

## Limitation of Religious Tolerance Practices among Mualaf Family Relations

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### Abstract

The life of Muslim by birth is accustomed to the Islamic culture and way of life. However, the life of Mualaf is different whereby Mualaf faces many challenges in living as a new Muslim. Meeting the demands of Islamic teachings either in the aspect of faith, worship or ethics requires patience and motivation. While facing challenges to deal with the community who are Muslim by birth, Mualaf also face the issue of religious tolerance when interacting with non-Muslim family members. In this case, it is importance for them to understand Islamic teachings and draw the lines that limits their interaction with the other especially in the matters of faith and the practices. This study aimed to assess the limitations of religious tolerance that occurs in the realities of a mualaf life. Textually, the study analyses the previous writing such as books and paper journals that relate with the issue of Mualaf and his religious life. Moreover, the study also includes the field research in which, a total of 17 informants from 4 zones were interviewed. Their response assists to understanding the real life of mualaf in dealing and interacting with non-Muslim family members. The findings of the study found that the informants were aware that there was no compromise in matters of faith and worship. Religious tolerance among mualaf only involves social interaction such as attending non-religious ceremonies. The findings are expected to give some added values to the researcher who studies on religious tolerance and to serve as a guide to a more detailed study on the impact of religious tolerance in improving the sustainability of good relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

**Keywords:** Mualaf, Social Interaction, Religious Tolerance, Religious Conflict, Ethnic Relation.

### Introduction

Mualaf is a minority Muslim in Malaysian society. Mualaf is defined as a new convert to Islam and addressed as 'saudara baru' (a new brother) (Anon, 2010). In Malaysian society context,

mualaf is the individual who has converted to Islam whether Chinese, Indian or other ethnicities. The Malays addressed mualaf to Chinese, Indian and other ethnic individuals who converted to Islam (Kasimin, 1985). Briefly, mualaf are synonymous with non-Muslims who choose to profess Islam. After professing Islam, the life of the convert is arduous and challenging. Among the common challenges are lack of self-motivation, resistance of family members, marriage and integration of Islamic culture as a new culture of the life. The main challenge is the conflict to maintain and sustain the feelings and relationships with family members who still hold the original religion with the demands of Islam. The differences that exist between religious beliefs and practices in Islam and other religions are contradictory to each other which could certainly trigger misunderstandings and in turn create tensions between cross-religious adherents.

Embracing Islam among non-Muslim ethnic groups in Malaysia has become the norm. Once choosing Islam as religion, they are required to change the belief system and lifestyle based on the pillars of faith and Islam (Baharudin & Kusrin, 2021). Similarly, the phenomenon of embracing Islam in Indonesia has a fairly diverse background, among others can be classified into three factors, namely spiritual dialogue, rationality (discussion), and identity factor for marrying a Muslim. While experiencing religious life as mualaf in carrying out his belief and duty as a Muslim, he is not supposed to forget the original culture and traditions that their family (Gufon, 2019). Indeed, a convert should perform his responsibilities as a Muslim which involves the belief and acts of worship. Islamic belief which is based on the oneness of Allah, the practice of worship or the way of eating, different ways of putting attire that contrary to other religions, requires the motivation and strength. These differences and contradictions form the limitation of religious tolerance practice among mualaf not only in Malaysia but elsewhere. The limitations refer to the limit of the practices that can be performed by mualaf compared to their previous life before converting to Islam. It is a guideline for the convert in sustaining his challenging life, living as a new Muslim. Prudent judgment, on the basis of clear understanding of religion, should be decided in balancing the limits of religion and cross-religious family relations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The life of mualaf change especially in his beliefs and practices, however it does not mean a total change in his lifestyle. Social life or lifestyle that does not contradict the teachings of Islam can still be maintained and practiced. Inevitably, mualaf still interact or live with his family member who hold the original religion, requires a clear and firm understanding of the fundamentals of Islam that includes the aspects of beliefs, practices or lifestyles. Lack of knowledge or understanding of Islamic religious beliefs and practices constitutes a wrong perception Muzaffar (1989), which results in misunderstanding on the differences of religious teachings and creates discomfort and tension between mualaf and non-Muslim family members or the original community (Azarudin et al., 2022a; Abdullah & Rosli, 2019).

A clear knowledge of Islamic fundamentals allows mualaf to be sensitive and concerned about the limits of religious tolerance, to eliminate misunderstanding among non-Muslim towards Islam and the Muslim community concurrently. Clearly, the Quran and Sunnah as the main sources of Islam, have outlined guidelines and stipulations in the practice of tolerance (Abdul Ghani & Awang, 2022). This ultimate resolution decides that no such religious tolerance in the matters of faith and the act of worship, but there is a leniency in the aspects of culture and lifestyle. The disparate religious life is a challenge for mualaf to actualize the rulings of religious tolerance as outlined by Islam. The far reaching of implementation the

religious tolerance limits within the relationship of mualaf with the non-Muslim community need to be examined through interviewing the informants who are among mualaf. Thus, the limitations of religious tolerance practices that occur in the realities of mualaf life will be assessed.

### **Literature Review**

The life journey of mualaf confronts with various hardship and difficulties especially in the early stages of converting Islam. The change of patterns and lifestyles requires a high level of fighting spirit and motivation especially in confronting the family members who still adhere to the old religion. There are many issues revolve around the previous religious beliefs and practices of mualaf that are contrary to the beliefs, practices and lifestyle in the Islamic setting.

Throughout the life of being a muslim, the original religious beliefs of his family members are no longer relevant but, his acceptance of Islamic religious beliefs and practices could lead to internal conflicts when mualaf are in a society of different faiths. This situation creates soul of mualaf is mixed about the positive and negative views of Kassim et al (2013), and and also hassle between calm to unsettled or vice versa. Among the factors of this disorder is lack of information or knowledge about Islam before converting to Islam. The study done by Kassim et al (2013), shows the arising problems among mualaf after converting Islam such as problems in performing worship and family relations, due to the lack of knowledge about Islam. While dealing with problems regarding religious and community issues, mualaf also faced internal challenges involving family issues (Sintang 2012; Samuri & Khan, 2020). In order to lead his new life as a Muslim, mualaf needs to adapt the Islamic way of life, live in a Muslim community and wisely sustain the existing relationship with the original family. There are various forms of relationship between mualaf and his original family, they are accommodative, neutral, temporary conflict and prolonged conflict (Awang & Khambali, 2014).

Accommodative relationships to compromy between different communities in sharing different languages and cultures. This form of relationship is widely found in the context of restoring Muslim and non-Muslim relations (Sintang, 2012). However, the findings from Awang and Khambali (2014), showed that relationships between mualaf with non-Muslim family members mostly faced with a tense atmosphere. This tense situation triggerd by the differences in beliefs and thoughts and it persists when knowledge on religious disparity is perceived as trivial matters. A study by Tinaz (2001), on black communities in America found that conversion of Islam provoked a diverse reaction among families and indigenous communities. The results found that 29% responded negatively, 12.1% were surprised, 17% felt mixed, only 17% were supportive while 4.8% were neutral. While studies conducted by Ramahi (2020); Kose (1996), observed the changes of current lifestyle, new practices in religious practices and how to dress pose new challenges to the British convert community. Associated with this, Sabastian and Parameswaran (2007), categorised the level of tolerance with regard to mualaf's relation with the family or the indigenous community into four; which are tense, neutral, accommodative and mutual support. While a study conducted by Sukarma and Rafika (2023), found that women in Australia faced more social challenges in practicing life as as a convert compared to men.

According to Gufron (2019), many mualaf experience stress, intimidation, and torment from family, friends, and the environment. In such situations and circumstances, they do not commit negative reactions or retaliation, but concentrate on the process of strengthening

and strengthening themselves by conducting a religious dialogue with preachers or scholars who teach to easily forgive, establish good relationships, open, tolerant, and democratic attitudes. Rather than committing intimidation, mualaf change to respecting and appreciating them (Gufron, 2019; Akbar, 2022). Hence, mualaf are in need of social support programmes to re-establish self-confidence, strengthening religious beliefs, and activities that nourish fraternal ties with the original family (Abd Rahman et al., 2021).

Despite differences in religious beliefs and practices, Islam promotes interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims as in the word of Allah which means

*" O mankind ! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, And made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). "* (al-Hujurat 49:13)

Islam not only promotes interaction but also demands to establish good relations with non-Muslims. Allah said:

*"God forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them : For God loveth those who are just."* (al-Mumtahanah 60:8)

In line with the sustainability of good relations in the community, Islam also stress on the importance of maintaining family ties despite different religions. Family ties should be continued because embracing of Islam does not mean cutting of blood relationship and family ties. The basis of good relations between Muslims and non-Muslim relatives is explained in the word of Allah which means:

*" But if they strive to make the join in worship with me things of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not ; yet bear them company in this life with justice (and consideration), and follow the way of those who turn to me (in love) : in the end the return of you all is to me, and i will tell you the truth (and meaning) of all that ye did."*(Luqman 31:15)

As children, they could not avoid their responsibility to both parents, as stated by Allah SWT: *"And we have enjoined on man (to be good) to his parents : in travail upon travail did his mother bear him, And in years twain was his weaning : (hear the command), " Show gratitude to Me and to thy parents : To Me is (thy final) Goal."* (Luqman 31:14)

The aboved mentioned verses, two things related to Mualaf interaction with the parents, the first is the obligation to maintain a good family relationship and it is compulsory to perform the responsibilities of a son towards the parents, as prescribed by syarak (Harun & Kusrin, 2020). Taking into account that the family is a unit of the community, thus the steadiness of the family institution will certainly have an impact on society and the country (Dakir, 1996).

There are many past writings that revolve around religious tolerance including writing about concepts and understanding Fadzil (2011); Jaffary & Abu Bakar (2015); Sabir (2016); Abdul Ghani & Awang (2017); Abdul Ghani & Awang (2020); Nur Edi et al (2022) which

explains the meaning of religious tolerance and its conceptual understanding. Ruhaizah and Jaffary (2020), assert that *al-tasāmuḥ* is the most appropriate term to describe the relationship of religious tolerance suggested by Islam as explained by Sabir (2016), that *al-tasāmuḥ* means giving and receiving and not simply expecting one party to give and the other party to receive. While Awang and Abu Bakar (2015), explain tolerance is a person's willingness to interact and live together with other individuals of different cultures. The practice of religious tolerance was pioneered by the Prophet PBUH by giving autonomy to the non-Muslim community to realize religious ceremonies and rules according to their beliefs (Abdullah & Fathil, 2021).

Limitation of religious tolerance practices according to Islam, among them can be derived from surah al-Kafirun, verses 1 to 6, which means : *Say: O ye that reject faith !." I worship not that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you be your way. And to me mine".*

The main theme of this surah provides a definitive explanation between Muslims and non-Muslims where religious ceremonies cannot be mixed up, such as worship of Allah Almighty is irreplaceable with other Gods. Indirectly, this surah explains that the aspect of belief has no room for tolerance. The scope of permissible religious tolerance is (Abdul Ghani & Awang, 2020).

i. Religious freedom to adherents of other religions. With no any coercion or pressure for them to hold their beliefs and to practice their worship. However, Muslims are not allowed to celebrate the other religions' celebrations.

ii. Human relations whether Muslim or non-Muslim should be based on trust and good interaction

iii. Recommendation of good relations involving individuals who are ignorant and abusive towards Muslims

iv. Muslims are only allowed to be intolerant of non-Muslims who hate and fight Muslims and Islam.

v. Muslims are allowed to eat food prepared by the people of the Book and can marry them.

The above explanation provides a clear picture of the limitations of religious tolerance practice according to Islam by referring to Surah al-Kāfirūn

Writings and studies on tolerance practices in the context of pluralistic society Fadzil (2011); Abdul Rahman & Khambali (2013); Idris, Muda & Mastor (2019) was also discussed as an initiative to present the reality of religious tolerance and put forward proposals that can maintain the sustainability of good relations of all races in Malaysia. Research by Abdul Rahman & Khambali (2013), is a preliminary survey challenges of religious tolerance practiced in the Malaysian community. Study using this qualitative approach analysed the content of materials such as journals, books, magazines, articles and internet materials in addition to interview data obtained from informants. The main challenge faced by Muslims is the absence of a guided module to practice religious tolerance especially those that state the limitations and rules of religious tolerance that apply in the Malaysian context. In addition, this study is also too common covering all groups of society regardless of race and religion.

Mualaf is a minority Muslim group that needs attention. The studies focused on examining the life of a mualaf and his challenges in living a Muslim life were also conducted (Awang et al., 2022a; Awang et al., 2022b). The study of Awang and colleagues (2022b) aims to identify the challenges faced by groups who convert to Islam (mualaf) in building their identity as Muslims. This descriptive study used interview methods on five figures directly

involved in the management of mualaf in Malaysia. A significant finding found that one of the impactful challenges is living in a non-Muslim community. However, this study did not discuss aspects of the practice of religious tolerance as a challenge to Mualaf life and did not touch on the challenges of tolerating non-Muslim family members. In short, the aspect of religious tolerance among mualaf and the limitations of the practice of religious tolerance in the family relations of mualaf are given less attention. Therefore, this study focuses on the reality of convert life in tolerance with non-Muslim family members.

**Interview Data**

This study is qualitatively using interviews with mualaf for data collection process. The interview method is suitable for obtaining detailed data on an issue. A total of 17 informants among mualaf were interviewed from 4 areas selected by zone namely Selangor, Kedah, Terengganu and Johor. The interview session was conducted face-to-face and online due to the constraints of the spread of Covid 19. Interview questions are semi-structural in shape to make room for informants to answer questions comfortably and allow researchers to spontaneously ask additional questions. The study data was descriptively analyzed by evaluating each theatically screened verbal response. Each theme was examined to display the practice of religious tolerance that occurs among Mualaf and their non-Muslim family members.

**Data Analysis and Discussion**

The interview data was transcribed and analyzed by content analysis to identify the extent of tolerance practices practiced along with limitations that limit the relationship of mualaf' interactions with non-Muslim family members. Table 1 below briefly displays the background of the informants among mualaf who have been interviewed. A total of 17 informants were interviewed with a balanced total gender number, 8 male and 9 female and the majority of informants (11) were married individuals.

Table 1  
*Background of the Informants*

| No | Informant    | Gender | Race                | Status   | Profession                     |
|----|--------------|--------|---------------------|----------|--------------------------------|
| 1  | Informant 1  | P      | Chinesse            | Married  | Housewife                      |
| 2  | Informant 2  | P      | Filipino            | Widow    | Jobless                        |
| 3  | Informant 3  | L      | Chinesse            | Single   | Pemandu                        |
| 4  | Informant 4  | P      | Indian              | Married  | Housewife                      |
| 5  | Informant 5  | L      | Chinesse            | Married  | Technician                     |
| 6  | Informant 6  | L      | Chinesse            | Single   | Factory Worker                 |
| 7  | Informant 7  | P      | Filipino            | Married  | Housewife                      |
| 8  | Informant 8  | P      | Indian              | Married  | Housewife/doing small business |
| 9  | Informant 9  | P      | Chinesse            | Married  | NGO Activist                   |
| 10 | Informant 10 | L      | Chinesse            | Married  | NGO Activist                   |
| 11 | Informant 11 | P      | Indian              | Married  | Housewife                      |
| 12 | Informant12  | L      | Indian              | Divorced | Jobless                        |
| 13 | Informant 13 | L      | Mix Indian/Chinesse | Single   | Jobless                        |
| 14 | Informant 14 | L      | Chinesse            | Married  | Doing Business                 |
| 15 | Informant 15 | P      | Chinesse            | Married  | Housewife                      |
| 16 | Informant 16 | L      | Indian              | Single   | Staf at Perkim                 |
| 17 | Informant 17 | P      | Dusun               | Married  | Doing Business                 |

Interview data related to the relationship of religious tolerance are researched and divided into the following three themes, namely;

**Interaction of Non-Muslim family Members and Mualaf**

The results of the informant's interview found that some mualaf confronted with non-Muslim family members who understood the differences in religious beliefs and practices. Their family members cooperated with mualaf to fulfill their duties as Muslims such as providing space for prayer, providing halal food such as ordering food from the Malays and honoring fasting mualaf.

*“Eating and drinking at non-Muslim relative is not a problem because they do not cook unlawful food at home. Their use different utensils to cook unlawful food so that I can use other utensils to cook. They do not mind when I want to pray”.* (Informant 1)

*“In terms of food preparation, non-muslim family member are really considered. If they organise occasion, they order food from malay caterer”.* (Informant 3)

*“As I visit my uncle and aunty, they know I am muslim. They prepare separately the food for me, I do not feel being alienated”.* (Informant 6)

*“Performing solat at their house is not a problem”* (Informant 12)

*“my mother used to buy food where she would pick a chicken that slaughtered near at Malay shop”* (Informant 15)

*“at my family house there is ni dog, no wine, They do not eat pork. So whenever they cook I will eat. I feel safe and comfortable to eat”*( Informant 16)

The above statements show the impact of non-Muslims' lives along with Muslims, providing information on basic matters in Islam such as prayer and the unlawful food for Muslims through Islamic values-based interaction. This knowledge facilitates the process of living as a Muslim. One of the important aspects of tolerance in this new Muslim community is the aspect of decency in interaction. Zailani dan Ahmad (2021), stated that civilized, subtle interactions and values of decency interspersed with noble manners reflect the true personality of Muslims.

**Positive Lifestyle Interaction**

Among the most affected practices in the family relationship of mualaf with non-Muslim family members are the act of kissing hands, hugging parents or good behavior highlighted in front of non-Muslim family members, where this act successfully changes the perception of non-Muslims towards Islamic practices.

*“we start handshake our non-muslim parent because formerly we are not that close. Then we start to kiss our parent’s hand and hug them before going to work and coming back from work. After practicing it for some times, they start to cool down”* (Informant 13)

This practice coincides with the writing of Khadijah et al (2017), which explains the practice of tolerance if instilled in everyday interactions between different religious parties enable to produce a society that is positive, open-minded and compassionate. In fact, Islam has outlined the stipulation in the practice of religious tolerance but in reality, it is not entirely in line with the rulings. Therefore, research on practices in interaction was carried out based on interview to assess the extent of tolerance that is the practice in the reality of the lives of mualaf.

Based on the data that have been analyzed, religious tolerance in the matter of faith and worship specifically such as prayer is an element that has no room for compromise because the god who is believed and worshiped should not be interchangeable. Although this may cause discomfort to non-Muslim family members, the priority of faith and worship should be prioritised. While compromise is permissible when it comes to cultural activities such as food (which are said by the informant) and non-religious occasions. In order to maintain family ties as well as to build a good reputation of Islam from the non-Muslims' perspectives, activities such as attending non-religious events, eating food prepared by non-Muslim family members that does not contain or use illegal substances are permissible. Similarly, touching a dog is also permissible in an isolated situation for mualaf who want to maintain family and conditional relations; sculpting according to the method recommended by Islam.

### **Limitation on Religious Tolerance**

In general, analysis of the data shows the majority of mualaf still maintain family relationships with non-Muslim family members either they still live with them or always visit family members. However, there are limitations in their interaction. Among the themes of limitations of religious tolerance identified from the data analysis are;

#### *i. No compromise in faith and worship*

Tolerance in Islam recognizes and respects the differences in the religious beliefs and practices of each adherent. However, it does not mean accepting the divine beliefs of other religions as equal to the oneness of Allah SWT and does not mean that the truth of Islam is the same as the truth that exists in other religions. Islam insists there is no compromise or tolerance on matters contrary to the fundamentals of Islamic teachings (Abdul Rahman & Khambali, 2013).

The interview data found that mualaf are very clear on the issue of faith and worship specifically there is no room for tolerance when there are informants who avoid engaging with activities involve the beliefs of non-Muslim family members.

*"Celebrating the occasion is not an issue, but we do not pray during the celebration as they are. We just be together with the siblings." (Informant 1)*

*"During Deepavali this year, I do not visit my family but I visit them after the celebration is over" (Informant 12)*

#### *ii. No Barriers to Social Interaction*

Religious tolerance practiced by informants is geared towards social interaction without involving matters of faith and belief. They always visit their non-Muslim family members whether during festive or non-festive seasons. When they are with family members during



the festive season, they do not participate in or participate in religious ceremonies. They simply gather for a meal and have a friendly conversation with family members. Among the informant's answers when asked about relationships with non-Muslim family members.

*"We are still in contact with the family. We visit them. No problem with the festive celebration. Celebrating the occasion is not an issue, but we do not pray during the celebration as they are. We just be together with the siblings"*  
(Informant 1)

The findings of Khadijah et al (2017), found that experience of tolerance is highlighted in the aspect of visiting each other, managing death, food preparation and festive celebrations. This shows these practices have become routine in the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims which ultimately creates a harmonious atmosphere in the community. Muslims should avoid attending or engaging in religious celebrations as Islam prohibits its adherents from celebrating celebrations that are harmful to the Islamic faith (Baharudin & Khusrin, 2021; Khambali et al., 2014).

### iii. Meticulous in Matter of Food

In interacting with social interaction such as visiting or being together in celebrations, the main thing to pay attention to is food. A Muslim should be careful when it comes to a matter of food so that it is only halal food. It is evident that mualaf are cautious when it comes to food and preparation matters.

*"Alhamdulillah..I do not decide to live with my parent. In term of food, there is no problem because we are vegetarian..just eating vegetables not other than that" "my non-muslim friends and relatives, they visit me during Hari Raya. I do invite them to come over and eat"* (Informant 4)

*"when going to my non-muslim mother's house. I bring my mother to have food outside. Before that I used to bring my own pan and my mother cooked using it. At last, they understood"* (Informant 5)

The study of Awang et al (2022b) found that observation of mualaf to the routine of the the Muslim Malay's life made them sensitive to matters that are prohibited and taboos of religion such as food.

However, there was a case among the informants who touched a dog while at the home of a non-Muslim member of his family. This is something awkward from the custom of the original Muslims.

*"Later on, they can accept it because I still stay with them even after converting to Islam. They think I can not stay with them after being a Muslim. Then if I touch the dog, I will wash accordingly. So they accept me as Muslim because being a muslim is not that complicated Alhamdulillah"* (Informant 15)

It is worthy to note that Mualaf is aware of the ruling of touching dogs in Islam and takes the right action by following the recommendations of the Islamic Shari'a. This situation will indeed be faced by mualaf when he is in his non-Muslim family house. Ismail et al (2021),

explained that every difference in life that occurs among people is common that is inevitable because it occurs on the provisions of Allah. The right of tolerance in human life differences including non-Muslims should be respected based on fiqh ta'ayush.

### **Conclusion**

As a result of informant interviews among muallaf, the data showed that muallaf try to maintain family ties with non-Muslim family members by visiting them even though they have converted to Islam. Analysis of the data also shows that muallaf possess important information that is fundamental to Islam. This information causes the muallaf to be aware of the limitations of religious tolerance. Muallaf is very clear and understand that matters of faith are issues that cannot compromise or share with other religions as it involves beliefs about divinity. Therefore, religious activities involving worship other than Allah should be avoided. Similarly, with matters involving the culture of life such as wearing and eating, muallaf are also sensitive and cautious in this regard. They participate in celebrations or occasions of a social interaction such as dining but remain concerned about the preparation of food that does not contain ingredients that are not allowed in Islam. Matters involving the preparation of food should be examined in detail to identify the extent of the relaxation in Islam when it comes to food cooked by non-Muslims.

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