THE CONCEPTS OF INTERACTION AMONG MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: SABAHANS’ EXPERIENCE

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Interaction is a vital action that everyone needs in life. Every human being depends on one another to fulfil their necessary needs. Islam has emphasized on interaction through the many revealed words in the Qur’an as well as the Sunnah of Muhammad, the Prophet (PBUH). In order to build a positive relationship, many concepts of interaction have been introduced by Islamic scholars specifically as a guidance for Muslims that also universally applicable to the whole nation regardless of different religion and ethnic. The success in the implementation of these concepts can be proven based on the rulings of Muhammad in Medina. The Constitution of Medina is a great guideline in building a strong united multicultural society. This article aims to explain several elements of interaction which are ta’āruf, tafāhum, and takāful would be considered as pushed factors to foster harmony in multicultural society. The
method used for data collection involves empirical investigation and exploratory fieldwork in the rural community at Keningau district of Sabah. Using the micro observation scale and self-participation, the findings show the elements of interaction in different religious adherents proofed to be tolerant, accommodative and acceptant as these can be seen in their life experience of social cohesion within the mixed-faith family and the building of place of worship in their neighbourhood. Moreover, several elements of interaction have given significant impact in creating a peaceful coexistence among multicultural society by focusing into Sabahans’ experience that based on the implementation of interaction; including tasāmuh, mahabbah, and taʾāmul that underlying the concept of fiqh al-taʾāyusy.

**Keywords**: interaction, multicultural, taʿāruf, tafāhum, and takāful, Sabah.

**Introduction**

Living in a multicultural environment has urge the sense of need to perceive values such as tolerance, respect, understanding, cooperative and love among the society. Malaysia as part of the multi-racial as well as multi-adherent society has proven the importance of the values mentioned above in maintaining a peaceful and harmonious living for the country. (Star Online. 2014) In discussing about the implementation of the best practices and positive values as well as ways in developing good relationship, Islam has explained intricately many times on the importance of adāb and akhlak in life through the main Islamic references which are Qur’an and Sunnah. Moreover, religion and morality in Islam are interrelated to the extent that one’s character or moral behaviour presupposes faith and one’s faith is affected by their action. (H. Tata Fathurrohman. 2015).

The formation of relationships that happen every day within human beings regardless of bad or good relationships are affected by the process of interaction among them. Interaction plays a big role in constructing a united and well-balanced society, as it is the essence in building a relationship. In understanding more about social interaction, many scholars including Western and Islamic scholars have introduced lots of interaction concepts. These concepts are created in order to understand more about people, or as means to improve social relationship within community, society, and even nation. Hence, throughout the discussion on this paper, authors aim to elucidate the different concepts of interaction and its importance as well as the implementation of these concepts in the reality world nowadays.

Malaysia as we know, is a country of ethnic diversity. Living in this kind of state have made Malaysians practiced a complex and multi-layered route in their historic path. The beginning of multi-ethnic Malaysia construction can be drawn back since the Malacca Sultanate era (see Zaid Ahmad. July 2007).
The Exposure of Malaysia

This section is imperative on twofold foundations. First, it attends the determination of sharing some universal knowledge to those who generally not familiar with Malaysia. Secondly, it is essential as an elementary framework that is theoretically brings about clear understanding on multiculturalism and pluralistic society within the context of Malaysian. (see Zaid Ahmad. July 2007).

Geographically, Malaysia is in the centre of Southeast Asia, which occasionally being called as Malay Archipelago. It comprises of two distinct lands: the peninsular Malaysia bordering Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia, and the Eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak, which are in the northern part of the island of Borneo. Malaysia is enchanted with its multicultural arrangement, consists of the Malays, Chinese, Indians, the Orang Asal/Orang Asli (the aborigines of Peninsular Malaysia) and the native or indigenous ethnic groups of Iban, Kadazan, Dusun, Bidayuh, Murut, Melanau, etc. that form the population of Sabah and Sarawak. The Malays are the largest community in Malaysia as well as dominant in the country’s politics. Almost all of the Malays are Muslims. They speak Malay language and practice Malay culture. Meanwhile, the Chinese encompass somewhat fewer than one third of the inhabitants and most of them are the devotees of Buddhism and Taoism, speak Hokkein, Hakka and Cantonese, and are prevailing in trades and businesses. The Indians account for less than eight percent of the population. They are mainly Hindu Tamils, which originated from Southern India who speak Tamil, Malayalam and some Hindi, and live mainly in plantation estates on the west coast of the Peninsular. There are also other societies such as Sikh, Eurasians and other races who made up the remaining inhabitants (see Zaid Ahmad. July 2007).

Historically, Malaysia has been affected with a multi-coloured historical voyage, thus becomes Asia’s utmost pluralistic societies. The challenges that came in have certainly impacted Malaysians and its country through the appearance of various social and cultural forms. In terms of cultural aspect, it is possible to see at least two major dominant influences, (1) the Islamic religion and culture as well as (2) the Western lifestyles, culture, ideology and civilisation.

Today this country being inhabitants by over 25 million individuals that comprise of Malays, Chinese, Indians, indigenous and other minorities who live together in peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. Although Islam has been made as an official religion of Malaysia, freedom of worship still being certain by the constitution. As a result, religions other than Islam are widely and openly practiced, particularly in urban areas where the society is more plural than people who live in rural area. Urbanization is presently around 51 per cent, and the capital of Kuala Lumpur, has about 2 million
people living within its vicinity. Originally, the Chinese are largely concentrated in towns and urban areas. However, with the current rapidly change of trends by the migration of Malays and Bumiputras into cities have resulted in the increasing number of Bumiputra city dwellers. The national and official language is Bahasa Melayu (Malay language), but English is commonly used showing another empirical mark of British colonial rule and the more recent impact of globalization. Besides that, there are also other main languages that can be found in Malaysia, including several dialects of Chinese language (Cantonese, Hokkien or Hakka), and Tamil, Hindi and Punjabi amongst the Indian inhabitants (Hassan and Basri 2005).

**Sabah: Religious Diversity**

In Sabah, religions play a vibrant role in the assemblage of people of diverse ethnic and cultural background. Generally, the people of Sabah can be grouped into three main groups namely Muslims Bumiputera, non-Muslims Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera. These categorizations are unlike the plural society in Peninsular where they are more absorbed on Malay Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera (the Chinese and Indians). Such phenomenon be present in Sabah because there are Bumiputeras who are not Muslims. As stressed by Shamsul (2005), ‘pluralism’, be it in a region, country, province, an urban area or a rural area, is a product of its history. In addition, the communal system in Sabah is more to egalitarian; as elucidated by Sabihah Osman (2007:48). According to her, the royal effects in Sabah were not as clear and strong as in the Peninsular and Sarawak. Therefore, there is no such social status between the people of Sabah---everybody is equivalent. Moreover, the census account, which has been steered since the colonization era up till now, shows that there is no main ethnic, i.e. the percentage should be more that 50 percent, in Sabah. This is unalike from the structure of people living in Peninsular, i.e. Malays 55 percent, Chinese 34 percent and Indian 10 percent (Sabihah Osman 2007). Even if there is a dominant ethnic in Sabah, like Kadazandusun, the total number of this ethnic group is only 18.44 percent (479,944 people) and Bajau 13.18 percent (343,178 people), and these two subsidize only 30 percent (Malaysia Yearly Census Book 2010, Census Department Malaysia).

Moreover, the Muslims show the peak number of distributions, followed by the Christians, Buddhists and atheists or no religion with the ratio of 63:36 (Muslims: non-Muslims). Another one percent, i.e. 26,598, have faith in in traditional religions (pagans). The poll shows that the religious assortment in Sabah is not only focused on world key religions that are Revealed or Semitic or Abrahamic religions such as Islam and Christians, and Cultural or non-Abrahamic religions such as Buddha, Hinduism and Sikh. The people also believe in animisms.

In addition, Islam and Christians are two major religions for the majority of the people in Sabah, and this does not only for the people living in
urban areas, it is also the religions of those living in rural areas. This is definitely different from the situation in Peninsular where the people are normally focused on one area, i.e. the Muslim-Malays in rural areas, Chinese (Buddhist and Christians) in urban areas and Hindu-Indians in estates. As stated by Sabihah Osman (1985:15), “the demographic formation in Sabah is different from Peninsular because British did not group the people according to their economic functions like they did to the people in Peninsular”. This ‘break and rule’ system was not clearly practised in Sabah, and this creates a more diverse and frequent interaction among the different ethnics and religions in Sabah. Budi Anto Mohd Tamring (2008) states that the synthesis of different ethnics---since they are living in the same areas and frequently meeting each other---in Sabah has resulted in various forms of relation such as daily interactions in matters related to economy, culture and politics. Moreover, Sabah has its own uniqueness that is not only portrayed in its ethnic diversity, dialects, culture and customs, it is also shown in its religious diversity. In the human history, an ethnic is usually associated with their religion. For instance, the Chinese are identified as Buddhists and Taoist; the Indians are Hindus, and Malays are Muslims. Also, in Sabah, some ethnic groups are identified according to their race and religions. This can be seen among the Bajau, MalayBrunei, Bisaya, Idaan and Sungai who are identified as Muslims or ‘born Muslim’. In the political context of Sabah, these ethnic groups are identified as the ‘Muslim Bumiputera’ and most of them living along the east and west coasts of Sabah (Suraya Sintang 2003). On the contrary, identity through religions is not applicable to some ethnic groups of Sabah such as Kadazandusun, Murut and Rungus who are mostly concentrate in remote areas. It is undeniable that these ethnic groups are known as ‘non-Muslim Bumiputera’. However, some of them are Muslims and they are known as ‘saudara baru’ or Muslim converts. Until today, some of the people of these ethnic groups have no religion which is only believe in animisms. According to Budi Anto Mohd Tamring (2008:132), “that similarity in religions of the different ethnics in Sabah have in some way improved the relation across ethnics and religions. Besides that, it is a common phenomenon for the members in a family in Sabah to embrace more than one religion”. For instance, although the parents have no religions (pagans), the children are allowed to choose any denominations if they are Christians, or they can choose to embrace Islam through various factors (Suraya Sintang 2003). Despite embracing different religions, the relation between family members and neighbours is good and close (Mat Zin Mat Kib 2003). They visit and respect each other although they believe in different religions. This closeness is shown through their accommodative attitude during interaction with friends or relatives of different religions. For instance, it is normal for non-Muslims to say assalamualaikum to their Muslims encounters. The same goes to their way of dressing and names, where the use of ‘bin’ and ‘binti’ do not replicate their religions. According to Mat Zin Mat Kib (2003:48), “sometimes it is problematic to distinguish their religions through their daily practices because some do not have beliefs that are clearly linked with various facets of social lifestyles”. The close bond between the religions is also inspired
by their way of living that is culturally integrated through sharing the same dialects or languages, originating from the same state, having the same family relation, sharing the same culture, practising intermarriage, doing business in the same venues, i.e. tamu and sharing the same faith (Hasan Mat Nor 2007), which influence them to be easily cooperated, accommodative and matured as well as have an open mind towards the variances exist.

**Definition and Concepts of Interaction**

Interaction literally means an active relationship between two or more persons or an act in such a way that will influence each other through communication and direct involvement. (John & Edmund, 1989: 361). Based on this definition, interaction not only includes communication but also social engagement. A successful interaction depending on a good communication and this process then influence the formation of society. This cycle process can be referred from the following diagram:

**Figure 1. Cycle Process of Interaction**

In managing this cycle process, many researchers especially in the field of sociology have studied regarding this matter particularly. Based on the research done by Blumer (2008), he explained that interaction happen when there is an involvement between each other or more that try to move themselves mentally into the state or situation of the particular person they are dealing with. Hence, the action of trying to understand the behaviour or act of other persons till the process of communication and interaction happens is called social interaction. (Dadi Ahmadi. 2017: 301-316).

He then added that social interaction also requires the understanding of symbols that includes meaning, language and thought (Dadi Ahmadi. 2017: 301-316). Joel M. Charon who studied Blumer’s theory on Symbolic Interactionism explained that these symbols are important in defining a person’s attitudes and characters whenever they are interacting with others or even in defining themselves as a person (Joel
M. Charon. 1979:61). The symbols like ideas, perspectives, thought, languages and actions assist every person in their socialization with others.

On the other hand, looking into the perspective of Ibn Khaldun\(^1\) in terms of interaction, he characterized interaction as an important entity for each individual. (Ibn Khaldun. 1993:1-4; Syed Omar bin Syed Agil. 2008:110). Ibn Khaldun stated that the need to cooperate and unite with each other is natural inclination for human being in order to achieve basic needs in life. Every person is dependent on others even for a small grain of rice. It happens through the cycle of interaction for example from the production of machines, to the planting and reaping of paddy fields, and the process continues until the rice are completely ready to cook and eat. Thus, these natural needs of human being that always dependent on each other defined by Ibn Khaldun as ‘a political and social being’. The continuous cooperation and unity that happen between human being will form social organizations that later develop towards a civilization which is called as \textit{`umrān}. (Ibn Khaldun. 1993:1-4; Syed Omar bin Syed Agil. 2008:110).

In Islam, the concepts of interaction are introduced in many terms for example, there are few Qur’anic words that indirectly refer to the meaning of interaction as Allah S.W.T. stated in the Qur’an: “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Qur’an, 49:13). And the other verse says: “ Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is [rightly] guided” (Qur’an, 16:125)

Based on these verses, it is clearly shown that Islam really encourage people to interact with each other by using the words \textit{`lita`ārafū} and \textit{jādi\textsl{h}um} which means ‘to know’ and ‘to argue’ between them in good manner. Further explained in tafsir Ibn Kathir (Ibn Kathīr. 2001: 50:33), the verse stated above in Surah Al-Hujurat indicates that regardless of different tribes, religions and nations, all humans are created equal as they are born from the same offspring of Adam and Hawa. The wisdom behind these differences in creation is because Allah would like them to know and understand each other as well as a means for human to accept, respect and embrace the differences that they have. (Khadijah & Khairul, 2005:91-121). Meanwhile, the word \textit{jādilhum} is synonym with what been commonly discussed nowadays which is dialogue. \textit{Jādilhum} or \textit{al-jidāl}

\(^{1}\) Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was a historian and also was formerly known as a sociologist with his introduction of New Science known as \textit{`ilm al-ijtima` al-insāni} (The Science of Human Society) and \textit{`ilm al-`umrān al-basāri} (The Science of Human Civilization). These two concepts have given big impact toward the development of Muslims thought that being referred for such a long decade. Meanwhile, his two books titled \textit{Muqaddimah} and \textit{al-`Ibār} have contributed a lot in the discipline of social sciences.
literally means arguments or debates in determining something truth. This term that had been mentioned 29 times in the Qur’an shows the importance of debates or dialogue as to discuss and clarify any religious or social issues. (Suraya, 2017:107). The two terms that been discussed above, not only elucidate the inclusiveness of Islam, but also to express that Islam really emphasizes on the importance of interaction among people to spread love, kindness and peaceful living among humankind. (Suraya Sintang, 2017:108-109).

Referring to Arabic language, there are two Arabic words that defined as interaction which are tafā‘ul and ta‘āmul. Ibn Manzur, stressed that ta‘āmul comes from the root word ‘amal means work. (Ibn Manzur.1886: (13) :504). It is constructed referring to the word tafā‘ul which been defined as interact, cooperate and associate that throughout these actions give influence or effect towards each other. (Kamus Besar Arab-Melayu Dewan. 2006: entry: “تعامل”; Al-Ma’any. 2017). The concepts of interaction have been discussed by Islamic scholars through many approaches. Hassan al-Banna for example, had introduced three basic pillars of interaction especially in building a relationship in an usrah2 (Hassan al-Banna, 1979: 3) or halaqah. (Ḥusayn ibn Muḥṣin ibn `Alī Jābir. 1991: 283). He stated that there are three steps in interaction that build a strong bond relationship, which includes ta‘āruf3 (Muhammad Idris al-Marbawi. 1998, 3:16), tafāhum4 (Muhammad Idris al-Marbawi. 1998: 104) and takāful.5(al-Maany, 2018). Also, there are other scholars who added ta‘āwun6 (Mohd Puzhi Usop et al. 2009:67). As an additional step from these three pillars. (Hamidah. 2015: 331; Ali Abdul Halim Mahmud. 1993:26). These steps or processes of interaction not only help in forming a strong relationship among society but also towards developing successful nation especially in a multicultural environment.

In forming a relation or ukhuwah, ta‘āruf is important as the very first step in every interaction. It is the basic level for people to get to know each other. This step can lead people to the next level of interaction by allow them to open their heart from only knowing to another level of curiosity which is understanding or tafāhum. This is because through knowing one another, it influences people to feel the sense of openness and acceptance in embracing the uniqueness of every individual. (Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali 2018:62; Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali. 2020. 22 (1): 73-102). Tafāhum as defined by Nur Eervannudin and

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2 ‘Usrah’ according to Hassan al-Banna is synonym with the meaning of brotherhood that portrays unity. Hassan al-Banna emphasize on usrah to show unity or a strong and close relationship among Muslims. Meanwhile, usrah in Arabic means family.

3 “Ta‘āruf” means get acquainted originated from the word “‘Arafa” means know about something.

4 “Tafāhum” is defining as understanding each other which form from the root word “fahima” bermaks means to understand.

5 “Ta‘āruf” means get acquainted originated from the word “‘Arafa” means know about something.

6 “Takāful” is synonym with the word “damān” which means protection. It is originated from the word “takāfala” means to agree with each other or coincide.

7 “Ta‘āwun” means cooperating or helping each other.
Jiyanto means mutual understanding and it is an advance step to be close and comfortable with somebody (2016:460). Reaching to this state, it will not only make individuals to achieve good relationship with others, but also avoiding any misunderstanding and conflicts. In addition, it is easier in fostering people to become supportive and helpful which known as \( ta'āwun. \) (Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali 2020. 22 (1):73-102). Reliance on one another and being supportive can make a community stronger and have a vivid relationship filled with positive and great environment instead of hatred and oppression. Achievement of this level can finally result in achieving the highest level of interaction, which is \( takāful. \) At this stage, people will no longer focus on themselves, instead the priority will be about others. The action of \( takāful \) was described in the Hadith of Muhammad the Prophet: “\text{Nu}man bin Bashir (May Allah be pleased with them) conveyed: Messenger of Allah S.W.T said: ‘The devotees in their mutual kindness, empathy and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever’”.

Hamidah, explained that relationships that reach to this stage of \( takāful \) are filled with the highest level of love and concern to one another. The burden of others will be shared and affect one another, as they will no longer have any self-interest. (2013:331).

Besides these four levels of interaction, there are also other opinions regarding the concepts of interaction. According to Abdul Halim Mahmud (1993:30-40), he stated that there are six levels of interaction in order to gain strong relationships, which are, \( ta'āruf, ta'āluf, \) (Abdul Halim Mahmud: 32; Al-Ma’any. 2018) \( tafāhum, ri`ayah, \) \( ta`awun, and tanāṣur. \) Meanwhile, from the viewpoint of contemporary Islamic scholars, the concepts of interaction being discussed in detail with more comprehensive views in order to conform with the current situation nowadays. For example, the concept of \( fiqh al-ta`āmul, fiqh al-ta`āyusy \) has been introduced towards achieving good and peaceful relations among multicultural society that comprise of different faiths and races.

The meaning of \( ta`āmul \) as discussed before is defined as mutual cooperation, and interaction that takes place between two persons or more. The concept of \( fiqh al-ta`āmul \) is commonly used among scholars to explain on the effort of unifying relationships between spouses in marriage,

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8 Hadith narrated by Muslim, Kitāb al-Bir wa al-Silāḥ wa al-Adab, Chapter Tarāhūm al-Mu`minīn wa Ta`ātufuhum wa Ta`āduduhum, hadith no. 6586. Referred to Abu al-Husain Muslim bin al-Hajjaj bin Muslim, “Sahih Muslim,” in Mausū “ah al-Hadīth al-Syarīf al-Kutub al-Sittah, ed. Salih bin ‘Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh (Riyad: Dar al-Salam, 2000), 1130.

9 “Ta`āluf” means unity between one another. Comes from the root word “ta`ālafa” which means gathered. “Ri`ayah” is defined as taking care and look after. Originated from the term “ra`ā” means shepherd and preserve.

10 “Tanāṣur” means help each other or mutual support, which comes from the term “naṣara” means help. Synonym with the kalimah “ta`āwun”.

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society of different faiths and cultures, as well as in Islamic economy (mu`āmalah). Abdul Aziz bin Fauzan al-Fauzan stated that *fiqh al-ta`āmul* is a concept that emphasize on perfecting *adāb* and *akhlāk* or morality (Abdul Aziz bin Fauzan al-Fauzan, 2004:78). He mentioned that in Islam, successful interaction not only focusing on the interaction with Allah, but also with humans. Many people do successfully perform well in their `ibādah, for example, prayers, fasting and reading the Qur’an, yet still portray bad attitudes or *akhlāk* towards others. They still have the sense of hatred, being injustice, untrustworthy and other negative attitudes (Abdul Aziz bin Fauzan al-Fauzan, 2004:78). Hence, by complying with the objective of *fiqh alta`āmul*, this concept is one of the means that encourage people to spread justice, peacefulness, love and mercy as a basic foundation in building good relation among multicultural society.

Also, in discussing about multicultural society, there is another concept that also focus on promoting unity, which is *fiqh al-ta`āyusy*. This concept has been discussed widely among Western and Islamic scholars as it holds a comprehensive meaning. *Ta`āyusy* literally means going through a harmonious life despite having different faiths and races (Al-Ma`any, 2018). Zulkifli and Anis (2018:22) further described that *ta`āyusy* means living together as a community that is based with the spirit of love, high tolerance, acceptance of diversity, mutual understanding, trust and complementing each other. Besides that, the term *fiqh al-ta`āyusy* also synonym with the word co-existence. As explained by Kamar Oniah (2010:27) in her study on pluralistic co-existence, she stated that co-existence means each community has its own identity and uniqueness that comprise of different ethnic, race, religion and language. They live together as a society or in the same country. She argued that the basis of producing a successful nation is through harmonious and happiness co-existence. (Kamar Oniah Kamaruzzaman, 2010:17).

However, by looking back to the role of Muslims as vicegerents of Allah, it is an obligation for Muslims to prioritize aqidah above all as the basis of unity among humankind (Asyraf Wajdi Dusuki, 2016). *Khayr Ummah* as stated in the verse below shows that aqidah is the root of spreading da`wah. A strong level of aqidah influence people towards spreading goodness and avoiding munkar: “You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah. If only the People of the Scripture had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them are believers, but most of them are defiantly disobedient” (Qur’an, 3:110).

According to Syed Qutb, (1972. 1:447; see Mohd. Shafiee bin Hamzah et al. 2015:3) although literally the sequence of aqidah in this verse is later than the action of *amar ma`ruf nahi munkar*, he translated that in spiritual meaning, the action of *amar ma`ruf nahi munkar* is actually influence by aqidah. This is because by truly abiding the principles of tauhid, it is indirectly affecting the spread of goodness and avoidance of munkar.
Example of this description can be proven from the greatest time of Islamic history during the ruling of Muhammad. The unity of Aus and Khazraj, as well as Muhajirin and Ansar proves that by having strong faith and loyalty towards Allah S.W.T., a long conflict relationship drastically transforms into a vivid relationship that unite strongly.

Hence, in summary, based on the above discussion on the concepts of interaction and its definition, interaction is not only about building relationship, but also involves moral improvement, ethical values, and thoughts. Having aqidah as the foundation in every interaction, the concepts of interaction based on Islamic perspective being introduced such as ta`āruf, tafāhum, takāful, ta`āwun, fiqh al-ta`āmul, and fiqh al-ta`āyus, clearly shows that the priority of good values and akhlak Islamiyyah is very important to be instilled in the society.

Rasulullah (PBUH)’s Implementation on the Concepts of Interaction

The prime example of Rasulullah (PBUH)’s implementation on the concepts of interaction can be proven from the Constitution of Medina. The diversity that exists among the society of Medina, which was populace by Jews, Muslims, pagans, animisms and other ethnics, indicate that the Constitution of Medina was created with full of justice, fairness, respect, love and tolerance (Yusri & Tengku Ghani, 2012: 3 (2):5). According to Azyati Azhani et al., the so called ‘one Ummah’ in this charter not only dedicated specifically for Muslims, but also include non-Muslims in order to bring awareness to the society of Medina that they are one and need to unite in building a strong society (Azyati Azhani Mohd Mazuki et al. 2013: 5 (2):5).

Furthermore, the Constitution of Medina also resulted in the union of Muhajirin and Ansar as well as to finally end the long battle of Aus and Khazraj (Yusri & Tengku Ghani, 2012: 3 (2):5). Rasulullah’s approach in forming a brotherhood among Aus and Khazraj which known as Ansar as well as Ansar with Muhajirin had given big contribution in creating a solid form of Muslim brotherhood in Medina. This approach later on, being followed by other non-Muslims community. Also, the implementation of ta`āruf, tafāhum, takāful, and ta`āwun can be seen indirectly through the formation of brotherhood. Despite not knowing about one another, the people of Ansar were so acceptance and willing to offer wealth, accommodation and other belongings to the Muhajirin. Rasulullah’s way of uniting Muhajirin and Ansar not only lead them to the level of ta`āruf and tafāhum of each other but also to the highest level of interaction which is takāful (Mohd Rashad Shamsuddin. 2002: 261; Abdul Aziz al-Fauzan, 2007: 329).

The values of love and sincerity between Muhajirin and Ansar was shown from one of the examples of the story narrated by Al-Waqidi in his book Asbāb al-Nuzul. From Abu Hurairah R.A, Rasulullah (PBUH) had offered
a man from *ahl-suffah*¹¹ (Jalaluddin Rakhmat. 2013: 30) to an Ansar man in order to help the Muhajir. Hence, the Ansar man brought the Muhajir to his home to offer him food and accommodation. Although not having much except for the Ansar’s family, he insisted to help and asked his wife to put their children to sleep in order to prevent hunger. His wife being very obedient, followed his command and served the food for the Muhajir. On the next day, Rasulullah (PBUH) met the husband and wife and said to both of them “Indeed Allah was so impressed with your actions”. Then revealed the following verse as a symbol of compliment to the Ansar (Mahmud Mohamad Babeli. 2002: 52; Ali Abdul Halim Mahmud. 1993: 392). “And [also for] those who were settled in al-Madinah and [adopted] the faith before them. They love those who emigrated to them and find not any want in their breasts of what the emigrants were given but give [them] preference over themselves, even though they are in privation” (Qur’an, 59:9).

The emergence of Islam not only influence in fostering great characters as Muslims among them, but also make their faith stronger and freedom from their own desire. The successful of the Constitution of Medina in bringing unity and justice for the Medina nation despite their diversity, had proved the great ruling of Rasulullah (PBUH) in cultivating peaceful coexistence. Such comprehensive constitution that comprise of rights and responsibilities of each individual had brought them together by becoming a world class civilization and respectable nation.

**Malaysians as Multicultural Society: Sabahans’ Experience**

Looking at the situation in Malaysia that is also characterized by multicultural nation, there are yet many unsolved issues regarding misunderstandings, oppressions and discrimination that surrounds Malaysian societies. Khadijah argues that differences of ethnicities, skin colours, faiths, cultures, and thoughts have given big impact as challenges in creating harmonious living among nation. In order to improve the situation, the cultivation of religious values and improvement of morality are much needed in the society (Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2018:62). Hence, the implementation of the concepts of interaction according to Islamic perspective as discussed above are practical in fostering good characters.

The idealism of the levels of interaction (*ta’āruf, tafāhum,* and *takāful*) for example, influence society to become more knowledgeable and understanding of other cultures and religious tradition. Instead of being prejudice and ignorant of learning other faith, the process of *ta’āruf* is a good start in creating awareness in the society. It automatically inculcates the sense of respect and openness towards others. Besides, this situation

²¹ *Ahl-suffah* is a group of men among the sahabah of Prophet (PBUH). that lived around the corner of Medina mosque. They are poor and got no families as well as home to live. They were part of Muhajirin that migrated to Medina for protection.
also resulted in creating a supportive nation or can be described as the stage of takāful. Similar with the formation of brotherhood in Medina, the supportive nation was impacted from the act of takāful and absolute sincerity.

The case study in Sabahans’ experience can be best illustrated the Islamic concepts of interaction (ta’āruf, tafāhum, and takāful) as it encompasses the best practices in the social cohesion within the mixed-faith family and being receptive towards the building of others’ religious place of worship in their neighbourhood. This kind of situation is the typical scenario and can be seen in many areas in Sabah at the Eastern part of Malaysia. Keningau, which is situated in the Interior Division of Sabah and the fifth-largest town in Sabah, is one of the exemplary districts of multi ethnic-religious society. The estimated population is 177,735 and the total population is Christians (nearly 138,063 people) and 15 percent Muslims (estimated 40,000) and the other five percent are those who are remain as animists. The social cohesion within the context of mixed-faith family has been formed from the output of intermarriages whether it involves inter-faith marriage which lead to the conversion to Islam or inter-ethnic marriage which does not involve to any conversion.

Most Sabah native people practice intermarriage that is expressed not only in their readiness to marry across borders, but also in their everyday experiences such as living together under one roof either as members of mixed-faith families or fellow men in their neighbourhood. The social reality of living together in the mixed-faith family is potentially more prone to capture a sense of social cohesion. It is important to highlight that the social interconnection is an facet of social wellbeing which is resolute by unison, established by shared understanding, mutual backing and trade-off in social affairs (Deepa, 2000). Aiedah Abdul Khalek (2019) points out that a cohesive society is constructed based on three ultimate pillars – the nonattendance of social omission among the adherents of the society, interaction and connection that binds them, and collective values regardless of their socio-religious backgrounds. In Malaysian context of social cohesion, Jamilah et al. (2013) conducted the preliminary study on the interaction level among Malays, Chinese and Indians in Penang which showed the poor social cohesion among the inter-ethnic relations. It has also been recorded that the highest number for the location of daily interaction occurred at the workplace which means the interaction is utterly dependent on the situation or circumstances.

The unified elements clearly seen in Sabah’s mixed-faith family relationship, on the contrary. It’s not too early to suggest that Sabah’s mixed faith family can be one of the strongest examples of social cohesion as it has been shown to be interrelated, spending time together, and offering moral support to one another. Suraya et al. (2019) points out that most of the native people of Sabah feel comfortable to invite other family members from different religious background into their ceremony and can get along with each other easily to be served on the same table and living...
together under similar house. Aiedah (2019) argues that at the very insignificant stage, eating which is an elementary humanoid stipulation, is a shared perspective to see the level of social cohesion in a community. Some religions and belief systems have their own dietary guidelines. Muslims are only permitted to consume halal food. The concept of halal in the social cohesion context could be observed from two dissimilar stances – positive or negative. In some cases, variances in dietary practices can either bind or break the society. When the members of the society take such variance positively and with respect, the dining experience could be a display place for accomplishing social unity. The Sabahans’ experience in the mixed-faith family have shown the example of the best practice on how the non-Muslim family members show their respect to the Muslim dietary regulation during the festivities and marriage ceremony. It is the social norms in Sabah, the family would prepare two different set of meals; one table serving for halal meal and the other one would be served with the non-halal meal. The Muslim family side would normally prepare the food to avoid any doubt from the other fellow Muslim friends and family to have the meal during the feast.

When eating, many of us usually feel cherished and treasured if others take into consideration of our dietary prerequisite. This is especially true in the context of number of dietary necessities such as vegans, Seventh-day Adventists, Hindus and Buddhists practitioners. This in turn made it important for multi-cultural society members to respect the variances so that the aim of attaining social cohesiveness and well amalgamated society be achieved (Aedah Abd. Khalek 2019). Hence, the mixed-faith family is a microsocial level which implies the individual representations from the family members of different religious attachment share the moments and the reality of social cohesion which would echo solely a degree of living-togetherness. Table 2 shows one of the informant’s mixed-faith family which comprise of different religious affiliations at one of the villages in Keningau district.
Table 2: Fieldwork on September, 4 2020 at Kg. Bariawa Laut, Keningau

Another element of social cohesion in Muslim-non-Muslim relation at the studied area of Keningau district is the situation of building others’ religious place of worship in their neighbourhood. It was important to many people to emphasise that Christians and Muslims in many areas of Sabah lived side by side, with full acceptance of one another. The pictures below show how the mosque and the church is sitting close with each other without any protest from the people of different religions whether are staying at rural area or urban area at the city centre of Keningau.
Cathedral St. Francis side by side with Masjid al-Rahim at the central city of Keningau district.

Ukhwah Mosque and St. Anthony, Catholic Church at Anin Apin, Keningau.

Picture depicted from google map retrieved on September, 6 2020.
The religious infrastructures of mosque and churches which build side by side has promoted peace message and utilise religious networks to strengthen brotherhood within the community of different religions. The model of building religious place of worship at the neighbourhood in many parts of Keningau district has fostered social cohesion through demonstrating tolerance, practical mercy and caring for the others.

The relationship among mosque and church is usual. In these areas, they generally share parking spaces during busier times such as during Friday prayer among Muslims and Sunday service among the Christians. They also often host inter-religious exchange of ideas and organize sports competitions. It is also normal to see during Ramadan where all Muslim are fasting the church staff bring foods to the mosque.

The religious institutions have also care for the neighbour through food distribution to the displaced families who too asking for the shelter regardless of their religious background. (interview Affendi Kasimin, 4 September 2020). Hence, the micro social observation shows the
Sabahans’ experience on living together of the Muslims and Christians with the message of peace not only at the studied area of Keningau, but also in many parts of Sabah.

Ultimately, we may say that Sabah is providing premises is that for nation to survive and prosper, everyone, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background, must be given their fair share of space and opportunities in Sabah. Sabahans’ community should take pride in this diversity not only for what it means to be a Sabahans’ people but also as a model that can share with others who are managing diversity in their midst. It shows that the faith communities live and worship in a dense, urban environment. We may see that Sabahans’ community celebrate the similarities that they share, appreciate the differences that exist among them, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other’s religious traditions. Underlying what they have achieved thus far are years of effort by everyone, including the government. This, indeed, suggest that religion contributed significantly as a social and spiritual improvement. For this reason, we acknowledge the significance of religion in fostering harmonious lives.

Based on the above-mentioned discussion, the findings from the Sabahans’ experiences at the studied area have managed to show the best practices in implementing good values of Islamic interactions (ta’āruf, tafāhum, and takāful) with the people of other religions. The different religions cannot be an excuse for Malaysia to be fragmented because all religions have put great emphasis on social cohesion. Mohd. Ridhuan Tee (2010) points out that Islam teaches its followers to always keep intact the unity as mentioned clearly in surah al-Hujurat 49:13 as follow, “O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.” Unity among the multicultural society not only embraces the philosophy of existing together harmoniously in the multi-religious community in Sabah but also manifests itself in family life. Thus, unity in mixed-faith family can serve as an example of a relation that reflects the continuity of rahmah (mercy) values as the core of family relations either in harmonizing relations or in resolving strained relations.

Apart from that, living in a multicultural country as in Malaysia, dialogue can also be part of the important means in constructing a peaceful coexistence life. It cannot be denied that dialogue always happen in Malaysians interaction every day. Regardless of what topics being discussed, dialogue can actually play an important role to generate social unity. Suraya Sintang mentioned that due to its importance, there are many activities and discussions nowadays that encourage people to practice dialogue, more specifically in interfaith dialogue (2012:147). Interfaith dialogue can bring benefit to the people through discussion of current issues, misunderstanding inputs, as well as finding solutions on the problems arise among the society.
Nonetheless, looking through the discussion on the comprehensive concept of fiqh al-taʿayusy, this concept is most probably the best concept to apply in a Malaysian multicultural nation. Accordance with its meaning of co-existence, living in a multicultural environment really urges individuals to practice living with tolerance and respect. The importance of fiqh al-taʿayusy is proven from the inclusiveness of other concepts such as tasāmuh, mahabbah, and taʿāmul that underlying the concept of fiqh al-taʿayusy.

Conclusion

In summarizing all of the concepts of interaction that had been discussed in this article, with referring to Sabahans’ experience as what Islam expects, aqidah (Islamic theology/faith) plays and important role that affect the creation of a successful and developed society. Prioritizing aqidah (Islamic theology/faith) as the foundation in every concept of interaction, these concepts clearly been developed with emphasizing on the Islamic values and morality to be applied among the society. All these concepts share similarities in encouraging individuals to be tolerance, compassion, understanding and respect between one another as well as to be freed from desires in order to conform to its purpose in building a successful society.

Underlying what Sabahans’ community had achieved thus far are years of effort by everyone, including the government who stress on the implementation of interaction; including tasāmuh, mahabbah, and taʿāmul that underlying the concept of fiqh al-taʿayusy. But we should never believe the work is done, as moulding a nation of diverse communities is always a work in progress.

Today in Sabah, it is not uncommon to see different faith communities coming together to help the less fortunate in their society. The people of Sabah generally express their significant interest in common pursuits for the good of their greater community in line with values of Islamic interactions. This suggest that religion is an element that play significant contribution in Sabah society in the area of social and spiritual function.

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