

Understanding The Christian Community's Stance towards the Muslim Community in Sabah: After the Ban on the Usage of the Term *Allah*

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ABSTRACT

The Muslim-Christian relationship dates back to more than 1400 years. Over the years, many incidences have contributed to the fluctuation in the relationship between the two religions. In the Malaysian context, the practice of different religion is allowed, as defined in Article 3(1) of the national constitution "Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation". Nevertheless, the Muslim-Christian relationship has entered a new phase when on 22 October 2013, the Court of Appeal has decided that the Catholic Church's publication, *Herald – The Catholic Weekly (Herald)* has been banned from using the term *Allah*. This issue has garnered local and international attention because it will shape the future of the Muslim-Christian relationship. Even though this issue has affected the Christian community in West Malaysia, specifically, it has also left an impact on the other Christian communities including those in Sabah. Thus, this brings forth the discussion of the Christian community's stance towards the Muslim community in Sabah post 22 October 2013. This research employs both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. The outcome of the research shows that the Christian community demonstrates a positive attitude towards the Muslim community and they conduct their daily activity without any animosity or negative reaction.

Keywords: Religion, Muslim, Christians, Tolerance, Sabah

INTRODUCTION

The Sabahans are renowned to be tolerant and amicable people. When the term *unity in diversity* is being discussed, the image of Sabah and its people who live harmoniously despite their diverse beliefs and ethnicity come to mind. This is not simply the view of the researcher

but one that has been substantiated by previous researchers such as Ahmad Tarmizi Talib (2013) and Azizan Baharuddin (2014).

It is undeniable that the Sabahan community is a tolerant group, nevertheless, the question arises as to whether this tolerance can be maintained in the light of the current situation when sensitive religious issues have stirred within the society. The Court of Appeal decided on 22 October 2013 that the Catholic Church's publication, *Herald – The Catholic Weekly (Herald)* is banned from using the term *Allah* (Berita Harian 23 Oct 2013). This issue has garnered local and international attention because it is believed that it will leave an impact on the Muslim-Christian relationship in the future (Berita Harian 17 July 2013). Even though this issue specifically revolves around the Christian community in West Malaysia, it is seen to also leave an impact on other Christian communities including those in Sabah (William 5 Nov 2013; the Malaysian insider 11 Jan 2014).

CHRISTIANS IN SABAH

The arrival of Christians into Sabah can be traced back to a Christian missionary, Odorio who arrived in Borneo as early as 1322. Consequently, in 1567, Borneo received another two Jesuit missionaries from Portugal. Twenty years later, in 1587, two more Franciscan missionaries arrived in Borneo. Then in 1687, a Theatine missionary named Antonio Ventimiglia was said to have lived for five years on the East Coast of Borneo (David 1985).

After that, Christianity flourished in Borneo during the reign of Brooke (1841) in Sarawak and BNCC (1881) in Sabah. The history of the SIB Christians' expansion into the remote areas of Borneo began with the establishment of the Borneo Evangelical Mission (BEM) on 31 August 1928. Rev. C.H. Nash who was then Chairman, C.H. Southwell who was the Honorary Secretary and R.S. Tregaskis who was the Honorary Treasurer founded BEM. On 5 October 1928, BEM started their mission on evangelization by sending three missionaries; Hudson Southwell, Carey Tolley and Frank Davidson to Sarawak, accompanied by Henderson, a retiree, as a guide (Lees 2006).

Hudson Southwell was a graduate from the University of Melbourne. He loved travelling and exploring to places such as the Arctic, Himalaya, Tibet and to several other isolated areas just to gain new experiences. His interest was very much consistent with his family's strong religious commitment and with their desire to mold him into a missionary even long before he was born. When he was 26 years old, he studied at the *Melbourne Bible Institute* to prepare himself for the life of a missionary. It was there that he met Frank Davidson and Carey Tolley who were assigned to serve in Borneo together with him (Lees 2006).

During their first year in Sarawak, Hudson Southwell and Carey Tolley paid a lot of attention to the Iban community. Based on their records, in early 1930 they had made at least one meeting with the Iban community in Lubai, Penderuan, Medamit and Medalam River; while, Frank Davidson focused on the Kelabits in Medihit (Limbang) and later on the Bisayas. The cold

reception of the Ibans towards the Christian teachings made Carey Tolley turn his attention to the Lun Bawang, particularly on those living along the Trusan River. His evangelization mission came to fruition when in 1933 the Lun Bawang began to show interest in the Christian teachings and was interested to learn more about God from the point of this new religion introduced to them (Lees 2006).

In 1938, Stafford Young continued Carey Tolley's missionary work. Stafford Young together with Lawai, a young Lun Bawang who embraced Christianity went to visit other Lun Bawang in 1938. The response of the Lun Bawang was very encouraging; twenty to thirty Lun Bawang accompanied them from one village to another to listen to the teachings delivered. Not only did they accept Christianity but they also worked at being good Christian followers (Lees 2006).

In 1947, the first school of theology was established in Lawas; and the entire first batch of the students was from the Lun Bawang community. The group consisted of ten couples who came from various villages. Racha Umong was one of them who, twelve years later, became the Chairman of the *Sidang Injil Borneo* (SIB). By 1948, BEM had 75 head of churches (Lees 2006). In short, from 1938 up until 1950, Christianity expanded very quickly to the point that BEM faced a shortage in missionaries (Lees 2006).

THE USAGE OF THE TERM *ALLAH*

According to Eugene Yapp, the Secretary-General of National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF), the Arabs had used the term *Allah* as a translation for "God" since the 2 century and it became the source of an early reference for its usage in West Malaysia. The term *Allah* used by Christians in the Malay language version of the Bible, the *Al-Kitab* is based on the historical point that the translation of the word "God" had not existed in the early arrival of Christianity into this country (the Malaysian insider 11 Jan 2014).

The usage of the term *Allah* by the Christians in Sabah is also not a new notion. Furthermore, the community has been using the term *Allah* ever since the inception of Christianity here. The *Al-Kitab* or the Malay / Indonesian versions of the language have long been using the term *Allah* as the translation for the word God. The Christians in Long Pasia have been using the term *Allah* in their evangelization and ministry work in church since 1933 (Pastor Siten @ Rondi Daud, 49 years interview on 31 July 2015).

The writer's experience as a researcher in Sabah since 2003, has also recorded a similar finding. The Murut Tahol community who are Christians in Ulu Tomani, for example, identify their god as *Allah* all the while. Their Holy Bible, *Al-Kitab*, is in the Indonesian language that also uses the term *Allah* to refer to the god whom they worship. In addition, they were also fluent in using words or phrases, which were normally related to the Muslims like *InshaAllah*. When communicating with others, they introduced themselves as Christians. In the same vein, they also identify people who hold onto traditional beliefs as heathens. From the writer's observation, the Christians here have many similarities with the Muslims. Moreover, the names

that they use are similar to the names that the Muslims use; such as Salbiah, Normadiah and so on. A pastor from Kg. Alutok, for example, is called Yusof. The translator who is a friend who has helped the writer in the field is named Jamil. To the writer, this is among the uniqueness of the Christians in Sabah.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY'S STANCE TOWARDS THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

According to a previous research, the Sabahan Christians attitude towards the Muslim community is positive (Ahmad Tarmizi Talib, 2014). That research employed both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. Perception and prejudice were among some of the yard sticks used for measurement. The research summarized that the Christian community's perception towards the Muslim community is positive and that the prejudice level is low. However, in light of the current situation where the term *Allah* has become a point of dispute, it is pertinent to reexamine the earlier view. Thus, a research to explore the relationship between the Muslims and Christians in Sabah after the incident began in April 2014. 399 respondents participated in this research with 204 Muslim respondents and 195 Christian respondents. However, in this discussion, only data from the Christian respondents was analyzed and published. The responses provided by the Christians, which related to the practices and way of life of the Muslims, reveal the Christians' attitude towards the Muslims.

PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

Below are the profiles of the Christian respondents, which encompass information such as their age, ethnicity and their highest level of education. Based on table 1, the number of respondents aged between 18-21 years of age was 60 (30.8%), 22-30 years old was 85 (43.7%), 31-40 years old was 29 (14.8%), 41-55 years old was 18 (9.2%), and 56 years old and above was 3 (1.5%). The highest number of respondents came from the Kadazan Dusun with 110 people (56.4%), followed by the Murut community with 23 people (11.8%), the Rungus community with 16 people (8.2%), the Iban community with 15 people (7.7%), the Chinese community with 10 people (5.1%), and other communities with 21 people (10.8%). The number of respondents who did not receive any formal education was 3 persons (1.5%), whereas the number of respondents who studied until the PMR level was 11 (5.5%). The number of respondents who reached the SPM level was 44 people (22.6%), followed by one respondent (0.5%) who completed the UCE education. STPM leavers consisted of 48 people (24.6%), respondents who obtained the certificate were as many as 12 people (6.1%), respondents who obtained diploma were 34 people (17.4%), respondents who achieved the degree level of education were 37 people (19%), and the respondents who achieved the masters' level were 5 persons (2.6%). This shows that the majority of the respondents received formal education up until the SPM level and above.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

| Item | Details | No | Percentage |
|--------------------|----------------------|-----|------------|
| Age | 18-21 years old | 60 | 30.8% |
| | 22-30 years old | 85 | 43.7% |
| | 31-40 years old | 29 | 14.8% |
| | 41-55 years old | 18 | 9.2% |
| | 56 years old & above | 3 | 1.5% |
| Ethnicity | Kadazan Dusun | 110 | 56.4% |
| | Murut | 23 | 11.8% |
| | Rungus | 16 | 8.2% |
| | Iban | 15 | 7.7% |
| | Chinese | 10 | 5.1% |
| | Others | 21 | 10.8% |
| Level of Education | No formal education | 3 | 1.5% |
| | PMR/ SRP/ LCE | 11 | 5.5% |
| | SPM/ MCE/ O Level | 44 | 22.6% |
| | STPM/ A Level/ | 48 | 24.6% |
| | Matriculation | 12 | 6.1% |
| | Certificate | 34 | 17.4% |
| | Diploma | 37 | 19% |
| | Degree | 5 | 2.6% |
| | Masters | | |

FINDINGS

The stance of the Christian community towards the Muslim community, from the context of this research, can be explicated through answers provided by the Christians when the questions related to the practices and way of life of the Muslims, were posed to them. The responses are analyzed and recorded in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Christians' Response on Prejudice to Islam

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree | Total |
|--|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| <i>Azan</i> or the call to prayer from the mosque bothers me | 78 40% | 63 32.4% | 33 16.9% | 10 5.1% | 11 5.6% | 195 100% |
| I do not feel comfortable living nearby a mosque | 78 40% | 60 30.8% | 27 13.8% | 19 9.8% | 11 5.6% | 195 100% |
| I avoid befriending Muslims | 109 56% | 64 32.8% | 16 8.2% | 4 2% | 2 1% | 195 100% |
| I feel uneasy working with a leader who is Muslim | 111 56.9% | 52 26.7% | 25 12.8% | 4 2% | 3 1.5% | 195 100% |
| I do not like to work in an environment with Muslims | 95 48.8% | 64 32.8% | 29 14.9% | 6 3% | 1 0.5% | 195 100% |
| If I hold a wedding party, I will not invite friends who are Muslims | 106 54.5% | 65 33.3% | 18 9.2% | 4 2% | 2 1% | 195 100% |
| I am uncomfortable to be neighbours with Muslims | 106 54.5% | 64 32.8% | 21 10.8% | 3 1.5% | 1 0.5% | 195 100% |
| I do not feel comfortable attending Muslim celebrations | 104 53.3% | 56 28.7% | 30 15.4% | 4 2% | 1 0.5% | 195 100% |
| I do not find any problems with the festive practices of the Muslims | 8 4.1% | 8 4.1% | 22 11.3% | 64 32.8% | 93 47.7% | 195 100% |

Based on table 2, in response to the statement “*Azan* or the call to prayer from the mosque bothers me”, 78 respondents (40%) replied that they strongly disagreed that the call to prayer bothered them. This is followed by 63 respondents (32.4%) who stated that they disagreed. 33 respondents (16.9%) responded by saying that they were uncertain as to whether the *azan* bothered them. Next, 10 respondents (5.1%) answered that they agreed and 11 respondents (5.6%) expressed that they strongly agreed. This shows that the majority of Christians are not bothered by the call to prayer or *azan*.

The Second item, in response to the statement “I do not feel comfortable living nearby a mosque”, 78 respondents (40%) replied that they strongly disagreed with the statement that they do not feel comfortable living within the vicinity of a mosque. This is followed by response by 60 respondents (30.8%) who answered that they disagreed. 27 respondents (13.8%) replied that they were uncertain as to whether they did not feel comfortable living nearby a mosque. The next 19 respondents (9.8%) stated that they agreed and 11 respondents (5.6%) stated that

they strongly agreed with the statement. This shows that the majority of the Christian community do not find living nearby mosques a concern.

The third item, in response to the statement “I avoid befriending Muslims”, 109 respondents (56%) responded that they strongly disagreed with the statement that they avoided befriending Muslims. This figure is followed by 64 respondents (32.8%) who stated that they disagreed. 16 respondents (8.2%) replied that they were uncertain. The next 4 respondents (2%) answered that they agreed and the last 2 respondents (1%) said that they strongly agreed. This shows that the majority of Christians do not face any problems in befriending Muslims.

The fourth item, in response to the statement “I feel uneasy working with a leader who is Muslim”, 111 respondents (56.9%) replied that they strongly disagreed with the statement that they feel uneasy working with a leader who is a Muslim. This is followed by 52 respondents (26.7%) who stated that they disagreed. The following 25 respondents (12.8%) answered that they were uncertain. The next 4 respondents (2%) replied that they agreed and 3 respondents (1.5%) stated that they strongly agreed. This shows that the majority of Christians do not find it a problem working with a leader who is a Muslim.

The fifth item, in response to the statement “I do not like to work in an environment with Muslims”, 95 respondents (48.8%) stated that they strongly disagreed with the statement that they do not like to work in an environment with Muslims. This is followed by 64 respondents (32.8%) who answered that they disagreed with the statement. The following 29 respondents (14.9%) claimed that they were uncertain. 6 respondents (3%) stated that they agreed and 1 respondent (0.5%) strongly agreed. This shows that the majority of Christians do not find an issue with working in an environment with Muslim people.

The sixth item, in response to the statement “If I hold a wedding party, I will not invite friends who are Muslims”, 106 respondents (54.5%) replied that they strongly disagreed with the statement. This is followed by 65 respondents (33.3%) who responded that they disagreed. 18 respondents (9.2%) replied that they were uncertain. The next 4 respondents (2%) responded that they agreed and the last 2 respondents (1%) stated that they strongly agreed. This shows that the majority of Christians do not have an issue with inviting their friends who are Muslims to join in the festivities of a wedding celebration which they organise.

The seventh item, in response to the statement “I am uncomfortable to be neighbours with Muslims”, 106 respondents (54.5%) responded that they strongly disagreed with the statement that they felt uncomfortable to be around Muslim neighbours. This is followed by 64 respondents (32.8%) who stated that they disagreed, whereas 21 respondents (10.8%) responded that they were uncertain. Next, 3 respondents (1.5%) replied that they agreed and 1 respondent (0.5%) strongly agreed. This shows that the majority of Christians do not have a problem with having Muslims as their neighbours.

Item number eight, in response to the statement “I do not feel comfortable attending Muslim celebrations”, 104 respondents (53.3%) responded that they strongly disagreed with the statement that they do not feel comfortable attending Muslim celebrations. This is followed by 56 respondents (28.7%) who stated that they disagreed. This is followed by another 30 respondents (15.4%) who replied that they were uncertain. Next, 4 respondents (2%) responded that they agreed with statement and 1 respondent (0.5%) strongly agreed. This shows that the majority of Christians do not face any issue with attending Muslim celebrations.

Item number nine, in response to the statement “I do not find any problems with the festive practices of the Muslims”, 8 respondents (4.1%) responded that they strongly disagreed with the statement that they do not find any issues with the festive practices of the Muslims. This is followed by another 8 respondents (4.1%) who disagreed. 22 respondents (11.3%) stated that they were uncertain. The next 64 respondents (32.8%) responded that they agreed and 93 respondents (47.7%) responded that they strongly agreed. This shows that the majority of Christians do not find a problem with the festive practices of the Muslims.

Table 3: Christians’ Responses on Muslims’ Discrimination

| | Never | Seldom | Sometimes | Always | Total |
|--|--------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| The Muslims treat me as an outsider | 103 52.8% | 50 25.7% | 39 20% | 3 1.5% | 195 100% |
| I am being marginalized by the Muslims | 114 58.5% | 54 27.7% | 27 13.8% | 0 0% | 195 100% |
| The Muslims do not trust me | 118 60.6% | 45 23% | 29 14.9% | 3 1.5% | 195 100% |

Based on table 3, in response to the statement “The Muslims treat me as an outsider”, 103 respondents who are Christians (52.8%) responded that they were never treated as an outsider by the Muslims. This is followed by 50 respondents (25.7%) who replied that they were seldom treated as an outsider by the Muslims. Another 39 respondents (20%) answered that they sometimes felt like they were being treated as an outsider by the Muslims. The next 3 respondents (1.5%) replied that they were always treated as an outsider by the Muslims. This shows that the majority of Christians do not feel as though they have been treated as outsiders by the Muslims.

The second item, in response to the statement “I am being marginalized by the Muslims”, 114 respondents (58.5%) responded that they never felt marginalized or sidelined by the Muslims. This is followed by 54 respondents (27.7%) who replied that they seldom felt that they were being marginalized by the Muslims. This next 27 respondents (13.8%) answered that they sometimes felt marginalized by the Muslims. No respondents selected the option that stated they always felt sidelined by the Muslims. This shows that the majority of Christians do not feel that they are being marginalized by the Muslims.

The third item, in response to the statement “ The Muslims do not trust me”, 118 respondents (60.6%) responded that they have never faced a situation where they were not trusted by the Muslims. 45 respondents (23%) replied that they seldom faced the situation where the Muslims do not trust them. 29 respondents (14.9%) said that they sometimes faced the situation where Muslims do not trust them then. Next, 3 respondents (1.5%) answered that they always faced the situation where Muslims do not trust them. This shows that the majority of Christians do not feel that the Muslims do not trust them.

DISCUSSION

The positive responses given by the Christians illustrate their positive attitude. The results of this research is consistent with an earlier research conducted by Ahmad Tarmizi Talib (2014), which showed that the perception of the Christian community towards the Muslim community is positive whilst the level of prejudice is low. In other words, the strained situation that arises due to the ban on the usage of the term *Allah* did not leave an impact on the relationship between the Christians and Muslims in Sabah. The findings of this research do not meet the expectations of some groups who claim that this issue may leave a mark on the relationship between the Christians and Muslims in Malaysia including those in Sabah (William 5 Nov 2013; themalaysianinsider 11 Jan 2014). The view asserted by Rahimin Affandi Abd. Rahim (2011) which concluded that the level of unity between races and religions in Malaysia is still in a fragile state is an inaccurate reflection of the Sabahan community.

Many have questioned the factors that contribute to these findings. According to Khadijah and Mohd Herzali (2008), the culture of dialogue and religious interaction were among the factors that helped to shape the understanding and to avoid hostility. However, was this the case in Sabah? It is undeniable that the Christians in Sabah do not concede to the ban on the usage of the term *Allah* which was imposed on them. This matter is seen as conflicting with the right to religious freedom which had been assured by the Malaysian constitution (Parthiban Muniandy 2012). Furthermore from another angle, the decision of the Court of Appeal is deemed to have neglected in total the rights and interests of the Christian community in Sabah which consists of the native community (aniletto.com). What distresses the Christian community more is that this case may have an effect on their other religious activities since the Court of Appeal has clearly stated that the term *Allah* is not a part of the fundamental trait of the Christian religion (christianitytoday.com).

This development has indeed disappointed the Christian community. However, when the researcher addressed the issue of the ban on the usage of the term *Allah* on *The Herald* to Pastor Siten @ Rondi Daud, the pastor stated that he did not agree with the decision on the ban, but he is not much bothered by it and continues to live his life as he has always done so. When questioned on the reason the Christians in Sabah are still reacting positively towards the Muslims despite this issue, he declared that this is generally due to the family ties evident in the Sabahan community which has been strong since the earliest of time. Inter marriages between couples from various religious backgrounds which has been practised for a long time in Sabah,

especially between the Christians and the Muslims, is one of the reasons for this positive attitude. The pastor himself has a younger brother who is a Muslim. They respect each other's choice of religion and accept the diversity in the religious practices within the family.

Even though the Sabahan community consists of people who are from different faiths, the majority of them come from a similar cultural background. This is due to the fact that the majority of the Muslims and Christians here are mainly natives of the land or also known as the *peribumi* community. Thus, although the Sabahans consists of different ethnic groups, they generally share the same origin and have many similarities in terms of culture. Furthermore, the practice of intermarriages between Muslims and Christians has also helped to strengthen the relationship of the different faiths within the community (Dr. Suwaid Tapah 1 Feb 2016). In other words, the community here in Sabah have interacted and lived together as a family and as a community all this while. Therefore, tolerance among the members of the community has long since been the way of life for the people of Sabah and it will not disintegrate that easily. The situation is different compared to the demographic in West Malaysia where identification of the different religions is demarcated further by the differences in race. The Malays generally are Muslims, the Chinese are either Buddhist or Christians, and the Indians are either Hindus or Christians. There are some non-Malays who are also Muslims, albeit the number is small. This situation has caused a divide within the West Malaysian community, and is seen as the main factor which contributes to the sensitive religious issues among the members of the community.

Based on the responses obtained from the respondents, 56.4% consists of the KadazanDusuns, followed by 11.8% Muruts, 8.2% Rungus, 7.7% Ibans. This means that 84.1% of the Christian community involved in the research most likely have family members who are Muslims. This point certainly influences their attitude towards the Muslim community. Having familial ties with Muslims is not limited to the natives or *peribumi* but this point may be extended to the Chinese respondents (5.1%) who may have familial ties with Muslims as well. This is due to the fact that the Chinese community also practice intermarriage with the local community and they are known as Sino. This fact further establishes the view that familial ties is the main factor which influences the positive stance of the Christians towards the Muslims.

CONCLUSION

This research summarises that the attitude or stance of the Christian community towards the Muslim community continues to be good and positive despite the incident of the ban in the usage of the term *Allah* on the *Herald-The Catholic Weekly (Herald)* which had been decided by the Court of Appeal on 22 Oct 2013. This result prove to us that Sabah continues to be a role model for religious tolerance in Malaysia.

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