The Correlation ‘Dialogue of Life’ and Process of Conversion: A Study within Chinese Converts

Azarudin Awang¹,², Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali²

¹Academy Contemporary of Islamic Studies
University Technology MARA (UiTM) Terengganu, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia
²Deparment of Aqidah and Islamic Thought
Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya (UM), 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The socialising with their Muslim friends, living within the Muslim society, getting their education from national schools and having friends from different ethnicities were the early ties experienced by the community of converts. The relationship between the religion that occurred is known as ‘dialogue of life’, numerously found within the experiences of the Chinese converts in Terengganu, a state situated in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Therefore, the experiences itself changed their doubts towards Islam which then led to their religious conversion. A majority of the Chinese community in Terengganu whom are Buddhist makes up the 2.4% of the whole population of Terengganu, whereby a majority of it consists of the Malay Muslim community. From the study it was found that through the process of the conversion, the Chinese community had built up their religious confidence through the experiences of the dialogue of life with the Malay Muslim community. This study used the interviewing methodology with 20 Chinese converts in Terengganu. The objective of this study is to explore the role of the dialogue of life experiences by the pre-converted Chinese community in Terengganu and also to see the relation between the dialogue of life and conversion which took place within the Chinese community. The findings can explain the importance of understanding Islam through dialogue of life so that it does not conjure any aspects of prejudice towards Islam and its followers. Lastly, the dialogue of life is seen as one of the motivations for the converts to explore Islam intellectually.

KEYWORDS: dialogue, life, conversion, religion, community, Chinese.

INTRODUCTION

The word convert is of English origin. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, conversion is explained as turning in position, direction, destination, change in character, nature, form or function. A convert is defined as one who has been converted, as to a religion or an opinion [1]. Jalaluddin stated that generally religious conversion means changing or entering a religion. From the aspect of its etymology, he explained that the word originated from the word conversio, which means repent, move and change. This root word was expanded which caused the meaning to change from one situation or from one religion to another [2]. Ibnu Manzur in Lisan al-Arab explained عقن as having two meanings, which are neck and embrace. The two meanings have close relations because الرجالة عنفة means hugging the neck of two men [3].

Therefore, based from the earlier definition above, it can be explained that the main reason behind the conversion is changing, moving, conversion, embracing or repenting. Usually the term conversion refers to the various changes that occur in a human’s life that is out looking for truth of the religion. In the usage of the Malay language, embracing also refers to the changing of religion, even the word a-na-ko in Arabic is borrowed into the Malay language as anut. Thus, the use of anut in Malay and Arabic gives out the same meaning which is embracing. In finding a deeper meaning to the term, scholars came out with a definition that was more specific and organised. Zakiah stated that conversion meant opposing and could be related to the occurrence of changing confidence that opposes natural confidence [4].

Digging deeper into the phenomena of religious conversion, Mohamed Asin in his book “Religious Conversion: The Meaning and Its Type” stated that conversion is the process of spiritual changes from belief and its changes can be seen through the practices of the belief [5]. Houtepen explained that religious conversion was a shift that resulted in rebuilding of the identity by letting go of the religious belief which was irrational [6]. Paloutzian et.al, stated that religious conversion was the reason behind the personality changes, let it be rapid or slow, active or passive [7]. Johnsen found that an individual who made religious conversion would go through changes of self-
confidence, anxiety, and identity of religious practices [8]. Meanwhile, Mulyono et al., found that when an individual makes the religious conversion, he or she would have conflicts over their identity and emotion [9]. If we were to look closer at the literature review above, it can be said that when an individual makes a religious conversion it is not only about demanding changes to belief but it also covers the aspect of behaviour, emotion, identity and thoughts. Thus, the process of conversion usually takes time for them to adapt with as they have to find time in building their confidence with the new religion.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data are obtained through interviews with 20 Chinese Muslim respondents in Terengganu. In justifying the selection of the respondents, it was only given to a Chinese community that had converted to Islam in the state of Terengganu. Therefore, to further strengthen the findings of the study, the respondents had to clarify their gender, previous religion, period of conversion to Islam, race, education background and occupation. The author had the interviews carried out at the Kompleks Darul Hidayah Converts Training Centre and Darul Fitrah office in Kuala Terengganu. Apart from that, through the information from a friend of a convert, the author also had an interview by making a visit to the house of the convert. The semi-structured questionnaires were planned to obtain the needed data. In order to strengthen the questionnaires, a pilot test was carried out on 5 Chinese converts. Therefore, an improvement towards the questionnaires directed to the converts was made. Then, the results obtained through the recordings were transferred in the form of a transcript. To further smoothen the research, the researchers had divided the results according to categories.

**MEANING AND RELATION DIALOGUE OF LIFE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

According to Azizan Baharudin, in everyday life, a multi-religious and multiracial community usually enrich their own understanding by practising their traditions and values through cooperation, communication and living together. Such environment occurs anywhere inside the human life, be it in the office, at school, in the hospital, in the car or others [10]. Thus, Fitzgerald (2005) explained that the dialogue of life occurs within every human group and that it is the most basic dialogue stage. When living closely with people of different religions, we would obviously try to talk to each other, socialising, supporting and helping one another [11]. This is done not out of well manner socialising ethics, but it is what our religion wants us to do. The dialogue of life not only involves the community leader, but it also involves every individual in the community [12]. Dialogue of life which is seen as religious interaction without communication (non-verbal) is an effective method in giving understanding upon values that exist in one’s religion. Every human being that follows other community’s religious practices is able to give out questions on the variety of life cultures [13]. Therefore, it can be explained that the dialogue of life in this form occurs in the daily life of a society that has different belief, customs and language. Khadijah et al. explained that the view of the community will alter after the direct involvement with dialogue of life [14]. This means that the dialogue of life gives an opportunity to someone in putting themselves closer to new transcendence, forming new beliefs and getting rid of any doubts that existed before. This is further strengthened with statements by Chuah et al., who said that for an individual who made a religious conversion, meaning that a transformation of confidence has occurred and created a new relationship with God [15]. This is also explained by Fuadzulaim who stated that the social and environmental factors played a part in spreading religion. Social factors usually consist of the relationship between families, friends and the surrounding community [16]. Thus, teaching or the received education, traditions of a certain community and also religious institutions are the early forms dialogues of life within a converted community.

In local studies, for instance, T. Norhayati found that 20% of the converts in Kelantan is caused by the existence of early interaction with the local community through their daily conversations. Usually they are attracted to the life of the Malays who help one another, practise the concept of cooperation, harmonious, gotong-royong (to help one another in Malay Muslim culture practise), feasts and others [17]. Based on the above statement it can be explained that the dialogue can be made as one method of dawah, especially in the ways of what happens in aroutine life. The pre-conversion experiences had given much information to the converts in having an early picture about the religious truth.

**THE EXPERIENCES OF THE CHINESE PRE-CONVERSION COMMUNITY INSIDE THE DIALOGUE OF LIFE**

The population report of Terengganu in 2010 showed that the Chinese population was 27,900 or 2.4% from the overall population (by Department of Statistics Malaysia). Though the community forms only a fraction of the total population, still it is the second largest group after the Malay Muslim community that forms 95% of the total population in Terengganu. This fraction of the population is still it the second largest group after the Malay Muslim community that forms 95% of the total population in Terengganu.

The Chinese community is considered as the second largest group after the Malay Muslim community that forms 95% of the total population in Terengganu. Therefore, to further strengthen the findings of the study, the respondents had to clarify their gender, previous religion, period of conversion to Islam, race, education background and occupation. The author had the interviews carried out at the Kompleks Darul Hidayah Converts Training Centre and Darul Fitrah office in Kuala Terengganu. Apart from that, through the information from a friend of a convert, the author also had an interview by making a visit to the house of the convert. The semi-structured questionnaires were planned to obtain the needed data. In order to strengthen the questionnaires, a pilot test was carried out on 5 Chinese converts. Therefore, an improvement towards the questionnaires directed to the converts was made. Then, the results obtained through the recordings were transferred in the form of a transcript. To further smoothen the research, the researchers had divided the results according to categories.

**MEANING AND RELATION DIALOGUE OF LIFE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

According to Azizan Baharudin, in everyday life, a multi-religious and multiracial community usually enrich their own understanding by practising their traditions and values through cooperation, communication and living together. Such environment occurs anywhere inside the human life, be it in the office, at school, in the hospital, in the car or others [10]. Thus, Fitzgerald (2005) explained that the dialogue of life occurs within every human group and that it is the most basic dialogue stage. When living closely with people of different religions, we would obviously try to talk to each other, socialising, supporting and helping one another [11]. This is done not out of well manner socialising ethics, but it is what our religion wants us to do. The dialogue of life not only involves the community leader, but it also involves every individual in the community [12]. Dialogue of life which is seen as religious interaction without communication (non-verbal) is an effective method in giving understanding upon values that exist in one’s religion. Every human being that follows other community’s religious practices is able to give out questions on the variety of life cultures [13]. Therefore, it can be explained that the dialogue of life in this form occurs in the daily life of a society that has different belief, customs and language. Khadijah et al. explained that the view of the community will alter after the direct involvement with dialogue of life [14]. This means that the dialogue of life gives an opportunity to someone in putting themselves closer to new transcendence, forming new beliefs and getting rid of any doubts that existed before. This is further strengthened with statements by Chuah et al., who said that for an individual who made a religious conversion, meaning that a transformation of confidence has occurred and created a new relationship with God [15]. This is also explained by Fuadzulaim who stated that the social and environmental factors played a part in spreading religion. Social factors usually consist of the relationship between families, friends and the surrounding community [16]. Thus, teaching or the received education, traditions of a certain community and also religious institutions are the early forms dialogues of life within a converted community.

In local studies, for instance, T. Norhayati found that 20% of the converts in Kelantan is caused by the existence of early interaction with the local community through their daily conversations. Usually they are attracted to the life of the Malays who help one another, practise the concept of cooperation, harmonious, gotong-royong (to help one another in Malay Muslim culture practise), feasts and others [17]. Based on the above statement it can be explained that the dialogue can be made as one method of dawah, especially in the ways of what happens in routine life. The pre-conversion experiences had given much information to the converts in having an early picture about the religious truth.

**THE EXPERIENCES OF THE CHINESE PRE-CONVERSION COMMUNITY INSIDE THE DIALOGUE OF LIFE**

The population report of Terengganu in 2010 showed that the Chinese population was 27,900 or 2.4% from the overall population (by Department of Statistics Malaysia). Though the community forms only a fraction of the total population, still it is the second largest group after the Malay Muslim community that forms 95% of the total population in Terengganu. Therefore, to further strengthen the findings of the study, the respondents had to clarify their gender, previous religion, period of conversion to Islam, race, education background and occupation. The author had the interviews carried out at the Kompleks Darul Hidayah Converts Training Centre and Darul Fitrah office in Kuala Terengganu. Apart from that, through the information from a friend of a convert, the author also had an interview by making a visit to the house of the convert. The semi-structured questionnaires were planned to obtain the needed data. In order to strengthen the questionnaires, a pilot test was carried out on 5 Chinese converts. Therefore, an improvement towards the questionnaires directed to the converts was made. Then, the results obtained through the recordings were transferred in the form of a transcript. To further smoothen the research, the researchers had divided the results according to categories.

**MEANING AND RELATION DIALOGUE OF LIFE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

According to Azizan Baharudin, in everyday life, a multi-religious and multiracial community usually enrich their own understanding by practising their traditions and values through cooperation, communication and living together. Such environment occurs anywhere inside the human life, be it in the office, at school, in the hospital, in the car or others [10]. Thus, Fitzgerald (2005) explained that the dialogue of life occurs within every human group and that it is the most basic dialogue stage. When living closely with people of different religions, we would obviously try to talk to each other, socialising, supporting and helping one another [11]. This is done not out of well manner socialising ethics, but it is what our religion wants us to do. The dialogue of life not only involves the community leader, but it also involves every individual in the community [12]. Dialogue of life which is seen as religious interaction without communication (non-verbal) is an effective method in giving understanding upon values that exist in one’s religion. Every human being that follows other community’s religious practices is able to give out questions on the variety of life cultures [13]. Therefore, it can be explained that the dialogue of life in this form occurs in the daily life of a society that has different belief, customs and language. Khadijah et al. explained that the view of the community will alter after the direct involvement with dialogue of life [14]. This means that the dialogue of life gives an opportunity to someone in putting themselves closer to new transcendence, forming new beliefs and getting rid of any doubts that existed before. This is further strengthened with statements by Chuah et al., who said that for an individual who made a religious conversion, meaning that a transformation of confidence has occurred and created a new relationship with God [15]. This is also explained by Fuadzulaim who stated that the social and environmental factors played a part in spreading religion. Social factors usually consist of the relationship between families, friends and the surrounding community [16]. Thus, teaching or the received education, traditions of a certain community and also religious institutions are the early forms dialogues of life within a converted community.

In local studies, for instance, T. Norhayati found that 20% of the converts in Kelantan is caused by the existence of early interaction with the local community through their daily conversations. Usually they are attracted to the life of the Malays who help one another, practise the concept of cooperation, harmonious, gotong-royong (to help one another in Malay Muslim culture practise), feasts and others [17]. Based on the above statement it can be explained that the dialogue can be made as one method of dawah, especially in the ways of what happens in routine life. The pre-conversion experiences had given much information to the converts in having an early picture about the religious truth.
population. Therefore, it can be explained that within the multi-societal community in Terengganu, it shows a vast Islamic environment and this has exposed the Chinese community with the daily religious and cultural interaction of the local community. Thus, the context of religious conversion within the Chinese community in Terengganu, the elements of the dialogue of life can be seen in the aspects of socialising with Muslim friends, education in school and couples, which later leads to marriage. These experiences are explained below:

"The main reason I entered Islam is because of the interaction with the Malay community. I was also born in a Malay majority area. So, it's normal to socialise with the Malays, my neighbour was also Malay. There weren't many Chinese people around those days" [18].

"I converted when I was in school, I lived at Ladang village. I mixed with the Malay people, so of course my intention was to eventually enter Islam... I studied secretly with some Malay people" [19].

"I worked at Somei Factory in Gong Badak, most of the workers there are Malay Muslims. So, obviously I hung out with Malays everyday. So, during the fasting month I would also fast although I have not yet embraced Islam" [20].

"I converted because of the influences from my friends and the environment I lived in. Those days, while studying, I stayed at the school hostel. There, almost all my friends were Malays. So, from what I observed they have good characters, covered up modestly... I liked that, because they took their religion seriously, the way they pray also mirrors that. That time I was studying for my diploma in nursing in Kajang town" [21].

"When I was in school... an Ustaz always taught our classes... the weird thing was we too loved to go to the Jawi classes (writing classes using Arabic letters) for some unknown reason... some of the students told us that it's not our class, and that we should be going to the moral education class. I could see the distinction between the Muslims and the Chinese" [22].

"I love learning new things, I love learning... so when I entered Islam, I had a lot of things to learn..."," [23].

"When they heard I was going to convert, my parents made a lot of noises... especially my mom... she cried a lot. I told them, I want to enter Islam to marry a Malay boy. My mother couldn't accept it, so I stayed at my Malay friend's place, till my dad came and coerced me to come home... and come back into Buddhism" [24].

"Because I wanted to have a relationship with a Muslim (to be my life partner), I had a friend, he had problems, he used to come to me with his problems, I was his friend for about 10 years, he had problems, so I said we could be together, he said we couldn't because I wasn't a Muslim... I wanted to be there for him, he said be a Muslim first... I went to the Department of Islamic Affairs, and said I wanted to convert. The staff asked if I was kidding. I said... I was for real... so he said... I didn't even know how to say syahadah" [25].

Based on the findings of the interview above, the relation of dialogue of life through the process of mutual interaction and education are the factors that motivated the Chinese community to get to know Islam and the culture of the Malay Muslim even more. It is blended together with the peaceful environment and being respectful with one another. This situation formed a new perception within the Chinese community about Islam and from there onwards it encouraged them to convert. The religious conversion factors see the existence of close relation between the dialogue of life and the religious conversion. Khadijah et. al stated that the element of ‘meeting’ and ‘interaction’ that happened in dialogues of life formed the friendship and sharing of different believers [14]. The daily relationship that occurred spontaneously helped to expose the Chinese community to the life of the Malay Muslim community. Thus, the phenomena of religious conversion stems from the curiosity of the life of the Malay Muslims through their involvement in the dialogue of life during the pre-conversion.

**THE PROCESS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

In order to address the issue of religion, the Terengganu Chinese community carries out comparison, analysis, evaluation or synthesis on the previous religion and also Islam itself. Therefore, in this context the Chinese community had carried out various higher forms of thinking on what have they gone through in their life dialogue. The Chinese community compares the similarities and differences that existed in Buddha and Islam. The following are the explanations:

"Well, I did my own comparisons, when it comes to God, He created the rain, sun, the earth, caused night, whilst our races have different beliefs, our sun god, water god, god of fortune, were all different... When there was a religious ceremony at home, I questioned the elders... they couldn't answer, and they scolded me, called me a smartypants. So I thought deeply on what I wanted, it took me a few years, but then I acted... It might've been some guidance from Allah that drove me and gave me strength to run away from home" [26].

"From the aspect of theology, most things are similar, even in the sense of practices, we recite our prayers, we pray. Like if we do good, we can become monks, do more good, and in the end you become a God. That was what got me thinking... how can that be... that would mean there are many gods... how is that possible... that is why the Chinese pray to the god of the land, god of the air, god of the sky, of the cave and many, many more" [24].

316
"I took Islamic History... I read about all the tales of Islam... I also read a lot on Buddhism... Christianity too, I studied the Bible, the translated Quran... Buddhist scriptures... from there I drew my comparisons"[23].

"We became Buddhist monks in about 3 years, we wore the yellow cloth, we had to follow... we entered to help our parents, to avoid the fires of hell, according to them. Food and drinks are sent by people, breakfast lasts till 12.00pm. If someone touches the food they have to bring in fresh ones. At night, one can't eat, only water is allowed, and chocolate. The general position is that we can't get married, we looked up to the elder monks, but there’s one who did quench his occasional thirst for flesh, so I ask myself how can we trust these monks, they sin as well. People pray to us, but we too are normal sinful human beings... I feel this part is quite meaningless” [27].

The differences that existed within the religion encouraged the Chinese community to observe further into the strengths and weaknesses of their own religion respectively. Studies on divinity problems, monks and the Holy Scripture opened a new perception towards the world view of the Chinese pre-conversion community. The comparison also took in the aspects of similarities that existed in the religion itself, for instance the prayers and worship. In the process of observing the Chinese community do see the existing weaknesses within the religious doctrine that is followed at present. For example, Resp # 09 (Cantonese) felt dissatisfied from “those who have been Buddhists all this while” were not able to explain the issue of Buddhist divinity. It was the same for Resp # 20 (Hokkien) who felt that the vague questions upon human issues (monks) becoming God. The failure to obtain any concrete information created disturbances within their thoughts. Sayings such as “How can that happen?” and “I don’t think it’s worth it” showed the existence of polemic inside their minds and spirits of the Chinese community. In relation to that, it is found that the experiences of some Chinese community who have been following Buddhist teachings deeply gave them the advantage of analysing the comparisons academically. The findings of the interview are as follows:

"We become Buddhist monks in about 3 years, we wore the yellow cloth, and we had to follow... "[27].

"As a Buddhist, I am a female teacher, I teach the kids weekly about Buddha, the Buddhist chants, meditation and I lead the prayers done to the idols... others just follow my footsteps" [28].

Apart from that, within the Chinese community the comparison of their worshippers is carried out. It is told as being mentioned below:

"I look up to my step-father, Hj Yusuf... a long time ago I asked him, how come you look so calm and composed, how are you able to handle things... what are your secrets. He said, we are nothing, we are Muslims, so we abide by the Islamic law and guidelines, once you understand the laws and guidelines you will understand... well, teaching you is quite hard... because you are not a Muslim" [23].

Thus, within this period a personality shift in their religion occurred from calm into a conflicted one. That individual will build up a deep understanding of Islam until they are able to defend the true concepts of Islam. The observation is not only on the religious doctrine but the respondents were also looking out for the behaviour, moral and values of the Muslim community itself too. According to Kholidah this situation will give way into making conflict within their inner self that is chaotic as well as developing a feeling of uncertainty, panic, giving up, doubt and anxiety[29]. Based on the findings of the study this situation will prolong itself until a Chinese community expresses their willingness to embrace Islam. It is proven the results given by the converts reflected the occurring conflict of confidence and anxiety, as told by Johnsen.

In the context of religious conversion, the cognitive development also affects the identity of the convert and from there it gives way to new idealism about religion[29]. Idealism is the desire or ambition but it is not realistically more than just a dream [30]. Taking into account the irrational idealism that existed inside religious doctrines, it is seen tooad more conflict within the mind. In Chinese belief, the concept of God is manifested in many ways, for instance the God of Land, God of the Sea and God of the Heaven as well as having the belief that the monks can change into God created uncertainty over the religion. The findings of the interviews are explained below:

"If we do good, we can become monks, do more good, and in the end you become a God. That was what got me thinking... how can that be... How is that possible”[28].

“People pray to us (monks), but we too are normal sinful human beings... I feel this part is quite meaningless”[27].

Sometimes their perception on the previous religion seen as 'exclusive' slows down the process of religious conversion. This next respondent explains it:

"It took me about 30 years (doing research and studies of Islam). It wasn't easy to convert my religion... for me Buddhism is the best"[23].

The transcript above explains that there are a certain number of converts who religious went through a long period before converting to Islam because they were still convinced that the teachings in Buddhism was the best for them. However, they soon realised that the religion had flaws and weaknesses within them. This situation created an emotional conflict (regret) over the weaknesses of their present religion. This coincided with the findings from
Palouztian et al. who stated that in the process of religious conversion, an individual will face emotional and personality conflict. The findings of the interviews are explained below:

"When we sit with Malays, we were not Muslims yet, so we felt awkward, but when we looked at them, they accepted us. We feel guilty, due to the religious system has been imposed on us" [23].

The Chinese community had reflected on the possibilities (hypothesis) upon their act of converting to Islam. The possibility such as being opposed by their families is usually what happened within their community. This is explained in the transcript below:

"I told my siblings, I am afraid they would be against me, my family are totally anti-Islam... so I was afraid they opposed me, and they did go against my decision, so I came clean..." [31].

Taking into account the worst possibilities that might occur, the respondents made a decision by keeping it confidential over their religious conversion to Islam from their friends and relatives. This is explained in the following transcript:

"We keep it a secret as a sign of discretion not of fear... it’s just that when people like me enter Islam, we do think of the pros and cons. We have to think it through and through... choose the good and apply, but discretion is very crucial, if we get found out by family or friends, they question us, so you are Islam now... but you are still the same as you were" [23].

Although they are kept their conversion to Islam confidential, their families would soon know about it, even though their conversion were not exposed to their families still the news will be uncovered when someone knows about it. The explanation from a respondent on this transcript below:

"It wasn’t me who told my mom that I had converted, but my friend. He called her, and... my mom lost it. I was at home then, so I got scolded by her, got beaten up by my dad, and he begged me to revert into Buddhism" [21].

After feeling confident with Islam, the Chinese community made a decision to convert. The decision to embrace Islam was an important factor and the Chinese community had a lot of considerations prior to their decision. In relation to that, there are some who took a really long time to weigh in their decision into religious conversion where they had to look deep into the religion itself before making their decision. This is explained in the followings:

"I got a sign from Allah when I was 12 in a dream, after that I prayed to God for a delay period, let me study my religion first, and so I did study and researched the religion, I once went to a Buddhist temple in Kota Bharu to find my answer" [28].

"It took me about 30 years (doing research and studies of Islam). It wasn't easy to convert my religion... for me Buddhism is the best" [23].

The confronted conflict that they had slowly faded away as their strong belief took over their decision into converting. Thus, the step that they made brought in peace and the willingness to take on challenges[29]. In the process of religious conversion, asking a friend, leaving their homes by bringing their belongings and staying over at their Muslim friend’s house were the early steps that the Chinese community made. This description is further explained by respondents below:

"My parents have passed away, my proclamation of faith was on Thursday, that Wednesday, I asked my friend how to enter Islam, packed all the things I needed, put them into the car, then I went to school, did my syahadah and not returning home” [31].

"So I went to my neighbour’s house… the late Cik Minah, her father adopted me … it was then.. I ran away from my home and stayed in my Muslim friend’s house”[32].

The process of conversion ended when the Chinese community made the syahadah oath (it is used for a person or a group which becomes witness of Islam). In the context of Terengganu the syahadah oath is performed in religious offices in Terengganu, taught by the staff from the Religious Department. The followings are the respondents’ explanations:

"When I entered Islam... I didn't know anything. Nothing at all... and I went to the Department of Islamic Affairs office in Kuala Berang town. When it was time to say Asyhaduallah.... I was clueless" [33].

The process of understanding Islam is covered by suspiciousness towards the religious confidence. Although within the respondents there were those who actively took part in Buddhist religious institutions, internal conflicts made them rebuild their confidence again. Going back over their experience on the life dialogue with the Muslim community, the Chinese community made comparisons, thought deeply on the religious phenomena that existed within the two religions. Among the comparisons were the concept of divinity in Buddhism and Islam, Buddha’s characters and morals, and the roles of monks and God. Thus, the weaknesses that existed in the present religion gave way for the Chinese community to convert. Apart from that, religious conversion relates closely with cognitive development, behaviour and emotion. The cognitive development, behaviour and emotion made them worry over their religion.
Based upon the results from the interview, it can be concluded that the process of religious conversion saw the existence of interrelated dialogue of life within the Chinese Muslim community in Terengganu. Factors such as socialising, surrounding environment with the Malay Muslim students, readings and adopted families were the dialogue of life elements. In this matter, Khadijah et al. stated that the dialogue of life not only demanded religious toleration but it gave implications towards the attitude of influencing one another. Therefore, there will be individuals who will get ‘exposed’ and ‘affected’ by this phenomena until they lastly opt for a change of religion[14]. Based on the study by T. Norhayati that touched on Islam conversion in Kelantan, she found that the converts obtained information about Islam through socialising with the locals. Some were even impressed with the practices and characters shown by their Muslim friends. This situation attracted the non-Muslim friends to learn and know more about Islam and to learn something new and different from their own religious experience[17]. This is further strengthened with studies done by Rani and Jenny who explained that religious conversion existed due to earlier interactions from their surroundings, peer influence, families and marriages within the community of the converts [34].

Hensman stated that the occurrence of the life dialogue was sufficient just by celebrating other religious rituals and cultures without having to answer any form of religion-related questions. This has enabled participants to get involved either by understanding or observe or to get involved in other people’s religious activities and cultures, provided that it is done honestly even though without a formal discussion[13]. These experiences are found within the dialogue of life network of the Chinese pre-convert community as in Resp # 18 (Hokkien) “observing” the behaviour of the Muslim community by saying “from them I observed they have good characters, covered up modestly…” , Resp # 06 (Hokkien) ‘understanding’ by saying “...from there I made a comparison” and Resp # 16 (Cantonese) involving in Malay Muslim religious activities “So, during the fasting month I would also fast modestly and behave according to the locals.” The activities in the lifedialogue that occurred within the Chinese pre-convert community too had seen their involvement in various religious ties that had no restriction on age, level of education, occupation, gender and race. This comes to show that the lifedialogue which took place within the life of the Chinese community in Terengganu happened in a vast circle of life.

CONCLUSION

The dialogue of life plays a vital role within the groups of the pre-converts especially within the Chinese community in Terengganu. The experiences of the Chinese converts in Terengganu explained that in the context of finding the religious truth, dialogue of life through socializing, getting education from Muslim-majority schools and socialising with significant others had broaden the views for the Chinese pre-converts community into understanding more on the similarities and differences that existed within different religions. Thus, a strong confidence in choosing one’s beliefed the Chinese community to convert to Islam. Therefore, it is clear that there is a strong relation between the concept dialogue of life and Islamic conversion among the converts in Terengganu.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to wish thank to Mr Zairi Ismael Rizman for his help in reviewing and editing the paper.

REFERENCES


18. Resp # 17 (Hokkien), 2012. interview, Darul Fitrah office at 10.50 a.m. on 6 December 2012.

19. Resp # 12 (Hokkien), 2012. interview, Darul Fitrah office at 11.00 a.m. on 22 November 2012.

20. Resp # 16 (Cantonese), 2012. interview, Darul Fitrah office at 11.00 a.m. on 22 November 2012.

21. Resp # 18 (Hokkien), 2012. interview, Darul Fitrah office at 11.00 a.m. on 22 November 2012.

22. Resp # 14 (Hailam), 2012. interview, Complex of Darul Hidayah at 10.50 a.m. on 25 November 2012.

23. Resp # 06 (Hokkien), 2012. interview, at his residence in Pangsapuri of Permint Harmoni, Cherung Lanjut Road, Kuala Terengganu at 12.30 p.m. on 14 November 2012.

24. Resp # 01 (Hokkien), 9 April 2012.

25. Resp # 11 (Foochow), 2012. interview, Darul Fitrah office at 11.00 a.m. on 22 November 2012.

26. Resp # 09 (Cantonese), 2012. interview, Complex of Darul Hidayah at 11.00 a.m. on 21 November 2012.

27. Resp # 20 (Hokkien), 2012. interview, Complex of Darul Hidayah at 9.00 a.m. on 15 November 2012.

28. Resp # 07 (Hokkien), 2012. interview, at Complex of Darul Hidayah at 10.55 a.m. on 19 November 2012.


31. Resp # 13 (Hakka), 2012. interview, Complex of Darul Hidayah at 10.30 a.m. on 25 November 2012.

32. Resp # 08 (Hokkien), 2012. interview,Complex of Darul Hidayah at 10.30 a.m. on 19 November 2012.

33. Resp # 15(Foochow), 2012. interview at her office in Gong Pauh village, Kuala Terengganu at 11.45 a.m. on 6 December 2012.