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Negotiating Religious Identity among Bidayuh Muslim Converts in Sarawak: A Qualitative Study through Fiqh al-Taʿāyush

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Abstract

Religious conversion represents a significant transformation in an individual's spiritual orientation and may also reshape relationships, cultural belonging, and perceptions of identity. For indigenous converts, the process may involve additional challenges when religious identity is closely associated with cultural and ethnic expectations. This qualitative study explores how Bidayuh Muslim converts in Sarawak negotiate their religious identity following conversion to Islam. Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with four Bidayuh converts (two men, two women), audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns across participants' narratives. The study employs Fiqh al-Taʿāyush (jurisprudence of coexistence) as an interpretive framework to examine how converts navigate boundaries between Islamic obligations, Bidayuh cultural heritage, and relationships with non-Muslim family and wider communities. Two concrete findings emerged. First, converts actively reconstructed belonging by distinguishing between religious obligations and culturally meaningful practices, notably by establishing separate halal food stations and hosting distinct gatherings during longhouse celebrations to demonstrate that dietary boundaries do not equate to familial rejection. Second, participants resisted pressure to assimilate into Malay cultural norms, articulating a self-defined Bidayuh-Muslim identity that refuses the erasure of indigenous heritage while maintaining Islamic commitments. These findings suggest that religious conversion does not necessarily result in the abandonment of ethnic or cultural identity; instead, participants negotiated coexistence through ethical boundary-setting, mutual respect, and continued social engagement. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of religious identity negotiation among indigenous Muslim converts in a multicultural Malaysian context and illustrates how Fiqh al-Taʿāyush can inculcate daʿwah approaches that support hybrid identities without compromising religious integrity.

Keywords: Bidayuh Muslim converts, Religious identity negotiation, Fiqh al-Taʿāyush, Indigenous Muslim converts, Sarawak

1. Introduction

Religious conversion constitutes a significant transformation in an individual's spiritual orientation, but its implications extend beyond personal belief. In multicultural and multi-religious societies, conversion may influence family relationships, cultural participation, communal belonging, and an individual's understanding of self. Consequently, religious conversion may involve an ongoing process of identity negotiation rather than a single transition from one religious affiliation to another. For members of indigenous communities, this process may pose challenges. Conversion to Islam can sometimes be perceived by family members as a departure from inherited religious traditions and collective cultural practices. At the same time, converts may encounter expectations within the Muslim community to adopt cultural practices associated with dominant Muslim groups. As a result, indigenous converts may experience tensions between their newly adopted religious identity and their existing ethnic and cultural identity. This situation is particularly relevant to Bidayuh Muslims in Sarawak. The Bidayuh community possesses distinctive cultural traditions, kinship structures, social practices, and collective identities. Following conversion to Islam, Bidayuh converts may therefore negotiate multiple dimensions of belonging. Their experiences cannot be adequately understood through a simple distinction between religious adherence and cultural rejection. Instead, conversion may be understood as an ongoing process through which individuals reinterpret their religious identity in relation to family, culture, community, and personal beliefs. According to Ayten et al. (2019), as cited in Masri (2025), religious conversion is not merely a theological decision but a profound identity negotiation, especially where religion intersects with ethnicity, culture, and political structures. Thus, constant negotiation is one of the ways for the converts to manage various aspects of life and community. The concept

of religious identity negotiation is therefore essential to understand the experiences of Bidayuh Muslim converts. Religious identity is not necessarily constructed in isolation but may develop through interactions with family members, religious communities, cultural expectations, and wider society. Converts may need to determine how they understand themselves as Muslims while simultaneously maintaining meaningful connections with their Bidayuh heritage. In this context, *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush*, or the jurisprudence of coexistence, provides a useful interpretive framework. Contemporary discussions of *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush* emphasise practical relations between Muslims and non-Muslims through principles such as tolerance, mutual respect, compassion, justice, and ethical social interaction (Khambali et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2021). Its application in this study allows the experiences of Bidayuh Muslim converts to be examined and explored, especially on how Bidayuh Muslim converts negotiate their religious identity following their conversion to Islam. In Hamdan et al. (2021), Fiqh Ta'ayush is conceptualized as a compound term: fiqh, indicating deeper comprehension, and ta'ayush, referring to the cultivation of a way of life grounded in love and togetherness. Collectively, the term underscores the principles of harmony and communal solidarity. Linguistically, ta'ayush is a verb derived from the morphological pattern (wazan) that conveys mutuality (al-Asmar, 1997). Consequently, Hamdan et al. (2021) interpret fiqh ta'ayush as a framework for social interaction among diverse communities; across gender, race, religion, and origin, which aims to foster harmonious coexistence.

Islam calls for equal rights among all human beings, despite of religious background, ethnicity, nationality, or gender. This principle is exemplified in the conduct of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, who made no distinction between individuals, based on social status, whether they were Muslim or non-Muslim. Although existing studies have examined religious conversion, indigenous identity, Muslim minority experiences, and inter-religious coexistence, limited attention has been given to how Bidayuh converts in Sarawak navigate Islamic, Malay, and indigenous identities, countering traditional narratives of total assimilation or "Masuk Melayu." Additionally, it bridges a gap in the literature by applying Fiqh al-Taʿāyush (jurisprudence of coexistence) to micro-sociological contexts, specifically the longhouse environment, rather than focusing on the macro-level political theory found in existing research. This study demonstrates a need to reframe the study's focus toward cultural and communal navigation. Therefore, this study addresses the gap by examining how Bidayuh Muslim negotiate their religious and cultural identities across family, community, and Muslim social contexts through the interpretive framework of Fiqh al-Taʿāyush.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Bidayuh Muslim converts and, specifically, the ways in which they negotiate their religious identity following conversion to Islam. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focuses on personal narratives, perceptions, relationships, identity formation, and the meanings participants attribute to their experiences. Rather than measuring religious identity through predetermined variables, the study seeks to understand how the participants describe and make sense of their own identity following conversion.

2.2 Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four Bidayuh Muslim converts (two males and two females). Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the interviewees had direct and relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The participants were Bidayuh Muslim converts who met the predetermined inclusion criteria and were able to provide firsthand accounts of their experiences of negotiating their religious identity following conversion to Islam. The semi-structured format enabled the researchers to explore common areas of inquiry while allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words. The participants are indigenous Bidayuh individuals from Sarawak who have embraced Islam. This specific demographic was intentionally selected because they occupy a unique intersectional space, balancing indigenous tribal heritage (*adat*, *kampung* life, longhouse traditions) with minority-majority religious dynamics (Islam within a regional administrative framework influenced by Malay-centric cultural norms). The interviews focused primarily on participants' experiences following conversion, including their understanding of their Muslim identity, responses from family members and communities, experiences related to Bidayuh cultural identity, religious adjustment, and strategies used to manage situations involving different religious and cultural expectations. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts yielded three interconnected dimensions of identity negotiation among the Bidayuh converts: Dual Disconnection, Cultural Preservation, and Active Boundary Negotiation.

The interviews were conducted during a Sarawak festive celebration at one longhouse, with English and Bidayuh used bilingually as the languages of communication. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Non-English words and phrases were subsequently translated into English to facilitate the analysis and reporting of the findings.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 The findings presented are limited to selected responses that directly address the research objective, with particular emphasis on how Bidayuh Muslim converts negotiate their religious identity following conversion to Islam. The data are presented under the themes of Dual Disconnection, Cultural Preservation, and Active Boundary Negotiation. Participant 2 and 4 are males, while Participant 1 and 3 are females, and they are between 30-45 years of age, embracing Islam for about more than 5 years to 10 years.

3.1. 1 Active Boundary Negotiation: Familial friction and dietary boundaries

Participant 3: *I make it a point to actively bridge the gap by explaining to my relatives that my new faith changes what is on my plate, but it does not change the love and respect I have for them. By taking the initiative to cook separate, certified halal dishes during celebrations, I hope to show them that my conversion is not an act of rejection, but a deeply personal path to God. Change in the kampung doesn't happen overnight, and I've learned to accept the quiet sighs and occasional resistance with patience and grace.*

As articulated by the participant above, the enforcement of Islamic dietary laws is frequently misinterpreted by non-Muslim kin as a symbolic rejection of ancestral heritage and hospitality, transforming communal longhouse gatherings into spaces of quiet tension and spatial exclusion. The participant proactively establishes separate halal food stations and hosts distinct gatherings to prove that the conversion is a personal path to God rather than an act of familial rejection.

Participant 3's initiative to establish halal food stations and separate certified cooking spaces directly embodies the *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush* core principle of *taʿāmul* (ethical social interaction). Rather than viewing dietary restrictions as a barrier to filial piety, the convert operationalises coexistence by maintaining hospitality without compromising religious compliance (*ḥalāl*). Active negotiation through patience (*ṣabr*) and proactive communication transforms potential family alienation into a shared, respectful space, demonstrating how Islamic boundaries can coexist alongside indigenous communal life.

3.1.2 Dual Disconnection: Negotiating Bidayuh and Muslim identities within the mainstream

Participant 4: *I am not 'Malay enough' to practice or fit in seamlessly, I just want a space to be authentically Dayak and authentically Muslim at the same time, without having to choose between my heritage and my Islamic faith*.

This response indicates the pressure faced by the participant to cast off his indigenous identity, and this forced him to build an unshakable spiritual backbone from scratch, transforming a challenging period of estrangement into an empowered ownership of his dual identity, as a Muslim and as a Bidayuh.

Participant 4's refusal to adopt solely to Malay cultural norms as a prerequisite for Islamic identity aligns with *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush*'s rejection of forced cultural assimilation. Under this jurisprudence lens, Islam accepts cultural diversity (*ʿurf*) as long as it does not directly contradict the main theology (*aqīdah*). Participant 4's effort to build an authentic Bidayuh-Muslim identity requires mutual tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), demanding space to remain indigenous without being treated as culturally lacking by the dominant Muslim community.

3.1.3 Dual Disconnection: Pressure to abandon Bidayuh identity

Participant 1: *It's this invisible, suffocating expectation that to be a 'real' Muslim here, I have to strip away everything that makes me who I am. From day one, Malays look at me as if my entire life before the shahadah was a mistake that needs erasing, pushing me to talk like them, dress like them, and adopt a completely alien cultural script just to prove I belong. I'm constantly walking this exhausting tightrope: my own Bidayuh family back in my kampung look at me sideways like I've abandoned my Bidayuh heritage, while the born Muslim Malays treat me like an eternal probationer who hasn't quite learned how to fit into their mould. It isn't spiritual guidance. It is a slow, heavy-handed assimilation project that makes me feel like an absolute stranger in both worlds.*

As highlighted by the participant above, the pressure has made her to reevaluate and reclaim her emotions by replacing the feeling of helplessness with fierce self-determination. Stripped of community approval and family applause, many converts intensely interrogated their core beliefs, realising that their hybrid identity is not a flaw but a unique strength.

Participant 1's experience of being pushed toward an alien cultural script, reflecting the tension between religious obligation and cultural pressure. *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush* provides a corrective framework here, indicating that embracing Islam does not necessitate abandoning ancestral heritage. Reclaiming one's hybrid identity from a position of self-determination allows the converts to resist the heavy-handed assimilation project while grounding their Islamic practice in authentic Bidayuh roots.

3.1.4 : Cultural Preservation: Constructing a Self-defined Bidayuh Muslim Identity

Participant 2: *The isolation stripped away all the outside noise and gave me the fierce agency I needed to stitch my fractured identity back together on my own terms. I stopped apologising for who I am and started embracing the unique space I occupy.*

Participant 2's admission shows that self-reflection has cleared away confusion and forged a solid spiritual conviction and quiet confidence that no longer depends on external validation. Ultimately, the established resilience enables the participants to negotiate between both cultural and religious worlds, and accept the uniqueness of having dual identities. Participant 2's journey toward self-definition highlights internal resilience and agency. By integrating Islamic convictions with Bidayuh heritage on their own terms, the convert manifests the practical essence of *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush*, allowing an individual to engage both non-Muslim kin and wider Muslim society from a foundation of quiet confidence and to accept the uniqueness in having two identities.

3.2 Discussion

The findings indicate that the negotiation of religious identity among Bidayuh Muslim converts can be understood as a dynamic process involving several interconnected experiences. The participants did not simply replace one religious identity with another. Instead, their narratives suggest an ongoing process of reconstructing belonging while responding to family expectations, cultural identity, religious commitments, and community perceptions. Three interconnected phases emerged from the analysis: Dual Disconnection, Cultural Preservation, and Active Boundary Negotiation. Collectively, these phases demonstrate how the participants worked towards developing a religious identity that was meaningful to them while maintaining aspects of their Bidayuh identity and important social relationships. The findings can be further understood through the framework of *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush*. Contemporary scholarship describes *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush* as concerned with practical relations between Muslims and non-Muslims and with principles that support peaceful and ethical coexistence (Ismail et al., 2021). By applying Fiqh al-Taʿāyush, the research proves that Islamic adherence and indigenous Bidayuh identity are not mutually exclusive. Through the three identified phases: Dual Disconnection, Cultural Preservation, and Active Boundary Negotiation, the converts rely on principles like *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *maḥabbah* (affection), and *taʿāmul* (ethical social dealing) to navigate family relationships and challenge cultural assimilation pressures. Ultimately, *Fiqh al-Taʿāyush* offers a powerful jurisprudential framework showing that indigenous converts can maintain deep religious convictions while remaining meaningfully rooted in their heritage and non-Muslim kinship networks.

Khambali et al. (2021) further associate interaction within multicultural societies with concepts such as *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *maḥabbah* (mutual affection), and *taʿāmul* (social dealings). These concepts are relevant to the experiences of Bidayuh Muslim converts because their religious identity is negotiated within continuing relationships with family members and wider communities. From this perspective, religious identity negotiation does not necessarily require the rejection of people who hold different religious beliefs. Instead, it may involve establishing appropriate boundaries while maintaining respect and social relationships. The participants' experiences therefore illustrate that coexistence is an active process. They negotiate their religious identity through decisions concerning family interaction, cultural participation, and religious observance. They gradually accept and acknowledge their uniquenessof having dual identities and gain more confidence in lives as converts. In this study, the framework therefore helps explain how the participants negotiate the boundaries of their religious identity while continuing to participate in family and community life.

4. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that religious identity negotiation among Bidayuh Muslim converts is a dynamic and non-linear process rather than a straightforward transition from one religious identity to another. The findings identify three interconnected processes such as Dual Disconnection, Cultural Preservation, and Active Boundary Negotiation, through which the converts navigate changes in family relationships, preserve meaningful aspects of Bidayuh cultural identity, and establish boundaries that enable continued participation in cultural and family life while maintaining Islamic commitments. These findings further demonstrate that religious conversion does not necessarily entail the abandonment of ethnic or cultural identity, positioning converts as active agents in shaping and negotiating their identities. Theoretically, the study extends the application of Fiqh al-Taʿāyush by demonstrating its relevance as an Islamic ethical framework for understanding religious identity negotiation within culturally and religiously diverse communities. The principles of coexistence, mutual respect, social responsibility, and appropriate boundary-setting provide a lens for understanding how Islamic commitment can be maintained alongside continued familial, cultural, and social relationships. Practically, the findings point to the need for more culturally responsive support for Muslim converts, particularly through family engagement, community-based guidance, and religious education that recognises rather than marginalises indigenous cultural identities. Future research should extend these findings through larger and more diverse samples of Bidayuh Muslim converts, with attention to gender, age, geographical location, length of time since conversion, family circumstances, and levels of community integration. Comparative studies involving other indigenous Muslim converts could further establish whether the identity negotiation processes identified in this study reflect broader patterns of conversion, coexistence, and cultural continuity.

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