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Intercultural Theology in the Multicultural Context of Muslim-Buddhist Relation in Malaysia: History, Identity, and Issues

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Abstract: Relationship-oriented questions have always been at the crossroads of ethnoreligious identity, religious freedom, religious conversion, religious prejudice, and religious pluralism throughout Muslim-Buddhist co-existence in the sixth century within the Malay Archipelago. Other faiths could be freely practised except for propagation towards Muslim communities with Islam being the religion of the federation. This study aimed to explore Muslim-Buddhist relation types and the issues underpinning the following themes: history, identity, and concerns. Content and thematic analysis as well as discourse analysis were utilised as the study method for data collection and evaluation. The data were thematically analysed with ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software. Resultantly, the Muslim-Buddhist interaction pattern in Malaysia has occurred (culturally and religiously) from the early establishment of both religious communities. This relation, which has shifted in ethnoreligious orientation at every interaction level, opens more avenues and complexities requiring holistic management.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhism; Chinese culture; Muslim culture; ethnoreligious; multiculturalism; intercultural theology; Muslim-Buddhist relation; Islam and Buddhism; religious pluralism



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1. Introduction

Western theologians strive to secure a lasting position in the interrelated discipline of missiology, comparative religion, and ecumenism with intercultural theology (Wrogemann 2021, p. 1; Küster 2014, p. 171; Ustorf 2008; van den Toren 2015, p. 136) given the advent of religious pluralists and inclusivists of Islam and Buddhism through the religious diversity paradigm. The term ‘intercultural theology’ entails a theology of religions, inculturation, contextual theology, cross-cultural theologies, or multiple religions derived from relevant works (Cheetham 2017, p. 3). Parallel to van den Toren (2015, p. 125), intercultural theology catalyses a critical consideration of the relationship through interactions between distinctive contextual theologies. Intercultural theology is developed through dialogues with the social sciences. In this vein, intercultural theology concerns the implicit theologies expressed in other categories (economic, social, ecological, religious, and locality) beyond textbook denotations of ‘theology’ or ‘culture’ (Wrogemann 2021, p. 1). From several intercultural theologians’ perspectives, the term implies an engagement with different theological expressions between different groups beyond a mere exchange of insights. Intercultural theology, which originates from how one perceives multiculturalism as ‘God’s circumstantial will’, characterises multiple interactional methods between individuals from different cultures (Moe 2019, p. 17). Muslims acknowledge diversity as a manifestation of the greatness of God, the ultimate Creator, for people to be acquainted with one another.

Allah states in the Quran as follows: “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted” (Q.S. 49.13). Following Yusuf (2021, p. 205), the Qur’an perceives religious diversity as a natural phenomenon in one’s life, thought process, and society. Religious diversity also encourages a sense of competitiveness between religious communities to perform good deeds. Meanwhile, Buddhists observe that diversity induces global peace and growth while Buddhism advocates maximising human welfare and happiness (*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya*). The Buddha states in the Sutta-Nipāta as follows: “To be attached to one view and to look down upon others’ views as inferior—this the wise men call a fetter”. In this regard, inherent life values and the interdependence and reciprocity of individuals and other life forms constitute a fundamental Buddhist belief (Sarao 2017, p. 913). The Buddhist scholar Harris (2013, p. 89) asserted that most Sutta Pitaka discourses are narratives depicting the Buddha’s conversation with diverse groups and individuals.

The acknowledgement of religious diversity in Islam and Buddhism empirically offers common thematic orientations in the comparison of elements from different religious traditions based on history (Awang et al. 2022; Frydenlund and Jerryson 2020; Ramli et al. 2020b), theology (Ramli et al. 2020c; Khajegir and Heidary 2020; Awang et al. 2021, p. 5; Yusuf 2021; Yew et al. 2021; Obuse 2014; Dastagir and Ramzy 2019), culture (Fee 2004; Goh 2009; Ishak 2010; Ismail and Ahmad 2009), and conflict (Abdul Razak and Saleem 2021; Lehr 2018; M. Joll 2010; Yusuf 2007). Nevertheless, Islam and Buddhism are frequently depicted as radically different and doctrinally irreconcilable (Obuse 2014, p. 76) with their similarities limited to the ethical–philosophical spectrum. This restriction renders the concept of theology almost nonsensical (Obuse 2015, p. 409). Several Buddhist scholars propounded the term ‘intercultural theology’ as Buddhist discourses on non-mundane spheres, including the Buddha(s) and dharma as the eternal truth. As some Buddhist ‘theologians’ have engaged in this hermeneutical exercise by interacting with their Muslim colleagues, the aforementioned justifications substantiate the intercultural theology between Islam and Buddhism by ‘establishing’ the indivisible core of religion despite various unbridgeable differences. This statement precisely reflects God’s words in the Holy Qur’an as the essential message conveyed by the most important messenger of God (Wrogemann 2021, p. 1). The highlighted issues lead to the following question: How is religion perceived and understood based on its own and other adherents? Following theologians’, anthropologists’, and sociologists’ proposed disciplines, inter-faith relations and intercultural theology should be emphasised in contemporary religion-oriented research. This study explored the significance of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Malaysia from a doctrinal viewpoint based on intercultural theology to manifest the diversity of ethnoreligious identity.

2. Theoretical Framework of Muslim-Buddhist Relation

The theoretical manifestation of the Muslim-Buddhist relation in Malaysia, has been suggested in various frameworks. Although some theories have gained popularity and generated enthusiasm, they have not been verified with extensive empirical evidence from different countries. Recent work attempts to apply theoretical frameworks on the Muslim-Buddhist relation to theological exchange of pluralism (Yusuf 2021, p. 217; Reza Shah-Kazemi 2010) and parallelism (Obuse 2014, p. 81; Yusuf 2022, p. 2). On the other hand, tolerance and inclusivism have been regarded as more practical towards the ethnoreligious society (Ramli et al. 2022). As societies were ethnoreligious oriented, which involve parties that are defined along religious lines, societies where religion is an integral aspect of social and cultural life and where religious institutions represent a significant portion of the community and possess moral legitimacy as well as the capacity to reach and mobilise adherents throughout the community (Kadayifci-Orellana 2009, p. 265), the intercultural theology includes the relation in which common ground between people with different theological and cultural background can be actively constructed through a process of

dialogue in which existing elements are prioritised and new approaches are formulated. The end goal of such a process is an integration of norms across theology which serve to govern relationships between Muslims and Buddhists in Malaysia.

3. Early Encounter in the Malay Archipelago

Buddhism, which emerged within the Malay Archipelago in the second century (Yaacob 2011, p. 168), became an essential religion that followed ancient animism- and dynamism-oriented beliefs (Muhamat Kawangit et al. 2012; Mohd Nasir 2012, p. 5) in early Malay kingdoms: Langkasuka (2 C.E.), Chi Thu (2 C.E.), Kedah Tua (5 C.E.), Pahang Tua (5 C.E.), Srivijaya (7 C.E.) (Awang et al. 2022, p. 137), and Majapahit (13 C.E.). Animism is regarded as Kapitayan (ancient religion of the Nusantara people) in some Malay communities. This notion is misunderstood by Westerners as animism and dynamism, which involves nature-worshipping and superstitious beliefs. Sunyoto (2017, p. 17) affirmed that religion is centred on monotheism rather than animism and dynamism as claimed by Westerners. Based on the archaeological sources found in various parts of the Candi (temple) in Bujang Valley and Santubong, the influence of Buddhism in the Malay Archipelago is determined by inscriptions on stupa walls and the construction of Buddhist temples containing sacred words from the Buddha's teachings written in *Pallava* script. Some parts of the relevant artifacts found in Ulu Kelantan, Choras Hill, and Perlis suggest the practice of Buddhism within the region in the sixth century (Adzrieman et al. 2012, p. 445). I-Tsing (635–713 C.E.), a Buddhist monk who transited in Srivijaya in 671 C.E. on his way to Nalanda (Abdullah 1994, p. 6), recorded the presence of Buddhism in the region. Upon arriving in Srivijaya, a centre for Buddhism studies integrated with some Hindu teachings from the Mahayana tradition at the time (Ramstedt 2002, p. 636; Mat and Sulaiman 2007), I-Tsing (635–713 C.E.) identified over a 1000 Buddhist monks who meditated and studied in Srivijaya and adhered to religious practices that mirrored those of the Buddhist teachings in India (Ackerman and Lee 1988, p. 15; Abdul Rani 2005, p. 70; Coedes 1975; Kasimin 1983, p. 155; Ramstedt 2002, p. 636; I-Tsing 1896, p. xl).

The aforementioned Buddhist centre in Srivijaya depicts Southeast Asia as the crux of Buddhism at one time (Zain 2000, p. 192). For example, a Buddhist religious centre was situated on Seguntang hill at Palembang while Mataram, Central Java was known as a Buddhist state in the late seventh century. The kingdom of Sailendra, which ruled Mataram, was initially influenced by Hinduism but converted to Buddhism in the middle of the eighth century and built the Borobudur monument (Afsaruddin 2002, p. 61). This conversion led to the prevalence of Buddhism and minimal influence of Hinduism among rulers, immigrants, and foreign traders in ninth-century Malay kingdoms (Afsaruddin 2002, p. xi; Abdul Rani 2005, p. 71). Such evidence is based on Buddhism-related artefacts that are only available in specified areas, which supported the following hypothesis: Indian and Chinese merchants and traders constitute the religious minority (Khaw et al. 2011). People were not inclined towards Buddhism given the lack of missionary influence found in Islam and Christianity, thus retaining their traditional beliefs. In Al-Attas (1990, p. 16), no historical record has proven the influence of Buddhism on the thoughts of Malay scholars or the society at large except on traditional arts (Al-Attas 2018, p. 4).

Based on the records, Muslims first arrived in the seventh century during the reign of Srivijaya (600–1200 C.E.). Some Malays embraced Islam despite the prevalence of Buddhism or Hinduism among the rulers. Most people conserved their ancient religion. Muslim-Buddhist relations occurred with the presence of Muslims and Buddhists. This interaction was identified through correspondence between the kingdoms of Umayyad and Srivijaya. The letter written by the Umayyad Muslim Caliph, Umar Abdul Aziz (682–720 C.E.), to the Buddhist Maharaja Sri Indravarman the Srivijaya (702–728 C.E.) (Salomon 1996, p. 433) in Arab records concerned the ruler's acceptance of Islam (al-Andalusi 1983, p. 72; Fatimi 1963; Fācūr 1991, p. 252; Al-Taghrībirdī 2010, p. 240). The letter was presumably written around the seventh or eighth century for the purposes of diplomatic relations and

theological exchanges. The kingdom successfully established trade relations with China, India, and the Middle East at that time (Aljunied 2022, p. 15).

Evidently, early Muslim-Buddhist relations occurred through diplomatic relations between Srivijaya and the Umayyad kingdom, followed by theological exchanges. The third form involves social interactions with trading activities. Rulers and urban dwellers were less inclined to embrace Islam during this period as Arab preachers depicted the religion as stringent and uncompromising, which did not complement Malay customs and traditions (Nasution 2018, p. 63). Following Al-Attas (1990, p. 16), rural-area Malays adhered to other religions (not Islam or Buddhism) at the time while retaining their current belief system until the arrival of Islam, which complemented their traditions and costumes (Al-Attas 1990, p. 16; Din 2011, p. 25). Islamic preachers were known to access rural areas that were not influenced by other religions. In this vein, Islam was embraced by a group of people in Pattani, which welcomed Muslim preachers and traders from the Middle East and Central Asia, such as China, India, and Arab (Denisova 2008, p. 141; Suryadi 2017, p. 180).

Another group of Muslim preachers arriving at the Malay archipelago in the ninth and 10th centuries, including Champa (Asif 2016, p. 32; Mohd Noor 2011, p. 30; Din 2011, p. 23; Mandal 2017, p. 27), catalysed the development of small Islamic territories around the region. Islam garnered wide social acceptance with the third phase of Muslims arriving from Central Asia in the 14th century (Din 2011, p. 20). This acceptance facilitated the emergence of Islamic kingdoms in Perlak, Barus, and Samudera-Pasai. Islamic influence was found in coastal areas given sufficient access to modern civilisations at the time (Fairozi and Anggraini 2020, p. 122). Marco Polo, who returned to the Persian Gulf by sea from China at the end of the 13th century, highlighted the presence of Saracen Merchants (Muslim traders) who preached Islam to the locals and converted them in Perlak (Sunyoto 2016, p. 31). Subsequently, Islamic kingdoms were founded in Perlak, Barus, and Samudera-Pasai at the end of the 14th century.

The Melaka Sultanate (1400–1511 C.E.), which incorporated the Melaka Code of Law and Maritime Law following traditions infused with Islamic law (Aljunied 2022, p. 16; Burhanudin 1998, p. 158; Shamsul 2005; Aziz and Shamsul 2004) and minor Hinduism-Buddhism influences (Yasin 1994), emerged as a pivotal Islamic centre in the 15th century (Din 2011, p. 22). The Malay kingdom attained its peak through the Malacca Sultanate (1400–1511 C.E.) as a trading centre and seaport connecting both the Eastern and Western worlds. Concurrently, Islam had gained prominence as the primary religion in the Malay world adopted, specifically with Parameswara's conversion to Islam in 1403 C.E., followed by his subjects. Malacca has solid diplomatic relationships with other Islamic territories as a sovereign kingdom with protection from the Ottoman Empire (Azmi et al. 2016, p. 15). The presence of Islam denotes a shift in this region based on civilisation- and religious-oriented advancements (Daud 2011, p. 105). Despite being the main religion of the Malacca Sultanate (1400–1511 C.E.), Islam did not prevent diplomatic relations with other kingdoms, such as Ryukyu in China, Majapahit in India, and Mamluk in Persia (Hasanuddin Yusof 2020, p. 101).

Notably, this relation includes marriage between the Chinese princess from the Ming Empire and the Malay ruler apart from diplomatic and economic aspects (Ramli and Awang 2018, p. 171; Yuanzhi 2001, p. 184). The reasons underpinning this alliance with China, a powerful authority in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Africa in the 15th century, are understandable as Melaka (a relatively small empire) strived to deter invasion threats from Siam (Yuanzhi 2001, p. 184). Some of the Chinese diplomats, including Admiral Zheng He and his interpreter, Ma Huan arrived with Muslims (Ma 2005, p. 95). Such interactions resulted in a pluralistic society and assimilation into the Malay socio-cultural context where Buddhists retained the religious beliefs originating from the Chinese community (Mat and Sulaiman 2007). The glory of the Melaka Malay Sultanate empire, which lasted for 111 years, was deposed by a series of colonisation and shifts in the Southeast Asian cosmopolitan landscape (Aljunied 2017, p. 136), specifically the Malay Archipelago. Based on Ghani and

Awang (2017, p. 74), the established relations and interactions between the Malay society and other counterparts occurred naturally without coercion or force, thus enabling them to acknowledge their diversity through inclusiveness and tolerance. As Islam is a global religion, intercultural theology was conveyed to indigenous people and traders through Muslims' *da'wah* activities during the early period.

4. 'Unattached' Encounter in the Colonisation Period

The Portuguese (1511–1641), who were motivated to conquer Melaka and monopolise its port trades for several reasons (the fabled priest-king Prester John's pursuit of wealth, control of Asian spice trade routes, and anti-Muslim crusading sentiments) were the first of a long line of Western colonialists (Daniels 2005, p. 18). During this period, the relation proved ambiguous given the lack of a religious identity that represented both ethnicities. The Portuguese, who were more inclined toward the Indian–Hindu community discouraged Chinese migrants from venturing to Melaka by imposing higher taxes on their goods (Daniels 2005, p. 18). Some of the Malays who avoided the colonised port were considered 'pirates' following their resistance against the Portuguese. Meanwhile, the Dutch successfully deterred the Portuguese from entering the Cape of Good Hope and the East Indies in 1602. Despite the multitude of wealthy Indian traders who fled Melaka with their profitable trade networks, Melaka reflected a notable Indian presence under the Dutch (1641–1824) occupation (Daniels 2005, p. 20).

The Chinese population in Melaka grew significantly during the Dutch period in contrast to their decreasing Indian counterpart. The United East Indies Company promptly dispatched Chinese labourers from Batavia upon conquering Melaka to rebuild the vegetable fields that were destroyed during the Siege of Melaka. The Chinese from the southern provinces of Fukien, Kwangtung, and Kwansi fled from the turmoil in China following the Manchu destruction of the Ming dynasty (Daniels 2005, p. 20; Gabriel 2014, p. 1212; Wang 2012, p. xxvii). The numerous forms of Chinese folk religions and the three religious teachings (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) characterised the dominant religions in the southern provinces apart from the Ming dynasty. Some of these Chinese migrants, who arrived in Melaka from Southeast Asia and China to seek a better life, worked with Dutch officials and assimilated with the older Chinese community in Melaka. This assimilation produced the 'Straits-born Chinese' or Baba (male) and Nyonya (female). Some of the individuals acculturated with the Malay and Javanese populations while the newcomers adopted various assimilated patterns and married 'local' or 'Malay' women from the peninsula and archipelago (Daniels 2005, p. 20).

Chinese migrants began spatially and occupationally expanding to economic areas previously controlled by Malays owing to their growing community. Chinese people, primarily traders and shopkeepers, began engaging in new occupations: miners and planters. Situated on the outskirts of the colonial town and overseen by Dutch-appointed officials, their villages (known as *Kapitan Cina*) were near temples similar to the Indian community. As the oldest Taoist–Confucianist–Buddhist temple in Melaka, *Cheng Hoon Teng* was founded in 1645 by Lei Wee King, the second *Kapitan Cina*, who also purchased the Bukit China Cemetery as a gift to the Chinese population (Daniels 2005, p. 20). Ethnicity orientations occurred minimally due to segregation. In 1795, the Dutch lost control of Melaka to the British, who ruled the region until 1931. A massive influx of migrants, primarily Chinese and Indians, resulted in one of the 'classic' multiracial communities. The Chinese population in Melaka increased from 4000 to 85,342 between 1827 and 1931, which accounted for almost 40% of the overall population. Most of the Chinese migrants worked on tapioca plantations and tin mines controlled by British and Chinese companies. Various Chinese-owned pepper, gambier, and tapioca plantations in Melaka were organised into dialect organisations or *kongsi*. Furthermore, Chinese merchants and shopkeepers began assuming middleman roles in colonial distribution networks (Daniels 2005, p. 22).

The growth of the Buddhist community partially resulted from the arrival of Chinese immigrants from South and Southeast Asia in the 19th century after the formation of

the Straits Settlements (1826–1901). The British coerced them to work as traders, miners, and plantation labourers in the economic sector (Ooi 2013, p. 22; Hoffstaedter 2009, p. 122). Parallel to Pek Koon (1996, p. 501), most Chinese immigrant communities comprised of the Han people with some adhering to Chinese religious traditions (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism) and others complying with those of Christianity. The arrival of immigrant communities to Malaya thus increased the Buddhist population. The first wave encompassed the Theravada Buddhist community from South and Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka with Buddhist traditions that varied from those in Malaysia. This difference could be observed in the Buddhist temple architecture designs existing in Malaysia manifested by various traditions and communities (Ooi 2013, p. 36).

The second wave encompassed the Mahayana Buddhist community from China. The Buddhists from this tradition were more proactive in the presence of monks from China (Ooi 2013, p. 36) to navigate the religious rituals of birth and death. In adapting a novel avenue, wealthy the Straits-born Chinese bought terrace houses on Heeren and Jonker Streets, two historic Dutch streets in town, while less-wealthier counterparts lived in houses and over shop lots. The concentration of the Chinese population in urban areas with close proximity to their livelihood became a dominant residential pattern across the Straits Settlements and the better part of Malaya. Chinese migrants eventually surpassed the Straits-born Chinese in terms of economics and prestige despite their business success. Newcomers with minimal cultural assimilation to the Malay culture and much exposure to the British culture (English- rather than Malay-speaking) gained more reputation. Dialect organisations or *kongsi*, clan associations, and secret societies were subsequently formed by Chinese migrants to sustain group cohesion and serve the formed Chinese interests (Daniels 2005, p. 22).

The British colonialists exploited Malays, who were described as clever and energetic despite being unreliable, uncivilised, and unsophisticated, as food producers, farmers, and fishermen. Although certain Malay rulers' children were admitted to English schools for absorption into the colonial administration, the Malays were primarily excluded from English education. Meanwhile, the Chinese were stereotyped as hardworking and inventive individuals serving as vicious, immoral, and wicked middleman traders, tax collectors, and competitor entrepreneurs. The Chinese (and Indians) attended English schools more than the Malays (who attended Malay medium and Islamic schools) in addition to Chinese- and Indian-language medium schools (Daniels 2005, p. 23). Such integrations and relations proved limited during this phase following the segregation policy implemented by British colonialists from economic, social, and educational perspectives where Muslims represented the Malays and Buddhists represented the Chinese, (Ghani and Awang 2017, p. 74; Mat and Sulaiman 2007). Hence, it was deemed challenging to identify significant Buddhist-Muslim relations owing to ethnocentrism. Religious identity was insufficiently strong enough to represent both communities compared to ethnicity.

5. Relationship in the Post-Independence Period

Malaya, which achieved independence in 1957, led to the formation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963 for a new political, social, and economic landscape in the country. Malaysian social classes currently meet on a bigger scale and engage in places beyond the marketplace compared to past periods, which preserved the 'racially' segregated Malaya society despite discourses and institutionalised practices. Religious identity among the community was low in this phase following modernity-oriented influences. Individuals' lifestyles resembled that of Westerners. For example, the Malay elite consumed alcohol and engaged in public singing and dancing. Malay women were comfortable wearing tight and revealing blouses, exposing parts of their body and hair, or experimenting with western attire (Abbott and Gregorios-Pippas 2010, p. 136). Most people emphasised social development, particularly in terms of economic and communal life. Mainstream political parties, such as UMNO, MCA, and MIC represented Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities, respectively. Interfaith relation was not prioritised at the time despite the

establishment of interfaith movements, such as the Pure Life Society. Nevertheless, the movement was geared towards charitable activities by providing premises for homeless individuals following the war. In this phase, the practice of dialogues did not significantly impact society following the lack of emphasis among the general public.

The Pure Life Society organised special meetings among religious leaders and society in Kuala Lumpur in June 1956, which led to the establishment of the Malayan Council for Interfaith Cooperation encompassing Dr Muhammad A Rauf, Dr Ooi Keng Seng, Rev. Gurney Fox, Sardar Ganga Singh, Sir Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Tan Sri Khir Johari, Dato' E. E. C. Thuraisingham, and Mr R. Braddel Ramani. The Muslims and Buddhists were palpably concerned with the exerted efforts. The council formed the Malaysian Inter-Religious Organisation (MIRO) in 1963 (Ramli and Awang 2018, p. 176) '*to promote mutual understanding and cooperation among all religions*' (Basri 2019, p. 25). Notwithstanding, no significant interfaith programme is yet to be organised. The prevailing sentiment reflects that "the Malay is first of all a Malay, then Muslim and then a Malayan; and the Chinese first of all a Chinese then a Buddhist or Christian if he is religious and then possibly a Malayan ... " as ethnic-bound identities proved omnipotent. Consequently, the UMNO-Malay-dominated nation favoured a largely Malay-defined common nationality over a multiracial Malayan nationalism following the May 1969 ethnic riots (Guan and Suryadinata 2011, p. xvi). This incident also instigated the dissolution of MIRO, whose role was taken over by the government and rebranded as the National Unity Body chaired by V.T Sambanthan, a religious leader in Malaysia (Basri 2019, p. 25). It was deemed challenging to unite people through ethnicity given its bias toward superiority. Thus, the government initiated an integration policy with religious identity as its core entity to collectively develop the nation from political, economic, educational, and social aspects. For example, *Rukun Negara* (national ideology) was established in 1970 to acknowledge the co-existence of the 'belief-in-God' doctrine regardless of religious and traditional backgrounds (Hoffstaedter 2009, p. 128).

6. Relationship in the Post-Islamisation Period

National political and social reformation emerged with the rise of the Islamic movement in the late 1980s following the Arab–Israeli war (1967), Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan (1979), and Islamic Revolution of Iran (1979) (Norsharil Saat 2014, p. 53). The aforementioned events affected Malaysia through Islamic movement-mobilised initiatives, such as the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) (Jamaat Tabligh), and Arqam (Ramli and Awang 2018, p. 177; Hamid 2000, p. 32; Norsharil Saat 2014, p. 53). Inspired by the Islamic wave, this movement actively promoted *da'wah* in society by emphasising the aspiration of Islamisation (economically, socially, educationally, politically, and culturally) in line with the concept of Islam as a way of life (*Islām hua al-Dīn*). The Islamisation agenda created a novel paradigm in the Malaysian Muslim community by substituting Western traditions with Islamic practices. Islamic movements and parties interacted with one another while preserving ethnic relations. For example, PAS established the Chinese Consultative Council (CCC) in 1985, whereas ABIM established Islamic Outreach—ABIM (IOA) in 1987 to engage with non-Muslim societies (including the Chinese) instead of engaging with interfaith programmes. The government supported this initiative by applying Islamic values in government administrations. The necessity to appreciate and apply Islamic values in life structured a novel paradigm in the Malaysian Muslim community. Despite garnering much popularity among the Muslim community, this development indirectly invoked a lawsuit against the government for favouring the Muslim majority. The government also applied Islamic values to government administrations in recognising the overwhelming response of Muslim community members to the universal practice of Islam (Barr and Govindasamy 2010; Liow 2011, p. 381; Norsharil Saat 2014, p. 53). The implications of Islamisation on the non-Muslim community were initially less significant given its emphasis on the majority population: Malay Muslims. Regardless, the target was widened at one point by engaging non-Muslim communities on a social

scale. For example, the government organised a Qur'an recitation competition broadcast on national television. Muslim organisations have also expanded Islamic preaching activities focusing on Muslim understanding to include non-Muslims (Ramli et al. 2020a, p. 94).

Religious activities have become routine and fashionable in Islamic practices following the advent of Islam on a national scale and the prioritisation of religious issues by politicians and relevant authorities. The government continues subsidising the construction of mosques, providing Islamic education subjects to Muslim students from elementary school to higher education, and implementing Islamic banking and insurance systems. Regarding consumption, halal certification was made compulsory for all Muslim and non-Muslim restaurant owners and products with Muslim consumers (Ramli et al. 2020a, p. 95). This mandate resulted in a cultural backlash that depicts the marginalisation of non-Muslim elements within the Malay culture.

7. Relationships in Modern Malaysia

The Muslim-Buddhist relations in Malaysia significantly manifest religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Concerning religion, the 2020 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020), which estimated the population at 32.4 million citizens, recorded Islam as the most widely-professed religion at 63.5%, followed by Buddhism (18.7%), Christianity (9.1%), Hinduism (6.1%), other religions (0.9%), and no or unknown religions (1.8%). Based on the official statistics (if held constant), Islam accounted for 2.2% of the current national population while other religions (Buddhism) decreased to 1.1%. Regarding ethnicity, the *Bumiputera* composition (indigenous people or literally translated as 'son of the soil') rose 2.0% points to a record 69.4% in 2020 compared to 67.4% in 2010. Nevertheless, the Chinese and Indian population declined to 23.2% (2010: 24.5%) and 6.7% (2010: 7.3%), respectively, while other counterparts decreased from 0.3% to 0.7%. Other ethnic groups with distinctive languages, cultures, and religious beliefs, such as Indonesians, Rohingyas, Pakistanis, Thais, Sinhalese, Filipinos, and Eurasians were also identified. Ethnic groupings were divided along religious lines with most Malays, Hindus, and Chinese being Muslims, Indians, and Buddhists (with a rapidly-growing Christian minority), respectively (Hoffstaedter 2009, p. 122). Identity definitions and definers in Malaysia are intricate and sensitive topics given the multitude of dichotomies and identities striving for supremacy and inclusion or exclusion from institutional identities. Basic cultural or racial denominators insufficiently disclose the (i) complicated edges and negotiations of identification both within and on the margins of these identity markers and the (ii) experience plane of identity: being Muslim or otherwise. Malaysian citizens are assigned to one of four identify groups by the Malaysian government. The Malay identity is the most protected and battled-over entity. The state strives to preserve the Malay identity limits and instill them in discourses. The remaining ethnic groupings (Chinese, Indian, and Others) are nonetheless significant identities despite being less politicised. As a nation-state, Malaysia continues to envision diversity within its constituent, power sharing, and political factions based on ethnicity rather than a single nation (Hoffstaedter 2009, p. 123).

The Muslim-Buddhist relations in Malaysia could be traced to the early initiation of a formal dialogue in discussing the globalisation-induced challenges encountered by Asian Muslim and Buddhist communities in 1999 (Awang et al. 2021, p. 3). Regardless, not many individuals were interested in theological exchanges following sensitive issues. This initiative eventually received acceptance from the religious community to conserve social cohesion and mutual understanding through interfaith associations and dialogue institutions that promote *da'wah* through interactions. For example, the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), a non-profit organisation (NGO) established in 1994, provided a support system to converts (Chinese Muslims) and encouraged interactions between Chinese Buddhists and Chinese Christians. Likewise, the Hidayah Centre was established in 2005 to provide a dialogue-based platform for Malaysian religious and ethnic communities. The Centre for Civilizational Dialogue, a dialogue institution established in 1996, fundamentally mediates a useful mechanism to discourse the issues arising from

inevitable encounters between nations, ethnic groups, faith systems, ideologies, world-views, and cultures. A similar approach was adopted by the Chinese Buddhist association through the Malaysian Buddhist Association, Sokka Gakkai Malaysia, and Buddhist NGOs (Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia) by engaging with the Muslim community in several interfaith programmes. For a Muslim, the causal factor of this relation is undeniably motivated by intercultural theology under the Islamic doctrine (Ramli and Awang 2016). Buddhism does not advocate propagation toward the Muslim community, which is forbidden by Article 12 of the Constitution. As such, the focus is to strengthen the Buddhist brotherhood apart from improving one's understanding of the doctrine and rituals as a good follower.

8. Results and Discussion

The correlation between social and cultural developments and the desirability of changes in the theological enterprise is rendered complex. Social developments merely imply the appropriate development of academic theology to remain environmentally relevant. This advancement is exemplified in the intercultural Muslim-Buddhist or Malay–Chinese theology. Religious and cultural developments exposed Islamic and Buddhist theological thoughts to regional diversity, thus confirming the catalysation of intercultural theology with an inherent religious identity–ethnicity integration. This occurrence demonstrates a crude yet effective division of intercultural theology into encounters with other religions, theologies, and ethnicities.

8.1. Intercultural Theology within Religious Identity

Numerous examples of intercultural theology are identified in a common institutional framework with religious identity as the primary theological aspect (Obuse 2014, p. 76; Berzin 2008; Ramli et al. 2020c; Yusuf 2020; Tabrizi 2012; Vidyarthi 2020). A rare example is identified in the Muslim-Buddhist relation from the seventh to 10th century when Muslims and Buddhists engaged in diplomacy, social-cultural exchanges, and theological dialogues (Awang et al. 2022, p. 142), which continued post-Islamisation through *da'wah* initiatives. The *da'wah* principle in Islam does not merely serve to convert others but verbally delivers valuable Islamic messages through good deeds. The initiative was supported by the identification of common Islamic and Buddhist grounds among religious scholars. For example, Reza Shah-Kazemi (2010), the Muslim theologian, outlines three fundamental parts: dialogue, theology, and spirituality. Despite being a non-theistic religion (Obuse 2015, p. 409), Buddhism could theologially consider the following aspects similar to Islam: (i) belief in the Ultimate Truth (*Al-Haqq*) who is also Absolutely One, Absolute Reality, and the Source of Grace and Guidance to human beings; (ii) the belief that each soul is accountable to a principle of justice in the Hereafter, which is rooted in the very nature of Absolute Reality; (iii) belief in the categorical moral imperative of being compassionate and merciful to all, if not in the central cosmogonic and eschatological functions of mercy (in other words, the world was created through Mercy and one is saved and delivered through Mercy); (iv) the belief that human beings are capable of supra-rational knowledge as a source salvation in the Hereafter and enlightenment in reality; (v) belief in the possibility of a sanctified state for human beings with the conviction that all should aspire to this state of sanctity; (vi) belief in the efficacy and necessity of spiritual practice through fervent prayer, contemplative meditation, or methodic invocation; (vii) belief in the need of detachment from the world, the ego, and its passionate desires (Reza Shah-Kazemi 2010). Theological exchange includes identifying primary symbols in religious scriptures, such as recognising Buddha as the 'unmentioned' prophet and the bodhi tree as fig tree in the Quran beyond the common ground in the fundamental religious doctrine (Ramli et al. 2020c, p.56).

8.2. Intercultural Theology within Ethnic Identity

The Muslim-Buddhist relations in Malaysia were previously expanded to four phases. The first phase entails the early development of Muslim and Buddhist societies in the

Srivijaya and Melaka kingdoms. Muslims were represented by various communities worldwide (Arabs, Indians, Persians, and Chinese) at the time while Buddhists originated from India and China. Both religions significantly impacted specific social groups, such as rulers and the elites. The indigenous people and Malays were initially uninterested in both religions as they retained belief systems based on their traditions. Buddhism was primarily embraced by rulers in early kingdoms, such as Srivijaya. The religion was successfully embraced by the people post-separation of Islam during the reign of the ruler of Melaka. Specific religious elements were integrated into the culture. The relationship revolved around tradition and ethnicity apart from economic, social, and diplomatic aspects. The second phase occurred minimally during colonisation as Malay Muslims were dispersed across certain areas to deter resistance. The colonialists brought in more Chinese immigrants, most of whom followed Chinese folk religions, such as Buddhism. The people were segregated economically, socially, and educationally based on the 'divide and conquer' plan. The relationship orientation occurred in the form of ethnicity in phase three post-independence. A diverse society necessitates optimal co-existence for national development. Led by the Malay elite, the government strived to strengthen social cohesion with a nationalist agenda. The non-Malays (including the Chinese) were also involved in national governance, specifically post-election, which resulted in the victorious coalition of Malay, Chinese, and Indian parties under the Alliance Party. The level of religious awareness was low among most elites following the strong influence of secularisation owing to colonisation and ethnocentrism. Contrarily, some Muslim and Buddhist groups focused on promoting religious values in their community. In this vein, the Malay–Chinese interaction occurs through ethnicity and cultural orientations. Religious identity gained more prominence with government support and Islamic awareness among community members in the fourth phase, specifically in the post-Islamisation period. This phenomenon led to the emergence of a religious association to improve religious values and optimal engagement with others.

8.3. Issues in Relation

The issues underpinning Muslim–Buddhist relations in Malaysia could be divided into two orientations: ethnicity and religion. Muslims and Buddhists reflect major ethnicities (Malays and Chinese), Indians and Chinese constitute Muslim minorities, and Indians, Sinhalese, and Siamese encompass Buddhist minorities. Both Malays and Chinese fought for their rights as Malaysians with ethnicity as the primary orientation. The Malays sought to preserve their rights as aboriginals, particularly the 'special position' provided in Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution: quota reservation for *Bumiputras*. The non-Malays, including the Chinese minority, argued that such provision creates a racial distinction between Malaysians from different ethnic backgrounds, thus leading to ethnocentrism through affirmative action policies that solely benefit *Bumiputras* as the majority population. The Chinese strived to defend their rights based on the available provisions as a minority, specifically in political, social, economic, educational, and religious contexts.

Concerns about religious identity were raised post-Islamisation following the increasing awareness of religious identity and practice among Muslims. Thus, Islamic values were manifested in every life aspect, including interfaith encounters. Some were eager to propound Islamic teachings to non-Muslims rather than engage in social relations to convert the Chinese to Islam. Meanwhile, Buddhists' level of religious awareness, specifically among youths, remained low as religious teachings were restricted to ritual practices. Much effort was exerted by Buddhist organisations, such as the Buddhist Missionary Society (BMS), Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia (YBAM), and Malaysian Buddhist Association (MBA) to strengthen their religious identity, values, and education among Buddhists in the Chinese community. Regarding Islamisation, Buddhists are generally less inclined to interfere in Muslims' political and religious matters (Ooi 2014, p. 326) as long as they are left to their pursuits (Abdullah 2003, p. 126), such as religion, society, economy, and education (Choong 2010, p. xii). Nevertheless, issues involving the conservation of religious practices

and teachings, such as Islamic state matters, religious freedom, religious conversion, Islamic law amendment, and funerals rights have encouraged them to collectively protest with other religious minority groups. Overall, religious issues pertaining to Muslim-Buddhist relations could be associated with the Malay-Chinese counterpart and vice versa. Some contended that the conflation of ethnicity and religion and strained Malay-Chinese ethnic relations in Malaysia proved detrimental for Chinese Muslims who intend to preserve their 'Chineseness' and faith separately (Guan and Suryadinata 2011, p. xii). Regardless, ethnicity results in more complexities compared to religious intricacies. Chinese Muslims do not encounter many issues when assimilating with local Malay Muslims. Such individuals could simultaneously retain their 'Chineseness' through cultural preservation and uphold their Islamic identity by avoiding what contradicts the fundamentals of their Islamic faith (Mahmud et al. 2020, p. x). Following Ma (2005, p. 106), In current times, Chinese Muslims demonstrate better relations with the Malays and Chinese (regardless of their faith) following an adequate level of understanding, tolerance, and acceptance. Better-educated and well-travelled Muslims and Buddhists reflect an acceptance of individuals from both communities at multiple levels: parents, siblings, friends, and bosses. Better-educated Muslims and Buddhists who belong to the higher echelons of society and hold respectable organisational positions are more socially accepted than counterparts who lack the aforementioned attributes. Such social differences would challenge Chinese Buddhists and other minority groups to preserve their religious identity.

9. Materials and Methods

This qualitative study performed content and thematic analysis with available documents or archives to internalise Muslim-Buddhist relations from an ethnoreligious viewpoint. In addition, discourse analysis was also applied. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use (Frey 2022, p. 278). Such documents constituted widely-distributed narrative materials derived from several sources: articles, books, religious scripture, and archives. Following the broad range of document and archival sources, the study method aimed to analyse the materials historically by dividing the text into several phases, while discourse analysis emphasises how language is used in a hermeneutic and phenomenological way to create meaning. Typically, this approach includes an analytical process of dissecting and analysing language use as well as the social context of language usage. Part of the discourse analysis approach, socio-political, is the focus of the article because it is most commonly used within the social and human sciences (Frey 2022, p. 448). The application of both analysis types proved adequate to address the following questions: (i) When did the relation begin? (ii) What is relation type? and (iii) What is the issue emerging from the relation? Secondary sources on relations, religious identity, religious conflicts, and ideas were utilised and reviewed in this study to promote social cohesion among religious societies, specifically between Muslims and Buddhists. The materials were then transferred into the ATLAS.ti[®] programme for coding and identification of possible themes. The research questions were used to build preliminary codes from the literature. The analysis began with the process of reading each material until the authors could make sense of each word and sentence. These analyses also resulted in the creation of new codes. The relationship and significance of the codes were determined. Then the axial coding was produced. In order to establish appropriate themes, several codes were merged and reorganised.

10. Conclusions

As ethnic identity has proven pivotal to Buddhism and Islam in Malaysia, it is erroneous to assume Islam as a religion exclusively for Malays and Buddhism for the Chinese. The term 'Muslim' does not imply Malays except on constitutional grounds. Although Malays do not reflect any identification other than their affiliation with Islam, some Chinese identify as Muslims. Buddhism generally represents the Chinese majority in urban areas

and minority groups (Sinhalese and Siamese) in rural counterparts. From a typographical perspective, Islam, as a universal phenomenon, does not merely constitute the religion of several regions. In describing Islam as a global religion, Malay Muslims should not be prioritised over Chinese Muslims. Likewise, Malay Muslims' theology should not be favoured over that of Chinese Muslims. The significance lies in perceiving the intercultural theology derived from collective works between (i) Malay and Chinese Muslims and (ii) Muslims and Buddhists. Concerns about multiculturalism, hospitality, otherness, marginality, majority, and liberation should be seriously regarded in the three-fold context of religious institutions, academies, and society. The intercultural theology established through theological, scriptural, and cultural exchanges proves necessary given the irrelevance of a monolithic notion of intracultural theology (established within a single stream of dominant tradition) and cross-cultural theology (developed by crossing different cultures without interactions) amidst a multicultural world. Conclusively, the future of Muslim-Buddhist harmony which is generally represented by Muslim Malay and Chinese Buddhism depends on collaborative interactions regardless of identity and culture coupled with the power of God's cosmic workings.

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