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RELIGIOUS PLURALITY AND INTERFAITH COEXISTENCE IN SABAH: REALITIES AND CHALLENGES FROM AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Religious tolerance plays a crucial role in maintaining social harmony within multicultural societies, particularly in regions with diverse ethnic and religious compositions such as Sabah, where Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous belief systems coexist. This study explores the lived realities and emerging challenges of religious tolerance in Sabah, drawing from a qualitative content analysis of theological, legal, and socio-cultural sources. Findings reveal that the state's long-standing culture of openness, shaped by pre-colonial intercommunal interactions, interfaith marriages, and shared community spaces, has fostered a spirit of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Everyday practices, such as shared worship infrastructure and community collaboration during religious events reflect deep-rooted intercultural integration, reinforced by local wisdom and Islamic ethical values. While a general sense of religious harmony prevails, this study highlights those challenges to religious plurality in the lens of Islamic perspectives. The study identifies realities and challenges, including identity issues surrounding interfaith marriage, limited religious literacy among certain Muslim populations, and the risk of syncretic practices arising from uncritical adoption

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of local customs such as *adat sogit*. These realities highlight the fragile balance between cultural openness and religious integrity. While the spirit of tolerance remains strong, the lack of theological engagement within interfaith dialogues raises questions about the depth of religious plurality in Sabah. The study also finds that contextualof Islamic jurisprudence such as *Fiqh Taayush*, especially those rooted in Quran and Prophetic tradition offer a flexible yet firm framework for coexistence. This study therefore propose inclusive recommendations include strengthening Islamic education, enhancing public awareness of religious duties, and fostering institutional collaboration across. These steps are vital to preserving religious identity while sustaining interfaith harmony. Ultimately, the study contributes to the discourse on plurality by presenting Sabah as a dynamic case of how Islamic theological and legal perspectives can coexist with and support multicultural realities.

Keywords:

Fiqh al-Ta'āyush, Religious Tolerance, Religious Pluralism, Religious Plurality, Sabah, Islam In Sabah, Interfaith Relations, Multicultural Society

Introduction

Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia stipulates that Islam is the religion of the Federation, while simultaneously guaranteeing the freedom of other religions to be practised in peace and harmony (Federal Constitution, 2020). This constitutional provision reflects not only the fairness and inclusivity of Malaysia's legal system but also plays a pivotal role in fostering a harmonious and pluralistic society. In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation such as Malaysia, religious freedom forms the cornerstone of social stability particularly in the state of Sabah, which is renowned for its ethno-religious diversity. Sabah stands out as one of the most heterogeneous states in Malaysia, home to a wide array of ethnic groups including the Bajau, Kadazan-Dusun, Murut, and Melayu-Brunei communities.

This ethnic diversity is mirrored in the religious landscape, where Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous belief systems are all practised across the population. Islam is the majority religion in Sabah, and its historical development has been shaped by political, economic, and social factors. Furthermore, daily interactions and intermarriage have significantly contributed to both the spread of Islam and the strengthening of interreligious cohesion. The unique demographic composition of Sabah has elevated religious tolerance to a fundamental element in the maintenance of social harmony. This tolerance is not only underpinned by constitutional and legal frameworks, but is also deeply embedded in the social values and practices of local communities. As such, understanding the concept of religious plurality in the Sabah context serves as a critical mechanism for sustaining interfaith harmony. The state of Sabah in East Malaysia stands as a distinctive site of religious and cultural cohabitation. With a religious demographic composed of approximately 69.6% Muslims, 24.7% Christians, and smaller percentages of Buddhists, Hindus, and others (Department of Statistics, 2020), Sabah has been historically characterised by interreligious openness and peaceful coexistence (Aratin & Rahman, 2022; Tamring et al., 2020). In light of growing global concerns over religious conflict and polarisation, Sabah offers an alternative narrative rooted in pluralistic harmony and mutual respect.

This paper aims to explore religious plurality in Sabah, with a specific focus on the sociological structures and cultural dynamics that sustain it. The conceptual framing of this paper is rooted in sociological theory while drawing on contextual insights from local ethnographies and policy frameworks. This study also highlights challenges to religious diversity in the lens of Islamic perspectives.

Literature Review

Conceptual Foundations of Religious Diversity in Islam

Islam, as the official religion of the Federation, plays a central role in shaping Malaysia's religious discourse. The Constitution affirms both the special position of Islam and the freedom of others to practise their faiths, aligning with the values of *rahmah* (compassion), inclusivity, and justice embedded in Islamic teachings. Idris and Farid (2022) affirm that religious diversity is a part of divine will (*Sunnatullah*), not a deviation from it.

Religious plurality refers to the factual existence of diverse and differing religious traditions across the world. This diversity is understood within the Islamic worldview as part of the divine will (*Sunnatullah*) and an undeniable aspect of human civilisation. Islam recognises and affirms this multiplicity of religions, promoting a universal message rooted in *rahmah* (compassion) and justice, while upholding a principled approach to interfaith tolerance.

Therefore, religious plurality refers to the coexistence of diverse religious communities within a given societal context. It is a descriptive condition that recognises the factual presence of multiple faith traditions cohabiting within a shared space. In contrast to the ideological assertion of religious pluralism, which implies equal theological validity among religions, plurality does not require the suspension of one's doctrinal commitments. Within the Islamic tradition, this distinction is significant, as theological pluralism is generally seen as incompatible with the foundational concept of *tawhīd* (Fuad, 2005; Kazeem & Shehu, 2023).

Yet, Islam does not equate this diversity with theological equality. The framework of tolerance in Islam involves respecting others' rights to believe differently, while also maintaining the belief that Islam contains the final and complete truth. It is suggested that, classical and contemporary Islamic thought has long acknowledged the reality of religious diversity (*ta'addudiyyah al-dīn*), as seen in the Qur'anic. This is clearly illustrated in the Qur'an, which affirms diversity as an expression of God's creative will:

"O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another." (Qur'an, 49:13)

"There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion." (Qur'an, 2:256)

These verses affirm two critical elements of religious plurality: the acceptance of human diversity and the preservation of individual religious freedom. The Prophet Muhammad's model of governance in Madinah further exemplifies Islamic support for peaceful coexistence. The Constitution of Madinah (*Ṣaḥīfah Madīnah*), which was agreed upon between Muslims, Jews, and other groups, guaranteed religious liberty and mutual obligations, thereby institutionalising plurality in the early Islamic state (Ishak et al., 2022; Yusoff et al., 2021).

The Constitution of Madinah (*Ṣaḥīfah Madīnah*), as analyzed by Ishak et al. (2022), provides an early historical reference point where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) managed a multi-religious society through mutual agreement, justice, and a sense of shared nationhood. Hussin (2022) argues that the principles of freedom of religion and protection of minority rights within this charter serve as a model for religious coexistence in plural societies, including Malaysia.

Ishak et al. (2022) highlight that this charter provided not only societal stability but a deeply ethical model for respecting religious liberty. Hussin (2022) extends this application to the Malaysian context, arguing that the Madinah model holds relevance as a guide for religious coexistence in a plural society like Malaysia. Such a framework underlines that recognition of religious rights and freedoms is compatible with Islamic governance, not contrary to it.

Theoretical of Islamic Ethics and Jurisprudential Frameworks of Religious Diversity

An integrated theoretical framework is essential for a comprehensive analysis of religious plurality, particularly when examining it through the lens of Islamic ethics. Such a framework not only delves into the sociological dynamics that foster coexistence but also explores the underlying Islamic theological and legal principles that guide and support this harmony. It provides a crucial perspective to identify and analyze the challenges that arise in maintaining both religious identity and cultural openness within a pluralistic context. The nature of religious diversity is recognized as part of the divine order, has led to its theoretical development from the prophetic era to modern times. This includes the adaptation of the principle of *Fiqh al-Ta'āyush* (jurisprudence of coexistence) (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2020) in which applied based on the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law), all of which are vital for understanding and fostering harmonious interfaith relations.

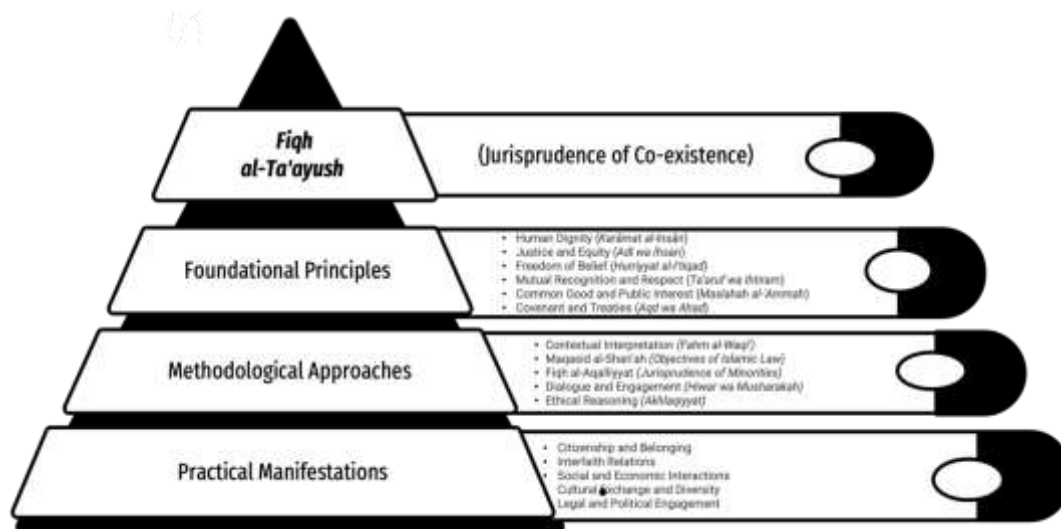


Figure 1: A Theoretical Model for Pluralistic Societies

Source: Modified by researchers

The idea of *Fiqh al-Ta'āyush* as modern juristic framework rooted in the Quran was enriched by the contribution of classical and contemporary Muslim scholar to address the realities and challenges of pluralistic societies in an Islamic legal and ethical context. Classical Islamic scholars developed principles relevant to religious tolerance and coexistence, through the exact

term "*Fiqh al-Ta'ayush*" with reference to the modern context. Their works set the ethical and jurisprudential groundwork origins in Islamic governance from the Prophet's era (the Constitution of Medina) and major Islamic empires like the Ottoman Millet system (Abdullah and Fathil, 2021).

Fiqh al-Ta'ayush, or the jurisprudence of coexistence, represents a contemporary Islamic legal framework that governs how Muslims live peacefully and respectfully within pluralistic societies. According to Dr. Yūsuf al-Qarḍāwī, *Fiqh al-Ta'ayush* is rooted in Islamic principles that emphasize justice, equal citizenship, and interfaith dialogue, asserting that Islam promotes peaceful relations with non-Muslims unless aggression occurs (al-Qarḍāwī, 2005, 2009). He views coexistence as a core objective of Shariah. Dr. Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī likewise upholds peaceful interfaith engagement based on ethical responsibility, emphasizing that Islam only permits conflict in cases of clear aggression, and otherwise calls for da'wah, respect, and justice even with religious differences (al-Būṭī, 1993). Both scholars reject extremism and agree that cooperation, not conflict, reflects Islam's true principles.

Nonetheless, Qardhawi in his writing of *Fiqh Minorities* also stresses on the issue on *Fiqh al-Zakat* and his extensive writings on Muslim minorities, emphasize how Muslims should live peacefully and respectfully within non-Muslim majority contexts, which closely aligns with the principles of *fiqh al-ta'ayush* (Asror, Rofiqi, Syafaq, & Hilmy, 2023). This concept is grounded by principle of diversity as a sign of God's creation which encourages *ta'aruf* (knowing one another), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *ta'awun* (cooperation), *takaful* (mutual support), and *mahabba* (love and care) (Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2020). Thus, recognition of diversity is the most crucial element in legal ruling system based of Islamic lens.

As articulated by Zulkifli (2019), the concept of *al-ta'ayush* embodies a societal framework wherein diverse communities coexist within a shared national space, underpinned by mutual respect and compassion. In this context, cultural and religious differences are acknowledged and embraced, while the fundamental rights of minority groups are protected and preserved. These precedents institutionalized coexistence and protection for minorities, serving as a practical foundation. Abdullah and Fathil (2021) explore how *al-ta'ayush* was practiced through the Ottoman Millet and Malaccan Shahbandar systems. It is suggested that historical evidence indicates that Muslim rulers during the Ottoman and Malaccan periods exhibited notable tolerance towards non-Muslim communities, particularly through the provision of autonomous rights. These rights allowed non-Muslims to govern themselves in accordance with their own legal systems and to freely observe their religious practices. This approach stands out as distinctive, not only because it was rooted in Islamic principles, but also because it emerged during a time when religious and cultural tolerance was generally uncommon. Islam, therefore, played a pioneering role in promoting the concept of *al-ta'ayush*. Therefore, emphasize that *fiqh al-ta'ayush* is essential for national unity, social harmony, and the protection of minority rights in multi-religious societies (Munir Abu Bakar, 2024).

Religious Coexistence in Malaysia's Constitutional and Socio-political Framework

Malaysia's Federal Constitution (1957), under Article 3(1) and Article 11(1), establishes Islam as the religion of the Federation while protecting freedom of other religion. This establishment enables a structured balance between Islam and interfaith harmony in a multicultural and multi religious society. This balance has been reinforced through national integration policies, such as the National Security Policy 2021–2025, which highlights religious tolerance and unity as

essential to national strength (National Security Council, 2019). The National Security Policy (2021–2025) furthers this by advocating national integration through legal enforcement and daily interactions, echoing Islamic principles of justice and social cohesion. Yusoff et al. (2021) and National Security Council (2019) emphasize that such policy frameworks support *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* objectives by the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property.

It is suggested that, national integration is fundamental to the nation's strength and security and can be attained by robust connections that unify all Malaysians, supported by daily contacts (bottom-up) and law enforcement (top-down). This initiative is essential for promoting unity in Malaysia's pluralistic society, encouraging mutual understanding, tolerance, acceptance of diversity, awareness of the social contract that supports national cohesion, and respect for human rights as outlined in the Federal Constitution (National Security Council, 2019).

Concurrently, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has provided a pathway for MADANI framework aims to reshape Malaysia's religious relations through its emphasis on inclusivity, mutual respect, and compassion. However, its effectiveness faces both opportunities and challenges. The Core Values Driving Religious Coexistence the MADANI framework's six pillars are including Sustainability, Prosperity, Innovation, Respect, Trust, and Compassion believe to provide a blueprint for interfaith harmony. Thus, these values resonate across governance, culture, economy, and everyday life (New Straits Times, 2023).

Plurality and Coexistence in the Sabah Context

The state of Sabah is considered as the second largest state in the Malaysia and often highlighted as its unique culture and peaceful coexistence of different faiths. Sabah has a population of 3,418,785 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). The diversity of cultures and races that has existed in Sabah for decades have contributed to the existence of various religions in Sabah including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and others. Nevertheless, the Muslim population has contributed to the largest number in Sabah represented by the Bajau ethnic group, and followed by the Idahan, Sungai, Iranun, Malay-Brunei, Kedayan, Bisaya, Sulu, Cocos, Tidong and others. Meanwhile, Christians in Sabah are represented by the Rungus, Kwijau, Lotud, Lundayeh, Dumpas, Tembenua, Southeast, Tatana and others (Hajimin et al., 2021).

Sabah's religious plurality is deeply embedded in its historical, geographical, and cultural fabric. The region has long been a point of intersection for various ethnic groups, including the Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Murut, and Chinese communities, each with their respective religious traditions (Hajimin et al., 2020). Additionally, Sabah's religious plurality is understood not merely as statistical diversity but as a lived condition embedded in everyday encounters, mutual respect, and shared civic spaces.

This diversity is reflected in interfaith marriages, proximity of worship spaces, shared participation in festivals, and mutual respect during life-cycle events (Sintang et al., 2024). In Greater Kota Kinabalu, religious plurality manifests in daily life through shared educational institutions, public markets, neighbourhoods, and social spaces. These shared spaces facilitate what Suraya Sintang et al. (2022) call a form of "organic plurality," where religious diversity is not merely tolerated but actively lived and negotiated through respectful interaction. This diversity is reflected in interfaith marriages, proximity of worship spaces, shared participation in festivals, and mutual respect during life-cycle events (Sintang et al., 2024).

The development of Islam in Sabah is seen as growing due to several factors including political, economic, and social. Among the efforts that played an important role in involving the massive spread of da'wah by the Pertubuhan Islam Seluruh Sabah (USIA) led by Tun Datu Mustapha in 1967-1976 and has indirectly contributed to the mass conversion of the people in Sabah. The association is a combination of Islamic associations in Sabah which was established from the revival of the nationalism of the Islamic community in Sabah.

Beginning with a historical overview of the state's interreligious interactions, its history has had an immense impact on the continuation of peaceful coexistence. The historical efforts by leaders like Tun Mustapha have significantly influenced the religious landscape, notably through Islamization initiatives that increased the Muslim population and led to constitutional changes recognizing Islam as the official religion of Sabah (Hajimin et al., 2020). Sabah's population comprises various ethnicities and religions, which has historically led to a culture of openness and acceptance (Aratin & Rahman, 2022) (Tamring et al., 2020).

Therefore, Sabah culture's social landscape is an ideal illustration of the social virtues of naturally interacting with people and building relationships in a variety of positive ways, including intermarriage mixed-faith families, interfaith activities, funeral in a similar location, and the proximity of houses of worship. Apart from that, interactions during festivals and daily life promote cultural understanding, with families often comprising members from different faiths (Sintang et al., 2024). The fact that it naturally is featured in interreligious relationships involving individuals demonstrate a significant amount of tolerance for others.

Table 1: Religious Composition of the Population in Sabah

No.	Religion	Population (%)
1	Islam	69.6
2	Christianity	24.7
3	Buddhism	5.1
4	No Religion	0.4
5	Hinduism	0.1
6	Others	0.1

Source: Department Of Statistic Malaysia (2020)

Islam in Sabah

The spread of Islam in Sabah began as early as the 10th century, with the Muslim population largely represented by the Bajau ethnic group, followed by the Idahan, Sungai, Iranun, Malay-Brunei, Kedayan, Bisaya, Sulu, Cocos, Tidong, and others. Historically, the expansion of Islam in Sabah can be traced to the 16th century, primarily through the influence of the Sultanates of Sulu and Brunei, which spread the religion across the eastern and western coastal regions. However, this influence did not extend to the interior regions such as Ranau, Keningau, Tambunan, and Kiulu. As a result, many indigenous communities in these inland areas only began embracing Islam around the mid-20th century (Muhiddin, 1990).

The Muslim population in Sabah has grown significantly since the early 20th century. In 1921, Muslims comprised 31.1% of the total population, which increased to 32.1% in 1931 and rose further to 34.5% by 1951. By 1960, the Muslim population had reached 172,324, accounting for approximately 40% of Sabah's total population (Ismail, 1997). Several political, economic, and social factors have contributed to this growth. One of the key initiatives was led by the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) under the leadership of Tun Datu Mustapha between 1967 and 1976. During this period, USIA large-scale of *da'wah* (Islamic outreach) efforts, which significantly contributed to mass conversions to Islam among local communities.

USIA also played a vital role in strengthening Islamic education and promoting the core teachings of Islam by providing essential facilities and religious instruction across the state. These efforts were instrumental in deepening the understanding of Islam among the local population and in consolidating Islamic identity in Sabah (Hamid & Akhmetova, 2019). In addition to institutional efforts, the acceptance of Islam in Sabah was also supported by daily social interactions, which often led to interfaith marriages and contributed to the spread of Islam across different communities.

Christianity in Sabah

The development of Christianity in Sabah traces back to the period of British colonial rule in North Borneo, primarily through the missionary efforts that introduced Catholicism and Protestantism to the indigenous population. One of the most significant milestones in this process was the establishment of the *Borneo Evangelical Mission* (BEM) on 31 August 1928, which marked the beginning of the growth of the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) church in the interior regions. Founded by Rev. C.H. Nash (Chairman), C.H. Southwell (Honorary Secretary), and R.S. Tregaskis (Honorary Treasurer), the mission sought to evangelize the indigenous peoples of Borneo (Lees, 2006).

The spread of Christianity during this period was further supported by the establishment of missionary schools, healthcare services, and various forms of community outreach, which helped integrate Christian values into everyday life. The construction of churches and religious centres across the state further solidified the presence of Christianity. Today, Christianity is the second-largest religion in Sabah, represented by various denominations including Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism, and SIB. Prominent Christian institutions such as Sacred Heart Cathedral in Kota Kinabalu and Basel Christian Church in Sandakan continue to play a central role in the religious and social lives of Sabah's Christian communities (Reid, 2014). Ethnic groups such as the Rungus, Kwijau, Lotud, Lundayeh, Dumpas, Tembenua, Tenggara, and Tatana form the majority of Christian adherents in the state (Hajimin et al., 2021).

Buddhism in Sabah

Buddhism in Sabah is closely linked to the migration of the Chinese community to the region beginning in the 19th century. Most Buddhist adherents are of Hakka and Hokkien descent, originating from southern China and arriving during the British colonial era to work in mining, agriculture, and trade (Tan, 2000). Today, Buddhists make up approximately 5.1% of Sabah's total population, with the majority residing in urban areas such as Kota Kinabalu, Sandakan, and Tawau work as economic hubs that also serve as centres for the Chinese community.

Despite being a minority compared to Muslims and Christians, Buddhism continues to contribute meaningfully to the state's religious landscape. Notable religious sites such as the Puu Jih Shih Temple in Sandakan serve not only as places of worship but also as focal points for community gatherings and cultural continuity within the Buddhist population. Puu Jih Shih serves as a centre for Buddhist worship and Chinese cultural heritage in Sandakan, reflecting the historical presence and contributions of the Chinese community in Sabah (New Straits Times, 2024).

Traditional Beliefs and Animism

Traditional beliefs and animistic practices remain integral to the cultural identity of many indigenous groups in Sabah. These belief systems is centred on ancestral spirits, the spirit of rice (*bambarayon*), and various natural and supernatural entities have shaped customary laws, rituals, and social norms passed down through generations. However, the influence of globalisation, religious conversion, and the expansion of world religions have led to a gradual decline in the practice of animism (Appell, 2001).

Nonetheless, elements of traditional beliefs persist, especially in cultural celebrations such as the *Pesta Kaamatan*, a harvest festival celebrated by the Kadazandusun in honour of the rice spirit. The festival celebrates rice not just as food but as a sacred gift that sustains life, prosperity, and cultural identity for the Kadazandusun. It expresses gratitude for the harvest and reverence for the spiritual essence within the rice crop (Belly et al., 2024). Similarly, the Murut and Rungus communities continue to practice rituals involving forest spirits and ancestral worship, particularly in healing ceremonies and rites of protection. These practices underscore the enduring relevance of indigenous cosmologies, even as they coexist with mainstream religious systems.

Darimbang, Pugh-Kitingan, and Lunkapis (2023) explore the ritual underpinnings of native law in some Murut villages, rituals include the Mangaraa Sogit Pomogunan, a blood sacrifice involving chickens or larger animals like pigs or water buffaloes, offered to appease spirits believed to cause illness or misfortune. These sacrifices are followed by a period of mintoron (prohibition), during which the village is closed off to outsiders and normal activities are restricted to maintain ritual purity. In summary, the Murut and Rungus peoples uphold rich ritual traditions centered on forest spirits and ancestral worship, combining animal sacrifices, ceremonial dances, and spiritual leadership by shamans or priestesses to sustain their cultural identity and spiritual connection to the natural environment

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using content analysis as the main method to explore religious plurality and interfaith coexistence in Sabah from an Islamic theological and legal perspective. The focus is on examining how Islamic teachings, as reflected in selected Qur'anic texts, interact with the constitutional, legal, and fatwa frameworks that shape interreligious relations in the state. The primary sources of data include selected Qur'anic verses related to the themes of religious diversity, social harmony, and coexistence. These verses are interpreted contextually to reflect the theological basis of Islam's approach to plurality. In addition to the Qur'an, this study examines legal and constitutional documents such as the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, especially provisions on freedom of religion, Islam as the religion of the Federation, and the rights of religious minorities. The Sabah State

Constitution is also considered, with attention to how Islam is positioned in relation to Sabah's multicultural and multi-faith population.

Further, the study incorporates the Islamic Family Law Enactment 2004 (Sabah) that govern matters of interfaith marriage, conversion, apostasy, and custody in cases involving Muslim and non-Muslim parties. Also included are official fatwas and guidelines issued by the Sabah State Mufti Department concerning interfaith issues, religious status, and community boundaries. All texts are analysed using thematic content analysis. This involves identifying recurring ideas, patterns, and principles within the documents, and interpreting their meanings in relation to the broader realities of interfaith life in Sabah. The analysis focuses on how Islamic theology and legal norms are applied, challenged, or adapted in a pluralistic society, particularly in relation to marriage, conversion, and religious identity.

As a text-based study, no fieldwork or interviews are conducted. Ethical research practices are maintained through proper citation of sources, balanced analysis, and a respectful approach to religious and legal sensitivities. The integration of theological, legal, and constitutional content allows this study to offer a well-rounded view of the realities and challenges of religious plurality in Sabah from an Islamic perspective.

Discussions

Religious Tolerance in Sabah: Lived Realities

The perception and practice of religious tolerance among different ethnic groups in Sabah are characterized by a historical context of cultural openness and social cohesion. This environment fosters high levels of inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony, which is evident in daily interactions and community practices. In Malaysia, religious tolerance is practised in accordance with Islamic values. Examples include the absence of coercion in religion, respect for the beliefs of non-Muslim family members, harmonious relations with non-Muslim neighbours, and commercial or social interactions across faiths (Khadijah & Siti Nor Azhani, 2020).

Sabah stands as a prime example of this tolerance in action. Known for its ethnic and religious diversity, Sabah's society has maintained high levels of harmony despite differences in customs, beliefs, and traditions (Nur Azian & Nur Farhana, 2022). As noted by Suraya Sintang et al. (2022), religion plays a constructive role in promoting values of openness, mutual cooperation, and a spirit of forbearance between different communities. Historical context of Sabah landscape in tolerance is emerging from interactions predating colonialism, leading to established social relations and intermarriages across different communities (Tamring et al., 2020). As a result, this historical development built cultural openness of Sabahans allows for a relaxed identity, promoting acceptance of various customs and beliefs (Aratin & Rahman, 2022). This tolerance is reflected in daily life. For example, houses of worship from different religions are often located near one another without friction. Shared parking spaces between mosques and churches, especially on overlapping days of worship, are common. These arrangements rarely provoke conflict.

Apart from that, interfaith marriages further demonstrate this openness. Among indigenous communities, particularly the Dusun shows a notable flexibility in accommodating religious difference, including willingness to embrace Islam in a context of mutual understanding,

without legal coercion (Suraya Sintang et al., 2022). These marriages often reflect genuine interest and voluntary engagement rather than institutional pressure.

Community engagement in Sabah has significantly fostered mutual understanding and interreligious tolerance. Daily interactions and cooperative efforts, such as interfaith dialogues, shared celebrations, and joint community programs, reflect a deep-rooted culture of coexistence and respect among diverse religious groups (Sintang et al., n.d.). In rural settings, residents actively support one another during religious events, reinforcing bonds that transcend doctrinal boundaries (Mardawani et al., 2024). This spirit of solidarity is not limited to ceremonial occasions but is embedded in everyday life, including shared responses to funerals with ambiguous religious status, collaboration over heritage issues, and informal conflict resolution.

One particularly illustrative example of this sensitivity involves a mosque in Membakut, where the prayer direction (qibla) faces a visible Christian cross. Instead of controversy, the local Muslim community resolved the issue by installing curtains—an act that symbolises the community's commitment to peaceful coexistence and mutual respect (Suraya Sintang et al., 2022). Still, such tolerance is not immune to challenge. Sustaining harmony requires education, awareness, and vigilance against narratives that exploit difference. Yet, Sabah's case illustrates how Islamic ethics, local wisdom, and community commitment can foster a mature, plural society—one that honours faith without suppressing diversity.

Studies by Sintang et al. (2024) and Tamring et al. (2020) further illustrate Sabah's lived interfaith harmony evident in intermarriages, mixed-faith households, shared funerary practices, and festival participation. This also can be seen through strong social integration and religious solidarity through everyday interactions where people from various religions participate in each other's social and religious events, such as eating together and attending gatherings across faiths. This cooperation nurtures peace and rejects hostility, rooted in values of patriotism and a sense of belonging among Sabah's diverse population (Khalli et al., 2021).

Apart from that, Sabah Council of Churches emphasize mutual respect and understanding as essential for sustaining harmony. They highlight shared values such as compassion, which are common across different faiths, reinforcing national unity and interfaith understanding. Sabah's GRS information chief, Datuk Joniston Bangkuai, emphasised that the state's long-standing spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding among all faiths must be recognised (Sokial, 2025). It demonstrates in initiatives such as the Harmony Walk/Run, which visits various places of worship including mosques, churches, gurdwaras, and temples, showcase Sabah's peaceful coexistence and encourage unity through understanding.

In summary, religious harmony in Sabah is sustained through a combination of government support, grassroots social integration, community-led initiatives, and a shared commitment to mutual respect and understanding among diverse religious groups. This harmony is a notable example of peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious society. Marinsah, Bakar, Yusof, and Basir (2024) also assert that Fiqh Sabahi represents an effort to harmonize Islamic jurisprudence with local cultural diversity, fostering peaceful coexistence and social cohesion in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society especially in Sabah. It underscores the adaptability of Islamic law through contextual interpretation and community-sensitive application, making it a model for pluralistic Islamic jurisprudence in Malaysia. The values are rooted in moderation

and tolerance based on Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah, promoting tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect among different ethnic and religious groups in Sabah.

Religious Challenges and Realities in Sabah

Religion, defined as a belief in God, His attributes, and commandments (Kamus Dewan, 2007), plays a central role in shaping personal and communal identity. In Sabah, the diverse religious landscape includes Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous beliefs. While religious plurality is deeply rooted in the region's history, it may also present challenges when not managed through mutual respect and tolerance. This section presents key findings related to the socioreligious dynamics in Sabah, highlighting the challenges and implications of maintaining religious plurality and tolerance within a diverse society in the Islamic perspectives.

Interfaith Marriage and Religious identity

Religious identity is often shaped by parental influence, with most individuals adopting the faith of their parents. Early spiritual guidance plays a significant role in instilling religious values and fostering long-term commitment to a particular belief system (Azaruddin Awang, 2021). However, religious identity is not static, it may evolve due to various life experiences, including interfaith interactions, personal exploration of religious doctrines, and, notably, interfaith marriages. Islam has considered religious identity as a vital part in shaping Muslim community. Thus, it is necessary to build a strong foundation in family institutions begins with marriages. Studies show that interfaith marriages in Sabah, especially in areas like Ranau, contribute positively to social integration and foster good relations between Muslim and Christian communities despite religious differences (Aratin, Abdul Rahman, & Awang, 2021).

In the Islamic context, interfaith marriages are generally prohibited, particularly for Muslim women, who are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men regardless of the latter's religious background (Saleh et al., 2023). According to the Islamic Family Law Enactment 2004 (State of Sabah, 2004), a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man, thus such marriages are considered void unless the non-Muslim man is a Kitabiyah (People of the Book, i.e., Christian, or Jewish) and converts to Islam. Interfaith marriage in Sabah frequently leads to conversion to Islam, as formal registration requires the non-Muslim partner's conversion.

However, there have been reported cases where individuals who converted to Islam for marriage later sought to return to their original faith following divorce, often reflecting deep personal struggles with religious identity (Nur Azian & Nur Farhana, 2022). These cases become more complex when children are involved, as issues of custody, inheritance, and legal recognition arise. The legitimacy of the marriage may be questioned, potentially affecting the child's legal status and the spouses' rights to maintenance and property division (Putra & Saravistha, 2023). In Malaysia, such marriages are typically not legally recognised unless the non-Muslim spouse converts to Islam, leading to significant legal and social implications (Listyawati et al., 2020). Nevertheless, interfaith marriages not only present legal and societal challenges but also foreground the fragile and dynamic nature of religious identity in plural societies.

Religious Understanding and Practices

Another significant concern in the context of religious plurality in Sabah is the limited understanding and inconsistent practice of Islam among segments of the Muslim population.

Religious tolerance tends to become fragile when individuals lack a strong foundation in their own faith, which may lead to confusion in navigating interreligious interactions and compromises in core Islamic principles. In such cases, Muslims who are not firmly grounded in their religious obligations may unintentionally adopt cultural norms and local customs that diverge from Islamic teachings. While Islam permits interreligious cooperation and promotes peaceful coexistence, it simultaneously emphasises firm adherence to the foundational elements of belief (*'aqidah*) and practice. In Sabah, one example of this tension is seen in the continued observance of customary practices such as *adat sogit*, a traditional form of conflict resolution used among indigenous communities to promote social harmony and communal reconciliation. Although such practices serve important sociocultural functions and reflect local wisdom, their integration into Muslim life must be critically assessed through the lens of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) to ensure alignment with *shari'ah* principles (Rosazman Hussin, Johan Johnes & Jeannet Stephen, 2022). Without a clear theological framework, the uncritical acceptance of such customs risks diluting Islamic identity and potentially leading to syncretic practices that compromise religious integrity.

Religious Literacy and Awareness

Empirical studies have shown that Islamic knowledge and observance remain limited in certain segments of the Muslim population in Sabah. For instance, Qurratu Ain Rapihi and Zaizul Ab Rahman (2018) report that Islamic awareness among the Bajau Darat community is moderate, particularly in matters related to worship (*'ibadah*) and moral character development (*akhlāq*). While awareness of zakat fitrah (obligatory alms) is relatively high among the Bajau-Sama communities on the west coast of Sabah, understanding of the broader zakat framework remains insufficient. Many respondents are unfamiliar with other forms of obligatory almsgiving, as well as the functions of institutions such as the Sabah Zakat Centre and Baitul Mal, which are essential for economic justice and redistribution in Islamic governance (Kasim Mansur, Rozilee Asid & Mohd Safri Saiman, 2021). This limited comprehension of fundamental Islamic obligations restricts the ability of Muslim individuals and communities to embody Islamic values effectively within a religiously plural context. When Muslims themselves exhibit incomplete adherence to or understanding of their faith, it weakens their role as ethical exemplars in society. In turn, this may hinder efforts to foster mutual respect and understanding among non-Muslim communities, who may struggle to appreciate the significance or boundaries of Islamic teachings in shared spaces.

Balancing Religious Identity and Cultural Openness

Sabah is often praised for its peaceful coexistence among people of different religions and ethnicities. This harmony is largely attributed to the openness and friendliness of Sabah's diverse communities (Nur Azian & Nur Farhana, 2022). Thus, religious tolerance is essential in sustaining the peaceful coexistence between various faiths in the multireligious community. As stated by Suraya Sintang et. al (2022) the harmonious atmosphere within the community in Sabah is a result of the cultivation of the virtues through the practice of co-operation between different faiths. In fact, with the presence of these different beliefs, it has not become an obstacle to the establishment of a harmonious and tolerant environment within the Sabah community (Nur Azian & Nur Farhana, 2022). However, openness must be accompanied by clear boundaries to ensure that Islamic principles are not compromised. Islam is a holistic way of life that governs not only rituals but also dietary rules, clothing, social conduct, and interpersonal relations.

Despite the harmonious claimed of religious diversity in presented in Sabah, the nature of this coexistence presents significant challenges especially to the Muslim community. The theological implications of this coexistence however remain underexplored particularly from the standpoint of the Muslim community. While Nazmi Khalli et al. (2022) demonstrate that Sabah is rich in social harmony and interreligious sensitivity, their findings primarily reflect dimensions of religious plurality without deep theological interaction. Existing studies tend to approach interfaith relations from sociological or descriptive angles, offering limited insight into whether the interactions among religious groups reflect genuine pluralism grounded in theological engagement, or if they merely indicate passive tolerance and superficial coexistence.

Strategic Recommendations for Strengthening Religious Literacy and Interfaith Harmony in Sabah

Addressing the challenges of religious plurality in Sabah requires increased emphasis on religious literacy, strengthened institutional involvement, and more robust community engagement. Muslim are encouraged to deepen their understanding of Islamic teachings and consistently embody these values in daily life. It is suggested that religious agencies such as the Department of Islamic Affairs Sabah (JHEAINS), Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah (MUIS), and Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM), along with various Islamic NGOs, play a crucial role in sustaining and expanding efforts related to religious education and public outreach.

With a population approaching 3.5 million, Sabah necessitates broader and more integrated strategies to ensure religious awareness reaches all layers of society. The dominance of ethnic identity over religious consciousness contributes to a fusion of customary practices and Islamic duties, often making it difficult to distinguish between cultural expression and religious obligation. This situation calls for coordinated inter-agency collaboration aimed at promoting Islamic values while respecting the multicultural and multi-faith fabric of Sabah. By nurturing a deeper understanding of Islam and fostering respect across religious lines, Sabah holds the potential to emerge as a progressive model of pluralistic coexistence, where Islamic principles are observed with integrity and interfaith harmony is grounded in mutual respect

Conclusion

Religious harmony remains a fundamental of national cohesion and sustainable development in multi-religious societies such as Malaysia. In Sabah, the enduring spirit of interfaith tolerance, reflects a unique socio-cultural fabric shaped by historical interactions, communal wisdom, and shared values across diverse religious groups. However, maintaining this harmony requires more than passive coexistence. It demands ongoing investment in religious literacy, legal clarity, interfaith engagement, and theological reflection to ensure that pluralism remains both respectful and resilient.

From an Islamic perspective, the imperative to uphold religious tolerance is grounded in foundational principles such as *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *ta'āyush* (peaceful coexistence), and *'adl* (justice). These values are enshrined in the Qur'anic explanation and further embodied in the Prophet Muhammad's ethical treatment of People of the Book and other religious communities in Medina. Islamic theology thus provides a robust framework for affirming social harmony without compromising religious integrity, particularly when contextualized through *Fiqh al-Ta'āyush* (jurisprudence of coexistence) and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law).

As this study demonstrates, Sabah's experience illustrates the potential of integrating Islamic theological values with constitutional principles and local socio-cultural realities. It reveals a model in which legal plurality, religious tolerance, and cultural openness are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. Thus, greater institutional synergy between religious authorities, civil society, and educational institutions is essential to ensure that religious harmony is deepened, not merely preserved. In doing so, Sabah can continue to serve as a living testament to Malaysia's aspiration for a pluralistic society grounded in mutual respect, national unity, and Islamic ethical guidance.

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