

**THE SPIRIT OF HUMAN FRATERNITY
PERVADES SABAH'S INTER-RELIGIOUS
LANDSCAPE PRESERVING UNITY IN
DIVERSITY**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol24no1.6>

Abstract

Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together is a document of joint common ground between Muslims and Christians. It reinforces the initiative to work together for world peace. It has inspired the spirit of fraternity based on the teaching inherent in Muslim and Christian Revelations. This paper presents a portion of a study's result on how the fraternity spirit penetrates the religious communities in Sabah to live together in accommodative relationships and open-minded attitudes. The paper employed a qualitative approach to designing a case study in Keningau district in the interior division of Sabah. The data collection involves ethnographic fieldwork by conducting interviews with religious leaders and selected local people with mixed-faith families and participant observation in several villages related to this study. The findings indicate that the Muslims and Christians in Sabah can be characterized as brothers and sisters

and inspired to be an example of fraternal friendship. These attitudes have been attributed to them: displaying respect for different religions, being committed to fostering peace, being open to differences, and being willing to coexist in proximity. Hence, the spirit of human fraternity pervades Sabah's inter-religious landscape, which has preserved unity in diversity.

Keywords: Human Fraternity; Muslims; Christians; inter-religious landscape; Sabah.

Khulasah

'Persaudaraan SeInsan' merupakan dokumen asas berteraskan elemen sejagat antara masyarakat Muslim dan Kristian sebagai agenda mengukuhkan kerjasama bagi mewujudkan keamanan dunia. Inisiatif ini diilhamkan daripada ajaran berkaitan semangat persaudaraan yang wujud dalam kedua-dua agama tersebut. Makalah ini menyajikan sebahagian hasil kajian mengenai 'semangat persaudaraan' yang menunjangi komuniti Muslim dan Kristian di Sabah; yang telah hidup bersama dalam bentuk hubungan akomodatif dan sentiasa bersikap terbuka. Makalah ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang melibatkan pengumpulan data di lapangan secara etnografi melalui wawancara dengan pemimpin agama dan masyarakat tempatan terpilih yang mempunyai keluarga beragama campuran dan penduduk setempat yang mempunyai keluarga beza agama dan pemerhatian ikut serta di beberapa kampung di daerah Keningau, Sabah. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa masyarakat Muslim dan Kristian di Sabah boleh dicirikan sebagai 'saudara seinsan' dan menjadi pemangkin dan inspirasi kepada contoh 'persahabatan persaudaraan'. Sikap ini ditonjolkan melalui sikap masyarakat yang diperlihatkan melalui rasa hormat terhadap masyarakat beza agama, berkomitmen untuk memupuk perdamaian, terbuka terhadap perbezaan, dan bersedia untuk hidup aman damai dan harmoni.

Justeru, semangat 'persaudaraan seinsan' ini menonjolkan landskap hubungan antara agama di Sabah yang telah mengekalkan elemen kesatuan dalam kepelbagaian.

Kata kunci: 'Persaudaraan SeInsan'; Masyarakat Muslim dan Kristian; landskap hubungan antara agama; Sabah.

Introduction

The two Abrahamic faiths, Islam and Christianity, have a pivotal role in nurturing peace and interreligious harmony. Fostering peace can be done in many ways and involve various religious institutions and communities. At the top level of high-rank leaders of religious institutions, several discussions and agreements were initiated, which resulted in the proclamation of several documents for inter-religious engagement and work together for world peace. To name a few of those are *The Document of Nostra Aetate* (1965), *A Common Word Between You and Me* (2007), and the latest one is the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (2019). The documents have become the subject of scholarly research interests.

The *Nostra Aetate* launched a historic new positive dialogue in Muslim-Christian relations and initiated a new era of reaching out in friendship with members of non-Christian religions.¹ It acts as the means to change the attitude of Muslims and Christians from hostility to mutual respect and unbiased understanding of one another way of belief.² The most similar message brought by A

¹ Teresa Joseph, "Nostra Aetate a Landmark Vatican Document," 2020, accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343969052_Nostra_Aetate_a_landmark_Vatican_document.

² Fatmir Mehdi Shehu, *Nostra Aetate and the Islamic Perspective of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2008).

Common Word or *kalimatun sawā'* in Arabic has been the recent collaboration for peace initiatives that gave birth to the United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week.³ A *Common Word* has also contributed to the Muslim initiative that invites Christians to affirm what they have in common and Muslim commitment to fresh thinking about relations between Islam and Christianity.⁴ The initiatives never end up until the present time. The principle of 'loving god and neighbour', a theological common ground for both Islam and Christianity, is continuously emphasized as the central theme in the *Document on Human Fraternity*.

Nevertheless, promoting peace has long been initiated by Muslim and Christian leaders in the global arena. It is indeed a much more urgent need to nurture peace at the grassroots level as the religious communities are still anchored by prejudice and misunderstanding.⁵ A lack of interaction between religious adherents is among the sources of misunderstanding.⁶ However, Malaysians can be said to have a high understanding of each other's religions and enjoy a harmonious lifestyle as there are no

³ MABDA English Monograph Series, "A Common Word Between Us and You: 5 Year Anniversary Edition," 2012, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://www.acommonword.com/>.

⁴ Joseph Victor Edwin, *A Common Word Between Us and You: A New Departure in Muslim Attitudes Towards Christianity* (Birmingham: The University of Birmingham, 2010), 6; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, "The Quest for 'A Common Word': Initial Christian Responses to a Muslim Initiative," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20(4) (2009), 369–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410903194852>, 369.

⁵ Arfah Ab. Majid et al., "Designing Inter-religious Model for the Grassroots: A Preliminary Survey," *International Journal of Advanced Research in Islamic and Humanities* 2(3) (2020), 1-18.

⁶ Abdul Hakim Mohad et al., "Muslim-Christian Relations in Malaysia: Issues and Solutions", *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 7(1) (2019), 347-353.

major religious conflicts.⁷ In other words, Malaysians manage the differences through elements of interaction such as mutual respect and openness with each other.⁸ In light of the *Document on Human Fraternity*, this study argues that Sabah, East Malaysia, can be an exemplar for promoting peace and unity in diversity as the people of different religions manage to showcase some good living practices in the sharing environment. Pugh-Kitingan asserts that Sabah's diverse cultural and religious landscape, and its distinct historical development, have fostered inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance and coexistence among its people.⁹

This study believes that the spirit of fraternal friendship between Muslims and Christians penetrates the Sabah's inter-religious landscape. A case study at Keningau district in the Interior Division of Sabah was significantly presented to prove the argument. This article divides into two main discussions; first, to understand the substance of *Human Fraternity* and the document's spirit and its significance in resolving the intensity of religious persecution nowadays. Secondly, to demonstrate how the religious communities in Sabah, particularly Muslims and Christians, express their readiness to live together in accommodative relationships and open-minded attitude towards the religious landscape of mosque and church being built together in a similar vicinity. This study

⁷ Suraya Sintang, "Peaceful Coexistence in Religious Diversity in Sabah, Malaysia," *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: Arts & Humanities - Psychology* 14(1) (2014), 67–77.

⁸ Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, Khadijah. et al., "Islamic Perspective on the Concepts of Interaction among Multicultural Society", *Afkar: Journal of Aqidah & Islamic Thought* 23(2) (2021), 249-274. <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol23no2.7>

⁹ J. Pugh-Kitingan, "Cultural and Religious Diversity in Sabah and Relationships with Surrounding Areas", in *Islam and Cultural Diversity in Southeast Asia* (Tokyo: ILCAA, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2015).

employed a qualitative approach that combines data derived from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documented data analysis.

The Document on Human Fraternity

Scholarly recent studies on the *Document of Human Fraternity* are scarce. Nonetheless, the Encyclical "*fratelli tutti*" has some insights on the elaboration that describe the spirit of human fraternity.¹⁰ *Fratelli tutti* is an Italian phrase that means "all brothers and sisters," as Pope Francis puts a vision of universal solidarity. It shows a love that excludes no one, focusing on the remarkable friendship between Christians and Muslims. *Fratelli tutti* elaborates on the *Document of Human Fraternity*, which calls for social companionship and reciprocal dialogue on the causes of lack of unity brought about by the world's ongoing peace disruptions.

Catalano points out that the document represented an absolute novelty in the two-millennia-long history of the church and a source of inspiration to open towards collaboration with other religions.¹¹ Tomy Michael, the first Malay language publication, wrote on the correlation between the Indonesian law document over the social

¹⁰ Laurie Johnston, "Friendship with All – but Especially with Muslims," *The Journal of Social Encounters* 5(1) (2021), 19–22; Mustafa Genc, "Fratelli Tutti: An Interpretation of Dialogue and Friendship in Society: An Islamic Perspective," *The Journal of Social Encounters* 5(1) (2021), 33–36; Soroj Mullick, "All-Inclusive World: An Appraisal of Fratelli Tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship" *AUC* 66 (2021), 12–21. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4318167>.

¹¹ Roberto Catalano, "Is Interreligious Dialogue Changing the Church? The Significance of the Document on Human Fraternity," in *Changing the Church: Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Chapman M.D. and Latinovic V. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 209–215. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53425-7_24.

issues related to the religious conflicts.¹² Most of those studies chose the document as a conceptual framework to highlight the joint common ground of Muslim-Christians. They considered the document an extended global handshake of interreligious goodwill, fellowship, and mutual collaboration to better world peace.

The three joint documents (*Nostra Aetate*, *A Common Word*, and *Human Fraternity*) would not have been possible if not for the interreligious friendship that inspired and sustained the relationship between Muslims and Christians. The legacy of common ground in Abrahamic religions has strengthened their initiatives to work together for world peace. The latest development that proves these efforts' seriousness is the *Document on Human Fraternity*. On February 4, 2019, the Pope of the Catholic Church, Francesco, and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Shaykh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, met in Abu Dhabi to sign the *Document on Human Fraternity*.

It is a joint statement calling for the reconciliation of people of goodwill in service of universal peace.¹³ The document is a heartfelt aspiration from both representatives of the two most prominent religious leaders of Abrahamic religions. It is a document that invites all the religious communities to come together under the human fraternity. It may guide future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters.¹⁴ Thus, it is a continuous effort

¹² Tomy Michael, "Korelasi Hukum *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* Dengan Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 24 Tahun 2007 Tentang Penanggulangan Bencana," *Jurnal Hukum Magnum Opus* 2(2) (2019), 35–40.

¹³ Pope Francis, "How Can Curiosity and Dialogue Bring Peace to the World?," 2019, accessed January 10, 2021. <https://www.forhumanfraternity.org/>.

¹⁴ "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," 2019, accessed February 4, 2021.

to cultivate fraternal friendship between Christians and Muslims, as exemplified by the model of friendship between Francis and al-Tayyeb. As Johnson asserts, it is a kind of personal friendship and dialogue that moves far beyond mere digital connectivity, which is not enough to build bridges.¹⁵ As a result, let us embrace the culture of dialogue as a means of collaboration and building common ground.

The Document on Human Fraternity is a substantive aid in reinforcing unity and a proclamation on the urge for world peace and living together in a harmonious environment. Pope Francis' visit to the United Arab Emirates commemorated the 800th anniversary of the encounter between Saint Francis and the Sultan of Egypt, al-Mālik al-Kāmil. The visit signifies a new page in interreligious relations and fosters a culture of mutual respect. It is crucial for Muslim and Christian ties as the two Abrahamic faiths are brothers and sisters, despite their differing beliefs.¹⁶

The primary term used in the document is a human fraternity which implies the general fraternity between human beings based on teaching inherent in both Muslim and Christian revelations. Olivieé and Martínez-Brocal highlight the document's starting point as faith in God, which coincides with the idea that the religions aim to believe in God, honour Him and invite all men and women to believe that this universe depends on a God

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.htm.

¹⁵ Johnston, "Friendship with All," 20.

¹⁶ Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahman Muhammad al-Tayyeb, "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," February (2019), 1–7, accessed February 5, 2021. <https://www.muslim-elders.com/HumanFraternity/document-human-fraternity.html>.

who governs it.¹⁷ The idea signifies some aspirations to build social friendship between religious communities by allowing people to show self-expression and reciprocate by listening, looking, knowing, understanding, and finding common ground that suit each other.¹⁸ Therefore, the document is not only a milestone regarding the relationship between Muslims and Christians. Instead, the document is a blueprint to adopt the culture of dialogue, collaboration, and mutual knowledge between faiths.¹⁹

Human fraternity aims for knowledge and cooperation whereby knowing the others is necessary to understand the other cultures, faiths, and lifestyles. However, knowing the others is not enough to cultivate a peaceful environment as the religious communities need to cooperate. Cooperation is urgently required in social activities and interaction as they live in one social entity. This fraternity, of precious value for all religions, needs to be achieved at different levels – namely, the dignity of human life (men and women, children and elders), family, justice based on mercy, freedom of the person, freedom of religion, the protection of sacred spaces and spaces of worship, condemnation of pseudo-religious fundamentalism, the culture of dialogue and tolerance, the protection and recognition of minorities and the relations and understanding between East and West.²⁰

¹⁷ Antonio Olivie and Javier Martínez-Brocal, "Church Communication Highlights 2019," *Church, Communication and Culture* 5(1) (2020), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2020.1713018>

¹⁸ Genc, "Fratelli Tutti : An Interpretation of Dialogue", 33.

¹⁹ H. E. Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot, "Prophetic Meaning of the Document on Human Fraternity," 2019, accessed February 10, 2021. <https://www.pcinterreligious.org/prophetic-meaning-of-the-document-on-human-fraternity-ayuso>.

²⁰ "Fraternity for Knowledge and Cooperation," n.d., accessed February 5, 2021. <https://www.cimer.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Fraternity-for-Knowledge-and-Cooperation.pdf>.

Muslims and Christians are encouraged to live in fraternity. In terms of the common spiritual paternity and generation, a human fraternity brings believing communities together and renders them, brothers.²¹ The fraternity would cultivate cooperation since both parties have long befriended each other. They have always played their roles in promoting universal peace. The positive relationship has been marked by signing the three documents (*Nostra Aetate*, *A Common Word*, and *Human Fraternity*). In this regard, Muslims and Christians can demonstrate their fraternal affinity by appreciating the differences in symbols, rites, doctrines, and religious sites of worship. Fraternity does not mean renouncing the good and the true (that would be to compromise principle), but rather learning how to put all things, including humanity, in their proper place.²²

In the Malaysian context, the reciprocal cooperation between Muslims and Christians contributes significantly to national unity. The scenario in Sabah exemplifies the micro impact of this togetherness and peaceful coexistence. As one of the multi-religious states on Borneo Island in East Malaysia, Christianity is not only accommodated as the second most widely practised religion after Islam. It is also clearly involved in the presence of both faiths in one family.²³ The close friendship of both religious communities has continuously been expressed with an open-minded attitude in sharing space of facilities of mosque and church built together in the same village.

This article demonstrates the fraternal friendship between Muslims and Christians inspired by the

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Suraya Sintang et al., "The Dialogue of *Hikma*: Generating Harmony in Muslim-Non-Muslim Relations," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24(2) (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2013.772328>, 214.

document's spirit and how it penetrates the inter-religious landscape in Sabah. This study was carried out by displaying several cases and examples from the study case in the Keningau district. The ethnographic method employed in this study with thematic analysis gathered from participant observation notes and interviews with several religious leaders and selected local people with mixed-faith families.

The Spirit of Human Fraternity and Its Significance for the Present Times

The spirit of human fraternity, which implies fraternal friendship that embraces humanity, can be further understood from the Islamic concept of brotherhood and the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* inscribed by the Christian tradition. Mustafa Genc quoted several verses from the al-Quran, highlighting how Islam urges Muslims to befriend others.²⁴ The Qur'ān (49:10) states, "The believers are but brothers, so make peace and reconciliation between your brothers. And be mindful of Allah so you may be shown mercy", and "They are those who donate in prosperity and adversity, control their anger and pardon others. And Allah loves the good-doers" (The Qur'ān 3:134). These verses clearly state that brotherhood is a comprehensive concept based upon the good character with others, treating others the way we want to be treated and uniting upon common values in religion, family, and humanity.²⁵

The scholars interpreted "brother" in the Islamic tradition of *ḥadīth* to mean universal brotherhood, as other prophetic narrations mention love for the neighbour and people, which includes non-Muslims and unbelievers. *Ḥadīth* al-Nawāwī in *Sharḥ al-Arba'īn* 13 commented, "This is interpreted as a brotherhood in general, such that

²⁴ Genc, "Fratelli Tutti : An Interpretation of Dialogue," 33.

²⁵ Abu Emina Elias, "Faith in Allah - Brotherhood in the Quran and Sunnah," 2014, accessed February 15, 2021. <https://abuaminaelias.com/good-character-is-the-path-to-salvation/>.

it includes the unbeliever and the Muslim. Thus, he should love for his brother the unbeliever what he loves for himself, which is his entering Islam, just as he should love for his brother Muslim that he remains in Islam".²⁶ Considering the extensive meaning of brotherhood, Leirvik refers to the term as symbolic brotherhood as mentioned in the Qur'ān (3:103), "For ye were enemies. He joined your hearts in love so that by His grace, ye became brethren."²⁷ In this sense, brotherhood in the Medinan revelations comes close to the notion of the *ummah*, as reflected in some translations into English: "And verily this brotherhood (*ummah*) is a single brotherhood (*ummatan wāḥidatan*)," the Qur'ān (23:52). Brotherhood is developed in Islam in opposition to kinship relations (as in the Meccan phase) and vital awareness of competing for religious allegiances (as in Medina).

Concerning religious ties, the so-called Medinan constitution invited the Jews to form 'one community (*ummah*) with the believers', although they differ in religious adherences. As things evolved, with growing suspicion between Muslims and Jews in Medina, the definition of *ummah* gradually came to mean Muslim brotherhood, which in many places implies "a plurality of *ummah*".²⁸ Abdurrahman elaborates that humankind was one *ummah*, but this unity was broken by human beings' differences that they created among themselves.²⁹ The Qur'ān (10:19) "The people were but one nation, then they

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Oddbjørn Leirvik, "Aw *Qāla*: 'Li-Jārihi': Some Observations on Brotherhood and Neighborly Love in Islamic Tradition," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21(4) (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2010.527104>, 360.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 360.

²⁹ Abdurrahman Toyese Adesokan, "An Appraisal of Peaceful Co-Existence Between Muslims and Non-Muslims in Houston, Texas of USA," *E-Journal of Arabic Studies & Islamic Civilization* 2 (2015), 49.

differed. And had it not been for a previous command from your lord, the matter would have been immediately judged between them for what they differed." It emphasizes the primary purpose of sending His Messengers to this world is to restore the balance and unity of humankind. This is how Rasulullah SAW taught Muslims to appreciate peace and maintain the human right to respect each other, love, protect the rights of minorities, and tolerate the diversity of religions, ethnicities, and races.³⁰

Muslims have been contributors to social friendships with other religions. The Pew Research Center 2013, as pointed out by Mustafa Genc, indicate that Muslims in various regions were willing to develop goodwill in society and tend to be friend with Christians as they have the knowledge related to the common ground between Islam and Christianity.³¹ The finding of the Pew Survey also reveals that Muslim respondents were more likely to be somewhat comfortable with sons marrying Christians than daughters marrying Christians. Therefore, Mustafa Genc points out that openness to interfaith marriage provides an environment for dialogue and friendship in society.³² Based on these research findings, such a condition has been proven in the inter-religious landscape in the focus study area of Sabah, where the practice of interfaith marriage has been acknowledged as an ancestral heritage and social norm.³³ The social friendship between Muslims and Christians has significantly built a bridge for

³⁰ Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, Khadijah "Kepelbagaian dan Kesatuan Dalam Konteks Fiqh al-Ta'ayush di Malaysia Menurut Perspektif Pemikiran Islam," *Afkar: Journal of Aqidah & Islamic Thought* 22(1) (2020), 73-102. <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol22no1.3>

³¹ Genc, "Fratelli Tutti : An Interpretation of Dialogue," 34.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Suraya Sintang and Mohd. Tamring Budi Anto, "Pattern of Inter-marriage in Keningau: A Preliminary Study Towards Religious Tolerance," *Jurnal UMRAN* 2(1) (2016), 37.

collaboration and awareness of the necessity of living together as brothers and sisters.

A similar expression reveals the brotherhood's message from the Christian traditions in reference to the Encyclical *fratelli tutti*. *Fratelli tutti* has conveyed the spirit of human fraternity as it literally means "All Brothers and Sisters".³⁴ It calls for fraternal friendship, particularly between Christians and Muslims,³⁵ and social action through a creative social friendship and fraternity.³⁶ *Fratelli tutti* provides a common framework beyond boundaries and universal love. Pope Francis states the common framework as S. Mullick cites:³⁷

It is about how we make others our neighbour and not about who is my neighbour. To be a good neighbour, we have to be close and concerned with our neighbour's wellbeing." This micro perspective of accepting others as our neighbours becomes a starting point to spread love to the various nations as we regard them as part of the more remarkable human family. In this context, Pope Francis promotes a new socio-political model inspired by solidarity based on "political love" and "social friendship." A "politics of love" is forgiving, remembering, and breaking the circle of violence through peace and justice. Meanwhile, social friendship implies the set of practices that allow us to realize universal company as a way of life. The spirit of human fraternity is built on the value of universal love with a willingness to accept others as our good

³⁴ Genc, "Fratelli Tutti : An Interpretation of Dialogue," 33.

³⁵ Johnston, "Friendship with All", 19.

³⁶ Mullick, "All-Inclusive World", 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

friends which we care for each other and stay together as brothers and sisters.

Fratelli tutti is an invitation to build a sense of belonging to a single human family through deep relationships as brothers and sisters, promoting fraternal friendship between Muslims and Christians. *Fratelli tutti* fostered inclusivity about the Biblical and Christian perspective of universal love for all and is deemed a radical blueprint for a post-coronavirus world in maintaining peace for all human beings.³⁸

In this regard, *fratelli tutti* offers the spirit of human fraternity concerning the problem of human sustainability. As an elaboration of the document on human fraternity, *fratelli tutti* emphasizes the Islam-Christian dialogue concerning the theological traditions, honour God and honour human dignity to signify that the document's spirit reflects human diversity and the diversity of the revelations and theologies. In this context, a new approach toward understanding religious diversity must be put into clear practice. Religious diversity is no longer seen as a call to conquest or proselytism. Instead, it recognizes the other, which implies a recognition that is neither forced uniformity nor conciliatory syncretism.³⁹ By this, the Muslims and Christians are encouraged to learn to accept the theological expressions of the other's religion without judging them based on their own, as we respect each other's specific jurisdictions. Therefore, the *Document on Human Fraternity* indicates a new step taken in Muslim-Christian relations previously initiated by *Nostra Aetate* dan *A Common Word*. It is an endless effort to cultivate mutual respect between different communities.

Why does Christians-Muslims friendship the paradigmatic example of human fraternity, and why does

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁹ "Fraternity for Knowledge and Cooperation."

Pope Francis seems most willing to transcend this divide? Johnston explains the most obvious reason is that so many Christians and Muslims worldwide continue to live intense or conflictual relationships.⁴⁰ In many contexts, vilification of Islam has become a means for politicians to incite fear and gain followers. US former President Trump's campaign of "Muslim ban" and veil bans in Europe are examples of seeing Muslims as "dangerous others." The Christians, particularly those living in the USA, have failed to realize that this anti-Islamic rhetoric has real-world consequences for the other countries as it is the cause for aggravating Muslim-Christian tensions and the deaths of both religions.

Therefore, the human fraternity's spirit has been deemed an urgent need to resolve the intensity of religious persecution nowadays. The church attacks in Sri Lanka and Christchurch shooting mosque represent the most lethal episode of religious persecution facing Muslims and Christians in recent years. The attack on Christians in Sri Lanka on April 21, 2018, on Easter Sunday, left 250 people dead; this is an example of those incidents. Most victims died in a suicide bombing inside two Catholic churches and one Protestant. One of the two Catholic churches where terrorists committed suicide in the church of Saint Sebastian in Negombo, a Christian-majority town, and the other church that suffered an attack was St. Anthony's church in Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka.⁴¹ Another example of a recent incident was on March 15, 2019, a mass shooting at two Christchurch mosques, live-streamed to Facebook, resulting in the deaths of 51 Muslims, leaving the rest of the world in a state of shock.⁴²

⁴⁰ Johnston, "Friendship with All," 19.

⁴¹ Olivié and Martínez-Brocal, "Church Communication," 9.

⁴² S. Every-Palmer et al., "The Christchurch Mosque Shooting, the Media, and Subsequent Gun Control Reform in New Zealand: A

Analyzing these religious persecution incidents, Hawi D. et al. argued that Muslims' attacks received significantly more coverage than attacks by non-Muslims, and hard news tended to portray Muslims as "dangerous others".⁴³ They perceived Muslims as violent and supportive of terrorist groups. Thus, as one of the Middle East Muslim countries, the step taken by United Arab Emirates (UAE) was to sign the *Document of Human Fraternity* with the Christian counterpart symbolizing Islam as a religion of peace and clarifying the image of Muslims as "friendly others".

With this new vision of recognizing the others, Muslims and Christians are encouraged to be more inclusive to engage in any social activities to cultivate peace in their living environment. The religious communities can practically do the collaborative engagement by allowing sacred places of worship, mosque, and church, built together in the same vicinity. It is an indicator of recognizing the others' right to practice their religions and welcoming others as our fraternal friendship.

In this regard, the spirit of the human fraternity, which emphasizes living together as brothers and sisters, has been realized with the visible action plan of building the three houses of worship. It is collectively known as the Abrahamic Family House, located on Saadiyat island in UAE's capital city of Abu Dhabi, expected to be completed in 2022. The three houses of worship stand together as a symbol of religious tolerance and a sign of hope for mutual collaboration and promoting world peace. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, ordered a building dedicated to interfaith harmony and the

Descriptive Analysis," *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 28(2) (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2020.1770635>.

⁴³ Diala Hawi et al., "Terrorism Anxiety and Attitudes toward Muslims," *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 48(1) (2019), 81.

new landmark that symbolizes the state of coexistence and human fraternity.⁴⁴ The initial harmonious effort shown by UAE demonstrates the spirit of human fraternity. It penetrates the world that the inter-religious landscape of building the house of worship next to each other can be the tangible way to actualizing peace in Abrahamic religions. With this background and framework, we highlight the spirit of human fraternity with the emphasis on fraternal friendship and recognizing others' right to practice their beliefs; this study proceeds to discuss how the essence of human fraternity penetrates the inter-religious landscape in Sabah.

Methodology

This paper employed a qualitative approach to designing a case study in the district of Keningau in Sabah's Interior Division. Through ethnographic fieldwork, the data collection was managed by conducting in-depth interviews with religious leaders and selected local people with a mixed-faith families and a micro-scale participant observation in several villages related to this study. The in-depth interviews with the key informants, who are the authoritative religious leader and local group experts in Keningau, is to get the information on the historical background and current situation of inter-religious relation between Muslims and Christians and their experiences with the people living together next to the other house of worship.

The researchers also conducted informal in-depth interviews with selected local people to gain information about their experiences living together in a mixed-faith family. Two informants have been purposively selected in the study with the criteria of contentious and supportive

⁴⁴ K. Thor Jensen, "Mosque, Synagogue and Church Being Built Together in Abu Dhabi," *Newsweek*, 24 September 2019, accessed January 13, 2021. <https://www.newsweek.com/church-mosque-synagogue-abu-dhabi-1461097>.

relationships with their non-Muslim family of origin. Their real names were not revealed as the other key informants because they shared their personal life experiences that needed to be kept confidential. Therefore, the study put the nickname or anonymous name for discussion in this study.

The micro-scale participant observation has also been piloted in several villages in Keningau to closely examine the scene of the mosque and church being built together next to each other. These two data collection techniques provided a meaningful context for interpreting and understanding the religious landscape in Sabah and how this situation demonstrated the fraternal friendship of Muslims and Christians as inspired by the human fraternity's spirit.

The district of Keningau has been chosen as the focal area of study as it is the biggest town in the Interior Division in Sabah, representing Muslims and Christians living together and exemplifying the locality of mosque and church adjacent to one another in a similar vicinity. As the fifth-largest town in Sabah, Keningau appears to be one of the exemplary multi ethno religious society districts. The estimated population is 177,730; approximately 80 percent of the total population is Christians (nearly 138,963 people) and 15 percent Muslims (estimated 40,000). The other five percent are those who remain as animists and other religions.

Keningau contributes to the second-highest number of inter-marriages after the capital city of Kota Kinabalu.⁴⁵ Inter-marriages can be measured as the excellent practice of religious tolerance in accepting the other religion to be a member of the mixed-faith family and an indicator of being open and receptive to the others. Therefore, the selection of Keningau as a case study meets the

⁴⁵ Suraya and Mohd. Tamring, "Pattern of Intermarriage in Keningau", 37.

expectation of this study's aim to demonstrate how the spirit of fraternal friendship between Muslims and Christians, as inspired in the document, penetrates the inter-religious landscape in Sabah.

The data and information were analyzed using descriptive analysis by highlighting the accommodative relationship between Muslims and Christians in the mixed-faith family and the open-minded attitude in allowing mosque and church to be built together in a similar vicinity. The analysis is based on triangulating information from field reports, transcription of interviews, and pictures taken during the fieldwork.

The Muslim-Christian Relations in Sabah

The spirit of human fraternity appears to be relevant to the people in Sabah, one of the states in East Malaysia located on the northern part of Borneo Island. Based on The Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (MyCensus) 2020, Sabah is the second-largest population after Selangor, estimated at 3.9 million people in 2017 or 12.1 percent of the 32 million Malaysian population.⁴⁶ Since the Sabah census 2020 has not been formally released yet, the religion distribution is based on the 2010 census of 3.1 million people, which shows Islam constitutes 65.4%, Christianity 26.6%, and 8% of other religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Chinese folk religion and unknown).

The Sabah population reveals that Muslims indicate the highest number of population, followed by Christians, Buddhists, and those who stick to traditional religion or

⁴⁶ "Jumlah Penduduk Sabah Kedua Tertinggi," *Borneo Online*, 31 Oktober 2017, accessed January 15, 2021. <https://www.utusanborneo.com.my/2017/10/31/jumlah-penduduk-sabah-kedua-tertinggi>; Shazni Awang Samat, "Planning of Muslim Worship Place (MWP) in Sabah Case Study: District of Penampang," Thesis Master of Science (Built Environment), Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2020, 2.

animist (the term used by the local people to those who have no religion), with the ratio of 63:37 (Muslims and non-Muslim). The 2010 Malaysian census revealed the total population was 28.3 million, and the percentage was distributed by religion; Muslims 61.3%, Buddhists 19.8%, Christians 9.2%, Hindus 6.3%, and others 3.4%.⁴⁷ In this regard, Abdul Hakim Mohad et al. characterize the Muslim-Christian relations in Malaysia as majority-minority and superior-inferior interaction.⁴⁸ Such a relationship might be applicable in the Malaysian context, yet it is still arguable when discussing the Muslim-Christian relations in the inter-religious context in Sabah.

Sabah boasts three characteristics beneficial for studying variation across religious denominations. Firstly, the state primarily reflects Malaysia's religious composition, with slightly higher percentages of Christians. As mentioned above, Christianity has become the second-largest religion that the people of Sabah professed after Islam. Secondly, Sabah is a well-equipped religious training institution for both faiths of Islam and Christianity. This phenomenon can be seen with an Islamic training centre or *Dakwah* training centre in the districts of Kundasang, Kudat, Keningau, and Lahad Datu, as well as Christian mission training centres such as Bundu Tuhan Retreat Centre at Kundasang, Tatal Retreat Centre at Keningau, Kionsom Baptist Retreat Centre at Kota Kinabalu, Haleluyah Retreat Centre at Tamparuli. Finally, Sabah's long history of religious tolerance has facilitated open religious practice.

Islam and Christianity are two major religions for most people in Sabah, not only those living in urban areas. It is also the religion for those living in rural areas in the internal division of Sabah. The Christianization of the

⁴⁷ "Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal," accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index>.

⁴⁸ Abd Hakim et al., "Muslim-Christian Relations in Malaysia," 348.

indigenous people, especially the communities of Kadazandusun and Murut, in the interior of Sabah was more successful than any attempt at spreading Islam.⁴⁹ Thus, religions play a vital role in grouping people of different ethnicities and cultures in Sabah. This grouping or ethnic dichotomy in Sabah can be categorized into three main groups, i.e., Muslim Bumiputeras, non-Muslim Bumiputeras, and non-Bumiputera. These categorizations differ from the plural society in West Malaysia, which focuses more on Malay Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera, the Chinese, and Indians. This difference exists in Sabah because not all Bumiputeras are Muslims, unlike Malay Bumiputera in West Malaysia. The Muslim Bumiputera in Sabah is not similar to the Malay Bumiputera, although both are associated with Islam. The Muslim Bumiputeras consist of various ethnic groups such as Suluk, Brunei, Bisaya, and Idahan. They are still intensely practising their customs, which are slightly different from the Malay culture.

It is essential to differentiate the term Muslim Bumiputera in Sabah from Malay Bumiputera in West Malaysia. The relationship we discuss in this paper refers to Muslim Bumiputera with non-Muslim Bumiputera. The term non-Muslim Bumiputera (or, to be precise non-Malay Bumiputera) refers to Christian Bumiputera. Therefore, the background of religious diversity in Sabah, which is most likely represented by Muslim-Christian relations, is considered unique because religion and ethnicity overlap and do not represent specific communities. Identity through religions does not apply to some indigenous groups of Sabah, such as Kadazandusun, Murut, and Rungus, although they are known as non-Muslim Bumiputera and predominantly Christian

⁴⁹ Mat Zin Mat Kib, "Christianization in Sabah and the Development of Indigenous Communities: A Historical Study," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 77(1) (2004), 63.

followers. However, small numbers converted to Islam mainly because of a mass campaign of conversion in the 1970s⁵⁰ or getting married to a Muslim spouse or other non-inter-relational factors of self-study, media influence, and so forth.⁵¹

Comparing West and East Malaysia's religious communities, the situation and the ethnic dichotomies are slightly different. The West Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) community occupies a separate ethno-religious identity known as Malay-Muslims, Chinese-Buddhist, and Indian-Hindus. Chong notes that ethnic identity is often associated with religion, which discusses cultural matters bound to include religious issues.⁵² The West Malaysia situation is also identical with the location they live. The people generally concentrated in one area, i.e., the Muslim-Malays in rural areas, Chinese (Buddhist and Christians) in urban areas, and Hindu-Indians in estates. Unlike the religious communities in Sabah, the historical factor had little impact on demographic formation because the British did not group the people according to their economic functions as they did in Peninsular Malaysia. The 'break and rule' system was not practiced in Sabah, and this created a more diverse and frequent interaction among the communities of different ethnicities and religions in Sabah.⁵³ Therefore, the religious communities in Sabah, predominantly Muslims and Christians, are not

⁵⁰ Siaw Fung Chong, "Can Allah and *Tuhan* Not Be One?": Overcoming Issues and Challenges of Muslim-Christian Relations among Malaysian," Final Paper for Intercultural Theologies Course at Princeton Theological Seminary Spring 2016. "Discussed Issues Related to Muslim-Christian Relations in Malaysia and Propose Model of Engagement," 2016, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://www.academia.edu/>, 5.

⁵¹ Suraya Sintang, "Peaceful Co-Existence in Religious Diversity in Sabah, Malaysia," *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: Arts & Humanities - Psychology* 14(1) (2014), 69.

⁵² Chong, "Can Allah and *Tuhan* Not Be One?", 7.

⁵³ Suraya, "Peaceful Co-Existence in Religious Diversity", 68.

separate entities since they live in the same village and city and regularly engage in economy, culture, and politics.

The state of Muslim-Christian relations in Sabah can also be understood considering the sensitive issue of the Catholic using the word 'Allah' in the Malay version article published in the *Herald* in 2010. The case had evoked controversy and social dissatisfaction in Malaysian society. However, the two religious' communities in Sabah have managed to handle the strain situation with mature and friendly manners. Although this issue has resulted in religious vandalism in a few churches and mosques in West Malaysia, no such incidents have occurred in Sabah.⁵⁴ It was neither impact on Muslim-Christians' relations in Sabah nor adverse reactions from both religious communities.⁵⁵ The social dissatisfaction continued to happen in West Malaysia in 2014 and 2015 when two incidents were reported involving the protest over the church construction in a Muslim area⁵⁶ and the incident which demanded the Christians to remove a symbol of a cross in the exterior building of the shop lot churches.⁵⁷ These two cases have never been reported in Sabah, although there are enormous church buildings and

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵⁵ Abd Hakim M. et al., "Understanding The Christian Community Stance towards the Muslim Community in Sabah: After the Ban on the Usage of the Term Allah," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7(8) (2017), 459. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v7-i8/3248>.

⁵⁶ Pathma Subramaniam, "Fearing 'Christianisation', Local NGO Wants Construction of New Church Stopped," *Malay Mail*, 2 Nov 2014, accessed February 13, 2021. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2014/11/02>.

⁵⁷ Today World, "Legality of Churches Does Not Arise under Constitution, Says Interfaith Council," 2015, accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/legality-churches-does-not-arise-under-constitution-says-interfaith-council>.

shop lot churches with the cross symbol typically seen in many places in Sabah.

Therefore, the Muslims and Christians in Sabah can be characterized as brothers and sisters and inspired to be an example of fraternal friendship, different from the superior-inferior relationship. The fraternal friendship in Sabah inter-religious context can be attributed to these attitudes and outlooks; capable of expressing a genuine attitude of respect towards other religions, committed to nurturing peace in society, open to differences, and willing to live together in a similar vicinity. In a case study in the Keningau district, this paper highlights two points of discussion; the accommodative relationship between Muslims and Christian in the mixed-faith family and their open-minded attitude towards mosque and church being built together next to each other in their neighbourhood.

Result and Discussion

1. Accommodative Relationship between Muslims and Christians in the Mixed-Faith Families

The Bumiputeras, both Muslims and Christians, are the fellow native settlers of the land in Sabah who have engaged in interfaith and intercultural relations. The accommodative relationship between the two followers can be expressed when they attain a sense of harmony with their environment. Sociologists use accommodation to describe a process by which competing and conflicting individuals and groups adjust their relationships to overcome the difficulties that arise in competition and infringement of conflict.⁵⁸ It means merely adjusting oneself to the new environment; as such, having a mixed-

⁵⁸ "Accommodation: Meaning, Nature and Characteristics of Accommodation," accessed February 4, 2021. <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/sociology/social-interaction/accommodation-meaning-nature-and-characteristics-of-accommodation/31275>.

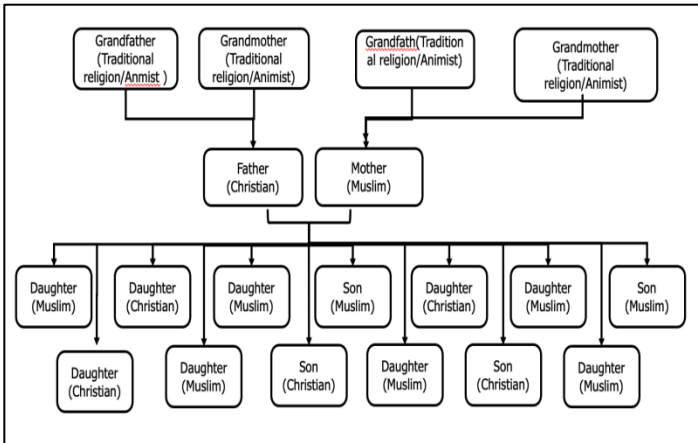
faith family is one of the cases requiring adjustment to the new environment as it involves cultural and religious boundaries.

The fieldwork study in the Keningau district, the biggest town in the interior division of Sabah, which was carried out from September 2020 until January 2021, found that most of the local people or indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah have mixed-faith families. The mixed-faith families in which the parents are from different religious backgrounds,⁵⁹ in the sense of representing combinations of any two or even more of the following five faiths – traditional religion (traditional religion/animist), Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and Buddhism.

Several case studies have been presented in these figures below in the form of the mixed-faith family tree as collected from the interviews with two selected local people at several villages in Keningau.

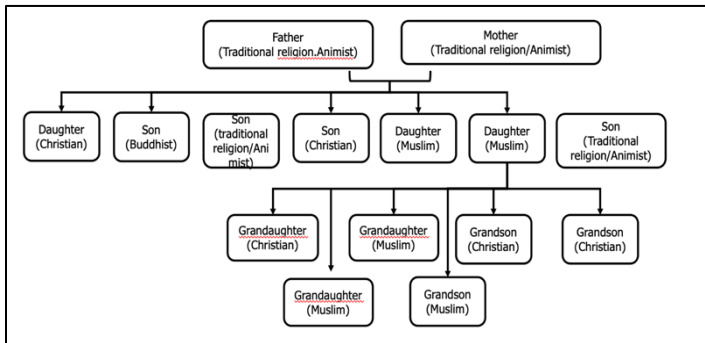
⁵⁹ Elisabeth Arweck and Eleanor Nesbitt, "Plurality at Close Quarters: Mixed-Faith Families in the UK," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3(1) (2010), 155. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187489210X12597396698663>.

Figure 1: Family tree of the mixed-faith family



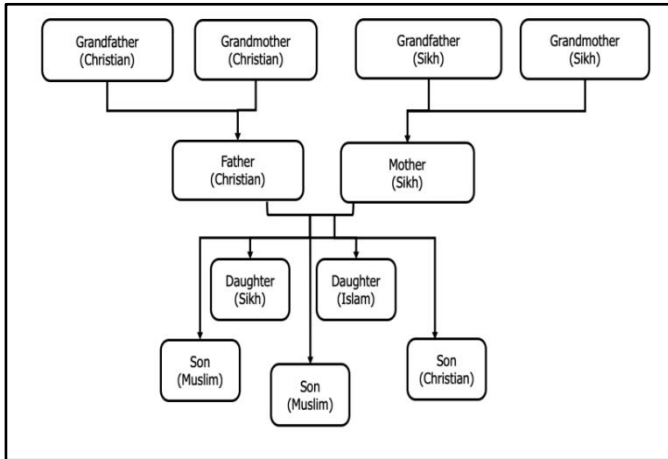
Source: Dusun ethnic group from Kampung Riting, Apin-Apin, Keningau. Fieldwork was conducted on September 12, 2020

Figure 2: Family tree of the mixed-faith family



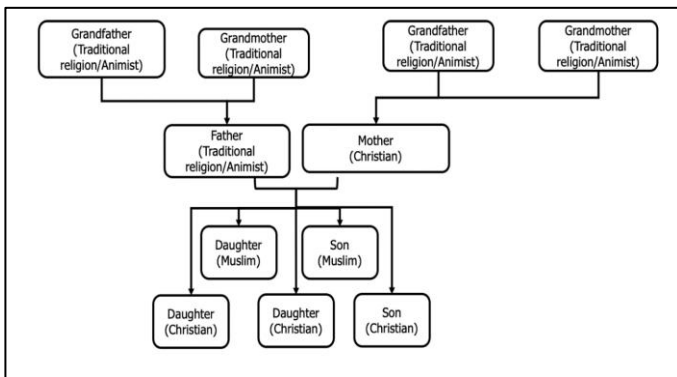
Source: Dusun ethnic group from Kampung Toboh Laut, Keningau. Fieldwork was conducted on September 12, 2020

Figure 3: Family tree of the mixed-faith family



Source: Dusun ethnic group from Kampung Kepayan Baru, Keningau. Fieldwork was conducted on December 28, 2020

Figure 4: Family tree of the mixed-faith family



Source: Dusun ethnic group from Kampung Buang Sayang, Keningau. Fieldwork was conducted on December 28, 2020

Figures 1-4 depict the trees of four mixed-faith families in Keningau who practice two to four religions.

Three different religions are shown in cases 1, 3, and 4 (Traditional religion or animist, Islam, and Christianity; Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity). Case 2 comprises four different religions (Traditional religion or animist, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism). Islam and Christianity are the two most dominant religions adhered to by members of the mixed-faith family among the indigenous people in Keningau. Muslims and Christians have space for regular encounters and engage in inter-cultural activities that they share as one family.

In this regard, this study conceives the Muslim and Christian relation as accommodative interaction as they sometimes express their consensus in certain aspects on matters related to the others' faith. In contrast, in other circumstances, they might disagree with the others. Negotiation skills and regular engagement are used in accommodative interaction in which the two parties are sometimes in conflict and have consensus at other times. The situation typically happens in the mixed-faith family of new Muslims in their relationship with non-Muslim families of origin. The previous finding by Suraya and Khadijah asserts that the non-Muslim family agreed with the decision made by his daughter to marry the Muslim spouse and gave permission to embrace Islam to legalize the marriage according to Shariah law.⁶⁰ However, the non-Muslim family did not accept the change and decision made by the new Muslim woman to wear the hijab, as it is noticeable to others. The accommodative interaction indicates that the non-Muslim family can tolerate specific religious obligations in Islam. Yet, it is hard for them to compromise the other thing when they feel it humiliates them.

⁶⁰ Suraya Sintang and Khadijah Mohd. Khambali @ Hambali, "Double Marginality in New Muslims' Relationship With Born Muslims and Non-Muslims," *International Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 4(3) (2018), 156. <https://doi.org/10.20469/ijhss.4.10004-3>.

This study also interviewed selected local people from mixed-faith families to get information on their experiences of living together and their relationship with their different family members. The initial findings show that they have to adapt to the situation of living together with family members of other religions. They have also gone through different forms of relationship: contentious or supportive. The interview with informant 1 (Amirah, not a real name), living at Kampung Bariawa, Keningau, a Dusun ethnic group, shared her experience of having a supportive relationship with her non-Muslim family of origin:

I was a Christian before and had converted to Islam when I decided to get married to my husband. I have four siblings, and three of them have converted to Islam. My parent remains Christians. My grandfather and grandmother converted to Islam after being cured of the sick with the traditional Islamic treatment. In terms of my relationship with my parent, they are very cooperative and respect Muslim food. My family does not eat non-halal food (particularly pork) at home. They choose to eat pork at the restaurant which serves non-halal food.⁶¹

Another case is with the second Dusun informant (Kasmah, not a real name) from Kampung Riting, Apin-Apin Keningau, who shared her story of having a contentious relationship with his non-Muslim family origin:

My parent is Christians, and my brother and I choose to embrace Islam when we get married to Muslim spouses. Only two of us are

⁶¹ Amirah (not real name), Informant 1, Muslim convert. Interviewed on September 13, 2021 at Kampung Riting Apin-Apin Keningau, Sabah.

Muslims out of eight siblings who are Christians with different denominations. Five are Christian Catholics, and another is Christian *Sidang Injil Borneo* (SIB). My late father protested my decision to convert to Islam and asked my husband to pay the ransom (the local people call it *sogit*) and pay RM1000 as a refund for the penalty of changing my religion. However, after a year, my father gradually accepted us when he saw me, and my husband was always taking care of his needs and supporting his life.⁶²

The two cases above are examples of so many other cases of mixed-faith families in the district of Keningau. The religions of Islam and Christianity are the two dominant religions that form a mixed-faith family. From the above cases, the study found that the relationship between Muslims and Christians in the mixed-faith family is often in contact in daily life. As one family with members from different religions, they sometimes conflict because they disagree with the religious boundaries. While at other times, they compromise to deal with the changing situation as they are one family member of different religions and always there to help and support the family's needs. As such, the life experience of these two cases of the mixed-faith family appears to be accommodative relationships as Christian families adjust their relationships to overcome the difficulties or conflicts with the Muslim family member to live in harmony with them in the new environment.

⁶² Kasmah (not real name) Informant 2, Muslim convert. Interviewed on September 12, 2021 at Kampung Riting Apin-Apin Keningau, Sabah.

2. An Open-Minded Attitude to the Construction of a Mosque and Church Together

Togetherness is the best term to describe the Muslim-Christian relations in Sabah as they are often in the condition of getting regular engagement. As they are not in competition for dominance and not a separate community with differences, the togetherness also reflects the sharing space of building houses of worship. The ethnographic survey in Keningau found several villages and locations where the mosque was built close to the church.

Based on the participant observation technique, the first location that we have found is in the central town of Keningau, which lies the Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier, around 100 meters from the mosque or Masjid Ar-Rahim and shop lots, as shown in Figure 5. The Roman Catholic Mission was vital in building the Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier. It was led by Bishop Monsignor August Wachter, who first hung out, made friends, and worked with the local people, then identified a site to build a church. Starting from the first step, around November 7, 1938, Monsignor Wachter took a second visit to Keningau with two priests, Father Dulcer and Father Sim. At that time, they had land to build the Cathedral as it is now⁶³. They did build not only the Cathedral but also the school, which was completed in January 1940. The Roman Catholic Mission played an essential role in building the Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier and school, which served the local community's needs.

⁶³ Rev. Father David Richard Gasikol, Priest at Cathedral St. Francis Xavier, Keningau. Interviewed on January 8, 2021 at Cathedral St. Francis Xavier Keningau, Sabah.

Figure 5: Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier and Masjid Ar-Rahim



Source: The township of Keningau. Fieldwork was conducted on September 12, 2020

However, it temporarily stopped services two years later, in 1942, when the Japanese invaded and occupied North Borneo (now Sabah). It was not until late September and early October in 1945, Keningau was finally liberated by the Australian 9th Division. Rev. Father Grant set the task of reconstructing the church and school by putting new quarters for teachers. Though the church runs the local mission, students from different races and religions attended the school. It has Dusun, Murut, Chinese, Sino, Bajau, Eurasian, and European students. They sit together as brothers and sisters, which shows a perfect example of friendship in the small town of the interior. In October 1953, the Governor of North Borneo, Sir Ralph and Lady Hone visited St. Francis Xavier and was impressed with the students from different backgrounds in one school. Among the early local

teachers are Edmund Ottingil and Catherine Sodomon, the daughter of the late OKK Sodomon of Bingkor.⁶⁴

According to Father David, a priest in charge of the Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier, this cathedral represents a symbol of the administrative centre of the Catholic church.⁶⁵ Keningau is one of the three dioceses in Sabah, besides two more dioceses at Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan. Keningau Diocese covers the whole areas in the interior division, the district of Tenom, Tambunan, Sook, Nabawan, Sipitang, Kuala Penyu, and Beaufort. That is why it has been called the Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier because the capacity of coverage of the whole churches of those districts is under the Cathedral administration. Most of the Christians in Keningau are professed by the ethnic groups of Kadazandusun, Murut, Chinese, and immigrants from Indonesia and the Philippines. Other than the Catholic church, there are also denominations from the Pentecostal church, such as Seventh Day Adventist, *Sidang Injil Borneo* (Borneo Evangelical Mission), *Gereja Yesus Benar* (The True Jesus Church), Anglican, and so on. There is also the religion of Islam, which has been significantly established in Keningau for a long time, in a relatively quiet numerous here and a small percentage from Buddhism and Hinduism.

In addition to the Cathedral, *Masjid Ar-Rahim* is a neighbouring mosque. According to Ustaz Muhammad Amirul Hadi,⁶⁶ a designated *imam* on duty to lead the congregational prayer said that this masjid was built on

⁶⁴ Abednigo Chow Yau Shung, "Heritage and Legacy of St Francis Xavier K ' Gau," *Daily Express Online*, May 4, 2013, accessed February 15, 2021, <http://www.dailyexpress.com.my/>.

⁶⁵ Rev. Father David Richard, a priest at the Cathedral of St. Francis Xavier. Interviewed on January 8, 2021.

⁶⁶ Mohammad Amirulhadi bin Haidon, Imam Masjid ar-Rahim, Keningau. Interviewed on January 8, 2021 at Masjid ar-Rahim, Keningau, Sabah.

May 3, 1970, and officially inaugurated by Tun Datu Mustapha Bin Datu Harun, a former Chief Minister of Sabah (1967-1975). It was believed that the Muslim community had begun after several Dusun Muslim families migrated to Keningau from the districts of Ranau and Tambunan in the 1940s and 1950s. When the government started establishing many agencies, such as Keningau Islamic Training Centre and Teacher Training Institute, the number of Muslim communities grew significantly. Most Malay Muslim Bumiputera from West Malaysia work as civil servants from these two institutes, and some get married to the local people. Since then, the landscape of Islamic growth in Keningau had drastically changed, with the establishment of numerous villages with majority Muslim residents such as Kampung Kota Ayangan, Kampung Kota Bayangan, Kampung Tudon Baru, Kampung Minawo, and Kampung Paganatan.⁶⁷

The existence of a mosque is believed to be a symbol of constancy to the greatness of Islam in a particular area because the mosque's construction usually comes together with a minaret, which is viewed as a tower with a sign of power and domination. A minaret is one of the essential elements of a mosque and Islamic architecture. It is a place where the *muezzin* goes there to recite *azan*.⁶⁸ As a social phenomenon, *azan* unifies and regulates the Muslim community by marking the times for prayer and creating a religious context that obligates a specific spiritual response.⁶⁹ In the locality, the mosque's construction has been seen not suitable for the non-Muslim environment as they believe that a loudspeaker of *azan* is inconvenient for non-Muslims. It had been reported on *Malaysiakini*'s web

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Shazni, "Planning of Muslim Worship Place (MWP)," 5.

⁶⁹ Tong Soon Lee, "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore," *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader* 43(1) (2013), 199–208. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203036037>.

page on the 'Azan controversy' that non-Muslims complained to the mosque to decrease the volume of azan during the prayer time. They complained about the excessive volume of the azan prayer.⁷⁰ The use of loudspeakers to moderate the loudness of azan evoked social issues concerning Muslims in several localities in West Malaysia.

However, looking at the scenario in Sabah, particularly at Keningau, the volume of azan has not caused any disruptions that have jeopardized Muslim-Christian relations. This scenario can be observed in constructing the house of worship in Keningau, which included both a mosque and a church. From the participant observation, apart from the two places of worship in the township (Figure 5), several villages in Keningau have this religious landscape. Figures 6, 7 and 8 show the villages with churches and mosques near each other; Kampung Riting Apin-Apin (St. Anthony church with the neighbouring mosque of Masjid Ukhuwah), Kampung Toboh Laut (St. Mary Catholic church with the neighbouring mosque of Masjid Ar-Rasyid) and also Kampung Ayangan (St. Paul Catholic church with the adjacent mosque of Masjid Al-Malik).

⁷⁰ "Azan Controversy: Who's Fault?," *Malaysiakini*, accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/153470>.

Figure 6: St. Anthony Catholic church and Masjid Ukhuwah



Source: Kampung Riting, Apin-Apin Keningau. Fieldwork was conducted on December 28, 2020

Figure 7: St. Mary Catholic Church and Masjid Ar-Rasyid



Source: Kampung Toboh Laut, Keningau. Fieldwork conducted on December 28, 2020

Figure 8: St. Paul Catholic church and Masjid Al-Malik



Source: Kampung Ayangan, Keningau. Fieldwork was conducted on December 28, 2020

In the meantime, the non-Muslims neither lodged any complaints regarding the loudspeaker of the *azan* nor did they have any feeling of anxiety with the proximity of the houses of worship. In a similar case, the Muslim neighbours have never against any inconvenient cause from the bell ringing during regular Sunday prayer or any religious activities at the church, such as Ash Wednesday on the season of Lent, Eucharist prayer, etc. According to Mr. Rufus bin Gahin,⁷¹ the Native Chief Representative responsible for monitoring the well-being of folks' village at Keningau, no matter what religion they believe, they are considerably flexible as they respect the other religious practice. They used to be neighbours with the other faith as they live in the same village. They do not care much if the church and mosque are being built together side by side, as everyone is concerned about his religious belief.

⁷¹ Mr. Rufus bin Gahin, Native Chief Representative. Interviewed on September 13, 2020, at the office of Mahkamah Anak Negeri (Native Court), Keningau, Sabah.

He said that "no incident involving religious disputes" had been reported to him.⁷²

Both Muslims and Christians are open-minded towards the houses of worship being built together next to each other. They are accustomed to tolerant practices and affectionate to the others as brothers and sisters as they used to be surrounded by the others' religious places of worship. This shows that the people in Sabah have good social relationships despite the differences in religions

The Spirit of Human Fraternity Penetrates the Inter-Religious Landscape in Sabah

The reality of joint common ground between Muslims and Christians, as aspired by the *Document on Human Fraternity*, reflected the relationship of the religious communities in Sabah. In other words, the spirit of the human fraternity on the call for social friendship and universal love penetrates the inter-religious landscape in Sabah. The fraternal friendship between Muslims and Christians conceives universal love, a sense of belonging, and deep relationships as brothers and sisters. These have been demonstrated through open-mindedness toward the places of worship built together in their community and accommodating family members of different religions. These positive values have contributed to the religious tolerance in Sabah. It is not Antagonistic Tolerance (AT) as Robert M. Hayden et al. assert⁷³:

That communities who define themselves and each other as Self and Other primarily on religious grounds, and who live intermingled but usually discourage intermarriage. Such communities compete for 'dominance', indicated by control over key religious sites; a

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Robert M. Hayden et al., *Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites and Spaces, Antagonistic Tolerance* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 1.

change in dominance is embodied in a change in these sites. These communities are 'tolerant' because their members usually live peacefully close to each other. Still, they are antagonistic in that they continue to define themselves as separate communities with different and often competing interests. Antagonistic Tolerance is thus a mode of competitive sharing of space which is also seen in the religious sites in such a mixed environment.

In contrast to the religious tolerance in Sabah, where the communities can be described as neither they fight for supremacy nor they are in the mode of competitive sharing of space. Instead, they have practised tolerance in matters related to living together in one similar environment. They also have shown a good practice between new Muslims and their relationship with the non-Muslim family of origin. They are getting regular contact with each other from different walks of life and are willing to share space to build the house of worship next to each other. With this kind of situation, the new model of tolerance can be identified in Sabah's inter-religious landscape, which is identical to the accommodative relationship and open-minded attitude of Muslims and Christians.

Sabah provides a vast space for people to intermingle with others, leading them to interact regularly across boundaries. In some instances, the engagement is too close as they contact members of other faith in the mixed-faith family. They have also been exposed to others since childhood through their mixed-faith family or living in the same village. Such an experience has resulted in a friendly and accommodative relationship between Muslims and Christians. They tend to get to know others closely, not only their names but also the others' cultures and beliefs. Thus, the people in Sabah, both Muslims and Christians,

have always been associated with the popular image of 'unity in diversity'. They are renowned for being tolerant and affectionate to love the others as brothers and sisters and willing to accommodate and not socially awkward the others' differences.

The people in Sabah live in harmony with tolerance as they extensively practice intermarriage, live together in the same village, tend to share the similarities they have in common and are willing to accept differences that exist. Although they identify with different religious affiliations, they do not define themselves as separate communities. They make others their neighbours and intermingle with the others in various places in the workspace. In the village, they live peacefully together near each other. As a result, interfaith engagement occurs within the micro circle of mixed-faith families and the macro inter-communal relation between Muslims and Christians. Such an engagement has led to deep relationships as brothers and sisters as they are frequently in a state of daily interaction with one another, live as a neighbour and participate in inter-cultural activities together.

Therefore, togetherness is the best word to describe Sabah's Muslim and Christian relations. They are connected in one family and have a sense of belonging as one community. They visit and respect each other although they believe in different religions. This closeness is shown through their accommodative during interaction with friends or relatives of different faiths. It is ordinary for non-Muslims to greet by saying '*Assalamualaikum*' to their Muslim encounters and uttering the Islamic word '*Astagha*' in daily interaction, whether with Muslim or non-Muslim friends.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the close bond between Muslims and Christians in Sabah is forged by their shared way of life and common interests. They have been culturally

⁷⁴ Suraya, "Peaceful Co-Existence," 69.

integrated through sharing the same dialects or languages, having the same family relation, sharing the same culture, and doing business in the same venues, i.e., *tamu*. This intercultural communication between Muslims and Christians has shaped the positive values of cooperation, accommodating and being open toward the variances. The relationship between family members and neighbours seems friendly and close despite accepting different religions. The findings of a study on Muslim and non-Muslim social cohesion in Tenom and Tambunan, two districts in Sabah's interior division, are almost identical to those of this study.⁷⁵

The previous study showed that there were several indicators of social cohesion from the daily basis interaction. For instance, eating, staying, and celebrating festivities together, attending a funeral, preparing halal food for Muslims during fasting in Ramadhan and performing prayers at the home of the other party of a different religion. The result of the research also showed that the attitude of acceptance and accommodating recorded the highest response and the willingness of believers of various faiths to deal with differences and conflicts harmoniously. This attitude fosters social cohesion as existing differences easily compromise them.

Therefore, the people in Sabah are not only in a harmonious life with religious tolerance, but they are also in the state of *muhibah*. As such, Haslina Ibrahim describes the situation of harmonious living together in the diversity as *muhibah*.⁷⁶ The term derived from the Arabic word

⁷⁵ Suraya Sintang et al., "Kesepaduan Sosial Dalam Hubungan Antara Agama Di Pedalaman Sabah," *Borneo International Journal* 2(1) (2019), 14.
<https://majmuah.com/journal/index.php/bij/article/view/33>.

⁷⁶ Haslina Ibrahim, "*Muhibah* for a Sustainable Framework of Inter-Religious Relation in Malaysia," presented at a Joint Seminar between The Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion, KIRKH, IIUM and Cismor, Doshisha University, Kyoto on

hubb means mutual love or the state of loving each other. It is love that puts off hatred and anger. Haslina further explains that *muhibah* is a beautiful social philosophy compared to tolerance because tolerance is a colonial word that signifies a superior-inferior relationship.⁷⁷ Contrary to *muhibah*, the term symbolizes coexistence, togetherness, kinship, love and affection, sympathy, empathy, and respect. *Muhibah* is built based on agreement and sincerity of accepting each other among the Malaysians. Instead of tolerance, *muhibah* became the heritage and spirit of all Malaysians, including the Sabah people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the spirit of human fraternity has symbolised the fraternal friendship between Muslims and Christians in Sabah. It has resulted in being a model of unity as they have been friends for a long time and continue to be good friends to show the importance of living in harmony in Sabah. The fraternal friendship between Muslims and Christians in Sabah conceives through universal love, a sense of belonging, a willingness to accept differences, and having a deep relationship as brothers and sisters.

These positive values have contributed to the new model of tolerance in the inter-religious landscape in Sabah, which is identical to the accommodative relationship and open-minded attitude of Muslims and Christians, as discussed in the case study in Keningau. They are tolerant because they are not a separate community with differences. Instead, they are one community willing to live and work together to unite the nation. Thus, the legacy of common ground in Abrahamic religions, love your neighbour, urged the two believers to

"Shariah, Governance And Interreligious Relations", 26th October 2013, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2013, 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*.

sustain their relationship for the endless effort to promote world peace.

Acknowledgement

This paper is an output of an FRGS research funded by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia (MoHE), through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme FRGS/1/2019/SSI05/UMS/02/1, FRG0527-1/2019.

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