

Muslim Converts Personnel's In Malaysian Armed Forces: Problems and Challenges

Burhanuddin Jalal*

National Defence University of, Malaysia

Sayuti Ab Ghani

National Defence University of, Malaysia

Amnah Saayah Ismail

National Defence University of, Malaysia

Abstract

Malaysian Armed Forces Religious Corps which established in 1985, has tried to convey the Islamic *da'wah* and Islam in particular against members of the Armed Forces. The Effects of missionary work submitted has affected non-Muslim groups and they then embraced to Islam. This study was conducted to see to what extent the development of new converts in the Armed Forces. Library research, questionnaire, interview and observation were used to obtain data related to the development and education of a new brotherhood and sister in Islam. The research questionnaire was used as an instrument field to see the problems and challenges among the army personnel. The study was conducted on 57 respondents who were members of the Malaysian Armed Forces. Random sampling technique was used and the results were analyzed using SPSS version 16 using descriptive and inferential method. The findings may explain openly about the development of converts among members of the Malaysian Armed Forces after converting to Islam as well as information about the state and community feedback and solution to converts and pluralistic society and responsibility to support and spread the propaganda against communities of different races and cultures in Malaysia.

Keywords: Converts; Cross cultural; Education; Muslim; Religion.



CC BY: [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1. Introduction

Malaysian Armed Forces Religious Corps or also known as *KAGAT (Kor Agama Angkatan Tentera in Malay)* was officially established on 16 April 1985 after various efforts have been made to create a special institution that administers religious and spiritual affairs in Malaysian Armed Forces (Anonymous, 2005). The role and responsibilities held by KAGAT cannot be taken lightly because its role is extensive in covering all three branches of service of the Malaysian Armed Forces, namely Malaysian Army, Malaysian Navy also Malaysian Air Force. Given the fact that the membership in Malaysian Armed Forces primarily comprises of Muslim Malays, it is thus reasonable that an organization under Malaysian Armed Forces is given the mandate to instill Islamic values among its personnel. Even the foundation of KAGAT at the time was really timely due to the fact that based on our nation's past history, we have inherited British leadership and military administration before the Independence (Mohammed, 1998).

The Malaysian Constitution in Article 3(1), dictates that, "Islam is the federal religion, but other religions can be practiced harmoniously and peacefully in any parts of the Federal" (2007 Federal Constitution). Based on this, religion has become one of the most important characteristics in Malaysia, and therefore, it is plausible to have Islamic values instilled in this country's Public Service system, at par with the Malaysian Constitution as mentioned in Article 3 (1) in the Malaysian Federal Constitution (Abdul H. Z. A., 1990). Broadly speaking, Islamic activities in Malaysia post-Independence are divided into two parts. The first is any official activity as carried out by the government through Malaysian Islamic Development Office and also religious activities and programs handled by the Islamic Council at state level. Secondly, the religious activities done unofficially by the people and the public through the non-government organisations like people's association, Malaysian Islamic Charity Organisation, Malaysian Islamic Youth Front and so on (Wan, 1980).

The *da'wah* organisation towards new brothers and sisters serves to be one important issue that deserves attention among various parties and the Armed Forces are of no exception. If this issue cannot be resolved, it is feared that social ills like deviancy, the increasing number of street beggars, the decline of marriages institution and so on will occur. This study focuses on the *da'wah* effort done by Malaysian Armed Forces Religious Corps especially education programs on new Muslim converts in the Malaysian Armed Forces.

2. Methodology

Generally speaking, this study adopts the library study and field study. The questionnaire forms were distributed to new converts who were undergoing a course at the Armed Forces Islamic Understanding and Training Institute (ILMI) in Port Dickson. Other than the questionnaires, several series of interviews with various parties related to new converts were also held. Observation was done during the education program and distribution of aid to the new converts.

The procedure to analyse the data of the study is by using *Statistical Package For Sosial Science (SPSS)* Version 16. The process of data analysis from the questionnaire will start by revising and checking the questionnaires obtained from the respondents involved. The quantitative data will be analysed using the *SPSS*. The questionnaire adopts the binary scale where it only looks at the descriptive form that is through the frequency of distribution and frequency of percentage only. Data from the interview and observation is done by making a comparison towards the institution other than comparing it with previous works. With the data gathered through the methods above, it was then analysed using the following methods:

- a. Inductive Method, which means the pattern of thinking which seeks for evidence from specific matters to more general evidence. The data obtained will be concluded in the form of general description.
- b. Deductive Method, which means the pattern of thinking that seeks for evidence by leaning on general evidence on matters that are naturally specific.
- c. Comparative Method, meaning a conclusion that is made based on the data obtained through a comparison between both the deductive and inductive methods. Using the three methods above, it is hoped that the new finding obtained is satisfactory and not dubious. The data and information are still regarded as raw materials that serve as the fundamentals of the study either as material for analysis or as a temporary conclusion.

3. Results

The following is among the findings established:

3.1. Education Levels of Converts.

To ensure that the personnel of Malaysian Armed Forces have embraced Islam and become new Muslims, the Religious Office of the unit or Batalion always ensures that every new convert is guided and given proper Islamic education through personal guidance or through programs or courses carried out according to the schedule. Among the programs often carried out by Religious Corps of the Malaysian Armed Forces in the effort to consolidate Islamic education are as follows:

- i. New converts' intensive course.
- ii. *Fardu Ain* Courses
- iii. New converts' intensive course (advanced).
- iv. Social programs and activities
- v. Da'wah preaching qualification course.
- vi. Professional qualification course.

3.2. Challenges Among New Converts

New converts cannot break away from challenges when embracing Islam - challenges that can rob off one's faith and principles if they do not have a strong stand. There are various challenges that they have to face be it in terms of the cultural shock, societal humiliation, emotional disturbance and so on (Lam, 2005). If these challenges are not overcome wisely and urgently, other issues will surely emerge and will lead to more serious issues which is returning to the original religion (deviancy). Therefore, yielded from past studies, in general, researchers will list down several challenges faced by the converts and researchers and divide the challenges into three categories- challenges from family members, the society and the integration of the Islamic culture they have just embraced (Nur A'thiroh Masyaa'il Tan Abdullah@Tan Ai Pao, 2013).

3.3. Family Members

Various challenges have been faced by Muslim converts during the time, and after, they embraced Islam. Among them, they are greatly opposed by their original families, that they are disowned by their real parents and they are not allowed to go home and the cutting off all ties, family-wise, financial-wise and social-wise. That these issues really disturb their emotions and which will lead to stress (Nur Athiroh Masya'il Tan Abdullah Fariza Md Sham, 2009). Some of the challenges faced by the converts including the alienation and dismissal from the converts' own families. Most of their family members regard converting from one's religion to Islam as a humiliation as they see Islam as a religion only for the Malays. Embracing Islam is thought of as a form of betrayal and humiliation to the discordancy and struggle of the nation because for them it is all about cutting the family ties. That is the reason why they exist in their families and the society. There are also some converts who live with their families who are obviously non-Muslims but they are separated from other aspects of family life. This is not a new issue but it appears to be a tradition that co-exists with the converts' acceptance of Islam (Abdul G. H. D., 2011).

In the research that has been done, it is found that challenges among the convert families include '*becoming the subject of cynicism by family for embracing Islam*' and '*labeled as converting into Malay*'.

3.4. Integration of Islamic Culture

The integration is a process to create a national identity in a group that separates from the culture, social and location in a political unit (Shamsul, 2012). In another definition, integration is a process that unites every member of the society and the nation as a whole through the national ideology so that every member of the society can form one collective identity and value also a feeling of nationalism among them (Kose, 1996). The unity of the society is part of an important component that makes up national development. Therefore, it is important for us to study the background and characteristics of the pluralistic society in our country (Sanusi, 1989). According to George Simmel, the interaction between humans originates from all forms of social life. The society comprises of various forms of relationships and interactions among individuals. Examples of interactions are conflict, cooperation, competition, task distribution and superiority-inferiority relations (Ting, 1979).

Some of the converts already have occupations before they embrace Islam in fields or jobs that conflict with Islam. For instance, they work at gambling premises, alcohol factories, night clubs and so on (James and Yusman, 2014). After converting into Islam, this group is in a dilemma whether to continue working by neglecting the demands and teachings of Islam, or to quit their jobs and look for new jobs to support themselves and their families. Other than that, there are also converts who get the pressure from their non-Muslim employers after the latter knows that their staff have embraced Islam that they fire them or make them quit as they are not able to take in the pressure (Abdul G. H. D., 2011).

The outcome of the study towards the integration of the Islamic culture reveals that there are three items of variables which obtain the highest score in overall from the ten items given to the converts. The items include 'difficult to *istiqamah* when practising Islam', *Difficult to distinguish between Malay culture and Islamic practice* and the item "difficult to pronounced letters in Arabic".

3.5. The Existence of Cases Where Converts Deviate from Islam

Based on the interview with the respondents and citing the study done by Aidit (2014) it is found that converts are inclined to take a step back from Islam based on a few main factors. Table 3 explains that the environment contributes to the issue of deviancy. Other than that, factors such as 'lacking the support and guidance from the Muslim community', 'way of life of the Muslim community that does not reflect true Islamic teachings', also become the contributing reasons why some converts made the decision to deviate from Islam.

4. Conclusion

In general, there exists a difference in integration of new converts towards the Malay culture, although the lives of the soldiers in general are exposed to this very culture, as the majority of them are Malay. Other than that, the Malaysian Armed Forces Religious Corps (KAGAT) needs to improve the aspect of *da'wah* management especially in regard of new converts although the number is scarce. Among them are:

- a. To enhance the understanding of new converts towards Islamic understanding and Malay culture so that the acceptance of the latter is expected and well-treated, automatically and directly creating a strong integration (Mohd and Osman, 2003).
- b. The majority of the soldiers are Malay-Muslim, where they have to shoulder the responsibility to guide new converts. They need to practise a good Malay culture and automatically demonstrate Islam as a *syumul* and prominent religion.

In sum, the effort for Islamic *da'wah* in Angkatan Tentera Malaysia must continue to be enhanced, as well as strengthened. The consolidation of *da'wah* management also encompasses the aspect of the preachers themselves namely the members and officers of KAGAT. Building human quality in preachers is vital especially from the aspects of knowledge, information, skills and attitude. If their qualities can be developed, automatically it can generate disciplined preachers, and those who are able to communicate with the target groups perfectly- they should be able to understand the concept of '*hikmah*' in *da'wah* as decreed by Allah (s.w.t.) in Chapter al-Nahl (16:125) which means, "*Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knowledge best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.*".

Acknowledgement

This research is supported by the short Grant Research Scheme No. UPNM/2016/GPJP/4/SSI/1 from Research dan Management Centre (RMC), National Defence University of Malaysia. We also would like to express our gratitude to all researchers for their cooperation in this study.

References

- Abdul, G. H. D. (2011). *Islam dan saudara kita*. BPI Selangor Islamic Council: Shah Alam.
- Abdul, H. Z. A. (1990). *Cabaran masa depan KAGAT*. Malaysian Armed Force Headquarters: Kuala Lumpur.
- Aidit, G. (2014). *Development an islamic perspective*. Pelanduk Publication: Petaling Jaya.
- Anonymous (2005). *Jabatan arah kagat. Di persada kegemilangan*. Malaysian Armed Force Headquarters: Kuala Lumpur.
- James, L. and Yusman, N. (2014). *Meeting the challenge of tarbiah non-government organization and welfare of muslim converts*. National University of Malaysia: Bangi.
- Kose, A. (1996). *Conversion to islam, A study of native british converts*. Kegan Paul International: London.

- Lam, J. (2005). *Religious conversion and reconstruction of identities, The case of chinese muslim converts in Malaysia*. Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore: Singapore.
- Mohammed, R. A. (1998). Pembinaan sahsiah tentera dalam Islam dan kaitannya dengan ketenteraan masa kini.
- Mohd, S. Y. and Osman, A. (2003). The problem of mu'allaf in Malaysia. *Jurnal Islamiyyat, Jil, 24*: 65–84.
- Nur A'thiroh Masyaa'il Tan Abdullah@Tan Ai Pao (2013). Da'wah program of muslim welfare organisation of malaysia towards the muslim converts, A research on perception and effectiveness.
- Nur Athiroh Masya'il Tan Abdullah Fariza Md Sham (2009). Keperluan memahami psikologi saudara Muslim. *Jurnal Hadhari, 1(2)*: 83-97.
- Sanusi, O. (1989). *Ikatan etnik dan kelas di Malaysia*. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia: Bangi.
- Shamsul, A. B. (2012). *Modul hubungan etnik*. Pusat Kajian Etnik. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia: Bangi.
- Ting, C. P. (1979). *Konsep asas sosiologi*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka: Kuala Lumpur.
- Wan, H. A. W. A. K. (1980). *Islam di Malaysia, Kedatangan dan perkembangan abad 7-20m. Dalalm tamadun islam di Malaysia*. Malaysian History Association: Kuala Lumpur.