

# **CHINESE AND SIAMESE CULTURES IN MALAY MUSLIMS ENVIRONMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this study is to explore the quality of religious understanding between Muslims and Buddhists in Kampung Tendong. The researcher prepared some relevant indicators to measure the quality. These indicators include intra-religious understandings and inter-religious understandings. Using a convenience sampling technique, a total of one hundred and forty (140) respondents were drawn from Muslims and Buddhists of Kampong Tendong, Pasir Mas, Kelantan. The sample size together with the above-mentioned indicators showed that the quality of interaction based on frequency is below average (i.e., 42.59%). The results show universal values of the two religions, namely Islam and Buddhism that bind people together. On the other hand, the discouraging factor of interaction among the residents of Kampung Tendong was that trivial issues of religious differences. Therefore, the significance of the study lies mainly in showing the level of religious understanding between Muslims and Buddhists in Kampung Tendong. This result is essential to the policy-makers to develop a better pattern of inter-racial interaction in a remote area of Peninsular Malaysia. The study finally discusses the need for broader and more comprehensive research in this area.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Social Interaction, religious understanding, acculturation, assimilation, Muslims and Buddhists.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Living in Malaysia is a very unique experience, this is due to his citizen which comprise of various ethnic, religion and identity. Majority of the residents are Malay and profess Islam then Chinese whose are mainly Buddhists and Christians, Indians whose are Hindus and Christians and others like Indonesians, Siamese, Burmese and so on. Surprisingly, with these varieties all residents of Malaysia live in peace and harmonious environment. People might raise a question on how Malaysian citizens live with this phenomenon. Thus the main objective of this study is to explore the real pattern of relationship among the Malays majority towards Buddhists minority in Pasir Mas, Kelantan.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The methods adopted in the study are library research and field studies. There are two sources of data: primary source which includes interviews with Muslim religious scholars and Buddhist monks, and a survey questionnaire directed to villagers of all walks of life. Meanwhile the secondary source is collected through library research obtained from both print and electronic media such as books, journals, magazines, internet and statistical reports.

The researchers started the field work by using a survey method through distribution of questionnaires to 200 respondents of Muslims and Buddhists. The researchers then interviewed ten important knowledgeable persons like Muslims religious scholars and Buddhist monks. The researchers used *Bahasa Melayu* as the medium of communication in her study as it is the common language of communicates between them. All data obtained and collected through these methods were then examined and analyzed by the researchers. Thus, this research applies both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

## **Historical Background of Pasir Mas**

Kelantan is one of the states in Malaysia, which is located in the northeast of Peninsula Malaysia. It comprises of 15,022 km<sup>2</sup> areas, and bordered by Thailand in the north, Terengganu in the southeast, Perak in the west, and Pahang in the south. In the northeast of Kelantan is the South China Sea. Kota

Bharu is the capital city which has been declared an “Islamic City” or “*Bandaraya Islam*” by the state government.

The total population of Kelantan is 1.4 million people comprising of 95% Malay, 3% Thai, 1.9% Chinese, and 0.1% others. The state has ten *jajahan*, namely Kota Bharu, Pasir Mas, Tumpat, Pasir Puteh, Bachok, Kuala Krai, Machang, Tanah Merah, Jeli, and Gua Musang. Since 95% of Kelantan’s population consists of Malay and under the Malaysian Constitution, all Malays are considered Muslims. Islam has become the most influential religion in the state.

*Jajahan* of Pasir Mas is located in the western portion of Kelantan which is about 200 square miles in area. The Kelantan River forms the eastern boundary of the *jajahan*, while the Golok River forms the western one. The state capital of Kota Bharu which is a political, administrative and commercial centre of the state lies 11 miles away from Golok River.

Under *jajahan* of Pasir Mas there are 10 *daerah* (districts). They are; Alor Pasir, Bunut Susu, Chetok, Gual Periuk, Kangkong, Kuala Lemal, Kubang Gadong, Pasir Mas, Rantau Panjang and Kubang Sepat. In the district of Kubang Sepat there are seven mukims. Those mukims include Tendong, Sakar, Kubang Pak Amin, Kubang Sepat, Paloh, Hutan Chenggal and Padang Embun.

In Mukim Tendong there are six *kampung* (villages) with a total population of 3,548 people. Malays 3,221 or approximately 90.8%, Chinese 297 (8.4%) and others (including Siamese) 30 (0.85%) (Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, 2000). These six villages are Kampung Tendong Hilir, Kampung Tendong Hulu, Kampung Gaung, Kampung Resak, Kampung Cherang Tok Rong and lastly Kampung Cabang Empat Tendong which is known as Kampung Tendong where the study is conducted. Kampung Tendong has a multiracial society. It comprises of Malays, Chinese and Siamese natives. Despite the difference in ethnicity, their relationship is harmony and it indicates social stability of the diversified population of the state.

The total population of Mukim Tendong as recorded by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2000, is 3,548, which comprises of 3,221 Malays, 297 Chinese and 30 others (including Siamese) (Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, 2000). Moreover, according to the report *Carta*

*Kebersihan Luar Bandar Daerah Kubang Sepat, 2006* prepared by the Health Department of Pasir Mas, Mukim Tendong comprises of 3,867 with 727 houses. It also stated that Kampung Tendong has 716 people with 143 houses. However, this study is confined to Muslims and Buddhists of Kampung Tendong, not to the whole population of Mukim Tendong.

Before the social interaction of Muslims and Buddhists is discussed, it is necessary to examine briefly the history of Chinese migration into Malaysia. Trade and seeking job opportunities were two major reasons for the settlement of the Chinese in Malaysia.

It is recorded by Tan et. al (2005) that Chinese trade in the Malay Peninsula started as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese traded with kingdoms on the peninsula that they called *Tun Sun* (said to be situated at the mouth of the Johore River), *Chu Li* (believed to be a port at the mouth of the Kuantan River, Pahang) and *Ch'ih Tu* (thought to be in Kelantan). In the same source, the authors presented a Chinese chronicle that *Ch'ih Tu* had sent diplomatic and trade missions to China during the Tang Dynasty (619-906 A.D), and the Chinese emperor presented a gift of 100 rolls of silk to the kingdom of *Ch'ih Tu* in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (2005: 4). These were the best examples of early relationship of Kelantanese with the Chinese.

On the other hand, seeking jobs opportunities was the economic reason which attracts the Chinese to settlement in Malaysia. Historically, mainland Chinese faced overpopulation, natural calamities and the exploitation of peasants by landlords brought tens of thousands of Chinese out of the coastal provinces of China to Nanyang (Tan et. al., 2005: 9). The majority of those who joined the migration into Malaysia came to work in the land or involve in trade. Some of them negotiated with the Malay rulers and chiefs of tin mines to acquire the lands for plantation or cash crops.

In the case of Kelantan, the Chinese migrated and settled in a significant numbers in Kelantan since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The settlers were generously given land for farming by the Sultans and powerful royal families. According to Robert L. Winzeler (1985: 18) the Chinese settlers occupied and owned much of the land about 40 kilometers along both sides of the Kelantan River. They socialized well with local Malays and became highly assimilated to the local way of life. Today, Chinese descendants

wear Malay-style dress, speak the Malay Kelantanese dialect and observe Malay customs. However, they have retained their Chinese religion and customs.

Majority of the Chinese in Kelantan are the followers of Theravada Buddhism. In Mukim Tendong, the Kuan Yin statue sits in a temple is believed to have been built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Even though the Chinese population is small with 297 individuals, they preserve their religious practices. They celebrate Chinese festivals, enjoy Chinese norms, cultures, and lifestyles like consuming liquor, eating pork and having dogs as pets.

A Buddhist is a person who believes in Buddhism. It is a world faith, a philosophy and a way of life based on the teachings of Buddha, a person of noble birth who was born in India about 2,500 years ago. In the beginning, he led a luxurious lifestyle, lacking nothing materially and his father wanted him to follow his footsteps and become the king of the *Sakya* clan. However, after observing great sufferings at the age of 20 Buddha left the life of luxury and became an itinerant monk to pursue spiritual knowledge.

After years of practicing extreme austerities and engaging in prolonged and intense meditation, Frithjof (1989) noted in his book that Buddha realized that neither the extreme of self-indulgence nor the extreme of self-mortification lead to an end of suffering. He said “avoiding these two extremes I have realized the middle path” (1989: 27). Buddha traveled all over India for about 40 years. After his death, Buddhism spread throughout South East Asia, China, Japan, Tibet and the West.

In the study, Buddhists are the occupants of Chinese and Siamese of the Buddhist faith in Kampung Tendong. Buddhists largely are identified by their Chinese or Siamese names, which are different from the Malays.

On the other hand, Muslim is a person who adheres to a religion called Islam. Islam is a religion revealed 1400 years old ago. Muslims believe that there is only one God (*tawhid*), called Allah (*subhanahu wa ta'ala*). Islam was revealed to Rasulullah Muhammad bin Abd Allah. Muslims believe that Muhammad (*sallallahu alaihi wasallam*) was the last Prophet of Allah (*subhanahu wa ta'ala*). The word “Islam” stems from the fourth verbal form of the root *slm: aslama*, which literally means “to submit” or “to surrender”. Thus, the word Islam has come to mean “submission”, “surrender”,

“resignation”, and “obedience” to Allah (*subhanahu wa ta’ala*) and His guidance (Mir Zohair Husain, 2003: 1).

The religious scripture of Islam is the Holy Qur'an and the place for communal worship is called Mosque (*Masjid*). Islam is a way of life, governing religious practice and morality as well as social relationships, marriage, divorce, kinship, economy and political relations. Someone who believes in Islam is a Muslim. Muslims believe that Islam teaches the true and successful way of life for all people.

At present, the Muslims are mainly Malay residents of Kampung Tendong who profess Islamic religion. A unique aspect to distinguish Muslims and non-Muslims (who confess other religious faiths other than Islam) of Kampung Tendong is their dress code. The female Muslims are identified through their *hijabs* that cover their heads and most often they wear long and loose dresses. Majority of males wear headgear tailored (*kopiah*) especially for the purpose of prayers (Zuriati Binti Mohd Rashid & Wan Mohd Azam Bin Amin).

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

In this study, respondents are divided into Muslims and Buddhists. There are four constructs to measure social interaction namely mixed interaction, sharing workplace, sharing leisure time together as well as religious understandings. Using a convenience sampling technique, a total of one hundred and forty (140) respondents were drawn from Muslims and Buddhists of Pasir Mas, Kelantan. The sample size together with the above-mentioned indicators showed that the quality of interaction based on frequency is above average (i.e., 67.83%). Precisely, for “mixed interaction” was 82.7%, “sharing workplace” was 72.44%, “sharing leisure times together” was 66.72%, and “religious understandings” which were divided into two parts ‘intra-religious understandings’ was 82.95% and ‘inter-religious understandings’ was 34.34% with the average percentage of 42.59.

Based on responses of the questionnaire, there are 140 respondents, 94 (67.1%) were Muslims and 46 (32.9%) were Buddhists. The study shows that Muslim male respondents were the majority with

47.9% followed by Buddhist males 20.7%, Muslim females 19.3% and lastly Buddhist females constitute the smallest number, 17 (12.1%). The frequency for each sex group showed males were 68.6% followed by the females 31.4%.

In total, female respondents were only 27 persons compared to 67 of males. One might say that the small number of female participation in the study is due to customary practice of the Malays. This is because, the administration of the questionnaires was done in public, by approaching those who were in markets, restaurants, shops, retailers, and other places. These places are infrequently visited by women folk of Kampung Tendong as it is a part of Malay custom that a female is traditionally indoor rather outdoor. They spend more time doing household chores, cooking and handicrafts. Thus, for those who strictly practice such kind of custom, would discourage their daughters and grand-daughters from going outdoor without any purpose (Zuriati Binti Mohd Rashid & Wan Mohd Azam Bin Amin).

Based on the researchers' observation, majority of females in this location preferred to stay at home and active in-door. Thus, it can be concluded that the Malay residents in Kampung Tendong strictly uphold and preserve their customs. This is in-line with a comment made by an anthropologist, Robert L. Winzeler in his work (1985: 7) which stated that Islam is also prominent in the identity of Kelantanese Malays. Within the context of Malaysia and perhaps South-East Asia generally, Kelantan is marked by a strong popular commitment to Islam.

Moreover, on several occasions when the researchers approached a group of people or a family, the males voluntarily participated in the study. Their females would encourage males to take part in the study. A big number of them refused to answer the questionnaire if their spouses voluntarily participated. Again, this shows their commitment to Islamic principles. The male is regarded as a leader in a family life. In return, the female should give full respect and obey to his command as long as the command does not transgress with Islamic teachings. Thus, this leads to lower number of Malay female participants in the study.

In contrast, due to the process of assimilation, the Buddhists tend to adapt the Malay custom. The females are expected to be at home and take care of the household. As reported by Winzeler, "upon

entering a rural Chinese village and meeting the inhabitants the observer who is aware of cultural and social distance between Malays and other ethnic Chinese is apt to be impressed by how similar these Chinese outlook as Malays” (1985:51).

Another important possibility is that, the Chinese of Kelantan are unique and differ from other Chinese in other Malaysian states. This is because, the Chinese of Kelantan generally have dark complexion and, an appearance similar to that of the Malays and Thais (Teo, 2003: 58). Besides that, their language (that is capable of speaking Kelantanese dialect), clothing, food and eating style are also similar to the Malays (Teo, 2003: 58-65). These similarities make the process of interaction between the Malays and the Chinese in Kampung Tendong run smoothly. The results yielded an affirmation towards the process of Chinese assimilation towards Muslims culture.

Teo Kok Seong (2003) stated about the Chinese in Kelantan as having some Malay and Thai influences in culture and language, reflecting the processes of cultural and language contact, interaction and influences. The language spoken by these Chinese is a reflection of the processes of assimilation on their part to the local Malays and Thais. Being a minority group, these Chinese are a good case study of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic experience.

Uniquely, even though the Chinese differ in their religious belief with that of the Malays, there is no reported case of hostile and turmoil among the two communities in Kampung Tendong. Thus, this study plans to examine the factors which bind their social interactions.

In the previous discussion, the five indicators of social interaction are used they are mixed interaction, sharing workplace, sharing leisure time together, religious understanding as well as discussion factors that promote and hinder interaction. Those five items are briefly explained below:

Based on previous discussions, it can be said that the Muslims and the Buddhists in Kampung Tendong were having positive mixed relationship. This is due to several possible reasons. Firstly, they had no communication problem. As stated earlier, the Chinese are fluent in speaking Kelantanese dialect. By so doing, they are easily accepted by the Malays and this scenario could make the process of communication smooth and effective.



Secondly, the residents of Kampung Tendong did not have any problem in running their daily activities. This is because the Chinese have similar features and appearance to that of the Malays, in terms of their dark complexion, styles of clothing, food and eating habits. These similarities make the process of interaction more meaningful.

Lastly, the result of the study yielded an affirmation towards the process of assimilation. The above two mentioned reasons are the best explanations of the assimilation process in Kampung Tendong.

Most importantly, universal values are the sole factor that binds Muslims and Buddhists in Kampung Tendong tightly. They freely interact with each other because their religious faiths encourage them to do so. Thus, if they tightly adhere to the religion, peaceful co-existence among them would enhance.

Under the indicator of 'sharing workplace', there is no doubt that the residents of Kampung Tendong were having positive interaction in their work settings. This is because majority of them did not have any problem and even comfortable in sharing the same career and place of work with the other believers. It could be assumed that the shared universal values of their religions that make them tolerant toward other religious followers.

Another important point is majority of the respondents reported that there is no such segregation occurs in their workplace. Above all, both groups either Muslims or Buddhists insisted that their colleagues would help each other as a team in completing a task regardless of their faiths.

Based on the data collected, the result yielded that the respondents were having mixed interaction and even shared their leisure times together. Majority of them responded that they enjoyed the companies of other religious believers. They also participated in similar collective activities run by the authorities. They have no problems eating together and shopping at the same coffee houses, restaurants, markets, shop retailers and other places. All of these determine that the residents of Kampung Tendong were having positive interaction and they share their leisure times together. It could be said that the universal values of their religions encourage them to socialize well with others.

On the other hand, under the religious understandings, there were two important things to discuss. Both groups, either Muslims or Buddhists were having good understandings of their own religions and this deep understanding is not a disruptive aspect to their relationship. Furthermore, in term of the lack of understandings in other religious teachings would not also a determinant to hinder their positive interaction. In short, religious difference would not break but rather enhance and strengthen the good relationship of the two groups. The main reason is due to the shared values that their religions have in common.

The study discovered that, the possible variable that facilitates interaction is universal values shared by the two religions – Islam and Buddhism. These similarities would bind their relationship together and tightly bonded.

On the other hand, the study also found that the possible destructive element to their relationship is that trivial religious issues. These issues are the sole factor that could discourage close relationships among them. However, it could not break the strong ties among them. Why? Possible answer is the concept of universal values that shared by both religions that drive their good relationship.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As a conclusion, one might say that the residents of Kampung Tendong were having positive interaction between the two groups, namely Muslims and Buddhists. Even though they have huge differences of religious beliefs, cultures, norms and practices yet it could not break or even shaken the closed relationship that they have. Uniquely, there is no conflict or collision case reported by the local government or authorities. It shows that they were having good interaction with each other this is due to the process of acculturation and assimilation.

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