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PATTERN OF INTERMARRIAGE IN KENINGAU: A PRELIMINARY STUDY TOWARDS RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Suraya Sintang, Budi Anto Mohd. Tamring & Khadijah Mohd. Hambali

Abstract

This paper seeks to discuss the profiling pattern of intermarriage among the Keningau community and how the intermarriage can be a social indicator towards the practice of religious tolerance. This has been done by analyzing the quantitative data collected randomly from some villagers in Keningau. The concept of intermarriage as discussed in this paper broadly means intermarriage between different ethnic groups, interfaith marriage between different religions and interfaith marriage that leads to conversion to Islam. The findings show that there are some cases where the interfaith marriage involved Muslim and non-Muslim couples. Other findings discussed in which the intermarriage is concerned, are of mixed-faith family (one family, different religion), conversion to other religions and interfaith marriage among siblings and relatives. This study shows that most of the respondents gain positive experience either involving interethnic or interreligious relations which lead to their good responses on the readiness to getting married to different religions and not hesitating in attending family meals from other religions. The findings conclude that the profiling pattern of intermarriage in Keningau is a very encouraging sign towards religious tolerance as intermarriages seem acceptable by the respondents involved in this study.

Introduction

It is quite common to find people of various ethno-religious-cultural backgrounds living side by side in harmony with tolerance of one another. Frequently, this tolerance is stretched to its limits when issues pertaining to religious sensitivities and interests are affected. Intermarriage is one of the religious issues which demand high intensity of tolerance from the members of family and society. In Malaysian context of intermarriage, it is a typical observant in Sabah where people from different ethno-religious background practice intermarriage which involves interfaith marriage or interethnic marriage, and it is common that the spouse or the family involve in intermarriage manage to deal with the situation of tolerance. To prove how intermarriage is well practiced in Sabah, this study has been carried out in the district of Keningau, one of the rural settlements of Sabah native people. Data gained by quantitative method, in which the questionnaires which are designed according to the pattern of intermarriage, was collected not only from the respondents involved but also from their families and relatives. The distribution of questionnaires was done randomly in four villages which are identical with mixed ethnicities and religions.

Interfaith Marriage in Malaysia

Malaysia may have a long tradition of intermarriages either in the form of interfaith marriage or interethnic marriage. J. Milton Yinger defines intermarriage – or as he calls it, religious intermarriage – as a process that occurs when persons who belong to or are identified with different ones of the major religious groups of a society, get married. Intermarriage deals with the idea that a couple can be religiously different in several ways – not just one – each of which can affect their interaction. He also considers intermarriage as a phenomenon, not only of a pair, but of a social structure.

Interfaith marriage – traditionally called mixed marriage – is a marriage between partners professing different religions in which both partners remain adherents to their distinction religions. An interfaith marriage is also defined as a union in which the two spouses follow different religious traditions. This definition does not sufficiently clear in describing the real context of meaning applied in the interfaith marriage in Malaysia. It is because, in Malaysia, a non-Muslim who wishes to marry a Muslim must first convert into Islam before the marriage can be recognized as valid. The more applicable meaning for interfaith marriage as practiced in Malaysia is a marriage in which a partner who is non-Muslim has changed his/her religion to Islam as a requirement to allow him/her to marry the Muslim partner. As such it leads to religious conversion, religious assimilation and cultural adjustment. Jolanda argues that the term "Muslim-non-Muslim

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marriage" itself, however, might not be appropriate for these marriages in Malaysia since conversion to Islam is required before marriage, thus the marriage itself is an Islamic marriage. For a couple from different religious backgrounds contemplating marriage, the options are one spouse can convert to the religion of the other, both can maintain separate religions, both can convert to another religion, or one or both can drop out of religious involvement.9

In Malaysia and Singapore, studies on ethnic intermarriage have shown that such marriage typically occurs within the same religious groups: Indian Muslims marrying Malays, and Chinese and Indians marrying if they are both Christians.5 The limited number of Chinese marrying Malays has been attributed to different factors. According to Hassan (1974) as quoted by Jolanda Lindenberg, argues that the compulsory conversion to Islam is an important deterrent to interethnic marriages between Malays and Chinese.10 The study of interfaith and interethnic marriage in Thailand is not so much different from the case in Malaysia. In Southern Thailand, interethnic and interfaith marriages led to the practices of conversion in Muslim-Buddhist residence, religious coexistence as well as religious and cultural complications.11 Previous studies showed that interfaith and interethnic marriage seems to cause a controversial issue in several Southeast Asia countries. However, it would be rather different in the context of community in rural area of Sabah, particularly in the focal study of Keningau, which will be further discussed in this paper.

Nevertheless, intermarriage in different groups in society can be an effective way to bring greater understanding among these groups. Intermarriage can also facilitate harmonious relations between adherents of different religions and the breaking down of religious boundaries. It has been argued by Varshney12 that the region with the highest intermarriage rates also remained in peace during the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. While Jolanda Lindenberg13 argues that intermarriage was seen as a positive sign of harmonious relations between the different ethnic groups. Therefore, intermarriage plays a vital role in social structure to promote religious tolerance as it encourages people to be open to the new pattern of families in contemporary generations.

This paper does not intend to discuss further on the issue of intermarriage and its implementation in Malaysia either from the Islamic Law or Civil Law. Nor will it scrutinize Islamic theology and the traditions of Islamic legal thought which is upheld in every school of Islamic law, including the codified elements of Islamic law and inheritance. Instead, this paper aims to elucidate the real practice of intermarriage focusing on the pattern of intermarriage among the people in Keningau, Sabah.

The practice of intermarriage in Sabah

Sabah shows its own unique experience in practicing intermarriage since it has been accepted as ancestral heritage and social norm. Intermarriage can be considered a social indicator that encourages the people of Sabah to be tolerant with others regardless religion and ethnic boundaries. The religious tolerance among Sabah people is not only reflected in their readiness on marriages across boundaries but also demonstrated in their daily life interactions, such as in living together, either as members of mixed-faith families or fellow men in their neighborhood. A 2012 study in the district of Telupid had showed a good practice of religious tolerance in the willingness of local community accepting the close sitting of the building house of worships and their willingness to stay together in mixed-faith family. To prove more on the religious tolerance in Sabah, the empirical study in the district of Keningau has been carried out to further discuss the real practice of intermarriage as one of the social indicators of religious tolerance.

Table 1 below shows the statistic on intermarriage which leads to conversion into Islam as reported by The Department of Religious Affairs of Sabah from the year 2000-2009. It shows that the district of Keningau contributes to the second highest number of intermarriage after Kota Kinabalu. This can be described as Keningau having its own uniqueness in intermarriage culture; thus, the number is higher than in other districts even though Keningau is the fifth biggest district in Sabah after Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, Tawau and Lahad Datu.

Keningau is a district and a major town located in the interior division of Sabah. It is the oldest and largest town in the interior part of Sabah. The name 'Keningau' is derived from the locally abundant Javanese cinnamon tree (Cinnamomum burmannii), locally known as 'Koningau'. The tree is