Conceptualizing Muslim and Non-Muslim Social Interaction in Malaysia Based on the Maqasid Shariah Framework

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ABSTRACT

In human life, diversity in background, ethnicity, and religion is an unavoidable reality. As social beings, humans naturally enjoy associating and interacting with others to foster mutual understanding and appreciation of differences. Social interaction occurs when individuals engage with other individuals or groups in various aspects of daily life. For Muslims, any form of relationship with non-Muslim communities must take into account religious boundaries. In this regard, social interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims should be guided by Islamic principles based on the *maqasid al-shariah*, namely the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Therefore, this study seeks to examine how the principles of *maqasid al-shariah* can serve as a framework or guideline for shaping social relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. This study adopts a qualitative approach by reviewing articles and writings that discuss religious issues and interfaith relations. The findings indicate that Islamic teachings establish specific boundaries for interactions with nonMuslims, particularly in matters involving their religious celebrations or rituals. However, there are views suggesting that a clear guideline should be developed to help Muslims understand the permissible limits of interaction with non-Muslims, especially in relation to cultural and festive celebrations. This study is significant as it provides a preliminary understanding and guidance for Muslims to maintain harmonious interreligious relations without compromising their Islamic principles and faith (*aqidah*).

Keywords: Framework, Social Interaction, Muslim, Non-Muslim, *Maqasid al-Shariah*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a unique country as it comprises people of various ethnicities, religions, and cultures. This diversity makes Malaysia rich in traditions and values that reflect the identity of its pluralistic society. However, at the same time, such diversity can also pose challenges, especially when it involves issues related to religion and belief (Khalli et al., 2022). Social interaction is an important aspect of human life as it shapes how individuals connect and adapt to others. Factors such as family and living environment greatly influence a person's social development. In the context of Malaysian society, social relations among different ethnic and religious groups can lead to two contrasting outcomes either fostering peace or creating conflict if not properly managed (Min & Jianjun, 2024).

Efforts to preserve interreligious and interracial harmony must be carried out conscientiously by all parties, regardless of background. Therefore, religious leaders, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the general public must play a collective role in nurturing the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and understanding among one another. This approach is essential to ensure that national unity remains strong and that society continues to live in peace and harmony (Meerangani et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

Salihah Ali et al. (2021) explain that much confusion and debate have arisen among the Muslim community in Malaysia when some Muslims participate in non-Islamic festivals and cultural celebrations. Within the Muslim community, there are individuals involved in activities that may affect their faith (ʿaqīdah), such as participating in religious ceremonies, singing hymns of other religions, or delivering greetings that glorify non-Islamic religious festivals. For example, there was a case where students from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) were reported to have participated in cleaning a Hindu temple an act that was perceived as potentially leading to confusion and the weakening of Islamic faith (Mohd Husni, 2022).

According to the Perlis State Mufti Department (2019), Muslims are prohibited from taking part in any nonIslamic religious rituals because such activities are directly related to the worship practices of other religions. Similarly, the Johor State Government has issued a *fatwa* forbidding Muslims from participating in any nonMuslim religious festivals. However, other scholars such as Mohd Rus and Zulfaqar (2017) argue that attending festive events without any religious elements is permissible as long as it does not compromise Islamic faith.

This issue does not only occur among born Muslims but also among *muallaf* (new converts to Islam). They often find it difficult to distinguish between cultural practices that are permissible and religious rituals that are prohibited, especially when invited to family celebrations such as Christmas, Thaipusam, Chinese New Year, or the Ponggal Festival (Salihah Ali et al., 2021). According to Nur Farhana and Nur Syarihah (2020), such situations sometimes lead to tension and disharmony between Muslims and non-Muslims. For instance, converts to Islam often face emotional pressure when they abandon their former religious or cultural festivities after embracing Islam. Some are ostracized or viewed negatively by their families, who perceive them as disrespecting ancestral traditions.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. The harmony that has long existed depends on mutual respect among various ethnic and religious communities. However, for Muslims, a clear understanding of the boundaries of faith (ʿaqīdah) is crucial to ensure that interreligious relations are maintained without compromising religious principles. Therefore, it is essential to examine the role of *maqasid al-shariah* in guiding Muslim–non-Muslim relations in Malaysia so that the sensitivities of the Muslim community are preserved while strengthening interreligious unity and harmony.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion of the literature review covers the following topics: ethnic and religious diversity in Malaysia, the concept of social interaction, social interaction in Islamic teachings, religious controversies between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia, the role of *maqasid syariah*, parameters of Muslim–non-Muslim social interaction, and the framework of Muslim–non-Muslim social interaction.

Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Malaysia

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2024), the country's total population as of May 2024 was estimated at 33.2 million people. Generally, the Malaysian population can be divided into two main groups namely Muslims and non-Muslims. The Muslim group comprises those born into Islam, such as the Malays, Melanau, and Indian Muslims, as well as those who have converted to Islam from other religions. Meanwhile, the non-Muslim group consists of individuals who adhere to other faiths, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, traditional Chinese religions, and a small number who have no religious affiliation (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024).

In terms of percentage, Muslims make up about 61.34% of Malaysia's total population. The remaining population comprises Buddhists (19.8%), Christians (9.2%), Hindus (6.3%), followers of Confucianism, Taoism, and traditional Chinese religions (1.3%), while approximately 2.1% fall under other or unspecified categories

(Nisar Mohammad, 2020). This clearly indicates that Malaysia is a pluralistic nation with a multi-religious and multicultural population composition.

Each ethnic group in Malaysia possesses its own distinct identity and traditions, forming part of the nation's cultural heritage. For instance, the Malay community uses the Malay language as the primary medium of communication and practices Islam as a way of life. The Chinese community, on the other hand, predominantly uses Mandarin or various dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, and Teochew, while embracing Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese beliefs. The Indian community generally speaks Tamil and practices Hinduism as its main religion. In Sabah and Sarawak, the *bumiputera* groups such as the Kadazan-Dusun, Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, and Murut each have their own languages and customs. A large proportion of them are Christians, while others are Muslims or still adhere to indigenous beliefs (Azarudin, 2015).

The ethnic and religious diversity in Malaysia not only reflects the richness of its cultural and migratory history but also underscores the importance of tolerance, understanding, and interfaith cooperation in maintaining social harmony. In a pluralistic society like Malaysia, the ability to respect and appreciate the beliefs of others serves as a fundamental basis for ensuring stability and collective well-being (Sintang, 2022). Hence, interreligious and intercultural harmony is not only a symbol of national strength but also reflects the maturity of Malaysians in managing diversity ethically and respectfully.

Social Interaction

By nature, human beings have an inherent desire to interact and cooperate with one another in daily life (Asrul, 2013). Interaction refers to the relationship that occurs between individuals, between an individual and a group, or between groups. Such interaction only takes place when there is communication and social connection, whether face-to-face or indirectly (Batinah et al., 2022). There are three key elements necessary for effective interaction the source of information, the mode of communication, and the recipient of the message (Efendi, 2024).

Through social interaction, various forms of cooperation and adaptation can emerge, such as accommodation, assimilation, and acculturation. However, interaction may also lead to conflict. Therefore, negative attitudes such as ethnocentrism, cultural misunderstanding, stereotyping, and prejudice should be avoided to ensure that social relations are not disrupted. The negotiation process that takes place in social interaction functions to reduce disagreement and prevent conflict between parties with differing views or values (Asrul, 2013).

In the Malaysian context, social interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims possesses distinctive characteristics compared to other countries. Relations between these two groups are built upon the principles of the Federal Constitution and the social contract, which form the foundation of harmony in Malaysia's plural society (Khairul Azhar et al., 2020). Overall, the success of interethnic relations in Malaysia depends largely on how well people understand and respect cultural and religious differences. By promoting open dialogue and tolerance, the society can maintain harmony and prevent conflict within the diversity that serves as the nation's greatest strength.

Islam and Social Interaction

Allah says in *Surah al-Hujurat* (49:13):

"O mankind! Indeed, We have created you from a male and a female, and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another."

Based on this verse, Allah created humankind from a single origin and allowed them to develop into various nations and tribes with the purpose of mutual acquaintance (*ta'āruf*). This process of getting to know one another occurs through socialization, which takes place via interaction. Allah forbids human beings from boasting of

their lineage or wealth and from belittling others, as the most honourable person in His sight is the one who is most pious (*muttaqī*) (Al-Maraghi, 1993). From this perspective, it can be understood that social interaction in human life must involve at least two actors or more, have a clear objective, occur through reciprocal relations, and involve direct or indirect social contact.

Specifically, Islam introduces several principles to guide social relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, such as respecting the principle of religious freedom (see *al-Baqarah*: 256), avoiding all forms of extremism, chauvinism, and fanaticism, and engaging in interaction with wisdom (*bi al-hikmah*). In line with this, Khairul Azhar et al. (2020) further elaborate that Muslim–non-Muslim interactions should avoid insulting other cultures or religions, uphold tolerance among believers to prevent conflict, preserve interreligious harmony, emphasize common values, and reflect the ethical teachings of Islam in interfaith relations.

Religious Controversies between Muslims and Non-Muslims in Malaysia

According to Siti Khatijah and Fadzli (2017), after Malaysia faced issues concerning citizenship and the social contract (1950–1960), language (1960–1970), and matters of quotas and urbanization (1970–1980), the country began to encounter religiously sensitive issues between 1980 and 1990. Conflicts and tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities during this period made religion one of the most delicate subjects in Malaysia's multi-religious context. Among the early issues raised were related to mosque activities and the call to prayer (*azan*), which some non-Muslims living near mosques or *suraus* found disturbing. In subsequent years (1990–2010), similar concerns were expressed by non-Muslim communities regarding the use of loudspeakers in mosques and *suraus*, particularly during religious lectures and sermons (Ab. Aziz et al., 2008).

Later, Zaid et al. (2014) found that between 2010 and 2020, several other issues emerged, including disputes over the custody of children of converts, cases of religious insult, conflicts over burial rights, debates over whether Malaysia is an Islamic or secular state, discussions about *hudud* laws, disputes over places of worship, the jurisdiction of civil and Shariah courts, religious conversion, the use of the word *Allah*, and the propagation of Islam among non-Muslims.

Additionally, there were other religion-related issues affecting Muslim–non-Muslim social relations in Malaysia, such as praying for non-Muslims, non-Muslims entering mosques, attending non-Muslim religious ceremonies, and wearing religious symbols of other faiths. Farhana and Nur Syahirah (2020) argue that the rise of these religiously sensitive issues has been one of the contributing factors to the decline of social harmony within society.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that religion-related issues have increasingly shaped Muslim–nonMuslim relations in Malaysia since the 1980s. The tensions began with matters concerning mosques and the *azan* and have since expanded into more complex disputes such as custody of children of converts, burial claims, and debates over Malaysia's identity as an Islamic or secular state. These issues continue to affect social harmony, with sensitivities surrounding religious symbols and practices potentially undermining intercommunity relations.

The Role of Maqasid Syariah in Interfaith Relations

Maqasid is the plural form of *maqsad* and *maqsid* (المقصد), derived from the Arabic word *qasada* (قصد), which means "to aim toward a goal." Meanwhile, *syariat* refers to the source or path established by Allah, encompassing matters of faith (*aqidah*), law, religion, and clear jurisprudential guidance (Muhammad Thahir, 2012).

Maqasid Syariah, or the objectives of Islamic law, is a concept in Islamic jurisprudence that emphasizes the fundamental purposes of Shariah to protect and promote human well-being. In the context of interfaith relations, Maqasid Syariah plays a critical role in ensuring harmony, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among different religious communities.

From the perspective of religious practice, Maqasid Syariah stresses the importance of safeguarding freedom of

religion and respecting each individual's beliefs. This means that every person has the right to choose and practice their faith without coercion or discrimination. In terms of protecting life, Islam discourages all forms of violence and promotes peace and safety for all people, regardless of their religion. Additionally, Islam values knowledge and freedom of thought as a means of promoting peaceful living. Therefore, interfaith dialogue should be conducted in a healthy, respectful manner to foster better understanding and tolerance.

Regarding lineage, Islam permits interfaith marriage only if the partner converts to Islam, while ensuring that the rights of children from the marriage are protected and that the family can live harmoniously despite religious and cultural differences. Concerning property, Islam promotes social justice and guarantees that non-Muslims can own and manage property without discrimination (Khadijah, 2020).

In conclusion, Maqasid Syariah supports peaceful and harmonious relationships among different religious communities. It requires Muslims to respect and protect the rights of individuals from other faiths, contributing to the creation of a just and peaceful society.

Parameters of Muslim–Non-Muslim Social Interaction in Malaysia

Malaysia's multicultural harmony is reflected through practices such as community cooperation (*gotongroyong*), mutual visits, and the celebration of festivals across ethnic groups. For instance, the Chinese community celebrates Chinese New Year, Chap Goh Meh, Wesak Day, and traditional performances such as lion and dragon dances. The Hindu Indian community celebrates Deepavali, Thaipusam, and the Ponggal Festival, while in Sabah and Sarawak, Christian communities celebrate not only Christmas but also Kaamatan and Gawai festivals. This spirit of unity is further highlighted when non-Muslims invite their Muslim friends, neighbours, and newly converted relatives (muallaf) to join in their cultural and festive celebrations (Mohd Rosli Saludin et al., 2023).

The Muslim community in Malaysia comes from diverse educational and religious backgrounds. Some are new converts to Islam who require proper guidance to deepen their understanding of the religion. At the same time, they need to maintain respectful ties with their original culture to avoid being perceived as isolating themselves from their former families or communities (Azarudin et al., 2023). However, due to limited religious knowledge, some Muslims may unknowingly engage in non-Muslim cultural or religious practices that could compromise their faith. The Qur'an, in Surah al-Kafirun, clearly instructs Muslims not to participate in the religious rituals of others (Yusof et al., 2013).

Islamic tolerance does not mean accepting or merging with the beliefs of other religions. Misunderstanding this concept has led some Muslims to take lightly their participation in non-Muslim religious or cultural festivities that contradict Islamic teachings and moral norms. Such actions include taking part in non-Muslim funeral rites, bowing to religious symbols, believing in religious superstitions or prophecies, and uttering statements that glorify other faiths (Abdul Halim & Unggun Tiara, 2019). These behaviours not only tarnish the image of Islam but also cause discomfort among other Muslims.

Differences in religious knowledge among Muslims in Malaysia have shaped various interpretations of interreligious and intercultural relations. In some cases, unreliable sources are used to justify certain actions. Several past studies have examined the sharing of festivals and cultural practices in Malaysia. For example, Cristina Andin et al. (2022) found in their study on Sabah festivals that festive celebrations can influence attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of interethnic tolerance. Rafidah et al. (2021) noted that Islam promotes harmony and tolerance among people, which is manifested through acts such as visiting during celebrations and respecting others' cultures. Meanwhile, Mohd Faqih and Zuliza (2021) identified three forms of interaction among new Muslim converts during Deepavali celebrations with their original families — some fully participated, some only made social visits, while others completely refrained from joining the celebration.

**Framework of Muslim–Non-Muslim Social Interaction**

Humans, as social beings, have various roles in life, one of which is social interaction with others, whether within a group or outside the immediate community. Social interaction is also dynamic, encompassing relationships

between individuals, between groups, or between individuals and groups simultaneously (Idrus, N. et al., 2023).

In this context, social interaction refers to the mutual influence between two parties between individual and individual, individual and group, and between Muslims and non-Muslims in order to achieve specific objectives. However, ambiguity arises when Muslims engage in practices outside their usual norms, especially concerning the celebration of non-Muslim festivals and cultural events.

Therefore, frameworks serve as guidelines for Muslims to participate in non-Muslim cultural and festive celebrations in a manner that does not lead them away from Islamic teachings and Shariah. Hasbim (2023) emphasizes that properly implementing practices in daily life — based on correct faith, Shariah, and ethics can strengthen the identity of a Muslim. It can be concluded that by following these established parameters, Muslim individuals can maintain their religious identity, particularly when engaging in social interactions and collaborations within a multi-religious community.

Figure 1: Significance of the Framework of Muslim & Non-Muslim Social Interaction
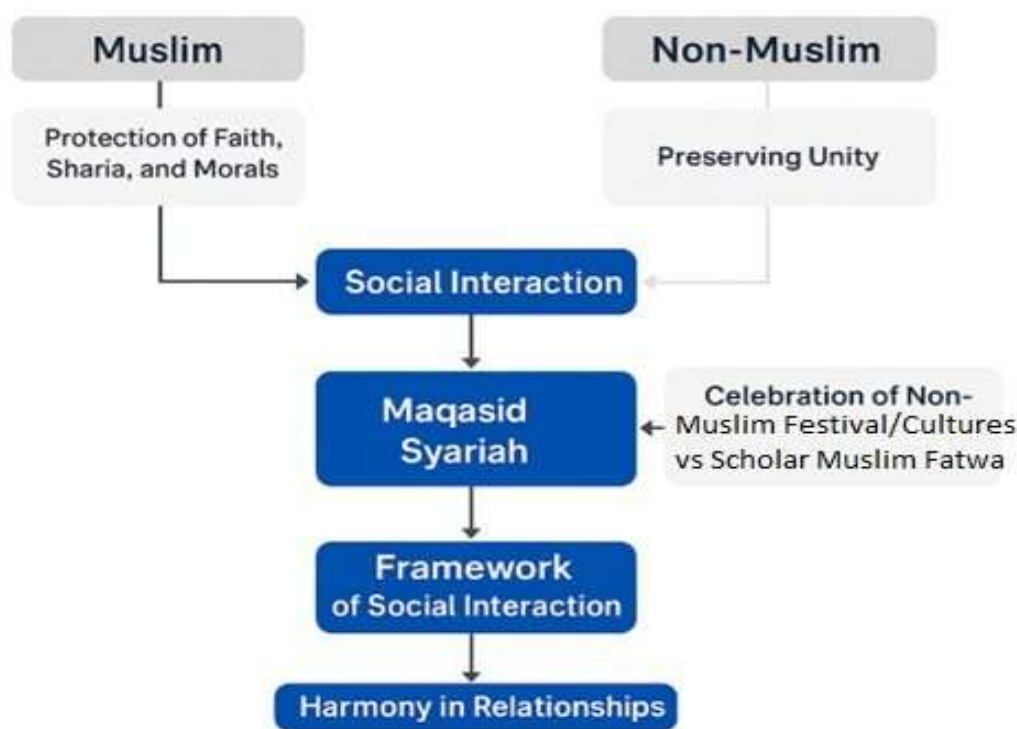
CONCLUSION

Festivals play an important role in strengthening unity in Malaysia. Citizens from diverse religious backgrounds have the opportunity to understand and respect the cultures and beliefs of other communities. Sharing festive foods and participating in traditional celebrations help to build stronger bonds between different groups. Participation in national and multi-ethnic celebrations also contributes to the formation of a unique and harmonious national identity.

However, caution is necessary for Muslims when celebrating non-Muslim festivals to ensure that they remain steadfast in their faith, adhere to religious guidance, avoid social conflict, preserve the unity of the Muslim community (*ummah*), and respect religious sensitivities.

The development of a framework for Muslim social interaction in celebrating non-Muslim festivals and cultural events in Malaysia provides guidance for Muslims to engage with others in accordance with Shariah. This framework not only safeguards the faith of Muslims but also helps maintain interethnic harmony through cross-

cultural and interfaith social activities. This effort is in line with the values of the Rukun Negara, particularly the principles of Courtesy and Morality and the Supremacy of the Constitution, which emphasize respect, tolerance, and unity among Malaysia's multiracial society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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