

Challenges of Da'wah to The Semai Community in Pos Lemoi Cameron Highlands

Ainuddin bin Kamaruddin, Norfadelah binti Nordin, Wan
Hashridz Rizal bin Wan Abu Bakar, Siti Masliah binti Mohd Nuri
Faculty of Islamic Studies, Sultan Ahmad Shah Pahang Islamic University (UnIPSAS)
Email: ainuddin@unipsas.edu.my

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Abstract

Da'wah activities to the Orang Asli community in Malaysia have been ongoing for decades and have been carried out by various parties including individuals and organizations. Unfortunately, the rate of Islamization among the Orang Asli is still low. There are various factors contributing to this, including the challenges faced by preachers in Orang Asli villages, to the extent that the goal of Islamizing 100% of the Orang Asli population in several targeted villages by the Islamic Religious Council has not been achieved, including Pos Lemoi located in the interior of Cameron Highlands, Pahang, Malaysia. The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges faced by preachers in their efforts to convey Islam in Pos Lemoi. This study holds significance in furnishing pertinent data concerning the challenges of da'wah in Pos Lemoi. The resultant data and thematic insights have the potential to aid religious authorities in Pahang in formulating more efficacious da'wah strategies for the future. This study used a semi-structured interview method to obtain primary data from preachers who have experience in preaching in Pos Lemoi. The data from the interview transcripts were then analysed using ATLAS.ti Version 9 to identify themes related to da'wah challenges. The study found that the main challenge in conveying da'wah to the Orang Asli community of the Semai tribe in Pos Lemoi is the problem of attitudes and perceptions of the residents. This includes issues such as inconsistent attendance in religious classes, shyness, considering knowledge unimportant, the perception that Islamic teachings are difficult, and a mindset that they are difficult to learn due to their age. Other challenges such as transportation problems to Pos Lemoi, internal problems of preachers, and the attitudes of Muslims themselves were also identified from the interviews conducted. The study also identified that the implications of the challenges and problems faced by preachers resulted in low acceptance of Islamic da'wah among the Semai community in Pos Lemoi. Future studies are expected to pay attention to the methodological aspects and da'wah strategies to the Orang Asli community who live far in the interior of the Cameron Highlands district and examine the factors that attract or hinder the acceptance of Islam among them.

Keywords: Da'wah Challenges, Orang Asli, Indigenous People, Semai, Cameron Highlands.

Introduction

The indigenous people in Malaysia are one of the minority groups in the country. They can be found throughout the states in Peninsular Malaysia except for Perlis and Penang. According to the latest official statistics updated in November 2018, the population of indigenous people in Peninsular Malaysia is 178,197 (Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, 2018). They can be divided into three ethnic groups: Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malay.

Pahang Darul Makmur is the state with the largest population of indigenous people compared to other states in Peninsular Malaysia. Indigenous people from various ethnic groups live in the forested and fringe areas of Pahang, such as the Jakun, Semai, Jah Hut, Semaq Beri, Temuan, Semelai, and others. According to the statistics from the Department of Orang Asli Development or Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (2018), the Jakun ethnic group is the largest followed by the Semai ethnic group. The same statistics also show that the majority of indigenous people in Pahang are animists, followed by those who do not have a religion.

From a historical perspective, the planned propagation of Islam to non-Muslim communities in Malaysia only began in the 1960s with the establishment of PERKIM, or the Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organisation. Puteh et al (2014) assert that the primary objective of establishing PERKIM was to propagate Islam among individuals who do not subscribe to any religious belief, particularly among non-Muslims. Propagation of Islam to the Orang Asli community is believed to have started in the 1980s (Toshihiro, 2007). Throughout Malaysia, official data from Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (2018) shows that 35,975 Orang Asli have converted to Islam. This number may have increased today, but as of December 2022, no official statistics have been released.

Pos Lemoi, Cameron Highlands, Malaysia was chosen as the study location because the Pahang Islamic Religious and Malay Customs Council (MUIP) aims for 100% of the Orang Asli population in this village to embrace Islam. To date, only 110 people in Pos Lemoi have converted to Islam, while 145 others have yet to convert (Samah et al., 2020).

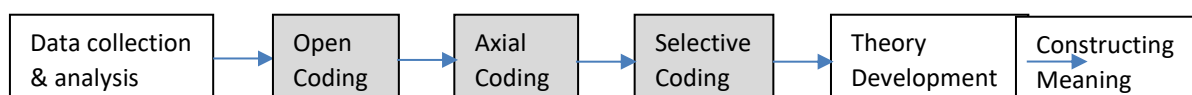
Pos Lemoi is a settlement of the Orang Asli community located in Cameron Highlands, Pahang. It can be accessed via the Sungai Koyan - Cameron Highlands road and then turning onto a smaller, rocky road near Lembah Bertam. Only rugged vehicles such as four-wheel drive vehicles can pass through this road due to its hilly and sometimes slippery terrain. Pos Lemoi is currently led by Tok Batin Zainal bin Bah Siapa, who converted to Islam in November 2020. Based on an interview with Tok Batin (Siapa et al., 2020), the word 'Lemoi' means 'teeth' according to the old folks' stories. However, the exact story behind the name of the village is uncertain. It is possible that someone who was fishing in the river broke their teeth, hence the name Kampung Lemoi. The original pronunciation was 'Lemun' and over time it became 'Lemoi'. In the past, the village residents lived scattered and nomadic lives. They began living in groups around 1968, and around 2002-2003, stone houses began to be built. At present, the population of Pos Lemoi is about 252 people in around 34 houses. To sustain their livelihoods, the villagers engage in farming activities, planting cassava, sekoi (a type of rice), peanuts, and other crops. Sekoi is like rice, but it cooks faster than rice. It has a yellowish color and a finer grain. It tastes slightly different, being more fatty than regular rice. At present, the facilities in Pos Lemoi include an elementary school, a field, and a moderately-sized multipurpose hall used as a surau for congregational prayers and for religious classes.

Literature Review

Based on previous research, the challenges of da'wah to the Orang Asli community from one locality to another vary. It also depends on the ethnic background and the prevailing conditions during the study. A study by Mohad and Mokhtar (2020) focused on the challenges of da'wah to the Orang Asli community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the study was conducted during the Movement Control Order, the challenges encountered were influenced by restricted movement. Among the challenges identified in the study were difficulties attending the mosque for congregational prayer and poor attendance at Islamic celebration events. Infrastructure issues in rural areas, such as poor internet connectivity, also posed a challenge. Meanwhile, Rahman and Mustapha's (2020) study identified 12 challenges faced by the Pahang Islamic Religious Council and Malay Customs or MUIP in carrying out da'wah to the Orang Asli community in Pahang, including challenges related to the Orang Asli's location, inadequate mastery of the Orang Asli language by preachers, threats from the Orang Asli community, a shortage of preachers, negative attitudes and behaviors by the local population, competition from Christian missionaries, financial resource problems, internal preacher problems, attitudes of the Orang Asli community, attitudes of the Malay community, broken promises, and a lack of coordination among NGOs. Kawangit's (2015) study provides a more detailed account of the problems and challenges faced by the Orang Asli target group in Pahang who are not yet Muslim and those who are already Muslim. For the non-Muslim Orang Asli, the main issues found include the belief that Islam is a difficult religion, strong competition from Christian movements among them, and aggressive opposition to preachers from the Orang Asli community. For the target group who are already Muslim, the two main issues highlighted are negative attitudes among the Malay community and the Orang Asli's reluctance to learn about Islam. According to Don and Nasir (2012), failure to address challenges will have a negative impact on da'wah. Therefore, preachers must have sufficient da'wah provisions and be prepared to face these challenges. At the same time, according to Ghani et al (2020), Islamic movements make various challenges and issues faced as a process of strengthening and maturing the struggle as a da'wah movement. Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify the challenges that affect the effectiveness of da'wah to the residents of Pos Lemoi.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative research design with the main data collection method being interview conducted at the study location. According to Williams and Moser (2019), the process of qualitative research using interview methods can be described as follows:



A semi-structured interview method has been chosen in this study to obtain more organized data as well as to help the researcher gather further information from each informant through follow-up questions. This method was conducted on ten study participants, with nine of them being preachers who are frequently involved in preaching activities in Pos Lemoi and its surrounding areas. One other study participant was Tok Batin Pos Lemoi, Mr. Zainal bin Bah Siapa. He was interviewed to obtain basic data on the

background of Pos Lemoi. Interviews were also conducted with two students from the Da'wah Department of UnIPSAS who underwent industrial training in Pos Lemoi as preachers for a period of four months. The main focus of these interviews was to uncover the challenges faced in carrying out preaching activities to the residents of Pos Lemoi.

All interview sessions were recorded in written and audio formats. The interview details were then transcribed one by one and analysed thematically. ATLAS.ti version 9 software was used to identify themes related to the challenges faced by the informants in preaching. ATLAS.ti is one of the CAQDAS programs, which stands for Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis. According to Talib (2019), thematic analysis focuses on producing themes from qualitative source analysis. Since themes are the focus, the search for themes is a priority, requiring more complex, detailed, and extensive data sources. According to Braun & Clarke, (2006), analysing interview data in research usually involves several steps, including transcription, coding, and identifying themes. The transcription process involves converting audio or video interviews into written transcripts. The next step is to label relevant words, sentences, or sections. This process is called coding. Next, the researcher can decide which codes are important and group them into several categories. Then name these categories. These categories are called themes. In making coding, there are three techniques used, starting with open coding, followed by axial coding and finally selective coding. (William & Moser, 2019)

According to Talib (2011), open coding is the initial phase of analysing data in an open and unrestricted manner in an effort to identify ideas, phenomena, and others that can be summarized as codes representing more general categories. In axial coding, the researcher collects codes into specific categories. In other words, the researcher groups the codes identified during the open coding process into categories and gives them appropriate names. This process results in several categories from many codes for easier understanding and interpretation. Selective coding involves selecting and connecting categories to identify the main categories that provide meaning and a storyline to the phenomenon under study.

Findings

At the first stage of analysis, the researcher read through the entire transcript and identified important content that represented the challenges faced by the study participants in their da'wah activities. Sentences or keywords in the transcript were highlighted and labeled with codes using ATLAS.ti software. This process, called open coding, produced the following findings

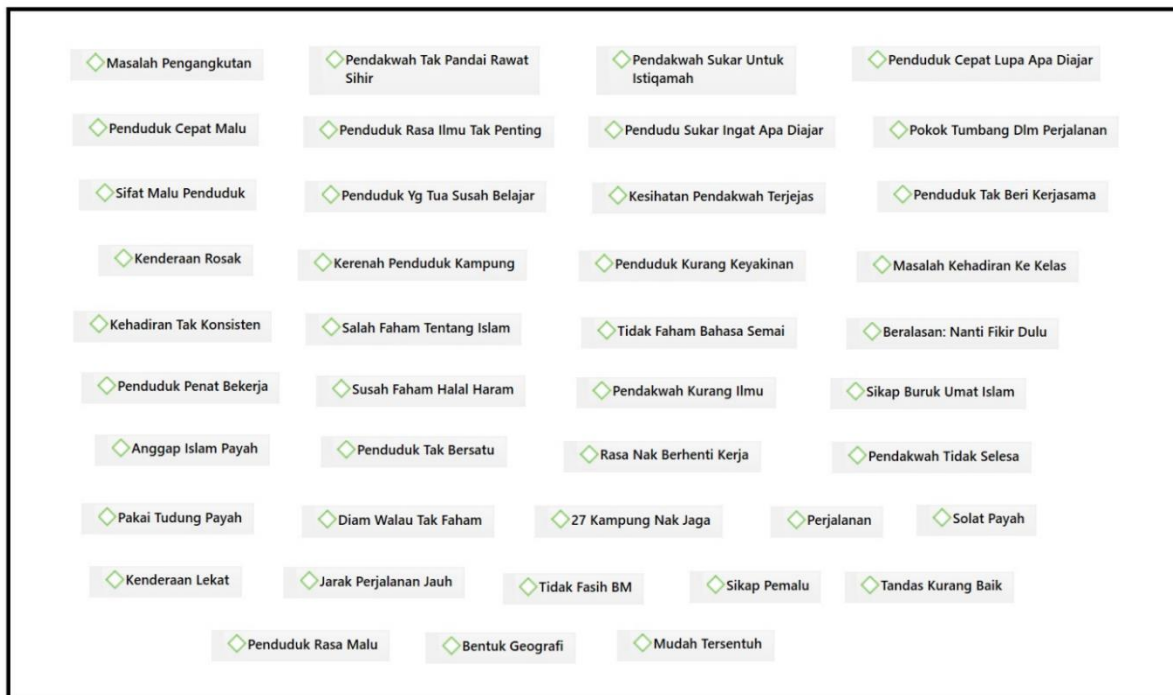


Figure 2: Codes Generated from Interview Transcripts (in Malay Language). Source: Atlas.ti
 For the next step in analyzing the study data, the researcher used the 'Word Cloud' function on all interview transcripts that had been merged into one document to identify the words that would form the themes related to the challenges of da'wah in Pos Lemoi. According to Talib (2019), the word cloud and word list functions provide an initial overview of the dominant words in the article, in this case, the interview transcript. Filters were applied to remove words such as prepositions, articles, and others that were not related to the theme. Using the word cloud function to analyze the frequency of words in all informant interview transcripts resulted in findings that were too general. Therefore, the researcher applied the word cloud function to the labeled codes from the entire transcript. The findings are shown in the following diagram



Figure 3: Word Cloud of Frequency of Words in Codes (in Malay Language). Source: Atlas.ti

Based on the findings shown above, the ATLAS.ti software has successfully provided an overview of the challenges faced by the preachers. The larger the word formed in the word cloud, the more often it is mentioned by the study participants in the interview. Words that appear larger such as 'ilmu' (knowledge), 'perjalanan' (journey), 'payah' (difficult), 'malu' (shy), 'sikap' (attitude) and smaller words such as 'kendaraan' (vehicle), 'kesihatan' (health), 'keselesaan' (comfort), 'geografi' (geography), 'kesalahfahaman' (misunderstanding) and others have provided an indication of the challenge codes that exist.

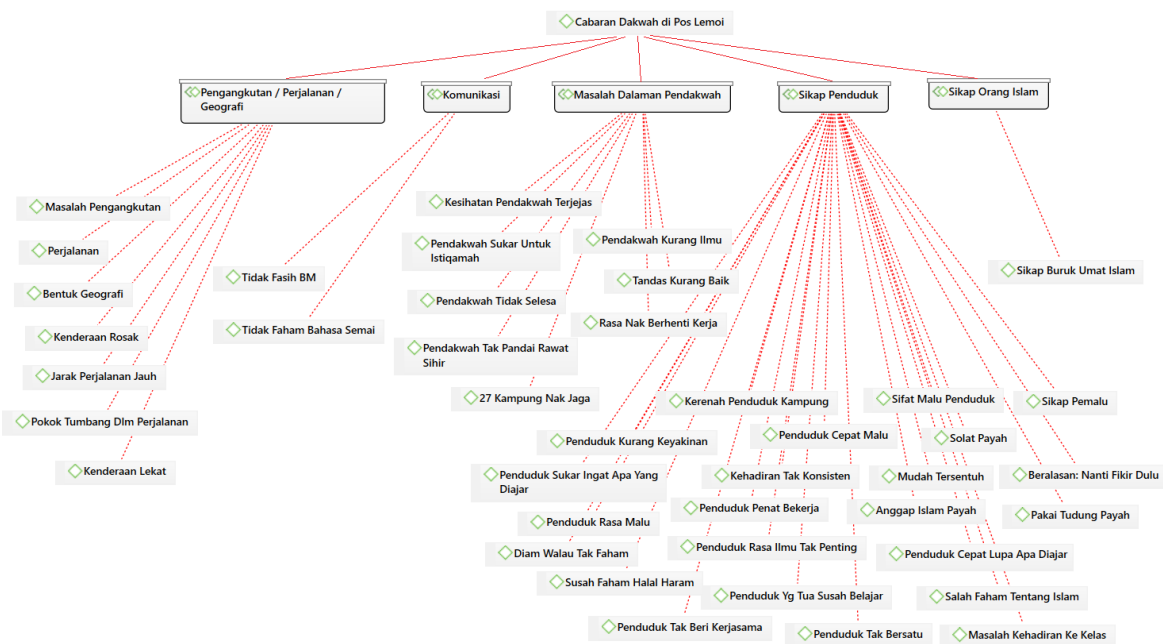


Figure 4: Challenges of Da'wah Themes Formed from Open Coding, Axial Coding and Selective Coding. Source: Atlas.ti

Figure 4 above shows the themes that emerged from the codes in the interview transcripts of the study participants (in Malay Language). These codes were divided into three stages or types, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. A total of 41 codes were identified from the entire interview. From the 41 codes in the open coding group, it can be identified that all of them can be separated into five axial codes, namely 'Transportation / Travel and Geography', 'Communication', 'Internal Issues of the Da'wah Preachers', 'Attitude of the Indigenous People, and 'Attitude of Muslims'. These five codes form the theme of the challenges of da'wah to the Semai indigenous community in Pos Lemoi, Cameron Highlands.

Discussion

Based on the coding of the interview transcripts with nine study participants, it can be formulated that the challenges of da'wah (Islamic propagation) to the Semai community in Pos Lemoi, Cameron Highlands can be divided into five themes. These five themes are:

- (i) Transportation, Travel, and Geography
- (ii) Communication
- (iii) Internal Issues of the Da'wah Preachers
- (iv) Attitudes of the Indigenous People
- (v) Attitudes of the Muslims

Transportation, Travel and Geography

The first theme of the da'wah challenge in Pos Lemoi is transportation, travel and geography. The geographical factor contributes to the difficulty in connecting Pos Lemoi with the outside world. Its location from the main road is about 18 kilometers away. However, its hilly terrain and narrow, steep and slippery roads make the journey to Pos Lemoi take about two hours or more and can only be passed by four-wheeled vehicles. The situation worsens when it rains and the road becomes slippery or muddy in some places. The situation is also quite steep and dangerous, especially when traveled at night. According to participant 4 (P4), "Pos Lemoi is one of the posts located in the hinterland. In Cameron Highlands, it is now the farthest from before. This is an area where transportation is very difficult." According to participant 7 (P7), "da'wah to the indigenous people is also challenging for preachers because they have to travel a long distance and carry their own necessities."

Communication

The second theme of the challenges of da'wah in Pos Lemoi is communication. The challenge in the form of communication arises from the problem of language differences between the preachers and the residents of Pos Lemoi. On average, Malay preachers are not fluent in Semai language except for those who have been active in this field for a long time and have been back and forth in da'wah activities in the villages around the Cameron Highlands and Lipis districts. Similarly, some residents of Pos Lemoi are not fluent in Malay and have difficulty understanding the explanations of preachers who teach there.

Internal Challenges of Preachers

The third theme identified as a challenge to preaching in Pos Lemoi is internal challenges faced by preachers. It has been identified to occur among several study participants. The challenges include feeling tired and wanting to quit (PK2), difficulty in being consistent in preaching work (PK3), lack of knowledge among preachers (PK5), and discomfort

experienced by preachers when staying in the Orang Asli village. According to study participant 7 (PK7), "the challenge of preaching in Lemoi is primarily on the preachers themselves, uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, poor toilet facilities, and no comfort in sleeping like at home." When staying in the Orang Asli village, the preacher's health is sometimes affected (PK7). Study participant 1 (PK1) who is in charge of the Cameron Highlands area explains that it is not possible to frequently visit Pos Lemoi. He says, "We cannot visit every week. Only 3-4 times a year. Not much in a year. Because in Cameron, there are many villages. We have to take care of other villages, 27 villages." Study participant 8 (PK8) revealed that sometimes there are disturbances caused by black magic among the villagers. Preachers who are in the village do not have the knowledge or skills to deal with black magic. The ability to treat diseases, let alone black magic, has been shown to affect the preacher's credibility and can change the Orang Asli's perception of the preacher. The history of Christianization among the Orang Asli in Broga, Selangor is said to be related to an event that occurred in 1987. Christian preachers took advantage of convincing some villagers that the healing of Encik Sharip bin Tajam's child was related to belief in God Jesus (Sahad & Sa'ari, 2005)

Attitude of the Indigenous People

The attitude of the indigenous people or the local natives is the most commonly identified challenge for da'wah based on interviews that have been conducted. The theme contains 25 codes. The feeling of shyness among the population is a code that can be extracted from participants 4, 6, and 9. Participant 5 (P5) stated, "Okay, among the challenges facing the indigenous community, especially in Kampung Lemoi where I am currently located, I find that one of the challenges is that the people feel shy. From a perspective of lack of confidence, they feel this way when facing outsiders, especially preachers who come to help them understand Islam itself." According to participant 6 (P6), "One of the challenges when teaching Islam to indigenous people is their shyness. If there is something they do not understand, they remain silent and are shy to ask." Similarly, according to participant 8 (P8), the indigenous people in Pos Lemoi are quick to feel shy to learn about Islam. They feel that their age is a barrier to their ability to learn something new, and it is their mindset. According to participant 9 (P9), the people here seem to have a hidden secret that causes them to be less united in activities, including religious classes.

The study also identified that there is a perception among the indigenous people in Pos Lemoi that Islam is difficult. Participants who teach Islam to the population also found that the people here have difficulty remembering what is taught and have difficulty understanding the concepts of halal and haram. When they learn, they easily forget what was taught previously. For those who are elderly, they have difficulty learning. Some are also reluctant to learn because they consider the knowledge to be unimportant. This contributes to inconsistent attendance and poor cooperation with preachers. In addition, other identified challenges from this study include their sensitivity, fatigue from work, and other reasons.

Muslim Attitude

The negative attitudes of Muslims are seen as a challenge to the da'wah to the Semai people in Pos Lemoi. According to participant 4 (PK4), "Sometimes our own Muslim attitudes make them far from Islam. So I call on Muslims and myself to show non-Muslims good behavior so that they can accept Islam well."

However, this challenge is not seen as serious as it is only mentioned by one participant (PK4) out of 9 interviewed. This challenge exists but is general in the field of da'wah to indigenous communities everywhere. It is true that Muslims or Malays who live adjacent to indigenous communities should set a good example, especially in terms of behavior. However, according to Zain & Alwi (2014), some Malays themselves do not show good and commendable behavior, but instead display a negative image. This causes the image of Islam in the eyes of indigenous communities to become bad.

Conclusion

The study identified five themes as challenges to the implementation of da'wah in Pos Lemoi, Cameron Highlands. The primary or biggest challenge found from this study is the attitude of the indigenous people or the local residents. This challenge was also found in a study by Rahman & Mustapha (2020), which found that the attitude of indigenous people, such as feelings of shyness and age factor, hinder their ability to learn about Islam. This is followed by internal problems of preachers as well as challenges of travel, transportation, and geography (include supporting evidence from past studies).

The study recommends that future research should be conducted quantitatively, such as studying the attitudes of residents towards da'wah. Future studies should also pay attention to the methodological aspects and da'wah strategies to the Orang Asli community, examine the factors that attract or hinder the acceptance of Islam among them. As this study was conducted only in Pos Lemoi, it cannot be generalized to other places. Therefore, it is also recommended that research be conducted in other indigenous villages or to other ethnic groups or even in other states.

Acknowledgement

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