

Interaction among Various Ethnic Groups from Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: Ethnic diversity is one of Allah the Almighty's signs of His creation. Differences in terms of skin color, physical appearance and language are some of the unique characteristics of human beings as part of the beauty in Allah's creation. These differences should be perceived as part of the grace given by Allah to the humankind. This appreciation towards Allah's gift must therefore be shown in the right way. One of the ways is through the polite and civilized interaction among the various ethnic groups. The diversity of certain nations is certainly significant because from the differences of ethnicity different potentials will emerge that can be shared between various ethnic groups in the concept of sharing. The differences in culture between ethnics also show the different ideas and levels of intellectual, creativity and innovation. Differences in thoughts and ideas also results in the beauty and the uniqueness in terms of food, culture and science and technology. Unfortunately, there is still prejudice from certain parties toward interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. To obtain information about this topic for this study, content analysis method was used. The findings show that Islam has a clear policy when interacting with others and at the same time, it preserves the rights of non-Muslims. Each Muslim therefore has to respect their rights.

Key words: Ethnic interaction, Muslims, human being, physical appearance, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

This study discusses da'wah or preaching through interaction among the various ethnic groups. This is in line with the uprising of Prophet Muhammad as the messenger who brought the teachings of Islam to humankind from various ethnic groups. Islam brought by Him and His fellow companions contains blessing and mercy which promotes peace and harmony not only to humans from various ethnic groups but also to all creatures. Islam provides equal rights and fair treatment to non-Muslims and this has been the focus of many Islamic scholars through their works. To obtain data for this study, document analysis methodology was used. The findings of the study reveal that Islam provides fair interaction policy towards non-Muslim community. It also shows that non-Muslims have certain rights which should be respected.

Problem statement: There are still unclear views from certain parties on interaction among various ethnic groups from the perspective of Islam. They are of the opinion that Islam orders Muslims to hate other non-Muslim ethnic groups and that Muslims can treat them cruelly. Even today, there is still some kind of prejudice towards Islam. In his study, Griffin (2008) from Center for Research on Globalization explains that there are still some who think

that the September, 11 tragedy was staged by Muslims. Islam is also considered as a religion that promotes violence. Therefore, this study aims to explain the interaction among various ethnic groups from Islamic perspective.

Literature study: There are many classical works that have touched on the interaction among ethnic groups written by Islamic scholars. Works such as *Ahkam al-Sultaniah* by al-Mawardi and *Ahkam Ahl al-Zimmah* by Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyyah are among those that explain this issue. Modern scholars have also written about it including Rashid (1993) in his book *Huquq al-Muwattanah* and also Lutfi (1990) in his book entitled *Ikhtilaf al-Darain*.

Meaning of interaction: Interaction is mutual or reciprocal, action or influence. In the Islamic concept, interaction can be seen through the practice of giving salam among Muslims regardless of whether they know each other or not as mentioned in a hadith or narration by Prophet Muhammad SAW which means:

A good Muslim is by giving food and salam to those you know or strangers (Muslim, 2000)

Umar ibn al-Khattab R.A. once sent new clothes to a relative who lived in Makkah and had not embraced Islam.

This interactional effort was carried out through the practice of mutual visits in proper manner regardless of religion. In other words, interaction in Islam is referred to as al-Taaruf that is with the purpose of knowing each other.

By interacting with other individuals, it would foster better relationship and cooperation in various matters involving the same or different ethnic groups.

This interaction among the various ethnic groups would create a harmonious relationship from the aspects of politics, economy, education, family, management and other aspects (Al-Fayumi and Abd Al-Muiz, 2006). This interaction indirectly would also create positive perception towards Islam as a religion which obliges all mankind to live peacefully and harmoniously with mutual respect and tolerance in all matters regardless of ethnic and religion.

Requirement of interaction in the Quran: The importance of interaction is explained in the Quran as mentioned in surah al-Hujurat verse 13 which means:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)

The above verse clearly shows that the purpose of the creation of humankind of various races and ethnics is not to become enemies. Instead, they should be acquainted and interact with each other. Faith wise, skin color or ethnic diversity is not the benchmark of human nobleness beside Allah. What matters to Allah is the person's level of piety through his or her religious worship. This verse makes us aware of the origin of human being despite coming from different ethnic groups and religions, thus defying the practice of apartheid or discrimination against skin color.

The awareness to interact started on the basis that humankind originates from one source as explained by Allah in surah al-Nisa' verse 1 which means:

O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord who created you from a single Person, created of like nature, His mate and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women

In the above verse, Allah commands mankind to have taqwa or fear of Him and at the same time to make mankind realize that they are His creation. When they start to see this, it would motivate them to perform ibadah

to Allah. Due to this self devotion, man was created by Allah as Allah says in surah al-Dhariyat verses 56-58:

I have only created Jinns and men that they may serve Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. For God is He Who gives (all) Sustenance, Lord of power and steadfast (for ever)

Interaction and change: The early generation of Islam displayed excellent interactional practice. The spirit of sharing benefits and prosperity taught in Islam encouraged them to interact with other races.

This factor had spread Islam to Rome and Persia and their empires, especially during the rule of Umar Ibn al-Khattab R.A. (634-644). During the reign of Uthman ibn Affan R.A. (644-656), Islam had spread to Cyprus and Rhodes (Abdullah, 1981). According to Abdul Rahman Abdullah, what was amazing was that during the Bani Umayyah ruling, Islam had spread to Asia, North Africa and Europe including Spain and France.

From the historical aspect, the interaction can be seen throughout the journey by Arab missionaries who came to the Malay Archipelago by taking the sea route starting from the Jeddah coast through Eden, South of the Arab Peninsula passing through Gujerat before reaching the Malay Archipelago. They also took the land route beginning from Syria and Iraq towards Khusaran then moving across north of Persia to Afghanistan heading towards China before arriving at the Malay Archipelago (Yahaya, 2001).

The change that took place as a result of this interaction especially during the Melaka Sultanate was very obvious. Melaka had its first exposure to Islam when Parameswara embraced it through his marriage with a Pasai princess, Puteri Ratna Keumala in 1414 and later changed his name to Sultan Iskandar Shah. Melaka later become an glorious empire, especially during the rule of Sultan Mudzaffar Shah (1456-1477) with Islam becoming its official religion. Ethnically, Melaka emerged as a metropolitan city which attracted various ethnic groups such as Chinese, Arabs, Kling, Javanese, Bengalis, Gujeratis and Champa (Talib, 2006).

The interaction between local people and Muslim traders who at the same preached Islam had spread the religion along the coast of the Malacca Straits until Demak, Japara, Brunei, Sulu and Palawan. This situation also reflected the changes that occurred from the aspects of social life and culture involving various ethnic groups. Other changes happened administratively, especially when the Sultan appointed four syahbandars or harbor masters from various ethnic groups-Javanese, Chinese, Arab and Kling (Talib, 2006). According to Talib (2006) to

ensure community harmony each ethnic group had its own settlement that is Kampong China, Kampong Kling, Kampong Arab and Kampong Jawa. The glorious and harmonious life through interaction among the various groups put Melaka in history as a great Malay empire.

The change produced through interaction was obvious as the interaction was constructive and instilled noble and civilized values. It did not hamper or destroy any kind of creativity or innovation produced by the new community. In fact, it had fostered it as proven when Chinese and Indian civilizations expanded in various fields.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study observes the basic principles in interaction among the various ethnic groups from the perspective of Islam. To obtain data, content analysis method was applied. The researchers conducted an analysis of works content written by scholars on the subject studied to get important principles on ethnic interaction according to Islam.

RESULTS

Basic islamic principles in inter-ethnic interaction: The following will explain the basic Islamic principles in inter-ethnic interaction. The principles, once and for all proves that Islam as an advanced religion in its effort to preserve community unity. Among the principles (Al-Turayqi and Ibn Ibrahim, 1989) are:

Be merciful to all creatures: One of Allah's beautiful names is al-Rahman and among its characteristics is merciful. Allah sends His messenger, Prophet Muhammad SAW to provide mercy to all creatures as mentioned in surah al-Anbiya, verse 107 which means:

We sent thee not but as a Mercy for all creatures

From there onwards, Islam has strongly encouraged mankind to be merciful to each other. Prophet Muhammad SAW said:

Those who are not merciful will not receive mercy (Al-Bukhariy, 1997)

According to Ibn Battal, the hadith encourages Muslims to do good to all creatures including non-Muslims (Ibn Hajar and Ibn Ali, 1986). It also shows that the concept of mercy is to be embraced by everybody not only for Muslims (Al-Turayqi and Ibn Ibrahim, 1989).

When interacting with anyone, a person should physically display the quality of mercy even to non-Muslims. Despite the obstacles and challenges faced by Rasulullah SAW in preaching to the non believers, he said:

Verily my resurgence is not to be damned but
I've been sent as messenger of mercy (Muslim, 2000)

That should be the attitude of a Muslim which is merciful, caring, kind and humble. These qualities should never be considered as insulting or a sign of weakness, instead they are crucial in order to become a strong and noble individual (Al-Turayqi and Ibn Ibrahim, 1989).

Do good deeds and ihsan (generous): When doing good deeds with non-Muslims, priority should go to the parents followed by relatives and then other individuals depending on their interests and positions. With regard to parents rights, Allah stresses in surah Luqman verse 15 which means:

But if they strive to make thee join in worship with Me things of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not yet bear them company in this life with justice (and consideration) and follow the way of those who turn to me (in love): in the end the return of you all is to Me and I will tell you the truth (and meaning) of all that ye did

Although, we should not obey the parents when asked to shirk or associate partners with Allah, this does not mean that the person should not be merciful and treat his or her non-Muslim parents well (Ibn Kathir, 2004). In the same matter, Asma binti Abi Bakr A.A. asked Rasulullah SAW which means:

My mother came to see me because she really wanted to see me but she is a musyrik. Can I communicate with her? Rasulullah replied, of course, please communicate with her (Ibn Hajar and Ibn Ali, 1986)

In the same context, Islam allows Muslims to visit the graves of non-Muslims with the intention of learning something positive from it. This is based on a hadith or narration from Buraidah R.A. reported by Ahmad, Ibn Abi Syaibah, al-Hakim, Ibn Hibban and al-Bayhaqi as well as hadith from Abu Hurayrah R.A. narrated by Muslim, Abu Dawud, al-Nasa'i and others which mean:

And when I asked for permission to visit her grave (Prophet Muhammad's mother), Allah allows it. Therefore, go visit the graves because it will

There are also other Islamic scholars who are of the opinion that non-Muslims can visit the graves of Muslim relatives.

Among individuals who we need to be kind to are the neighbors, although they are non-Muslims as stated in a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah (R.A.) which means:

Those who have faith in Allah and the hereafter so be kind to your neighbors (Al-Bukhariy, 1997)

According to Ibn Rajab, Muslims are required to be kind to their neighbors, regardless of their religion (Al-Bukhariy, 1997).

Be kind: As a religion which brings mercy to all mankind, Islam forbids any kind of abuse and bad criticism towards other Muslims as well non-Muslims. This is supported by a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah (R.A.) which means:

Those who have faith in Allah and the hereafter must say good things or keep quiet (Al-Bukhariy, 1997)

Islam is against any kind of violence such as abusing or hurting others. As narrated by Muslim while Hisyam Ibn Hakim was passing in front of a group of non-Muslim farmers in Syam, he saw them being tortured by standing under the hot sun for not paying taxes. So Hisyam said, I heard Rasulullah said which means:

Verily, Allah will torture those who torture others (Muslim, 2000)

Based on the hadith, it is obvious that Islam preserves the life and rights of non-Muslims who live in a Muslim country. Islam demands that Muslims deal with non-Muslims in a kind and civilized manner (Al-Turayqi and Ibn Ibrahim, 1989).

Associate nicely: As a religion which places great importance in community relationship, Muslims should not ignore non-Muslims in their community so that the great teachings of Islam can be spread to others. There is evidence that Prophet Muhammad himself did business with a Jew when he traded his metal outfit for 30 scoops of wheat (Al-Bukhariy, 1997).

A Muslim who mixes around with others and remains patient of their weaknesses is better than a Muslim who does not mix around and is impatient of their weaknesses (Al-Tirmidhi, 2000).

DISCUSSION

It is obvious from this study that Islam is the religion which promotes inter-ethnic interaction and is against any kind of hatred. Differences in skin color and language do not determine an ethnic group's nobleness. Instead, it is determined by the good deeds performed. When viewed from the inter-ethnic interaction principles, Islam requires Muslims to do good to everybody regardless of race and religion. It shows that Islam does not treat any ethnic groups as enemies reflecting the fairness in Islam.

Regarding matters on welfare, Islam clearly obliges all Muslims to be kind to everyone, especially to his or her parents. A person must obey his or her parents when asked to do good things, although the parents are non-Muslims. When interacting, Islam forbids anyone from abusing or hurting any individual of different skin color or religion. Those who torture or mistreat others including non-Muslims will be tortured by Allah SWT in hell.

In Islam, inter-ethnic interaction requires that every individual to be patient when dealing with others weaknesses. Such quality is considered admirable and better than individuals who do not mix around with other people. This proves that Islam encourages community life as well as concerned attitude towards others problems. In other words, Islam despises those who are selfish and ignorant of matters in the community.

CONCLUSION

Interaction among ethnic is one of the demands in Islam. It aims to spread Islam as a good way of life to ensure that peace and harmony is enjoyed by all ethnic groups regardless of religion. This would squash claims from certain quarters who regard with a suspicion the treatment of Muslims towards non-Muslims. This study has proven that Islam has laid down positive foundations in the context of ethnic relations as well as to ensure the general rights of non-Muslims.

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