

A Review of Factors Influencing Conversion to Islam Among Orang Asli in Malaysia

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Abstract

The indigenous population residing across Peninsular Malaysia traditionally adhered to animistic beliefs, and a portion remained non-religious. With the establishment of various Islamic propagation bodies, both governmental and non-governmental, efforts toward Islamization among the indigenous population commenced. While the rate of indigenous people embracing Islam remains relatively low, the numbers have steadily increased over the years. This study aims to explore the factors driving the adoption of Islam within the indigenous community by employing a literature review methodology. Previous studies have revealed a dynamic array of factors influencing the adoption of Islam among indigenous communities, including marriage, continuous efforts by preachers, personal interest, dream inspirations, peer influence from family members, neighbors, village heads (Tok Batin), personal interests, and more. Future studies are encouraged to delve specifically into factors influencing the adoption of Islam and factors resisting Islamic propagation within indigenous communities based on village, state, or ethnic group differentiations.

Keyword: Conversion, Islam, orang asli, indigenous people

1.0 Introduction

Malaysia is a country characterized by ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. This diversity fosters a multitude of religious beliefs and practices within its society. The Malay community has been historically associated with Islam for centuries, while other ethnic groups in Malaysia have embraced Islam through conversion processes. Despite Islam being the religion of the Federation and with 63.5% of the country's population identifying as Muslims (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022), the constitution allows for the practice of other religions peacefully. The diversity inherent in this multicultural society, as previously outlined, renders Malaysia a unique nation. From an Islamic missionary perspective, it presents an opportunity and a providence for missionaries to propagate Islamic teachings among non-Muslims.

The indigenous peoples, also sometimes referred to as Orang Asli, constitute an ethnic group found in Malaysia. They are present throughout the states of Peninsular Malaysia except for Perlis and Penang. Statistics from the Department of Orang Asli Development (2018) in Malaysia indicate that Pahang Darul Makmur state holds the largest population of Orang Asli followed by Perak, Selangor, Kelantan and Johor.

The available data shows that the rate of conversion to Islam in the states of Malaysia has consistently increased over the years, encompassing individuals from the Chinese, Indian, indigenous, and Bumiputera populations in Sabah and Sarawak. This paper aims to examine the factors driving the adoption of Islam among

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the indigenous communities in Malaysia through the application of a literature review methodology.

2.0 Definition of Conversion and Reversion

'Conversion' is a concept or term commonly used in Judaism and Christianity to refer to the process of changing or exchanging one's religion. However, this term does not exist in the Arabic language and is not mentioned in the Quran (Sintang & Khambali, 2016). Nevertheless, this term has been widely adopted to denote the process of changing or exchanging one's religion over time, including within the context of embracing Islam.

Linguistically, 'conversion' is defined as the act or process of changing something into a different state or form (Collins, 2023), and as the act or process of changing something from one form, use, or system to another (Oxford, 2023).

There are perspectives among scholars and authors that disagree with the use of the terms 'conversion' or 'convert' in reference to someone changing their religion to Islam (Mulyana, 2004; Nasril, 2015; Casey, 2019; Huda, 2018; Corbin, 2023). They suggest substituting the term 'convert' with 'revert'. Their rationale stems from the belief that the term 'convert' is suitable only for religions other than Islam. For individuals transitioning from another religion to Islam, they propose the term 'revert'. 'Revert' signifies returning. An individual who originally followed Islam but then grew up and embraced a different belief due to factors such as lineage and others would be aptly referred to as a 'revert'.

In Malaysia, numerous preachers endorse and promote the term 'revert,' including Chinese Muslim preacher Lim Jooi Soon and Firdaus Wong. Moreover, Firdaus Wong has established and leads a non-governmental organization known as Multiracial Reverted Muslim, abbreviated as MRM. Various entities, encompassing individuals, speakers, and Islamic outreach organizations in Malaysia, have normalized the use of the term 'revert.' This normalization is evident in videos on platforms like YouTube and in articles disseminated by the Islamic Outreach Foundation of Malaysia (YADIM), Hidayah Centre Foundation (HCF), and others.

The debate regarding the more appropriate term, whether 'convert' or 'revert,' remains inconclusive. Nonetheless, researchers do not perceive this matter as a significant issue. Corbin's (2023) perspective aligns with author's opinion that 'convert' or 'revert' merely represent differences in terminology arising from varying perceptions. No problems or negative implications arise if the terms 'convert' and 'conversion' are used to refer to the adoption of Islam. Shikongo (2022) employs both terms interchangeably, "convert or revert," within each sentence in his writing. Within academic discourse, keywords commonly used in titles of papers and past studies regarding religious conversion to Islam predominantly feature 'convert' and 'conversion,' or in Malay and Indonesian 'konversi', rather than 'revert' and 'reversion.'

3.0 The Scenario of Religious Conversion Among Indigenous People in Malaysia

Based on the latest official statistics from the Department of Orang Asli Development Malaysia (JAKOA) updated on June 30, 2022, the total population of Orang Asli in Malaysia stands at 209,575 individuals. Within this population, ethnic groups from the Senoi category represent 55.21%, followed by ethnic groups from the Proto Malay category at 41.77%, and lastly, the Negrito ethnic group comprises only 3.02%.

However, the latest statistics regarding religious affiliations among the Orang Asli in Malaysia have not been released. The most recent official statistics available are from the update as of March 31, 2018, as follows:

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STATE	ANIMISM	ISLAM	CHRISTIANITY	BUDDHISM	BAHAISM	HINDUISM	ATHEISM	TRIBAL RELIGION	OTHERS	TOTAL
JOHOR	5,603	5,358	429	312	0	29	973	364	71	13,139
KEDAH	0	207	0	0	0	0	63	0	0	270
KELANTAN	1,201	4,789	424	12	61	15	2,358	4,353	244	13,457
MELAKA	799	274	90	16	0	8	328	0	0	1,515
NEGERI SEMBILAN	4,314	1,294	897	120	11	64	2,333	1,299	199	10,531
PAHANG	30,199	7,483	5,127	382	1,823	44	18,469	2,803	1,176	67,506
PERAK	9,931	12,409	9,651	146	3,167	70	16,682	323	920	53,299
SELANGOR	5,996	3,268	733	36	9	31	1,551	5,833	130	17,587
TERENGGANU	0	893	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	893
TOTAL	58,043	35,975	17,351	1,024	5,071	261	42,757	14,975	2,740	178,197

Source: Malaysia's Official Open Data Portal (2018)

The statistics above indicate that the majority of the Orang Asli population in Malaysia still adhere to animistic beliefs. This is followed by atheists and practitioners of Islam. Additionally, the statistics reveal that only 35,975 individuals among the indigenous population nationwide have embraced Islam. This constitutes 20.19% of the overall Orang Asli population in Malaysia. Terengganu, a state situated on the east coast of Malaysia, stands as the sole state recording a 100% adherence of its indigenous population to Islam.

Throughout Malaysia, efforts in Islamic outreach to indigenous villages are consistently pursued, resulting in an increasing number of indigenous individuals embracing Islam over time. However, overall, the rate of Islamization among the indigenous communities in Malaysia remains relatively low (Aini & Sabri, 2019). This is partly attributed to the presence of several negative perceptions within the indigenous communities towards Islam (Hussain et al., 2018). These perceptions include views that Islam is a difficult religion, Islam imposes numerous prohibitions, converting to Islam equates to becoming Malay, among others.

4.0 Factors Influencing Conversion to Islam Among Orang Asli in Malaysia

The factors driving the embrace of Islam among the indigenous people in Malaysia, based on previous studies, can be depicted as follows in the table:

Author (year)	Research / Article Title	Findings (Factors Influencing Conversion to Islam among OA)
Sahad, S. N. & Sa'ari, C. Z. (2005)	Islamisasi dan Kristianisasi di Kalangan Orang Asli Temuan, Broga.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Marriage Factor - Continuous Da'wah Efforts from Penggerak - Dream
Shahar, A. F. et al. (2017)	Faktor Tarikan Masyarakat Orang Asli Memeluk Islam di Selangor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Marriage - Financial Assistance - Inspiration - Research - Influence - Interest - The most prominent factor is the INTEREST factor, which is the frequent recitation of the Quran that is often heard among the local community.
Don et al. (2017).	Isu dan Cabaran Dalam Dakwah Saudara Baru. Modul Literasi Undang-Undang Untuk Mualaf.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidance from Allah - Peer Influence Factor - Marriage Factor - Certain personal interests

Mohamad (2003)	Pengislaman Masyarakat Orang Asli di Negeri Kelantan dari Perspektif Undang-Undang	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In 1983, the Islamic awakening of the indigenous people in Kelantan began. - The involvement of government agencies, statutory bodies, and NGOs commenced. - Establishment of the Indigenous Da'wah Unit of the Kelantan Islamic Religious Council.
Junoh, et al. (2022)	Pembangunan Akidah Orang Asli di Malaysia: Isu dan Cabaran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The impact of their communication in harmony with the Muslim community
Ahmad et al. (2022)	Kepercayaan, Adat Budaya Dan Amalan Keagamaan Orang Asli Kanaq Di Kota Tinggi, Johor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They have been given initial exposure to Islam as well as the uniqueness of Islam - Further explanation about Islam by religious officers. - Mass conversions to Islam in neighboring villages. - Majority approval of the villagers and the conversion of the Village Head (Tok Batin).

Source: Literature review

5.0 Discussion

The study on the factors of religious conversion among the indigenous people in Malaysia remains significantly underexplored. The majority of studies have focused on aspects related to the approach or methodology of religious propagation. Existing studies have primarily been conducted in Selangor, Malaysia. Shahar et al. (2017), in their study involving 40 indigenous individuals who converted to Islam in Selangor, identified six main factors influencing their choice of Islam: marriage, seeking financial assistance, inspiration, through study, influential factors, and interest. Within the realm of interest, one notable factor was the attraction of some respondents to the recitation of the Quran commonly heard in the local community. Based on these findings, researchers observed that the factors of inspiration, through study, and interest are three strong factors that can instill a higher level of conviction among converts to Islam. This could potentially contribute to the sustainability and long-term commitment of their adherence to Islam, possibly lasting until the end of their lives. The other two factors, namely marriage and seeking financial assistance, are relatively fragile. Typically, religious conversion due to the desire to marry or for financial aid does not stem from a sincere heart or genuine belief in the newfound religion. Rather, it arises from certain pressures. For instance, embracing Islam due to the need for financial assistance emerges from the pressures of life, hardship, or poverty.

Regarding specific pressures in life, there are also studies indicating that some indigenous individuals embrace Islam due to particular personal interests. One of these reasons is their belief that by converting, they can evade legal consequences for past transgressions. Upon embracing Islam, there is a process of name change and identity information alteration. They perceive that through this method, authorities such as the police would encounter difficulties in tracing them (Don et al., 2017).

Some indigenous individuals adopt Islam due to imitation (Don et al., 2017). When influential or respected figures within the indigenous community convert to Islam, it influences several other community members to follow suit. This factor leads to a portion of them displaying little interest in learning about Islam or showing no characteristics of being Muslim at all. They continue engaging in their previous activities contradictory to Islam, such as gambling, alcohol consumption, and the like. This indicates that their conversion to Islam does not stem from genuine willingness but rather from the influence of others.

The factor of 'marriage' was also touched upon in the study conducted by Sahad (2005). Conducting

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research in Broga, Selangor, Sahad found that inspiration gained from dreams could also trigger the indigenous people's desire to embrace Islam, alongside the continuous efforts made by preachers (penggerak dakwah).

Mohamad (2003), conducting a study in Kelantan, elucidated that Islamization efforts among the indigenous people in the state commenced in 1983 with the involvement of government agencies, statutory bodies, and NGOs. He added establishment of the Indigenous Da'wah Unit of the Kelantan Islamic Religious Council played a profoundly significant role during that time.

Meanwhile, Junoh et al. (2022) in their work stated that harmonious communication with the Muslim community has an impact on the conversion to Islam among the indigenous population. Ahmad's (2022) study on the Orang Kanaq indigenous community in Johor revealed that mass conversions to Islam occurred in neighboring villages, the majority consensus among the villagers, especially the village head (Tok Batin), significantly influenced the entire village community to embrace Islam. This phenomenon could also be interpreted as an adoption of Islam through peer influence, as suggested by Don et al. (2017), following the lead of the Tok Batin or neighboring individuals.

6.0 Conclusion

This study provides a glimpse indicating that the factors contributing to the indigenous people's interest in embracing Islam are diverse and dynamic. This aligns with the perspectives of Rambo (1993), Lofland & Stark (2018), and other scholars in the field of religious conversion. However, it is essential to note that this study offers only a limited overview of the factors influencing the adoption of Islam among the indigenous people in Malaysia. There is a likelihood of variations in the factors driving the adoption of Islam among indigenous communities, between villages, across states, and among different ethnic groups.

Therefore, it is recommended that future studies delve deeper into a focused exploration of the factors that attract the indigenous population to Islam. Additionally, investigating the factors contributing to the continued rejection of Islam among many indigenous individuals would provide valuable insights for comprehensive understanding.

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