

Muslim Converts' Narratives of Tolerance Towards Non-Muslim Celebrations in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study in Sabah and Kelantan

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the narratives of experiences among Muslim converts in facing the celebration of non-Islamic festivals in two culturally distinct states, Sabah and Kelantan. The diverse composition of the pluralistic society and the dynamic level of interfaith interaction in both states make them significant locations for investigation. The study adopts a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews involving six Muslim converts, three in Sabah and three in Kelantan, as well as two religious figures who are directly involved in managing Muslim convert affairs at the state level. The findings reveal that the level of tolerance toward non-Islamic celebrations is higher among Muslim converts in Sabah compared to those in Kelantan. These differences are also evident in the acceptance of local cultural practices and social interactions. The narratives shared by the respondents reflect various forms of personal adaptation and challenges faced in balancing Islamic identity with family relationships. Key factors influencing the level of tolerance include confusion regarding the boundaries of Islamic creed (*aqidah*), social pressure from their original families, and a lack of post-conversion guidance. The study recommends strengthening integrated guidance programs and interfaith education to help converts understand the concept of tolerance based on the principles of Islamic creed. It is hoped that these findings will contribute to enriching the discourse on interfaith relations and the building of a harmonious society within Malaysia's multicultural and multi-religious context.

Keywords: narrative, tolerance, Muslim converts, festival celebration, Sabah, Kelantan.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has long been recognized as a nation inhabited by people of various ethnicities, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. This diversity is prominently reflected in the wide array of religious celebrations observed throughout the country. For instance, Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Hari Raya Korban are celebrated by the Muslim community, Chinese New Year by the Chinese community, Deepavali by Hindu Indians, and Christmas by Christians community. These celebrations occur in rotation throughout the year, from the state of Sabah to Perlis, symbolizing a vibrant calendar of multicultural festivities. As such, these multi-religious and multi-ethnic celebrations not only enrich the cultural landscape but also reflect the unity in diversity that forms the cornerstone of Malaysia's national harmony. However, the states of Sabah and Kelantan present two contrasting manifestations of this pluralistic reality. Sabah is renowned for its ethnic and religious diversity, where different communities coexist harmoniously. In contrast, Kelantan displays a more homogenous demographic, marked by a dominant Islamic identity that shapes its societal norms and daily life. These socio-demographic differences make a comparative study between the two states both relevant and insightful.

Muslim converts, or *mualaf*, play a significant role as individuals navigating the intersection of two identities: their former identity, closely tied to their original families and communities, and their new identity as Muslims. In a society as religiously and culturally diverse as Malaysia, such individuals face a unique set of challenges, particularly in adapting socially and reconciling their past with their present. One of the key challenges arises

during the celebration of non-Muslim festivals. For Muslim converts, the question of whether and how to participate in such celebrations is not only a matter of Islamic legal and theological concern but also involves complex social and familial pressures. This situation highlights the urgent need for deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and levels of acceptance among Muslim converts regarding non-Muslim religious celebrations within Malaysia's multicultural society. For example, a study by Baharudin and Mohd Kusrin (2021) revealed that Indian Muslim converts in Malaysia often face a dilemma during Hindu festivals. Many tend to visit their families while choosing not to participate in religious rituals, in an effort to maintain family ties while remaining true to Islamic teachings. Similarly, research by Awang & Mohd Khambali (2014) showed that Chinese Muslim converts in Terengganu encountered difficulties in preserving family relationships, particularly during traditional Chinese celebrations, due to religious sensitivities and divergent interpretations of Islamic practice.

Moreover, public perceptions of Muslim convert participation in non-Muslim festivities vary. Some view it as an expression of openness and religious tolerance, while others regard it as a transgression of Islamic theological boundaries. Despite the relevance of this issue, systematic research on the attitudes and acceptance levels of Muslim converts toward non-Muslim celebrations remains scarce. This lack of data presents challenges for policymakers and religious institutions in designing appropriate guidance and support programs to help Muslim converts integrate harmoniously into a multicultural society while remaining aligned with clear Islamic principles. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the attitudes of Muslim converts toward non-Muslim religious celebrations through their personal narratives. It also seeks to compare the level of tolerance among Muslim converts in Sabah and Kelantan when engaging with their original families or communities during such festivities. Investigating their level of tolerance not only provides insights into social integration and intercultural understanding but also helps identify the dynamics of acceptance among the Muslim community toward religious practices of others, particularly within the context of states with differing socio-religious backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Islamic Tolerance

In Islam, the concept of tolerance is closely associated with the Arabic term *tasamuh* (التسامح), which represents a foundational principle emphasizing harmony, justice, and respect for diversity. *Tasamuh* is derived from the root word *samaha*, which conveys meanings such as gentleness, forgiveness, and leniency. It reflects an attitude of openness and compassion in human relations, regardless of religious, racial, or cultural differences (El Hasbi & Fuady, 2024). *Tasamuh* in dealings with non-Muslims does not imply religious compromise, but rather mutual respect among adherents of different faiths, as well as concern for social issues and common interests (Mustafar & Badhrulhisham, 2021).

The Qur'an and Sunnah (The actions, statements, and silent approvals of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)) emphasize that tolerance is a core principle in building a peaceful and united society. One of the most frequently cited verses is Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 256: "There is no compulsion in religion," which underlines Islam's rejection of forced belief. Likewise, in Surah Al-Mumtahanah, verse 8, Allah commands Muslims to act justly and kindly toward non-Muslims who do not wage war against them. This verse highlights Islam's recognition of human rights in interreligious relations. Historically, the Prophet Muhammad SAW exemplified *tasamuh* through the Constitution of Madinah, which granted rights and protections to non-Muslim communities, allowing diverse groups to live peacefully under one Islamic political entity (El Hasbi & Fuady, 2024).

Al-Qaradawi elaborates that *tasamuh* encompasses three key levels. First, granting religious freedom to non-Muslims to choose their beliefs without coercion or threat. Second, ensuring that non-Muslims are allowed to maintain their beliefs without being forced to abandon them. Third, permitting them to conduct religious rituals permitted in their own traditions, even if such rituals are prohibited in Islam. Thus, *tasamuh* in Islam does not denote compromising one's creed, but rather principled tolerance, an ethical engagement in differences, grounded in the objectives of Islamic law (*maqasid syariah*) and the recognition of the legitimate presence of other religions within a shared social space (Abdul Aziz, 2024). Within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the principle of *tasamuh* is applied in the context of flexible social dealings (*mu'amalah*), such as trade,

visiting, and cooperation with non-Muslims, provided such interactions do not involve religious rituals that contravene Islamic teachings. Therefore, *tasamuh* is a vital approach for fostering an inclusive and peaceful society where every individual is free to practice their faith without infringing on the rights of others.

Ultimately, the concept of Islamic tolerance must be understood from multiple dimensions to prevent Muslims from inadvertently engaging in practices of *tasyabbuh* (imitation of non-Islamic religious rituals), while remaining firmly committed to Islamic creed (*aqidah*) (Ibrahim 2019). In Malaysia's pluralistic society, internalizing this concept is especially crucial for Muslim converts (*mualaf*), who often face dilemmas in adjusting to multireligious environments. A sound understanding of *tasamuh* enables Muslims to practice tolerance based on the principles of *shariah*, thereby contributing to the construction of a united and harmonious nation.

Islamic Guidelines on Participation in Non-Islamic Celebrations

A celebration refers to an activity organized either individually or collectively to commemorate a significant event with cultural, religious, or historical value. Celebrations also serve as a medium to strengthen identity, enhance social bonds, and foster mutual understanding among different ethnic and religious communities. From the Islamic perspective, celebrations must be based on obedience to Allah SWT, spiritual devotion, and the expression of gratitude for blessings and religious accomplishments. Islam does not encourage excessive celebrations or those that contradict Islamic law (Mustafar & Badhrulhisham, 2021).

The views of Islamic scholars regarding Muslim participation in non-Islamic religious celebrations vary, depending on the context, intention, and form of participation. In general, scholars agree that Muslims are not permitted to participate in non-Islamic celebrations if such participation involves religious rituals or beliefs that contradict Islamic creed (*aqidah*), such as worshipping idols, wearing religious symbols of other faiths, or directly engaging in non-Islamic rituals (Zulkifli, 2018). This is based on the verse from Surah Al-Kafirun (109:6), "To you be your religion, and to me my religion," which clearly delineates the boundary between Islamic faith and other beliefs. According to the *Lajnah Fatwa al-Da'imah* (1990), comprising senior scholars from Saudi Arabia, attending or imitating ritualistic practices of other religions is considered a form of *tasyabbuh* (imitation), which is prohibited in Islam, as it signifies an implicit recognition of those beliefs.

However, more lenient perspectives exist among contemporary scholars, especially when the participation is purely social and does not involve acts of worship or compromise religious principles. For instance, al-Qaradawi (2002) permits Muslims to attend non-Muslim celebrations as part of social interaction (*muamalat*), provided it does not compromise Islamic *aqidah* and is intended to maintain social harmony. In the Malaysian context, the 78th *Muzakarah* (Conference) of the National Fatwa Committee in 2007 concluded that Muslims may attend non-Muslim religious celebrations under specific conditions. These include: the event must not contain religious rituals, must not be held in places of worship, must not involve glorification of religious symbols, and must not include utterances contrary to Islamic beliefs. These ruling underscores the importance of preserving Islamic faith while promoting interfaith harmony through cross-cultural and interreligious engagement.

For Muslim converts (*mualaf*), a clear understanding of the rulings and guidelines concerning participation in their original religious festivals is vital. It helps them manage familial and communal relationships without compromising their Islamic faith. Scholarly discussions on this matter demonstrate that Islam is not rigid, but instead offers room for contextual consideration based on *maqasid syariah*, cultural realities, and contemporary challenges.

Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Sabah: A Context for Intercultural Celebrations

In terms of regional diversity, the state of Sabah in Borneo showcases a unique social composition, shaped by various ethnic groups that form its population. Md Rasip et al. (2025) explain that Sabah is home to 33 indigenous ethnic groups who speak over 50 languages and 80 dialects. The Kadazan-Dusun people constitute the largest ethnic group in the state, comprising nearly 30% of the population. They celebrate the *Pesta Kaamatan* (Harvest Festival) annually on 30 and 31 May, as a form of thanksgiving to the spirit of rice and the bounty of the harvest. The Bajau also known as the "Cowboys of the East" and the Murut, formerly known as headhunters from the

highlands, are the second and third largest ethnic groups in Sabah. In addition, many other indigenous groups reside in Sabah, such as the Bisaya, Brunei Malays, Bugis, Kedayan, Lotud, Ludayeh, Rungus, Suluk, Minokok, Bonggi, Ida'an, and many more. The Chinese community also forms a significant part of the non-indigenous population in the state.

According to 2020 statistics, approximately 69.6% of Sabah's population are Muslims, 24.7% are Christians, 5.1% Buddhists, 0.2% adhere to other religions, and 0.4% report no religion (Wikipedia, 2020). Sabah is renowned for its high level of religious and cultural tolerance among its multiethnic population. This harmony is acknowledged not only by political and community leaders but is also evident in the way festivals of various communities are celebrated together in a spirit of unity and goodwill—demonstrating openness and intercommunal harmony (Mohd Tamring & Mahadi, 2020).

Kelantan's Islamic Identity and Comparative Perspective with Sabah

In contrast to Sabah, Kelantan is a state deeply influenced by strong Malay-Islamic traditions. Based on 2024 data, the population comprises 95.5% Malay Muslims, 1.2% other Bumiputera, 2.4% Chinese (Buddhist), 0.3% Indian (Hindu), and 0.6% Siamese (Buddhist) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025). The majority of Kelantan's population is made up of the Malay Muslim community, and religious practices play a highly dominant role in daily life. Here, Islam not only influences religious rituals such as congregational prayers, but also permeates almost all aspects of culture, including the arts, fashion, and food (Erasiah et al., 2023).

Traditional art forms such as *wayang kulit* and *menorah* dance (of Siamese origin) have been adapted to reflect Malay-Kelantanese Islamic values, often emphasizing moral teachings and religious education embedded in daily living (Fan, & Silahudin, 2024). In Kelantan, the strong influence of Islam also shapes the state's identity—such as through governance policies that integrate *shariah* principles into state law—making Kelantan an example of a state that has incorporated more Islamic elements into its social and legal structure (Erasiah et al., 2023). Despite Islam shaping the landscape for 95% of the population, interethnic relations and integration in Kelantan have remained peaceful and harmonious. Religious tolerance, economic cooperation, and cultural adaptation have been key factors supporting close relationships between the various ethnic groups (Fan, & Silahudin, 2024).

While religious and cultural differences are clearly observed, both Kelantan and Sabah demonstrate wisdom in managing their diversity. Sabah, with its more heterogeneous population, emphasizes values of tolerance and respect for other religions and cultures. Despite differences in belief, communities in Sabah tend to live in a spirit of mutual respect. On the other hand, Kelantan with its strong Islamic identity integrates religious values into social life, while also allowing its people to preserve deeply rooted Malay cultural traditions. Both states, though different in their approaches to culture and religion, exemplify how diversity can be harmoniously woven together, contributing to a more peaceful and understanding society.

Previous Studies on the Celebration of Non-Muslim Festivals among Muslim Converts

Several studies have explored ethnic traditions, particularly the celebration of festivals and cultural practices in Sabah and Kelantan, which contribute to social harmony, ethnic tolerance, and cultural preservation. A study by Andin et al. (2022) examined the role of indigenous festivals in Sabah in fostering ethnic tolerance, using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). This theory emphasizes three key elements—attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control—that influence how individuals engage with ethnic celebrations such as *Pesta Ka'amatan* (Kadazandusun), *Regatta Lepa* (Bajau), and *Pesta Kalimantan* (Murut). The study recommends continued application of this theory in future research to enhance understanding of the relationship between ethnic identity and festival participation.

Another study by Johnes et al. (2022) investigated the role of folk festivals in strengthening social cohesion. Folk celebrations held by various ethnic groups in Malaysia, particularly in Sabah, were found to encourage integration and enhance interethnic relations. This qualitative study analyzed literature to show how folk festivals contribute to the development of economic and social sectors—such as tourism and agriculture—while also promoting ethnic harmony. Lazarus and Abdul Rahman (2022) studied the transformation of the *Magahau*

celebration among the Rungus ethnic group in Sabah, highlighting the shift from ritual ceremonies to communal festivals as a result of changes in belief systems. Their study focused on the cultural transition within the Rungus community influenced by religious developments and social change. In another study, Lazarus and Saearani (2023) examined the *Mamapak* ritual and how the structure of traditional performances among the Rungus has evolved. Both studies demonstrate how social and religious changes have influenced traditional practices, with the community adapting their rituals to suit modern contexts. Karuppiah and Hussin (2021) conducted a study on intercultural marriages among the Sino-Kadazan community in Sabah and the challenges they face in maintaining their ethnic identity. The study revealed that interethnic marriages have fostered harmonious relationships within the community while preserving cultural elements. These studies collectively indicate that cultural practices and festivals play a crucial role in strengthening interethnic relations, fostering social integration, and preserving Malaysia's cultural heritage.

In Kelantan, a study by Mat Hassan and Mohd Yusoff (2018) explored Peranakan Chinese elements in the performance of the *Menora* dance. The research shows how intermarriage between Chinese and Siamese communities in Kelantan resulted in cultural assimilation evident in the traditional *Menora* dance. The Peranakan Chinese influence emerged through the cultural assimilation process involving intermarriage and cultural interactions between the two communities. A second study by Yaakob et al. (2023) discussed factors contributing to social harmony and cohesion between the Malay and Siamese ethnic groups in Kelantan. It found that government policies, religious teachings, and local cultural practices—such as the use of the Kelantanese dialect and the recognition of *bumiputera* status—have fostered mutual respect and tolerance between these groups. A third study by Abu Bakar and Raja Halid (2024) investigated *Dikir Laba* performances in Kelantan, a form of traditional entertainment that is gradually declining among the younger generation. The study highlighted how *Dikir Laba* serves to strengthen social ties within the community, especially during weddings, religious celebrations, and festive occasions. These studies illustrate how various cultural elements, from *Menora* dance to *Dikir Laba*, contribute to social harmony and the preservation of traditional heritage in Kelantan.

Most previous studies have focused on the role of ethnic culture and festivals in promoting social harmony and ethnic integration, as seen in the works of Andin et al. (2022) and n Johnes and colleagues (2022). Similarly, research on cultural and ritual changes among ethnic communities in Sabah—such as the Rungus and Sino-Kadazan—tends to emphasize sociocultural identity rather than the specific experiences of Muslim converts (*mualaf*). In Kelantan, the focus has been more on cultural interaction between the Malay, Chinese, and Siamese communities, and traditional practices such as *Menora* and *Dikir Laba*.

However, there remains a lack of direct and in-depth research examining the real-life experiences of Muslim converts in facing non-Muslim celebrations, especially from the perspectives of tolerance, challenges, and the *aqidah*-social considerations they navigate. Additionally, there has been little discussion on how Muslim converts adjust to family relationships with non-Muslim relatives, or how religious guidance assists them in deciding whether or not to participate in such celebrations. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the lived experiences of *mualaf* in Sabah and Kelantan two states with distinctly different social realities in understanding and embodying the concept of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious celebrations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of Muslim converts (*mualaf*) in celebrating the festivals of their non-Muslim family members. A qualitative design was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the respondents' experiences, views, and values within their social and cultural contexts. The study involved only six Muslim converts who were purposively selected from two main states, namely Sabah and Kelantan, representing different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In addition, two key figures involved in matters concerning Muslim converts in these states namely Info#SO (for Sabah) and Info#KO (for Kelantan) were also interviewed to provide supplementary insights. The research instruments consisted of questions on basic demographics and semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed accounts of the respondents' experiences and perspectives. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded using a digital voice recorder, and later fully transcribed by the researcher for analysis purposes. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the researcher also conducted peer debriefing with fellow researchers to review the codes and themes developed, ensuring that they were free from individual bias.

For data analysis, the researcher employed thematic analysis using an inductive approach. The process began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to allow the researcher to fully absorb the meaning of each narrative. At this stage, initial notes were made to identify significant excerpts or expressions related to the study's objectives, such as aspects of family relationships, boundaries of faith (*aqidah*), cultural adaptation, and emotional experiences. The second step involved coding, where each meaningful unit of data was marked with a specific code. These initial codes were descriptive in nature, for example, "maintaining family ties," "not attending religious ceremonies," or "honouring family with gifts." The codes were then grouped into broader categories, which were later clustered into preliminary themes based on shared meanings or recurring patterns. Subsequently, these themes were compared between the findings from Sabah and Kelantan to identify similarities and differences. To ensure respondent confidentiality and to facilitate direct comparative analysis between the two localities, the researcher used the code Info-S# for respondents from Sabah and Info-K# for those from Kelantan. The process continued with theme review, where the relevance of each theme was assessed against the raw data. Themes that did not sufficiently support the study's objectives were either discarded or merged with stronger themes. This was followed by theme defining and naming, in which the boundaries and meanings of each developed theme were clearly articulated.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Attitudes Towards the Celebration of Non-Muslim Festivals.

Informants were asked about their attitudes towards celebrating their former religious festivals. Based on the interviews, the findings from new Muslim converts in Sabah are as follows:

Info-S1#, who comes from a Christian background, still attends festive celebrations when invited by family members. However, participation is limited to gathering and dining together, without engaging in any religious elements of the celebration. This is explained in the following narrative:

"Actually, from the beginning, we only held simple feasts which were more of a family gathering. It wasn't an officially celebrated event, as I mentioned earlier. We just gathered, enjoyed food together, exchanged small gifts, and then everyone went home. That's all."

Similarly, Info-S2#, also from a Christian family, shared the following narrative:

"Every time I return home for the festive holidays, my family understands that I can't eat everything that's prepared. Usually, it's my sister who cooks because my mother misses her children's cooking. So if I didn't cook the food myself, only then would I eat what was served."

Info-S3#, who was formerly Buddhist, recounted their experience of celebrating Chinese New Year:

"My family would usually prepare food and eat together in turns. But after I embraced Islam, my mother understood that I needed to eat separately. So next to the house, there's a store that my mother decorated beautifully, and we would eat there. We also cooked and brought our own food."

The attitude of Muslim converts in celebrating their family's original religious festivals in Sabah aligns with the explanation given by an officer responsible for managing Muslim converts in the state, as follows:

"We advise converts that they may attend family celebrations as long as they do not commit acts of shirk. For example, they should not worship idols, participate in religious prayers of other faiths, or consume prohibited food. They are also advised to observe proper Islamic dress and manners. If the celebration is social in nature, such as a meal or a family visit, then it is permitted." (Info#SO)

In contrast, the narratives from Muslim converts in Kelantan are as follows:

Info-K1# decided not to participate in the traditional Chinese New Year celebration when invited by family

members. The informant opted not to attend in order to avoid family tension and protect their non-Muslim mother from being mocked by other family members due to their conversion to Islam:

"She did invite me, but I didn't really want to go because if I went, they would make fun of my mother. So to avoid putting her in that position, I decided not to go."

Info-K2#, originally from the Philippines and formerly Christian, married a native Kelantanese and no longer celebrates their former festivals. This was explained as follows:

"We don't want to go back anymore, we've cut it off. We no longer celebrate Christmas. It's not that we hate it, but it makes us feel unsettled. When we return, the family prepares joyfully, setting up the tree, putting up lights, the smell of food—all of that reminds us of the past. Our hearts become divided. We love our family, but at the same time, we are afraid that our faith will be shaken. So, we decided not to go back."

Info-K3#, of Siamese descent, shared their thoughts when invited to join the Songkran festival:

"Songkran is celebrated, but I personally don't really participate. Usually, people just take water and bathe, as part of tradition. In rural areas, people playfully splash water at each other joyfully. I haven't really had the full experience because during my school days, when they held events, I didn't feel like going, so I didn't join."

Respondents in Kelantan were found to be more cautious in participating in non-Muslim family celebrations. This was also stated by the management of Muslim Converts in Kelantan as follows:

"In family festive gatherings, the convert community may gather and eat together with their families, but they must ensure that the food provided is halal, and that no non-Islamic religious practices are participated in by Muslims." (Info#KO)

Factors Influencing Tolerance

A key factor driving tolerance among new Muslim converts towards non-Muslim festive celebrations is the desire to maintain harmonious family relationships. In Sabah, despite religious differences, family ties remain strong. Family members continue to visit and show care for one another, even asking when someone doesn't celebrate a certain festival. This empathy reflects mutual respect for each other's beliefs. Attending religious celebrations of other family members also occurs without prejudice. This shows that harmony in a multireligious society is possible when family values and mutual respect form the foundation of interaction. Info-S1# elaborated:

"Yes, they do visit. Even when we don't hold celebrations, they will still ask. In our family, some have interfaith marriages. So if someone doesn't celebrate Hari Raya or Chinese New Year, others will still ask why, and usually they'll still come and join."

Info-S2# experienced a period of estrangement after embracing Islam, but the relationship was later restored, especially during festive seasons. The ability to maintain family ties without compromising religious commitment reflects constructive two-way tolerance between people of different faiths in a pluralistic society:

"At first, I was quite distant from my family, but now I've started meeting them again during Christmas."

Info-S3#, despite now celebrating Eid as a Muslim, still values their cultural heritage by also celebrating Chinese New Year. In fact, non-Muslim family members show interest in understanding the Malay-Muslim culture by attending Eid celebrations and seeking out traditional dishes such as rendang, festive cookies, and spiced chicken. This mutual exchange illustrates acceptance of differences and contributes to building a harmonious and united society:

"Chinese New Year? Of course I celebrate... When it's Eid, they come over... they'll look for rendang, cookies, spiced chicken... they look for all those things... they want to learn about Malay culture."

The encouragement for Muslim converts' involvement in festive celebrations in Sabah was expressed by an officer as follows:

"In family life in Sabah, there are various religions. So when the festive season comes, they help each other in making preparations. Some are busy cooking, others are tidying the house. Although their religions differ, each still carries out their own religious rituals. However, the family relationships remain close, with mutual respect for one another." (Info#SO)

Among informants in Kelantan, tolerance toward non-Muslim family members is strongly influenced by emotional bonds, particularly between mother and child. A mother's unconditional love, even after her child has converted to Islam, forms the foundation of positive emotional ties and motivates new Muslim converts to remain respectful and tolerant towards their non-Muslim family. Info-K1# shared:

"My mother is a very understanding person. I know she was disappointed, but she never got angry with me. She just said, 'You follow the path you choose, as long as you are happy. I will always pray for you.' When she said that, my heart softened. I felt guilty, but at the same time relieved because my mother did not abandon me. She treated me as usual—calling me to eat, asking how I was, and sometimes even buying halal food for me. Although she could not fully accept my change, her love for me never faded..."

Info-K3# explained that although there is physical distance, emotional ties remain intact:

"I keep in touch with my mother only through Facebook, even though it has been a long time since I last went back. It's not because I don't want to, but because the cost of going back to the Philippines is too high. Even my income here is just enough to get by. So, the way I maintain my relationship with my mother is by always chatting with her, asking how she is, and sending pictures of the grandchildren. Sometimes, during festive seasons, my mother will send me long messages."

Despite facing rejection from some family members, Muslim convert still strive to maintain good relations with their mothers. This shows their commitment to preserving family ties despite religious challenges. Info-K3# described this as follows:

"I can agree with the way my family treats me, like I'm still part of the family. That is the most important thing... it makes our family bond even closer. I realize that not all families are able to accept one's conversion to Islam easily. Some family members still opposed my decision, especially in the early stages. Even so, I continued to make efforts to maintain a good relationship, particularly with my mother who has not embraced Islam. Despite the differences in religion and the challenges of acceptance, I hold firmly that preserving family ties is more important."

What is clear is that post-conversion relationships are often shaped by the initial negative perceptions of non-Muslim families toward the acceptance of Islam. This was explained as follows:

When someone converts to Islam, there will indeed be negative perceptions among family members. They feel as though I have become distant from them, which makes the relationship strained and leads to conflict in the early stages. When conflicts arise, converts sometimes find it difficult to return and meet their families, especially when they are ridiculed with all sorts of unpleasant remarks from family members." (Info#KO)

Understanding Religious Boundaries During Non-Muslim Celebrations

A significant aspect among new Muslim converts when attending non-Muslim family celebrations is the choice of modest and appropriate attire. This reflects an understanding of basic Islamic principles and an effort to preserve personal dignity and faith even in non-Muslim settings:

"We have a dress code. For example, when we used to attend Christmas in church, we wouldn't wear things like

singlets. Instead, we'd dress more modestly and cover our aurah." (Info-S1#)

Some Muslim converts also consult religious teachers or lecturers before attending non-Muslim family events. This cautious approach helps them avoid any actions that might compromise their Islamic beliefs:

"Before I went, I asked my lecturer for advice. I asked whether I could attend, because I was afraid my faith might be shaken. My lecturer and ustaz said it's permissible, and there's no sin—as long as our intention is sincere. Everything depends on our intention and submission to Allah." (Info-S2#)

In festive settings, some Muslim converts opt to prepare their own food and eat separately to avoid consuming non-halal food:

"We eat on our own in a section next to the house. There's a store that my mother beautifully decorated. We cook and bring our own food to eat there." (Info-S3#)

Although this may seem isolating, it reflects the early struggles of Muslim converts to balance Islamic obligations with family sensitivities. In Islamic jurisprudence, such situations are discussed under concepts like *darurah* (necessity), *rukhsah* (concessions), and *hikmah* (wisdom in outreach), especially for those still educating their families.

One of Muslim convert from Kelantan shared:

"When I wanted to go back home, they asked me not to wear the hijab. So in the house, I didn't wear it, but I didn't leave the house either. That's why I didn't return during Chinese New Year." (Info-K1#)

Some, however, have chosen not to participate in such celebrations at all:

"I have not gone back to celebrate Christmas with my family for a long time. It is not because I do not love them, but because I am worried that the festive atmosphere may affect my faith. I am aware that I am still new in Islam and my conviction is not yet firmly strong. Therefore, if I am in an environment filled with Christian customs and rituals, I am afraid that I might be influenced again." (Info-K2#)

Another Muslim convert described how their family's understanding has evolved:

"Previously, my family said that in Malaysia, matters of religion should be understood together. So, they stopped questioning me. Now I wear the niqab, and no one asks why I changed." (Info-K3#)

Attending non-Muslim social events is permissible as long as it does not involve prohibited elements or contradict Islamic beliefs, such as idol worship, alcohol, or religious rituals. In these contexts, the Siamese convert from Kelantan continues to uphold Islamic principles (such as aurah), demonstrating the ability to distinguish between social involvement and religious boundaries.

DISCUSSION

The form of tolerance demonstrated by new Muslim converts in Sabah in maintaining family relationships despite religious differences reflects what is known as interfaith familial resilience a strong and enduring family bond that persists regardless of differing religions or beliefs. In the sociology of religion, such relationships signify the presence of *everyday religious tolerance*, which refers to daily practices of tolerance that occur naturally in familial and multi-ethnic social interactions (A. Jauhar & Mofawg, 2023). The narratives obtained through interviews indicate that new Muslim converts in Sabah embody the Islamic value of *ukhuwah insaniyyah* (human fraternity), which emphasizes that Muslims can build positive and inclusive relationships with non-Muslims as long as it does not violate the principles of Islamic creed (*akidah*). Mutual participation such as Muslims attending Chinese New Year celebrations and non-Muslims joining Hari Raya festivities is regarded as a form of *reciprocal respect*, which underpins social harmony. This aligns with the spirit of the Malaysian Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion and cultural expression. Hence, the experiences and narratives of these new Muslim converts not only demonstrate a high degree of tolerance but also serve as a

living model for peaceful coexistence in a religiously diverse society.

Undeniably, familial relationships serve as a source of strength for new Muslim converts in building their identity. The continued affection of a mother even after her child embraces Islam becomes a critical foundation for the development of emotional well-being and a tolerant attitude among Muslim converts in Kelantan. This study supports findings by Sintang et al. (2022), who found that well-maintained interfaith family relationships can foster harmony and mutual understanding across ethnic lines. Therefore, the bond of love and respect toward non-Muslim mothers and families continues to be a catalyst for harmony in multireligious family contexts. In Sabah, new Muslim converts are more open to maintaining interfaith familial relationships through daily acts of tolerance and mutual celebration of religious festivals, reflecting values of *ukhuwah insaniyyah* and social cohesion. In contrast, in Kelantan, relationships tend to focus more on maternal affection and a cautious approach regarding religious boundaries, with an emphasis on emotional stability and respect within family ties.

The experiences of new Muslim converts in Sabah reveal a more flexible approach to participating in non-Muslim celebrations, depending on the family background and circumstances. The narratives collected from Info-S1# to Info-S3# show that they continue to attend family events on the basis of familial ties without engaging in religious rituals, and they remain observant of Islamic guidelines such as dietary laws. A study by Mustafar & Badhrulhisham (2021) emphasized that such *tasamuh* (tolerance) in social matters is crucial to maintaining harmony without compromising religious principles.

Conversely, the narratives from new Muslim converts in Kelantan portray a more cautious attitude toward non-Muslim celebrations. This is influenced by both family sensitivities and a commitment to their new Muslim identity. Info-K1# chose not to attend such celebrations to protect the dignity of their mother, while Info-K2# and Info-K3# demonstrated a conscious distancing from their previous religious festivities as a way to strengthen their faith and identity (to avoid weakening their belief). This finding is consistent with the study by Wan Zanuddin et al. (2024), which found that such attitudinal adjustments reflect the efforts of new Muslim converts to maintain harmony while safeguarding their creed through principled and diplomatic means. In Sabah, new Muslim converts tend to attend non-Muslim family celebrations selectively while observing Islamic boundaries, reflecting principled *tasamuh*, as suggested by Abdul Aziz (2024). In contrast, a firmer stance is taken in Kelantan, where Muslim converts abstain from attending celebrations to protect family dignity and reinforce their Islamic identity.

The experiences and narratives of new Muslim converts in Sabah during non-Muslim celebrations such as dressing modestly and covering their *aurah*, consulting religious authorities, and adhering to dietary restrictions illustrate a cautious form of cultural adaptation. This aligns with the concept of *religious boundary maintenance* in the sociology of religion, where individuals who embrace a new religion tend to uphold the boundaries of their faith within interfaith social interactions to avoid severing familial ties (Rubini et al., 2023). This diplomatic approach reflects the Islamic principle of *maslahah* the safeguarding of religious interests while not compromising social relationships which can serve as a guideline for interreligious engagement in a pluralistic society.

This demonstrates that new Muslim converts not only understand the fundamentals of *shariah* but also possess the capacity to balance the need to uphold *akidah* with the social demands of maintaining family relationships wisely. In Kelantan, the decision by new Muslim converts not to celebrate their former religious holidays is aimed at preserving faith and avoiding any form of *tasyabbuh* (imitation of non-Islamic practices), even under familial pressure. This cautious attitude reflects a process of self-discipline (*tarbiah*) that harmonizes *shariah* obligations with family etiquette, as emphasized by Kamal Basir (2023), who stressed the need for gradual religious guidance for new Muslim converts. The willingness to learn, ask questions, and make informed decisions is also evident in the narratives collected, revealing the efforts of new Muslim converts to build their Muslim identity without severing social ties abruptly.

CONCLUSION

The attitudes of Muslim converts toward the celebration of non-Muslim festivals differ between Sabah and Kelantan, reflecting varying levels of tolerance shaped by their respective social and cultural contexts. The

narrative among Muslim converts in Sabah demonstrates a higher level of tolerance through selective participation in family celebrations while adhering to Islamic boundaries. In contrast, the narrative of Muslim converts in Kelantan emphasizes a more cautious approach, with a tendency to distance themselves from such celebrations in order to preserve their Islamic identity and respect family sensitivities. These differing narratives highlight how levels of tolerance are influenced by cultural, religious, and familial factors in the lives of Muslim converts.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that structured post-conversion guidance programs and interfaith support workshops be introduced, involving religious institutions, community organizations, and non-Muslim family members. Such programs would not only assist new converts in managing family relationships more harmoniously without compromising their faith, but also provide non-Muslim family members with the opportunity to better understand Islamic sensitivities. In this way, family ties can be preserved within an atmosphere of mutual respect, preventing conflicts between religious obligations and familial bonds. For future research, it is suggested to use a clear and consistent theoretical framework, such as identity negotiation theory or *maqasid shariah*, so that the data and interpretations can be explained more clearly and systematically.

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