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APPLYING THE CONCEPT OF LI-TAʿĀRAFU TO THE JAPANESE MUSLIM YOUTH CULTURAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

MENGAPLIKASIKAN KONSEP LI-TAʿĀRAFU DALAM PROGRAM PERTUKARAN BUDAYA REMAJA MUSLIM JEPUN

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the application of the Quranic concept of *li-taʿārafu* (to know one another) in a Cultural Exchange Programme aimed at strengthening the faith and identity of Japanese Muslim youth. The study aims to explore how intercultural communication in Malaysia can help address challenges faced by these youth, such as limited Islamic education and identity crises. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through participant observation, interviews, and written reflections from nine participants. The findings suggest that the programme, grounded in *li-taʿārafu*, facilitated mutual understanding, dialogue, and cultural exchange, enhancing participants' Islamic identity and sense of belonging. The paper concludes that such programmes offer an effective *daʿwah* strategy for Muslim youth in non-Muslim-majority societies.

Keywords: *li-taʿārafu*, Cultural Exchange Programme, Japanese Muslims, intercultural communication, Islamic *Daʿwah*, Muslim identity.

ABSTRAK

Kertas kerja ini mengkaji penerapan konsep Quranic *Li-Taʿārafu* (untuk saling mengenali) dalam program pertukaran budaya yang bertujuan untuk memperkukuhkan iman dan identiti remaja muslim jepun. kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka bagaimana komunikasi antara budaya di malaysia dapat membantu menangani cabaran yang dihadapi oleh golongan remaja muslim jepun, seperti pendidikan islam yang terhad dan krisis identiti. kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dimana data dikumpul melalui pemerhatian peserta, temubual, dan refleksi bertulis daripada sembilan peserta. dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa program yang

berasaskan konsep *Li-Taʿārafu* ini memudahkan pemahaman bersama, dialog, dan pertukaran budaya, yang dapat memperkasakan identiti islam dalam kalangan perserta dan semangat kekitaan. kertas kerja ini menyimpulkan bahawa program sebegini menawarkan strategi dakwah yang berkesan untuk remaja muslim dalam kalangan masyarakat yang bukan majoriti muslim.

Kata Kunci: *li-taʿārafu*, Program pertukaran budaya, Muslim Jepun, komunikasi antara budaya, Dakwah Islamiah, identiti Muslim.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing visibility of Islam in non-Muslim-majority societies has brought about a complex set of challenges for Muslim communities. This is especially true in countries like Japan, where Muslims represent a small minority in a highly homogeneous society. The issue is most pronounced among Japanese Muslim youth, who often find themselves caught between the demands of their faith and the pressures to assimilate into a secular society. As the Muslim population grows in Japan, it becomes evident that there is a pressing need to provide better avenues for youth to connect with their faith and identity.

Japanese Muslim youth face a myriad of obstacles when it comes to Islamic education. The country lacks a robust and well-structured Islamic educational system, and the scarcity of Islamic schools and resources makes it difficult for young Muslims to maintain a consistent connection to their faith. This is compounded by societal pressures to conform to Japanese cultural norms, which can be at odds with Islamic values, particularly regarding dietary restrictions, daily practices like prayer, and overall lifestyle choices. In many cases, these youth feel torn between their cultural identity as Japanese and their religious identity as Muslims. This dual identity often leads to confusion, isolation, and a weakened sense of religious commitment.

In response to these challenges, the concept of *li-taʿārafu* (to know one another), as outlined in the Quran (49:13), offers a solution. This Quranic principle emphasises the importance of mutual understanding, respect, and dialogue among people from different backgrounds. In a world where Muslims are increasingly living as minorities, particularly in countries like Japan, *li-taʿārafu* provides a framework for intercultural engagement and religious understanding. It encourages Muslims to engage with others in a manner that fosters cooperation, peace, and the exchange of ideas, which can ultimately strengthen their own faith.

This paper explores the application of *li-taʿārafu* within the context of the Japanese Cultural Exchange Programme, a unique initiative aimed at strengthening the faith and identity

of Japanese Muslim youth. Through an immersive experience in Malaysia, these youth are given the opportunity to interact with a Muslim-majority society, where they can explore Islamic practices, culture, and values. By participating in this exchange, they not only gain a deeper understanding of Islam but also experience firsthand the sense of community that comes with being part of the global Muslim ummah (community).

The objective of this paper is to investigate how the Cultural Exchange Programme, grounded in the principles of *li-taʿārafu*, can be used as a *daʿwah* strategy to address the challenges faced by Japanese Muslim youth. By examining the experiences of participants, this paper aims to demonstrate how intercultural engagement can play a crucial role in enhancing their sense of religious identity, fostering mutual respect, and encouraging the practice of Islam in a multicultural world. Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to the growing body of literature on intercultural *daʿwah* and communication to provide insights for future programs aimed at supporting Muslim youth in non-Muslim-majority societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The globalisation of Islam has led to the emergence of Muslim communities in diverse cultural contexts, including Japan. Today, Japan is home to more than 200,000 Muslims, taking up 18% of the entire population (Asahi Shimbun, 2023). Despite the growing number of Muslims in Japan, Japanese Muslim youth often face significant challenges in maintaining their faith and identity due to the lack of a well-structured Islamic education system and the pressures of assimilation into a predominantly non-Muslim society. To investigate such a phenomenon, this study draws on the Quranic concept of *li-taʿārafu* manifested in the Cultural Exchange Programme as an intercultural initiative and *daʿwah* approach aimed at strengthening the faith and identity of young Japanese Muslims.

Daʿwah is a fundamental responsibility entrusted to all Muslims. In implementing *daʿwah* initiatives, Muslim preachers must be mindful of the *daʿwah* audience (madʿu). Whether it be the philosophy, orientation and methodologies that the (preacher) daʿi chooses to apply, all these must suit the *madʿu* (audience) that the message is intended for. *Daʿwah* must be carried out in the best possible manner to appeal to people's hearts and minds, as outlined in the following verse:

> Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel. And argue with them in the best of manners. Surely, your Lord knows best the one who deviates from His path, and He knows best the ones who are on the right path. (Qur'an,16:125).

In the current digital era, *daʿwah* is no longer limited to theoretical face-to-face preaching, whereby a preacher speaks directly to a group of people who sit and listen in a given space, such as a classroom, seminar, or workshop. Although this method of *daʿwah* is still valid and is carried out actively, we must be open to another *daʿwah* strategy.

This paper explores the potential of the Cultural Exchange Programme as a method of *daʿwah* which allows the Japanese Muslim youth to experience a culture that is different from theirs. It examines the concept of *li-taʿārafu* ingrained in the Cultural Exchange Programme organised by Chiba Islamic Cultural Centre through which Japanese Muslim youth immersed themselves in the Malaysian-Muslim culture. We also take heed of the following verse:

> Those who remember Allah standing and sitting and lying on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: Our Lord! Thou hast not created this in vain! Glory be to Thee; save us then from the chastisement of the fire. (Qur'an:3:191)

Such a Quranic verse implies that human learning is not necessarily accomplished in a classroom; indeed, it can be facilitated by any other conducive environment, which includes experiences of other cultures. By participating in the Cultural Exchange Programme, these Japanese youth may transform not only their worldview about Islam but also prepare them to become future leaders in their community. The objective is to achieve social and cultural transformation, to become part of a community of excellence, the best people known in the Quran as *khayra ummah* (Quran:3:110). In order to achieve the aspiration of a *khayra ummah*, the daʿī or preachers must also reach out to their madʿu or audience at local and global levels (Ismail, 2019).

To accomplish the mission of generating the *khayra ummah* at the global level, their daʿī may face several challenges in reaching out to their madʿu from diverse cultural backgrounds. The needs and interests of the madʿu must be taken into account. Therefore, an understanding of intercultural communication strategy from the *daʿwah* perspective is appropriate for carrying out the Cultural Exchange Programme. In this context, the concept of intercultural *daʿwah* may be defined as an act of effective communication pertinent to matters of heart, mind and emotion

(Sharif & Shamsudin, 2017). Hence, through the lens of intercultural *da'wah*, the da'i looks for things that are common between themselves and the mad'u, which could help them in enhancing their da'wah strategy for a diverse group of people (Sharif & Shamsudin, 2017).

Islamic Education in Japan

Islamic education in Japan is limited, and this limitation is one of the primary reasons why Japanese Muslim youth struggle with their faith. Japan's Muslim population primarily consists of immigrants from countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran, many of whom come to Japan for work or study. These immigrants, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds, often lack the resources to provide their children with formal Islamic education. There are very few Islamic schools or centers that cater specifically to the educational needs of Muslim youth, which results in a reliance on informal and sporadic religious instruction, typically offered by mosques or community centers.

In contrast to countries with large Muslim populations, where Islamic education is more accessible, Japanese Muslim youth are often left without the necessary support to understand their faith deeply. This lack of education can lead to confusion about Islamic practices, misinterpretations of Islamic teachings, and a diminished sense of religious identity. The shortage of resources, along with language barriers, creates an environment where Japanese Muslim youth are unable to engage fully with their faith or the broader Muslim community. This challenge is exacerbated by the cultural isolation experienced by many Muslims in Japan, where the dominant culture does not prioritise or accommodate Islamic beliefs and practices.

At a time when Islam appears to be growing in Japan, Islamic education provided by these mosques, also known as Islamic centres, is very few. These mosques are located far from one another. Apart from the usual Friday prayers, a mosque perhaps would only organise lectures once or twice a year or once a month due to a shortage of manpower and resources. For instance, the Chiba Islamic Cultural Centre, in particular, does not offer Islamic education classes specially tailored for teenagers.

The growth of the Muslim faith among Japanese, in general, and the development of much-needed Islamic education among second-generation Japanese Muslim youth, in particular, are challenges yet to be taken up by the majority of Muslim immigrants. Understanding the backgrounds of these immigrants would help inform this predicament. The majority of Muslim

immigrants are unskilled, blue-collar workers in the industrial sector, generally not well-educated or highly qualified, and lack a proper understanding of Islam. Starting work as trainees with very long hours (8.30 AM – midnight), minimal pay and hardly any basic rights, many of them started working illegally for a period of time, gaining legal status upon marrying a Japanese woman (Vestre, 2011).

Another example of foreign-born Muslims living in Japan is the Turkish community. Turkish men in their 20s and 30s began to arrive in Japan looking for better jobs in the 1990s. Since then, these men began to marry ethnic Japanese women and settled down in Japan. With the birth of children, how they were going to raise these offspring became a matter of concern for the Turkish-Japanese couples. Religious education is not an easy subject to deal with, but when a significant number of Muslim families who share the same ethnicity are present, it is easier to work together as a community, as the Turkish-Japanese families in Aichi Prefecture discovered. Turkish-Japanese families, where the blue-collar Turkish fathers originated from Ordu Province, Turkey, organised classes together with the mosque in Aichi Prefecture to facilitate their children's Islamic education. In this way, the children were exposed to Muslim Turkish culture for the short weekends, provided they did not have other commitments at the public Japanese schools they attended on weekdays (Takeshita, 2015).

The teachers who taught Islamic education for the weekend school came from the Turkish community itself. The language of instruction is Turkish, as the parents wanted the children to have at least a basic grasp of the Turkish language. Even then, they acknowledged that it is really difficult for the children to grow their Turkish language and, therefore, their understanding of Islam once they start kindergarten and elementary school (Takeshita, 2015).

Children spend a lot of time at public schools where the language of instruction is Japanese. If these Turkish-Japanese children tried to speak Turkish in front of their Japanese friends at school, they were teased, which discouraged them from further trying. Also, a great majority, i.e. less than 5% of the mothers in the Turkish-Japanese marriages, were ethnic Japanese; these mothers did not speak Turkish at all and only spoke to their children in Japanese at home. Thus, exposure to the Turkish language is very limited to whatever little communication they had with their fathers at home, if at all, and during their weekend sessions at the mosque, if they did not miss it or if the classes were not cancelled (Takeshita, 2015). Since language acquisition is crucial to properly digest the Islamic religious lessons imparted in these sessions at

the mosque, it is not clear how much these children could understand given their limited command and understanding of the Turkish language.

Similarly, Bangladeshi Muslims in Japan attempt to pass on their root ethnic and religious identities to their children by forming tight-knit communities where possible. These Bangladeshi Muslim parents believed that they were responsible for their children's Muslim identity construction. They associate with and form alliances with Japanese locals for business opportunities but form what is called "multicultural symbiotic ties" (Sultana, 2019).

Social and Cultural Expectations in Japan

Japan is known for its cultural homogeneity, and the expectations to conform to societal norms are deeply ingrained in everyday life. For Japanese Muslim youth, the pressure to assimilate into Japanese society can be overwhelming. From a young age, children are taught to fit in with their peers, and any deviation from the norm is often met with criticism or exclusion. This pressure to conform extends to Muslim youth, who must navigate the tension between their religious practices and the secular, non-Muslim culture in which they live.

For example, Muslim youth in Japan are often faced with the challenge of adhering to halal dietary laws in a society where pork is commonly consumed and where halal food is not always readily available. Furthermore, the practice of daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and other Islamic rituals may set Muslim youth apart from their non-Muslim peers, leading to feelings of alienation. In many cases, Muslim youth feel that they must choose between their religious identity and their desire to fit in with mainstream Japanese society. Homogeneity contributes towards a sense of belonging. Immigrants in Japan are pressured and expected to assimilate into Japanese culture, no matter where they come from, giving rise to acculturation issues. Anyone who tries to be different or appears to be different for any reason is looked down on with disdain and will have a hard time fitting in. Through daily exposure and media, particularly pop culture, children who attend public Japanese schools are exposed to the Japanese value system and worldviews and, over time, will get assimilated (Yuki, 2017).

Conflicts begin early in school when all children are supposed to eat the same food prepared by the school. Muslim children as young as 4 years old begin to ask questions like why they can’t eat pork when they see that everyone else does. Even if the meat is chicken or beef, they still cannot eat it, if it is not halal. There were Muslim parents who served halal meat at

home but simply let their children eat whatever was served at school because they did not want their children to be treated as outcasts. As they grow older, a Muslim child who tries to pray regularly will be teased by other students. Thus, Japanese Muslim students early on feel that they are foreigners in their own birth country.

By age 5, Japanese children begin to attend elementary school. The homogeneity of Japanese culture continues; they are taught that it is better to be just like everybody else – eat the same food, speak the same language, and wear the same attire. Being Japanese means one must assimilate culturally, socially, and systematically. Thus, Japanese Muslim children would find it difficult to be practising Muslims and identify themselves as Muslims every step of the way. Some children even ask their parents at which point in their lives could they become real Japanese (Takeshita, S. 2008). Some concerned Muslim parents have expressed the need to build Muslim schools to create consistency between the values taught at home, at school and within the community (Shiro, 2011).

Identity Struggles Among Second-Generation Japanese Muslims

Second-generation Japanese Muslim youth face a unique set of challenges related to identity. Many are born to mixed marriages, where one parent is Japanese and the other is Muslim, often from a foreign background. As a result, these youth frequently feel caught between two cultures: the Japanese culture in which they were raised and the Islamic culture of their parents. This dual identity can lead to confusion, as they try to reconcile the expectations of both cultures.

The physical appearance of many second-generation Japanese Muslim youth further complicates their sense of identity. While they are born and raised in Japan, they often do not look like the "typical" Japanese person. This difference in appearance can result in them being perceived as outsiders, both within the Japanese society and the Muslim community. The sense of being a "foreigner" in their own country can lead to feelings of isolation and a weakened connection to their faith.

In the 1980s, many unskilled workers entered Japan, but rather than opening up to the concept of diversity and multiethnicity, the idea of lower-class "others" in comparison to the pure Japanese national became stronger. The concern was that if multiethnicity were to be celebrated in Japan, it would weaken their cultural assets, which rely heavily on sameness and homogeneity to live and breathe as a Japanese would. Anyone not looking like a Japanese or not behaving like

a Japanese is perceived as a lower-class "other." The negative term used is gaijin, which literally carries the meaning ‘outside-person’ (Curtis, 2011), a "foreigner," a discriminatory expression. In Japan, anyone deemed non-Japanese becomes a foreigner, an alien, or a gaijin. Other meanings of gaijin include "strangers," "undecidable," and "outsiders, "giving an impression that "You don’t belong here." In Japan, it is well-known that one must do everything he can to not stand out, not to be different, to avoid being the nail that sticks up (a pervasive Japanese proverb), or be prepared to be hammered into conformity or be treated as an "other" (Kamada, 2009).

The challenges faced by second-generation Japanese Muslim youth highlight the need for initiatives that can help them navigate the complexities of their dual identity. The Cultural Exchange Programme offers a unique opportunity for these youth to experience Islam in a supportive environment where they can engage with their faith and culture in a way that is both meaningful and affirming.

Although it is true that Japan’s constitution officially respects peoples of different faiths and religions, and states that no discrimination shall be exercised towards those who profess different faiths and religions, the reality is that anyone who looks different or lives differently does not fit into the highly homogeneous culture of Japan and risks being treated and alienated as gaijin. The first-generation Japanese Muslims, the parents of the second-generation Japanese Muslim youth, who made a conscious choice of taking the shahada and becoming Muslims, were in a different situation. They reverted to Islam upon conscious deliberation. Most importantly, they were already adults, no longer teenagers, and therefore, were not under adolescent peer pressure to conform. Their children, second-generation Japanese Muslims, are experiencing what their parents, the first-generation Muslims, did not personally experience when they took the shahada. These children possess hybrid identities, ‘being half’ in Japan (Kamada, 2009).

Further, the first-generation Japanese Muslims were pure Japanese. They look no different than other Japanese. It can be presumed that they faced less pressure in comparison to their children, the second-generation Muslims. In fact, second-generation Japanese Muslim youth are gaijin on two levels. Firstly, physically they do not look Japanese; if they practice Islam, they will not be eating exactly the same food as they must ensure their food is halal. Secondly, they have certain behaviours that are not considered Japanese, for instance, praying five times a day and fasting (Kamada, 2009).

Japanese Muslim youth often experience identity crises due to the dual pressures of maintaining their Islamic identity while assimilating into a predominantly non-Muslim society. The lack of a well-structured Islamic education system further exacerbates this issue, leaving many young Muslims without the necessary knowledge and support to uphold their faith.

The Role of li-taʿārafu in Daʾwah and International Relations

The concept of *li-taʿārafu* plays a central role in intercultural *daʿwah* and international relations, which seeks to spread Islamic values in a culturally sensitive and inclusive manner. According to the Quran (49:13), human beings were created in different tribes and nations to "know one another," not to despise each other. This principle emphasises the importance of mutual respect, dialogue, and understanding among different cultures and communities. In the context of *daʿwah*, *li-taʿārafu* encourages Muslims to engage with others in a way that fosters cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

Studies on intercultural communication and *daʿwah* emphasise the importance of adapting religious messages to the cultural context of the audience. By understanding the cultural norms, values, and needs of their audience, Muslim preachers can communicate Islamic teachings in a manner that resonates with the listeners. In non-Muslim-majority societies like Japan, intercultural *daʿwah* becomes an essential tool for bridging the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims and for fostering mutual understanding.

> O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Qur'an: 49:13)

The term *li-taʿārafu* in the above *āyat* (verse) is often quoted as meaning "to know each other", from the root word, *ta-ʿarūf* (knowing). *Ta-ʿarūf* is one of the main components of *ukhuwwah*, which can be interpreted as strategic bonding (Mhd Sarif, 2019). Further, this concept of *ta-ʿarūf* leads to a deep and true meaning of brotherhood or *ukhuwwah* in Islam. Brotherhood in this context means love, respect, sincerity, sympathy and mercy for those who share the Islamic belief. The foundation of this brotherhood is not a mere relationship joined by blood or race, but formed with the rope of ʿaqidah (Ahmad, 2012).

In Islam, the concept of *tahāwur* (dialogue) is intertwined with the concept of *ta-ʿarūf* (mutually knowing, mutually interacting). For Muslims, the Qur'an is the first and primary source of reference to guide us on how to think and behave, including the idea of establishing communications to build positive, strong and mutually beneficial relationships through *tahāwur* and *ta-ʿarūf*.

The root word of *tahāwur* is *hiwār*, meaning a situation in which two or more parties exchange speech and discuss to express ideas and get responses to accomplish common goals. *Tahāwur* (Dialogue) is essential to achieve mutual understanding and respect among all parties and sidestep potential conflict due to differences in opinion (Kurucan & Erol, 2012).

Throughout the ages, Islam has played a unique role in promoting dialogue and harmony between civilisations. Muslim rulers in the past provided freedom, justice and rights to everyone regardless of culture, religion and civilisation (Elius et. al., 2019). When civilisations interact through *tahāwur (*dialogue), we seek to consult before forming opinions; we seek to find ways to cooperate. Humanity will grow and flourish if we interact with each other in a dynamic way. *Tahāwur* (Dialogue) and reasoning are the best ways to uphold truth and resist falsehood. "And dispute you not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say,

> We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our Allah and your Allah is One; and it is up to Him we bow (in Islam). (Qur'an, 29:46).

Another example of the importance of *tahāwur* is:

> But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear (Allah). (Qur'an, 20:44).

Naturally, when we want to get to know (*ta-ʿarūf*) an individual or a group of people, we have to undergo some kind of dialogue (*tahāwur*). It is impossible for *ta-ʿarūf* to take place inside a vacuum. Thus, Allah states in the Qur'an:

> O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) (Qur'an: 49:13)

Also, according to another Surah:

> If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah. We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good (Qur'an: 5:48)

Tahāwur (Dialogue) has the potential to play a transformative and constructive role in society. *Ashki* (2006) defined the term *tahāwur* (dialogue) as a type of communication between people that respects the differences of 'the Other', which allows for true listening in a safe environment that offers possibilities for the transformation of self-awareness in each individual.

Mutual understanding amongst people of different backgrounds is not automatic. Individuals and communities, big and small, can get familiar with one another by spending time and effort to know one another's backgrounds, customs, cultures and traditions. Humankind can only achieve the true meaning of brotherhood by going through the process of *ta-ʿarūf* (Ahmad, 2012). If carried out with honesty and sincerity, *ta-ʿarūf* can help restore goodness in human nature and set people free from injustices rooted in social structures. Ta-ʿarūf can also assist individuals and communities to gain faith in God (Yogaiswara, 2015). In the context of achieving a balanced life for the individual and society and strengthening brotherhood and sisterhood among Muslims regardless of ethnicity, age, race or culture, the process of *ta-ʿarūf and tahāwur* can help build and enhance a Muslim identity (Ibrahim et al., 2015).

Diversity is a gift from God which makes it incumbent upon us to make every effort to know one another (Qur'an, 49:13). Differences between individuals and groups can enrich humanity so long as we are open-minded and willing to learn from each other. We need to contextualise our differences and reflect on the values and meanings of these differences to gain real insights. With regard to education, children deserve to grasp a clear understanding of religion in order to gain a strong Muslim identity, so they learn how to live peacefully according to the principles of their own faith and amongst others of different faiths (Selçuk, 2018). Hence, applying the concepts of *ta-ʿarūf* between and amongst Muslim communities from different

ethnicities of multicultural backgrounds from around the world can help make this goal become a reality.

The concept of *li-taʿārafu* also strongly supports the field of international relations by offering a framework for fostering peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and constructive dialogue among nations. Scholar like Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi (2012) also refers to concept of *li-taʿārafu* ("so that you may know one another") to highlight the fundamental importance of diversity and mutual understanding among human societies. As a counter-narrative to the "clash of civilisations," *li-taʿārafu* advocates for the recognition of cultural diversity as a strength and resource for global collaboration. Its application in international relations studies provides a moral and ethical foundation for addressing global challenges, promoting intercultural understanding, and achieving sustainable peace through justice, respect, and shared humanity.

While *li-taʿārafu* forms the foundational principle for intercultural understanding and respect, it is relatively limited when compared to Siddiq Fadzil's comprehensive concept. Siddiq Fadzil (2018) expands *li-taʿārafu* into a seven-step model—*tahāwur (*dialogue), *taʿārafu* (interaction), *ta-ʿāyush* (coexistence), *tasāmuh* (tolerance), *tabādul* (exchange of ideas), *ta-ʿakhī* (brotherhood), and as-silmīyy (peaceful coexistence)—offering a more structured and actionable framework. This broader framework not only emphasises mutual knowledge but also provides specific pathways to deepen relationships and sustain harmony over time.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising ethnography as the primary method for data collection. Ethnography is a research method that involves the researcher immersing themselves in the environment of the participants to observe and interact with them in their natural setting. This approach is particularly well-suited for understanding the experiences and perspectives of Japanese Muslim youth participating in the Cultural Exchange Programme.

The study was conducted with nine Japanese Muslim youth, aged 15-23, who were hosted by Muslim families in Malaysia as part of the Cultural Exchange Programme. Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and written reflections. Participant observation allowed the researcher to observe the interactions between the youth and their host families and to gain insights into their experiences throughout the programme.

Interviews were conducted with the participants before and after the program to gather their thoughts on their experiences and the impact of the exchange on their faith and identity. The written reflections provided an additional layer of data, allowing the researcher to analyse the participants' thoughts and feelings about the program after they had returned to Japan.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying key themes and patterns in the participants' responses. These themes were mapped onto the seven steps based on the concept of li-taʿārafu proposed by Siddiq Fadzil (2018):

1. *Tahāwur* (Dialogue): Initial discussions and interactions between the participants and their hosts

2. *Taʿārafu* (Mutual Knowledge and Interaction): The process of getting to know one another and learning about each other's cultures.

3. *Ta-ʿāyush* (Coexistence): Living together and respecting one another's differences.

4. *Tasāmuh* (Tolerance): Accepting and respecting cultural and religious differences.

5. *Tabādul* (Exchange of Ideas): Sharing thoughts and ideas on religion, culture, and life.

6. *Ta-'akhī* (Brotherhood): Building a sense of brotherhood and mutual support.

7. *As-Silmīyy* (Peaceful Coexistence)**:** Achieving peace and harmony within oneself and in relationships with others.

These themes were explored in relation to the participants' experiences, providing insights into how the Cultural Exchange Programme helped strengthen their Islamic identity and foster a greater sense of belonging. The relative simplicity of li-taʿārafu (El-Ewaisi, 2012) does not inherently address the practical steps needed to translate understanding into enduring social cohesion or conflict resolution. El-Ewaisi (2012) focuses primarily on initiating mutual recognition and understanding but does not extend into the realms of tolerance, active dialogue, or practical mechanisms for achieving societal harmony and peace. Siddiq Fadzil's framework, on the other hand, addresses these gaps by incorporating elements such as active dialogue (tahāwur), fostering fraternity (ta-'akhī), and building a peaceful coexistence (as-silmīyy),

thereby offering a more comprehensive guide for intercultural da'wah efforts and conflict resolution. This suggests that while li-ta'ārafu is foundational, it benefits significantly from integration into more detailed models like Siddiq Fadzil's, which provide a roadmap for achieving and sustaining the ideals li-ta'ārafu advocates.

FINDINGS

The findings indicate that the Cultural Exchange Programme had a positive impact on the participants, particularly in terms of strengthening their Islamic identity and fostering a deeper understanding of Islam. Participants reported that the program helped them overcome feelings of isolation and confusion about their faith, providing them with a clearer sense of who they were as Muslims.

Through their interactions with Malaysian Muslim families, the participants learned to appreciate the diversity within the Muslim world and gained a deeper understanding of Islamic practices. They also experienced a strong sense of community and brotherhood, both with their host families and with other participants. By the end of the program, many participants expressed a renewed commitment to practicing Islam and a desire to share their newfound knowledge with others.

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of the Cultural Exchange Programme as a tool for applying the concept of *li-ta'ārafu* to strengthen the faith and identity of Japanese Muslim youth. By providing an immersive experience in a Muslim-majority country, the programme enabled participants to gain a deeper understanding of Islam and to develop a stronger connection to the global Muslim community. The findings suggest that intercultural engagement, facilitated through programs like the Cultural Exchange Programme, can help address the challenges faced by Muslim youth in non-Muslim-majority societies, such as Japan.

The Cultural Exchange Programme is about building human-to-human relationships, in particular, planting the seeds of a successful long-term relationship between host parents and incoming Japanese youth. *Ta-'arūf*, the root word for *li-ta'ārafū*, is about taking the time and initiative to understand each other at a deeper level, where both host parents and Japanese youth take the time to understand each other, especially their needs and interests. This is the concept which our study sought to emulate. The following are the results of the interview analysis, which

we mapped against the 7 steps ingrained in the concept of *li-taʿārafū* with the experiences of Japanese Muslim youth of the Cultural Exchange Programme.

1. *Tahāwur* (dialogue)

The Japan-Malaysia Cultural Exchange Programme 2019 began with discussions between the researcher and the Japanese side (CICC or Chiba Islamic Cultural Centre as the official organiser) in March 2019. Were it not for the many detailed discussions between the researcher and the CICC, this programme would not have been designed as it had been. In fact, for the record, initially, the idea was to conduct a seminar-like training programme for the Japanese Muslim youth, which would not have worked as well as the Cultural Exchange Programme. As stated by the Chairman of CICC, who was present throughout the programme, "CICC is very happy with the programme."

2. *Ta-ʿarūf* (mutually knowing, mutually interacting)

Malaysia is a multiethnic, multireligious and multiracial country. The host parents and families in the Japan-Malaysia Cultural Exchange Programme 2019 originated from different ethnic backgrounds including Pakistani, mixed Chinese-Malay and Indian parentage. However, since these host parents were born and bred in Malaysia, they were uniquely Malaysian, to the delight of the Japanese youth. One thing that Malaysians are proud of is how they treat guests, as well as making them feel at home with different ethnic cuisines. Riku said, "I would like to be as friendly like Malaysians." Riku's host parents, who came from Pakistani-Indian parentage, feted the Japanese youth with Pakistani-Indian special foods. Likewise, the host parents with Malay backgrounds served Malay foods. At meal times, the Malaysian hosts made sure the Japanese youth were fed well and that they were not left alone by themselves.

Direct, face-to-face interactions with their hosts exposed the Japanese youth to the hosts' culture. The Japanese youth were accompanied by their host parents and family members, chauffeured at all times by their host family everywhere they went. All week, they communicated and interacted with their host parents and other family members and witnessed the lifestyle of the hosts and what it meant to live as Muslims. As Akiko noted, she liked the "experience of Islamic culture."

Several of the host parents also delighted the Japanese youth by introducing some basic Malay words. During the verbal presentation, Kawai proudly declared, "Umur saya 17 tahun (I am 17 years old)."

At the end of the programme, the personal touch, kindness and care shown by the host parents had left a lasting impression upon the young minds, as commented by Marisi: "(I) like Malay culture, the country is unique, taught Malay language."

Further, the Japanese youth appreciated that their host families had children of the same age group, as highlighted by Daiki, who stated that he learnt: "how to interact with Muslims of the same age." Tokuda gave the same feedback: "There were many people of the same age, and it was fun." The youth enjoyed such interactions and asked for more, as commented by Kawai: "I wanted more opportunities for interaction."

Despite a packed schedule, the Japanese youth found that "it was a lot of fun" as declared by Tatsuki. Halal food that was easily available and having Muslim friends of the same age with whom they could talk and get along were some of the everyday things Muslim Malaysian youth take for granted in Malaysia, but they were new experiences to the Japanese Muslim youth. Many of them were the only Muslims in school. Culture, of course, is not just about foods, it is also about how the host family members relate to one another, how they dress, what time they wake up, how they talk to one another, how they respond to specific situations - these are all examples of Malaysian culture which were new to the Japanese Muslim youth. What the Japanese youth remembered most was the hospitality and the caring and kind treatment they received from their host parents and family.

3. *Ta-ʿāyush* (coexistence; live on respect and consideration)

Throughout the entire week, the Japanese Muslim youth learned to coexist with each other and their host parents and families, as well as observed how multiracial and multireligious Malaysians coexist with one another. As stated by Tatsuki: "Love and respect is a very important key word in this country [...] and this is the secret to the successful realisation of a multi-ethnic nation." The Japanese Muslim youth saw people of multiracial and multireligious backgrounds working together for a common cause, e.g. at the National Heart Institute, which sparked the comment from Riku: "(Malaysian) diversity living together," and as such, he was "impressed

with Malaysia." Daiki thought that "Tun Dr Mahathir (is a) a great leader" to have united Malaysians in such ways.

For the Japanese youth, opportunities existed for *li-taʿārafū* related to three levels of relationships; namely: a) Japanese youth-Japanese youth, b) Japanese youth-host parents, c) Japanese youth-Malaysian youth (teenagers/young adults who were children of the host parents). The Japanese Muslim youth began to see that diversity is a beautiful thing and could be a source of strength and unity for a community. Therefore, the Japanese Muslim youth realised that being different from the majority in Japan has the potential to bring much good to Japan, their birth country.

At the most basic level, although the Japanese youth were Muslims, they were born and raised in a different cultural environment and naturally were used to different ways of doing things. Still, they sensed the warmth of the Malaysian hosts. Akiko remarked that she was aware of "Feelings of caring for people." The Japanese youth felt appreciated and respected, and they reciprocated by being fully cooperative throughout the programme. Kawai commented that he learned about "cooperation, cooperation." The Japanese youth learnt that to make things work, people have to transcend beyond their differences.

Most of the Japanese Muslim youth did not have Muslim friends back home in Japan. Making friends with the Malaysian youth was a positive and encouraging experience for them. As Akiko noted, in Malaysia, she met "a lot of Muslim friends of the same age. I used a lot of English to communicate with local people."

Throughout the Cultural Exchange Programme, they gained tips on how to live as Muslims in the future. Thus, the Japanese youth learnt that no matter who you are and where you live, respect and consideration are crucial elements for peace and harmony in yourself and within the community.

4. *Tasāmuh* (tolerate each other's differences)

The Japanese Muslim youth and host parents and other family members tolerated each other's daily habits. Communication was a major concern, as most of the Japanese Muslim youth were not proficient in English. Still, the Japanese Muslim youth found their experiences with their host families positive. Kawai said he learnt "Difference in culture." Daiki said: "(I) learn Malaysian

habits. Malaysians made an effort to talk to me. I didn't know much about English, but I can relax."

Kaito noted that despite the differences between him and fellow Japanese Muslim youth and between him and the host family, he learnt the "importance of teamwork." Nothing untoward happened. The Japanese Muslim youth carried themselves well with respect and dignity, making an equally positive impression on the Malaysian families. They accepted that differences were unavoidable since all parties came from different cultural backgrounds, but these differences did not become a show-stopper for them to build a good relationship with one another.

5. *Tabādul* (Exchange of ideas)

Every day, the Japanese Muslim youth, despite language issues, communicated their thoughts and ideas to each other, their host parents and family members, and vice versa with the help of interpreters. Some of them also used online resources, such as Google Translate, to ease communication and exchange ideas with one another.

Islamic education is sorely missing in Japan. They hardly had any opportunities to discuss and exchange ideas related to Islam, which is critical to gaining a better understanding of Islam. During the Cultural Exchange Programme, for the first time, they saw the concept of Islam as a complete way of life. Haruto noted that he learnt "The importance of zakat, halal and creatures." Yuta also expressed the same thing, saying that he saw the "halal production methods" that he had never known back home in Japan.

It was apparent that the Japanese youth were not used to discussing Islamic matters and ideas openly. They realised from the Cultural Exchange Programme that it was important to grasp a clear understanding of Islamic ideas before one could be a true Muslim. Kawai said, "I thought it was good because there were various ideas of Islam." The Japanese Muslim youth were impressed with the seriousness of Muslim Malaysians in fulfilling Islamic criteria, e.g., "Malaysians are intricate (procedures) such as halal certification," as observed by Tokuda.

They also learned that being Muslim does not mean being less loyal to your birth country. In fact, Islam requires us to be the best version of ourselves, so that we can serve the community in which we live. Interest in the cultures of others could mean benefiting from the positives of that culture. Tatsuki said that "Malaysians are very interested (in Japan). Everyone here likes

Japan - anime, drama, character." Thus, liking certain cultural aspects of a country does not make a person any less Muslim.

6. *Ta-'akhī* (to associate as brother)

The love and care, the brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*), that a Muslim feels for another is a deep, beautiful, unique emotion that can only be understood by a person who has experienced it. The Malaysian host parents and other family members treated the Japanese Muslim youth with much kindness and care. As a result, the Japanese Muslim youth felt at home, appreciated and treasured. This is crucial to plant the seeds of a lifelong relationship of brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*).

The kindness and care the Malaysian host parents and other family members showed the Japanese Muslim youth was unlike anything they had ever seen or felt. Thus, according to Haruto, "Everyone was very kind."

In this Cultural Exchange Programme, where relevant, for each visit, a briefing was presented, where a speaker would enlighten the audience why a certain Islamic practice was done, the benefits and the wisdom behind the practice, followed by a Questions & Answers session, in which the Japanese youth were encouraged to ask anything they had in mind. As a result, the Japanese youth began to see Islam in a new light, as stated by Daiki: "I was able to learn more about Islamic culture." Marisa, who, prior to the trip, never told anyone about her religious affiliation as Muslim, discovered a new perspective. She said at the end of the programme "I hope in Japan the number of Muslims will increase in future."

The Cultural Exchange Programme had left a lasting positive impression on these Japanese Muslim young minds, in particular, the warmth and kindness expressed by their Malaysian hosts. When asked if they wished to participate in future Cultural Exchange Programmes, all nine Japanese youth responded in the affirmative, i.e., "Yes." Based on these responses, it is deduced that the Cultural Exchange Programme experience had been uplifting for the participants; it had indeed touched the hearts and minds of all nine Japanese Muslim youth.

7. As-Silmīyy (to live in peace; rahmatan-lil-ʿālamīn - living together peacefully and in harmony

Living together peacefully with others begins with having peace and harmony within oneself. By the end of the Japan-Malaysia Cultural Exchange Programme, based on the feedback given, we

believed that the Japanese Muslim youth felt peace within themselves as Muslims. We also believed that they have gained a keen sense of accomplishment through the varied activities conducted, which helped deepen their personal connections and relationships with one another as well as with their host parents and families. The Japanese youth expressed positive sentiments, such as that expressed by Daiki who stated, "I want to participate more in the Muslim community in Japan."

Learning salient details of Islamic History made them want to know even more about the Islamic legacy they have inherited from their parents. Tokuda, for example, listed "the greatness of old Muslims" as one of the top 3 things he learnt during the Cultural Exchange Programme. Tatsuki said he learnt to "Be proud of being Muslim." Kaito had one simple wish: " I want to share what I got this time with my friends." It would be safe to assume that the Japan-Malaysia Cultural Exchange Programme has broadened their worldview, both as Muslims and as Japanese nationals. Equally important, when they left they felt more comfortable with their Muslim identity. Tokuda said, "I did a lot of things that I could not experience in Japan." It is hoped that their new-found confidence as Muslims would continue to develop peace in their hearts, motivate them to practice as Muslims, and enable them to contribute positively in the Japanese community where they reside.

Over the course of the Cultural Exchange Programme, as a result of their personal connections and positive interactions with their host parents and families, the Japanese Muslim youth felt at home in Malaysia and developed self-confidence as Muslims. After the programme, they realised it is alright to be different from the non-Muslim majority. Tatsuki said, "On the last day, I was talking to my host parents until 3 a.m."

Further, the Cultural Exchange Programme opened the eyes of the Japanese Muslim youth to the suitability of Islam in modern life. In Malaysia, they saw for the first time the benefits of diversity, Muslims and non-Muslims living and working side by side in harmony. After the programme, they realised it is alright to be different from the non-Muslim majority as attested by their comments. Haruto declared, "I want to study cultural differences with other countries."

The researcher deduced that the Cultural Exchange Programme had strengthened their Muslim identity, based on their written and verbal feedback. Asked what they would do differently now that they had returned to Japan, each of these Japanese Muslim youth responded in ways that showed their intentions to follow through on activities related to Islam, either in the

form of personal worship or getting involved in the Muslim community. In terms of personal worship, Haruto said he would "Cherish worship." Tokuda echoed the same sentiment by saying, "I worship (solat) every day."

Other remarks indicated that they wanted to step out of their reservations as Muslims and reach out to the Muslim community in Japan. For example, Akiko said, "I want to start by making more Muslim friends by participating more in the Muslim community in Japan." Yuta also intended to "participate in exchanges with nearby Muslims." Riku went a step further by expressing his desire to play a leading role sometime in the future: "I want to take the lead in helping people!" Tatsuki, who loved to talk, decided to "live a little more dignified" back home in Japan. Tatsuki also realised that he has a lot to learn about Islam and that learning from YouTube and other online resources is far from sufficient. Therefore, he desires to "learn the history and culture of Islam more and spread it to others." Thus, Tatsuki has learnt that being Muslim is a source of pride and strength and is a treasure to be cherished and shared with others, Muslims and non-Muslims.

All the above responses, taken together, implied that the Cultural Exchange Programme has strengthened the Japanese youth's identities as Muslims. All nine of the second-generation Japanese Muslim youth who participated in this research were total strangers to one another before coming to Malaysia. However, from the researcher's observations of their facial expressions and body language, they quickly made friends with one another, although the researcher could not understand what they were saying, since they communicated with one another entirely in Japanese.

It was interesting to note that they became much more at ease with one another during and after the visit to Janda Baik. The ratio of Japanese youth to Malaysian youth then was nearly 1 to 1. The activities were well-organised and highly engaging, and the lead facilitator debriefed all the youth at the end of each activity to put meaning into it. With such lively interactions, the Japanese Muslim youth's perception of living Islam as too rigid and too hard to adhere to was being subtly challenged (Fathil & Fathil 2011).

Further, these outcomes bode well for the formation of long-term brotherhood between all three relationship levels: Japanese youth-Japanese youth, Japanese youth-host parent, and Japanese youth-Malaysian youth who were teenagers/young adults who were children of the host parents. The positive outcomes in this research supported the results of earlier studies done on

cultural sensitivities (Martinsen, 2011 & Reynolds-Case, 2013), which showed that direct interactions with locals contribute to valuable consequences, including the establishment of local networks to the benefit of the participants.

Table 1 organises the steps of *li-taʿārafu* alongside their descriptions and outcomes to clearly demonstrate how the concept can be applied in an intercultural programme like the Cultural Exchange Programme:

Step	Description	Outcome
Step 1: Understanding Diversity	Promote awareness of the cultural, religious, and social differences among participants.	Awareness of cultural differences and appreciation for diversity.
Step 2: Initiating Dialogue	Facilitate open and respectful communication through structured discussions.	Open and respectful communication that fosters trust.
Step 3: Mutual Interaction	Encourage collaborative activities and shared learning experiences.	Collaborative learning experiences that build rapport and understanding.
Step 4: Practicing Coexistence	Create an environment where participants live and work harmoniously despite differences.	Harmonious relationships and enhanced intercultural adaptability.
Step 5: Promoting Tolerance	Cultivate acceptance and respect for differing beliefs, practices, and perspectives.	Increased acceptance and a reduction of biases and prejudices.
Step 6: Exchanging Ideas	Share knowledge, cultural practices, and traditions to deepen mutual understanding.	Knowledge sharing and a richer appreciation of diverse cultural expressions.
Step 7: Building Brotherhood	Strengthen bonds of unity and friendship among participants.	Lasting connections, friendships, and a shared commitment to intercultural harmony.

Table 1

CONCLUSION

This paper underscores the potential of the Cultural Exchange Programme as an effective intercultural *daʿwah* strategy to support Japanese Muslim youth in maintaining their faith and identity. By drawing on the Quranic concept of *li-taʿārafu* and integrating insights from cultural and Islamic studies, the study provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the unique challenges faced by this demographic. The Cultural Exchange Programme may also help strengthen the identity of Japanese Muslim youth by fostering a sense of belonging to a global Muslim community. Interactions with peers from different cultural backgrounds can help participants appreciate the universality of Islam and develop a stronger sense of Islamic identity.

Intercultural engagement through the Cultural Exchange Programme can address the identity crises faced by Japanese Muslim youth. By promoting mutual understanding and respect, the programme can help participants navigate the complexities of their dual cultural identities and develop a more integrated sense of self. Future research should explore the long-term impact of such a programme and identify additional strategies for supporting the spiritual and cultural development of young Muslims in diverse cultural contexts. Future research should explore the long-term impact of such programs on the participants' faith and identity, as well as investigate additional strategies for supporting the spiritual and cultural development of young Muslims in diverse cultural contexts. Programs like the Cultural Exchange Programme offer a valuable opportunity for Muslim youth to engage with their faith in a supportive and inclusive environment, fostering a sense of belonging to the broader Muslim ummah and promoting peace and understanding across cultures.

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