

## Social Interaction Pattern in Muslim-Christian Relation in Ranau, Sabah

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### Abstract

*Sabah, Negeri di Bawah Bayu is known as a harmonious state due to the good relations established in its community despite being made up of various ethnicities, cultures, races, and religious beliefs. However, lately, the emergence of religious issues in Sabah has become more widespread, especially on conversion issues due to marriage or divorce. Consequently, there are different religious beliefs between children and their parents due to this issue. This article discusses the Muslim-Christian relationship in Ranau interaction and issues. This article using a qualitative data which collected through interviews with representative of Muslim and Christian Religious leader. The data of this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, which first is interaction pattern in Muslim-Christian Relation in Ranau. Second: Issues in Muslim-Christian relation in Ranau. The result showed that the sensitive issues in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau arose due to involving child religions due to conversion in one family. In summary, Muslims and Christians in Ranau have a good relationship in the community through the practice of intermarriage, socio-economic, social activities, and working together to survive for society and their residence. The shows that Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau are going well in a dialogue of life.*

**Keyword:** Muslim- Christian Relation, Religious Tolerance, Interfaith Dialogue, Sabah Malaysia.

Sabah is a state that has its uniqueness because its population consists of various ethnicities, cultures, religions and, languages. Sabah "The land below the Wind," formerly also known as North Borneo. Before the development of Islam and Christianity in Sabah, the people of Sabah lived in a pagan culture and practiced animism. Sabah received the influence of Islam around the 1300s and Christianity around the 1800s. However, in the context of religious development, the rapid expansion of Christianity was aided by the British colonial mission to Sabah, which brought Western elements into the customs of Sabah society. This assimilation was difficult to accept by the people of Sabah. However, this influence cannot be denied when it involves education and economy.

In the state of Sabah, there are 38 different districts. This study focuses on the Ranau district. Ranau has the highest Kadazandusun ethnic composition in Sabah, which has made Ranau one of the target areas of the colonialists in spreading the teachings of Christianity. The situation caused Christianity first to arrive and take root in Ranau, Sabah. Based on Sabah's 1991 statistical data, Ranau district recorded the highest population for the Kadazandusun ethnic group compared to other communities in Sabah. There are 40,334 people estimated out of the total population of Ranau, which is 49,753 people. At the same time, the rest are groups from the Chinese, Bajau, Brunei, Sungai, Bugis, Timorese, and Filipino ethnic groups (Suraya Sintang 2019: 51).

A different situation occurred in the development of Islam in Ranau, which grew slow because there were problems in terms of communication, mountainous terrain, and financial difficulties faced by Muslim leaders that made it difficult to preach Islam in Ranau (Muhiddin Yussin 1990: 9). The situation caused the entry of Islam in Ranau to be relatively late compared to other districts in Sabah. Islam only began to be accepted by a handful of Ranau people around the 1940s. The early spread of Islam in the Ranau district used a more traditional method that displayed the teachings of Islam through mystical medical knowledge. This activity was led by Mansur Sarif or Sarif bin Ambik who came from Java (Suraya Sintang 2019: 53). The development of Christianity that first arrived in Ranau caused the establishment of many churches in the area. Thus, this study focuses on the discussion about social between Muslims and Christians in Ranau, Sabah.

### The development of Islam and Christianity in Sabah

The formation of Muslim-Christian relations in Sabah went through several different phases. Before the development of Islam and Christianity in Sabah, the indigenous people of Sabah lived in a pagan culture and practiced the beliefs of animism (Mat Zin Mat Kib 2015: 23). Even the peace and harmony of the life of the indigenous people of Sabah was never threatened even though part of Sabah was under the Sultanate of Sulu and others were under Sultanate of Brunei (Muhiddin Yussin 1990: 11). The situation began to change after the development of Islam and Christianity in Sabah. Therefore, the relationship between Muslim-Christians in Sabah goes through several different phases. The first phase of Muslim-Christian relations during the British colonial era (1881-1963), the second phase of Muslim-Christian relations during the USNO party rule era (1967-1975), and the third phase of Muslim-Christian relations during the Berjaya party rule era (1976-1985).

i. The first phase of Muslim-Christian relations during the British colonial era (1881-1963)

The arrival of colonial powers to Sabah was established and known as the British North Borneo Chartered Company (SBBU) in 1881. The SBBU has launched a policy of large-scale Christianization among the indigenous community of Sabah to marginalize the Muslim community in Sabah (Muhiddin Yussin 1990: 12). During the British colonial period in Sabah, relations between Muslims and Christians were in poor condition and disharmonious due to the gap created by the British between Muslims and Christians in Sabah. There is a feeling of dissatisfaction among Muslims because their welfare is not taken care of, and they live in poverty.

ii. The second phase of Muslim-Christian relations during the USNO party rule era (1967-1975)

Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun led the USNO Sabah party in 1967. After winning the election, the USNO party did not use the opportunity to strengthen the party's position among the non-Muslim community. The USNO party has not fulfilled the demand of the people in Penampang town, who are mainly from the Kadazan-Dusun ethnic group to improve the infrastructure facilities and infrastructure in their village (Hamdan Aziz 2015: 129). Tun Datu Mustapha also implemented a large-scale Islamization policy in Sabah. The policy that has been carried out caused the number of Muslims to be more than the Christian community in Sabah around 1973 (Alexzender Ginli 2018: 134) and led to the enactment of the Sabah constitutional policy, which is to make Islam the official religion in Sabah on 23 September 1973. The Islamization policy has been triggered dissatisfaction among Sabahan Christians at the time (Alexzender Ginli 2018: 131).

iii. The third phase of Muslim-Christian relations during the Berjaya party rule era (1976-1985).

BERJAYA party made several policy changes as a result of issues that arose in the USNO government. The focus of the BERJAYA Party's government is to create a stable and multi-racial administrative system. Thus the Berjaya party rose against the USNO party in the State Election, and success was in their favor on 15 July 1975 (Daily Express 12 February 1976, Sabihah Osman 2008: 14). The position of the BERJAYA government was solid and stable in the early 1980s. Racial conflicts, especially between the Chinese and indigenous Muslims, can be resolved well. The Chinese community is also allowed to hold their cultural activities, including dragon and lion dances banned by the USNO government (Hamdan Aziz 2015: 195). However, the policy of strengthening the BERJAYA government in Sabah did not last long when several internal factors emerged that caused the downfall of the BERJAYA party.

Based on this scenario, starting from the colonial era until the BERJAYA party rule, there are internal tensions in Muslim-Christian relations due to the Christian Missionary Movement and the Islamization Movement developed through the political agenda. This tension is not due to issues in Muslim-Christian social ties. This study explains the reality of social relations in Muslim-Christian relations in Sabah, especially in Ranau.

### Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative study that uses a semi-structured in-depth interview instrument. According to Merriem (1998), the use of semi-structured interviews is more flexible and provides an opportunity for informants to elaborate on their experiences and views. The in-depth interview session lasted for 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes for each selected informant and used purposive sampling. The interview was conducted with representatives of religious leaders who are seen as authoritative sources that teach and be a reference point to understand the needs and limitations in understanding religion. A representative of Islam in Ranau coded as (M1-Muslim 1) and a representative of Christian religious leaders in Ranau (coded as C1-Christian 1) who were involved as informants of this study. These interview data were analyzed thematically. According to Creswell (1998: 148-149), content analysis is oftently used in qualitative research.

### Result and Discussion

Based on thematic analysis, this paper themed the data into two themes (I) Social Interaction in Muslim-Christian Relations in Ranau. (II) Sensitive Issues in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau.

i. Social Interaction in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau, Sabah.

### a. Mixed Marriage/Inter marriage

Generally, marriage is a concept that describes the formal relationship between a man and a woman that allows them to live together, have intimate relations and produce offspring. Intermarriage is the practice of marriage between individuals of different races or religions. There are various definitions of intermarriage, but the often used is marriage involving couples of other races, ethnics or different religions (Budi Anto & Saidatul Normis 2020: 150).

According to Miri Song (2019), the high rate of mixed marriages in the community is an indicator of a harmonious society. There is a mixture of cultures in the daily interactions in a family despite different religions. This experience produces an open-minded person who celebrates diversity and respects the differences in their culture and family. The practice of intermarriage in a family is a common situation found in Sabah (Budi Anto & Saidatul Normis 2020: 158). This practice occurs in Ranau with a total rate maintains over five years from 2015-2020, as described in the table below

Table 1: Number of intermarriage between Islam and Christianity in Ranau

Year	Male	Female
2015	8	6
2016	16	4
2017	14	9
2018	13	5
2019	13	19
2020	13	5

Source: Sabah Islamic Religious Affairs Department 2021

This table shows the existence of the implementation of intermarriage involving the two religions of Islam and Christianity among the community in Ranau, Sabah. This intermarriage is one factor contributing to the formation of good relations between Muslims and Christians in Ranau, Sabah, as described in the table below:

Table 2: Intermarriage impact in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau, Sabah

Theme	Sub-theme	Informant Explanation	Informant Code
Muslim- Christian relation in Ranau	Marriage	The practice of marriage can strengthen the friendship between two families. I agree if it is said that the practice of intermarriage involving two different religions can create an atmosphere of harmony and build good relations between Muslims and Christians in Sabah	M1
		Intermarriage between the two different religions has indeed formed a good relationship among the Muslim-Christian community in Ranau because marriage can form a family community. The family must have an attitude of mutual respect. Although different in terms of practices and beliefs. Because religious people have awareness, they have a high value of integrity in themselves that is acquired in their respective religions. So we must be applied in a family setting.	C1

Source: Interview with Ranau Muslim and Christian Informant (2021)

Based on these interviews, the study found that intermarriage involving two different religions among the Ranau community significantly contributed to forming good relations between Muslims-Christians in Ranau, Sabah. The implementation of intermarriage can build trust between religious believers and reduce prejudice. In addition, the attitude of mutual understanding and mutual respect for religious sensitivities is easier to educate because they are a family. This situation fosters good interaction among family members to allow them to carry out daily life together without quarrels. It clearly shows that intermarriage involving two different religions in Ranau is one factor that led to the formation of a good relationship between Muslims and Christians.

### b. Settlement Patterns

The settlement pattern of the community in Ranau, Sabah, has been mixed between Muslims and non-Muslims due to the practice of intermarriage practiced in a family. According to Haji Mansur, this mixing can be seen based on the statistics of the Muslim and Christian population in one of the areas included in Ranau as the table below.

Table 3: Settlement Pattern of Kundasang Community in 1993

Bil	Name of Village	Total Polation	Muslim	Non-muslim
1	Kg. Kauluan	340	40	160
2	Kg. Kundasang Lama	290	276	14
3	Kg. Kundasang Lama	362	362	156
4	Kg. Lembah Permai	895	895	22
5	Kg. Semuruh	233	233	14
6.	Pekan Kundasang	3000	2500	500

Source: *Haji Mansur Anang's*

The table above shows there have interaction among Muslims and Non -Muslims in the settlement area of Mukim Kundasang, Ranau. The mixing culture allows them to perform activities together, resulting in forming a good relationship among the community. It was also explained by the respondents through interviews conducted. The following are the results of the interviews conducted in the table below:

Table 4: Effects of settlement patterns in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau.

Theme	Sub- theme	Informant Explanation	Informant C ode
Muslim- Christian relation in Ranau	Settlement patterns	Although the settlement area of the Ranau community is mixed between Islam and Christianity, they live in peace and harmony. An example can be seen by constructing an adjacent surau and church, which I know is located in Kauluan village. But the surau is not used for Friday prayers. The construction of the surau and the church are adjacent because they have family ties between Muslims and Christians. The same goes for the cemetery. Muslim and Christian cemeteries are neighboring the village. It shows that they have a very good relationship even though they are different in trust.	M1
		The pattern of settlement in the area around Ranau district itself is very influential in good relations between the community due to a mixture of Islam and Christianity in the village. There is good interaction between the two religious groups.	C1

Source: *Interview with Ranau Muslim and Christian Informant (2021)*

The interviews show that both informants admitted that there was mixing in the settlement area between Muslims and Christians in Ranau, Sabah. The mixing of the settlement areas does not cause problems for the community, especially in Ranau. Still, it allows them to live together in harmony despite differences in religion and belief. There is a surau and a church built next to each other in Kampung Kauluan, Ranau, and all worship and social activities in the house of worship can be carried out without any sensitive issues. It shows that the people who have adapted to the mixed settlement pattern between races and religions are a factor in building good relations between the Muslim-Christian community in Ranau, Sabah.

#### c. Festivals and SocioEconomics

Good relations among the multi-religious and multi-cultural Sabah community can be highlighted by celebrating the Moginakan festival or better known as Tadau Kaamatan (Jacqueline Pugh 2016: 241-242).

As the largest ethnic group in Sabah is the Kadazan Dusun ethnic group, the Tadau Kaamatan Festival is one of the festivals celebrated in Sabah in May every year. The Borneo Mail (1859) also reported that the joy of the Tadau Kaamatan celebration could be felt at every level, including the Village, District, and State levels. The celebration of this festival is usually held in an open area that allows this celebration to be attended by the public regardless of ethnicity or race. During the celebration period, various activities were also carried out to enliven the festival.

Good relations between Muslims and Christian in Ranau are also formed through economic interaction. The development of Islam and Christianity in Ranau did not prevent economic networks of the Ranau community with communities from Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Tawau, and Kota Kinabalu (Ranau District Council 1973-2020, Kundasang Stall File 1973-2020). The active agricultural-based economic activities in Ranau have resulted in the existence of stalls selling vegetables produced by the local community regardless of religion. This farmers' and wholesale market is an attraction for the outside community to come and buy upland vegetables from Ranau. These economic activities reflect the existence of good relations among the Muslim and Christian communities in Ranau. The interviews are detailed in the table below.

Table 5: Impact of Social and Socio-Economic Interactions in Ranau Muslim-Christian

Theme	Sub-theme	Informant Explanation	Informant Code
Muslim- Christian relation in Sabah	Socio-economic Interaction	Good association among the community is also built through the Monginakan ceremony or the Tadau Kaamatan festival. Due to the majority of its population from the Kadazandusun ethnic group. So this party is a mandatory ceremony. The festival is celebrated by all communities regardless of status. But the most important thing from this festival is that we know that the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Sabah is close to each other.	M1
		The events that illustrate the good relations between Muslim-Christians in Ranau are shown through the economic interactions in Tamu. Tamu is the main focus area for the Ranau community to carry out buying and selling activities. Vendors in this guest from various parts of Sabah. There is a good relationship	C1

Source: Interview with Ranau Muslim and Christian Informant (2021)

The interview results explained that the Kaamatan festival is a festival that unites the community in Ranau, Sabah. The highest number of Kadazandusun ethnic adherents was recorded in Ranau. So it is not surprising if the community in the area celebrates the Kaamatan celebration. The informants also stated that this festival had formed a good relationship between Muslims and Christians in Sabah because they celebrate this kaamatan festival. All communities in Ranau are invited to participate. The informants stated that Pasar Tamu in Ranau is the most important place to gather Ranau communities, Muslim and Non-Muslim. This Pasar Tamu opened for the Ranau community to carry out small-scale buying and selling activities every Saturday. The existence of good interaction through buying and selling activities carried out and mutual help among the community regardless of religious status.

#### **d. Harmonious Interaction in Workplace**

For the Ranau community, working together at work regardless of religion is a daily practice and not a sensitive matter. Both informants stated that working together despite having different religious beliefs did not pose a problem for the community in Ranau for Muslim and Christian communities in Ranau were carry out daily activities together and living in the same house for families of different religions. The detailed explanation in the table below.

Table 6: Effects of Harmonious Interactions in the workplace in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau

Theme	Sub-theme	Informant Explanation	Informant Code
Muslim- Christian relation in Ranau, Sabah	Work Together	Ranau is a production center for various agricultural products, especially in the Kundasang. So most of the traders in this area hire local workers and foreign workers for garden work. They also hire employees of different religions. The relationship with the employee is good, and they can work together.	M1
		Ranau is a production center for various agricultural products, especially in the Kundasang sub-district. So most of the traders in this area hire local workers and foreign workers for garden work. They also hire employees of different religions. The relationship with the employee is good, and they can work together.	C1
	No Fighting & No Racist	Although different in religion and belief, there are no fights and disputes among the Muslim and Christian communities in Ranau. This is due to the close relationship and having family ties in the community.	M1
		Through good interaction among the Ranau community, despite differing religious beliefs, there are no fights or racist issues in religion.	C1

Source: Interview with Ranau Muslim and Christian Informant (2021)

Based on the interviews, it was found that good relations among the Muslim-Christian community in Ranau were due to the recruitment of local and foreign workers to the farm. As Ranau is known as the largest producer of vegetables and fruits in Sabah, employers have to hire workers regardless of religion to help manage the farm. Hence, this indirectly leads to good relations between employees and employers in Ranau, Sabah. It clearly shows the interaction between religious believers in the workplace and contributes to forming good relations between Muslims and Christians in Ranau. Harmonious interaction among employees can create a comfortable and productive workplace zone.

**ii. Sensitive Issues in Muslim-Christian Relation in Ranau, Sabah**

Generally, sensitive religious issues in Malaysia are variously classified into three parts, namely theological, social and ethical issues (Nur Farhana & Nur Syariah 2020: 98). However, in the history of the formation of the state of Sabah, there are some sensitive issues in the relationship between Muslims and Christians that lead to theological matters. For example, religious matters arose during the colonial rule that brought in the Christian Missionary Movement. In contrast, issues arose again in the USNO and BERJAYA parties in Sabah when the Islamization policy was implemented among Sabah's indigenous communities (Hamdan Aziz 2015: 225-230).

However, this study attempts to explore the views of Muslim and Christian religious leaders in Ranau concerning the current issues they face in daily Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau. As a result, the study found that the issue of apostasy (conversion of Islam to Christianity or another religion) and religious determination during funerals for those who did not inform had converted was the most sensitive issue that always occurred. Even more difficult when the issue is finally resolved through the legislative path. It is explained further in the table below.

Table 7: Sensitive Issues in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau, Sabah

Issue	Subtheme	Informant Explanation	Informant Code
Conversion	Religious conversion due to marriage and divorce	There are also cases of conversion from Islam to Christianity or other religions in Ranau. There is also a change of religion without the knowledge of Islam. This case was only known during the management of the remains. After the children, other family members confirmed that there had been a conversion on the body. So it poses a problem in terms of funeral management. This situation also causes differences in religious beliefs between parents and children. However, in my opinion, this issue did not cause division among the Muslim and Christian communities in Ranau due to the high level of respect.	M1
		Indeed, there is also the issue of apostasy. It is also the case in my own family. When you get married, you must follow the religion of your husband or wife. I am open to this matter. Because in terms of religion, we cannot –[be forced. That's why he wants it. But I still pray that whatever religion he holds so that he continues to abide by the teachings of that religion. likewise, after divorce, a return to the original religion remains the same	C1

Source: Interview with Ranau Muslim and Christian Informant (2021)

Based on these interviews, there is only one issue that arises in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau. This issue involves the issue of religious conversion that stems from the practice of marriage. The study found that both informants asserted that although there was a need for religious conversion in interfaith marriages, it would not sever family ties. Family and community members are always advised that the decisions made do not cause regret in the future.

It is shown that, the sensitive issue in Muslim-Christian relations in Ranau only involves the problem of religious conversion that occurs due to the high practice of intermarriage among the community. However, this issue did not cause any controversy among the community and did not threaten the good relations between Muslims and Christians in Ranau. It proves that there is a high level of understanding in the social interactions between Muslims and Christians daily, thus resulting in a high level of understanding. This coincides with the explanation (Nur Farhana et.al 2020: 177), which asserts that understanding and recognizing the background and fundamental beliefs of religions is the first step in forming religious tolerance that results in a harmonious society.

### Conclusion

In summary, the relationship between Muslims and Christians in Ranau is very well-formed due to social distance among the community that can unite the community in Ranau even though they have different religious beliefs. The relationship between Muslims and Christians in Ranau is one of the most significant contributors to harmony between the communities in Ranau, Sabah. The willingness of believers of different religions to understand and respect religious and cultural sensitivities is vital to avoid prejudice. This situation has happened in Ranau and created a high level of mutual respect among the people of Ranau to deal with sensitive issues.

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