



**INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN MALAYSIA: A
STUDY OF THE DIALOGUE DESIGNS AND THEIR
EFFECTS ON LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING AND
PREJUDICE**

BY

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ABSTRACT

Since its implementation decades ago, inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia has yet to reach its full potential. Discrepancies in the concept of the dialogue resulted in confusion with various groups voicing their objections. As such, to eliminate doubts and suspicions, a clearer concept and an effective dialogue process which associated with the design of dialogue is required. This study intends to explore the inter-religious dialogue designs currently employed by various organizations and assess their effectiveness for increasing understanding and reducing prejudice. Case study design was employed to examine the design of inter-religious dialogue and the two-group post-test only randomized experimental design was applied to analyse the level of understanding and prejudice. The qualitative finding revealed that there were four types of dialogue practiced by various organizations, and the most commonly used was critical-dialogic education. Contact theory and inter-group dialogue stages were not systematically applied. Consequently, quantitative results through the t-test proved that there was no significant difference in the level of prejudice and understanding between the control and experimental groups, while the correlation analysis result indicated that understanding and prejudice were significantly inter-correlated. Based on both qualitative and quantitative findings, this study proposes a model for inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia (i.e. the elite and grassroots model). Apart from that, efforts should also be directed at developing a more systematic inter-religious dialogue design in the future so as to guarantee its efficacy in achieving the desired goals.

مستخلص البحث

عاشت ماليزيا عقوداً طويلة تمارس حوار الأديان؛ ومع ذلك فلم يُظهر حوار الأديان في ماليزيا النتائج الواعدة والمرتقبة طوال الفترة الماضية من الحوار. بل على العكس، إذ أسفرت أزمة مصطلح "الحوار" وعملية الحوار تضارباً وارتباكاً في الساحة؛ ولا يزال "الحوار" يواجه اعتراضات مستمرة من مختلف الفئات؛ ولذلك، فلا بد من الاهتمام بحوار الأديان لتوعية الناس بحقائقه؛ ولتوضح للناس مفهوم الحوار، وعمليته ومنهجه بشكل أوسع وأدق عما هو عليه الآن. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف منهج فعال ومؤثر في الحوار بين الأديان؛ بناءً على فرضيتينهما: زيادة التفاهم، والحد من التحيز بين الفئات الأديان. وقد طبقت هذه الدراسة أولاً منهج دراسة الحالة لتحليل مناهج الحوار بين الأديان. وثانياً أجرت الدراسة تصميمًا تجريبيًا عشوائيًا على مجموعتين متكافئتين لتحليل مستوى التفاهم والتحيز بين الفئات. كشف التحليل الأول عن أربعة أنواع من الحوارات التي كانت تمارس من قبل المنظمات، وأكثرها شيوعاً هو الحوار التعليمي. ويلاحظ هنا أن نظرية الاتصال ومراحل الحوار لم تكن تسير على النهج المطلوب. وكشف الثاني أنه لم يكن هناك اختلافاً كبيراً في التفاهم والتحيز بين المجموعة التحكم والمجموعة التجريبية. وقد اقترحت هذه الدراسة نموذجاً جديداً من الحوار بين الأديان في ماليزيا، وهو نموذج النخبة والقاعدة الشعبية. إضافة إلى أهمية توجيه اهتمام خاص لتطوير منهجية الحوار بين الأديان في المستقبل، من أجل ضمان فعاليته في تحقيق النتائج المرجوة منه.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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Signature..... Date.....

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**INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN MALAYSIA: A STUDY OF THE
DIALOGUE DESIGNS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON LEVEL OF
UNDERSTANDING AND PREJUDICE**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

am.	(<i>ante meridiem</i>): between midnight and midday
AMEIA	Archdiocesan Ministry of Inter-religious Affairs
CB	Community building and social action
CCD	Centre for Civilizational Dialogue of University of Malaya
CI	Collective inquiry
CE	Common Era; Critical-dialogic education
CR	Conflict resolution
DV	Dependent variable
ed/eds.	editor, edited by
edn.	edition/editions
e.g.	(<i>exempligratia</i>): for example
etc.	(<i>et cetera</i>): and so forth pages that follow
H _a	alternative hypothesis
Hr	hour
et al.	(<i>et alia</i>): and others
i.e.	that is
IIS	Islamic Information Services
IKIM	Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia)
INSaF	Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship
IPSI	Islamic Propagation Society International
IYC	Intellectual Youth Club of International Islamic University Malaysia
IV	Independent variable
JKMPKA	<i>Jawatankuasa Mempromosikan Persefahaman dan Keharmonian Antara Penganut Agama</i> (Special Committee to Promote Inter-Religious Understanding and Harmony)
Min	minute
MCCBCHST	Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism Sikhism and Taoism
MPP (USM)	<i>Majlis Perwakilan Pelajar University Sains Malaysia Kampus Kesihatan</i> (Student Representative Council of University of Science Malaysia Health Campus)
NA	Not available
n.d.	no date
NGO/NGOs	non-governmental organization
no./no.s	number/numbers
Org.	Organization
PLS	Pure Life Society
p.b.u.h	Peace be upon him
pm.	(<i>post meridiem</i>): after 12 o'clock/noon
STAD (MMU)	Student Affairs Department Multimedia Universiti Melaka Campus
TOR	Terms of Reference

TRANSLITERATION

CONSONANTS

'	ء	z	ز	q	ق
b	ب	s	س	k	ك
t	ت	sh	ش	l	ل
th	ث	ṣ	ص	m	م
j	ج	ḍ	ض	n	ن
ḥ	ح	ṭ	ط	h	ه
kh	خ	ẓ	ظ	w	و
d	د	‘	ع	y	ي
dh	ذ	gh	غ		
r	ر	f	ف		

VOWELS

Short Vowels

<i>Fatha</i>	َ	a
<i>Kasra</i>	ِ	i
<i>Damma</i>	ُ	u

Long Vowels

Long <i>fatha</i>	اَ	ā
Long <i>kasra</i>	يَ	ī
Long <i>damma</i>	وَ	ū

DIPHTHONG

ay	اي
aw	او

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Remarks by scholars or leaders on the significance of inter-religious dialogue has long resonated in the mainstream media and studies have reported its role in fostering peaceful co-existence among religious communities. Azman Amin Hassan the Chief Director of the Department of National Unity and Integration for instance, stresses the need for a dialogue platform in order to cope with issues associated with religious differences rather than simply suppressing them (“Time is right,” 2010).

These recommendations suggest that inter-religious dialogue is an effective tool in the management of diverse religious communities. However, there are still some who are unable to understand the need for such a dialogue. Prickly issues such as religious conversions were not appropriately dealt with and this led to prejudice among religious groups. This negative perception can be altered if the effectiveness of the current inter-religious dialogue designs is properly addressed. An effective dialogue requires an established and systematic design with the capability of delivering a positive impact on society.

Khairulnizam Mat Karim (2008), stressed that research in the field of inter-religious dialogue should encompass not only the theoretical, but also the practical aspects. Research on the theoretical aspect should include the goals, principles, dialogue guidelines, methods of implementation, and rules to be followed by those involved in designing and implementing the dialogue process.

The practical aspect of religious dialogue should include an evaluation of its effectiveness, the problems encountered, and the activities or approaches applied. Feedback from the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, and a thorough understanding of legal or constitutional matters affecting ethnic and religious diversity in Malaysia are also relevant from the practical aspect. Previous works on inter-religious dialogue focused mainly on its importance, roles, prospects and challenges. This theoretical approach led to the sluggish and unproductive implementation of the dialogue as there was insufficient effort directed at improving the designs and methods of implementation.

This study investigates the design of dialogue as applied in organizational models and analyzes the effectiveness of this design in increasing inter-religious understanding and eradicating detrimental attitudes such as prejudice to avoid inter-religious conflict. This chapter provides an introduction to this study including the background and history, the problems encountered, research questions, objectives, hypothesis and the significance of this research.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The background of this study is based on the general overview of inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. This sub-topic covers the extent to which inter-religious dialogue has affected inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations in this country.

The Landscape of Inter-religious and Inter-ethnic Relation in Malaysia

In order to grasp an understanding of the landscape regarding inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Malaysia, one has to take into account the role of power

relations. This is due to the fact that inter-religious and inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia are partly shaped by the system of power relations which generally revolve around the issues of social justice, privileges, rights, oppressions and the like, that affect the advantaged and disadvantaged groups, or majority and minority groups.

The different perceptions on the issue of power relations and social structure give rise to a stereotyped belief and a prejudicial attitude among members in a diverse society contributing to more harm than the differences in religious beliefs. The lives of the so called advantaged and disadvantaged groups were affected by different social realities (Demoulin, Leyens, & Dovidio, in press) relating to disparities in economic security, political power, and opportunities for social advancement (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

These different social realities create different motivations for members of two groups, the advantaged and disadvantaged. While the motivation of advantaged groups is derived from their need to support the stability of the social system that benefits them, the motivation for the disadvantaged groups on the other side, is based on their desire to promote social change (Sidanius, & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In general, people are more inclined to reflect on their marginalized identities rather than their privileged position.

Many Malaysian government policies, including the educational and cultural policies, were perceived as undermining the rights of the minorities in this country and this led to the creation of much resentment among them. This situation was further exacerbated with the inculcation of Islamic cultures and values in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Malaysian society (Lee, 2000).

The Inculcation of Islamic Cultures and Values

The presence of the power relation issue was identifiable during the 1960s with the formation of the new state of Malaysia, and also during the 1980s when the government started to incorporate more Islamic values in the country's administration. The 1960s was a period when the majority Malays were making attempts to advance their dominant and privileged position and promote Malay culture and language.

However, at the same time, the minority non-Malay groups were striving to uphold and reinforce their own cultural and religious identities and heritages. This inter-community conflict persisted and worsened when the Islamic cultures and values becoming more obvious in the public space.

Several authors (e.g., Jomo, K. S., & Ahmad Shabery Cheek, 1992; Mohamad Abu Bakar, 1981; Mohammad Nor Monutty, 1989; Chandra Muzaffar, 1987.; Hussin Mutalib, 1993; Muhamad Fuzi Omar, 1999) have attributed the government's plan to inculcate Islamic values in Malaysia during the 1980s as an immediate response to the growth of Islamic resurgence movements led by various *da'wah* groups that had gained momentum since the 1970s. Considered the voice of the Muslim majority in Malaysia, the government was compelled to support this revivalism spirit with the implementation of few Islamic programs and institutions (Hussin Mutalib, 1990).

The commitment of the government in this endeavour was manifested through the allocation of funds for the establishment of institutions dedicated to the research and propagation of not only Islamic, but also Malay arts and cultures (Lee, 2000). Hussin Mutalib (1993) identified a few major Islamic programs that were undertaken by the government during the 1980s:

1. Policy declaration to remodel Malaysia's economic system into an Islamic one in 1980.
2. Establishment of Islamic Banks, Islamic Pawnshops, Islamic Insurance and an Islamic Economic Foundation in 1981.
3. Establishment of a permanent site for the International Islamic Training Camp in 1982.
4. Establishment of an International Islamic University Malaysia in 1983.
5. Official declaration of Islamisation of Government Machinery in 1984.
6. Declaring that the status of Islamic judges and courts was to be on par with their counterparts in the civil judiciary in 1988.

These developments caused uneasiness among non-Muslims as they felt that the continued existence of their cultural and religious identities were at risk. They presumed that the advancement of Malay cultural and Islamic symbols and practices in public space would result in the contraction of the religious symbols and practices of other communities and religious groups.

Places of worship were among the issues that constantly became a source of conflict between the Muslim state and the non-Muslim community. For instance, Tan C.K (1985) argues that the state allocated large amounts of funding to build mosques while withholding funding and permits for the building of churches and temples. This was evident with the increased number of mosques throughout peninsular Malaysia.

Based on interviews conducted by Abdul Rahman Embong (2001), many agree that the worst episode of inter-ethnic conflict occurred on May 13, 1969. However, the 1980s was also perceived as a dark period as ethnic relations took a plunge due to the emergence of Islamic resurgence movements. This perceived

power inequalities in terms of cultural and religious practices often led to prejudicial attitudes.

Other Salient Issues Raised by the non-Muslims

Since its early establishment, a number of issues were raised by MCCBCHST (Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism Sikhism & Taoism) based on the need to protect non-Muslim rights in this Muslim majority country.

Among the issues included in their “Note of Protest” (Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism [MCCBCHST], n.d) were the case of Lina Joy (a Malay Muslim born woman who converted to Christianity), the prohibition on the use of the word ‘*Allāh*’ by non-Muslims, the ban of *al-Kitab* (i.e. the Christian bible in the Malay language), and the issue of performing *qurbān* (sacrifice) at multi-religious and multi-ethnic schools (Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism [MCCBCHST], 2011).

Economic Dilemma among the Majority Malay Muslims

While the minority were of the opinion that privileges in terms of cultural and religious authority favoured the majority, the majority, represented by the state perceived the minority domination of the economic sector as a threat to the economic position of the Malays. This reality was most obvious during the post-independence period.

As most Malays were only involved in the traditional agricultural sector since early history, they had been left out from full participation in the economic

development of the country by the Chinese who dominated the small and medium businesses and modern sectors of employment (Lee, 2001). It was estimated that until the 1970s, the Bumiputeras held only 2.4% of the economic pie while the rest was in the hands of the Chinese and foreigners (Ho, 2005).

In fact, a subtle form of prejudice and disenchantment among the Malays towards Chinese economic dominance had existed long before the achievement of independence. This perception can be traced in Malay art and literature. A research on Malay literature done by Chew (2007) traces the presence of prejudice in the way Malay authors portrayed the role of Chinese characters.

The Chinese character is always depicted as cunning and sly. For example *Cerita Awang Putat* (The Story of Awang Putat) by A. Rahim Kajai (1941) and *Istana Berembun* (Dewy Palace) by Ishak Haji Muhammad (1910) describes how the Chinese capitalist tried to bribe the Malay aristocrats and gradually eliminate Malay economic control.

This sense of economic deprivation, coupled with a racially charged general election campaign and a few other factors triggered ethnic riots on May 13, 1969. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was then introduced by Tun Abdul Razak, the former Prime Minister, to overcome the perceived unfair distribution of economic resources that undermined the Malay majority (Mahdi Shuid & Mohd. Fauzi Yunus, 2001).

The Reality of Prejudicial Attitudes among Malaysians

All these divisive issues emerged from perceived inequalities either culturally, religiously or economically to stimulate prejudicial attitudes. Ani Arope (2009) in his speech at a gathering of the Fulbright Association admits that Malaysian society

is still ingrained with prejudice as this problem was never wisely dealt with. Instead, the existence of this problem was suppressed, and eventually, self-denial set in. This prejudicial attitude is embedded in both the minority and majority groups in this country (“Enhancing tolerance,” 2009).

One of the informants in Abdul Rahman Embong’s interview (2001) admits that ethnic relations are not as close as it seems because “a lot of jealousy and prejudice toward one another still exist.” Another informant said that the inter-ethnic or inter-religious harmony or unity that we currently experience is bounded on the basis of toleration, not so much on civility and mutual reciprocity. This unity is born “out of necessity... it is unity for survival” unity that is “instrumental, collective and artificial” and not “unity of the heart” (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2001: 75-77).

This reality is also evident in a recent survey conducted by Merdeka Centre in 2011. The finding revealed that offensive racial stereotyping is still prevalent among the Malaysian public. Since the last survey in 2006, belief in racist stereotypes such as “The Malays are lazy”, “The Chinese are greedy” and that “The Indians cannot be trusted” only declined marginally by 2%, 3% and 2% respectively. These stereotypes are held not only by members of differing racial groups, but ironically, they were also accepted by members of the stereotyped community which indicates how deeply rooted these stereotypes are (Tan S. K., 2011).

The terrifying May 13, 1969 incident can recur if the issue of prejudice is left unaddressed. Noteworthy is an incident in March 2002 where six people lost their lives and 44 suffered injuries due to a mass brawl that erupted between the Malay and Indian communities in Petaling Jaya (Kamaruddin M. Said, 2002). The role of prejudice as the source of racial discord is asserted by Sri Rahayu Ismail, Zaid Ahmad, Haslinda Abdullah and Norbaya Ahmad (2009). Thus, before another

similar tragedy occurs, proper measures are needed to reduce prejudice, and inter-religious dialogue is a promising form of intervention for that purpose.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Lack of direction and ambiguity in some aspects of inter-religious dialogue can lead to discouragement when it comes to implementation and participation. Among the ambiguous matters in the aspect of inter-religious dialogue is the definition of this concept itself. With this in mind, the following questions need to be asked. Does the dialogue involve discussion, debate, group therapy or mediation? What is the purpose of implementation? Is it to resolve conflicts or to promote inter-religious understanding? What is to be the method of implementation? Will it be in the form of a seminar, or a forum? Who are the target groups? Are these groups to be made up of experts, or the public? What is the content of such a dialogue? How effective is the current practice in achieving its objectives, for instance in reducing levels of prejudice?

The ambiguity in these areas allegedly led to incessant objections and a lacklustre implementation of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia. When the government took the step of establishing an inter-faith committee known as *Jawatankuasa Mempromosi Persefahaman dan Keharmonian di antara Penganut Agama* (JKMPKA), or Committee to Promote Inter-religious Understanding and Harmony in April 2010 (Yeap, 2011), it had to deal with objections from various groups.

These ambiguous and overlooked areas need to be clarified prior to the commencement of any inter-religious dialogue program in this country as they play a role in deciding the process aspect of the dialogue which is related to the design of

the dialogue. According to Hurtado (2001), the design of the dialogue should include elements such as materials, number of participants and sessions, setting, and the overall structure.

This research intends to investigate a specific dialogue design in existing models of inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia and examine whether these current models are effective in increasing inter-religious understanding and reducing prejudicial attitudes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A number of research questions were formulated in the quest to explore the designs of inter-religious dialogue and its effectiveness in promoting understanding and reducing prejudice.

1. What are some of previous efforts in inter-religious dialogue that had been practised by different agencies in Malaysia?
2. What were the main goals of organizations when implementing inter-religious dialogue?
3. What are the design elements, contents and processes of inter-religious dialogue models in Malaysia?
4. What are some of the underlying factors that influence how dialogues are designed?
5. To what extent are the existing models of inter-religious dialogue effective in increasing understanding and reducing prejudicial attitudes?