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Understanding and Practicing of Islamic Teachings among Siamese New Muslim in Kelantan, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Malaysia comprises various ethnics and races like Malays, Chinese, Indian, and also the other ethnics, including Siamese. On the Siamese, they are originally from Thailand and migrated to Kelantan, Malaysia, due to certain causes such as looking for job, acquiring knowledge, and also due to marriage bond. It is believed that the Siam community lives in Kelantan, Malaysia, possibly due to geographical factor where Kelantan State is border to Thailand. Most of Siamese are Buddhist. But nowadays, their numbers who are converted to Islam are increasing. The aim of this study is to see the degree of understanding of the New Siamese Muslim concerning Islam and their practice of Islam after their conversion. The study will focus on Siamese New Muslims in Kelantan, Malaysia. A set of questionnaire was distributed in conducting the research as to know the degree of individual knowledge of Islam and also to get the necessary information related to the subject. Library research is also used in order to support the research. The study found that all respondents have understood Islam very well and have implemented obligatory duties (worship) as a Muslim; or in another words, Islam has been a part of their life.

Key words: Understanding, practicing, Islamic teachings, Siamese New Muslim, and obligatory duties in Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia comprises various ethnics and races like Malays, Chinese, Indian, and also the other ethnics, including Siamese. On the Siamese, they are originally from Thailand and migrated to Kelantan, Malaysia, due to certain causes such as looking for job, acquiring knowledge, and also due to marriage bond.

It is believed that the Siam community lives in Kelantan, Malaysia, possibly due to geographical factor where Kelantan State is border to Thailand. Most of Siamese are Buddhist. But nowadays, their numbers who are converted to Islam are increasing.

The focus of this particular study is to know how far the New Siamese Muslim understand Islam and whether their practice of Islam are in line with Islamic code of life (*syariat*) or not.

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THE ORIGIN AND RELIGION OF *ORANG THAI*

It is hard to trace the origin of Thais. Some experts say that they are originally from Sichuan, China. While the other have the opinion that they are from *Tenggara* (Southeast) China and North Vietnam. Some 2,000 years ago, they named themselves as *Tai* (*Dai* according to Chinese pronunciation) and migrated to the South towards Yunan and Guizhou. Their purpose of migration was to seek land for agriculture (Shirley, 1994).

Before 13th century, there were obviously different between Thais in five countries. Nowadays, they are consist of Black Thai (Thai *Hitam*) and Thai Loa in Vietnam, Thai Nuen and Thai Phuan in Laos, Thai Luen, Thai Yuan, and Thai in Thailand. In Myanmar, they are known as *Thai Yai* or *Shan*, meanwhile in *Barat Laut* (Northwest) India called as *Ahom*. There are also many groups of Thais in South China, particularly in Xiashuangbanna, the very Northern part of Yunnan. Their cultures, pattern, and tecnic of textile are quite similar. Eventhough having different slenght, but they are still in similar race or group (Shirley, 1994:42).

Majority of Thais are Buddhism. Buddhism regarded as state foundation, besides nation and king. King considered as the patron for all religions. Therefore, the freedom of religion in Thailand is believed to be existed since the early of 17th century, where the King of Ayutthaya at that time granted consent to Christians to bulid the church. Buddhism was a religion of state under the ruling of Sukhotai. The Thailand population at that time was influenced by religious teaching brought by people of Mon and Khmer. This influence can be seen where Thais practicing the concept of Hindu in ruling system, Brahmin caste system, and worshipping Erawan, the Elephant God. The influence of Hindu also obvious in classical literature like the story of Rama and Sita, Ramakien epic Thai version for *Hikayat Ramayana*.

Before the clash of culture, Thais practiced animism or worshipping nature. They believed that this world is full of unseen creature namely *Phi* which should be treated well otherwise the life will be harmed (Shirley, 1994:67).

THAI COMMUNITY IN KELANTAN, MALAYSIA

Thais population in Kelantan represent 1 percent of local population which most of them are Malays. Their adherence in Kelantan has different history compared to other ethnic in Peninsular Malaysia. Thais have long time ago migrated to Kelantan before the other immigrants, especially Chinese and India, migrated to Peninsular Malaysia (*Tanah Melayu*) at the end of 19th century and beginning 20th century. They live in Malay village. While the other immigrants most of them concentrated in town or estate area (Mohd Zain Saleh, n.y.).

The signifantct different between Malays and Thais are on the religious aspect. As the Malays are considered as Muslims, Thais are almost all of them are Buddhist Theravada. Despite that, there are certain aspects that are looking similar like cultural aspect. They shared the same cultural elements which are

influenced by Indian traditional such as believe in *bomoh* and magis, and also animism.

There are physically different between the structural building of Malays and Thais. In Thais village, we can find *biara* or *wat*, a special area which located holy area and Buddhist worship house. The place also serves for religious group's house (known as *bikhu*). Most of village with a lot of population have their own *biara*, while in the village with less population, *biara* will not be built on. However, as an alternative, normally a special building called as *samnaksong* will be built. The *bikhu* normally use to visit that special building for time to time. At this small building, *bikhus* from the other village will perform a special religious ritual together with the local villagers (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail & Rahimah Abdul Aziz, 2000:116).

PRESERVING AND CONSOLIDATING ETHNIC BORDER

As a minority group, *orang* Thai has its own various pattern of culture which form the basis or foundation of their ethnic identity. Various pattern of Thai culture have a close relationship with Theravada Buddhism which is its recipient are almost all of Thai population in Kelantan. At local level, Buddhism considered as a symbol of identity for Thai ethnic. It is Buddhism that bond together between Thais in Kelantan and Thais in Thailand in terms of culture in the context of regional. This element of culture has been used by local Thais in order to strengthen their ethnic and border (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail & Rahimah Abdul Aziz, 2000:117).

In Thailand, ethnic awareness as Thai has a strong relationship with Buddhism. This relationship has rooted at all level of Thai community, including royal institution. Ethnic identity of local Kelantan Thai has a close relationship with Theravada Buddhism the same with Thai in Thailand.

Therevada Buddhism is relatively acting as a main basic that stimulates the ethnic awareness of Thai. That kind of awareness need several steps to be taken to consolidate border and and the aspiration of their ethnic awareness. Buddhism and its all symbols like *bikhu* and *biara* are acting as a social symbol and culture of Thai and also stimulate and support Thais ethnic awareness and their identities (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail & Rahimah Abdul Aziz, 2000:118).

THAI BUDDHISM IN KELANTAN, MALAYSIA

Buddhism in Kelantan has two main features. Firstly, Buddhism is a fenomenan in rural area because almost all of *biaras* are located in the rural area. Buddhism has a quite similar feature to the tradition of Theravada Thai, especially from the aspect of building architecture, besides ceremony and religious ritual which emphasis on activities that lead to reward (*tham bun*) as usual practice in traditional Thai Buddhism

A fact that has to be accepted by Theravada Buddhism in Kelantan is that has to survive in a situation where the vast majority of the population is Malay

Muslim. Therefore, Buddhist as a minority group has to play a special role in the context of different social and cultural compared to the context of Thailand.

For Thais in Kelantan, Buddhism considered as an important symbol in terms of fulfilling the aspiration of *primordial sentiments* which is closely related to ethnicity and Thai identity. For this purpose, they use various ways to ensure important symbols such as *biara* and *bikhu* being preserved well despite of certain weaknessness and problems.

There are perhaps the function of traditional *biara* and *bikhu* having many changes compared to its function in Thailand. However, its basic function socially and religiously remain unchange. Moreover, the *bikhu* and *biara* institution are perhaps playing a new role in a special situation where the Buddhists are minority in Kelantan. This extra role happened as a result of continuous accommodation process by *biara* and *bikhu* in order to fulfil several social and political needs from dominant group around them.

The effort to preserve Buddhism as an important symbol can be seen through the initiatives to ensure that *biara* will be looked after perfectly. Despite having no financial support from the government, but most of *biaras* have been preserved well by using contributed fund from local Thais and alson contribution from Buddhism followers among Chinese. Most of contribution for *biara* comes from Chinese.

The status of Buddhism as minority means that there is no official recognition given to it. The only religion rectified as national religion in Malaysia and Kelantan is Islam. Therefore, in Kelantan several alterations need to be done in managing *biara* and matters related to Buddhism ritual ceremony. For example, date for several Buddhism rituals and ceremonies is being accommodated in order to suit with state public holiday, except special date which are cannot be changed anymore according to Buddhist calender like *Thaipusm* (Mohamed Yusoff Ismail & Rahimah Abdul Aziz, 2000:120).

BIARA AS A CENTRE FOR THAIS IDENTITY CONSOLIDATION

Most of Thais village are to be found scattered in rural area in several districts of Kelantan. However, those of people in that rural area are able to attend the *biara* ceremony at *Biara* centre. They are all come from different villages. Most of villages will send their representatives to attend the ceremony. Each delegation will bring together with them with financial or material contribution. Sometimes, delegations consist of civilian and *bikhu* who come two or three days earlier to assist house owner to prepare for the ceremony.

Biara ceremony which involves participation members from various villages far and near is usual practice among Kelantan. This special ceremony not only limited to Thai and *bikhu* in Kelantan only, but also involved *bikhu* and public from Thailand. During this special ceremony, prominent *bikhu* from Thailand will be invited as a special guest.

Normally, in *biara* ceremony the influence of religious institution from Thailand can be seen vividly, particularly in terms of management of an

important ritual which involves many people. At this time, the host *biara* will invite senior *bikhu* and religious officer of Thailand as a special advisor so as the management and organization of that ceremony will be conducted in line with current trend and standard.

Based on the above facts, it seems that Buddhism has its strong influence. Its disciples seem to be hold fast to their belief. However, due to their assimilation with Malay-Muslim community, some of Buddhists became interested in Islam. It is interesting to note here that some of Buddhists became a Muslim (New Muslim or *Saudara Baru* in Malay word) because of such assimilation (*Al-Wasilah*, 1999; and *Buletin JHEAIK*, 1999). Besides this factor, there are several other factors that inspired them to convert to Islam (Che Mohd Fahmi bin Che Omar, 2007). For example, good relationship with Malay-Muslim, good example by Muslim, environmental factor, and also their own willing.

The evidence of Siam community converted to Islam in Kelantan (covers the period from 2000 to 2006) can be shown in table 1 below:

Table 1
Siamese New Muslims Statistic from 2000 to 2006

Year													
2000		2001		2002		2003		2004		2005		2006	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
6	5	5	10	7	14	2	8	9	9	8	9	-	1
11		15		21		10		18		17		1	

M = Male; F = Female.

Source: *Islamisation of New Muslims Report According to Race and Sex from 2000-2006*.

UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE OF ISLAM AMONG SIAMESE NEW MUSLIM

This part of study tries to analyse the degree of understanding and practicing of Islam after Siamese New Muslim converted to Islam. The analysis is based on the distributed questionnaires (among 40 respondents).

This questionnaire is focuses on the information related to respondent background (Siam community), level of Islamic understanding, and attitude or their practice after conversion. The accumulated data will show their level understanding of Islam and their practice of Islam in daily life.

The background of respondents are important for the sake of the research. The background of respondents reveal the following:

First, Sex. There are 30 woman respondents and 10 man respondents. This is partly due to the limited number of man and it is easier to get woman respondents because their number of converted to Islam more than man. See statistic in table 1 as follows:

Table 2
Sex

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	10	25.0
Female	30	75.0
Total	40	100.0

Source: Questionnaires.

Second, Age. Table 3 shows quantity and respondent percentage in terms of age. The table revealed that those of aged above 40, the most of whom are converted to Islam which recorded 50 percent. The second highest are those of aged 31 to 40 with 20 percent. These two groups have chosen Islam as their religion may be because of their life experience and are able to differentiate the good and the evil.

Table 3
Age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
10-20	5	12.5
21-30	7	17.5
31-40	8	20.0
41 above	20	50.0
Total	40	100.0

Source: Questionnaires.

Third, Marital Status. The table 4 shows the status of respondent. The highest percentage of respondent is those of marriage with 70% and bachelor 30%. The figure revealed that most of them are those of marriage.

Table 4
Marital Status

Status	Frequency	Percentage
Bachelor	12	30.0
Marriage	28	70.0
Total	40	100.0

Source: Questionnaires.

Fourth, Occupation. The table 5 shows the type of respondent occupation. About 55% of them i.e. the highest are self-reliance. The second highest are 25%. The study found that the others are those of not having any job and full time housewives. They are 12.5% working in public sector and 7.5% in private sector.

Table 5
Occupation

Occopation	Frequency	Percentage
Self Reliance	22	55.0
Government	5	12.5
Private Sector	3	7.5
Others	10	25.0
Total	40	100.0

Source: Questionnaires.

Fifth, Education. For educational level, the highest score for level of education among Siamese New Muslims are secondary schools which represent 50%. The second highest are primary school which represent 27%. Meanwhile, 10% of them are at higher level i.e. university and college. Survey also found that 12.5% of respondents are never go to school. See table 6 as follows:

Table 6
Education

Education	Frequency	Percentage
Never go to school	5	12.5
Primary School	11	27.5
Secondary School	20	50.0
Collage/University	4	10.0
Total	40	100.0

Source: Questionnaires.

Sixth, the Length of Conversion. The table 7 below shows the year of respondents converted to Islam. Majority of them converted to Islam between years 1991-2000 which are the highest population with 45%. In years 1981-1990, their numbers quite encouraging with 37.5%. Their numbers have increased obviously 10 years later.

Table 7
Lengthy of Conversion

Years of Conversion	Frequency	Percentage
1970-1980	3	7.5
1981-1990	12	30.0
1991-2000	18	45.0
2001 ke atas	7	17.5
Total	40	100.0

Source: Questionnaires.

Seventh, Factor of Conversion. Table 8 below revealed factors of conversion. Own willing is consider as the highest factor that lead them to accept Islam with 57.5%. The second factor is marriage with 30.0%. Friend influenced is 7.5% and other factors are 5.0%.

Table 8
Factor of Conversion

Factor of Conversion	Frequency	Percentage
Marriage	12	30.0
Own Willing	23	57.5
Friend Influence	3	7.5
Other	2	5.0
Total	40	100.0

Source: Questionnaires.

Eighth, Degree of Islamic Understanding among Siamese New Muslims. The table 9 below found that most of respondent understand well the concept of Islamic understanding. They know concerning *Tauhid* (the Oneness of God) and aware of Muslim obligatory related to *ibadah* (praying). However, among them also those are confused while answering mind test question i.e. question number 3 where the study tries to test their level of understanding and confident when saying that *zakat* (alms giving) is the forth pillar of Islam. Whereas *zakat* is the third pillar of Islam. Therefore, their respon might be said as satisfactory eventhough they are New Muslims (Ghazali Othman *et al.*, 1992; and Akhmad Mohd Zain, 1999).

Nineth, the Practice of Siam Community after Conversion. The table 10 below shows that respondent give positive respon after their conversion. Based on their answer, respondent has practiced Islam perfectly, especially obligatory *ibadah* like fasting and prayer. They also perform *ibadah* that lead to reward such as reciting the Qur'an, attending religious lectures, covering their *aurat* and alson concern on *halal* and *haram* (lawful and forbidden) in their life (Said Hawwa, 1992). They also reject chauvinistic and built relationship with other ethnic in Kelantan.

Among them there are people who are still practice Siam community tradition and custom namely *laikatong*. *Laikatong* is Siam traditional festival in form of art. It is among removing *sial* (unlucky) custom. *Sial* will be thrown away and plung into river. Most of them, however, not practice this kind of tradition anymore.

Table 9
Degree of Islamic Understanding among Siamese New Muslims

No	Item	SD	%	D	%	LA	%	A	%	SA	%
1.	<i>Sholat</i> (prayer) is obligatory for every Muslim.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	40	100
2.	Fasting is obligatory for every Muslim.	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2.5	39	97.5
3.	<i>Zakat</i> (Alms Giving) is the fourth pillar of Islam.	5	12.5	3	7.5	11	27.5	5	12.5	16	40
4.	<i>Agama Islam adalah agama fitrah manusia.</i>	3	7.5	2	5	-	-	4	10	31	77.5
5.	I bear witness that no God other than Allah.	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	7.5	37	92.5
6.	I Perform Allah's injunction willing without coercion.	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	7.5	37	92.5
7.	I am confident that all of our deeds will rewarded or punished respectively.	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2.5	39	97.5
8.	I am confident that there is a day of resurrection.	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2.5	39	97.5

SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; LA = Less Agree; A = Agree; and SA = Strongly Agree.
Source: Questionnaire.

Table 10
The Practice of Siam Community after Conversion

No	Item	SDA	%	DA	%	NQD	%	A	%	SA	%
1.	You perform prayer five times daily.	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	7.5	37	92.5
2.	You are fasting completely in the month of Ramadhan.	-	-	-	-	1	2.5	6	15	33	82.5
3.	Your pattern of dress is change.	-	-	2	5	-	-	8	20	30	75
4.	You only deal with Siam community.	14	35	11	27.5	10	25	4	10	1	2.5
5.	You still practising Siamese way of life.	19	47.5	12	30	4	10	4	10	1	2.5
6.	I like to attend religious sermon.	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	17.5	33	82.5
7.	I concern much on lawful and unlawful.	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	17.5	33	82.5
8.	You are reciting the Qur'an every day.	-	-	-	-	4	10	8	20	28	70

SDA = Strongly Disagree; DA = Disagree; NQD = Not Quite Disagree; A = Agree; and SA = Strongly Agree.
Source: Questionnaire.

CONCLUSION

Based on this study, there are several suggestions related to the subject as follows. *First*, Siam community is believed to have a strong bond with their belief i.e. Buddhism. After converted to Islam, they imidiately reject their old belief. Most of them devoted their whole life to the new religion i.e. Islam. They understand well the pillar of Islam and *iman*. *Second*, the study found that Siam community has practice Islam well based on *syarak*. They at the same time leave the previous deviant teachings.

On the whole, it can be concluded that Siam community has achieved a good understanding and practicing of Islam. They have performed *ibadah* well. They have improved much in their way of life as a Muslim by practicing Islamic way of life and at the same time leaving Buddhism way of life. They also practice and apply Islamic creed and *akhlak* in their daily life. Despite be a Muslim, they still build a good relationship with their family and Siamese Non-Muslim. These practices show that Islam has taught and educated them to be a good Muslim by having a good repo with the other communities.

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