



e-ISSN: 2550-1569

Available online at  
<https://myjms.mohe.gov.my/index.php/IJSMS>

International Journal of Service Management and Sustainability  
10(1) 2025, 106 – 120.

**International  
Journal of Service  
Management and  
Sustainability  
(IJSMSust)**

# Bridging Cultures: A Case Study on the Assimilation Dynamics in Mixed Marriages Between Malays and Non-Malays in Sarawak

Ceaser Dealwis<sup>1</sup>, Aiza Bte Johari<sup>2\*</sup>, Affidah Bte Morni<sup>3</sup>, and Adib Sarkawi<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, Sarawak

---

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 31 January 2025  
Revised 28 February 2025  
Accepted 5 March 2025  
Online first  
Published 31 March 2025

### Keywords:

Chinese  
Dayak  
Islam  
Mixed Marriage  
Convert  
Assimilation

DOI: 10.24191/ijsms.v10i1.24218

### Citation in APA:

Dealwis, C., Johari, A., Morni, A., & Sarkawi, A. (2025). Bridging cultures: A case study on the assimilation dynamics in mixed marriages between Malays and non-Malays in Sarawak *International Journal of Service Management and Sustainability*, 10(1), 106 – 120.

---

## ABSTRACT

This study employed qualitative research methods, including interviews and observations, to explore the cultural and linguistic practices of Dayak Muslim and Chinese Muslim converts in Sarawak, East Malaysia. The primary objective was to assess whether these Muslim converts had integrated with the Malay majority in Sarawak and how much they had preserved their distinct ethnic identities. According to Barry's Model of Acculturation (1992), assimilation occurs when individuals adopt the cultural norms of a dominant or host culture, while integration happens when they adopt the host culture's norms while retaining their cultural identity. To date, no research has investigated the types of assimilation in mixed marriages between Malays and non-Malays in Sarawak. Data were collected from Dayak Muslim and Chinese Muslim converts in Kuching, Serian, and Samarahan divisions, focusing on language use in family, workplace, and entertainment contexts. Additionally, the study examined other assimilation factors, such as eating habits, clothing, festival celebrations, and self-identity. The findings revealed that Chinese Muslim converts in Sarawak tended to preserve a stronger cultural vitality than Dayak Muslim converts. These two groups of converts exhibited varying levels of assimilation regarding the use of the local Malay language and the adoption of Malay/Muslim cultural practices. While Dayak Muslim converts seemed to lose a significant part of their cultural heritage upon conversion, Chinese Muslim converts maintained a positive outlook on their ethno-cultural and ethno-linguistic identities. This challenges the perception that converting to Islam inevitably leads to becoming Malay and losing other cultural aspects.

---

<sup>2\*</sup> Corresponding author. E-mail address: [aiza@uitm.edu.my](mailto:aiza@uitm.edu.my)

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sarawak, located on the island of Borneo, is the largest of Malaysia's three regions. Known as the "Land of the Hornbill," it has a population of 2,509,500 people and 37 ethnic groups. The largest groups include the Iban (28.8%), Chinese (23.83%), Malays (22.9%), Bidayuh (8%), other Bumiputera, mainly Orang Ulu (6.3%), Melanau (4.9%), non-Malaysians (4.7%), and others (0.6%), such as Indians, Punjabis, Javanese, and Eurasians. Sarawak is a secular state, as outlined in its state constitution. According to the 2022 census, Christianity is the predominant religion in Sarawak, practiced by 50.1% of the population, followed by Islam (34.2%), Buddhism (12.8%), atheism (2.2%), and other religions, including Hinduism, Sikhism, and Bahá'í (0.5%) (Department of Statistics, Sarawak, 2022).

The Dayaks, traditionally a Christian group, still have some members who adhere to animist beliefs (Minos, 1982). Before the Brooke era (1839–1945), the Dayaks were primarily animists who constantly feared evil spirits, with their beliefs and perceptions shaped by omens in the jungle. After converting to Christianity, they began leading lives free from fear, embracing peace and hope. Early literature about the Dayaks was written by Christian missionaries (Dealwis, 2010). The number of Dayak Muslim converts has been growing, and their association, Persatuan Dayak Muslims Kebangsaan, has an online presence to share their experiences, perceptions, and activities.

The Chinese first arrived in Sarawak's Bau district in the 1830s from Sambas and Pontianak in Kalimantan to work in gold mining. By 1887, about 4,000 Hakka Chinese arrived in Bau (Lee, 1964). Large-scale Chinese migration began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with Rajah Charles Brooke recognizing their industriousness and encouraging their settlement throughout Sarawak to aid development. Initially, the Chinese were farmers, except in Bau, where they were mining gold. Over time, they expanded into commercial farming, business, timber, petroleum, and gas industries. The Chinese population in Sarawak grew steadily, becoming the second-largest community after the Dayaks. Beyond economic dominance, the Chinese became politically active by the late 1950s (Baring-Gould et al., 1909). While most Chinese in Sarawak practice a mix of Buddhism, Taoism, Chinese folk religions, and Christianity, the state's Islamisation agenda, set within its ethnic and religious diversity, has led to a growing Chinese Muslim population, supported by the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) Sarawak Branch's dakwah (evangelization) efforts.

## 2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Malaysia practices three types of marriage law, Civil, Islamic, and Customary. The Civil Law regarding marriage (Marriage and Divorce) 1976 (Act 164) was enacted according to the English Common Law and applied to non-Muslims in Malaysia. On the other hand, Muslim marriages are handled by the state's Islamic law -Shariah law. Marriage according to customary laws is meant for the *pribumis* in Malaysia, including the Dayaks in Sarawak. However, the marriage must also be registered under Act 164 for marriage validity and to be recognised legally.

Mixed marriages are a common phenomenon in Sarawak which consists of 37 multiethnic and multi-religious groups. Malays equate with Muslims in Malaysia and since Islam is the official religion of the country, a non-Muslim who contracts an exogamous marriage with a Malay must therefore convert to Islam, hence the identity *masuk Islam masuk Melayu*. According to Moustafa (2018), the issue of Islamic conversion is a sensitive one that has always intertwined with identity politics in Malaysia. The Malaysian Law does not recognise the interfaith marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. The command regarding the marriage of a non-Muslim to a Muslim as practiced in Malaysia based on commentaries by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1989:45):

*"If religion is at all a real influence in life to both parties or either party, a difference in this vital matter must affect the lives of both more profoundly than differences of birth, race, language or*

*position. It is therefore only right that parties to be married should have the same spiritual outlook. If two parties love each other, their outlook in the highest things of life must be the same."*

Suhaila Abdullah (2006) described Islamic conversion as a voluntary *ruhani* (Islamic spirituality) acceptance of the Islamic faith, thus it was very personal. A non-Muslim could do it privately or publicly; he or she must declare the *kalimah shahadah* (the Muslim testimony of faith) after understanding its meaning and accepting its message. The religious condition of the true conversion is the acceptance of the truth of Islam after knowledge, realization, confirmation, and voluntary declaration of *kalimah shahadah*. A 2020 review by Martinot and Ozalp highlighted that conversion to Islam was a gradual, deeply personal process, involving a sincere declaration of faith after understanding its meaning.

The Malaysian Federal Constitution defines a Malay as someone who practices Islam, speaks Malay, and follows Malay customs (Article 160.1). This definition is cultural, equating being Malay with being Muslim. According to Nagata (2011), Malay Adat (customs) covered various aspects of Malay Muslim life, including dress, housing, and etiquette, though it was most evident in major life ceremonies. Maryamah et al. (2023) further stated that the Malay custom was deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, functioning as a crucial identity marker for Malays, reflected in daily practices such as dress, housing, and etiquette, and became particularly prominent during major life ceremonies. Non-Malay individuals can join the Malay ethnic group through conversion to Islam, provided they adhere to these customs. Safran (2008) explained that to be considered Malay in Malaysia, a non-Muslim must convert to Islam, embodying the unwritten rule "masuk Islam, masuk Melayu."

According to Mujani et al., (2012), the estimated Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts was about 1% of the Malaysian Chinese population. The official statistic population was about 57221 Malaysian Chinese Muslims (Department of Statistics, 2020). No official data regarding the latest increased number of Chinese Muslims in Sarawak is available on the Malaysian Chinese Muslims Association (MACMA) Sarawak branch website sarawak@macma.my Various activities were organised for the members and their children by MACMA Sarawak. Muslim population in Sarawak is 32.4% of the total state population of 2,509,500.

## 2.1 Conceptual Framework

Barry's (1992) model of acculturation defined assimilation as the process of adopting the dominant culture, while integration allowed individuals to adopt the dominant culture without losing their own identity. Macionis (2008) explained that assimilation involved gradually adopting aspects like language, values, and relationships. Barry (1979, as cited in David & Dealwis, 2009) disputed that assimilation erased minority identities.

In Sarawak, Indian Muslims developed dual identities post-conversion, with older generations retaining Tamil heritage, while younger generations assimilated into Malay culture (David & Dealwis, 2009). Similarly, Dealwis (2019) found that Bidayuh converts in Peninsular Malaysia fully assimilated into the Malay community, losing their Bidayuh identity.

Assimilation is more common when both communities share a religion. David (2003) showed that the offspring of Pakistani Kelantanese unions assimilated smoothly, speaking the local dialect and integrating into the Kelantanese community. Lam (2006) explored how Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia adopted a Malay identity due to societal pressures, influenced by historical tensions between Malays and Chinese.

Chang (2023) discussed how Bruneians of Chinese Malay heritage navigated their identity, noting that Brunei's assimilation policy merged Bruneian identity with Malay Muslim identity. Bardis (1979, as cited in Chang, 2023) argued that groups with dual cultures often prioritized the dominant culture, as seen in Brunei where conversion to Islam resulted in full assimilation into Malay Muslim identity.

Suhaila Abdullah (2006) identified challenges faced by Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia, including identity crises and societal acceptance, often leading to emotional struggles, fear of losing their Chinese identity, and discrimination.

In conclusion, assimilation resulted in full integration into the dominant society, with the subordinate group internalizing the dominant culture (Swan et al., 2004).

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper adopts a qualitative research design to examine the cultural and linguistic practices of Dayak Muslim and Chinese Muslim converts in Sarawak, East Malaysia. The aim is to assess whether these Muslim converts have integrated into the Malay-majority community in Sarawak and to what extent they have maintained their ethnic identities.

The study utilized data gathered through semi-structured interviews and observations. The semi-structured interviews provided key insights into the types of assimilation experienced in mixed marriages between Malays and non-Malays in Sarawak. Data were collected from five Dayak Muslim converts and five Chinese Muslim converts across the Kuching, Serian, and Samarahan divisions in Sarawak, focusing on language use in the family, workplace, and entertainment domains. Other aspects of assimilation, such as eating habits, dressing, festival celebrations, and self-identity, were also explored. Observations conducted during home visits allowed researchers to closely examine language use in the home, eating habits, clothing choices, and festival celebrations.

A snowball sampling method was employed to identify the 10 participants, aged between 29 and 51, each with at least five years of conversion experience. A total of 25 interview sessions, amounting to 54 interview hours, were conducted over four months. To ensure participant confidentiality, all names used in this study were pseudonyms. Many of the participants were close friends and colleagues of the researchers, who extended invitations for home visits and observed Raya Aidil Fitri celebrations with their families and friends. The discussions were held in informal settings, such as over coffee and tea, either at the participants' homes or at locations arranged by the researchers, with each session lasting 45 minutes to an hour. Some participants accepted a token of appreciation from the researchers for their involvement in the study.

The semi-structured interviews aimed at addressing the following questions:

1. What language do you speak at home and your workplace? Is it important to speak your heritage language?
2. What are the choices of entertainment when marrying a Malay?
3. What are your dietary habits when marrying a Malay?
4. What are your clothing preferences when marrying a Malay?
5. What are your celebrations when marrying a Malay?
6. Do you consider yourself becoming more Malay when marrying a Malay? Why?

In addition, the research method employed a qualitative thematic analysis approach with an inductive framework to ensure that the findings were derived directly from the data rather than imposed by preceding theories. The data collection process which involved semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to express their thoughts and experiences in detail. No qualitative analysis software was used, but the researchers manually transcribed the recorded interviews. The responses were then systematically examined to identify recurring patterns, which were categorized under key thematic aspects based on emerging insights from the data.

The thematic analysis was used to identify, interpret, and report patterns within the data set to identify the key aspects of assimilation investigated and the extent of assimilation within the collected data. The analysis focused on the main elements (1) the language used at home (2) the types of entertainment (3) the types of food (4) the types of dressing (5) the types of festivals celebrated and (6) self-identity.

An inductive approach was also adopted, meaning that the themes were not predetermined but emerged organically from the data, ensuring that the analysis remained closely connected to participants' lived experiences. This approach enabled the researchers to explore the experiences and participants' perspectives while identifying the underlying factors influencing their actions and emotions. The study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the reasons behind particular occurrences and to represent the social and personal contexts in which these experiences were shaped.

Moreover, the manual coding process allowed for a more flexible and context-aware interpretation, ensuring that the nuances of human experiences were fully considered. By adopting this approach, the study successfully captured the personal, social, and cultural dimensions influencing the participants' perspectives, making it a valuable contribution to qualitative research.

#### 4.0 FINDINGS

Demographically, the study's participants include a mix of Dayak and Chinese Muslim converts of varying ages and places of origin and residence.

Table 1. Demography

	Dayak Converts	Chinese Converts
Respondent 1	36-year-old male, from Serian, residing in Kedah	
Respondent 2	47-year-old male, from Samarahan, living in Kuching	
Respondent 3	33-year-old female, from Bau, residing in Kuching	
Respondent 4	39-year-old female, from Kuching, living in Miri	
Respondent 5	51-year-old female from Kuching, residing in Johor	
Respondent 6		44-year-old male from Serian, living in Kuching
Respondent 7		37-year-old male from Kuching residing in Kuala Lumpur
Respondent 8		29-year-old male from Kuching living in Kuching
Respondent 9		35-year-old female from Bau, residing in Kuching
Respondent 10		48-year-old female from Samarahan, living in Shah Alam, Selangor.

The next part of the findings will present the six key aspects derived from the interview results. These include the language used at home, the types of entertainment, the kinds of food, the types of dressing, the types of festivals celebrated, and self-identity.

#### 4.1 Language Used at Home

Table 2. Language

Dayak	Chinese
<p>a) What language do you speak at home and your workplace?</p> <p>b) Is it important to maintain your heritage language?</p>	
<p>Respondent 1</p> <p>“I speak Malay at home because I’m staying with my Malay in-laws. At my workplace, I also speak Malay because most of my colleagues are Malay. Yes, it is important to keep our heritage language but I’m unable to do that as I’m far away from my community.”</p>	<p>Respondent 6</p> <p>“I speak Malay at home with my wife and Mandarin with my children. Sometimes I mix Chinese when speaking Malay. All my children attend Chinese schools and can speak Mandarin too.”</p>
<p>Respondent 2</p> <p>“Most of the time I speak Sarawak Malay dialect at home with my family and in-laws although at times we do mix with some English also. At the workplace, I speak Bidayuh with my Bidayuh colleagues, English and Malay with Chinese, Malay, and others... True it is important to speak my heritage language at home, but my children and in-laws are very comfortable with Sarawak Malay dialect.”</p>	<p>Respondent 7</p> <p>I live in Kuala Lumpur and we speak English at home most of the time. We also use Bahasa Malaysia sometimes when we visit relatives</p>
<p>Respondent 3</p> <p>“I speak Bau-jagoi with my children and to my husband, I speak Sarawak Malay. At my workplace, I speak Sarawak Malay, Bidayuh, Iban, and English. Yes, it is important because I want my children to know their Bidayuh dialect too when speaking to their Bidayuh grandparents and relatives.”</p>	<p>Respondent 8</p> <p>“My wife went to a Chinese school so we speak Mandarin mix with Malay and English at home with our children.”</p>
<p>Respondent 4</p> <p>“We speak English mix with Sarawak Malay at home. Unfortunately, my children cannot speak Bidayuh because we are not living in a Bidayuh community.”</p>	<p>Respondent 9</p> <p>“I speak Mandarin with my children at home and they attend Chinese schools. They speak English with their father and Malay with their paternal relatives.”</p>
<p>Respondent 5</p> <p>“I speak Bidayuh with my children and English mix with Sarawak Malay with my husband. We should never lose our heritage language because the more languages speak the better.”</p>	<p>Respondent 10</p> <p>“I’m not proficient in Sarawak Malay dialect but can understand it. I speak Hokkien dialect with my children at home and use English with my husband.”</p>

Based on Table 2, the Dayak Muslim converts (mu'allaf) could adapt to Malay dietary habits compared to the Chinese mu'allaf who preferred Chinese food to Malay food.

## 4.2 Types of Entertainment

Table 3. Entertainment

c) What are the choices of entertainment when marrying a Malay?	
Dayak	Chinese
Respondent 1 ‘I enjoy watching Malay and English movies. There is no change in language preference but my spouse often ask me to watch Islamic religious shows. I listen to Malay songs.’	Respondent 6 ‘I enjoy watching movies produced by American and also English movies. I don’t really watch Malay movies. I listen to English songs.’
Respondent 2 ‘I watch all types of shows including Islamic programmes. I also listen to all types of music and songs including Islamic ones. I listen to English and Malay songs.’	Respondent 7 ‘I watch a lot of Chinese and English movies and less Malay movies. The plot is always boring and similar. I listen to Chinese and English songs.’
Respondent 3 ‘I see that I’m very influenced by my husband and children’s selection of movies which are mostly in Malay. I seldom watch English or Hollywood movies. I listen to Malay and sometimes popular English songs.’	Respondent 8 ‘I watch Chinese movies and sometimes English movies. I listen to Chinese songs only.’
Respondent 4 ‘I watch a lot of Malay movies and Islamic dakwah movies as compared to other shows. I can learn a lot about Islam from them. I listen to Malay songs and religious Arabic songs.’	Respondent 9 ‘I watch Malay Movies and English movies. I also listen to Malay and English songs.’
Respondent 5 ‘My in-laws and husband only watch Malay and Islamic programmes. So, I watch them too. Before marriage I used to watch Hollywood movies in the cineplex too I listen to Malay songs only.’	Respondent 10 ‘I watch English movies more than Malay movies. I listen to English songs and occasionally to Malay songs.’

In summary, Table 3 shows that the Dayak Muslim converts (mu’allaf) could adapt to Malay and Muslim attire compared to the Chinese mu’allaf who preferred modern Western and Chinese clothing.

### 4.3 Types of Food

Table 4. Types of Food

d) What are your dietary habits when marrying a Malay?	
Dayak	Chinese
<p>Respondent 1</p> <p>‘My wife is a Malay from Kedah but she is very good at cooking Dayak-style food such as manuk pansuh and midin. We eat Malay dishes most of the time.’</p> <p>Respondent 2</p> <p>‘Only Malay dishes at home and outside as my wife and children prefer them. Sometimes we eat Western halal food too.’</p> <p>Respondent 3</p> <p>‘I often cook Dayak dishes such as chicken with tempoyak. Sometimes tempoyak with fish which my family likes. We also enjoy home cooked Malay dishes.’</p> <p>Respondent 4</p> <p>‘A family favourite at home is manok lulun. It is actually chicken boiled with lemon grass, ginger flowers and also tapioca leaves. We also eat all types of Malay dishes at home and outside.’</p> <p>Respondent 5</p> <p>‘Dayak dishes such as manok pansuh, and daun empasak goreng (stir-fried tapioca leaves) are common in my house. However, our main dishes are always Malay food. Dayak dishes are easier to prepare as compared to Malay dishes which require a lot of stir-frying using ingredients such a coconut milk or using a lot of paste or spices.’</p>	<p>Respondent 6</p> <p>‘Initially I struggled with the Malay dishes since they are always spicy and have coconut milk. Gradually, I can manage eating them. However, I still prefer Chinese cooking.’</p> <p>Respondent 7</p> <p>‘I like Chinese style noodles such as fried kuehtiaw and laksa. I have to look for halal Chinese food which is not difficult to find. However, I like asam pedas more than other Malay dishes.’</p> <p>Respondent 8</p> <p>‘I’ve eaten Malay food before I got married and don’t have a problem. Since my wife also prefers Chinese style of cooking, she and my mother cook Chinese dishes with sambal belacan and ulam to add on.’</p> <p>Respondent 9</p> <p>‘I love Malay food but I modify it to suit Chinese taste which is less spicy. I also cook a lot of Chinese style dishes for my family. Cooking Chinese food is less time consuming.’</p> <p>Respondent 10</p> <p>‘Amid family warmth, we arrange dishes of dates, Nyonya kuih, salted fish, chicken curry and a jug of air mata kucing, a Ramadan essential in our house . It is something I look forward to. I still have main dishes Chinese cuisines.’</p>

Table 4 indicated that the Dayak Muslim converts (mu'allaf) could adapt to Malay dietary habits compared to the Chinese mu'allaf who preferred Chinese food to Malay food.



#### 4.4 Types of Dressing and Clothing

Table 5. Dressing and Clothing

e) What are your clothing preferences when marrying a Malay?	
Dayak	Chinese
<p>Respondent 1</p> <p>‘I don’t change my dressing much except when going to the mosque for prayers and during Hari Raya. However, I don’t go around wearing shorts like I use to.’</p>	<p>Respondent 6</p> <p>‘I still wear modern westernized clothing for work and at home. No change except baju raya and when praying in mosques.’</p>
<p>Respondent 2</p> <p>‘I have no problem dressing as a Muslim wearing my kopiah almost every Friday to work.’</p>	<p>Respondent 7</p> <p>‘I celebrate Aidilfitri wearing a samfu – a traditional Chinese outfit comprising a shirt and trousers. I also finish off with a samping in order to give it a Malay twist.’</p>
<p>Respondent 3</p> <p>‘I have to wear tudung because it is required in Islam. I dress using fully covered clothing now unlike before.’</p>	<p>Respondent 8</p> <p>‘I don’t stick to Muslim style of dressing except during Muslim celebrations where I wear baju Melayu and songkok.’</p>
<p>Respondent 4</p> <p>‘My in-laws and husband change my style of dressing to suit a Muslim wear of dressing. I just follow as I’m staying with them. I also keep jilbab, abaya, and manteau all of which are loose fitting full sleeve gowns.’</p>	<p>Respondent 9</p> <p>‘I wear the fashionable hijab which is getting popular. Nevertheless, as a modern woman I still want to maintain my beauty with elegance but at the same time comply with the Islamic conditions.’</p>
<p>Respondent 5</p> <p>‘I wear the hijab daily at all times except at home. It is considered modest in Islam and I have to adhere to the Islamic faith. Most of my gowns are black in colour too to reflect my religious commitment.’</p>	<p>Respondent 10</p> <p>‘I don’t wear hijab or headscarf because I’m not ready to do so. I still believe modern fashionable clothes signify me as a Muslim individual with sense of freedom, self-pride, self-confidence.’</p>

In summary, Table 5 indicates that the Dayak Muslims converts (mu'allaf) could adapt to the Malay and Muslim attire as compared to the Chinese mu'allaf who preferred either modern western and Chinese clothing.

#### 4.5 Types of Celebrations Celebrated

Table 6. Celebrations

f) What are your celebrations when marrying a Malay?	
Dayak	Chinese
<p>Respondent 1</p> <p>‘I live in Kedah and I don’t celebrate Gawai. My in-laws think it is animism.’</p>	<p>Respondent 6</p> <p>‘Most Chinese love their culture so much and they think when I convert to Islam so I can no longer t celebrate Chinese Traditional Days. I don’t think so but Malays do frown at me when I do celebrate Chinese festivals.’</p>
<p>Respondent 2</p> <p>‘I don’t celebrate Gawai and Dayak celebrations anymore because I’m a Muslim and chose to follow my wife culture already’</p>	<p>Respondent 7</p> <p>‘I know still receives and gives Ang Pao or the Red Envelope at weddings and Chinese New Year to all who visit me.’</p>
<p>Respondent 3</p> <p>‘During Gawai, I went back to see my parents but I saw that they had to please me and my Muslim family buying new cooking utensils, halal meat and expected me to cook for Gawai to ensure it is halal. So, now I don’t go back during such celebration in order not to bother them much.’</p>	<p>Respondent 8</p> <p>‘From what I read, the Chinese cultural festivals do not go against Islamic law and Chinese Muslims I China celebrate them. For example, the Mooncake Festival. The dumpling Festival and Chinese New Year celebrations are cultural and not religious festivals?’</p>
<p>Respondent 4</p> <p>‘I don’t celebrate Gawai but celebrate Aidilfitri like other Muslims with the ‘takbir’ and ‘tahmid’ and ‘sunat Aidilfitri’ prayers. However, for dishes during Aidilfitri I serve some Datak food such as manuk (chicken), pansuh ikan(fish), kasam ikan, kasam daun ubi or ensabi vegetables, pak pantu and Malay cuisine.’</p>	<p>Respondent 9</p> <p>‘I do not bad an eyelid when some Malay relatives (husband side) commented when I celebrated the Mooncake festival last year. I gave them some halal mooncakes and we enjoyed them over Chinese tea.’</p>
<p>Respondent 5</p> <p>‘Our Bumiputera cultural similarities made the transition smooth. Our Gawai and Raya celebrations and festivities become merrier, we celebrate both Hari Raya and Gawai showing their acceptance of me as a Dayak Muslim.’</p>	<p>Respondent 10</p> <p>Many of my friends are Malays since school days so they always come to visit my house for Chinese New Year. When I married and became a Muslim, they still visit me for Chinese New Year bringing home cooked, too.’</p>

In summary, Table 6 revealed that the Dayak Muslim converts (mu'allaf) could easily assimilate and celebrate Malay Muslim festivals and fewer Dayak festive occasions as compared to the Chinese mu'allaf who preferred to celebrate Chinese New Year and Aidilfitri with a mixture of Chinese and Malay cultures.

#### 4.6 Self-identity

Table 7. Self-Identity

g) Do you consider yourself as becoming more Malay when marrying a Malay? Why?	
Dayak	Chinese
<p>Respondent 1</p> <p>‘I believe that the faith changes not the culture and identity. Like most Dayak converts we could not separate that and conveniently accept the Malay culture and identity.’</p> <p>Respondent 2</p> <p>‘The Islamic authorizes asked me to change my name when I convert to Islam. I just obeyed. In the beginning I was more Dayak than Malay but over the years I have embraced more Malay culture and identity because of my choice.’</p> <p>Respondent 3</p> <p>‘I’ve married a Malay and my in-laws have accepted me and expected me to totally adapt to Malay and Muslim way of life. Thus, not surprising many people think that I’m a Malay and I do not reject it.’</p> <p>Respondent 4</p> <p>‘I see no difference whether I am Malay or a Dayak now as I’m already a Muslim and my husband and children are all Malays.’</p> <p>Respondent 5</p> <p>‘My name may change but my face remains the same. Here, Malaysians say that if someone converts to Islam it means they’re becoming Malay. I guess I’m adapting the Malay culture more now and accepting my new identity as a Malay but everyone knows I’m a Dayak Muslim and proud to be one, too. Our cultural similarities made the transition smoother as well. Our celebrations and festivities become merrier. We celebrate both Hari Raya and Chinese New Year.’</p>	<p>Respondent 6</p> <p>‘Some Malay relatives and colleagues do insist that converting to Islam means that I and my children must have Malay or Arabic names, but this is totally wrong. They even implied that any western or non-Malay/ Arabic name should be haram or makruh I’m a Chinese Muslim not a Malay or an Arab.’</p> <p>Respondent 7</p> <p>‘At my workplace which is a government agency, here I am often expected to use and respond using my Malay name in all official matters.’</p> <p>Respondent 8</p> <p>‘I will not change my ethnicity. I was born Chinese and will die as a Chinese. I will not become Malay. I did not change my name upon conversion to Islam and marrying a Malay because Islam is a universal religion not just for Malays or Arabs only.’</p> <p>Respondent 9</p> <p>‘My cultural identity as a Malaysian Chinese has remained intact. It’s still me. Everybody knows me as Gin. Nothing really changed. However, I do get stares from Muslim ladies because I don’t wear a tudung (headscarf) and keeps my English name as my first name.’</p> <p>Respondent 10</p> <p>‘I guess my Chinese parents and relatives were worried that by converting to Islam I would lose Chinese identity and become a Malay. Yes, I wear the tudung but my identity remains a Chinese.’</p>

In summary, as described by Table 7, the Dayak Muslim converts (mu’allaf) could easily switch their self-identity to either Malay or remain as Dayak Muslims compared to the Chinese mu’allaf who just want to remain as Chinese Muslims.

## **5.0 DISCUSSIONS**

In Malaysia, Islam is closely associated with the Malay community, making the assimilation of non-Malays who marry Malays a significant focus of this study. However, it is important to note that not all Malays are Muslims, due to factors like apostasy or heresy (Chua, 2005 and Seng, 2009). The study's findings show that non-Malays who marry Malays generally assimilate into Malay culture, though this process appears to be more pronounced among Dayak converts than Chinese Muslim converts. In contrast, Chinese Muslim converts often face unique challenges in assimilation. In a study by Ishak (2023) that explored the interactions, integration, and assimilation between indigenous Malays and immigrant groups, it is revealed that the process is still in its early stages. The study also highlighted that Chinese Muslim converts strive to preserve their Chinese cultural heritage while embracing their Muslim identity, leading to a complex navigation of dual identities.

Observations during home visits revealed that Chinese converts are more inclined to preserve their Chinese identity and culture, while Dayak converts more readily adapt to Malay customs. The Dayaks, due to some shared cultural practices, find it easier to understand and integrate into Malay culture, whereas the Chinese are less willing to abandon their deeply ingrained cultural traditions despite converting to Islam. These findings seem to be parallel to the findings by Baharuddin (2007) which revealed that the predominance of religious material in Malay further complicates this assimilation, as many Chinese do not engage with Malay-language media, hindering their exposure to Islamic teachings. Assimilation is more likely when there is a willingness to accept differences in customs, habits, and lifestyle, and the findings suggest that Dayak converts are more open to this than Chinese converts.

The findings from this study and similar studies further suggest that while assimilation into Malay culture is common among non-Malays marrying Malays, the extent and nature of this assimilation can vary significantly across different ethnic groups. Factors such as the desire to preserve cultural heritage, community perceptions, and regional demographics play crucial roles in influencing the assimilation experiences of these individuals.

## **6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

To enhance mutual understanding and respect, efforts should be made to encourage ongoing dialogues among the Dayak, Chinese, and Malay communities. Such conversations can help dispel misconceptions about cultural assimilation and provide a platform for sharing experiences, strengthening Sarawak's social cohesion. Additionally, community-based initiatives that celebrate the diverse backgrounds of Muslim converts should be promoted. This would aid integration between the Dayak and Chinese Muslim converts within the larger Malay Muslim community, fostering a more inclusive atmosphere.

## **7.0 CONTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHORS**

The authors confirm equal contributions in each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work, in which the first author led the study, the second and third authors helped to write and edit the paper, and the last author organised the data and formatted the paper according to the required template.

## **8.0 FUNDING**

This work received no specific grant from any funding agency.

## 9.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## 10.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We deeply appreciate the participants who took the time to be interviewed and heartfelt gratitude to the reviewers and editors for their invaluable input in enhancing the manuscript.

## 11.0 REFERENCES

- Abdullah Tee Mohd Ridhuan. (2009). Persepsi orang Cina terhadap Islam Hadhari. *Jurnal Hadhari*, 1, Kuala Lumpur. <http://www.ukm.my/jhadhari/>
- Abdullah, Yusuf Ali. (1989). *The Holy Qur'an*. Brentwood: MD:Amana Corporation,
- Al-Qaradawi, Yusof. (1985). *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, edited by Kamal el-Helbawy et. al. Washington: American Trust Publication, USA
- Baharuddin, S. A. (2007). *Modul Hubungan Etnik [Ethnic Relations Module]*. Shah Alam: Pusat Penerbitan Universiti Teknologi MARA UiTM Shah Alam, Malaysia.
- Baring-Gould, S., & Bampfyld, C. A. (1909). *A history of Sarawak under its two Rajahs 1839-1908*, London: Henry Southerson & Co., United Kingdom.
- Chang, Y. H., & Nur Shawatriqah Sahrifulhafiz. (2023). Negotiating assimilation and hybridity: The identity of Chinese-Malays in Brunei Darussalam Asia in translation. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-6059-8\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-6059-8_13)
- Chua, O. (2005). *Preaching to the Non-Muslim Chinese in Malaysia*. Gombak: Research Centre, Malaysia.
- David, M. K. (2003). The Pakistani community in Machang, Kelantan: Reasons for language shift. *International Journal of Sociology of Language*. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2003.028>
- David, M. K., & Dealwis, C. (2009). Reasons for assimilation: Focus on Indian Muslims in Kuching. *Migracijske i etničke teme* 25, 1(2).
- Dealwis, C. (2010). *Language choices of the younger generation of Dayak Bidayuh*. UiTM Press. Shah Alam, Malaysia.
- Dealwis, C. (2019). Conversion narratives and assimilation of Bidayuhs in exogamous marriages with Malays: A case study of Bau-Jagoi in Sarawak. *Proceedings in KAIB 11 2019*.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2020). *Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2020*, Kuala Lumpur.
- Goffman, Erving. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, USA.
- Ishak Saat. (2023). Challenges of interaction, integration, and assimilation of Pribumi and immigrants in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Education and Management*, 12(2). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.22452/sejarah.vol32no2.11>

- Lam, Y. Y. (2006). Religious conversion and reconstruction of identities: The case of Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia. ScholarBank@NUS Repository. <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/entities/publication/f6a9f7ec-8705-49a1-8f9e-f617632f4024>
- Lee, Y. L. (1964). The Chinese in Sarawak and Brunei. *Sarawak Museum Journal*, XI, (23-24). Sarawak Museum Press. Kuching, Malaysia. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2051659>
- Maconis. (2008). *Race and ethnicity sociology*. Prentice Hall, Pearson Education Group, New Jersey, USA.
- Martinot, B., & Ozalp, M. (2020). Conversion to Islam: Review of research conducted between 2000-2020 on Western and Australian converts to Islam. *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies*, 5(1), 21-41. <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v5i1.269>
- Maryamah, S., Sartika, S. D., Juliana, S. A., & Neli. (2023). Konsep adat dalam peradaban Melayu. *Jurnal Multidisipliner Kapalamada*, 2(3), 186-200. [10.62668/kapalamada.v2i03.797](https://doi.org/10.62668/kapalamada.v2i03.797)
- Minos, P. (1982). *The future of the Bidayus*. Kuching Printing Press, Malaysia.
- Moustafa, T. (2018). *Constituting religion: Islam, liberal rights, and the Malaysian State*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mujani, W. K., Razak, A. Q. A., Kasri, A., Nasir, M. I. M. A., & Ya'akub, N. I. (2012). The Chinese Muslim community: Their economic, political and social involvement in Malaysia. *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences*, 6(3), 417-422. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332430922>
- Nagata, Judith. (2011). A Question of Identity: Different Ways of Being Malay and Muslim in Malaysia. *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia*, edited by K.M. Adams and K. A. Gillogly, Indiana USA.
- Safran, W. (2008). Language, ethnicity and religion: A complex and persistent linkage. *Nations and Nationalism*. 14, 171-190. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2008.00323.x>
- Sayyid Buhar Musal Kassim, Mohd Syukri Yeoh Abdullah, & Zawiyah Baba. (2013). A survey of problems faced by converts to Islam in Malaysia. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 8(1) Bangi, Malaysia. <http://www.ukm.my/e-bangi/>
- Seng, A. W. (2009). *Murtad: Jangan Pandang Sebelah Mata [Apostasy: Do not Look in One Eye]*. Kuala Lumpur: Must Read
- Suhaila Abdullah. (2006). *Pemikiran keagamaan dan sistem kepercayaan masyarakat peranakan Cina di Melaka Tengah* [Thesis Master]. Kuala Lumpur: Akademi Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya.
- Swan, J. Deumert, A., Lillis, T., & Mesthrie, R. (2004). *A dictionary of sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Wong, R. M. (2010). Chinese Muslims in Malaysia history. [https://www.islam.org.hk/eng/malaysia/chinesemuslim\\_in\\_malaysia.asp](https://www.islam.org.hk/eng/malaysia/chinesemuslim_in_malaysia.asp)

## About the Authors

**Caesar Dealwis** is an Associate Professor in the language department at UiTM Sarawak Campus and has been with UiTM since 2003. He holds a PhD in Sociolinguistics. His research interest includes sociolinguistics and English literature. He can be reached through his email at [cjerdealwis@uitm.edu.my](mailto:cjerdealwis@uitm.edu.my)

**Aiza Johari** has been a lecturer in the language department at UiTM Sarawak Campus since 2009. She holds a Masters in TESL (Hons.). Her research interests include education and reading habit. She can be reached through her email at [aiza@uitm.edu.my](mailto:aiza@uitm.edu.my)

**Affidah Morni** has been a lecturer in the language department at UiTM Sarawak Campus since 2000. She holds a Masters in TESL (Hons.). Her research interests include education and adult education. She can be reached through her email at [affidah75@uitm.edu.my](mailto:affidah75@uitm.edu.my)

**Adib Sarkawi** has been a lecturer in the computer science department at UiTM Sarawak Campus since 2007. He holds a master's in computer science (Hons.). His research interests include multimedia and system development. He can be reached through her email at [adibsarkawi@uitm.edu.my](mailto:adibsarkawi@uitm.edu.my)



© 2025 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).