Challenges of Religious Integration among Indigenous Muslim Converts (Mualaf) in Sabah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The increasing number of Muslim reverts (mualaf) in Sabah, particularly among indigenous communities, represents a distinctive trend within Malaysia's religious demography. Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia, where conversions predominantly occur among non-indigenous populations, reversion to Islam in Sabah involves ethnic groups such as the Kadazan Dusun, Murut, Rungus, and Sungai. This unique pattern necessitates an in-depth exploration to understand the specific dynamics influencing these religious transitions. This qualitative study aims to investigate the factors contributing to the rising number of *mualaf* among indigenous communities in Sabah, identify the principal challenges these converts face post-conversion, and critically evaluate the effectiveness of support mechanisms offered by religious institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected *mualaf* from various indigenous backgrounds across Sabah, complemented by secondary sources such as governmental reports, academic publications, and NGO documents. The findings indicate that indigenous reverts encounter complex and multifaceted challenges, including bureaucratic hurdles during formal conversion procedures, psychological stress associated with identity realignment, rejection by family members and local communities, limited religious literacy, and inadequate access to structured Islamic educational resources, especially in remote rural areas. Moreover, the lack of culturally sensitive religious educators and persistent societal stigma exacerbate feelings of isolation, complicating their integration into the broader Muslim community. Consequently, this research underscores the urgent need for inclusive and contextually relevant da'wah strategies tailored to indigenous cultural contexts. Additionally, practical recommendations are proposed for policymakers, religious institutions, and civil society groups to improve existing support structures, foster religious resilience, and ensure sustainable spiritual growth and communal empowerment for indigenous *mualaf.*

Keywords: Mualaf, indigenous Sabah, religious challenges, integration, Islamic da'wah.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of religious conversion to Islam in Malaysia reflects a complex interaction between faith, cultural identity, and social transformation. In Peninsular Malaysia, most *mualaf* originate from non-indigenous communities such as the Chinese and Indians. In contrast, the state of Sabah exhibits a distinctive trend, with Islamic conversion largely occurring among indigenous groups such as the Kadazan Dusun, Murut, Rungus, and Sungai. This pattern highlights the need for culturally contextualised *da'wah* approaches that resonate with the lived realities and traditions of local communities, particularly in rural areas like Sabah where family ties, intermarriage, and community influence are central to religious change.

While the number of *mualaf* in Sabah continues to grow steadily, their journey towards embracing and practising

Islam is marked by various challenges. These include bureaucratic barriers during the conversion process, emotional and psychological struggles, difficulty in adapting to Islamic practices, family rejection, and limited access to religious education. Many face isolation and confusion due to a lack of foundational Islamic knowledge and insufficient institutional support, especially in remote areas. Furthermore, the absence of trained local educators and the prevalence of social stigma often hinder their integration into the broader Muslim community.

This study aims to examine the factors contributing to the increase in *mualaf* among indigenous groups in Sabah, explore the major challenges these converts face in their post-conversion lives, and evaluate the role of religious institutions and NGOs in supporting their spiritual integration. Through a combination of fieldwork and literature review, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the *mualaf* experience in Sabah and to propose recommendations that can inform more inclusive and effective *da'wah* strategies across the region.

LITRETURE REVIEW

The state of Sabah, renowned for its ethnic and religious diversity, has witnessed a steady increase in *mualaf*, particularly among indigenous communities such as the Kadazan Dusun, Murut, Rungus, and Sungai (Rasip, Issraq and Amir, 2025). While this trend reflects successful Islamic outreach and the openness of local communities, it simultaneously reveals complex integration challenges. Despite institutional efforts by JHEAINS and NGOs, many *mualaf* struggle with socio-cultural adaptation, bureaucratic conversion procedures, emotional stress, and limited access to religious education—especially in rural areas. These difficulties are compounded by family rejection, economic instability, and a shortage of culturally competent religious educators. Social stigma and doubts over their sincerity often marginalise *mualaf* within the broader Muslim community. Thus, this study seeks to explore these root challenges and evaluate the effectiveness of support systems in promoting inclusive and sustainable religious integration for indigenous converts in Sabah.

Islam's spread in Sabah has been largely harmonious, respecting local customs and values central to indigenous identity. Mulyadi, Moh Dede, and Widiawaty (2022) emphasise the significance of traditional beliefs and native wisdom in shaping Sabah's social structure. Their study illustrates how the integration of Islam with indigenous traditions allowed cultural continuity during the Islamisation process. However, the specific experiences of *mualaf*—who often serve as bridges between ancestral customs and Islamic norms—remain underexplored. Greater attention is needed to understand how they navigate between these cultural-religious spheres and how this duality affects their integration, acceptance, and contribution to da'wah.

Historical analyses by Hajimin et al. (2020), reveal how pre-independence da'wah efforts laid the foundation for Islam's growth in Sabah, which intensified under USIA's campaigns during Tun Datu Mustapha's leadership. These efforts successfully transformed Sabah's religious demographics, turning Muslims into the majority. Yet, the religious identity of indigenous *mualaf*—shaped during this era of change—warrants closer study, particularly regarding the challenges they face in sustaining faith amid evolving socio-religious dynamics. Their spiritual journeys often intersect with the complexities of identity formation and cultural continuity.

Focusing on the Rungus community in northern Sabah, studies by Khalli, Sintang, and Ationg (2023) document a phased Islamisation beginning in the 1970s. Initial conversions were personal but gradually institutionalised through mosques and madrasahs, resulting in profound socio-economic and educational transformations. These shifts fostered new religious identities, but most existing research remains confined to localised contexts such as Matunggong. Broader studies are needed to assess the diverse integration experiences of *mualaf* across Sabah, especially regarding their spiritual development, communal acceptance, and access to institutional support in both rural and urban settings.

Misconceptions about Islam persist among non-Muslim communities in Malaysia, including in Sabah, posing barriers to integration. Among Chinese and Indian populations, conversion is often misinterpreted as cultural assimilation—"masuk Melayu" *become Malaya*—rather than a purely religious shift (Abdullah @ Tan, 2021). This misconception can rupture familial relationships and fuel emotional resistance, especially in communities deeply rooted in Confucian or Hindu traditions. Furthermore, the narrative that Islam spreads through violence continues to generate fear and alienation. These misunderstandings call for nuanced educational initiatives and respectful dialogue that emphasise Islam's values of peace, compassion, and family unity—principles essential

for fostering integration in Malaysia's multireligious society.

In summary, existing literature affirms that while the growth of Islam among indigenous communities in Sabah reflects the success of *da'wah* initiatives, it also highlights enduring integration challenges faced by *mualaf.* These challenges span historical, cultural, institutional, and personal dimensions. Yet, much of the current scholarship remains limited in scope, often focusing on specific communities or general trends. There is a clear need for further research that centres the voices and lived experiences of indigenous *mualaf,* not only to understand their struggles but also to inform more responsive, inclusive, and empathetic strategies for religious integration across Sabah.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology that combines both primary and secondary data to explore the challenges faced by *mualaf* in Sabah. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten selected *mualaf* from various villages in Sabah, representing diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, gender, and age. The interviews focused on their personal experiences related to emotional adjustment, access to religious education, family acceptance, and institutional support. Additional informal interviews were conducted with religious officers, local NGO representatives, and community leaders involved in *da'wah* efforts. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed. All data were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify key patterns. Secondary data was obtained through a review of relevant academic literature, government reports, institutional documents, and statistical records to contextualise the field findings. This combination of fieldwork and literature review allowed for a comprehensive and triangulated understanding of the multifaceted challenges encountered by mualaf in Sabah.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the underlying factors driving the steady rise in conversions to Islam among Sabah's indigenous communities, particularly in relation to cultural receptiveness and tailored da'wah strategies.
2. To analyse the multifaceted challenges faced by mualaf—including emotional, financial, educational, social, and geographic barriers—that hinder their integration and religious development.
3. To assess the effectiveness, accessibility, and cultural relevance of support mechanisms offered by religious institutions, government agencies, and NGOs in nurturing the faith, resilience, and identity of mualaf.

Research Finding

Increase in Number of Mualaf in Sabah

The rise in the number of *mualaf* in Sabah reflects the state's unique demographic composition and the dynamic nature of da'wah in the region (Borham, Abdullah, and Abdul Rahim, 2021). Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia, where most converts are non-indigenous such as the Chinese and Indian communities, the pattern of Islamisation in Sabah primarily involves indigenous ethnic groups. Sintang (2005) notes that the majority of converts in Sabah originate from communities identified as 'indigenous Sabahans', necessitating a culturally sensitive and locally contextualised approach to *da'wah*. Contributing factors include familial ties, intermarriage, and the influence of friends and neighbours, which have led to an increase in conversions among ethnic groups such as the Kadazan Dusun, Murut, Rungus, and Sungai (Aliakbar and Rasip, 2024).

Recent data from the Sabah State Islamic Religious Affairs Department (JHEAINS, 2024) indicates that the Kadazan Dusun consistently record the highest number of converts each year, highlighting the sustained effectiveness of Islamic outreach among this group. These statistics also reflect the openness of indigenous communities to Islam and their willingness to adopt new religious worldviews. This development aligns with the strategic expansion of *da'wah* efforts following Sabah's incorporation into Malaysia in 1963 (Adam, 2023). Since then, the growth of the Muslim population in Sabah has become a notable trend, particularly up to the

1980s, during which various Islamization programs were implemented and progressively embraced by indigenous communities. This phenomenon has not only influenced the religious landscape but has also reshaped the social and cultural fabric of the state (Rasip, Ramli and Hamzah, 2025).

Importantly, amidst challenges, several success stories have emerged. For example, the 'Masjid Bandaraya Kota Kinabalu' initiative has been widely praised for creating inclusive spaces where mualaf are actively involved in religious classes, community events, and leadership roles, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment.

No	Religion	1960	1970	1980
1	Islam	17,324 (38%)	260,945 (40%)	487,627 (51%)
2	Christianity	75,247 (17%)	157,422 (24%)	258,606 (27%)
3	Buddhism	63,313 (10%)	78,868 (8%)	–
4	Hinduism	–	–	2,896 (0.3%)
5	Others	206,740 (46%)	206,740 (46%)	65,078 (7%)
6	No Religion	–	–	57,481 (6%)
7	Total	454,311 (100%)	454,311 (100%)	950,556 (100%)

Table 1. Source: North Borneo Census and Population and Housing Census of Malaysia

The state of Sabah is renowned for its vibrant ethnic and religious diversity, where communities coexist in relative harmony (Adam, 2020). A key aspect of its religious landscape is the steady growth of the Muslim population following Sabah's entry into Malaysia in 1963 (Hajimin, et al., 2021). Unlike Peninsular Malaysia—where most converts are from Chinese and Indian backgrounds—conversion in Sabah predominantly involves indigenous groups. Sintang (2005) notes that the majority of converts come from the Kadazan Dusun, Murut, Rungus, and Sungai communities, reflecting how Islamization in Sabah is shaped by cultural bonds, family ties, and local receptivity. Rasip et al. (2025a) report that Kadazan Dusun remains the largest group of annual converts, followed by Murut, Rungus, and Sungai, illustrating the effectiveness of post-1963 da'wah strategies in indigenous contexts.

Census data supports this religious shift. Sabah's Muslim population rose from 38% (17,324) in 1960 to 40% (260,945) in 1970, and then to 51% (487,627) by 1980. This growth aligns with intensified da'wah campaigns by organizations like USIA, which promoted Islamic awareness and established religious schools in rural areas (Rasip et al., 2025b). The trend continues today. Between 2010 and 2018, JAKIM (2023) recorded Sabah as having the highest number of conversions nationwide—20,115 out of 89,102 new Muslims. Nur A'thirah (2021) attributes this to effective da'wah outreach, geographic inclusivity, and institutional support, which have fostered a significant religious and cultural transformation among indigenous communities.

The data shows a consistent annual increase in conversions, highlighting both the success of da'wah initiatives and growing indigenous acceptance of Islam. Over 1,000 individuals embrace Islam each year, with some years surpassing 2,000. This steady rise indicates that Islamization in Sabah is a sustained, inclusive process involving various ethnic and socio-economic groups. It also reflects strong religious and social networks that reinforce the commitment of *mualaf* (Hasmin, Marinsah, & Sintang, 2022). From 2019 to 2023 alone, 9,582 individuals converted to Islam in Sabah (Aliakbar, 2024), solidifying its role as one of the most active states in Islamic outreach. This increase underscores both successful institutional efforts and the openness of indigenous communities towards Islam as a comprehensive way of life. With continued educational, spiritual, and welfare support, conversion rates in Sabah are expected to grow further.

The Challenging Process of Conversion to Islam

In Malaysia, converting to Islam involves more than reciting the *shahadah*; it requires completing legal

procedures overseen by the Majlis Agama Islam Negeri (MAIN) or Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri (JAIN), which also handle religious education and documentation. While these procedures aim to ensure sincerity and validity, they can be challenging—especially for those in rural settings. For example, Informant #1, a convert from a remote area, shared:

"I live in a remote area, so it was quite difficult to manage the official registration as a Muslim. However, preachers from HCF helped me a lot, including providing transportation."

This underscores the critical role of NGOs like the Hidayah Centre Foundation (HCF) in facilitating access to religious authorities (Shaharuddin, 2017). Despite genuine intentions, many converts encounter bureaucratic challenges that affect their emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Azman et al. (2015) observe that JAIN's procedures are often seen as overly complicated and burdensome. Requirements such as sourcing witnesses, attending counselling, and obtaining official approval can be overwhelming, causing some converts to delay or reconsider their decision. A more compassionate and flexible system is needed to make the process more inclusive and supportive.

Systemic issues also persist within the registration process. Syed Ismail and Mohamed Hamidi (2023) report that some *mualaf* had to revisit religious offices multiple times due to technical issues—such as inappropriate witnesses or difficulty pronouncing the *shahadah*, especially among non-Arabic speakers. JAIN is thus encouraged to implement procedural reforms that uphold Islamic values while enhancing accessibility. **Policy suggestions include simplifying documentation for rural applicants, providing cultural mediators at registration offices, and allowing initial declarations of faith under simpler conditions with subsequent formalisation.** Such changes would reduce administrative strain and help build stronger connections between converts and the institutions that support them.

Emotional and Psychological Adjustment in a New Religious Life

Mualaf often face considerable emotional and psychological challenges as they adjust to their new identity as Muslims. Conversion is not merely a theological shift; it impacts family ties, social networks, and daily routines (Korchagina, 2018). The transition to a new religious lifestyle is seldom immediate and requires time, emotional resilience, and continuous support. According to Syarul Azman (2017), many converts experience diminished motivation post-conversion, often due to emotional disorientation and a sense of social dislocation. Informant #2 shared:

"At the beginning, I often felt stressed and confused after embracing Islam. The sudden change in lifestyle and the loss of support from my family made me feel lonely and uncertain about myself."

Kawi @ Abdullah (2020) observes that psychological stress may even precede conversion, particularly when internal conflict or family opposition arises. Such strain often undermines self-esteem and fosters religious uncertainty. This was echoed by Informant #3, who noted:

"Sometimes I questioned myself—whether I made the right decision. I felt like I was in between two worlds, no longer fully belonging to the old one, but not yet accepted in the new one."

Such emotional turmoil is common. Awang, Mat, and Abdul Ghani (2022) identify low self-confidence as a major internal struggle among *mualaf*, often caused by limited knowledge of basic Islamic practices, such as prayer, Qur'an recitation, and foundational teachings (Mohd Mazlan & Mohad, 2022). This sense of inadequacy can discourage converts from participating in the broader Muslim community, for fear of judgment or embarrassment, thus deepening their isolation (Rusli & Kadir, 2022).

Nevertheless, inspiring success stories exist. In some communities, mosques have launched mentoring programs where senior mualaf guide newcomers in basic religious practices, offering emotional support and building confidence. NGOs such as Hidayah Centre Foundation (HCF), Kadazan Dusun Murut Rungus dan Sungai Se Malayatis (KDMRS Muslim), and the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) actively collaborate with mosques to deliver these programmes. Their efforts have helped many mualaf overcome fears, strengthen religious understanding, and integrate into Muslim society.

Consequently, many become hesitant to attend religious classes or community events. While they may wish to learn the Qur'an, they often avoid engagement due to fear of criticism or being unfavorably compared to born Muslims. Concerns about social acceptance, fuelled by stereotypes and subtle prejudices, further burden their spiritual journey (Catic, 2024). Addressing these emotional challenges requires not only institutional support but also greater community empathy, understanding that every convert's journey is unique and deserving of patience and encouragement**.** Thus, religious institutions, NGOs, and the Muslim community must collaborate to offer sustained psychosocial support. As emphasized by Mohd Mazlan and Mohad (2022), ongoing guidance, compassionate counselling, and inclusive communal efforts are essential to alleviate emotional strain and foster a confident Islamic identity. Without these supports, many *mualaf* risk remaining isolated, hindering both their spiritual growth and full integration.

Family Opposition Towards Mualaf

Mualaf often face strong opposition from immediate family members after embracing Islam. This resistance typically stems from deeply ingrained religious and cultural values that view conversion as a betrayal of family heritage. According to Mutia Ulfa and Na'imah (2020), families struggle to accept such a shift in faith because it contradicts long-held beliefs. Yahya et al. (2021) add that many families are emotionally unprepared for a relative's conversion, frequently responding with rejection and resentment.

This emotional rejection can escalate into psychological distress and even physical harm. Abdullah @ Tan (2021) documents cases where converts were confined, assaulted, or cut off from communication by family members attempting to reverse their conversion. Informant #4 shared:

"My family could not accept my decision to embrace Islam. They tried to influence my beliefs and isolate me from others, hoping that I would eventually abandon the religion."

In more severe cases, converts are disowned or expelled from their homes, leading to emotional trauma and financial hardship. Azman et al. (2015) report that many *mualaf* lose both moral and material support from family and may even face verbal abuse from Muslim in-laws, deepening their sense of vulnerability during a critical adjustment phase. Muhamat @ Kawangit (2016) further highlights injustices such as denial of inheritance rights and, in extreme instances, threats to life from one's own relatives.

Family-driven Islamophobia adds to the hostility experienced by converts. As noted by Mohd Mazlan and Mohad (2022), *mualaf* are sometimes accused of embracing extremism or disgracing the family. Conversion, in these cases, is not merely misunderstood but demonized. This stigma often damages familial ties and weakens the emotional well-being of converts. Rusli and Kadir (2022) point out that many *mualaf* are scapegoated for perceived dishonour and subjected to ongoing verbal, emotional, or social exclusion. Such hostility places convert in a painful spiritual and psychological dilemma, torn between their newfound faith and family relationships. Informant #5 remarked:

"I embraced Islam through marriage, but the biggest challenge was facing my family's rejection. They saw my decision as a betrayal."

Despite these hardships, there are encouraging cases where families slowly accept conversion. In a community in Kudat, Informant #6 shared that through sustained dialogue and respectful interaction, his elder brother eventually attended a mosque's qurban event and became more open to Islam. Such examples show that perseverance and positive family engagement can gradually reduce resistance and strengthen support for a mualaf's new religious identity.

Given these challenges, religious institutions, NGOs, and the wider Muslim community play a vital role. Offering emotional support, shelter, legal aid, and consistent companionship is essential to help *mualaf* rebuild their lives with dignity, protection, and spiritual strength.

Challenges in Adapting to the Islamic Way of Life

Mualaf often encounter substantial challenges when adjusting to an Islamic lifestyle, which may differ greatly

from their previous religious and cultural norms. As noted by Abdullah @ Tan (2021), embracing Islam involves more than a change in identity—it requires a holistic transformation encompassing worship, dietary rules, dress, and social interactions. Without structured support, this transition can be emotionally and mentally taxing, leaving many converts struggling to incorporate Islamic teachings into daily life.

Upon reciting the *shahadah*, converts are immediately expected to observe Islamic obligations—many of which may be unfamiliar or daunting. Kawi and Abdullah (2020) highlight that most *mualaf* come from backgrounds with less demanding religious expectations. Practices such as abstaining from non-halal food, performing five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and dressing modestly can feel overwhelming. Rasip, Ramli, and Hamzah (2025) emphasize that fulfilling these duties requires discipline and a major lifestyle shift, including the abandonment of long-standing habits. Informant #6 reflected:

"I aspired to practise Islam, but I did not know where to begin. At times, I felt embarrassed to ask basic questions such as how to perform ablution or how to read the Qur'an. The fear of being judged by others often held me back."

Such struggles are common. A lack of foundational religious knowledge makes it harder for *mualaf* to practise Islam confidently. Mohd Mazlan and Mohad (2022) observe that many face difficulties performing key rituals like *wudhu'*, prayer, and Qur'an recitation. These challenges can lead to feelings of inadequacy and reluctance to join community activities, driven by fear of judgment or rejection. Social pressure from non-Muslim peers and perceived exclusion from the Muslim community further deepen this isolation.

Converts often face tension between cultural identity and religious practice. For instance, Rungus converts sometimes struggle with expectations to abandon traditional ceremonies, even when these are cultural rather than religiously forbidden. Addressing these boundaries requires sensitive guidance. Notably, KDMRS Muslim (2023) organises Islamic-themed Tadau Kaamatan celebrations, enabling mualaf to honour their heritage while upholding Islamic values. Such initiatives preserve ethnic identity and strengthen religious commitment.

Moreover, confusion between cultural practices and authentic Islamic teachings adds to their burden. Muhamat @ Kawangit (2016) notes that *mualaf* often struggle with inconsistencies in religious observance and Arabic pronunciation in prayer. Without sustained and compassionate *da'wah* engagement, such issues can impede spiritual growth and weaken a convert's connection to Islam. Therefore, religious institutions, da'i, and NGOs must cultivate a welcoming and supportive atmosphere. Inclusive outreach efforts—through structured classes, mentorship, and peer support—are crucial for helping mualaf build religious confidence, deepen understanding, and solidify their identity as practising Muslims. Efforts should also affirm that being Muslim does not necessitate the erasure of positive cultural heritage, as long as it does not contradict Islamic teachings. Helping converts appreciate that Islam transcends ethnicity can reduce inner conflict and foster a more confident Islamic identity.

Financial Challenges Among Mualaf

Financial hardship is a common challenge faced by many *mualaf* as they adjust to their new lives. Several factors contribute to this vulnerability, including the withdrawal of financial support from non-Muslim family members (Muhamat @ Kawangit, 2016), loss of employment, and the death of a spouse. These difficulties are especially acute for widows or single mothers, whose financial responsibilities often hinder participation in religious learning and community engagement (Azman et al., 2015). As a result, financial insecurity affects not only daily needs but also spiritual and emotional growth.

Fakhruddin and Awang (2020) highlight that financial instability is particularly stressful for converts who head households. Some are forced to leave jobs deemed incompatible with Islamic teachings—such as work in gambling, alcohol, or entertainment industries. Informant #7 shared:

"I quit my job as a nightclub singer after understanding Islamic teachings, because I realized the job was no longer compatible with the principles of my new religion."

While spiritually fulfilling, this transition often results in economic instability and limited job prospects. In other

cases, converts resign due to workplace discrimination or opposition from non-Muslim employers' post-conversion (Nordin, Ismail, & Mohamad Yusoff, 2018). Additionally, some are denied inheritance by their non-Muslim families out of rejection of their new faith (Kawi & Abdullah, 2020). These compounded barriers place converts in a precarious position where material deprivation limits their spiritual aspirations.

Given the seriousness of these challenges, structured and targeted support systems are essential. Financial aid, vocational training, legal safeguards, and access to *zakat* or *baitulmal* resources are critical in preventing the economic marginalization of *mualaf*. Without these supports, many may struggle to sustain themselves, let alone pursue a life grounded in Islamic values.

Limited Religious Understanding Among *Mualaf*

A limited understanding of Islam remains a major obstacle to the long-term spiritual growth of *mualaf*. While institutions like the Sabah Islamic Religious Affairs Department (JHEAINS) and various NGOs offer structured religious classes, many converts do not attend due to time constraints, geographic distance, or lack of motivation. Abdullah (2006) warns that inadequate exposure to Islamic teachings can lead to confusion—and in some cases—even cause reversion to previous beliefs. Reciting the *shahadah* is only the beginning; without continuous learning, integration of Islamic principles becomes difficult.

This knowledge gap also affects the family. Fakhruddin and Awang (2020) highlight that children of *mualaf* often miss out on basic religious education, weakening the family's Islamic identity. Mohad, Mansur, and Mokhtar (2016) report that many converts struggle with fundamental practices, while Adul (2022) notes that some are unfamiliar with essential *fiqh* terms. These gaps hinder their ability to practise Islam correctly and can lead to frustration. Informant #8 shared:

"Sometimes when I pray, I'm not sure if I'm doing it right. I try to follow what I've learned from YouTube, but I still feel unsure. It makes me scared to pray in front of others."

This uncertainty often discourages converts from joining communal worship or seeking guidance. Beyond institutional challenges, personal attitudes and home environments also matter. Sintang et al. (2018) observe that some *mualaf* lack enthusiasm to fulfil obligations, rarely seek knowledge, and receive little support from Muslim-born spouses. Informant #9 stated:

"I'm busy with work and managing my family, so I don't have time to attend religious classes."

Abu Bakar and Ismail (2018) confirm that job and family commitments often prevent *mualaf* from attending classes. These difficulties are worse in rural areas, where access to qualified teachers and Islamic centres is limited. As a result, many *mualaf* navigate their faith alone, relying on fragmented and often unreliable information. To address these issues, more flexible and accessible learning methods are needed. Options such as mosque-based weekend classes, mobile *da'wah* units, online platforms, and peer mentoring can help bridge the gap. As emphasized by Mohad, Mansur, and Mokhtar (2016), continuous and practical religious education is crucial—not merely to transmit knowledge, but to foster internalized understanding that shapes beliefs, practices, and character.

Public Attitudes Towards *Mualaf*

Public perception plays a vital role in shaping the lived experiences of *mualaf* as they embrace their new religious identity. Conversion to Islam entails not only a change in belief but also a transformation in lifestyle, social identity, and often outward appearance. Kawi and Abdullah (2020) highlight that *mualaf* frequently encounter negative public perceptions, including expectations that equate being Muslim with conforming to Malay cultural norms. These unwritten pressures—like wearing traditional attire or performing culturally specific rituals—can confuse and emotionally burden converts who seek to practise Islam based on its universal values rather than ethnic expressions (Aliakbar & Rasip, 2024). Personal accounts reflect these challenges. Informant #10 shared:

"I was looked at with disdain by other Muslims because of the tattoos on my face. I could sense their discomfort with my appearance."

Tattoos, unconventional dress, or distinct accents are often judged superficially as "un-Islamic," leading to exclusion rather than acceptance. These premature judgments weaken spiritual confidence and emotional resilience at a time when support is most needed (Syarul Azman, 2017). In some instances, *mualaf* are treated as second-class Muslims or suspected of converting for personal gain—such as for marriage or financial benefit (Abdullah @ Tan, 2021). Such suspicions diminish their dignity and discourage engagement in religious learning or communal life.

Nevertheless, Azarudin et al. (2022) present a different perspective, showing that most converts accept Islam sincerely, often at significant personal cost, including family estrangement and major lifestyle adjustments. Despite this, negative attitudes within the Muslim community can deeply impact their spiritual journey. Yahya et al. (2021) warn that without supportive structures—like empathetic mentors, welcoming mosques, or dedicated convert centres—converts risk falling into doubt, disengagement, or even leaving the faith altogether.

Hence, it is crucial for the broader Muslim community to nurture a spirit of empathy, inclusivity, and respect. Recognizing *mualaf* as valued members of the *ummah*—not as outsiders—can greatly enhance their confidence, spiritual development, and long-term commitment to Islam.

Financial Challenges Among *Mualaf*

Financial hardship remains a persistent challenge for many *mualaf* as they adapt to their new lives. Key factors include the withdrawal of support from non-Muslim family members after conversion (Muhamat @ Kawangit, 2016), job loss, and the death of a spouse. These burdens are particularly heavy for widows or single mothers, limiting their participation in religious learning and community activities (Azman et al., 2015). Such financial strain impacts both their daily sustenance and spiritual well-being.

Fakhruddin and Awang (2020) note that financial insecurity is especially taxing for *mualaf* who lead households. Many are compelled to leave previous jobs deemed incompatible with Islamic teachings—such as employment in gambling, liquor, or nightlife venues. Informant #11 stated:

"I quit my job as a nightclub singer after understanding Islamic teachings, because I realized the job was no longer compatible with the principles of my new religion."

While spiritually fulfilling, such changes often lead to economic instability and limited job options. Some also face discrimination at work or are pressured to resign by non-Muslim employers' post-conversion (Nordin, Ismail & Mohamad Yusoff, 2018). This discrimination—whether subtle or overt—further restricts their employment prospects. In some cases, *mualaf* are also denied inheritance due to rejection by non-Muslim relatives (Kawi & Abdullah, 2020).

These compounded challenges leave many converts in a vulnerable position, where material insecurity can hinder religious growth and integration. Without proper support, their motivation may wane, and access to religious education may diminish. Addressing these issues requires well-designed support mechanisms—such as financial aid, vocational retraining, access to *zakat* or *baitulmal*, and legal assistance. Ensuring *mualaf* are not economically marginalized is crucial to their successful transition and long-term commitment to Islam.

Shortage of Local Religious Educators

The shortage of local religious educators poses a significant challenge to effectively transmitting Islamic knowledge to *mualaf*, particularly in Sabah's rural and interior regions. Despite efforts by agencies such as JHEAINS, MUIS, YADIM, JAKIM, and various Islamic NGOs, many programmes face limitations due to a lack of instructors familiar with local cultures and languages. Mohad, Mansur, and Mokhtar (2016) argue that the absence of culturally aligned educators hinders meaningful religious communication, especially when language and cultural gaps exist between teachers and learners. Effective Islamic education depends not just on content but on how well it connects with learners lived realities.

Kawi and Abdullah (2020) confirm that *mualaf* are generally more receptive to *da'wah* from educators within their own communities, who command greater trust and can contextualise teachings meaningfully. Using

indigenous languages improves understanding, especially in key areas like *aqidah* and *ibadah*, where clarity is essential. This cultural sensitivity narrows the emotional and intellectual gap between instructor and learner, enhancing engagement. Informant #12 shared:

"The ustaz who came to teach in our village only spoke in Malay. Since most of us speak Dusun at home, I found it difficult to understand what he was saying. Although I was eager to learn, I couldn't follow the lessons properly. Eventually, I lost interest and stopped attending."

Such testimonies show how language and cultural mismatches can discourage *mualaf* from continuing their religious education during critical early stages. Additionally, the shortage of permanent local educators results in inconsistent programmes. Instructors from urban areas often cannot stay long due to transportation, infrastructure, or job commitments, leading to irregular or discontinued classes and lack of sustained support.

Rasip and Ab Razak (2024) advocate for cultivating indigenous religious educators from Sabah's diverse ethnic communities. Beyond Islamic knowledge, these educators need training in *da'wah* methods, intercultural communication, and community leadership. This would empower them to serve as culturally competent mentors who can maintain continuous, relevant, and empowering religious instruction. Building a homegrown *da'wah* ecosystem is thus essential—not only to introduce *mualaf* to Islam but to nurture their journey with meaningful guidance that strengthens identity and faith over time.

Challenges in Accessing Religious Education Among *Mualaf*

One of the key challenges faced by *mualaf* in Sabah—especially in remote and rural regions—is limited access to religious education. The state's rugged terrain and vast distances between settlements make it difficult for *mualaf* to attend Islamic classes, which are often concentrated in urban areas. Mohd Mazlan and Mohad (2022) note that long travel distances, lack of transportation, and high commuting costs hinder rural converts from participating in JHEAINS-organized classes. The absence of reliable public transport worsens the problem. Informant #12 shared:

"I rarely attend religious classes because of transportation problems and the long distance from where I live."

These logistical and financial barriers lead to recurring disengagement, weakening efforts to build Islamic knowledge and spiritual resilience among converts. Environmental conditions also disrupt access—seasonal monsoon rains, floods, and landslides frequently render roads impassable, making travel to education centres unsafe or impossible (Rusli & Kadir, 2022). These interruptions affect not only attendance but also the consistency of religious instruction, which is vital for nurturing faith. Without regular learning, *mualaf* become vulnerable to misinformation and spiritual stagnation (Aliakbar & Rasip, 2024).

Infrastructural deficiencies in rural Sabah further complicate educational delivery. Many villages still face basic developmental issues, including unreliable electricity, poor roads, lack of clean water, and limited digital access (Sintang et al., 2018). These factors discourage qualified religious educators from committing to long-term postings in these areas.

To overcome these layered challenges, inclusive and context-aware strategies are needed. Government and NGOs should consider mobile *da'wah* units, dedicated transportation services for *mualaf*, and village-based intensive religious programmes. While digital infrastructure remains uneven, remote learning via online platforms—where feasible—offers a complementary long-term solution. A hybrid approach that combines in-person instruction with digital outreach is essential to ensure *mualaf* are not only formally recognized as Muslims, but also supported in practicing their faith with confidence and consistency.

Questioning the Sincerity of Conversion to Islam

One persistent challenge faced by *mualaf* is the suspicion surrounding their sincerity—often shaped by prejudice and generalisations within segments of the Muslim community. Awang and Mohd Khambali @ Hambali (2015) note that some Muslims assume converts embrace Islam mainly for material gain, such as access to *zakat* or financial aid. These assumptions oversimplify the diverse spiritual journeys that lead individuals to Islam and

foster mistrust and social exclusion, hindering their integration into the *ummah*.

Aliakbar and Rasip (2024) emphasize that while some converts may require support—rightfully so—this should not be equated with insincerity. Every conversion is personal and context-specific, and judging motives based on isolated cases contradicts the Islamic ethic of *husn al-zann* (assuming good of others). In fact, Abdullah @ Tan (2021) found that many new converts were unaware of their eligibility for *zakat*, indicating that material benefit was not their motivation. Often, conversion stems from personal conviction, spiritual fulfilment, or deep reflection.

Unfortunately, negative assumptions—especially early in a convert's faith journey—can cause emotional hurt and alienation. Informant #13 shared:

"Someone once told me I became Muslim just to get married or receive financial help. I felt hurt because they didn't see the struggle, I went through to reach this decision. It wasn't easy for me to leave my old life behind."

Such remarks invalidate a convert's struggle and may lead to long-term psychological distress or withdrawal from the community. Converts need support—not suspicion; encouragement—not interrogation. The focus should be on nurturing *mualaf* with care, guidance, and companionship. They should be welcomed and mentored with dignity and respect. As Rasip and Ab Razak (2024) affirm, the Muslim community must reflect *qudwah hasanah*—prophetic character—by demonstrating Islam not only in principle but through compassion, sincerity, and moral integrity. A welcoming environment reinforces Islam's essence as a faith of mercy and unity. Supporting *mualaf* without prejudice strengthens both their spiritual journey and the broader mission of *da'wah*.

CONCLUSION

The increase in the number of *mualaf* in Sabah, underscores a significant religious and cultural transformation within the state's indigenous communities. Unlike the trend in Peninsular Malaysia, where most converts are from non-indigenous backgrounds, Islamisation in Sabah is primarily rooted among ethnic groups such as the Kadazan Dusun, Murut, Rungus, and Sungai. This phenomenon reflects not only the openness of native communities to Islam but also the effectiveness of culturally attuned *da'wah* efforts implemented since Sabah's incorporation into Malaysia in 1963. Data from JHEAINS (2024) and JAKIM (2023) affirm Sabah's consistent ranking among the highest in conversion rates nationwide, demonstrating a sustained trajectory of religious growth supported by familial influence, interethnic marriage, and grassroots missionary work.

Despite this positive development, the research highlights various structural and social challenges that hinder the holistic integration of converts into the Muslim ummah. Among the most pressing concerns are bureaucratic barriers in the formal registration process, especially in rural areas with limited access to religious offices. The requirement for witnesses, proper articulation of the *shahadah*, and administrative delays can discourage genuine seekers from completing their conversion. Emotional and psychological burdens are also prominent, as many *mualaf* experience anxiety, isolation, and self-doubt due to their lack of foundational religious knowledge and support, compounded by cultural dissonance and insufficient guidance.

Equally concerning is the lack of religious literacy, which often stems from either limited access to Islamic education or time constraints tied to economic survival. Many *mualaf*—especially single parents or sole breadwinners—struggle to attend classes provided by institutions such as JHEAINS or NGOs. In remote areas of Sabah, challenges are compounded by difficult terrain, poor infrastructure, and a shortage of local religious educators familiar with the native culture and language. The absence of such educators' limits continuity in religious instruction, leaving *mualaf* spiritually disconnected and ill-equipped to perform fundamental religious duties.

Moreover, converts often face serious social stigma and rejection, particularly from their own families. Emotional trauma, disinheritance, and accusations of betraying one's heritage are commonly reported. In some cases, Islamophobia within the family leads to verbal and physical abuse, exacerbating the emotional toll of conversion. Outside the home, negative public perceptions—such as being seen as second-class Muslims or being judged for retaining aspects of their former identity—further alienate converts. These experiences can

deeply affect their motivation to practise Islam or remain within the faith without targeted institutional and communal support.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight that while the growth in the number of *mualaf* in Sabah is promising, it must be matched with a strategic, inclusive, and compassionate response from Islamic institutions, government agencies, and the broader Muslim society. Prioritising psychosocial support, flexible educational programmes, the training of local da'i, and dismantling social prejudices are essential to ensure converts not only enter Islam but thrive within it. Sustaining this momentum requires more than conversion statistics—it demands a nurturing ecosystem that empowers *mualaf* as valued, practising, and confident members of the ummah.

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Interviews

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2. Informant #2, interviewed on 20 August 2024 in Kudat, Sabah.
3. Informant #3, interviewed on 20 August 2024 in Kudat, Sabah.
4. Informant #4, interviewed on 21 August 2024 in Kudat, Sabah.
5. Informant #5, interviewed on 21 August 2024 in Kudat, Sabah.
6. Informant #6, interviewed on 21 August 2024 in Kudat, Sabah.
7. Informant #7, interviewed on 21 August 2024 in Kudat, Sabah.
8. Informant #8, interviewed on 22 August 2024 in Pitas, Sabah.
9. Informant #9, interviewed on 22 August 2024 in Pitas, Sabah.
10. Informant #10, interviewed on 22 August 2024 in Pitas, Sabah.
11. Informant #11, interviewed on 25 August 2024 in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.
12. Informant #12, interviewed on 25 August 2024 in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.
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