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Cultural and Linguistic Assimilation in Mixed Marriages: The Case of Dayak and Chinese Muslim Converts in Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the cultural and linguistic assimilation of Dayak Muslim and Chinese Muslim converts in Sarawak, East Malaysia. Using interviews and observations, the research explores whether these converts integrate with the Malay majority community and the extent to which they preserve their ethnic identities. Barry's Model of Acculturation (1992) guides the analysis, distinguishing between assimilation—where individuals adopt the dominant culture's norms—and integration, where they balance adopting dominant norms while maintaining their original culture.

Data was collected from Dayak and Chinese Muslim converts in Kuching, Serian, and Samarahan divisions. The study focused on language use in family, workplace, and entertainment settings, alongside cultural markers like eating habits, dressing, festivals, and self-identity. Results reveal that Chinese Muslim converts demonstrate stronger cultural vitality and uniqueness compared to Dayak Muslim converts. While Dayak converts tend to assimilate more deeply into Malay culture, often losing significant cultural elements, Chinese converts maintain their cultural identity through markers of Chinese heritage.

This divergence challenges the common perception in Malaysia that conversion to Islam equates to becoming Malay, as encapsulated by the phrase *masuk Islam masuk Melayu* (converting to Islam means becoming Malay). The findings indicate that Chinese converts actively preserve aspects of their ethno-cultural and ethno-linguistic identity, unlike Dayak converts who exhibit greater cultural alignment with Malay norms.

The study concludes that fostering meaningful integration requires practices that respect and accommodate the values of both converts and the Malay community, derived through an Islamic lens. This approach emphasizes the importance of preserving ethnic diversity while promoting social and religious harmony among Muslim converts in Sarawak.

INTRODUCTION

Sarawak which is located on the island of Borneo is the largest of the three regions in Malaysia. The total population of the Land of the Hornbill as it is commonly referred to, is 2,509,500 people consisting of 37 ethnic groups. The largest group consists of the Iban, (28.8%) Chinese (23.83%), Malays (22.9%), Bidayuh (8%), other Bumiputera, mainly Orang Ulu (6.3%), Melanau (4.9%), non-Malaysians (4.7%) Others (0.6 %- Indians, Punjabis, Javanese, Eurasian). Sarawak is a secular state as stated in the State constitution. According to the 2022 census, Christianity is the biggest religion practised by Sarawakians, representing 50.1% of the total population. This is followed by Islam (34.2%), Buddhism (12.8%), Atheist (2.2%) Others (Hinduism, Sikhism, Bahai (0.5%), Department of Statistics, Sarawak (2022).

The Dayaks are a Christian race though some still practice animist beliefs (Minos, 1982). Before the Brooke era (1839-1945), the Dayaks were largely animists who lived in fear of the evil spirits around them. Thus, their whole perceptions and belief systems were guided by the omens and signs commonly existing in the jungle where they lived. Upon conversion to Christianity, they started to lead new lives free of fear peace and hope. The early literature of the Dayaks was written by Christian missionaries (Dealwis,2010). The Dayak Muslim converts are also increasing in number and there exists an online website for their association, *Persatuan Dayak Muslims Kebangsaan*. to inform the public about their perceptions, activities and experiences.

The Chinese first came to the gold-mining Bau district in Sarawak from the regions of Sambas and Pontianak in Kalimantan in the 1830s. In 1887, it was reported that there were around 4,000 Hakka Chinese in Bau (Lee,1964). The mass migration of Chinese began at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century. Rajah Charles Brooke was impressed and confident with the industriousness of the Chinese to enhance the development of Sarawak. As a result, he encouraged the migration of Chinese to all parts of Sarawak. The Chinese first came to Sarawak as farmers except for the district of

Bau where they were engaged in gold mining. Thereafter, they became involved with commercial farming and business besides the timber industry, petroleum and gas. The Chinese population gradually increased and eventually became the second-largest community in Sarawak after the Dayaks. Not only did they dominate the major economic sectors in Sarawak but later involved themselves in politics in the late 1950s (Baring-Gould et al, 1909). Most of the Chinese in Sarawak practice a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, Chinese folk religions as well as Christianity. The state's agenda of Islamisation in a context of ethnic and religious diversity has also seen an increase in the Chinese Muslim population in Sarawak in alliance with the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) Sarawak Branch's *dakwah* (evangelisation) efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia practices three types of law for marriages, namely Civil Law, Islamic Law and Customary Law. The Civil Law with regards to marriage (Marriage and Divorce) 1976 (Act 164) was enacted according to the English Common Law and applies to non-Muslims in Malaysia. On the other hand, Muslim marriages are handled by the state's Islamic law -Shariah law. Marriage according to customary laws is meant for the *pribumis* in Malaysia, including the Dayaks in Sarawak. However, the marriage must also be registered under Act 164 for marriage validity and to be recognised legally.

Mixed marriages are a common phenomenon in Sarawak which consists of 37 multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups. Malays equate with Muslims in Malaysia and since Islam is the official religion of the country, a non-Muslim who contracts an exogamous marriage with a Malay must therefore convert to Islam, hence the identity *masuk Islam masuk Melayu*. According to Moustafa (2018), the issue of Islamic conversion is a sensitive one that is always intertwined with identity politics in Malaysia. The Malaysian Law does not recognise the interfaith marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. The command regarding the marriage of a non-Muslim to a Muslim as practised in Malaysia based on the

Holy Qu'ran is (meaning): *“Do not marry Unbelieving women (idolaters), until they believe: A slave woman who believes is better than an unbelieving woman, even though she allures(s) you. Nor marry (your girls) to unbelievers until they believe: A man slave who believes is better than an unbeliever even though he allures(s) you ...”* (Q. 2: 221)

Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1989:45), gave his commentaries on the above verses: *“If religion is at all a real influence in life to both parties or either party, a difference in this vital matter must affect the lives of both more profoundly than differences of birth, race, language or position in life. It is therefore only right that parties to be married should have the same spiritual outlook. If two parties love each other, their outlook in the highest things of life must be the same.”*

Suhaila Abdullah (2006) describes Islamic conversion as a voluntary *ruhani* (Islamic spirituality) acceptance of the Islamic faith and hence it is very personal. It could be done at any time by a non-Muslim privately or publically; he or she simply needs to declare the *kalimah shahadah* (the Muslim testimony of faith) after understanding its meaning and accepting its message. The religious condition of the true conversion is the acceptance of the truth of Islam after knowledge, realization, confirmation and voluntary declaration of *kalimah shahadah*; *“that is to declare that I bear witness that there is no god to be worshipped except Allah and I bear witness that Prophet Muhammad is the final Messenger of Allah. Once the converts confirm their inner conscience to the condition of the true conversion then only, they can become a mu'min (true believer)”* (cited in Suhaila Abdullah 2006:4).

The Malaysian Federal Constitution describes a Malay as “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom” (Article 160.1).

Besides that, the Federal constitutional definition of being a Malay is cultural. Malay equates with Muslims and Nagata (2011) explains the significance of Malay *adat* or customs which encompasses various aspects

of Malay Muslim culture and social life, from styles of dressing and housing to rules of etiquette and social interaction. However, following *adat* Melayu Islam is most commonly restricted to the major life ceremonies of birth, engagement, marriage and death. This definition of who is a Malay allows people who originally do not belong to the Malay group to join the Malay ethnic group upon conversion to Islam as long as he or she practices the *adat* Melayu Islam. Moreover, according to Safran (2008), as such is the case with the Malaysian Malay identity, in which Islam plays a prominent role, any non-Muslim person living in Malaysia who aspires to be considered a Malay must inevitably go through the personal and social rite of conversion, thus, comes the unwritten understanding *“masuk Islam, masuk Melayu.”*

According to Wan Kamal et al., (2012), the estimated Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts are about 1% of the Malaysian Chinese population and the official statistic population is about 57221 Malaysian Chinese Muslims (Department of Statistics, 2020). There is no official data available on the Malaysian Chinese Muslims Association (MACMA) Sarawak branch website sarawak@macma.my regarding the latest increased number of Chinese Muslims in Sarawak, but various activities were organised for the members and their children by MACMA Sarawak. The population of Muslims in Sarawak is 32.4% of the total state population of 2,509,500.

Conceptual Framework

Barry's Model of Acculturation (1992) states that assimilation occurs when individuals adopt the cultural norms of a dominant or host culture. Integration, on the other hand, occurs when individuals can adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture while maintaining their culture of origin.

According to Macionis (2008), assimilation is a process by which a person or a minority group gradually adopt patterns of the dominant culture, encompassing changes in dress, language, values and friends. However, Barry (1979) as cited in Dealwis and David (2009) denies the fact that assimilation would

cause the complete disappearance of the minority group's identity.

The Indian Muslims in Sarawak for instance, have evolved with dual identities upon conversion to Islam. In a study conducted by Dealwis and David (2009) on the assimilation of Indian Muslims in Sarawak into the larger Malay community, it was discovered that while the older generation maintained much of their heritage Tamil language and markers of Indian identity, their offspring have assimilated into the Malay cultural norms.

Similarly, a study was conducted by Dealwis (2019) on conversion narratives and assimilation of Bau-jagoi Bidayuh in exogamous marriages with Malays. Findings indicated that the offspring of the Bidayuh converts living in Peninsular Malaysia have assimilated into the larger Malay community and there was a complete disappearance of the Bidayuh identity.

Assimilation is facilitated when the two communities share a common religion. David (2003), discussing the offspring of Pakistani men with Kelantanese women in Peninsular Malaya, showed that assimilation was complete as they spoke the local Kelantanese dialect and were completely integrated with the larger Kelantanese community. Being a minority, the Pakistani men adapted and assimilated with the local culture.

Lam (2006) investigated the religious conversion and reconstruction of identities among Chinese Muslims in Malaysia and stated the history of tension between Malay and Chinese in Malaya that caused the May 13th, 1969, racial riot, influenced the reconstruction of Muslim identity among the Chinese Muslim converts. The Chinese Muslim converts perceive that their new religious identity is constructed to change their ethnic identity through the change of name and habits which signify their Muslim identity. In Malaysia, since Islam equates with Malay identity, thus the Chinese Muslim converts' behaviour towards adopting the Malay identity has different levels of hesitancy and acceptance.

Chang (2023) explores how Bruneians who were born into a Chinese-Malay family define their identity. It detailed how the state classified them in terms of 'race', and how they negotiated their bicultural practices. Brunei has never adopted a multicultural policy; the state promotes an assimilation agenda by conflating Bruneian identity with *Melayu Islam Beraja*. Cultural assimilation is a social reality for the Chinese-Malays in Brunei as almost all converts practise Malay cultural customs and traditions.

Panos Bardis (1979 cited in Chang 2023) argues that when a group experiences two kinds of culture, there is a tendency that the group will privilege the dominant culture in the society while the minority culture plays a lesser role. This is exemplified by Chang's (2023) study whereby the offspring of the converted parent /parents are expected to have assimilated into the Brunei Malay culture as a result of their Chinese parent having to '*masuk Islam*' and '*masuk Melayu*'. This therefore means that in Brunei after converting to Islam one is expected to completely assimilate himself/herself into the Bruneian Malay Muslim identity.

Suhaila Abdullah (2006) explains certain problems faced by Chinese Muslim converts after their conversion to Islam, especially Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts. Although this research focused on Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts, the stated problems are similar to those of every convert in Malaysia. These kinds of problems may lead to certain negative invisible feelings from time to time in the converts before, during and after their conversion. The following are the stated problems in her research; the place of residence, cultural shock and transformation of identity, identity crisis, the impact of being referred to as *muallaf*, the weakness of *aqidah* among the Muslim converts, acceptance by Malay society, financial problems, lack of proper Islamic knowledge, misunderstanding and misconception of Islam, boycott of non-Muslim family, confidential or secret conversion, fear of losing Chinese identity, acceptance and usage of Islamic name, confusion of converting to Islam or becoming Melayu, ill treatment from Muslim community or racial issues of Islamic conversion, loss of

jobs because of Islamic conversion, lack of support from Muslim community, feelings of inferiority complex when with the Muslim community, unwanted attitudes of religious authorities, the challenges during the conversion and with the registration procedures, attending in obligated official Islamic classes or Islamic compulsory courses over an extended period of time .

In summary, in assimilation, an outsider or subordinate group becomes indistinguishably integrated into the dominant society. This implies that the values and culture of the dominant group are ultimately accepted and internalized by the subordinate group (Swan et al., 2004).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a qualitative research design to investigate the cultural and linguistic practices of the Dayak Muslim and Chinese Muslim converts in Sarawak, East Malaysia. It is aimed to determine whether these Muslim converts have integrated with the Malay majority community in Sarawak and to what extent they have preserved their respective ethnic identities.

The study draws on data collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and observations. The semi-structured interviews provided valuable information on the types of assimilation in mixed marriages between Malays and non-Malays in Sarawak. Data were collected from the five Dayak Muslim converts and five Chinese Muslim converts in Kuching, Serian and Samarahan divisions in Sarawak on the use of their language in the domains of family, workplace, and entertainment. Other types of assimilation such as eating habits, dressing, celebration of festivals, and self-identity were also examined. By visiting the homes of these respondents, the researchers could observe the language used in the home domain, eating habits, dressing and celebration of festivals more closely.

A Snowball sampling method was used to identify the 10 respondents. They are between the ages of 29 – 51 years old and have at least 5 years of conversion

experience. A total of 25 interview sessions and 54 interview hours were conducted over 4 months. To protect the participants' privacy, all names used in this study are not the participants' real names. Some of the respondents were all close friends and colleagues of the researchers who extended invitations for home and also during Raya Aidilfitri visits for the observations with their friends and family members. The discussions were held separately over coffee and tea, either in the respondents' homes or places arranged by the researchers, lasting between 45 minutes to an hour for each respondent. Some of the respondents accepted the token of appreciation given by the researchers to become the respondents.

The semi-structured interviews aimed to address the following questions:

1. What is the language you speak at home and your workplace? Is it important to speak your heritage language?
2. What are the choices of entertainment when marrying a Malay?
3. What are your dietary habits when marrying a Malay?
4. What are your clothing preferences when marrying a Malay?
5. What are your celebrations when marrying a Malay?
6. Do you consider yourself as becoming more Malay when marrying a Malay? Why?

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis to identify key aspects of assimilation investigated and the extent of assimilation within the collected data. The analysis focused on the main aspects (1) the language used at home (2) the types of entertainment and (3) the types of food (4) the types of dressing (5) the types of festivals celebrated and (6) self-identity.

Table 1: Profile of respondents

No.	Respondent	Gender	Age	Place of origin	Current place of residence
1.	Dayak convert	Male	36	Serian	Kedah
2.	Dayak convert	Male	47	Samarahan	Kuching

3	Dayak convert	Female	33	Bau	Kuching	<i>want my children to know their Bidayuh dialect too when speaking to their Bidayuh grandparents and relatives."</i>
4.	Dayak Convert	Female	39	Kuching	Miri	
5.	Dayak convert	Female	51	Kuching	Johor	
6.	Chinese convert	Male	44	Serian	Kuching	Respondent 4
7.	Chinese convert	Male	37	Kuching	Kuala Lumpur	<i>"We speak English mixed with Sarawak Malay at home. Unfortunately, my children cannot speak Bidayuh because we are not living in a Bidayuh community."</i>
8.	Chinese convert	Male	29	Kuching	Kuching	
9.	Chinese convert	Female	35	Bau	Kuching	Respondent 5
10.	Chinese convert	Female	48	Samarahan	Shah Alam	

FINDINGS

This section reveals the findings as derived from the participants' responses during the interviews and they include their choices of home language, entertainment, food, clothing, celebrations and self-identity.

1. Language

a) What language do you speak at home and your workplace?

b) Is it important to maintain your heritage language?

Dayak converts

Respondent 1

"I speak Malay at home because I'm staying with my Malay in-laws. At my workplace, I also speak Malay because most of my colleagues are Malay. Yes, it is important to keep our heritage language but I'm unable to do that as I'm far away from my community."

Respondent 2

"Most of the time I speak Sarawak Malay dialect at home with my family and in-laws although at times we do mix with some English also. At the workplace, I speak Bidayuh with my Bidayuh colleagues, English and Malay with Chinese, Malay and others. True it is important to speak my heritage language at home but my children and in-laws are very comfortable with the Sarawak Malay dialect."

Respondent 3

"I speak Bau-jagoi with my children and to my husband, I speak Sarawak Malay. At my workplace, I speak Sarawak Malay, Bidayuh, Iban and English. Yes, it is important because I

Respondent 4

"We speak English mixed with Sarawak Malay at home. Unfortunately, my children cannot speak Bidayuh because we are not living in a Bidayuh community."

Respondent 5

"I speak Bidayuh with my children and English mixed with Sarawak Malay with my husband. We should never lose our heritage language because the more languages we speak the better."

Chinese converts

Respondent 6

I speak Malay at home with my wife and Mandarin with my children. Sometimes I mix Chinese when speaking Malay. All my children attend Chinese schools and can speak Mandarin too."

Respondent 7

I live in Kuala Lumpur and we speak English at home most of the time. We also use Bahasa Malaysia sometimes when we visit relatives.

Respondent 8

"My wife went to a Chinese school so we speak Mandarin mixed with Malay and English at home with our children,"

Respondent 9

"I speak Mandarin with my children at home and they attend Chinese schools. They speak English with their father and Malay with their paternal relatives."

Respondent 10

I'm not proficient in the Sarawak Malay dialect but I can understand it. I speak Hokkien dialect with my children at home and use English with my husband."

In summary, the Dayak Muslim converts (*muallaf*) could easily switch to Malay as their home language as compared to the Chinese *muallaf* who preferred either Mandarin or English.

2. Entertainment

a) What are the choices of entertainment when marrying a Malay?

Dayak converts

Respondent 1

'I enjoy watching Malay and English movies. There is no change in language preference but my spouse often asks me to watch Islamic religious shows. I listen to Malay songs.'

Respondent 2

'I watch all types of shows including Islamic programmes. I also listen to all types of music and songs including Islamic ones. I listen to English and Malay songs.'

Respondent 3

I see that I'm very influenced by my husband and children's selection of movies which are mostly in Malay. I seldom watch English or Hollywood movies. I listen to Malay and sometimes popular English songs.'

Respondent 4

'I watch a lot of Malay movies and Islamic dakwah movies as compared to other shows. I can learn a lot about Islam from them. I listen to Malay songs and religious Arabic songs.'

Respondent 5

'My in-laws and husband only watch Malay and Islamic programmes. So I watch them too. Before marriage, I used to watch Hollywood movies in the Cineplex too. I listen to Malay songs only.'

Chinese Converts

Respondent 6

'I enjoy watching American and also English movies. I don't watch Malay movies. I listen to English songs.'

Respondent 7

'I watch a lot of Chinese and English movies and less Malay movies. The plot is always boring and similar. I listen to Chinese and English songs.'

Respondent 8

'I watch Chinese movies and sometimes English movies. I listen to Chinese songs only.'

Respondent 9

'I watch Malay Movies and English movies. I also listen to Malay and English songs.'

Respondent 10

'I watch English movies more than Malay movies. I listen to English songs and occasionally Malay songs.'

In summary. The Dayak Muslim converts (muallaf) could easily switch to Malay entertainment as compared to the Chinese muallaf who preferred either Mandarin or English entertainment.

3. Food

a) What are your dietary habits when marrying a Malay?

Dayak converts

Respondent 1

'My wife is a Malay from Kedah but she is very good at cooking Dayak-style food such as manuk pansuh and midin. We eat Malay dishes most of the time.'

Respondent 2

'Only Malay dishes at home and outside as my wife and children prefer them. Sometimes we eat Western halal food too.'

Respondent 3

'I often cook Dayak dishes such as chicken with tempoyak. Sometimes tempoyak with fish which my family likes. We also enjoy home-cooked Malay dishes.'

Respondent 4

'A family favourite at home is manok lulun. It is chicken boiled with lemon grass, ginger flowers and also tapioca leaves. We also eat all types of Malay dishes at home and outside.'

Respondent 5

'Dayak dishes such as manok pansuh, and daun empasak goreng (stir-fried tapioca leaves) are common in my house. However, our main dishes are always Malay food. Dayak dishes are easier to prepare as compared to Malay dishes which require a lot of stir-frying using ingredients

such as coconut milk or using a lot of paste or spices.'

Chinese converts

Respondent 6

'Initially, I struggled with the Malay dishes since they are always spicy and have coconut milk. Gradually, I can manage to eat them. However, I still prefer Chinese.'

Respondent 7

I like Chinese-style noodles such as fried kuehtiw and laksa. I have to look for halal Chinese food which is not difficult to find. However, I like asam pedas more than other Malay dishes.'

Respondent 8

'I've eaten Malay food before I got married and don't have a problem. Since my wife also prefers the Chinese style of cooking, she and my mother cook Chinese dishes with sambal belacan and ulam to add on.'

Respondent 9

'I love Malay food but I modify it to suit Chinese taste which is less spicy. I also cook a lot of Chinese-style dishes for my family. Cooking Chinese food is less time-consuming.'

Respondent 10

'Amid family warmth, we arrange dishes of dates, Nyonya kuih, salted fish, chicken curry and a jug of air mata kucing, a Ramadan essential in our house. It is something I look forward to. I still have the main dishes of Chinese cuisine.'

In summary, the Dayak Muslim converts (muallaf) could adapt to Malay dietary habits as compared to the Chinese muallaf who preferred Chinese food more to Malay food.

4. Clothing

a) What are your clothing preferences when marrying a Malay?

Dayak converts

Respondent 1

'I don't change my dressing much except when going to the mosque for prayers and during

Hari Raya. However, I don't go around wearing shorts like I used to.'

Respondent 2

'I have no problem dressing as a Muslim wearing my kopiah almost every Friday to work.'

Respondent 3

'I have to wear tudung because it is required in Islam. I dress using fully covered clothing now unlike before.'

Respondent 4

'My in-laws and husband changed my style of dressing to suit a Muslim wear of dressing. I just follow as I'm staying with them. I also keep jilbab, abaya and manteau all of which are loose fitting full sleeve gowns.'

Respondent 5

'I wear the hijab daily at all times except at home. It is considered modest in Islam and I have to adhere to the Islamic faith. Most of my gowns are black too to reflect my religious commitment.'

Chinese converts

Respondent 6

'I still wear modern Westernized clothing for work and at home. No change except baju raya and when praying in mosques.'

Respondent 7

'I celebrate Aidilfitri wearing a samfu – a traditional Chinese outfit comprising a shirt and trousers. I also finish off with a sampung to give it a Malay twist.'

Respondent 8

'I don't stick to Muslim style of dressing except during Muslim celebrations where I wear baju Melayu and songkok.'

Respondent 9

'I wear the fashionable hijab which is getting popular. Nevertheless, as a modern woman I still want to maintain my beauty with elegance but at the same time comply with the Islamic conditions.'

Respondent 10

'I don't wear hijab or headscarf because I'm not ready to do so. I still believe modern fashionable clothes signify me as a Muslim individual with a sense of freedom, self-pride, and self-confidence.'

In summary, the Dayak Muslim converts (muallaf) could adapt to the Malay and Muslim attire as compared to the Chinese muallaf who preferred either modern Western and Chinese clothing.

5. Celebrations

a) What are your celebrations when marrying a Malay?

Dayak converts

Respondent 1

'I live in Kedah and I don't celebrate Gawai. My in-laws think it is animism.'

Respondent 2

'I don't celebrate Gawai and Dayak celebrations anymore because I'm a Muslim and chose to follow my wife's culture already'

Respondent 3

'During Gawai, I went back to see my parents but I saw that they had to please me and my Muslim family by buying new cooking utensils, and halal meat and expected me to cook for Gawai to ensure it is halal. So, now I don't go back during such celebrations in order not to bother them much.'

Respondent 4

'I don't celebrate Gawai but celebrate Aidilfitri like other Muslims with the 'takbir' and 'tahmid' and 'sunat Aidilfitri' prayers. However, for dishes during Aidilfitri, I serve some Datak food such as manuk (chicken), pansuh ikan(fish), kasam ikan, kasam daun ubi or ensabi vegetables, pak pantu and Malay cuisine.'

Respondent 5

'Our Bumiputera cultural similarities made the transition smooth. Our Gawai and Raya celebrations and festivities become merrier, We celebrate both Hari Raya and Gawai showing their acceptance of me as a Dayak Muslim.'

Chinese converts

Respondent 6

'Most Chinese love their culture so much and they think when I convert to Islam I can no longer t celebrate Chinese Traditional Days. I don't think so but Malays frown at me when I celebrate Chinese festivals.'

Respondent 7

'I know still receives and gives Ang Pao or the Red Envelope at weddings and Chinese New Year to all who visit me.;

Respondent 8

'From what I read, the Chinese cultural festivals do not go against Islamic law and Chinese Muslims in China celebrate them. For example, the Mooncake Festival. The dumpling Festival and Chinese New Year celebrations are cultural and not religious festivals?'

Respondent 9

'I did not bat an eyelid when some Malay relatives (husband's side) commented when I celebrated the Mooncake festival last year. I gave them some halal mooncakes and we enjoyed them over Chinese tea.'

Respondent 10

'Many of my friends have been Malays since school days so they always come to visit my house for Chinese New Year. When I married and became a Muslim, they still visit me for Chinese New Year bringing home-cooked food, too.'

In summary, the Dayak Muslim converts (muallaf) could easily assimilate and celebrate Malay Muslim festivals and fewer Dayak festive occasions as compared to the Chinese muallaf who preferred to celebrate Chinese New Year and Aidilfitri with a mixture of Chinese and Malay cultures.

6. Self-identity

a) Do you consider yourself as becoming more Malay when marrying a Malay? Why

Dayak converts

Respondent 1

'I believe that the faith changes not the culture and identity. Like most Dayak converts we could not separate that and conveniently accept the Malay culture and identity.'

Respondent 2

'The Islamic authorities asked me to change my name when I converted to Islam. I just obeyed. In the beginning, I was more Dayak than Malay but over the years I have embraced more Malay culture and identity because of my choice.'

Respondent 3

'I've married a Malay and my in-laws have accepted me and expected me to adapt to the Malay and Muslim way of life. Thus, not surprisingly many people think that I'm a Malay and I do not reject it.'

Respondent 4

'I see no difference whether I am Malay or a Dayak now as I'm already a Muslim and my husband and children are all Malays.'

Respondent 5

'My name may change but my face remains the same. Here, Malaysians say that if someone converts to Islam it means they're becoming Malay. I guess I'm adapting to the Malay culture more now and accepting my new identity as a Malay but everyone knows I'm a Dayak Muslim and proud to be one, too. Our cultural similarities made the transition smoother as well. Our celebrations and festivities become merrier. We celebrate both Hari Raya and Chinese New Year.'

Chinese converts

Respondent 6

'Some Malay relatives and colleagues do insist that converting to Islam means that I and my children must have Malay or Arabic names, but this is wrong. They even implied that any Western or non-Malay/ Arabic name should be haram or makruh. I'm a Chinese Muslim, not a Malay or an Arab.'

Respondent 7

'At my workplace, which is a government agency, here I am often expected to use and

respond using my Malay name in all official matters.'

Respondent 8

'I will not change my ethnicity. I was born Chinese and will die as a Chinese. I will not become Malay. I did not change my name upon conversion to Islam and marrying a Malay because Islam is a universal religion not just for Malays or Arabs only.'

Respondent 9

'My cultural identity as a Malaysian Chinese has remained intact. It's still me. Everybody knows me as Gin. Nothing changed. However, I do get stares from Muslim ladies because I don't wear a tudung (headscarf) and keep my English name as my first name.'

Respondent 10

'I guess my Chinese parents and relatives were worried that by converting to Islam I would lose my Chinese identity and become a Malay. Yes, I wear the tudung but my identity remains Chinese.'

In summary, the Dayak Muslim converts (muallaf) could easily switch their self-identity to either Malay or remain as Dayak Muslims as compared to the Chinese muallaf who just want to remain as Chinese Muslims.

DISCUSSION

Islam is practised as synonymous with the Malay community in Malaysia. Therefore, this study focused on the assimilation of non-Malays when marrying Malays. However, it must also be stated that not all Malays are Muslims due to apostasy, heresy, etc. (Chua, 2005). The results from the findings of this study clearly show that the non-Malays who have married Malays have assimilated into the Malay culture but the assimilation seems to be occurring more for the Dayak converts (muallaf) as compared to the Chinese Muslim converts (muallaf).

Results from observation during home visits also provided evidence that the Chinese converts (muallaf) have a greater desire to maintain their Chinese identity and Chinese culture as compared to the Dayak converts (muallaf). Generally, their understanding of

the Malay culture affects their Islamic faith. The Dayaks tend to understand Malay culture easily because of some similar cultural practices as compared to the Chinese who were unwilling to abandon their deep-rooted Chinese culture just because of conversion to Islam.

According to Baharuddin (2007 almost all religious material relating to Islam is produced in Malay, further putting a barrier because unlike the Dayaks most Chinese do not consume Malay language media. At the end of the day, the message rarely reaches the Malaysian Chinese for them to even consider converting. Assimilation can happen when there is an in-depth understanding and willingness to accept differences in various aspects of life, habits and customs. The findings of this study showed that the Dayaks were more willing to accept differences in the Malay way of life as compared to the Chinese converts.

The Chinese Muslim respondents' rationale for wanting to maintain their Chinese language was that Islam came to China 1400 years ago and Mandarin was already used among the Hui or Chinese Muslims in China before coming to Malaysia. They argued that there is no need to abandon their heritage language when converting to Islam and marrying a Malay after all Mandarin has more economic value too. The Chinese respondents were also influenced by their earlier Chinese Muslim converts. According to Wong, (2010) the earliest Malaysian Chinese Muslim preacher Haji Ibrahim Ma Tian Ying stood out as the person who contributed the most in introducing Islam to the Malaysian Chinese in the Chinese language. Haji Ibrahim Ma Tian Ying spoke fluent Malay and Mandarin, besides English, Cantonese and Hokkien. He showed the Chinese Muslims that he was very much at home with the Malays even though he was born in China. He gave them evidence that he was knowledgeable about the Malay culture blended with the local Islam.

As for the Dayak Muslim respondents, they assimilated with the new Malay family and spoke Malay as their home language. Findings by Alfath (2015) who studied two villages in the hinterland region of West Kalimantan

indicated such easy assimilation of Dayaks into Malay culture. In her study, the Malays led their life according to the ways of Islam while the Dayaks were either animists or Christians. When Dayaks converted to Islam and became Muslims, they changed their ethnic identity to Malay. Besides that, these Dayak converts would also adopt and speak the Malay language.

The Dayak Muslim converts were assimilated easily into the Malay culture and their choice of entertainment was more like the Malays, Besides, the Dayak Muslim converts have also included Islamic programs as their entertainment. On the other hand, the Chinese Muslim converts were less assimilated as many still preferred English and Mandarin languages for the selection of movies and songs. Some of the Chinese Muslim respondents were skeptical that their choice of entertainment was allowed in Islam. However, Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1985), a leading contemporary Muslim jurist have to argue that, *"Islam does not require of Muslims that their speech should consist entirely of pious utterances, that their silence should be a meditation, that they should listen to nothing except the recitation of the Qur'an, nor that they should spend all their leisure time in the mosque. Rather, it recognises that Allah has created human beings with needs and desires, so that, as they need to eat and drink, they also need to relax, and enjoy themselves"*.

Generally, all the Dayak and Muslim converts said that they were encouraged to watch Islamic programs so that they could also become evangelists. They were often told to spread Islam as it is an evangelistic religion Besides that, as Muslim converts, they have often been encouraged to spread their new Islamic faith to the unbelievers (*kafir*) and as Muslims consider it to be the absolute truth.

From Surah 3:85 in the Quran, it roughly translates as:

"And whoever desires other than Islam as religion - never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers." Every Muslim has to inform the people around him about Islam and its teachings, as this is called "da'wah" (or dakwah, in Malay) (Abdullah, 2009).

For the Dayak Muslim and Chinese Muslim converts, celebrating the first Hari Raya was a relatively new experience. For the Dayaks, they had to dress as Malays and prepare Malay food, unlike the Chinese who still served some halal Chinese food and wore *samfu*. These new social interactions during festivities reinforce the new identity of Muslims in Sarawak and demonstrate the ongoing process of constructing identity for the Chinese Muslims more as compared to the Dayak Muslims who would eventually be more willing to be accepted as Malays.

The Dayak Muslim converts were also able to adapt to Malay and Muslim dietary habits when marrying Malays. The Chinese Muslim converts were less able to do so because many still preferred Chinese food which is considered healthier, being less spicy and without coconut milk.

The Malay traditional clothing of *baju kurung* and the Islamic dressing which includes hijab and Islamic clothing are commonly worn by Malay women. For Malay males the songkok, sarong and *baju Melayu* or Islamic clothing including *kopiah* are normally worn. The ethnic connotations when it comes to dressing are very strong in the Malaysian context. When a Dayak or Chinese dresses like a Malay man (songkok and *baju Melayu*) or woman (hijab and *baju kurung*), the Dayak convert or Chinese convert has *masuk Islam masuk Melayu*. However, with cultural hybridism existing in Sarawak, there are no significant norms on what a Chinese convert (*mualaf*) or Dayak convert (*mualaf*) should or should not wear. Undoubtedly, according to Goffman (1959:22), dressing is an important aspect of expressing identity because like stage props it provides the basis for human action played out before, within, or upon it.

When comparing the assimilation experiences of Dayak and Chinese Muslim converts, there are differences. The Chinese Muslim converts were not easily convinced to abandon their Chinese surnames which meant a lot to them as their Chinese surnames reflected their Chinese identity. For them, religious conversion did not equal identity construction. Although this could affect their

level of being accepted by the Malay community, the Chinese converts did not view that as more significant as compared to losing their heritage and identity and taking on the Malay identity. Thus, the process of reconstructing an identity is highly sensitive and complex for the Chinese Muslim converts as compared to the Dayak converts. Unlike the Dayak converts, the Chinese Muslims made significant adjustments between their religion and ethnicity by participating in various Chinese cultural celebrations. Thus, the Chinese converts have different attitudes towards adopting an Islamic name or maintaining their Chinese names.

The Dayak converts accepted the fact that during the process of religious conversion, they have to undergo a reproduction of identities, whereby they have to take on a new identity as Muslim and also Malay identities while trying to maintain their Dayak identity. They became more conscious that upon conversion, they have to talk, behave and look like a convert to gain acceptance by the Malay community. The acceptance by the Malays seemed to be significant for the Dayak converts to shape their new identity and self. Thus, unlike the Chinese converts, the Dayak converts regarded conversion to Islam as not only a shifting of religious belief but also an adoption of a new way of life. Nevertheless, for both Chinese and Dayak converts, the five pillars of Islam served as the foundation of their Muslim way of life, guiding their spiritual beliefs; what they can eat (consumption of pork, alcohol and non-halal food are no longer allowed); and what they wore (men and women) were proper attire according to the Qu'ran.

The implication of the findings for integration policies and community cohesion is necessary to avoid misunderstandings of the motives of conversion. This is especially true for Chinese Muslims who have to face a lot of challenges after their conversion. This is because the Chinese believe that Chinese identity cannot be achieved through cultural change and assimilation. For them, the Chinese identity is ancestor-given, ascribed and cannot be changed by conversion. Thus, it is common for Chinese converts to retain their Chinese names to add the name Abdullah (i.e. servant

of God) when registering with the Majlis Agama Islam. For the Dayak converts, the issue of taking a new Malay Muslim name with the surname Abdullah is generally acceptable and foreseen. Thus, it is easier for the Dayak convert to Islam to integrate and immerse with the Malay community as compared to the Chinese converts. Nevertheless, the majlis agama Islam in Sarawak recognised the strengths of the Chinese Muslim converts association and contributions to the Muslim community in Sarawak.

Undeniably, since Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, when the Chinese and Dayak convert from their religions to Islam, they as converts begin to practice Islam, their behaviour changes in line with the identity of the Malay. This is because Malay equates with Islam or *masuk Islam masuk Melayu*. The change in behaviour of the converts also contributes to the disintegration of their ethnic structure and rejection by their original ethnic group because of social differences that emerge post-conversion. Whilst they are welcomed by their Malay counterparts, it is nevertheless obvious that they may not interact and integrate fully into the Malay socio-religious community unless they assimilate.

Thus, to achieve a high level of social and religious interaction and integration of converts, the practices involved have to respect values that can be accepted by both converts and Malays. They should be derived from the perspective of Islam. The existing patterns and models of social and religious integration and interaction need to be modified so that can apply not only to the relationship between Dayak, Chinese converts and Malays but also to the whole population of converts. There must be an increase of attention shown to the significance of the ethnicity or race context of the new converts to Islam so that new patterns and models can be created for future reference.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese Muslim converts in Sarawak tend to maintain a strong cultural vitality and uniqueness as compared to the Dayak Muslim converts. The two groups of converts show a

different degree of assimilating towards the use of the local Malay language, as well as Malay/Muslim cultural traits and practices. The Dayak Muslim converts may have lost a vital segment of their cultural enrichment upon conversion to Islam but the Chinese Muslim converts, crucially hold positive perceptions about their ethnocultural and ethno-linguistic identity. This contradicts the perception that all who *masuk Islam masuk Melayu*, which inclined that converting to Islam means becoming a Malay and losing the other aspects of their culture.

This study provides enlightenment to the Muslim Malay community to know that Dayak and Chinese convert groups have a better understanding of the Malay cultural community to maintain the cultural integration between Dayak, Chinese and Malays in Sarawak to maintain a good balance between them.

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