BALIK-ISLAM IN MINDANAO: THE TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONG THE REVERTS IN SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master's Degree (M.A.)

By:

Charlene Angkay

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UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INTERNATIONAL INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the Balik-Islam experience in Mindanao, emphasizing that it is not just a one-time transformative event but an ongoing process of identity formation through multiple stages over time. It addresses the lack of understanding of post-conversion experiences among the Balik-Islam reverts outside BARMM and the scholarly neglect of identity development processes among Muslim reverts in Mindanao. Using a qualitative life-study approach, this research draws on the experiences of fifteen Muslim reverts living outside the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), specifically in areas such as Davao City, General Santos, and Sarangani. The study aims to explore how Balik-Islam reverts construct and negotiate their religious identity in non-BARMM areas amid sociocultural and institutional challenges. I introduce the concept of "liminal religiosity" to describe the spiritual and social state of these reverts, who exist in a limbo due to historical marginalization, sociocultural ambivalence, and institutional neglect. In Mindanao, Islam functions as a form of historical memory. Balik-Islam reverts face double marginality—they are distanced from their Christian family backgrounds and excluded from ethnolinguistic communities of born Muslims, where ethnic identity often influences religious legitimacy. The subsequent discussion and analysis draw on Rambo's idea of the "consequences" of conversion and Turner's concept of liminality to illustrate how they maintain and develop their faith amid suspicion, bureaucratic invisibility, and legacies of conflict, especially after the Marawi Siege in 2017, which created new memories of distrust as part of Muslim identity reformations. Despite these challenges, Balik-Islam participants demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency. They navigate their uncertain sense of belonging related to their contested religious identity through informal social networks of fellow believers, grassroots religious learning methods, and personal spiritual practices. This research, based on in-depth interviews with the Balik-Islam individuals outside the Bangsamoro region, shows that adopting a Balik-Islam identity is more than just a return to Islamic roots; it involves moving across places of fluid faith and belonging, layered with engagement and exclusion. The study provides original empirical insights into Philippine Islamic studies and global frameworks of conversion. It highlights the need for future research on how institutions approach and support conversion to Islam in their long-term efforts for integration and participation within Muslim communities. It also explores how emerging expressions of religious belonging influence the ability of Balik-Islam individuals to gain recognition within those communities.

Keywords**:** *Balik-Islam, religious identity, liminality, post-conversion, Mindanao*

ملخص

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ماجستير في الدراسات الإسلامية
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توضح هذه الأطروحة أن رحلة العودة إلى الإسلام في مينداناو ليست لحظة تحوّل ديني مؤثرة واحدة، بل هي عملية طويلة الأمد يُعيد فيها الأفراد بناء هويتهم عبر مراحل متعددة ومع مرور الزمن. استنادًا إلى سرد تاريخ الحياة لخمسة عشر مشاركًا فلبينيًا متحولًا إلى الإسلام في مناطق خارج BARMM ، بما في ذلك مدن دافاو (Davao)، وجنرال سانتوس(General Santos) ، وسارانغاني (Sarangani) ، أرفض التفسير المُبسّط للعودة إلى الإسلام باعتبارها مجرد استعادة للتراث الإسلامي.وقد برز مصطلح "التدين الحدّي" لوصف الحالة الروحية والاجتماعية للمتحولين إلى الإسلام، بوصفهم يحتلون موقعًا وسطًا يتسم بالتهميش التاريخي، والتناقضات الاجتماعية والثقافية، والإهمال المؤسسي. الإسلام حاضر في مينداناو كذاكرة تاريخية. ومع ذلك، غالبًا ما يتعرض الأفراد العائدون إلى الإسلام لتهميش مزدوج؛ إذ يُنبذون من خلفياتهم العائلية المسيحية، ويُستبعدون في الوقت ذاته من المجتمعات المسلمة ذات الطابع العرقي اللغوي، حيث يظل الانتماء العرقي شرطًا ضمنيًا للشرعية الدينية.يعتمد التحليل التالي على مرحلة "العواقب" (consequences) التي حددها رامبو (2014)، ومفهوم "الحدودية" كما طرحه تيرنر (1964)، لإظهار كيف يبني المتحولون دينهم ويحافظون عليه وسط الشكوك، والفراغ البيروقراطي، وتبعات الصراع المستمرة، لا سيما بعد حصار ماراوي (2017)، الذي عمّق روايات عدم الثقة المحيطة بالهوية الإسلامية والتحول الديني. وعلى الرغم من التحديات التي يواجهها المتحولون، فإنهم يُظهرون قدرة ملحوظة على الصمود وتأكيد دورهم الفاعل. ومن خلال شبكات غير رسمية من الأقران الذين يشاركونهم العقيدة، واعتماد نهج شعبي في التعلّم الديني، وممارسة الانضباط الروحي الذاتي، يتنقّل المشاركون ضمن موقع غير محدد من الانتماء في إطار هوية دينية متنازع عليها.تشير هذه الدراسة إلى أن هوية باليك-إسلام ليست مجرد عودة إلى ماضٍ إسلامي، بل هي انتقال في أنماط الانتماء، من موقع إلى آخر، داخل مجالات متغيرة من الإيمان والانتماء، تتسم بطبقات من المشاركة والاستبعاد. تمثل هذه الدراسة مساهمة تجريبية أصيلة في حقل الدراسات الإسلامية الفلبينية، وفي الأطر العالمية لتحوّل الأديان. والأهم من ذلك، أنها تدعو إلى المزيد من البحوث حول الاندماج المؤسسي طويل الأمد للمتحولين داخل المجتمعات المسلمة، والنتائج المحتملة لأنماط الانتماء الديني الناشئة في الفلبين، والتي تسهم بدورها في تشكيل قدرة أفراد باليك-إسلام على بناء فضاءات مستدامة للاعتراف بهم داخل المجتمعات المسلمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية. *باليك-إسلام، الهوية الدينية، الحدودية، ما بعد التحول، مينداناو*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my love and gratitude to Almighty Allah for His mercy, wisdom, and guidance throughout what has been a challenging yet fulfilling and rewarding academic journey. Only by His will was I able to endure this process and complete this thesis.

While studying at Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia (UIII), I have experienced profound spiritual, intellectual, and personal development. I am grateful to my thesis supervisor, Prof. Bhirawa Anoraga, Ph.D., for his thoughtfulness, patience, and valuable comments and advice. His expertise on Islam and society refined the core arguments of this thesis, and he provided clarity when I felt overwhelmed by the research.

I sincerely thank all my Faculty of Islamic Studies professors for their rigour, academic critique, and mentorship. I want to thank every faculty member individually for contributing to my development at UIII. Nonetheless, I have a personal debt to Dr. Haula Noor and Dr. Zezen Zaenal Mutaqin, S.J.D., for their meticulous attention to detail and insistence on scholarly excellence, even in phrasing and formatting. I also thank Prof. Syamsul Rijal, Ph.D., Dr. Phil. Syafiq Hasyim, S.J.D., Muhammad al-Marakeby, Ph.D., Aria Nakissa, Ph.D., Faried F. Saenong, Ph.D., and Dr. M. Ilyas Marwal, MM, for their varied, intriguing perspectives and encouragement, which helped frame my understanding of the field of Islamic studies in a global context.

To my colleagues and friends, especially the Filipino student community at UIII, I would like to thank you all for your support, laughter, and resilience. You reminded me that I was never alone on this journey.

This thesis would not have been possible without the openness of the Balik-Islam participants who shared their experiences with me. It was a gift for them to share their stories with me, and I thank them for their honesty and generosity during the interviews. Their lived experiences are the heart of this thesis, and I hope I have done justice to their voices.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my family, especially to my mother, whose own story of reversion to Islam was the very motivation behind this research. I am also

thankful to my father, whose immeasurable generosity allowed him to serve as my driver in the field, accompanying me to the participants' homes across Mindanao with patience and quiet support. He helped me make each trip safer, easier, and more enjoyable. To all my loved ones, thank you for your prayers, encouragement, unwavering support, and love throughout this journey. May Allah's peace and blessings be upon you**.**

TRANSLITERATION GUIDE

IJMES TRANSLITERATION SYSTEM FOR ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKISH

CONSONANTS

A = Arabic, P = Persian, OT = Ottoman Turkish, MT = Modern Turkish

	A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT
ء	ʾ	ʾ	ʾ	—	ز	z	z	z	z	ك	k	k *or* g	k *or* ñ	k *or* n
ب	b	b	b	b *or* p	ژ	—	zh	j	j				*or* y	*or* y
پ	—	p	p	p	س	s	s	s	s				*or* ğ	*or* ğ
ت	t	t	t	t	ش	sh	sh	ş	ş	گ	—	g	g	g
ث	th	s	s	s	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	s	ل	l	l	l	l
ج	j	j	c	c	ض	ḍ	ż	ż	z	م	m	m	m	m
چ	—	ch	ç	ç	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	t	ن	n	n	n	n
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	h	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	z	ه	h	h	h[1]	h[1]
خ	kh	kh	h	h	ع	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	—	و	w	v *or* u	v	v
د	d	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	g *or* ğ	g *or* ğ	ي	y	y	y	y
ذ	dh	z	z	z	ف	f	f	f	f	ة	a[2]			
ر	r	r	r	r	ق	q	q	ķ	k	ال	[3]			

[1] When h is not final. [2] In construct state: at. [3] For the article, al- and -l-.

VOWELS

		ARABIC AND PERSIAN		OTTOMAN AND MODERN TURKISH	
Long	ا or ى	ā	ā	words of Arabic and Persian origin only
	و	ū	ū	
	ي	ī	ī	
Doubled	ـِيّ	iyy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)	
	ـُوّ	uww (final form ū)	uvv	
Diphthongs	ـَوْ	au *or* aw	ev	
	ـَيْ	ai *or* ay	ey	
Short	ـَ	a	a *or* e	
	ـُ	u	u *or* ü / o *or* ö	
	ـِ	i	ı *or* i	

For Ottoman Turkish, authors may either transliterate or use the modern Turkish orthography.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Religious conversion to Islam has emerged as a prominent and widely studied global phenomenon in recent decades. Conversion is often conceived of as an intimate, personal, and even spiritual experience. Still, it is also a social and political process shaped through historical memory, cultural context, and institutional form.[1]

This is where the Islamic theological concept of reversion, rather than conversion, becomes critically important, given that every human being is born in a state of fitrah, or recognition of monotheism. This theological notion is particularly salient among Filipino converts to Islam because many articulate their return to Islam as a reclamation of a precolonial faith that has been suppressed through several centuries of Christian colonialism.[2]

In the Philippine context, the term Balik-Islam *(literally, "to return to Islam)* refers to individuals, often having a Christian background, who embrace Islam later in life. While both reversion and conversion to Islam have indeed occurred throughout the country, it has a distinct history and socio-cultural meaning in Mindanao.[3]

This study argues that Balik-Islam reversion is not just a spiritual return to Islam's original monotheism (fitrah), but a complex, socially embedded process of identity transformation. The Balik-Islam in Mindanao, especially outside the BARMM areas, must navigate what this thesis calls liminal religiosity, where the community isolates them. These individuals have left their Christian communities and often do not receive full acceptance into the Muslim ethnolinguistic group they join. The study focuses on their experiences after conversion, including how they maintain their faith, make claims, and rebuild their religious identity amid historical marginalisation and institutional neglect.

In the archipelago, Mindanao is the original location of the earliest Islamic

[1] Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*, 1999 ed (Univ. of the Philippines Press, 1999).
[2] Luis Q. Lacar, "Balik -Islam: Christian Converts to Islam in the Philippines, c. 1970-98," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 12, no. 1 (2001): 39–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410124405.
[3] Lacar, "Balik -Islam."

sultanates and, consequently, the site of a long history of resisting colonial conquest and religious coercion. From the 13th to 16th centuries, Muslim traders and missionaries, such as Tuan Mashaika and Syarif Kabungsuwan, integrated with local communities through intermarriage and introduced Islamic governance, education, and legal frameworks, particularly in the Sulu and Maguindanao sultanates. These sultanates institutionalised Islam, fostering organised Muslim communities that preserved local cultural practices while embracing Islamic teachings. This historical integration shapes the contemporary Balik-Islam experience, as converts seek to align with a faith rooted in Mindanao's heritage.[4]

This strong historical background notwithstanding, the Islamic tradition in Mindanao has been severely disrupted by several successive colonial incursions. The Spanish colonisation of the 16th century sought to abolish Islam and replace it with Christianity, while also making the "Moro" into otherness as a construct of resistance. Subsequently, the policies of American colonialism strengthened and reinforced these divisions by encouraging Christianity as the normative religious identity for the archipelago. Ultimately, these developments cemented the political marginalisation of Muslims, as well as established the political hierarchies of religion and ethnicity that continue to shape Muslims' experiences in Mindanao today.[5]

Grasping this history of marginalisation is essential for framing our understanding of current Balik-Islam practice. Contemporary reverts navigate a religious tradition deeply informed by local historical experience, but often in a region where Islamic institutions are few and social norms still largely reflect Christian-majority norms. For individuals who embrace Islam, there is usually a more profound sense of reversion than simply a personal spiritual journey; it can also be a negotiation of identity, a belonging, and claims to legitimacy within larger histories of marginalisation and cultural dislocation. Examining the experiences of Balik-Islam after their conversion offers valuable insights into how religious identity is formed,

[4] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.
[5] J. Nolasco, "Islam and Philippine Society: The Writings of Cesar Adib Majul," *Asian Studies Review* 46, no. 1 (2010): 1–2.

contested, and expressed.[6]

Furthermore, we must look at the religious conversion process to understand the emerging Balik-Islam phenomenon in Mindanao. Scholars like Ali Köse state that converting to Islam is a gradual and personal process involving spiritual searching, reflection, and personal interactions with others.[7] Luis Lacar's research supports this view of conversion, *Balik-Islam: Christian Converts to Islam in the Philippines, c.1970–98,* where Lacar argues that, especially in the Philippines, conversion usually takes three to six years and often begins with individuals making contact with Muslim communities. This gradual approach to religious change highlights the complexity of adopting a new faith. It helps explain the challenges Balik-Islam face in practising their religion and feeling a sense of belonging within Mindanao's diverse socio-cultural landscape after their conversion.[8]

Lacar further explains that *Balik-Islam* (*literally return to Islam*) refers to individuals, often from Christian backgrounds, who embrace Islam not as a shift from one religion to another, but as a reconnection with their innate monotheistic disposition. This local terminology holds both theological and historical significance, particularly in Mindanao, where reversion is viewed as a restoration of one's original spiritual nature, believed to have been obscured by conversion to Christianity. This perspective frames the conversion not as a rupture, but as a return. While it helps illuminate the transformative journey of Balik-Islam individuals, this study focuses specifically on how converts experience selfhood and otherness in the post-conversion period, as they navigate the socio-cultural landscape in Mindanao.[9]

Most Muslim scholars in the Philippines posit that the idea of Balik-Islam is conceptualized from a famous ḥadīth of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which states*: "Every child is born in a state of fiṭrah, but it is their parents who make them a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian"* (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 2658). Within this conceptual

[6] Douglas A Borer et al., "Global Development and Human (In)Security: Understanding the Rise of the Rajah Solaiman Movement and Balik Islam in the Philippines," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2009): 181–204, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590802622615.
[7] Ali Kose, *Conversion To Islam* (Taylor and Francis, 2012).
[8] Lacar, "Balik -Islam."
[9] Lacar, "Balik -Islam."

framework, religious identity is shaped by social and cultural contexts rather than being fixed at birth; thus, returning to Islam can be viewed as a transformative spiritual process. It resonates with Balik-Islam revert in the Philippine context, particularly in Mindanao, who perceive their acceptance of Islam as a return to their innate monotheistic nature. This theological foundation also illustrates the obstacles these converts face in effectively maintaining their new religious identity amid social and cultural factors, which the study will investigate. For example, in Christian communities in the Philippines, when a newborn is baptised *(also called Christening*), it signifies their entry into Christianity. However, Islamic belief states that a newborn, who has not been formally introduced to another religion, is still in the primordial, or fiṭrah state, and will be, unambiguously, a Muslim. Thus, when Filipinos, having been primed in a region with a strong Islamic past but living in a Christian majority society in Mindanao, are exposed to Islam through self-study, their social relationships, work, or other life events, they accept Islam as a reversion, not a conversion. This understanding shaped their progression of experiences, which this study examines by documenting the identity and belonging challenges experienced in their post-conversion phase in the complex socio-cultural milieu in Mindanao.

In Mindanao, waves of Balik-Islam reversion saw a revival from the late 1970s, as intermarriage, international employment, and global Islamic revival played a role, and growth continued from that point. Even though specific numbers are unavailable, Yoshizawa estimates that there were more than 200,000 Balik-Islam reverts by 2009, which has likely grown since then.[10] Despite the expansion of conversion, research on *post-conversion* experiences remains limited, particularly in non-BARMM areas of Mindanao. Most studies focus on why people convert, not how they sustain their faith in socially and institutionally challenging environments.[11]

While prior works like Lacar and Yoshizawa discuss the reversion process, most of them refrain from asking the next logical question and the 'what next': how do

[10] Asuna Yoshizawa, "Religious Conversion as a 'Winding Pathway': Experience of Balik-Islam and Muslim–Christian Relations in the Southern Philippines," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, December 13, 2024, 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2024.2436770.
[11] Lacar, "Balik -Islam."

Balik-Islam reverts maintain and negotiate their faith, belonging, and adapt to living in some contexts that may be less accepting of their new religious ownership. These highlight the need for academia to engage more with Balik-Islam reverts experiences over the long term, particularly in religious and social isolation areas. Compared with the studies of the Western contexts of religious conversion, the most frequently referenced intrinsic motives among converts typically are a spiritual quest, such as searching for peace, fulfilment, and certainty concerning life and the afterlife. Many converts express that they are drawn to Islam because of the explicit monotheism, the moral foundations, and because it infuses a sense of belonging in a values-based community. For example, Paul Mitchell's doctoral study, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Australian Muslim Converts,* highlights that many converts perceive Islam as instrumental in shaping a cohesive religious identity while providing a sense of belonging and moral foundations within their faith communities.[12]

In the Southeast Asian setting, specifically in the Philippines, Morados and Malayang argue that the conversion process for Balik-Islam typically occurs in three distinct forms, influenced by their unique place in Philippine society.[13] For example, researchers Hārūnānī and Uṣāmah identify overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) as one of the largest groups of Muslim converts, particularly those who convert while working in Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. By living in a cultural environment steeped in Islam and having daily interactions with Muslim colleagues and employers, many OFWs find spiritual fulfilment in Islamic teachings. In the Philippines, they tend to participate in establishing Balik-Islam centres and are involved in daʿwah, with some leaning towards Salafi understandings.[14]

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[12] Paul Mitchell, "Conversion to Islam: A Study of Australian Muslim Converts," with Griffith University and Halim I Rane, preprint, Griffith University, May 25, 2023, https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/5717.

[13] Macrina A. Morados and Aisha F. Malayang, "Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered," 2023, https://cids.up.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Balik-Islam-in-Some-Selected-Areas-in-Luzon-and-the-National-Capital-Region-Motivations-of-Conversion-and-Challenges-Encountered.pdf.

[14] Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama, "The Balik-Islam Phenomenon Filipino Muslim Reverts- Between the Gulf Countries and the Philippines," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)* 29, no. 1 (2024): 25–46, https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.v29i1.1826.

Additionally, Nadado and Vyhmeister emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships, particularly friendships and interfaith marriages, as significant contributors to conversion decisions. These forays into socializing underscore the fact that religion is not only a theology but also a relational practice, influencing people through their sphere of relationships, emotions, and situational circumstances.[15] These pathways reveal the interplay of theological and social factors in Balik-Islam conversions, setting the stage for exploring the post-conversion challenges converts face in sustaining their faith amidst Mindanao's complex socio-cultural landscape.

Morados and Malayang further explain that the development of various pathways to Balik-Islam conversion highlights the more dynamic character of religious conversions in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao, through scholarly writing. Balik-Islam, or "returning to Islam," encompasses spiritual craving and cultural considerations. Within Mindanao's unique circumstances, converts to Islam adopting different pathways are composed of key influences, which include (1) marriage to a Muslim spouse, (2) conversion to Islam for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) working in Gulf countries, (3) personal study and conviction to faith change and (4) the influence of recent development like digital daʿwah, social media, and Muslim organizations.[16]

These pathways not only alter the religious affiliation of Muslims, but they also present new theological pathways, such as Salafi influences, to the communities of Muslims in Mindanao. The study now examines how these conversion pathways shape the post-conversion challenges of maintaining one's faith and identity in a complex, contextualised environment marked by marginalisation.

The post-conversion experiences of Balik-Islam in Mindanao are an appropriate

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[15] Noel Nadado and Shawna Vyhmeister, "Why Christians Converts to Islam: A Filipino Perspective," *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 9, no. 1 (2006): 47–70.

[16] Macrina A. Morados and Aisha F. Malayang, "Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered," *University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) – Islamic Studies Program*, UP CIDS Discussion Paper, March 2023, https://cids.up.edu.ph/discussion_paper/balik-islam-selected-areas-luzon-national-capital-region-motivations-conversion-challenges-encountered/.

topic for scholarly attention, as they can no longer identify as non-Muslims but may still have to deal with social, psychological, and institutional challenges associated with their newly adopted conversion. Balik-Islam can be considered to be in a liminal state, which can lead to all sorts of marginalisation, stress, or discrimination from their former, pre-conversion social networks, often due to explicit or implicit notions of Islam being mistaken or misunderstood as a foreign religion. Similar problems are found in Hakan Emin Ozturk's work on Muslim converts in Canada, which mentions that as converts encounter stigmas linking Islam to extremism, stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women, and a limited view of Islam through an Arab lens, it is often fraught with challenges and may not always lead to meaningful inclusion.[17]

Moreover, this evidence implies that some studies indicate that Muslim converts must also grapple with significant lifestyle changes, as evidenced by research by Krotofil et al. They posit that Muslim converts experience profound transformations in their beliefs, values, and social life, navigating challenges as members of a marginalised group. Their conversion involves internal and external dialogues, leading to various outcomes such as acceptance, rejection, or compromise in their identities. [18]

In the same vein, Ozturk's study revealed that moderate or progressive converts experienced distressful rejection or suspicion from their previous social bonds, in addition to their established born-Muslim connections, resulting in what he describes as "*double marginalization*." Ozturk's observations relate to the experiences of Balik-Islam in Mindanao. For instance, Colonel Darren Comia of the Task Force Davao, in his observations, noted that many converts face exclusion from their previous community in their bureaucratic experience by being unable to acquire proper identification from the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) as a mechanism that misunderstands and marginalizes the convert or validates their

[17] Hakan Emin Ozturk, "Exploring the Dynamics of Muslim Conversion in Ottawa: Processes, Challenges, and Social Integration" (Université d'Ottawa / University of Ottawa, 2025), https://doi.org/10.20381/RUOR-30958.
[18] Joanna Krotofil et al., "Religious Conversion as a Dialogical Transformation of the Self – The Case of Polish Female Converts to Islam," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 36, no. 3 (2023): 382–400, https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2022.2095065.

attributes as a "*neglected sector*. [19]

Many Filipino Balik-Islam feel a lack of connection within pre-existing Muslim communities in Mindanao, even within longstanding Islamic cultures. As Yoshizawa and Kusaka note, many revertees described feeling socially isolated, even when living near mosques or participating in religious marketplaces. This feeling is repeated at the community level through various types of marginalisation, which may influence a person's perceived religiosity, ethnic identity, or adherence to locally produced Islamic traditions.[20]

As a result, new muslims were sometimes viewed as "not fully Muslim" or lacking in depth, no matter how genuinely converts engage with their faith. This intra-religious mark of exclusion not only affects a convert's spiritual path but also develops a hierarchy of belonging that values birthright Islam over spiritual conversion. It corresponds to the "consequences" stage, as noted by Rambo regarding converts whose social realities regarding integration are more complicated. This concept is related to another idea of liminality, Turner, whereby a convert is caught between positions of acceptance and marginalisation.[21],

The experience of Balik-Islam in Mindanao is heavily mediated by the region's political history of exclusion and conflict. One notable recent instantiation of this history is the Marawi Siege in 2017. The siege lasted five months and was a confrontation between ISIS-inspired groups, such as the Maute Group and Abu Sayyaf.[22] As documented by Duya, the blockade resulted in the displacement of over 350,000 people and the destruction of infrastructure, which led to a full-scale humanitarian crisis. However, aside from the material destruction, it disrupted

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[19] Krizzy S Daugdaug, *Task Force Davao Commander Proposes Program for "Balik-Islam,"* (Davao City), May 25, 2022, https://www.sunstar.com.ph/davao/local-news/task-force-davao-commander-proposes-program-for-balik-islam.

[20] Asuna Yoshizawa and Wataru Kusaka, "The Arts of Everyday Peacebuilding: Cohabitation, Conversion, and Intermarriage of Muslims and Christians in the Southern Philippines," 1, preprint, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, April 23, 2020, https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.9.1_67.

[21] Victor Witter Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*, 2014th ed. (Cornell University Press, 1964).

[22] Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

interfaith relations and national perceptions of Islam in enduring ways that hardened suspicion and stereotyping in the public domain.[23]

Gray notes that the siege exacerbated distrust between Muslim and non-Muslim communities and exacerbated narratives that associate Islam, particularly "*new Islam*", with extremism. For Balik-Islam, this stigma has been particularly acute. Many would experience scrutiny from their former Christian communities, who might view their reversion as suspicious or dangerous, while also facing distrust from born-Muslim communities where their adopted faith could be viewed as inauthentic or politically motivated. The result could be described generally as an ongoing experience of hypervisibility where the burden of vigilance becomes a near-constant negotiation of their legitimacy, fidelity, and religious authenticity.[24]

In the new post-Marawi context, reversion to Islam in Mindanao is understood not only as a private spiritual transformation but also as a political act, essentially a re-entry into a territory of heightened counterterrorism discourses, public fear, and state scrutiny. Compounding this are the historical memories of groups such as the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM), a radicalised group formed by a small segment of former Christian converts. Bartel and Nayve observed that the RSIM represented only a minuscule portion of the Balik-Islam population. Still, its violent activity fundamentally altered the public's imagination of conversion in the province, effectively creating a spatial narrative that linked spiritual seeking and militancy.[25]

The result is a social stigma where serious religious returnees can be criminalised, marginalised, or symbolically excluded from the religious communities they inhabit. Reverts open themselves to securitisation, not because of their actions, but because of how they are seen. For Balik-Islam, particularly if they do not belong to

[23] Hazel Ann Marie R. Duya, "Marawi Siege: Stories from the Front Lines, Written by Fonbuena, Carmela S.," *Philippine Political Science Journal* 43, no. 1 (2022): 98–101, https://doi.org/10.1163/2165025X-bja10032.
[24] Simon Gray, "Fighting Jihadists in Mindanao," *New Zealand International Review* 43, no. 3 (2018): 2–4, JSTOR.
[25] J.A. Bartel, *The Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM) and the Rise of Radical Islamic Converts in the Philippines: A Major Security Concern*, AD-A483 622 (Naval postgraduate school monterey ca, 2008), https://books.google.co.id/books?id=22T5jwEACAAJ.

any of the dominant Muslim ethnolinguistic communities, reversion is not simply a spiritual life course; it intersects with a field of distrust, religious uncertainty, and politicisation. The Marawi Siege is not only a historical backdrop, but it is a structuring event that disciplines how religious identity is claimed, policed, and resisted in contemporary Mindanao.

Many Balik-Islam continue to face obstacles to complete authentication. They are caught in a complicated position, distrusted by their earlier Christian communities but also treated with suspicion concerning their inclusion in Muslim society. In some instances, their knowledge of the local language and culture, and their predominantly Christian geography, have all been interpreted through a security lens, developing and intensifying local distrust or suspicion. These forms of scrutiny collectively create a dimension of social complexity that most individuals who revert have to deal with in their everyday lives, balancing loyalties, faiths, and identities.[26]

This explains why Filipino revert is situated in a somewhat unique social position. In religious or cultural terms, they are 'in-between' in that they are neither totally accepted as born Muslims, nor are they entirely free from the cultural extent and familial domain of the previous identity. They surely and often earnestly perform recognisably Islamic ritual practices, but they are also sometimes engaged with as individuals with partial rights to belong in a larger community of believers. This in-betweenness creates internal and external conflict as Balik-Islam are presented with opportunities to illuminate their belief in authenticity, belonging, and a spiritual home.

According to research by Morados and Malayang, we learned that Filipinos regularly experience individual and structural obstacles in establishing their religious identity in a predominantly non-Muslim area. Examples include tangible challenges related to access to ḥalāl food, services, and income, all of which stem from rural or urban contexts that were not designed or planned to accommodate Islamic practice. Reverts also face various ethical obligations, such as avoiding interest (ribā), avoiding vices (makrūh), and dietary idolization (haram). As hard as it may be for reverts to try

[26] Bartel, *The Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM) and the Rise of Radical Islamic Converts in the Philippines: A Major Security Concern*.

to meet their ethical obligations, the structural obstacles to social and financial sustainability exist regardless of the will of the newly embraced faith.[27]

Morados and Malayang further explain that legal and social pressures are exacerbated through their experience of gender. The upbringing of family and peer relationships of reverts will often change due to conversion, which contributes to alienation and separation. In particular for women, this discrimination can manifest itself regarding non-educational or employment opportunities as they are visibly expressing cultural Islamism through coverings, such as the ḥijāb, or possibly in some cases completely losing friendships or experiencing stigmas from peers. The interplay of faith and visible religious identity points to a broader sociological problem, as Muslims are discriminated against by their visual appearance and association with Islam through selective stigmatisation.[28]

While the case of Balik-Islam is more than just simply uncovering societal discrimination, they are also trying to modify their family relations. Family members who know their reverts can engage in feeling judged, or in some instances, completely forsaken, when they re-engage with their non-Muslim relatives. Even though the challenges encountered by Balik-Islam may not be viewed as an isolated issue, such relationships must be navigated alongside the ordinary practical adjustments that mark life in accepting and then continuing to cultivate a faith. Each different social layer and negotiation of the Balik-Islam experiences presents some emotional commitment to continue their practice, while simultaneously experiencing little support.[29]

A significant issue that continues to affect the experiences of Balik-Islam in the Philippines is the lack of institutional or social support in the community that would enable converts to stay located and connected to the larger Muslim ummah. A recent fieldwork study from the Institute for Autonomy and Governance (IAG) and the University of the Philippines Institute of Islamic Studies (UP–IIS) studying Balik-

[27] Morados and Malayang, "Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered."
[28] Morados and Malayang, "Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered."
[29] Morados and Malayang, "Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered."

Islam in various provinces of Luzon, and a few spaces in Metro Manila, found that Islamic organizations do not engage most of the time - other than at the initiation and formalization of a religious conversion. After the conversion process, the journeys of these individuals in terms of religious and theological alignments, ethical adjustments, and reconnections to a social community are unique and often limited to a few organizations. These organizations might offer some post-conversion support and development, such as individualized contextualised religious education or psychosocial support. Unfortunately, many Balik-Islam find themselves struggling with spiritual disorientation and social alienation due to the lack of ongoing support.[30]

Furthermore, the lack of structured support is at its absolute worst when the communities in which the Balik-Islam reside are in majority non-Muslim areas, and must struggle with both faith and social matters alone. In these locations, Balik-Islam has often not made any spiritual advancements and finds itself accepted nowhere in already established Muslim communities. The total lack of community support can lead to frustration, stagnation, and in some cases, an absolute disconnection from the faith community altogether. Disillusionment can retreat into non-commitment or even apostasy from the faith in the furthest progression. These confounding questions become even more complex for Balik-Islam in Mindanao. While non-indigenous Filipino Muslims still have long-standing connections to Islam, they can still be social and institutional outsiders as new Muslims. Balik-Islam in Mindanao is more socially vulnerable than "born" Muslims because they are living in a precarious situation of profound "in-betweenness" as they reflect on their religious identity. Also, their distance points to the extended Muslim ummah and the legitimacy and inclusion factors, which prevent belonging to Muslim families and indicate responsibility to the ummah.

Islam has existed in Mindanao for centuries, and even though the number of Balik-Islam converts is increasing significantly, the lived experiences of these

[30] Institute for Autonomy and Governance; University of the Philippines Institute of Islamic Studies, *Balik Islam Research* (Institute for Autonomy and Governance (IAG), 2021), 158, https://www.calameo.com/read/005163112511b968664bc.

individuals are still dangerously misunderstood and under-researched in both academia and public discourse. While recognizing conversion is often seen as an act of returning to one's fitrah or original nature, the experiences of everyday life for Filipinos who revert are often overshadowed by marginalization. They can be marginalized from both their former Christian communities and from recognized Muslim ethnolinguistic groups. The social dynamics altogether put them in a uniquely liminal place, where they exist in both their cultural nominalism and faith-based attachments.

Living in a region that is historically fraught with conflict, ethnic fragmentation, and religiously motivated violence, Balik-Islam face social exclusion, cultural ambiguity, and a lack of organizational or institutional support. While studies on religion and conversion in the Philippines have primarily focused on the reasons and process behind conversion, such as marriage, migration, and spiritual seeking, there has been a glaring and urgent need to delve into the complexities and challenges these individuals experience long after their conversion. This is particularly relevant for Balik-Islam in Mindanao, who continue to navigate their faith development amidst these ongoing issues.

Thus, the study will address this gap by providing a qualitative contextualization of how Balik-Islam navigate and reconstruct "*identity*," "*community*," and "*spiritual persistence*" in light of both internal and external tensions. The study contributes to the broader discourse as part of the growing field of religious studies within the Philippines, taking a unique approach that recognizes and centres on the lived experiences of converts previously described in the literature but have never been heard from.

Given the limited research on the post-conversion experiences of Balik-Islam individuals in Mindanao, this study focuses on those living in non-BARMM regions. These areas, with relatively minor Muslim populations and limited access to Islamic institutions or support systems, are often overlooked in research. However, this study will explore the lived realities of reverts in Davao City, General Santos City, Sarangani, and other non-BARMM areas, shedding light on the challenges they face in negotiating their identities without the benefit of strong communal or state-supported Islamic

infrastructures.

This study is grounded in the premise that Balik-Islam in these contexts encounter different obstacles and utilise different strategies to hold and protect their religious identity in predominantly Christian contexts. These strategies and struggles offer a critical lens for understanding how religious identity is affirmed, sustained, or contested in pluralistic societies.

As Rambo and Farhadian (2014) observe, conversion is a precarious endeavor: it must be affirmed, sustained, and received as part of a social community; without such external support converts have difficulty navigating new interpretations of their experiences, deepening their understanding of religion, and redefining their belongingness to groups both Muslim and not Muslim, which may include many iterations. Moreover, conversion experiences are not necessarily all constituted by similar conversion experiences. Some of the Balik-Islam, a term used to refer to Filipino Muslims who have converted to Islam, find a strength in their new practice of Islam and assume positions of leadership within the ummah. In contrast, many others find themselves socially isolated, marginalized, and dealing with disillusionment, all dependent on variables of education, welfare (s*uch as family welfare, and community welfare*), reception (*including gender, and costs of belonging*), and economic class status.

In light of this, the study addresses a significant research gap in Philippine religious studies by providing a context-specific, grounded examination of the post-conversion experiences of the Balik-Islam in non-BARMM Mindanao. This research has the potential to not only deepen our understanding of religious dynamics in the Philippines but also to inform policies and interventions aimed at supporting converts. It will explore how converts can reconcile their faith and religious identity while positively rebuilding their sense of belonging in an area with a shared Islamic history in Mindanao, yet mainly characterized by Christian practices. The study also investigates how much identity maintenance depends on community support, institutional inclusion, and redefinition of belonging within the broader Filipino Muslim ummah.

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

1.2.1 Research Aim

This study aims to provide a fuller understanding of the post-convert experience

of Balik-Islam in Mindanao, emphasising how they can navigate their religious identity amidst social exclusion, cultural ambiguity, and emotional adjustment. In particular, Mindanao is a locale rich in Islamic history, culture, and plurality, and this context is of particular importance as the research focuses on the lived experiences of converts in a dialectical process of negotiating a new social and spiritual reality.

Using Rambo and Farhadian's final stage of conversion, which involves consequences of a change, and Victor Turner's concept of liminality, this study explores the transformation between reverting identities. These often occur in a transitional or liminal space where individuals simultaneously revert to a previous identity, complete with prior socialisation, and emerge as a new identity within Islam. Employing a narrative life-history approach, this research examines how Balik Islam make sense of their transformation, how they enact and use strategies to affirm their faith, and the social context in which this occurs during their post-conversion journey.

1.2.2 Research Objectives

1. To investigate how Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao cope with social exclusion, cultural ambiguity, and limited institutional assistance while attempting to fulfil their religious commitment, this research will undertake a thematic analysis of narrative texts.
2. To identify the various coping strategies and spiritual practices (*such as praying, self-study, or community involvement*) that Balik-Islam use to constitute and affirm their post-conversion Islamic identity.
3. An interpretation of the connections between the converted person's long-term emotional and religious integration into the Islamic faith and the enabling and constraining factors prevalent in their society: community acceptance, family relationships, and the political conflict in Mindanao, particularly during the Marawi Siege.
4. To provide context-specific understandings of Islamic conversion by highlighting the challenges and negotiations necessary for Balik-Islam in Mindanao.

1.3 Research Questions

These research questions guide the core focus of the study by highlighting the continuing challenges, approaches, and resilience of Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao:

1. How do Balik-Islam in Mindanao continue to practice their faith while dealing with social, emotional, and structural barriers to their conversion?
2. What strategies and religious practices do Balik-Islam use to maintain their Islamic identity and spiritual development in contexts where community support is limited?
3. How do external aspects, such as community acceptance, regional violence, and familial relations, impact the capacity of Balik-Islam to continue its religious journey?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The current study uses the seven-stage model of religious conversion by Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian, focusing primarily on the "consequences" stage. It also applies Victor Turner's idea of liminality to understand the post-conversion experiences of Balik-Islam in Mindanao. These perspectives see conversion as an active spiritual and socio-cultural process involving ongoing identity change and social uncertainty, particularly in a region with Islamic heritage and complex interreligious relationships. By analyzing participants' stories and views through these frameworks, this study investigates how Balik-Islam manage their spiritual journeys, social exclusion, and "in-between" status.

1.4.1 Rambo's Conversion Model: "Consequences"

Rambo and Farhadian define conversion in seven stages, with the consequences stage being the most relevant to the current study. This stage analyses the "results" of conversion, which may facilitate positive results (*e.g., spiritual integrity, belonging to a community*) or negative challenges (*e.g., social isolation, lack of familial support*). For Balik-Islam, the consequences stage was embodied in the experience of navigating exclusion from a Christian family and analysing the scepticism experienced moving into the born-Muslim communities' category, with which they might share some faith

similarities, but had very few cultural similarities in Mindanao.[31]

1.4.2 Turner's Concept of Liminality

The concept of Balik-Islam among the people of Mindanao can be successfully analysed using Arnold van Gennep's classic model of rites of passage, which comprises three phases: separation *(pre-liminality*), liminality, and incorporation *(post-liminality*). The separation phase involves distancing oneself from an earlier identity or social state, leaving behind the Christian upbringing. Liminal is the ambivalent period of transition when a person has lost their old identity yet has not acquired a new one entirely. The final stage is the incorporation phase, which once again brings the subject back to society on a different status/identity, preferably as a recognised member of the Muslim ummah.[32]

This model represents the process of Balik-Islam reverts as they renounced their Christian identity (separation), moved between the unknown and dealt with inclusion into born-Muslim societies (liminality), and sought to become full Muslims (incorporation). However, this final stage may remain partial or incomplete, particularly in non-BARMM areas where institutional and social support is limited.

Turner adopted this framework but shifted attention from structure to process and symbolic meaning, using intensive field research among the Ndembu of Zambia to illustrate how rituals temporarily invert hierarchy and create communitas, an egalitarian social bond. Liminality is not mere disorientation but a transcultural zone of openness in which reclamations of inclusion and exclusion happen. Transitional experiences of the Balik-Islam convert include the shift between religious conventions, arduous emotional battles, and the more commonly reported ambiguity or rejections of the born-Muslim communities against them, particularly within the culturally close-knit sets of people (*such as the Maguindanao or the Tausug)*.[33]

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[31] Lewis Ray Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Oxford Handbooks Series (Oxford University Press, 2014).
[32] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Repr., transferred to digital printing, Religion, Rites and Ceremonies: In 5 Volumes 3 (Routledge, 2006).
[33] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.

1.4.3 Empirical Evidence

The relevance of the "consequences" stage of Rambo's model and the concept of liminal space developed by Turner for the Balik-Islam experience in Mindanao is supported by a few key empirical studies on Muslim converts in the Philippines. Lacar conducted one of the first studies of Balik-Islam conversion, highlighting the complex and prolonged transition process. He further explores social dislocation and familial rejection that many Balik-Islam converts experience after they revert to Islam. Lacar's article depicts a situation that closely resembles the concept of conversion proposed by Rambo. Conversion is a process that unfolds over time, where encounters after conversion, including spiritual doubt, institutional support, and fragmented experiences of belonging, can become as important a conversion feature as the actual moment of conversion itself.[34]

Yoshizawa's ethnographic work in Iligan City adds a layer of analysis to the complexities of Balik-Islam converts and conversion. He documented the ways converts negotiate their religious identity at the intersection of ethnic politics, born-Muslim expectations, and security surveillance. Yoshizawa describes the process of conversion as a *'winding pathway*' through which converts were 'neither fully accepted nor excluded', a state that mirrors Turner's liminality. Converts find themselves in a paradoxical state of partial inclusion, where their claims to religious sincerity are irregularly legitimised by ethnically-feudal Muslims who see them as local cultural outsiders and by their often-non-Muslim relatives. This paradoxical state of partial inclusion underscores the complexity of their situation.[35]

These studies underscore the importance of understanding religious conversion as a socially anchored and politically contingent process. They demonstrate that in the context of Mindanao, religious conversion is not merely a personal spiritual journey, but a process of belonging that is deeply influenced by histories of marginalization, inter-sectionalises of religious politics, and local and communal hierarchies. This broader perspective is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the post-

[34] Lacar, “Balik -Islam.”
[35] Yoshizawa, “Religious Conversion as a ‘Winding Pathway.’”

conversion experiences of Balik-Islam.

1.4.4 Integration and Application

Rambo's "consequences" stage and Turner's liminality provide a valuable lens for understanding Balik-Islam's post-conversion journey; Rambo offers an analysis of spiritual and relational outcomes, and Turner's liminality encapsulates the emotional and social ambiguity and uncertainty of navigating a space like Mindanao, which has the uniqueness of religious and ethnic tension. These two frameworks will develop thematic analysis of interviews, coding for consequences such as 'isolation' or 'spiritual growth', and liminality such as 'no acceptance by ethnic Muslims.' Both frameworks are a Western perspective, but can be adapted to Mindanao. However, in addition to considering the post-colonial framework or experiences, applying the frameworks should consider intersections of gender and ethnicity (*for example, female converts would have a completely unwitting bias of ḥijāb and prejudice*) to offer an inclusive analysis of the diverse contextual experiences.

1.5 Research Significance

This thesis examines the Balik-Islam experience in Mindanao, emphasizing that it is not just a one-time transformative event but an ongoing process of identity formation through multiple stages over time. It draws on life-history narratives of fifteen Filipino revert living outside the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)—in areas such as Davao City, General Santos, and Sarangani.

It challenges the simplistic view of reversion as a return to one's Islamic heritage. Instead, it introduces the concept of 'liminal religiosity' to describe the spiritual and social state of these converts. This state is a result of historical marginalisation, sociocultural ambivalence, and institutional neglect. In Mindanao, Islam serves as a powerful form of historical memory. However, Balik-Islam converts face a double form of marginalisation, being distanced from their Christian family backgrounds and excluded from the ethnolinguistic communities of born Muslims, where ethnic identity often determines religious legitimacy.

The subsequent discussion and deep analysis draw on Rambo's idea of the "consequences" of conversion and Turner's concept of liminality to show how they

maintain and develop their faith amid suspicion, bureaucratic invisibility, and legacies of conflict, especially after the Marawi Siege in 2017, which created new memories.

This study contributes academically and socially, in a genuinely meaningful way, by researching the largely unstudied phenomenon of post-conversion experiences of Balik-Islam in Mindanao, which has its unique history, experiences, and tensions formed by Islamic tradition, and tensions that have emerged between Christians and Muslims.

From an academic standpoint, this study will address a relatively large gap in the literature on conversion studies. It focuses mainly on dimensions related to motivations for conversion, but does not explore the lifelong process of sustaining faith. The study contributes to the research literature on how 'liminality', a term referring to the transitional or in-between state of being, influences identity within pluralist, post-conflict situations.

By qualitatively analysing the post-conversion narratives of Balik-Islam converts, I demonstrate how spiritually and socially positioned these narratives are regarding integration into wider community life. Socially, this study gives voice to converts with their lived experience, and fosters understanding and empathy for the broader social context surrounding their engagement and interactions outside of their communities, as they navigate upon entering Mosques and other places of worship, in a community under stigma.

Future studies emerging from this will undoubtedly inform, for example, expansions of community engagement initiatives and targeted support models, such as mentorship programs or workshops based on Islamic educational principles regarding social and spiritual integration into the diasporic Muslim fabric in Mindanao. In terms of the converts themselves, on an individual level, this study echoes their shared experiences of struggle and visibility, and perhaps even recognition for their contributions and honesty, with a heavy emphasis on today's micro complexity of the sociocultural terrain.

1.6 Research Method

This study utilised a qualitative research design to examine the lived

experiences of Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao. The subjective nature of identities covered within this study, such as emotional, spiritual, and social nuances during a transformation in identity, requires qualitative methods. Qualitative methodologies are most appropriate for exploring the lived realities of converts to Islam who are transitioning or adjusting their faith in the context of conditions of interfaith suspicion, tensions, and ethnic diversity in Mindanao, consistent with Rambo and Farhadian's "consequences" or Turner's liminality phases. The use of in-depth interviews explores how converts cultivate a religious identity within a vulnerable and complicated social and cultural environment.

1.6.1 Participant Selection and Sampling

The present research involved in-depth narrative interviews with fifteen Balik-Islam converts and two community leaders from areas in Mindanao that are outside the BARMM context. Although the sample size of 17 may appear small, it is methodologically justifiable for qualitative approaches, particularly for a life history and thematic narrative study. The data collection process adhered to the principle of theoretical saturation, a core tenet of grounded theory and qualitative inquiry. Interviews continued until no new themes emerged, signifying that the data collected were rich and conceptually robust.

While the study sample was limited in size, it was intentionally diverse. It included a variety of lived experiences regarding factors such as gender, age, ethnicity (e.g., Cebuano, Tagalog, Lumad), and the duration since conversion (ranging from newly converted to 15 years). This diversity allows for analytical depth by enabling cross-comparisons of participant narratives. Unlike quantitative research, which aims for generalization, qualitative inquiry prioritizes depth over breadth, providing contextual insights into the identities, experiences of marginalization and discrimination, and the resilience of Muslims who convert to Islam in a predominantly non-Muslim environment.

Including the two community leaders offers a meso-level institutional perspective that reveals how community structures support and integrate converts. This enriches the micro-level individual narratives of the participants. The sample design

produced detailed descriptions of the Balik-Islam experience and met the rigorous methodological standards set for the research.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across relevant dimensions, including the context of religious conversion pathways such as age, gender, ethnicity, and time since conversion. Given the challenges in reaching this target population, some snowball sampling was employed, along with the researcher's insider status and social networks, which included local mosques, community leaders, and grassroots organizations in the non-BARMM context. The eligibility criteria for participants included: (1) having converted to Islam from another religion, (2) currently residing in the non-BARMM areas of Mindanao, (3) being 18 years or older at the time of the interview, and (4) being willing to discuss their experiences candidly and publicly. All interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred local dialects (e.g., Cebuano, Tagalog, Sangil), and interpreters were used when necessary to maintain linguistic authenticity and cultural sensitivity.

1.6.2 Data Collection Procedures

The researcher collected data through the 60-minute face-to-face in-depth interviews (e.g., Davao City, General Santos City, Sarangani) in regions of Mindanao that are not part of the BARMM. Such interviews for reverts encompassed what inspired them to convert to Islam, how it transformed their lives, how they are accepted in their communities and families, and how their spirits expanded. Considering a possible hindrance to such travel by considering the logistics of non-BARMM regions, composed of a limited number of available mosques and community support compared to the BARMM regions, it is advisable to hold the interviews in safe and convenient locations. Interviews were videotaped with consent in order to ease transcription. It stresses why the respondents have accepted the religion of Islam, their experiences after accepting Islam, their relations with the community, their relationships with the family, and their spiritual experiences. A convenient and safe location to conduct the interviews has been selected. However, due to the differences in the logistics of non-BARMM areas (compared to BARMM areas), lack of mosques or community support (or ability to travel due to the socio-political situation on Mindanao) were considered.

The researcher shall record the interviews digitally to enable proper transcription.

1.6.3 Ethical Considerations

The study has adhered to ethical standards for academics by providing participants with informed consent forms outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality, and their choice to withdraw without penalty. Pseudonyms and discarding identifiable information will preserve anonymity. Given the sensitive topic of religious identity in non-BARMM areas in which the Muslim populations are minorities and religious conflict may persist, interviews will be conducted in a respectful, non-judgmental manner that fosters trust and acknowledges potential community mistrust.

1.6.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to highlight trends found within interview transcripts, using Rambo ‘s “consequences” stage *(i.e., isolation, spiritual fulfilment)* and Turner’s liminality *(i.e., ethnic exclusion, in-betweenness)* as guides. Coding will be identified through a manual and iterative process concerning coding thematic analysis, where initial codes emerged from Rambo and Turner’s theoretical frameworks and were developed through continuous comparison. Peer review and member checking will help mitigate inherent biases in the analysis and yield a thorough interpretation of participants’ experiences.

1.6.5 Limitations

While qualitative approaches lead to rich nuances in narratives, the generalizability of findings is restricted given a small sample size (*17 participants)*. It may not necessarily reflect the complexity and range of Balik-Islam experiences in non-BARMM areas. Some of the limitations of this study are logistical constraints that restrict access to Islamic infrastructures or social acceptability in non-BARMM areas, and language barriers might arise, where data collection took place in the participants' preferred dialects. Self-reported narratives present a challenge because they are vulnerable to social desirability bias. Although reflexivity, which regulates subjective biases and incorporates member checking in the analysis, helps mitigate this concern. The researcher needs to be cautious against this when interpreting the meanings behind participants' accounts. Nevertheless, these limitations are pertinent to this study. The

researcher frames the study to contextualise the Balik-Islam experience to provide academic and community opportunities.

1.6.6 Researcher's Position

It has an insider's perspective because my mother converted to Islam; this has fostered empathy and cultural competence, which helps build rapport and trust with participants in non-BARMM areas. However, assuming an insider's perspective could introduce bias based on their background in empirical matters. To maintain objectivity in interpretation, I use reflexivity to document my assumptions, and member checking was employed to confirm and validate findings, ensuring they accurately reflect participants' accounts and are convincing.

1.6.7 Age and Time of Conversion

The participants in respect to this study range in age from 18 to 55 years old, with years since conversion ranging from 2 years to 15 years, providing diverse insights into the Balik-Islam faith journey across early adaptation, mid-stage integration, and long-term commitment in non-BARMM areas of Mindanao. This range of time since conversion allows us to engage in a more nuanced investigation about how converts uphold their faith while learning to cope with the potential social and emotional ramifications of conversion, in which I draw on Rambo and Farhadian's "consequence" stage[36] and Turner's understanding of liminality and liminal processes. [37]

To provide a structured approach to the data analysis of post-conversion life experiences and trajectories of the research participants, I will categorize participants into three units according to their years since conversion, with the guidelines of Lacar's work on religious adaptation:

1. ***Group A (0 - 2 years):*** Newer converts such as Rhazzyl Dave Elicano (2 years) and Farah (2 years) are experiencing initial disorientation and level of social isolation at their onset of Islamic faith, demonstrating liminality at the stage of development, during which they transition from being part of a

[36] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.
[37] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.

majority group to a minority faith group with little Islamic community support in a non-BARMM region in Mindanao.

2. ***Group B (3 - 10 years):*** Middle-stage converts such as Fadia Haleema (3 years) and Abdul Rashid (5 years) are struggling to balance spiritual growth and some of the negative impacts of their journey, which includes some distance from their families in continuing to adapt to their new faith, correlating to Rambo's spatial "adaptation" and exclusion "consequences."
3. ***Group C (11 - 15 years*)**: Long-term converts such as Jenefer Rebustes (15 years) and Carilto Harinda (15 years) appear to be productive members of society with some practical coping strategies (*e.g., reliance on peer support networks*), demonstrating sustained liminal negotiation within a pluralistic context. Although these groups are only defined to demonstrate theoretical saturation[38] of each category and not theoretical representativeness with each unit having a detailed description in Table 1, and both research questions on the balancing act with challenges/consequences of conversion and the community dynamics on the outcome of successful conversion, the thematic analysis will consider the journeys of the participants and how their life experiences are reflective of their negotiation of spiritual fulfillment, experiences of social marginalization, and identity formation, in non-BARMM contexts of Mindanao.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Balik-Islam Participants in Mindanao

Name	Age	Year of Conversion	Ethnic Origin	Previous Religion	Gender
Participant 1	28	5	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Male
Participant 2	30	7	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 3	19	2	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Male

[38] Frank Van Rijnsoever, "(I Can't Get No) Saturation: A Simulation and Guidelines for Sample Sizes in Qualitative Research," *Academy of Management Proceedings* 2016, no. 1 (2016): 12040, https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2016.12040abstract.

Participant 4	35	15	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 5	40	9	Cebuano	Catholic	Male
Participant 6	33	6	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 7	34	5	Tagalog	Roman Catholic	Male
Participant 8	40	5	Tagalog	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 9	55	15	Lumad	Aglipayan	Male
Participant 10	36	5	Tagalog	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 11	27	3	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 12	25	6	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 13	39	9	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 14	26	4	Cebuano	Roman Catholic	Female
Participant 15	18	2	Ilongga	Born Again	Female

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Religious Leaders

Name	Age	Years of Experience	Position	Location	Gender
Sheikh A	45	20	• Executive Director, Muslim Religious Advisory Council of General Santos City • Vice President for Mindanao of the Salaam Police	General Santos City	Male

			Advocacy Group (SPAG)		
Sheikh B	50	25	Islamic Educator	General Santos City	Male

1.7 Outline

The thesis is structured into five chapters that build on each other to offer an insight into the conversion journeys of Balik Islam in the Mindanao region of the Philippines. Chapter 1 of the study presents an introduction highlighting the background details and setting out the research problem and question alongside the objectives and significance of the study's scope, implicitly covered in this section. The chapter also provides an overview of the methodology employed and references frameworks, like Rambo's stages of religious conversion and Turner's concept of liminality. This section sets the groundwork for exploring the significance of studying the journeys of individuals converting to Balik Islam religion in Mindanao, specifically in non-BARRM areas within academia.

Chapter 2 delves into the body of work on individuals who have converted to Islam globally and within the Philippines, specifically non-BARRM areas. It starts by discussing viewpoints on conversion and the reasons that drive individuals to embrace Islam while also touching on the obstacles that revertees commonly encounter. The chapter then shifts its focus to the Philippines. It delves into the context of Islam in the region, the emergence of Balik Islam communities and the social and cultural hurdles they confront. Furthermore, it examines how previous studies have either addressed or neglected to address the experiences of Filipino converts after their conversion.

Chapter 3 delves into an exploration of the present scenario of Islam in the Philippines, specifically focusing on the Mindanao region. It explains how Islam has influenced the identity in that area and looks into the social, political, and interfaith interactions impacting Muslim societies. This chapter provides background to the experiences of Balik Islam within a location known for its legacy of varied ethnicities and historical disputes.

Chapter 4 of the study shares findings about Balik Islam in Mindanao through their narratives and experiences. The chapter delves into the factors influencing their choice to adopt Islam and the obstacles encountered post conversion, including isolation, cultural adjustments, and inadequate communal assistance. The chapter discusses how individuals maintain their faith by developing support systems and participating in activities while redefining their sense of self.

Chapter 5 of the thesis, as a wrap-up section, summarises discoveries and discusses the implications of these findings while providing helpful advice for enhancing support systems for Balik Islam individuals in regions outside the core Muslim areas of communities. The chapter acknowledges the study's constraints. Suggests research avenues to further explore the relationship between religion, identity, and integration within diverse societies such as those in the Philippines.

CHAPTER II
UNDERSTANDING CONVERSION TO ISLAM FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

In order to analyse the transformation of religious identity among Balik-Islam in Mindanao, this chapter first situates global conversions to Islam. It defines the theological notion of reversion as distinct from the sociological notion of conversion *(Section 2.1*) with both classical Islamic texts and contemporary academic discourse. The following section will outline the motivations for converting to Islam (*Section 2.2*) as a socio-psychological identity transformation. Motivations for converting to Islam could be psychological/spiritual needs, a search for meaning, interfaith exposure, digital daʿwah, or possibly a crisis moment. It will follow up by examining conversion to Islam and post-conversion experiences *(Section 2.3*). This could involve being disowned by family members, experiencing cultural dissonance, facing antiquated gendered expectations, and being excluded by born-Muslim communities. The chapter concludes with a summary of coping mechanisms developed by Balik-Islam (*Section 2.4*), including spiritual resilience, religious education, mentoring, and the growing role of Islamic online spaces. This chapter has addressed a combination of global and local perspectives, which lay the theoretical groundwork for understanding the lived realities of Muslim revert in the Philippine context

2.1 Defining Conversion and Reversion in Islam

In sociology, conversion is commonly framed as a distinction in religious identification associated with the changes in beliefs, practices, moral values, and social belonging. For many forms of conversion to Islam, this transformation entails a deliberate self-reconstruction through new rituals such as ṣalāh and fasting, a new understanding of Islamic beliefs, and a reconfigured social belonging to the ummah. In the Philippines, however, Balik-Islam converts face issues with family estrangement, social opposition, and the cultural histories of Christian colonialism in reconnecting with an identity that predated colonisatio.[39]

[39] Lori Peek, "Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity," *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005): 215, https://doi.org/10.2307/4153097.

By contrast, reversion is a theological concept rooted in Islam's idea of fiṭrah, the innate human tendency to believe in the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*). The Qur'an states: *"So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fiṭrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people..."* (Qur'an 30:30). From this perspective, a convert to Islam is not adopting a new religious identity but rather returning to the original state of faith. The theological writings support this view. The Prophet (peace be upon him) explains in one ḥadīth that *Allah's joy over the return of a revert is similar to that of a man who lost a camel in the desert and then found it* (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 6309). Another ḥadīth states, "*...If he comes to me walking, I will come to him running...*" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 7405), indicating a divine readiness to receive the return of a believer. Sunni theologians emphasise that all humans are born with *fitrah*, framing reversion as a return to one's true self rather than transforming into something new.[40]

The dualism of conversion as identity transformation and reversion as spiritual return is particularly useful for comprehending Balik-Islam narratives. Converts see their conversion not as simply adopting Islam as a new belief system but as recovering a heritage lost due to the impacts of colonialism. In this sense, "Balik-Islam" does not simply describe a kind of conversion; it describes a reclamation of a self and a continuation of an identity before colonial contact.[41]

Similarly, research by Khalfaoui highlights that legal Islamic texts like Fatāwā al-Hindiyya acknowledged that community integration and social structures were just as much a factor in choosing one's religion as the individual faith.[42] As noted, these historical accounts relate to Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao about the search for community and an attempt to reclaim their culture, when many may be restored as an available course of action while navigating post-colonial ethnic conflicts..[43] This

[40] T. Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Papers Series (Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986)
[41] Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[42] Mouez Khalfaoui, "From Religious to Social Conversion: How Muslim Scholars Conceived of the *Rites de Passage* from Hinduism to Islam in Seventeenth-century South Asia," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 32, no. 1 (2011): 85–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2011.549312.
[43] Vivienne S. M. Angeles, "Rethinking Encounters and Re-Imagining Muslim-Christian Relations in Post-Colonial Philippines," in *500 Years of Christianity and the Global Filipino/a*, ed. Cristina Lledo Gomez et al., Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue (Springer Nature Switzerland,

historical account establishes a basis to acknowledge the social, spiritual, and cultural complexities of conversions today.

Recent studies of Islamic conversion depict a multi-layered understanding of reversion as a return to universal spiritual truths. For example, in the Western context, Latino Muslim communities often frame Islam as a recovery and a return to a monotheist root.[44] just as Balik-Islam communities do in the Philippines, who tie Islam to their pre-colonial Muslim heritage. This continuity is also theologically significant, as is the Quranic. Islamic theology complements this understanding as the Qur'an identifies that new converts, or muʾallaf al-qulūb (*those whose hearts are to be reconciled)*, are among the eight categories upon which zakat can be disbursed, Qurʾān 9:60 (Sūrat al-Tawbah).

In that vein, scholars, like Ibn Kathīr and al-Qurṭubī, discuss the role as central to the early phases of economic and spiritual stability for new Muslims after they convert to Islam. For example, recent studies by Johari et al. in the analysis *"The Role of Zakat and Success Factors for Muallaf Conditions: an analysis in Selangor, Malaysia*" analyse the benefits and effects of zakat assistance on new conversion (Muallaf) in Selangor. They note that support begins on the same day of their conversion, and their results indicate that their conditions improved by 0.11, which suggests that the organization's assistance dramatically improves the conditions and creates the longing to thrive as a Muslim.[45]

In the context of the Philippines, many Balik-Islam converts refer to themselves as "reverts," which reflects their belief that accepting Islam reconnects them with their suppressed pre-colonial Muslim heritage. Zakat plays a crucial role in supporting Balik-Islam communities in the Philippines, especially since there are often no social ties among individuals after conversion and no institutions available to provide initial resources for a successful transition. This distinction is not only important semantically but also influences how converts navigate their identities in

2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47500-9_4.

[44] Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oneworld Publications, 2014).

[45] Fuadah Johari et al., "The Role of Zakat and Success Factor for Muallaf Conditions: An Analysis in Selangor, Malaysia," *Ulum Islamiyyah*, 2018, https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:169784473.

their new faith, which is the central focus of this study.

2.2 Motivations Behind Conversion to Islam

The reasons for converting to Islam encompass many aspects: personal, social, intellectual, and practical. The research consistently indicates that many people convert to Islam for the personal pursuit or enhancement of a spiritual connection, an existential reality, and a coherent worldview. In Korchagina's research, many converts began their search for meaning through a crisis and a loss of belief or acceptance of the old belief paradigm. Many converts sought a meaningful life based on a doctrine consistent with their values, and they identified criteria for a new meaning in their lives through Islam.[46]

In addition, Harmsen states that the appeal of Islam's structured moral framework and its alignment with personal ethics can motivate conversion. This means that the transition of Balik-Islam converts in the Philippines is also framed by the historical consciousness that motivates the encounter and desire to reconnect with a precolonial Islamic heritage. Consequently, conversion is not merely a change in adherence to the mandates of a religion; it also encapsulates the desire to reconnect to a previous cultural epoch.[47]

Intellectual curiosity is an additional component to consider in the conversation surrounding conversion. Similar to Korchagina, a common discovery for many converts to Islam includes the theological coherence that Islam allows and the Islamic rationality for belief claims regarding tawḥīd (*unity of God*).[48] In addition to intellectual discovery, many people ascertain a potential conversion experience through pre-existing relationships with knowledgeable Muslims, in which those Muslims regularly practice the Islamic religion, who access daʿwah, and those who share Islamic-based content and videos online as they explore a conversion to Islam.[49] These experiences

[46] Anastasia V. Korchagina, "Conversion to Islam: Its Motives and Consequences Through the Looking Glass of Social and Psychological Research," *Minbar. Islamic Studies* 11, no. 2 (2018): 375–85, https://doi.org/10.31162/2618-9569-2018-11-2-375-385.
[47] Egbert Harmsen, "Nieuwe Moslims in West-Europa: Bekering Tot de Islam Als Keuzemogelijkheid in Hedendaagse Westerse Samenlevingen," *Religie & Samenleving* 3, no. 3 (2008): 173–96, https://doi.org/10.54195/RS.13152.
[48] Korchagina, "Conversion to Islam."
[49] Khalid Rhazzali, *Islam Online: A Netnography of Conversion*, 6 (BRILL, 2015),

outline that converting to Islam is typically not a spontaneous experience. There is often an amalgamation of unique and layered motivations influenced by an internal desire for meaning and the overlapping external influences that may have culminated before ever considering converting.

2.2.1 Spiritual and Existential Motivations

For many Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao, the acceptance of Islam is more than a change in belief; it is an existential journey that encompasses psychological healing, identity reform, and spiritual longing. This transformation is often mediated by the region's postcolonial situation, which manifested through distinct and nuanced struggles over indigenous identities and the erasure of Islamic legacies within consecutive epochs of Christianization. As Asad argues, the lasting effects of colonialism displace collective self-understanding; past identities cannot be converted into a collective spirit. However, this void can be filled by Islam's intrinsic commitment to tawḥīd, which offers a coherent worldview and ethics.[50]

Many converts claim that their previous religions or secular beliefs could not provide feelings of inner calm, order, or a moral compass. The structured rituals of Islam, namely, the ṣalāh (prayer), Ramadan fasting, and recital of the Qur'an, became not just religious obligations but also personal means of emotional regulation and spiritual intimacy. These must likewise help reconnect individuals to the Divine and their reestablished sense of purpose.[51] For many, the ummah becomes a sense of belonging, lost in their previous isolation. The Qur'an and Sunnah, which provide moral certainty of right and wrong, are juxtaposed to the relativism and ambiguity of modern secular life, drawing in recent converts seeking stability in an unpredictable environment.[52]

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https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004302549.

[50] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford University Press, 2003).

[51] Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, eds., *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (Guilford Press, 2005).

[52] Fenggang Yang, "God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community," *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 6 (2004): 1531–32, https://doi.org/10.1086/422072.

This return to spirituality is intertwined with identity, meaning, and community. Catic contends that converts typically undergo transformations that reshape their beliefs, religious practices, and public identity. Many of these converts adopt new habits, clothing marked by Islamic dress, and even change their name as part of their commitment to redefine their identity. It would even be accurate to indicate that these changes are fundamentally more profound than a shift in a person's identity, which reflects an amended understanding of themselves about a more encompassing social and moral context.[53] While her work is situated in a predominantly Western context, similar shifts also occur among Filipino converts, who frame their conversion moment as restoring a lost identity rather than an identity change. There is much literature on precolonial narratives of Islam in the Philippines, where their sense of return is spiritual and a reclaiming of culture.

Gender adds another dimension to this transformation. Sukarma and Farah note that social expectations and gender norms inform the experiences of converts. Women, for instance, may face condemnation for wearing visible religious dress such as the ḥijāb, while men may face new meanings of leadership and masculinity in Muslim communities. This typology of experience is based on studies conducted within the West, and it helps articulate new dimensions of the Filipino context as well, where converts, especially women, must engage with public visibility, opposition from family, and potentially institutional marginalisation.[54]

Nonetheless, this transition is not without its complications because converts are often subject to internal tensions and external pressures that negatively impact their post-conversion experience, as per the "consequences" stage of conversion suggested by Rambo. Internally, as Iyadurai[55] and Warraq[56] indicate, converts may experience

[53] Nuray Catic, "Persuaded by the Qur'an: Converting to Islam in Canada," *Religious and Socio-Political Studies Journal* 2, no. 1 (2024): 33–77, https://doi.org/10.29173/rssj18.
[54] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda*, Rev. ed, Comparative Studies in Religion and Society 16 (University of California Press, 2008).
[55] Joshua Iyadurai, "Religious Conversion: A Psycho-Spiritual Perspective," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 31, no. 3 (2014): 189–93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378814526823.
[56] Ibn Warraq, *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out* (Prometheus books, 2003).

cognitive dissonance between their prior beliefs and new faith. The resulting internal struggle can lead to a more profound understanding of a spiritual journey or deepen a spiritual experience. However, in some cases, it can also lead to spiritual disillusionment or apostasy when inadequate support systems exist. Socially speaking, disapproval or change in relationships with family and friends can exacerbate a convert's sense of spiritual isolation.

Spiritual satisfaction, identity reconstruction, and moral consistency are strong motivations for Balik-Islam converts to choose Islam as their faith. When people come to their faith, many reclaim it. Some are not assuming faith but rather self-recovering to a deeper level of identity, healing, and realignment, depending on the orientation of our predominantly plural and sometimes antagonistic society.

2.2.2 Role of interfaith relationships, dawah exposure, and digital influence

Interfaith experiences, exposure to da'wah, and the influence of media are critical to conversion experiences for many Muslims today. For example, research by Elius asserts that interfaith interaction often deepens an appreciation of different ways of seeing the world, which enhances theological comparison. For many converts, these experiences do not just offer theological comparison; they allow for increased appreciation of the spirituality and ethics of Islam, often resulting in strengthening ties to their new religion. [57]

Da'wah, which is inviting people to Islam, is often understood as both a religious obligation and a way to reach out to the community. Da'wah is a way to introduce Islam as a way of life and allow for reflection among non-Muslims. While historically, da'wah was conducted mainly through one-on-one conversation, the digital age has changed da'wah delivery.

Jima'ain notes that in the digital age, anyone can access Islamic religious teachings digitally, reconfiguring how people search for religious identity. He also points out those social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp, can establish two-way communication and embed da'wah more actively

[57] M Elius, "Interfaith Dialogue: An Islamic Framework," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Humanities* 68, no. 2 (2023): 193–206, https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v68i2.70363.

and easily. This medium enables Islam to be expressed through visual material, podcasts, and livestream discussions, which add yet another layer and reach to its messages. This medium works exceptionally well for engaging with young people. Furthermore, social media spans layers of time and space like no other medium while also providing a safe, confidential, and comfortable space for religious engagement. [58]

The digital landscape has its flaws. There are significant issues with authenticity and orthodoxy when there is no formal vetting process for online religious content. This is especially problematic for new converts whose early theological understanding relies heavily on material that is not contextualised and sometimes even lacks traditional academic rigour. While these changes reflect global shifts, they are especially felt in the Philippine context. Morados and Malayang argue that many Balik-Islam converts trace the start of their spiritual journey to websites, online spaces, or conversations with Muslim friends. In areas where access to institutional Islamic education is limited, particularly outside Muslim-majority regions, digital da'wah, combined with personal reflection and peer interactions, creates an interactive environment for religious exploration. Filipino converts, in particular, recall this blend of digital exposure and relational engagement as the catalyst for their reversion, entering Islam through a modern and personally meaningful process.

2.3 Post-Conversion Challenges

The journey of a convert does not end with a new belief in Islam. The post-conversion phase may present new challenges - spiritual doubt, weak ʿaqīdah, social excommunication, family rejection, etc., that could impede Islamic identity integration, and sometimes lead to apostasy.

Rusli and Kadir have identified weak foundations of belief as an important contributor to apostasy among muallaf in Malaysia. Suppose the muallaf are not firmly grounded in some of the bare acts of being a Muslim, such as ṣalāh, ṭahārah, Rukun Islam and Rukun Iman. In that case, the muallaf will often be confused by the new faith

[58] Muhammad Talhah Ajmain Jima'ain, "Dawah in the Digital Age: Utilizing Social Media for the Spread of Islamic Teachings," *Journal of Current Social and Political Issues* 1, no. 1 (2023): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.15575/jcspi.v1i1.444.

and consequently must practice their religion inconsistently. [59]

Converts often selectively engage with aspects of the faith or practice inconsistently, particularly in matters of ʿaqīdah, partly due to the absence of structured religious guidance. Some mullaf retain pre-conversion habits regarding fardhu ʿayn, which were never systematically taught the foundational obligations, further complicating their integration into the faith. In addition to the lack of post-conversion education, Rusli and Kadir have pointed out the absence of culturally responsive programs, ranging from mentorship to fardhu ʿayn instruction, which contribute to disengagement and spiritual disorientation among converts.

Moreover, Rusli and Kadir further explain that family and community pressures complicate their challenges. Family members may emotionally abuse them, reject or abandon them, which may lead to identity conflict and a decrease in motivation to practice. Converts experience this emotional pressure when they feel it is their responsibility to honour their family ties or friendship ties at the risk of faith. The convert's journey is also vulnerable in the case of marrying into Islam, when marriages dissolve through divorce, abandonment, or spousal neglect. Many converts will disengage from Islam in their new identity if they are left without a support network.[60]

2.3.1 Rejection from Family and Community

Experiencing rejection from family and the greater community represents a complicated challenge many Muslims converts face. Norhana et al. note that Chinese Muslim converts residing in Malaysia face the added emotional burdens from both forms of dual rejection. Converts are seen at first glance as simply "betraying" their cultural or family background, leading many converts to suffer tension, emotional distancing, and feeling excluded and/or belonging in their social networks before converting to Islam. [61]

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[59] Nazihah Rusli and Firdaus Khairi Abdul Kadir, "The Challenges Encountered by Mualaf After Conversion to Islam: A Study on The Apostasy (Murtad) Cases in Malaysia," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12, no. 8 (2022): Pages 538-544, https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i8/14050.

[60] Rusli and Abdul Kadir, "The Challenges Encountered by Mualaf After Conversion to Islam."

[61] Norhana Abdullah Siew Boey Ng, Azarudin Awang, and Azman Che Mat, "Chinese Muslims and Their Non-Muslim Families on Muamalat Fiqh Co-Existence (Ta'ayush)," *Global Journal Al-*

This disconnection is often made worse by marginalisation within Muslim communities. To illustrate, Casey has noted that converts may be viewed with scepticism about their faith and devotion as converts in racially or ethnically homogenous Islamic contexts. As converts from outside of inherited or customary religious expectations and cultural practices, they often struggle to attain the kind of acceptance to be open and defend their beliefs without being viewed with suspicion or rendered invisible.[62]

Subsequently, Martinot and Ozalp note that social isolation can create emotional and psychological strain on converts due to the disconnection from their non-Muslim family and unfamiliar Muslim communities. This social isolation diminishes the support systems available to converts and could exacerbate feelings of loneliness during a transition that typically is enjoyable and fulfilling on a spiritual level.[63]

In the Philippine context, Balik-Islam conversions occur amidst complications of cultural dissonance and regional variations; many people do not simply lack acceptance, but feel continually absent and not completely belonging, situated between a Christian upbringing and Mindanaoan Islamic culture, which can be a feeling that there is a regional difference, or cultural unfamiliarity—being between means a silent, but sustained struggle for spiritual rootedness and social connection.

Building on Lacar's idea, many Balik-Islam converts are not simply alienated from their family while becoming Muslim, but they are alienated from any established Muslim communities, particularly in the Philippines, where ethnicity and region can determine the accepting boundary. Religious identity is more complex for Balik-Islam; they do not belong to established networks like born Muslims or people who are born into a religion, and every conversion process would naturally be more turbulent,

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Thaqafah, July 28, 2024, 49–66, https://doi.org/10.7187/GJATSI072024-4.

[62] Patrick Michael Casey, "'They Don't Look at You as a Real Muslim': The Racial Exclusion of Black American Muslim Converts," *The Muslim World* 112, no. 4 (2022): 404–21, https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12448.

[63] Bonne Martinot and Mehmet Ozalp, "Conversion to Islam: Review of Research Conducted between 2000-2020 on Western and Australian Converts to Islam," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): 21–41, https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v5i1.269.

accentuated, and drawn out for all Balik-Islam in the Philippines. All this emphasises the obstacles of reidentification shared by Balik-Islam and all others entering a community as a religious disruptor in a pluralistic society and cultural style. The need for sincere and appropriate religious and community support is troubling.[64]

2.3.2 Isolation from Born Muslim Communities

Muslim converts often encounter a fair amount of social and cultural obstacles to community integration, especially in born-Muslim communities. Sealy, for instance, observes how British Muslim converts report frequently feeling like "strangers" in born-Muslim communities due to their personal cultural experiences, upbringing, value system, and social codes. This disconnect often reflects itself in subtle forms of exclusion, where the convert perceives a lack of full recognition or legitimacy as a Muslim. Some converts will go as far as to say that they do not mind being treated as "intimate strangers," as belonging to a religion will override social acceptance; however, when the cultural codes change, unfamiliarity affects the social understanding. There are tensions at play, especially when converts articulate criticism regarding particular cultural practices in Muslim-majority settings, further distancing themselves from the community generally and undermining their legitimacy as Muslims.[65]

Similarly, Catic indicates that converts experience intense loneliness and alienation, encountering judgmentalism and a lack of support from those they thought were their communities. These feelings are emotional and structural, as converts often cannot access inclusive worship spaces and mentoring networks that cultivate their spirituality. [66]

In the broader European context, Abdullah et al. illustrate the conditions of inclusion and the systemic barriers to social inclusion for Muslim minorities in Germany. This included discrimination, a lack of educational access, and economic disparity. The forms of exclusion facing converts, although not exclusive to them,

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[64] Lacar, “Balik -Islam.”
[65] Thomas Sealy, “The Betweenness of the Double Stranger: British Converts to Islam and Patterns of Belonging,” *Social Compass* 69, no. 1 (2022): 95–112, https://doi.org/10.1177/00377686211018436.
[66] Catic, “Persuaded by the Qur’an.”

reflect the marginalisation of converts who enter Islam as non-Muslims and must negotiate boundaries of belonging, both internal and external to Islam. [67]

These global insights provide considerable comparisons to the Philippine context, where Balik-Islam converts go through doubtful experiences of subtle exclusion and marginalisation, not only from their Christian-origin communities but even in culturally homogenous Muslim spaces. As Asuna indicates, the break from familial and ethnic continuity in religious identity adds to the complications of converting to Islam. It highlights the need for more inclusive spiritual communities and culturally appropriate supports. [68]

2.3.3 Learning curve in rituals, language, and doctrine

In addition to the external rejection, many converts also experience forms of acceptance crisis within accepted communities. A second layer in the acceptance process, Muslim converts can't simply embrace a faith; they must learn to navigate the presented ritual, language, theology, and culture of Islam. Establishing Curtis perspective, as new Muslims living in the United States, new Muslims needed to learn how to pray (*ṣalāh*), fast (*ṣawm*), and perform wuḍūʾ (*ritual ablution*) quickly while learning how to formulate this within a niyya (*intention*) and Arabic recitation. These skills are often difficult for new Muslims to learn without exposure. [69]

Also, learning Arabic for prayer and Qur'anic recitation is not just a technical challenge but a communal challenge since linguistic fluency is often intertwined with notions of authenticity in Muslim spaces. Snook et al.note that converts often show developing religious conceptualisations, which may produce increasing divergence between belief and practice, as exemplified by the inner negotiation involved in developing a new faith identity. [70]

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[67] Zulkarnain Zulkarnain et al., "Social Inclusion as A Challenge of Multiculturalism in Germany: A Study on Muslim Minorities," *Alfuad: Jurnal Sosial Keagamaan* 8, no. 2 (2024): 135, https://doi.org/10.31958/jsk.v8i2.12052.
[68] Yoshizawa, "Religious Conversion as a 'Winding Pathway.'"
[69] Edward E Curtis, *Muslims In America: A Short History* (Oxford University PressNew York, NY, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195367560.001.0001.
[70] Daniel W. Snook et al., "Conversion Motifs among Muslim Converts in the United States.," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13, no. 4 (2021): 482–92, https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000276.

In addition to the above-mentioned study, Powers highlights the spiritual tension converts face when engaging with Islamic ritual and its legalistic structures. For example, niyya is commonly taught as an obligation by new Muslims rather than a spiritually conscious intention. So, they may experience a disconnect when trying to participate with more spirit in their beliefs. This disconnect may result in anxiety and worry about making mistakes and being unfaithful to their adopted religion, as well as a hesitancy to engage in communal worship when possible. [71]

Nevertheless, converts also navigate unfamiliar Islamic cultural practices, including gender ratios, dress codes, and communal prayer behaviour, which can be at odds with previous experiences, causing discomfort or exclusion. In secular countries like the Netherlands, converts must balance Islamic obligations with social expectations, and any contradiction leads to a fracture that creates tension internally.[72]

Likewise, in the Philippines, Balik-Islam converts negotiate similar boundaries, in addition to restrictions caused by limited access to Islamic education and the pressure stemming from residual tension between Moro and non-Moro Muslim identities. Learning about Islam is not simply obtaining religious knowledge; it is personal, social, and perhaps even spiritual. Without a better-structured mentoring process with more inclusive religious education and compassionate communal spaces, converts are often left vulnerable to burnout or being socially overwhelmed. In sum, the conditions indicate the importance of having a clear support network.

2.3.4 Identity crisis and cultural dissonance

Muslim converts often experienced profound internal transformations in identity, which can lead to psychological dissonance and social dislocation because it involves reconciling a new religious identity with existing cultural, family, or national identities. It is a crisis that stems from the need to be a good citizen of the world and by respecting and embracing one's previous selves. In his study of religious converts, Radford notes

[71] P. R. Powers, "Interiors, Intentions, and the 'Spirituality' of Islamic Ritual Practice," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2004): 425–59, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfh036.
[72] Herman L. Beck, "Muslim Ritual Practices and Their Multilayered Messages in a Non-Muslim Environment: Examples from the Dutch Context," *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 46, no. 2 (2010), https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.4516.

that accepting a new religion is not just conceptualised as an act of theology but also about redefining the self in social networks that are often hostile or resistant to that choice. Radford's case studies examined Kyrgyz Christians but applied them to the broader understanding of Muslim converts in the Philippines region of Mindanao. The reconstruction of identity and structure involves negotiation for every convert concerning personal beliefs and the community's expectations. [73]

This negotiation produces identity tension for Muslim converts that creates cultural dissonance. This occurs when Islamic practices, such as gender roles, dietary rules, and prayer customs, conflict with established norms or family customs. For example, Wharton mentions that this dissonance worsens when the setting is secular or pluralist and religious expression is marginalised. Converts may feel stuck in a liminal state, stuck "betwixt and between" among their old and new communities, never fully belonging to either of these worlds. There is no direct evidence of this liminality. However, instead, it manifests in subtle disregard, uncertainty about authenticity, or internal conflict concerning which aspects of their previous identity are redeemable. [74]

In the Philippine context specifically, Balik-Islam converts endure this identity tension explicitly, as their identity transition returns a sense of spiritual self but also brings about a cultural reorientation, especially when this new identity challenges long-nurtured Christian-focused cultural belief systems, familial expectations, or non-Moro ethnic roots. As mentioned by Eder, Balik-Islam converts in the Christian Philippines are experiencing their version of an identity crisis as layered with ambivalence related to alienation from their traditional family, but also to social distance from the rest of the larger Moro Muslim community, which often relies on being thought of as notably belonging to a geographic, regional, ethnic, or historical group as part of their membership in the larger ummah. [75]

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[73] David Radford, *Religious Identity and Social Change: Explaining Christian Conversion in a Muslim World*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315776859.
[74] Barrie Wharton, "Twin Towers of Cultural Confusion? Contemporary Crises of Identity in Europe and European Islam," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 20, no. 1 (2008): 41–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/14781150701865197.
[75] James F. Eder, "Ethnic Differences, Islamic Consciousness, and Muslim Social Integration in the Philippines," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2010): 317–32,

2.3.5 Gender-specific struggles

As new Muslim converts navigate their spiritual and social identity transformation, they often face gendered challenges, especially when attempts to embrace a new Islamic identity meet everyday cultural expectations and religious expectations. Mahmood contends that religious practices, such as sitting at the prayer rug or donning the hijab, are not just external impositions, as some explicitly reject religious practices, but may be accepted as acts of ethical self-cultivation. [76]

While Mahmood's work chose to engage born Muslims, her concepts are still valuable for converts to Islam who have internalized religious disciplines in service of constructing a new identity based on Islamic faith. For female converts, they may don the hijab as a spiritual sign, and as a public signifier of change where others may witness and then observe their changes, inviting social scrutiny, misunderstanding, or downright hostility, particularly in non-Muslim societies. On the other hand, male converts may be pressured to perform their presumed role as leaders or representatives of the religious and community, regardless of their disposition, which highlights additional gendered expectations that shape convert experiences. [77]

McGinty's ethnographic research on female Swedish converts, including Marianne and Cecilia, described how women must manage competing frameworks, affirming a religious identity while also asserting for themselves agency as gendered beings both within the Muslim ummah and, more broadly, within the society outside of the faith. [78]

In a similar vein, Mitchell et al. also discusses how female converts stand out as having a much heavier load of surveillance than male converts, often because of stereotypes that represent Islam as problematic because of associated patriarchal qualities. This social vantage point places restrictions or expectations on women that

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https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2010.515812.

[76] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

[77] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*.

[78] Anna Mansson McGinty, "Formation of Alternative Femininities through Islam: Feminist Approaches among Muslim Converts in Sweden," *Women's Studies International Forum* 30, no. 6 (2007): 474–85, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2007.09.004.

complicate their integration into the Muslim community. [79]

Furthermore, Turner explains how female converts are also required to manage psychological discomfort as they move across the dimension of secular and Islamic moral universes, which she describes as "*convertitis".* These tensions are not binary nor simple, and they run through everyday life about their choices on food, socialising, or public appearance, or any number of choices that require negotiating multiple cultural codes or cultural practices.[80] While Amiano has identified conflicts stemming from a lack of social understanding of what it means to be a Muslim woman, this adds to the sense of disintegration into a sense of belonging for many female converts. [81]

On the other hand, Zebiri conceptualises the pressure for male converts to take on the role of someone who personifies religious leadership, or as a person who represents the community, regardless of their readiness for that identity. Male identity in approaching faith is, therefore, located in gendered dynamics that shape how men engage faith in private and public spaces. [82]

In the Philippine setting, Balik-Islam converts in the Philippines manifest specific gendered challenges with previous Catholic legacies, non-Moro heritage, and Islamic expectations. For example, Vivienne Angeles in her study *From Catholic to Muslim: Changing Perceptions of Gender Roles in the Balik-Islam Movement in the Philippines* found that female converts face family resistance to wearing the hijab, a visible break from Catholic values and norms, while also dealing with Moro expectations of piety, modesty, and domesticity which aided convert status from urban or secularised backgrounds.[83]

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[79] Paul Mitchell et al., "Gender, Identity and Conversion: A Comparison of Male and Female Converts to Islam in Australia," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 32, no. 3 (2021): 279–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2021.1960694.

[80] Karen Turner, "Convertitis and the Struggle with Liminality for Female Converts to Islam in Australia," *Archives de Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 186 (2019): 71–91, https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.45642.

[81] Itzea Goikolea Amiano, "Nuevas Musulmanas Españolas: Puzles Identitarios y Respuestas a Los Malestares Espirituales y de Género," *Arenal. Revista de Historia de Las Mujeres* 27, no. 1 (2020): 65–93, https://doi.org/10.30827/arenal.v27i1.11448.

[82] Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts*.

[83] Vivienne S.M. Angeles, "From Catholic to Muslim: Changing Perceptions of Gender Roles in a Balik-Islam Movement in the Philippines," in *Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia*, ed. Susanne Schroeter (BRILL, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004242920_010.

While male converts also experience their own set of pressures, and it is evident in the research of Angeles (2013), where she posits that men may not be competent in Islamic knowledge; however, they are perpetually called to lead a prayer or represent the religious community in public. These expectations mirror global patterns, where male converts are assumed to embody religious authority by default, adding to their cognitive and social burden. [84]

These dynamics illustrate what Angeles terms a "*gendered identity shift*," whereby Balik-Islam adherents will need to navigate a reconciling of their ancestral Muslim cultural background with the socio-cultural imprint left by their Christian upbringing and non-Moro ethnicity. The resulting cultural dissonance demonstrates a specific form of cultural dislocation, necessitating not just a spiritual accommodation but also negotiation of their gender roles.[85] Similarly, Lacar mentions that Balik-Islam organisations in Mindanao positively contribute to facilitating this transition towards reconciling gender role expectations through religious instruction, peer mentors, and inclusive networks that give converts space to embody their faith at their discretion while resisting strict cultural expectations.[86]

2.4 Coping Strategies among Muslim Converts

Coping strategies among Muslim converts are deeply influenced by their religious beliefs and spirituality, whereby Muslim converts can interpret and make sense of adversity, trauma, and psychosocial stressors through a coherently integrated framework: The Islamic lens. Although these strategies come about from challenges and not necessarily a premeditative stance, they are typically shaped through an Islamic worldview that emphasizes divine purpose, personal accountability, and moral growth.

Bondarchuk et al. argue that coping strategies can be dealt with in two main areas: problem-focused coping—which involves addressing the root causes of stress—and emotion-focused coping—where the one dealing with the psychological distress regulates it from the related emotions. Both strategies moderate these lived experiences

[84] Angeles, “From Catholic to Muslim.”
[85] Angeles, “From Catholic to Muslim.”
[86] Lacar, “Balik -Islam.”

for the control, particularly during instability in the post-conversion period for many of them. [87]

Many converts may provide testimony to turning to the Qur'an for comfort and clarity, using its verses as spiritual tools for resilience and guidance. Achour et al. suggest that acts of worship, such as ṣalāh (prayer), dhikr (*remembrance of God*), and duʿāʾ (*supplication*), can reinforce the capacity for inner calm and train behaviours to deal with and form purposeful interactions with internal chaos. Further, these acts are deeply contextualised in tawḥīd (*a monotheistic belief in the oneness of God*). Thus, these acts also promote the ability to constructively process trials before dealing with random life occurrences.[88]

In addition, Hatta et al. report through the use of semi-structured interviews that Muslims utilizing religiously informed coping strategies (primarily, proactive behaviors and spiritual acceptance) to cope with life stressors displayed significantly higher instances of psychological resilience and significantly lower levels of post-traumatic stress as compared with individuals engaging more necessitated coping strategies through their experience of trauma. For converts, these dimensions created immediate relief and a directed long-term pathway towards stability, identity construction, and spiritual growth. [89]

2.4.1 Spiritual resilience and personal discipline

The transition from non-Muslim to Muslim identity is often accompanied by a radical transformation in behavior, particularly concerning resilience and discipline when performing Islamic rituals. This process of transformation reflects the complex relationship between spirituality, the support of the larger community, and personal motivation. For many converts, spiritual resilience emerged and was used as a coping

[87] Olena Bondarchuk et al., "Coping with Stressfull Situations Using Coping Strategies and Their Impact on Mental Health," *Multidisciplinary Reviews* 7 (June 2024): 2024spe034, https://doi.org/10.31893/multirev.2024spe034.
[88] Meguellati Achour et al., "An Islamic Perspective on Coping with Life Stressors," *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 11, no. 3 (2016): 663–85, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-015-9389-8.
[89] Kusmawati Hatta et al., "Impact of Resilience and Coping Strategy on Post-Traumatic Symptoms Among Muslim University Students," *Islamic Guidance and Counseling Journal* 6, no. 1 (2023): 18–27, https://doi.org/10.25217/igcj.v6i1.3132.

mechanism to process the social and emotional challenges of life in the immediate post-conversion phase.

In Surabaya, Indonesia, a study by Wiwik reveals that Muslim converts who demonstrate spiritual resilience and firmly adhere to Islam, despite family resistance and their doubt. Many converts engaged in worship practices such as prayer and other Islamic behaviours to find stability and purpose, believing strongly in tawḥīd and the ethical nature of the Qur'ān. From the interpretations of the convert, ṣalāh, dhikr, and following the teachings of the Prophet were important mechanisms of anchoring spiritual resilience during difficult times.[90]

Moreover, Gumiandari et al. elaborate on this idea by emphasizing how the Islamic virtues of ṣabr and tawakkul (*trust in God*) can build resilience, support, and discipline. These virtues encourage converts to experience hardship calmly and faithfully, framing trials not as punishments but as opportunities for spiritual refinement. It was supported by research by Achour et al, who emphasize that prayers are the primary means that Muslims employ to cope with stress because they provide repeated outlets of divine engagement throughout the day.[91]

However, resilience comes with its own pitfalls. In the context of the Philippines, Yoshizawa posits that many Balik-Islam converts found it easy to say or declare the shahāda (*declaration of faith*), but encountered great difficulty in continuing their Islamic practice through the five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, or wearing Islamic clothing, particularly due to pressures and non-approval of family or non-Islamic family members.[92] Therefore, the current situation illustrates that conversion should not be perceived as a singular event but instead as an ongoing negotiation between conviction and social circumstance. Provided by Morados and Malayang's research reveals how Filipinos negotiated the issue of familial

[90] Wiwik Setiyani and Muktafi Muktafi, "The Resilience of Muslim Converts in Understanding Islam: The Role of al-Akbar Mosque for Post-Conversion Accompaniment," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 10, no. 2 (2020): 302–24, https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2020.10.2.303-325.
[91] Achour et al., "An Islamic Perspective on Coping with Life Stressors."
[92] Asuna Yoshizawa, "Religious Conversion as a 'Winding Pathway': Experience of Balik-Islam and Muslim–Christian Relations in the Southern Philippines," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 35, no. 3 (2024): 285–307, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2024.2436770.

estrangement by reinforcing their faith, strongly invoking a reliance on duʿāʾ and a patient approach to contacting family. [93] For instance, one Balik-Islam convert shared:

"I keep on asking (duʿāʾ) Allāh that He may include my parents among those whom He guides, and those to whom I give daʿwah whenever there is an opportunity.

Although the pattern of spiritual coping is recognisable globally among converts, the pressures they experience are culturally specific. In the Philippines, a predominantly Christian population, Balik-Islam often needs to balance its faith with the structures of their Christian family or social expectations. In Western contexts, however, the predominant pressures are Islamophobia, public scrutiny, and social alienation. Bullock's study of white converts in Canada, for example, showed that some were coping through increased religiosity and advocacy, while others resorted to avoidance strategies to cope with the absence of community. [94]

2.4.2 Role of religious education and convert-support programs

Religious education and support programs are central to the spiritual formation, moral development, and community integration of persons who accept a new faith. While the programs impart doctrinal knowledge and other intellectual functions, for Muslim converts, education and support programs primarily serve to develop character, provide emotional support, and create a sense of belonging.

Islamic and Christian religious education instil foundational values – honesty, trustworthiness, humility, and community responsibility. For instance, Arlina et al. suggest that these moral virtues support personal development, particularly when someone changes their spirituality. For Muslim converts, a phased learning experience of tawḥīd, ritual practice, and ethical attitudes provides a significant transition point into their new religious life.[95] Aderele argues that Islamic religious education fosters theological literacy and a deeper connection to the ummah, reinforcing identity and

[93] Morados and Malayang, "Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered."
[94] Katherine Bullock, *Coping with a New Liminal Life: White Converts to Islam*, 1, no. 3 (2024): 30.
[95] Arlina Arlina et al., "Peran Pendidikan Agama Islam Dalam Membentuk Karakter Bangsa," *El-Mujtama: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 4, no. 2 (2024): 699–709, https://doi.org/10.47467/elmujtama.v4i2.999.

emotional resilience.[96]

Recent studies suggest that the experiences of Indonesian converts demonstrate how institutional support can significantly relieve the transition for converts. In their research, Lamsir et al. demonstrate how organisations such as YASMUI and Muhammadiyah significantly assist Baduy Muslim converts. These organisations provide formal Islamic learning and offer social welfare and humanitarian programs, including health care and economic opportunity. These programs ensure that the learning of Islam is backed up and supported by services that can help a person prosper spiritually and socially. [97]

In contexts where religious minorities are at risk of being the subject of solicitation for proselytization, the combination of religious formation and social relief is essential. Lamsir et al. even note that charitable agencies and governments should collaborate to support these endeavours, particularly in counteracting rival missionaries, which may undermine or destabilise newly formed Islamic identities.[98]

In the Philippines, the madrasah has also taken a significant role as a site to capture and frame Islamic values. According to Yusri Madrasah, education is also rooted in its capacity to transform individuals, and therefore, cannot be seen as only consisting of the level of information; instead, Islamic Religious Education involves values, moral competence, and how converts can be incorporated into the Muslim communities. [99]

The argument over education-based conversion support is echoed by Tsani and Sauri, who concluded that education-based conversion support acts as a launchpad for new Muslims to learn new Islamic content and learn to navigate supportive spaces that

[96] Abiodun James Aderele, "Saved to Serve: Salvific Role of Christian Education in Discipling Muslim Converts for Sound Church Integration," *Edumania-An International Multidisciplinary Journal* 01, no. 03 (2023): 160–77, https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9004.
[97] Latipah Lamsir et al., "Management of Muslim Converts in Lebak Banten by YASMUI, Muhammadiyah, and Al Washliyah," *American Journal of Economic and Management Business (AJEMB)* 3, no. 9 (2024): 272–89, https://doi.org/10.58631/ajemb.v3i9.99.
[98] Lamsir et al., "Management of Muslim Converts in Lebak Banten by YASMUI, Muhammadiyah, and Al Washliyah."
[99] Nadia Yusri et al., "Peran Penting Pendidikan Agama Islam Dalam Membentuk Karakter Pribadi Yang Islami," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 1, no. 2 (2023): 12, https://doi.org/10.47134/pjpi.v1i2.115.

shape the evolving faith of the new Muslim through pedagogical patience, consistency, and compassion. [100]

2.4.3 Importance of mentorship, community belonging, and digital spaces

The process of religious conversion is not only an individual transformation but is also a social process shaped by access to guidance, a sense of community, and more digital networks. For Muslim converts, especially converts without familial or ethnic ties to the Islamic faith, these communities are vital for negotiating the otherwise difficult work of post-conversion life.

Personal mentorship is one of the most valuable forms of support. Experienced Muslims, whether they were born into the faith or are fellow converts, can support new Muslims in learning foundational practices such as salah, fasting, and Qur'an study. They can also support them in providing reassurance in moments of doubt or confusion. Mentors can also model how to live Islam as a routine in someone's everyday life and respond to inquiries and situations where they recognize cultural traditions or conventions but are trying to understand the core principles of Islam. Therefore, they will help convert Muslims to gain deep confidence, as well as emotional confidence and social inclusion in the ummah.[101]

Equally noteworthy is the feeling of participating in a physical Islamic community. When a convert feels that they are welcomed, accepted, and valued by the local congregation, they can transition from feeling in a state of "spiritual limbo." A strong physical community can validate their new identity and create opportunities for social engagement, which are important to well-being. Unfortunately, many converts, especially in non-Muslim and culturally homogeneous Muslim areas, do not have immediate access to such communities. This is the importance of the online.[102]

Recently, online spaces have become important resources for learning, support, and identity work. Online spaces include social media groups, YouTube channels, and forums with instant access to a wide range of Islamic knowledge, from rudimentary

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[100] Muhammad Jaohar Tsani and Sofyan Sauri, "Pendidikan Islam: Konsep, Masalah, Dan Solusi," *Educatio* 19, no. 1 (2024): 184–99, https://doi.org/10.29408/edc.v19i1.26032.
[101] Reza Aslan, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (Random House, 2005).
[102] Sealy, "The Betweenness of the Double Stranger."

rituals to sophisticated jurisprudence. The social media groups, forums, and YouTube channels allow converts to engage anonymously, safely ask challenging questions, and find mentors internationally. The anonymity and accessibility of online environments can also be liberating for converts where there are limited Islamic resources or inclusive communities due to their rural or conservative context.[103]

As Treadwell[104] and Parnther[105] argue, digital spaces are not initially alienating, but instead they facilitate community-building, professional development, and leadership for marginalised communities like women. Piela et al. examined this group dynamic with Polish female converts to Islam and showed how online spaces allowed for spiritual growth by navigating doctrinal learning and allowing them to negotiate a Muslim subjectivity. Their uses of digital places allowed them to shift from rigid, large, and entrenched ways of thinking *(often inspired by Salafism*) back to personalised and contextualised expressions of faith informed by their lived experience.[106]

However, this plurality creates epistemological problems, too. Conflicting understandings of Islam can bewilder some of the newer converts, especially if they began their exploration to find something specific to believe in religiously. Not only does the digital realm not gatekeep, and therefore allow for lots of diversity of thought, but it also creates doubt in whatever seems authoritative. Nonetheless, most converts learn to differentiate and find some balance in their practice of Islam that reflects their understanding and realities.[107]

In the context of the Philippines, Balik-Islam converts, particularly those from regions with little or no relation to Moro-majority geographical regions, indicate that they place about the same value on these online or digital resources. Online daʿwah

[103] Camey Andersen and Steven Thomas, "Online Mentoring," *EdTechnica*, ahead of print, 2023, https://doi.org/10.59668/371.13307.
[104] Brooke Dunbar-Treadwell, *The Case for Community in Online Spaces: Taking Back Connection* (Lexington Books, 2023), https://doi.org/10.5771/9781666934687.
[105] Ceceilia Parnther, "The Role of Online Communities in Leadership Development and Collaborative Mentoring," in *Voices from Women Leaders on Success in Higher Education*, 1st ed., by Barbara Cozza and Ceceilia Parnther (Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003219897-18.
[106] Anna Piela et al., "The Role of the Internet in the Formation of Muslim Subjectivity Among Polish Female Converts to Islam," *CyberOrient* 16, no. 1 (2022): 35–66, https://doi.org/10.1002/cyo2.24.
[107] Piela et al., "The Role of the Internet in the Formation of Muslim Subjectivity Among Polish Female Converts to Islam."

videos, Islamic groups of support, and even mentorship programs function as lifelines for those Balik-Islam who are trying to reintegrate into society or who have very limited or even no access to local madrasahs or masjids. These digital channels, when combined with community support and informed mentorship, provide a triple set of supportive resources that are also vital components of a healthy and resilient Islamic identity[108]

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the complex experiences of Muslim converts, particularly around motivations for adopting the Islamic faith, the challenges immediately faced upon converting, and the coping strategies they have developed to navigate the spiritual and social aspects of their newly-found religion. Using both worldwide scholarship and local Philippine contexts, focusing mainly on the Balik-Islam in Mindanao, I have demonstrated that conversion is a process, not simply a one-time decision, nor is it just about faith, but rather sometimes about negotiating faith, or adapting to faith, while continuing to validate beliefs. Converts undergo personal, psychological, and social transformation through complex interactions between individuals' beliefs, community responses, family, and institutional support.

Globally, often conceptualises Islamic conversion, primarily on the initial motivations to adopt Islam, i.e., spiritual searching, cultural rediscovery, or interfaith relationships. Such literature often fails to acknowledge the long process of acquiring, constructing, and maintaining a new religious identity. This research demonstrates that in the context of post-conflict Mindanao, not much is known about how Balik-Islam converts to Islam navigate their emotional and cultural lives on the other side of conversion.

[108] Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, *Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Educational Policy: Schooling and Ethno-Religious Conflict in the Southern Philippines*, Second edition, with De La Salle University Publishing House and Palgrave Macmillan (Firm), Islam in Southeast Asia (De La Salle University Publishing House ; Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

In their recent works, Zuleata[109] and Yoshizawa[110] argue that most studies frame conversion as a singular moment of transformation. Moreover, they fail to provide insights into the future, ongoing, internal, and external negotiations that these converts must engage in subsequently. It is the lack of those negotiated, often messy and overlooked experiences that this thesis hopes to illustrate. This research adds to the existing body of work by foregrounding the lived experiences of Balik-Islam in non-BARMM regions, which are largely overlooked in Islamic studies and Southeast Asian studies. This study has shown how converts trade and transcend liminality, rebuild religious identity, and construct community in often the most unlikely spaces. In doing so, it provides a sophisticated and contextually grounded account of religious transformation as more than belief, but as a means of making meaning and surviving, enduring, and eventually belonging.

[109] Johanna O. Zulueta, "Filipino Women Converts to Islam: Their Identities and Life Choices," in *Muslim Women's Lived Experiences and Intersectional Identities*, ed. Puspa Melati Wan et al. (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-75729-7_17.
[110] Yoshizawa, "Religious Conversion as a 'Winding Pathway.'"

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ROOTS OF BALIK-ISLAM REVERSION

Historical accounts show that Islam's arrival in the Philippines is often seen through a story of introduction and external influence brought by foreign traders and missionaries from Southeast Asia and beyond. A knowledgeable, historically aware perspective reveals that Islam was already integrated into certain parts of indigenous traditions in the archipelago itself, closely linked with local communities' precolonial social and cultural relationships. For many modern Balik-Islam converts, becoming Muslim is not an entirely new, foreign experience with a foreign religion; Balik-Islam represents a more deliberate rediscovery of a long-lost connection to Islam, reflecting a spiritual identity before colonialism changed and distorted it. This perspective reminds us that Islam was originally distinct and shaped by local meanings, practices, and authorities. Revived or reasserted signifies a return to a local spiritual identity that asserts historical independence, existing before colonial influences.

The chapter examines the historical and socio-cultural roots of Balik-Islam reversion, exploring how these origins continue to shape the identities and aspirations of modern Balik-Islam reverts. It starts with the early significance of Islam's introduction and spread, then discusses the effects of Spanish and American colonialism to illustrate how these regimes disrupted and replaced Islamic institutions during colonial times. The chapter also highlights the educational legacies and challenges faced by contemporary reverts. Through this analysis of different historical periods, we uncover the spiritual, social, and political currents that, although influenced by history, continue to strongly shape the lives of modern Muslim reverts in the Philippines.

3.1 Introduction: Islam in the Pre-colonial Philippines

Before colonisation, Islam had emerged as a cultural and political force in the Philippines and formed part of a shared identity within the larger Southeast Asian Islamic world. Although the scholarly community is divided on the exact timing of Islam's arrival, many agree that it began to be disseminated by maritime traders and Islamic missionaries from regional centres during the late 13th century. These early

interactions with Muslim traders and preachers transformed indigenous beliefs and social structures, weaving Islamic ideas into local systems of meaning and community organisation.

The establishment of sultanates, especially in the territories of Mindanao and Sulu, was a significant development in the emergence of Muslim political agency within the archipelago. These sultanates were not independent political units but members of a greater Islamic civilisation that spanned maritime Southeast Asia. In introducing and institutionalising Islamic law, customs, and governance systems, the emerging polities were consolidating new identities and asserting authority in ways defined in the local context.

Importantly, any portrayal of precolonial Filipino Muslim communities, specifically the Moros, has to engage these historical processes, which continue to shape present political, social, and cultural possibilities today. Islam engaged indigenous peoples in a theological and cultural transformation before Spanish colonialism, forging connections between faith, identity, and resistance that still resonate among Filipino Muslim communities and contemporary Balik-Islam converts.

3.1.1 Indigenous Networks and Early Muslim Encounters

Muslim traders from Arab, Persian, and South Asian regions were already involved in the expanding Indo-Malay Sea trading networks as early as the 9th century. While some traders made it to the Philippine archipelago, they intended to trade, not preach. According to Majul, a noted historian of Islam in the Philippines, not all early contacts with Islamic traders resulted in immediate conversions. As in other parts of Southeast Asia, the traders would trade and sometimes marry into local noble families, but they did not actively seek evangelisation. Their religious engagement was pragmatic and transient, lacking a sustained religious or institutional presence.[111]

However, as noted by Peter Gowing in his book *"Muslim Filipinos Heritage and Horizon,"* it implies that these first engagements eventually developed into a more sustained Muslim presence. These included missionaries, scholars, and settlers from

[111] Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*, 1999 ed (Diliman, Quezon City: Univ. of the Philippines Press, 1999).

Sumatra, India, and the Arab world, beginning the gradual process of religious transformation of the region. Over time, these initial exchanges transitioned into deeper religious and political connections that would shape how the Islamization of Philippine societies occurred. The encounters of the 9th century, while not immediately intended as conversions, laid the socio-cultural foundation for the more deliberate wave of Islamization beginning in the 13th century, which was driven not only by commerce but also by sustained missionary efforts, particularly those connected to Sufi networks.[112]

3.1.2 Integration of Islam into Local Polities

In the 13th century, Muslims' contact with the Philippines was evolving from a primarily commercial relationship to a relationship based on cultural and religious relationships, with the introduction of Muslim traders who brought Sufi missionaries who could draw in worshipers and practice inclusivity, called da'wa. The missionaries introduced communities to new religious practices, laws, and social organizations for indigenous communities, such as the Tausug, Maguindanao, Sangil, Maranao, and other ethnic groups. The beliefs of these communities practiced various forms, such as animism, ancestor worship, and social and political beliefs that preceded their awareness of Islam.[113]

Instead of directly displacing the indigenous beliefs in an outright way, Islam, particularly in its Sufi expressions, engaged with local cultures in a very different way, creating syncretic pathways to allow indigenous peoples to eventually embrace Islam. Early practices of Sufi Islam, such as dhikr through rhythmic movement and sound, suited the animistic worship of nature and spirits that was popularly accepted, allowing indigenous communities to use familiar forms to embody an acceptance of Islamic ideas. This integrative way of engaging indigenous peoples allowed Islam to be appropriately included genealogically in indigenous social systems while working to change conceptions of spiritual authority and collective identity.[114]

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[112] P.G. Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon* (New Day Publishers, 1979)
[113] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.
[114] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.

The rise of the sultanates, especially in Mindanao and Sulu, further institutionalised these integrative processes. These sultanates did not develop in isolation but emerged within the larger Islamic civilisation of maritime Southeast Asia. By adopting and institutionalising Islamic law, governance, and customs, the new sultanates assisted in consolidating new Muslim identities and claims to political power.[115] Madrasahs were established, along with the appointment of ulama within the sultanates, which enabled established practices of religious education and communal loyalty to the teachings of Islam.[116]

The actions of Tuan Mashāʾikah *(r.1380 CE*) and Shaykh Karīm al-Makhdūm (*r. late 14th century*), who remain prominent figures in the history of Islam in the region, were key to these developments. Tuan Mashāʾikah, who became a member of Sulu's local nobility through marriage to a local noblewoman, illustrates kinship's role in establishing Islam in elite social settings. Even if Tuan Mashāʾikah had political connections, the work of Shaykh Karīm al-Makhdūm is also significant in the history of Islam in the region. In the 14th century, Shaykh Karīm al-Makhdūm built mosques and centres for Islamic education and built a foundation that for 600 years has formed the basis for Islamic education and practice. Majul extends this argument by asserting that these formations were definitive institutions in creating an Islamic identity in the early history of Islam in the region, contributing to the formation of social communities who lived within Islamic frameworks and established Islamic formations, social institutions, and spaces, despite the assumptions of a multi-religious environment.[117]

Notably, the incorporation of Islam into these early polities countered the idea that Islam was merely a temporary or external phenomenon. Islam became deeply integrated into the local fabric of kinship networks, legal codes, and governmental arrangements and was thoroughly incorporated into indigenous political and social life. This history of incorporation will shape contemporary Balik-Islam converts' understanding of Islam as a faith with deep local roots and not simply as an imposition

[115] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.
[116] Milligan, *Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Educational Policy*.
[117] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.

from the outside.

3.2 Islamization of the Southern Philippines

The Islamization of the Southern Philippines is a transformational and multi-faceted process that changed the cultural, social, and political matrices of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. This later stage differed from the earlier stages of contact through trade alone, because this stage included Muslim scholars and missionaries who developed long-term religion and political institutions. Therefore, the Muslim scholars and missionaries made it possible to create sultanates, introduced Islamic education, and began administering Islamic law.

Additionally, many of these processes provided the foundation for a distinct Muslim identity that existed despite more than a century of colonial struggle and other colonising factors. Eventually, the historical consolidation of Islam in the south provided a historical basis for the contemporary Balik-Islam, as many Balik-Islam Muslims view Islam in the Philippines as being historically consistent with their studies. In other words, better institutional consolidation of Islam in the south has provided historical markers to communities such as the Tausug and Maguindanaos, while simultaneously giving contemporary Balik Islam Muslims a historical reference point.[118]

3.2.1 The Arrival of Makhdumin and the Role of Tuan Mashāʾikah

Sharīf Makhdūm is recognised by Majul (1999) as the first recorded Muslim missionary who came to the Sulu Archipelago around 1380 CE. The significance of his coming lies in the formal and organised attempt to Islamize the people of the southern Philippines. Unlike traders who may have inadvertently superficially introduced Islamic ideas, Makhdūm came to make Islam a living reality in these areas. He is credited for establishing the first mosque in Tubig-Indangan, Simunul, Tawi-Tawi—which still stands today in renovated form—as the Shaykh Karīm al-Makhdūm Mosque, known to be one, if not the oldest, in Southeast Asia.[119]

Tuan Mashāʾikah, also known as *Tuan Maḥāiqah,* was a well-respected Muslim

[118] Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama, "THE BALIK-ISLAM PHENOMENON," 2024.
[119] Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama, "THE BALIK-ISLAM PHENOMENON," 2024.

holy man who is believed to have arrived in Sulu just before or about the same time as Sharīf Makhdūm. While the details of Tuan Mashāʾikah's origins are also somewhat uncertain, local oral sources report that he may have been of Arab or Persian origin. Nevertheless, he is listed in the Tausūg genealogies and folk tales as one of the region's earliest figures to preach Islam. According to Majul, Tuan Mashāʾikah earned the respect of local communities through his great piety and his association with a person who possessed miraculous powers, which attracted the locals to him and formed the basis of their initial acceptance of Islam. It is a fair distinction to say that Tuan Mashāʾikah's influence was based more on his sanctity and the atmosphere of reverence he created, and probably did more to facilitate early conversions than Sharīf Makhdūm's more formal attempts at the dissemination of the Islamic faith.[120]

In addition, Majul's research on Tuan Mashāʾikah establishes him as a cultural intermediary who helped facilitate a process of syncretism between indigenous practices and Islamic teachings. He embraced both spiritual and cultural authority, allowing Islam to be adapted into local customs rather than entirely replace pre-Islamic practices. This gradual integration facilitated the introduction of Islam, allowing it to be perceived as a traditional way of life alongside the local tradition rather than as a foreign imposition. Tuan Mashāʾikah's legacy was to provide spaces for Islam to connect with individuals and communities on a personal and cultural level early in Islam's introduction, which allowed it to take root in the southern Philippines.

Similar to Tuan Mashāʾikah, modern-day Balik-Islam in the Philippines must navigate new (complex) cultural and social terrains to find adjustments to Islamic teachings to fit their already existing Filipino identities. They reflect a common approach to adapting Islam, one that is flexible and sensitive to context, very much in the tradition of Masyāʾikah's adherents centuries ago.[121]

3.2.2 Shaykh Karīm al-Makhdūm and Consolidation of Islam in Sulu

Furthermore, Majul states that by the mid-14th century, the Muslim missionaries were already contributing to the religious conversion of the local

[120] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.
[121] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.

communities within the Sulu Archipelago. Shaykh Karīm al-Makhdūm was perhaps the most significant of these missionaries. He is considered one of the most important Makhdūm of the southern Philippines. Historical accounts credit him with building the first mosques in the Philippines, eg, Shaykh Karīm al-Makhdūm Mosque in Simunul, Tawi-Tawi, which is still known to be the oldest mosque of the Philippines, and spreading the usage of Islamic laws and practices with the local leaders. The difference that he made was the ability to develop religious institutions that sustained the region for more than a century from its initial establishment. All of these contributed to his legacy as a major architect of Islam in the region and the long-term consolidation of Islam.[122]

At this point, Islamic education was primarily informal and community-driven, typically occurring in mosques and communal spaces. Local scholars taught children recitation, memorization of key passages, learning of the Arabic alphabet, and basic fiqh principles, often called Pandita or guru. In this context, most instruction was oral, and memorization played a significant role in the instructional model. While the Qur'an represented the circumference of their spiritual education, it also represented the ethical and social education of the community. As Majul insists, the early madrasahs laid a basic foundation for the formation of a distinct Muslim identity, and they pointed early converts, as the Muslim community did in general, to the ability to conduct themselves according to Muslim values despite being in an inter-religious setting.[123]

For many modern-day Balik-Islam revert, the lasting legacy of Sheikh Karim ul-Makhdum gives historical assurance that Islam has deep regional roots in the Philippines, thus challenging the idea of Islam as a foreign imposition and instead relocating it in the canon of Filipino identity, to which they could subsequently make an important and meaningful reconnection.

3.2.3 The Rise of the Sulu and Maguindanao Sultanates

According to the scholarly works of Majul, the spread of Islam in Mindanao was a gradual yet transformative process, beginning between the end of the 14th

[122] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.
[123] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.

century and the beginning of the 15th century (*1481*). Maritime traders connected the southern Philippines to the larger Malay-Islamic world. Muslim traders from Malacca, Johore, and Brunei visited the trading ports of southern Mindanao and northern Mindanao on several occasions, establishing local and regional commercial ties at key coastal trading ports (*Pulangi delta*), which facilitated the continual flow of proximate transactions and cultural and religious exchanges.[124]

In many cases, Muslim traders often accompanied Sufi scholars and ulama, allowing them to assimilate into the local culture and even form marriages with local women as part of the reconciliation process. Alternatively, they even engaged in diplomacy, where they solidified their bond with the local tribes and began to infuse local economies with Islamic identities as local leaders began to establish their connections to the Islamic world. Amid this increase, the establishment of tuning to economic and cultural life in Islam began to resonate with Indigenous societies as a potentially good thing. By the end of the 15th century, coastal areas in Mindanao had become involved in a larger Islamic network, which manifested as regional and transregional Islamic networks that would eventually form Islamic polities and future institutions on the mainland.[125]

Sharīf Muḥammad Kabungsuwān played a crucial role in the Islamization of Mindanao when he came to the Cotabato area in the late 15th or early 16th century and established the Maguindanao Sultanate. According to Majul, Kabungsuwān was a sharif from Johore, and he secured a monopoly on its religious authority by marrying a local princess, thereby merging his prophetic mission with local kinship. Kabungsuwān engage in da'wah, along with the assistance of other sharifs and makhdums, fused initiatives to spread Islam and created a centralized system of governance based on the Malay sultanates. Islamic institutions like khuṭbah (*Friday sermon*) and zakat (*obligatory charity*) were instituted, thus making Islam a public religious community. However, although Islamic political norms were introduced to governance, the sultanate maintained local datus' autonomy, making Islam more acceptable for different ethnic groups within Mindanao. By creating religious legitimacy and melding Islam with local political and social systems, Islam was firmly and indisputably settled in

[124] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.
[125] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.

Mindanao.[126]

By the sixteenth century, when Spanish colonizers arrived, Islam was already well-established, resulting in a resilient Islamic consciousness propagated in Mindanao's coastal areas. The awareness of a shared identity, regardless of diversity, enabled people to unify and collectively defend against all external threats. Majul points out that the shared rituals, legal norms, and political organizations that the Islamic consciousness produced were indispensable, as these factors enhanced a campaign of sustained anti-colonial resilience against threats to Muslim autonomy from Spanish Christianization and colonization. It is challenging to evaluate this moment of Islamic consciousness without considering tarsilas and the limitations of European biases; nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to confirm that the Islamization of Mindanao was historically significant. Islam substantially reconfigured the regional political structure, and the Islamic consciousness has produced a durable Islamic identity that has historical relevance for present-day Muslim communities.[127]

In contrast to events in Mindanao, it is evident in the Sulu Archipelago that Islam had established a strong presence in the Philippines long before the arrival of the Spanish. In a historical account, The History of Sulu written by Saleeby, there are clear indicators that Islam was fully institutionalized as an organized faith by the mid-fifteenth century supported by the leadership of Sharif Abu Bakr as he introduced Islamic law into Sulu, and created the first Islamic centralized political unit in Sulu (*drawing inspiration from Islamic centers of Malacca and Palembang*). Abu Bakr represented a political leader as well as a religious leader; he had given Sulu an Islamic worldview of the legal, cultural, and religious spheres.[128]

In contrast to Sulu's early and expansive maritime Islamization, Mindanao experienced later and more fragmented forms of religious diffusion driven mainly by the internal consolidation of native datus. Sulu enjoyed a strategic maritime location and established trade connections to sustain its wide external relationships with the

[126] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.
[127] Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.
[128] Najeeb Saleeby, *The History Of Sulu* (Alpha Edition, 2020).

Islamic world *(including China, Borneo, and the Malay Peninsula*). Jolo was cosmopolitan, with commercial interconnections to other Islamic societies, by the time of the Spanish arrival; this maritime-linked geography continued to promote thoroughgoing Islamic institutions and diplomacy. Mindanao's geographical logic facilitated the Islamization of its interior, particularly from landlocked regions and through clan-based governance rather than centralised institutions. This divergence in historical trajectories continues to manifest today: most Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao have encountered Islam primarily through informal da'wah, usually through personal relationships or with limited access to local religious institutions and social networks, often relying on online platforms. The historical elements of Sulu still retain many aspects of historical infrastructure that fulfil an integrated Islamic governing presence.[129]

Another significant distinction between the areas was their authority in religious matters. In Sulu, the Sultan had both political and spiritual authority as a hereditary leader, and he legitimized his rule through lineage, Islamic law, and a centralized religious bureaucracy involving appointed ulama and qadis, which stabilized the transfer of religious knowledge through generations. The sultanates of Mindanao carried political significance, but there was no centralised religious structure; instead, Islamic authority was more localised, overlapping with kinship and varying regionally. As documented by Saleeby, this disparity has persistent ramifications in the present, as many of the Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao lack avenues for structured teaching or stable mentorship, while Sulu's histories offer a mappable legacy of religious community and mentorship.[130]

The decline of Islamic authority in both regions, but especially in Sulu, which was affected by Spanish and then U.S. colonization, contributed to the wider fragmentation of Islamic identity across the archipelago. Saleeby claims that the colonization of the Sulu sultanate was systematic and dismantled the entire political and religious apparatus, essentially severing nearly a thousand years of religious

[129] Saleeby, *The History Of Sulu*.
[130] Saleeby, *The History Of Sulu*.

leadership lineage. As a faith within a decentralised religious framework, the fragmentation of governance and the consequence had social legitimacy, or not, but limited institutional status. So, disconnected history and the absence of structures were a two-fold process in the demise of institutions, leaving many of the modern Balik-Islamists to negotiate their religiosity in marginalization and absence of institutions[131]. Yet, for converts today, the historical memory of Sulu and Mindanao's Islamic sultanates serves as both grounding and aspiration, affirming Islam's deep indigenous roots and offering spiritual legitimacy to those reclaiming a faith long intertwined with Philippine history.

3.3 Colonial Interruptions and Moro Resistance

The colonial invasion of the Islamic polities of the southern Philippines by both Spain and the United States had profound effects that, some would argue, would lead to a lasting new form of resistance among the Moro.[132] Both colonial forces characterized the Moros as a dissimilar "other," often stereotyping them as inherently violent and incapable of self-rule. The violence of the Spanish colonial period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and the later violence enacted by American colonial forces, including the Bud Dajo massacre of 1906 [133], exemplify the violence of colonialism and how conscious repression of the Moros was used to eliminate autonomy and fold Muslim territories into colonial governance. The force used by Spain and the United States against the Moros was not merely a military engagement but a politics of identity and power. These crusades aimed to erase Islam as a local authority and implant Christian security systems, laws, and land policies that undermined Moro identity and sovereignty.

The historical grievances caused by land displacement and cultural erasure inspired a persistent challenge to experience in the pursuit of self-determination,

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[131] Saleeby, *The History Of Sulu*.
[132] Eberhard Crailsheim, "Wandel und Ambivalenz der Darstellung der „Moros" auf den kolonialspanischen Philippinen (16.–17. Jahrhundert)," *Saeculum* 64, no. 1 (2014): 25–40, https://doi.org/10.7788/saeculum-2014-0105.
[133] Omar Dphrepaulezz, "Genesis or Genocide? Leonard Wood, Theodore Roosevelt and the White Man's Empire in the Southern Philippines," *Theory in Action* 9, no. 4 (2016): 65–89, https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.16025.

helping to build a Moro individual and collective consciousness of resistance across generations [134]. Such a protracted conflict eventually yielded several significant political milestones, including the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in 2019, a sign of the slow acknowledgment of Moro autonomy.[135]

Despite these accomplishments, however, the colonial legacy persists and conflicts with the intentions of self-governance today, with current negotiations often concerning either ancestral domain rights or addressing historical injustices[136]. The subsequent subsections assess how the Spanish conquest, stripping of Muslim identity through conversion campaigns, and American colonies were leveraged to redefine and consume Islamic identity and resistance in the Philippines and how both of these processes continue to influence the living experiences of modern Balik-Islam converts and the Muslim Filipino community at large.

3.3.1 Spanish Conquest and the Resilience of Islamic Institutions

The Spanish colonization of the Philippines, which began with Miguel Lopez de Legazpi's arrival in 1565, involved a mix of political domination, economic exploitation, and religious conversion. Spain successfully took control of most of Luzon and the Visayas but faced strong resistance from the Muslim states in the south, especially Sulu and Mindanao. Before contact with Spain, these regions had developed centralized Islamic governments, established their own religious institutions such as madrasahs, and built networks of ulama to oversee religious education, traditions, jurisprudence, and manage maritime trade routes connecting them with other parts of the Islamic world.[137]

According to Gowing, he argues that Moros's Islamic identity and socio-

[134] Astrid S. Tuminez, "This Land Is Our Land: Moro Ancestral Domain and Its Implications for Peace and Development in the Southern Philippines," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2007): 77–91, https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2007.0044.
[135] Mohor Chakraborty, "Narrating the 'Moro' Saga in Mindanao," in *Marginalisation and Human Rights in Southeast Asia*, 1st ed., by Al Khanif and Khoo Ying Hooi (Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003331858-9.
[136] Tuminez, "This Land Is Our Land."
[137] Nolasco, "Islam and Philippine Society: The Writings of Cesar Adib Majul."

political cohesion created a significant obstacle for the colonial authorities to gain control over the Moros and Islam. The Spanish might have captured Jolo in 1876, but their authority over the Muslim territories was fragile and mostly symbolic. Their protracted resistance not only highlighted the presence and limits of Spanish power but also affirmed the strength of Islamic institutions in the southern Philippines[138]. Today, Balik-Islam converts use this history of resistance as a historical frame of reference, where the fact that Islam was not just simply introduced but defended, with dignity, agency, and faith.

Alongside military invasion, the Spanish also initiated a vigorous program of religious conversion, attempting to incorporate Muslims and indigenous people into the Catholic colonial order. Missionary orders, such as the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Augustinians, were the principal agents involved in these activities in order to convert Muslim rulers with the ulterior motive of exerting political influence. Legitimate conversion is also precarious in the context of religious pluralism, and many examples of conversion in the lives of Muslim leaders, like the baptism of Sulṭān ʿAẓīm al-Dīn of Sulu in 1751, for instance, were largely politically motivated or expedient. As indicated in Gowing's scholarly work, although Sulṭān ʿAẓīm al-Dīn accepted Christianity as an exile, his return to Islam as soon as he returned home in Sulu implies that at best these types of conversions can be understood as instrumental activity. When persuasion was not enough to convert the populations to Catholicism, Spanish military actions became more coercive, and involved burning entire villages, disrupting trade routes, and enslaving Muslims, with patterns of activity designed to dismantle Islamic institutions and forcibly assimilate them into the Catholic order[139].

Saleeby states that while there were singleton conversions, the wider Muslim population of the south maintained their religious institutions and resisted Catholic assimilation. Spanish attempts to baptize datus and sultans had failed to wear down the local legitimacy of Islam from the start[140]. As such, Islam remained with its adherents

[138] Peter G. Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon*, 4. imp (New Day Publ, 1989).
[139] Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos*.
[140] Saleeby, *The History Of Sulu*.

both as a spiritual identity and as a mode of anti-colonial resistance that created what Gowing called a "*religious frontier*," in direct opposition to the Christianized center of the Spanish colony. The historical boundary of Catholic hegemony with the autonomy of Islam creates a historical continuity for today's Balik-Islam. Assimilating to Islam became part of a larger legacy of resisting colonial powers, while also defending manifest independence based on long historical connections, framed by Islamic religious tenets.

Islam was seen by the Spanish colonial government as a serious barrier to their plan of political and ideological dominion, due to their acquired political and religious prerogatives in a Muslim context. The Muslim sultanates in Sulu and Mindanao had well-organized political systems, administered Islamic law, and related economically to nearby Islamic polities, which helped maintain their autonomy. The Spanish responded to Islamic authority and power by conducting military operations to wipe out the Islamic influence, with tactics that included burning settlements to the ground, disrupting trade, and enslaving Muslim people. In her writings, Gowing states that these attacks constituted a cultural assault on Islam, designed to erode the institutional basis of Islam. While the Spanish military succeeded in occupying territory like Jolo in 1876, Islamic authority and identity persisted, as many communities refused to yield either spiritually or politically, and they passed along a legacy of resistance to future generations.[141]

In addition to military conquest, the colonial administration implemented strategies that aimed to normalize a shift from Islam to Catholicism. Islamic legal systems (*sharīʿa)* were replaced by Spanish colonial civil codes, and Muslim leaders were commonly converted forcibly or substituted with colonial allies. Qur'anic Schools and instruction were explicitly outlawed through the disallowance of public prayers. Catholic institutions such as parochial schools and seminaries became the referent of public education; however, Gowing notes that colonial education reforms eroded the transfer of Islamic knowledge by asserting Christian doctrine as a normative structure

[141] Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos*.

in people's daily lives, within the governance of colonized communities.

Observably, by this means, Islam could be increasingly practiced in clandestine manners or rural enclaves, transformed from a system of public order to a furtive communicative private faith, mired by oversight and suspicion. Islam occurred as a mode of anti-colonial resistance, a "*religious frontier*". The historical silence on Islam and its institutions has created difficulties today for Balik-Islam generally, particularly in struggling to access religious education in non-Muslim northwest regions. This legacy of disallowed forms of defiance situates identity for Balik-Islam converts,

Besides institutional restraints, the Spanish designated a cultural and racial category on Filipino Muslims, thus recognizing them as "*Moros*," a Spanish label derived from the Moors of North Africa used in an attempt to dehumanize and stigmatize Muslim Filipinos. Samuel K. Tan in his book "*The Muslim South and Beyond"*, contends that the imposition of "Moro" as a category to divide and demonize was gradually appropriated by Muslims in the Philippines as one of identity, pride, and resistance.[142]

Tan highlights that the reconceptualization of "Moro" - from a colonial term of shame to a badge of resistance - is an indication of the historical consciousness of Muslim Filipinos. While the Spanish "Moro" was always meant to put a label on diverse Filipino Muslim ethnic groups like the Tausug and Maguindanao, it also went on to establish a larger Islamic consciousness by putting the groups together in collective resistance against Spanish, and later American, colonialism, for example, in the Moro Wars. Because it was a racialized term, it still adversely produced stereotypes of Muslims, which have ultimately persisted in the postcolonial period. It has inscribed Muslims into a category that is separate from, less than, and evil in contrast to the Christianized Filipino majority. By indicating Islam to be foreign and opposing, Spanish colonizers created a process of 'othering' that provided justification found in exclusion and ill-will, viably protecting Spain's colonial priorities for centuries regarding Filipino Muslims.[143]

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[142] Samuel K. Tan, *The Muslim South and Beyond* (University of the Philippines Press, 2010).
[143] Tan, *The Muslim South and Beyond*.

With the dominance of Christianity, Islam was gradually marginalized, socially and culturally. Muslim communities, as groups, were commonly discriminated against in terms of access to social services, civil rights, and political representation. The execution of Islamic practices and laws was limited, and almost exclusively embodied with an identity of resistance. Muslim identity was preserved through the customs of isolation as communities largely unknown to the rest of civil society were excluded from national institutions and public space.

3.3.2 American Colonial Policies and Negotiated Islamic Identities

The Treaty of Paris of 1898 marked the Philippines' transition from Spanish to American colonial control, bringing substantial changes and challenges to the country, especially its various Muslim communities. The American colonial experience attempted to fully integrate the predominantly Muslim regions into the system of the Philippine state. This process involved balancing local governance and religious practices with a new form of government centralized at the will of the American colonial government. Various policies and programs carried out by the American officials, such as disarmament campaigns and restructuring of the administration and local governance, heightened tensions and mistrust in the predominantly Muslim regions of the Philippines, as more serious attempts to dismantle the Islamic autonomy enjoyed for centuries were being initiated in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago.[144]

Michael C. Hawkins in his book, *Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines' Muslim South*, considers the way U.S. colonial authorities in general, and particularly in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, viewed Muslims as pre-modern subjects in need of being secularly educated, disciplined, and incorporated. American authorities, through this historicization process, attempted to "civilize" the Moros through schooling, restructuring their administration, and enhancing the militarization of their control. However, Muslim Filipinos, as Hawkins shows, consistently resisted or negotiated colonial authority that sought to convert them to Western-style administrative and social practices, while

[144] Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia*.

retaining an Islamic identity, and reconfiguring their cultural spaces characteristically. This hybrid colonial Moro identity that emerged functioned through resistance and accommodation, in different ways, aligns with contemporary struggles of Balik-Islam in reclaiming faith through enduring colonial structures.[145]

American colonial policies utilized an intricate set of governmental, cultural, and socio-political divisions. The United States marketed its colonialism as a project of *"benevolent assimilation,"* but these projects often complicated existing religious and cultural divisions in the Philippines, particularly between Christian Filipinos and Muslim or Indigenous populations[146]. The colonial state took administrative institutions from the British Empire and modified them to fit the Philippine context. The U.S. colonial administrators produced a system of governance that both professed to uphold the doctrine of American exceptionalism while employing hierarchical and paternalistic measures.[147] In advancing the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples into a Westernized culture, colonial policies intensified the division between Christian Filipinos and the so-called "*non-Christian tribes*," which merged Muslims into a marginalized category[148]

According to Kirsch[149] and Wertz,[150] they argue that the infrastructure development, including new roads, ports, and urban development projects, fostered both economic integration and colonial domination, with new rules in trades or ordinances to reach public order being justified by a paternalistic "civilising mission". While American administrators suggested that their empire was more democratic than

[145] Michael Hawkins, *Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines' Muslim South* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2012).
[146] Dina Marie B. Delias, "Dividing Nations: Early American Colonial Policies and Continuing Legacies in the Case of the Cordillera, Philippines," *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science* 10 (November 2005): 34–50, https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.10.3.
[147] Thomas R. Metcalf, "From One Empire to Another: The Influence of the British Raj on American Colonialism in the Philippines," *Ab Imperio* 2012, no. 3 (2012): 25–41, https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2012.0106.
[148] Delias, "Dividing Nations."
[149] Scott Kirsch, *American Colonial Spaces in the Philippines: Insular Empire*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429344350.
[150] Daniel J. P. Wertz, "Idealism, Imperialism, and Internationalism: Opium Politics in the Colonial Philippines, 1898–1925," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2013): 467–99, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X12000388.

other comparable empires in Europe, their narratives of benevolence do not match the coercive means used to implement these structures on the ground.

Moreover, one of American colonialism's polices is the effort to transform Moro identity through education. Hawkins points out that U.S. authorities portrayed Muslims as “pre-modern” subjects who required secular schooling to inculcate "*individuality*" and "*meritocracy*". Public schools were intended to replace madrasahs as the vehicle of religious knowledge. Even in the context of colonial schooling, many Moro families nevertheless preferred patterns of support for Islamic education, keeping madrasahs as their center of religious knowledge and maintaining Islamic education. Colonial schools allowed a limited number of elite Moros time to gain skills in terms of administration. Colonial schools provided Moros with a supplementary means to participate in the colonial state while maintaining elements of their cultural and spiritual autonomy. He further argues that these experiences reveal a "negotiated modernity", in which Moro communities did not fully meet the demands of assimilation, and instead worked within colonial systems for their naked survival.[151]

In addition to prevailing educational attempts, American bureaucratic measures like the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes and the Legislative Council were mechanisms of classification and control of Muslim populations through the use of ethnological studies and legal encumbrances. Anti-slavery campaigns upset existing power structures; however, Moro leaders were slow to contest these public acts of resistance, as they were privately and quietly sustaining sharīʿa and traditional practices. To the extent that there was public participation in colonial programs like the Moro Exchange or the legislative council, this was often simply performative acts of loyalty, which allowed some of the Moros to engage in shaping policy, while at least partially serving their independence. As Hawkins notes, drawing from Ann Laura Stoler’s study of colonial governance, disagreement or resistance to colonial rule was often not overt, but rather it was responsive that allowed Moros to navigate the contradictions of

[151] Hawkins, *Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines’ Muslim South*.

colonial rule and defend their religious and cultural identity.[152]

These actions of resistance and accommodation formed a hybrid colonial Moro identity that was neither fully assimilated nor completely insulated and that evokes the challenges faced by contemporary Balik-Islam reverts. As Wadi notes, stereotypes forged during the American colonial period are lodged in the Philippine national imagination, marking Muslims as outsiders in the context of nationhood and the challenges faced by converts today. For many Balik-Islam, returning to Islam is as much a personal return to faith as it is a collective act of reclamation, contending that the Islamic faith is a significant part of the Filipino identity forged by centuries of colonial-type governance.[153]

3.4 Emergence of the Balik-Islam Phenomenon in the Post-1970s

The revival of Islam in the Philippines in the post-1970s period marked a significant turning point in the country's religious culture. While Islam preceded Christianity in the archipelago (*especially among Moro groups in Mindanao and surrounding islands*), the specific movement known as Balik-Islam did not begin to take root until after the 1970s. As Morier-Genoud observes, this rise coincided with the gradual improvement of state-imposed restrictions on Islamic expression, allowing Muslims to reassert their identity and expand religious outreach beyond the established contours of traditional Moro populations [154]

The rise of Balik-Islam comes from multiple social, political, and spiritual factors. The 1970s experienced greater Christian-Muslim tensions, especially in Mindanao, and the violence and discord resulted in distrust, hostility, and fragmentation. In this context of bitterness, several Filipinos, usually from Christian backgrounds, and seeking a new spiritual framework, leading them to explore and eventually embrace Islam. As Lacar notes, this conversion is not often direct; it usually

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[152] Hawkins, *Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines' Muslim South*.
[153] J.M. Wadi, *Islamic Nationalism and Philippine Politics*, Occasional Paper (Institute of Islamic Studies, 2005),
[154] Eric Morier-Genoud, "The 'Rise' of Islam after Independence, 1974–94," in *Towards Jihad?*, 1st ed., by Eric Morier-Genoud (Oxford University Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197769348.003.0002.

takes many years, such as through personal relationships, marriages, or previous engagement with Tablīgh. The experience is profoundly deliberative, born out of a kind of inner spiritual crisis, shaped by the national crisis and moral ambiguity.[155]

Harunani and Ushama argue that the emergence of Balik-Islam was integrally connected to the wider socio-economic change. For example, in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) were confronted with more orthodox following of Islam, such as Salafis and Wahhabis, and adopted these religious orientations that fundamentally altered their perception. These global experiences established not only individual commitment but also dynamic new theological and cultural contexts for local Filipino Islamic practices upon their return. For many converts, Islam became a navigation pathway towards dignity, discipline, and cultural restoration against the background of Catholicism as the norm of religious identity.[156]

In this view, Balik-Islam is a emergent phase of Islam in the post-1970s context that is not only historically remarkable in the religious history of the Philippines, it also signals individual resilience in reclaiming spiritual agency as well as a re-Islamization of Filipino society within the continuing backdrop of political instability, global religious movements, and perpetual experiences of identity and meaning making.

3.4.1 Development of Convert-Focused Da'wah Organizations

The growing number of Balik-Islam converts post-1970s has underscored the pressing need for organized support mechanisms that are tailored to their unique social and spiritual realities. While many converts found their way into Islam through unstructured means, such as solicitation through friendship or marriage, informal shows of hospitality while abroad, most converts do not have access to ongoing guidance after they publicly affirm their faith with the shahāda. Thus, many of these immigrants face particular struggles with religious learning, identity construction, and social belonging.

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[155] Lacar, "Balik -Islam."

[156] Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama, "The Balik-Islam Phenomenon: Filipino Muslim Reverts- Between the Gulf Countries and the Philippines," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)* 29, no. 1 (2024): 25–46, https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.v29i1.1826.

Kusuma Wardana et al studied Sarawak, Malaysia, and identified particular organizations, like HIKMAH and New Muslim Villages (PBI), that were offering effective post-conversion support. Furthermore, these organizations contextualized Islamic teaching, provided religious education that was sensitive to cultural realities, and facilitated the process of becoming a part of the larger Muslim community. While the Philippine context differs, similar patterns have emerged, reflecting a regional response to the challenges faced by converts in Southeast Asia.[157]

In the Philippines, the needs of new Muslim converts were first addressed in urban centers, such as Metro Manila. Pioneer groups, such as the Islamic Da'wah Council of the Philippines (IDCP) and the Islamic Studies, Call, and Guidance of the Philippines (ISCAG), developed well-structured programs in the 1980s and 1990s. Found by Filipino Muslim converts in Riyadh in 1991, ISCAG began as a mechanism of information for interested non-Muslims but quickly grew into a regular halaqah, Qur'an reading, and especially for converts, educational seminars focusing on Islam. These programs were significant for new converts, especially those transitioning from Christianity, as they were designed to provide Islamic knowledge in a more approachable and contextualized manner. IDCP also facilitated local mosques and weekend Islamic education while becoming a key pillar in the urban da'wah environment.[158]

In contrast, convert-based da'wah in Mindanao is more extensive and grassroots. Islam is entrenched in the region by a family's inherited Moro identity, but Balik-Islam converts, particularly non-Moro Christians, often contend with added barriers to inclusion, based on ethnicity or language. Initiatives such as those at the Marawi Islamic Center have attempted to mitigate some of these barriers by providing livelihood support, as opposed to focusing solely on religious education, focusing in part on women converts. These initiatives are usually led by ex-OFWs, interfaith

[157] Bayu Mitra A. Kusuma, "Transnational Islam, Regional Terrorism, and Military Power: The Rise of the Muslim Special Unit in the Philippine's Armed Forces," *Journal of Southeast Asian Human Rights* 2, no. 2 (2018): 471, https://doi.org/10.19184/jseahr.v2i2.8363.
[158] Institute for Autonomy and Governance; University of the Philippines Institute of Islamic Studies, *Balik Islam Research*.

families, or independent imams wanting to create a safe, welcoming space, but research by Lacar and others, indicate that little engagement by existing main stream Moro organizations, alongside historical Moro vs. non-Moro tensions, continue to limit the capacity of these initiatives to scale, and their cohesion.[159]

Despite their importance, convert-focused da'wah organizations often face significant difficulties. Many of these organizations work with limited budgets, depend on volunteer labor, and do not have formalized relationships with state or religious organizations. In addition, some of the theological differences, most notably between Salafi-friendly organizations versus those associated with mainline Sunni agreements, can disorient and even overwhelm new converts trying to figure out the basics of Islam itself.

Nonetheless, these organizations have begun and continued to establish a key paradigm shift: seeing that conversion is not a moment-in-time, but an ongoing process that requires spiritual care, community support, and lifelong education. These initiatives and organizations have started to build institutional pathways for Balik-Islam converts to develop their theology, while developing identities based both in Islam and in negotiation with an increasingly complicated Filipino social life.

3.4.2 Motivations for Conversion among Balik-Islam Converts

The reasons for converting to Islam among Balik-Islam individuals in the southern Philippines vary greatly based on a wide array of influences, and to better understand how individuals in this context interpret their conversions, we must note that its motivation involves a blend of logical inquiry, an emotional yearning, a social connection, and a cultural sense of familiarity. Rather than being seen as a straightforward break from Christianity, converts more often than not view the course of their religious journey as a continuing search for spiritual truth, a "*dalan*" (pathway) to *kaluwasan* (salvation). Yoshizawa further explains that this pathway consists of theological reflection and discussion, focusing on *tawḥīd* as a means of rejecting the Trinity, as well as social interaction with Muslim friends, spouses, or employers.[160]

[159] Lacar, "Balik -Islam."
[160] Yoshizawa, "Religious Conversion as a 'Winding Pathway.'"

In many cases, conversion is not a static event but rather a gradual awakening that occurs through conversation, observing the practices of Muslims (*especially during the month of Ramadan*), or attending a gathering. Da'wah leaders often emphasize their use of biblical allusions and familiar stories of morality to pitch Islam as potentially the fulfillment of, rather than a departure from, former Christian teachings. This approach of smooth continuities, rather than dramatic ruptures, allows converts to transition to Islam as the culmination of a spiritual pilgrimage they had already embarked upon.[161]

Spiritual and cultural identity also play an important part in motivating conversion. Harunani and Ushama state that many Balik-Islam converts prefer to find a deeper, more stable relationship with the divine, seeing Islam as providing a stronger framework for personal discipline and morality while practicing worship daily.[162] For some, especially in Mindanao, conversion is a way to reconnect to long-silenced Islamic roots, and in this sense, a kind of cultural reclamation in a country where public life has had a dominant identity linked to Catholic institutions. The act of conversion, suggested as embracing Islam, is in many ways a form of identity assertion, reclamation of ancestral heritage, or settler-colonial misalignment to a historic narrative in which Islam is not foreign but fundamental[163]

The geographic sites such as Marawi City, Cotabato City, and Zamboanga City demonstrate the relevance of this conversation, as Islamic history is at times the only story of local memory and fluid, inter-generational meaning. Thus, conversion becomes not only theological, but also historical, as participants anchor their transformation in the legacy of precolonial and Moro resistance to the Spanish and American campaigns of Christianization.

Many Balik-Islam converts are former Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who encountered Islam whilst working in the Gulf states. These OFWs were typically exposed to more orthodox Islamic forms (*i.e., Salafism, Wahhabism*) which

[161] Yoshizawa, "Religious Conversion as a 'Winding Pathway.'"
[162] Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama, The Balik-Islam Phenomenon: Filipino Muslim Reverts- Between the Gulf Countries and the Philippines," 2024.
[163] Nadado and Vyhmeister, "Why Christians Converts to Islam: A Filipino Perspective."

emphasized scriptural purity and religious discipline. When they returned to the Philippines, many OFWs attempted to maintain their spiritual awakening by becoming involved with a local mosque or da'wah group and felt a sense of belonging and stability in Islam, as opposed to feelings of alienation and marginalization[164].

Henceforth, Rambo's view of religious conversion as a process influenced by interaction, context, and commitment is especially useful to analyze in light of the Balik-Islam experience. When we consider the ongoing socio-political climate filled with Muslim-Christian tensions, converting to Islam can also be seen as an act of resistance and a subtle yet powerful form of cultural and religious agency. Balik-Islam is referenced not just as a spiritual choice but mainly as a socio-cultural shift happening at the intersection of faith, community, memory, and power.[165]

3.5 Contemporary Struggles of Balik-Islam Converts

The challenges faced by Balik-Islam converts in the Philippines are complex and intertwined with layered histories, social constructions, and political contexts that shape their lived experience after conversion. Although it could be considered in a 'spiritual' context, converting to Islam in a predominantly Catholic country is never merely an individual act. Instead, it involves discussions of identity reconstruction, religious practice, social integration, and application of systemic bias. On a day-to-day basis, many converts struggle with applying Islamic morals and ritual practices, including regular prayer, dietary laws, and fasting. This is especially true in non-BARMM regions in Mindanao and rural areas, where the absence of Islamic educational institutions and mosque communities is often fragmented or lacking convert-specific resources.[166]

Gendered forms of discrimination intensify these difficulties, and especially for female converts who wear the ḥijāb, there is increasing pressure to remove their veils at work, to be denied a job, or to be dispersed from public spaces. These instances are reflective of a larger Islamophobic atmosphere reinforced by narratives from the media

[164] Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama, "The Balik-Islam Phenomenon," 2024.
[165] Lewis Ray Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Yale University, 1993).
[166] Morados and Malayang, *Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered*.

that portray Muslims as cultural outsiders or potential threats to national security[167] .

The socio-political narrative, especially after events like the Marawi Siege (2017) or Maguindanao Massacre (2009), has further marginalized Muslims in general and Balik-Islam in particular. As Susilo et al. reveal, converts in Metro Manila have tensions with their religious identity, and findings show that these converts reported social stigma, discrimination, and economic hardship following their conversion. These are not independent incidents but rather indicative of a broader climate of suspicion and exclusion.[168]

Beyond the personal and interpersonal realm, Balik-Islam converts experience social dislocation. They are estranged from their old Christian communities and often are distrusted by born-Muslims, leaving them in a liminal position where they are not yet or fully accepted as either Islamic or Christian. Converts often talk about this state of being as one of "in-betweenness," a condition of cultural and religious exile, constantly in need of negotiation for acceptance and belonging, usually to be denied. This sense of connectedness can hinder social equity, such as participating in collective ritual events, deepen emotional distress, and make a return to full baseline social inclusion in society with the ummah. As Morados and Malayang argue, Balik-Islam individuals can be easily sidelined in many job opportunities simply because, in some way, they are or have become Muslim, demonstrating that not only do we see the interplay of religious transformation with the structural marginalization of religion, but we also see religious transformation into economic marginalization in society and employment.[169]

These experiences are further complicated by suspicion from the state and the security profiling process. Acknowledging the state of extremist groups in the southern Philippines, and the heightened interest and sensationalism placed on "homegrown radicals," Balik-Islam males in particular have been monitored and profiled at a

[167] Mohamed Quadir Harunani and Thameem Ushama, "The Balik-Islam Phenomenon," 2024.
[168] Daniel Susilo et al., "Muslim Minority in Manila: Ethnographical Studies of Minority Expression on the Archipelago," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 61, no. 2 (2023): 419–40, https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2023.612.419-440.
[169] Morados and Malayang, *Balik-Islam in Some Selected Areas in Luzon and the National Capital Region: Motivations of Conversion and Challenges Encountered*.

heightened level. Bartel and Nayve for example, document that links, however few there are, spillover effects from the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM) are stigmatizing the Balik-Islam community largely. This is exacerbated by the public securitization of Islam in state discourses, so that converts to Islam are not considered spiritual renewers but rather are seen as potential threats to the local and national community.[170]

Henceforth, Abubakar suggests the Philippine government use a securitized framework to place Islam in this cautionary rhetoric, meaning converts are at greater risk of suspicion from both the public and institutional space. The risks of suspicion and profiling are particularly exacerbated in the non-Muslim majority dominant communities of Metro Manila, Visayas, and parts of Luzon, where the public Muslim population is smaller and more obvious.[171]

3.6 Conclusion

To conclude, Chapter 3 has examined the rich historical and sociopolitical backdrops of Islam in the Philippines – from its initial proliferation through trade and Sufi networks to its institutionalization through the Sulu and Maguindanao Sultanates. Rather than a foreign takeover, Islam had already been integrated into local governance, family relationships, education, and social identity and culture in the southern Philippines well ahead of the European colonial scholarship. In turn, the Spanish and American colonial regimes-initiated decades-long projects to dismantle these Islamic foundations through the imposition of Christian domination, racialized terms (*e.g., "Moro"),* and colonial-sponsored assimilation and conversion practices. These colonial projects not only weakened Islamic institutions but also embedded structural inequalities and enduring narratives of Muslim "difference" into the Philippine national consciousness.

However, these interruptions did not completely abolish Islam's authority, nor

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[170] Bartel, *The Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM) and the Rise of Radical Islamic Converts in the Philippines: A Major Security Concern*.
[171] Ayesah Uy Abubakar, *Peacebuilding and Sustainable Human Development: The Pursuit of the Bangsamoro Right to Self-Determination*, The Anthropocene: Politik--Economics--Society--Science Ser, v. 16 (Springer, 2019).

did they diminish Islam's cultural resonance. Rather, they produced forms of resistance, whether military, legal, cultural, or spiritual, which continue to shape Muslim Filipino identity today. The Balik-Islam phenomenon must be understood within this larger framework of continuity and rupture, and revival. Converts today do not merely take on a new religion; they enter into a complicated historical terrain shaped by colonial trauma, social suspicion, and complex feelings about belonging to a community. Their embrace of Islam challenges dominant historical narratives that portray Islam as marginal and instead reclaims it as an indigenous, precolonial legacy.

For that reason, the trajectories of Balik-Islam converts are not only private expressions of faith. However, they are social and political realities that involve converts negotiating multiple stigmas from the Christian communities they left behind, from specific born-Muslim segments of the Muslim population who normalize their authenticity over the authenticity of the converts, and from the state, which often takes a prejudicial and hostile view of Islamic revivalism. Their faith journey occurs within the intersection of belief, identity, stigma, and authority. Challenges such as those outlined above are significant not only for researchers but also as an opportunity to inform policies and programs that promote inclusive support and ultimately substantively support converts as they begin to rebuild their lives in Islam.

These overlapping challenges such as, spiritual, familial, community, and set the stage for the empirical narratives explored in Chapter 4. The preceding sections articulated a theoretical context, but it is the narratives and personal experiences of fieldwork that offer a glimpse into the lived complexities of the Balik-Islam experience. Chapter 4 comprises narratives of converts in Mindanao. These accounts shed light on how people undertake the difficult task of navigating torn family relations, economic uncertain, ideological gatekeeping, and distrust of one another based on similarity. Nevertheless, However, in their accounts, they also demonstrate resilience, spiritual rebirth, and the imaginative reconstruction of the self. Transitioning from analysis to lived experience, Chapter 4 aims to present Balik-Islam not just as a religious phenomenon but as an evolving and deeply human narrative of transformation and belonging.

CHAPTER IV

THE POST-CONVERSION STRUGGLES AND RESILIENCE OF BALIK-ISLAM IN MINDANAO

This chapter uses a thematic analysis to guide its discussion of the lived experiences of fifteen Balik-Islam converts living in non-BARMM areas of Mindanao. Informed by in-depth interviews from a larger study, this chapter engages with the complex processes reflecting post-conversion life, demonstrating how religious identity is constantly negotiated through a landscape marked by structural dislocation, cultural exclusion, and spiritual resilience. Using Rambo's 'consequences' phase and Turner's liminality framework, the stories presented in this chapter demonstrate that conversion cannot be seen as a singular experience, but rather a process of continued social, emotional, and theological adaptation.

The findings contest dual assumptions about conversion that treat conversion as either success or failure, instead demonstrating the multilayered and processual reality of becoming Muslim in a non-Muslim majority context. Converts occupy an "in-between" space, no longer fully part of their previous religious community but not fully accepted by some members of the born Muslim ummah. This liminal space creates marginalization but also opens doors for creative forms of resistance, identity reconstruction, and preservation of faith.

To organize this analysis, I identified seven interrelated themes throughout the chapter. First, I address the role of social exclusion and liminal belonging in shaping and defining the early struggles of the convert. Second, I illustrate, through a consideration of emotion-based resilience and spiritual anchoring, how it is possible to shift one's inner attitude and sense of self in the face of enduring challenges. Third, it investigates the challenges of religious practice and learning, especially in settings lacking formal support. Fourth, I address ethnic and cultural exclusions that the convert experienced in various communities of Muslims; together, they reveal a more nuanced sense of intra-ummah marginalization. Fifth, I highlight the gendered struggles and resilience of Muslim women converts, as well as some of the intersectional challenges they face. Sixth, I analyze how converts negotiate belonging and community,

particularly through digital and online spaces. Finally, I offer some thoughts on the institutional roles of da'wah and religious leaders regarding integrated and sustained pathways for the long-term engagement of converts. These themes collectively demonstrate that conversion is not a singular spiritual experience but rather a complex and relational movement shaped by social, cultural, emotional, and structural contexts.

Together, these themes offer insights into the everyday lives of converts to Islam and how Balik-Islam converts effectively contend with the obligations of developing a heavy and embodied Islamic identity while fighting their situational invisibility. In this chapter, I will argue that to understand Balik-Islam's post-conversion realities, we must adopt a relational and processual perspective on the emergence of religious identities within the broader socio-political, ethnic, and gendered contexts.

Ultimately, this chapter posits that Balik-Islam revert in Mindanao exist in a dynamic tension: their marginality in many spaces is offset by the resilience of their religion. Their stories suggest a re-conceptualization of conversion as a process rather than an endpoint, a process that continues to unfold across space and is shaped by structural constraints, spiritual creativity, and political goals.

4.1 Social Exclusion and Liminal Belonging

A common narrative among Balik-Islam revert solves social exclusion from their families that identify as Christian, and from the Muslim community that they try to interact with. This social exclusion can produce feelings of worthlessness, and one may fail to see oneself as worthy of social participation. Marginalized populations often contend with structural barriers preventing them from becoming socially integrated into both former and new communities, thus maintaining their exclusion and lack of social belonging. Marginality will find Balik-Islam people in a marginally liminal position--fluidly hopping between two religious and cultural identities. The liminal condition elaborated by Victor Turner is readily applicable here: individuals in transition who are neither part of their previous identity nor cohesively accepted into a

new one.[172]

Numerous converts to Islam have reported being either overtly or covertly excluded from the community of born Muslims as they attempt to explore their new religious identity. ***Abdul Rashid (pseudonym)*** a convert from Davao City, described how his Muslim peers who first introduced him to Islam eventually delegitimized his religious identity:

"They told me my conversion was wrong because I didn't follow traditional practices like drinking water mixed with soil, which they considered a ritual for reversion. They diminished my identity and insisted I could never be a 'true' Muslim because I was born a Christian."

His 'story' further highlights the enduring reality of cultural gatekeeping, whereby authenticity is still judged based on organization and cultural traditions rather than belief or practice. This maintains the convert in this liminal status, neither entirely accepted by the Muslim community nor free to return to their Christian home. What is clear here is how Turner's idea of liminality has affected Abdul Rashid, who is spiritually affirmed but relationally estranged. Rambo's "consequences" phase is well reflected here, as the ramifications of Abdul Rashid's conversion are that he not only loses his previous community but also faces rejection from his new community while also being pressured to merge with a cultural identity.

Similarly, ***Rania (pseudonym),*** a Balik-Islam convert married to a Maranao family, said she experienced estrangement from the new social group of Muslims:

"Some of my husband's relatives made me feel like I didn't fully belong. I experienced backstabbing and whispers behind my back, not because I lacked sincerity in my faith, but because I wasn't 'born Muslim."

Rania's experience demonstrates that conversion does not end social boundaries that are often based on ethnic identity and cultural expectations. She goes on to describe her uncertainty about her religious practices and the cultural practices:

[172] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.

"These internal conflicts made me feel torn between two worlds, the Islam I was studying and the Islam that surrounded me."

These stories illustrate the extended and varying experience of liminality for Balik-Islam converts. As outlined by Turner[173] he posits that liminal people are "neither here nor there," a status that reflects the life circumstances of these participants in social and emotional reality. According to Rambo and Farhadian[174], the implications of religious conversion are both internal changes, along with social ruptures and the need to reconstruct identity. Furthermore, George and Selimos note that social exclusion constrains the extent of the individual's liminal belonging by restricting the emotional access to surrounding support networks and heightening ambivalence to self-identity perception.[175]

In summary, Theme 1 indicates that for numerous Balik-Islam revert, the first consequence of the conversion is not spiritual reaffirmation, but social disconnection from the Christian context of their upbringing and from the Muslim communities they aspire to join. This dual feeling of being excluded places converts in a precarious, liminal state of belonging in which they do not fully belong to their communities of origin, but they also have not been received as members of the new religious community. This idea of liminal belonging resonates with Turner's idea of liminality or "betwixt and between," where individuals are assumed to possess an unfixed and unstable identity. Furthermore, Rambo's consequences phase indicates that when individuals go through the conversion process, the consequences will include not only their inward journey, but also a disconnection with their previous relational and communal way of life. Abdul Rashid's and Rania's accounts thus highlight that cultural gatekeeping, not doctrinal misunderstanding, frequently serves as the primary point of access or exclusion into the Muslim community, wherein being "born a Muslim" still emerges as more significant than sincerity and devotion. Unless Muslim communities

[173] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.
[174] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.
[175] Glynis George and Erwin Dimitri Selimos, "Searching for Belonging and Confronting Exclusion: A Person-Centred Approach to Immigrant Settlement Experiences in Canada," *Social Identities* 25, no. 2 (2019): 125–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2017.1381834.

more readily develop inclusive, affirming space for reverts, our Balik-Islam will often thusly experience Islam not as a journey toward home, but as a prolonged limbo of social and emotional consternation.

4.2 Emotional Resilience and Spiritual Anchoring

One consistent theme among the testimonies of Balik-Islam participants was the growing resilience provided through spiritual foundations. For most participants, conversion to Islam was not only acceptance of beliefs, but also a highly personal way to cope with and understand emotional distress, psychological suffering, or a loss of purpose. For these converts, Islam provided not only a religious system of ritual but also clarity, direction, and healing in times of struggle.

This emotional and psychological change is consistent with Rambo and Farhadian's[176] observations regarding the “consequences” of religious conversion period of inner reconstruction that follows a radical alteration of worldview. Likewise, Turner's notion of liminality implies that converts construct meaning during a transitional stage that mediates their former identity and their new identity, and have not completely experienced a 'symbolic resurrection'. During this period of transition, many have relied on Islam as a stabilizing force: an emotional and spiritual scaffold that creates an opportunity to reconstruct their emotional core.

The spiritual and emotional drivers of Balik-Islam revert in Mindanao often follow patterns similar to other non-mainstream faith trajectories. Rijal notes that his ethnography of urban Muslim youth in Jakarta reveals that participation in more traditionalist dakwah identities, such as Majelis Rasulullah, fulfills not just religiosity but emotional and psychological needs. The imaginative spaces that arose through this experience were not only composed of da’wah that has a charismatic quality to it or via collective rituals and interactions online, but were also places for what Asef Bayat identifies as "youthful piety" at the margin of urban precarity. Similarly, Balik-Islam Muslims often fill identity gaps and emotional voids through informal social networks, online learning, and repetitive bodily practices to support their development in their

[176] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.

faith. Like Rijal's experience, these expressions of faith are often not legitimized through the more formal Islamic institutional gatekeepers because the emphasis is placed on the search for contentment, legitimacy, and the opportunity to connect with deeper spiritual empowerment.[177]

The extent of change is especially evident in the words of ***Rhazzyl (pseudonym)***, a young military cadet who converted into a restrictive and unsupportive institutional environment. Rhazzyl described his life before Islam as lacking direction, living in a context where vices were normalized, and there was no spiritual discipline: *"Before I converted to Islam, I lived the kind of life that was common in many Christian communities—open to alcohol, vices, and little to no boundaries… it wasn't necessarily because I wanted that life, but because my environment encouraged it."*

After embracing Islam, Rhazzyl was not met with a supportive community; he faced organizational indifference and systemic barriers that hindered him from fulfilling the simplest of religious obligations. The five daily prayers (ṣalāh) became a daily hurdle—not just due to time constraints, but because the structure of cadet life did not afford a physical or spiritual place for Muslim worship. In an astonishing display of disrespect, the academy would not permit Jumu'ah *(Friday congregational prayer*) on its prescribed day, and instead relegated it to Saturday:

"Practicing Islam in the camp was a daily battle, not just against time, but against the invisible walls of indifference… Every missed prayer, every delay, especially of moving the Jumu'ah congregational prayer from Friday to Saturday, carved a small ache in my heart."

Notwithstanding these challenges, Rhazzyl was committed. His resilience was not realized through comfort but through difficulty. In a sociocultural milieu that failed to acknowledge or accommodate his religious re-orientation, Islam was the only framework to hold onto. There are psychological consequences of conversion, not only emotional disengagement from the past but also re-shaping the self in a new moral and

[177] Syamsul Rijal, "Following Arab Saints: Urban Muslim Youth and Traditional Piety in Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 48, no. 141 (2020): 145–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2020.1729540.

spiritual orientation. Rhazzyl's journey also illustrates Turner's liminality; he was "betwixt and between": neither fully accepted into the academy's dominant religious tradition nor securely grounded in a Muslim community.[178]

Using self-guided initiative, he began learning Arabic on his own, memorizing surahs, and ultimately led fellow Muslim cadets in prayer and suhoor during Ramadan. His case illustrates how emotional resilience sometimes comes not from validation from others but from the internalization of spiritual discipline. Rhazzyl's daily acts of worship, conducted with restrictions, became psychological and spiritual anchors so that he was able to resist assimilation and remain true to his identity and faith.

A journey from institutional exclusion to personal suffering, ***Jenefer (pseudonym),*** an OFW in the Middle East, offers another expression of resilience, one situated in solitude, sickness, and tawakkul (*trust in Allah*). Jenefer had just been diagnosed with cancer while working as a domestic worker in Kuwait and was at the peak of a crisis in her life, far from family and support systems. Jenefer's spiritual shift was inspired by the quiet and sincere nature of her Muslim employers, who took action instead of talking about their beliefs. On the day of her flight home, Jenefer embraced Islam, describing it not a random event, but as a divine plan:

"I actually embraced Islam on the very day of my flight back home… Everything happened very quickly, like it was meant to be."

After Jenefer returned to the Philippines, she learned Islamic practice through YouTube videos and Qur'an apps, with the occasional message to her prior employers. Although she was physically weak and broke, she still relied on prayer and Qur'anic listening for emotional medicine:

"I used to have a short temper, but now my patience has grown… You don't always have control over your situation, but Allah does."

Jenefer's story shows spiritual anchoring in isolation. Although Jenefer did not have strong community support or religious institutions, it highlights the strength of a believer who is recreating her identity and emotional health through self-taught

[178] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.

spirituality. Jenefer exemplifies Turner's idea of liminality in that, she is held between spaces; geographically distant from Muslim community, relationally disconnected from Christian relatives and her compromised health has limited her physical activities; yet, she finds an inner stability through faith.

While Rhazzyl and Jenefer have obvious misery, ***Melvin (pseudonym),*** exhibits a more reflective and internally motivated type of resilience. Melvin grew up in a Catholic family, was active in a Christian youth group, but felt something missing in his life, which he describes as a "spiritual void."

"With all of that, I couldn't find peace in myself. I often felt like there was something lacking. I would describe it as a void, something I cannot quite explain."

His path to Islam began with some self-examining reflection and a single visit to a masjid, where he experienced such tranquillity that it revolutionized his definition of worship and spirituality:

"There was a quiet reverence that resonated deeply within me… it was as though I was finally hearing the voice of my soul."

Melvin's emotional progression resonates well with Edara et al.[179], who noted that belief systems associated with religion allow individuals to manage emotion and navigate changes. While Melvin faced less opposition from family, he did face discrimination at work after his conversion. However, he did not become bitter but rather chose to focus on prayer and gratitude:

"Each prayer and visit to the masjid have become a source of spiritual healing… There is no worldly substitute for the inner tranquillity that Islam provides."

His transformation is evidence that resilience can also come from a quiet realignment, willingly taking a different path, not from crisis, but seeking spiritual coherence and emotional well-being. His story provides a nice counterpoint to the others and shows that even in a non-conflict situation, Islam can serve as a solid anchor for people who are going through emotional change.

[179] Inna Reddy Edara et al., "Religiosity, Emotions, Resilience, and Wellness during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Study of Taiwanese University Students," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 12 (2021): 6381, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18126381.

Collectively, these three narratives provide a rich yet consistent picture of how conversion cultivates spiritual and emotional resilience. Whether they were confronted with institutional exile, health issues, or spiritual encounter. Each participant was able to rebuild their inner life through learning, prayer, and trust in a divine being. Rambo's theory of emotional reconstruction and Turner's frame of liminality articulate the psychological work the individuals engaged in, moving into a process of reconstruction from a state of brokenness, confusion, and suffering into coherence, clarity, and whatever follows suffering. For Balik-Islam revert, Islam does more than change their religious affiliation; it transforms how they suffer, how they endure, and ultimately, how they heal.

In summary, Theme 2 has shown that for many Balik-Islam revert, Islam is not only a new belief system but also a significant source of emotional support and spiritual healing. From institutional neglect to physical illness to an existential sense of spiritual emptiness, all of the participants found that Islam provided a stabilizing force, an anchor when they were facing psychological hardship. Rambo's "consequences" phase is also pronounced here, as the converts are engaged in the emotional and cognitive reconstruction of the self and reorienting their identity and coping strategies within a new spiritual worldview. Turner’s idea of liminality is also a useful framework: all of the converts inhabit a transitory space: a space situated between a prior self and a newly born religious identity, in the interstice of communities, affiliations, and emotional worlds. But importantly, in that in-between state, new meaning, purpose, and stability emerge. The narratives suggest that post-conversion resilience is made possible not only by some external support but also, quite literally through internal spiritual anchoring—a quiet but definite transformation, through which they are also able to endure, resist, and transcend suffering, through faith.

4.3 The Struggles of Religious Practice and Learning

In the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao, one of the most enduring challenges for Balik-Islam converts is the challenge of learning and enacting Islam without formal instruction or a structured community. After declaring their faith, converts find themselves having to learn, without assistance or support, many

important elements of Islamic life, including daily prayers (ṣalāh), rules for purification, and the ability to read the Qur'an. This experience is often fraught with confusion and emotional burden, which can last an extended time and is especially impactful for converts who are also living in a non-Muslim area or do not have a madrasa or someone to assist or mentor them in their journey as a new Muslim.

These challenges are not limited to the context of the Philippines. In Malaysia, Samuri and Khan[180] note that converts commonly experience legal and social uncertainty and may feel distanced from religious institutions and their previous networks. Likewise, Abu-Raiya et al. point out that some converts may experience spiritual anguish, uncertainty, and conflict when performing new rituals and moral obligations.[181]

In this context, Rambo and Farhadian's[182] model of the consequences phase of religious conversion is especially noteworthy. During this decisive stage, converts must learn to make their new faith and practice personally meaningful and viable, often without any support structure. Turner's[183] concept of liminality is also very significant; it describes the convert's status as an intermediate state between two religious identities, no longer fully part of their previous faith, yet not entirely integrated into their new faith.

The personal narratives that follow reveal more about these particular learning struggles. While we can hardly consider these Balik-Islam individuals to have any institutional scaffolding, they demonstrate remarkable persistence, creativity, and authenticity in their attempts to connect to their new religion.

Delma (pseudonym), who was raised in a deeply religious household and was a devoted Catholic, described converting to Islam as intellectually and emotionally intense. Even with her spiritual upbringing, she knew right away that embracing Islam

[180] Mohd Al Adib Samuri and Azlan Shah Nabees Khan, "Legal Literacy for Muslim Converts in Malaysia," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 29, no. 3 (2021), https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.3.12.
[181] Hisham Abu-Raiya et al., "Understanding and Addressing Religious and Spiritual Struggles in Health Care," *Health & Social Work* 40, no. 4 (2015): e126–34, https://doi.org/10.1093/hsw/hlv055.
[182] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.
[183] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.

meant a learning and unlearning process:

"I quickly realized that when you convert to Islam, it is not just about converting; it's about learning and growing."

To comprehend the obligations of Islam, Delma enrolled in structured Islamic education courses (e.g., MI1–MI4, e.g., Madrasah Ibtida'iyah *(beginners' school*). She learned about tawḥīd, Islamic worship activities, and the moral bases of the Muslim way of life. However, structured learning and education do not reject the emotional encounters associated with a conversion to Islam. Delma's expanding faith complicated her relationships with her Christian family, leading to difficult separations between her Muslim children and her mother:

"It breaks my heart to feel like I'm caught between two families… Sometimes I have to make excuses just to get them to visit their grandmother."

Delma's narrative represents Rambo's consequences phase, in which converts have to restructure their everyday experiences, family roles, and religious practice around a new identity. It's also showing Turner's liminality, as she is connected emotionally to her new faith but socially tied to her old community, living in between.

In the same way, ***Mark (pseudonym)***, a 34-year-old convert from General Santos City, also faced intense learning challenges following his reversion. Mark came from an active background in Catholic youth ministry, so his initial spiritual crisis led him to seek answers in Islam. Although he converted after substantial conversations with an Islamic scholar, it was in the aftermath of conversion—the "consequences" phase, as framed by Rambo, that the real difficulties began. He lacked formal Islamic education as well as any past exposure to Arabic and felt completely overwhelmed. He stated to me in one of our discussions:

"I had no background in Arabic, while my peers were already far ahead. I was starting from scratch. But I didn't give up. I wrote the Surah Al-Fatiha on a large cartolina and memorized it line by line."

Mark's strategy of self-teaching, improvisation, and solitary memorization speaks directly to the psychological and behavioural dimensions of Rambo's consequences stage. The convert has to internalize not only a new belief system, but

also reverse daily practices and ethics without any institutional support. For him, this learning challenge is no longer simply about acquiring knowledge; rather it is some process of personal spiritual reconstruction.

At the same time, Mark's experience is representative of Turner's concept of liminality. He is in the middle of a symbolic fate about his Christian identity, and he is still slowly and uncertainly being reborn as a Muslim. He is in an ongoing state of liminality, suspended in time and space. His commitment to learning and praying becomes a form of emotional survival and identity work. He endured mockery from old friends and lacked familial support, yet remained grounded in personal prayer and the company of supportive Muslim peers.

While individual converts, like Delma and Mark, grapple privately with growing their Islamic knowledge, learning from community leaders, like ***Sheikh Abdul Baki (pseudonym)***, argues that structural deficiencies exacerbate those private struggles. Sheikh *Abdul Baki*, who is an Islamic educator and former da‘iyah in Saudi Arabia, emphasized the emotional fragility of new Muslims, many of whom cry during the shahāda not only from joy, but out of fear of rejection, abandonment, and disorientation.

Pangolima underscores the importance of al-mutāba‘ah (*continued mentorship*), aligning with Rambo’s assertion that post-conversion transformation must be nurtured over time:

“Many revert to Islam lack understanding of how to worship correctly. We tell them: seek knowledge. Worship must follow the guidance brought by the Prophet (peace be upon him).”

At the same time, he recognizes that da'wah activities still lack funding, are not supported by zakat funds, and continue to depend on informal mentorship and digital means of delivering information. Converts often are left in a liminal zone, as Turner would call it, lacking institutional structure and socially marginalized, even among some Muslims. Sheik Pangolima's reflections confirm that converts need more than just information; they require companionship and structured support to move beyond liminality and become thoroughly grounded in the faith community.

In sum, Theme 3 reveals that one of the most enduring and emotionally taxing challenges for Balik-Islam in the Philippines is not with the decision to convert, but with the long and often isolated challenge of learning and enacting that faith. Many of these converts are left to their own devices, either teaching themselves, using informal digital resources, or just trial and error, all of which can be intensely frustrating and spiritually disorienting. This situation is largely compatible with the consequences phase of Rambo's model, in that the convert is learning to reconstruct not only beliefs, but daily practices and routines, emotional orientations, and social roles - all while lacking formal scaffolding. There is a comparative similarity with Turner's liminality as converts exist in this transitory state - religiously committed but socially under-integrated, emotionally attached but institutionally unsupported. The accounts of Delma and Mark, and Sheikh *Abdul Baki's* comments, show that for the Balik-Islam community, faith development is not so much the process of learning or attending weekend courses, but ongoing engagement in the midst of disengagement. In other words, they have persisted, albeit neglected. Their experiences are a call for renewed attention to formally structured, empathetic, and community-based forms of mentorship, in which the path of conversion to a stable form of spiritual faith is not one walked alone.

4.4 Ethnic and Cultural Exclusion within Muslim Communities

One recurring but often unrecognized aspect of the post-conversion trajectory of Balik-Islam in the Philippines involves intra-religious discrimination, or more subtle forms of exclusion, within Muslim communities. For many converts, marginalization comes not from a divergence from correct Islamic theology or practice, but from cultural, ethnic, or linguistic differences. The shahāda represents a formal entry into a tradition, whereas scholars have pointed out that converts often do not find social or communal integration into the ummah.

This struggle can be conceptualized in light of Rambo and Farhadian's[184] "Consequences" stage of religious conversion, which conveys that the time after a

[184] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.

conversion requires many psychological, emotional, and social adjustments. The convert experiences significant mental turmoil, realizing that they must not only reconstruct their internal beliefs but also transition into a new religious environment, often with very little support. Turner[185] concept of liminality is useful here. It illustrates that converts occupy an "in-between" space, not identifying with their previous religious identity, even though they have not yet been fully accepted into the cultural and social structures of the new community.

Global studies reflect comparable patterns; Singleton draws attention to British Muslim converts from the period of Victoria, who often faced alienation, harassment, and exclusion from both Christian society and the Muslim spaces they inhabited[186]. For example, Casey illuminates the experience of white converts to Islam in the United States, who are racialized and treated with suspicion by both Muslims and non-Muslims, especially when making visible religious commitments, like wearing a hijab. These academic studies indicate that converts to Islam around the world often articulate experiencing a kind of boundary policing—a form of social gatekeeping, which subtly establishes who is viewed as a "real" Muslim based upon race and cultural familiarity and not" religious belonging or faith.[187]

In the Philippine context, we have ***Aisha (pseudonym),*** a Filipina convert from a devout Catholic background, who illustrates the dynamic at play on the personal level. After converting through personal study and reflection, Aisha entered into a Sangil Muslim family (*through marriage*). She also embraced Islam with clear intentions, yet still ended up feeling out of place in her in-laws' community. For example, she refused to participate, during a storm, in a local river offering ritual because she believed it did not conform to Islamic standards, and her rejection of the ritual was based on the concept of Islamic monotheism, and she was labelled disrespectful for her beliefs:

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[185] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.
[186] Brent Singleton, "'Heave Half a Brick at Him': Hate Crimes and Discrimination against Muslim Converts in Late Victorian Liverpool," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2017): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2017.1294376.
[187] Casey, "'They Don't Look at You as a Real Muslim.'"

"I'm in the middle of my husband's cultural traditions that feel like I need to follow, and the Islamic teachings I learned online. It's hard for me because I don't know what to do."

She also said that she was mocked for mispronouncing Sangil dialect words, which reinforced her position as an outsider. Even after having done Hajj, the most important spiritual journey in Islam, Aisha still felt that she was somehow perceived differently:

"Even in new circles, I could still feel a subtle difference, as a convert, there's always something that sets you apart."

Her narrative exemplifies the social and emotional costs discussed in Rambo's consequences phase, in which internal conviction does not guarantee full social belonging. Even with her genuine faith and completion of Hajj, her inability to assimilate emphasized Turner's notion of liminality—a state where she was spiritually affirmed but socially suspended between deemed religious legitimacy and cultural exclusion.

Carlito (pseudonym), a Balik-Islam da'wah worker from Sarangani, is another powerful example. Carlito is the grandson of a Balik-Islam revert, but he was also born to Christian parents. There was no formal religious education for Carlito: growing up Christian with no introduction to Islam, Carlito was exposed to Islam through a local tradition that misinformed him. As part of the tradition of completing the first step in the process of becoming Muslim, a misinformed version of the shahāda process, Carlito was instructed by the traditionalist to dive into the river and drink muddy water. He later learned from attending a formal Islamic lecture series that he had not been introduced to Islamic teachings.

"I came to realize that it is not the process of shahāda *as I learned. I am confused because I'm not sure whether my* shahāda *last year is accepted or not."*

In pursuit of proper religious growth, Carlito moved to a majority-Muslim community to progress in his understanding and practice of Islam. But rather than support, Carlito found ridicule after forgetting a line in the adhān (*call to prayer*):

"Honestly, I was embarrassed because I heard Muslims laughing at me. I felt disrespected."

Instead of having the compassionate correction or instruction provided to Carlito, he experienced public humiliation, with the reality that certain born Muslims place cultural and ritual expectations on shared rituals while relegating converts, especially those with little access to systemic education in their new religion. This reaction also highlights the policing of boundaries often experienced by reverts, in which there seems to be a messing up of their sincerity when they cannot observe and enact cultural norms.

Similar to Aisha, Carlito also finds himself in a conflicted space, the Muslim community does not fully accept him, but he is not able to return to his faith roots as a Christian either. His attempts to live into his new faith were not met with an open communal welcome but instead subtle forms of exclusion, which put him in the middle of the social and emotional tensions encompassed in Turner's notion of liminality and recalled Rambo's consequences phase.

Even with these challenges, Carlito converted his suffering into purpose. Together with a few other converts, he began grassroots da'wah efforts with limited resources in far-flung barangays by distributing food, dispelling Islamic teachings and sometimes providing spiritual advice to marginalized people:

"Even with little, if you act for Allah, it reaches hearts."

Carlito's narrative demonstrates how, for many converts, faith serves as a vehicle for resilience and social change. Without institutional support, he constructed meaning and belonging through action, authenticity, and service. His journey testifies that for many Balik-Islam, community is often forged by and from the margins, not granted by the center.

The presentation of ethnic exclusion, cultural gatekeeping, and liminal belonging is the main driver of a complex, poorly understood issue known as intra-religious discrimination among Muslim converts. Many Balik-Islam converts in the Philippines believe that after they formally declare, they will be fully received and acknowledged in the Muslim community. Nevertheless, many Balik-Islam converts

experience rejection in secret or even publicly. Their rejection, not because of the sincerity of their belief, but instead from their ethnic background, linguistic proficiency, or cultural heritage.

Overall, Theme 4 illustrates that the biggest struggle for many Balik-Islam is not becoming Muslim, but being accepted and embraced by the Muslim community. Their accounts echo the urgent calls for a more inclusive ummah that places taqwā (*consciousness of God*) and sincerity of belief as the criteria for belonging, not ethnicity, language, or culture. In the words of Rambo and Farhadian shows the work of conversion fundamentally does not finish with the shahāda, and for many reverts, the conversion process, toward acceptance and belonging in Islam for themselves, is a continuous and difficult path.[188]

4.5 Gendered Struggles and the Resilience of Muslim Women Revert

An important but under-researched area of life after conversion among Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao is the gendered aspect of their struggle. For many women, conversion to Islam is not simply a religious change but a radical change involving gender roles, family relations, and societal expectations. As these women cross the threshold into a new faith, they find themselves in liminal spaces, in between identities, communities, and often, between visibility and exclusion.

Their resilience is not formed in comfort but rather through overcoming structural barriers, social detachment, and religious misinterpretations. Many of these female converts must navigate the challenges of practicing piety in patriarchal settings, maintaining Islamic practice in unsupportive environments, and sustaining their belief with no validation from an Islamic community. During these challenges, they inhabit Rambo and Farhadian's[189] "Consequences" phase of religious conversion, whereby the real consequences and often painful challenges of conversion begin to take shape. At the same time, their liminal existence, which is neither fully formed in a Muslim community nor fully part of their former social world, embodies Turner's[190] concept of

[188] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.
[189] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.
[190] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.

liminality, where they have an opportunity for transformation, even when they are in the liminality of not fully belonging in one social world or another.

The stories of ***Carelle*** **(pseudonym*)***, ***Fadia*** **(pseudonym),** and ***Amina*** **(pseudonym)** demonstrate this highly gendered reality. Despite the distinct socio-historical contexts of each story, their testimonies collectively reveal how gender is not only a site of struggle but also a source of spiritual resilience and ethical clarity. These women do not just accept their realities and conduct themselves with patience; they reformulate what it means to be a Muslim, a woman, and a Filipino in contemporary society.

Carelle, a single mother and aviation worker in Davao City, exemplifies resilience after her religious conversion. Raised in a Catholic family and educated in Catholic schools, Carelle's early spiritual beliefs were shaped by traditions like Simbang Gabi, rosary rituals, and praying to saints. Her shift to Islam, however, did not occur until she left the Philippines to work in Qatar. During this time, after her husband betrayed her and she felt her world in Qatar was falling apart both personally and professionally, Carelle began to reevaluate the foundation of her beliefs.

Carelle experienced a spiritual reawakening after long discussions with her aunt, a practicing Muslim, and reflecting on the Qur'anic story of Maryam A.S. She had seen Mary as significant in her former faith, but she was not as central as she is in Islam. Therefore, she shared with her aunt a sense of female piety, strength, and dignity that Maryam embodied—qualities that resonated with Carelle's desire for spiritual agency and recognition.

Nevertheless, her journey was not without challenges. Upon her return to the Philippines, she found herself negotiating her new religious identity within her job in the aviation industry, which is often secular and subtly Islamophobic.

"In my industry, women who wear the hijab are often passed over for promotion for leadership roles... While I haven't worn a hijab yet due to practical reasons, I try to dress modestly and live by the tenets of Islam."

Her choice to wear her hijab part-time is not a step back from her faith; she intentionally occupies this space because she assesses her devotion to Islam and the

severe oppression and discrimination against her gender and religion from her employer. Her struggles extend beyond her employer, too; she experiences discrimination within her Muslim faith community, too. As a single parent, she feels she is often seen and judged at mosques, which produce a woman's worth in terms of her husband or marital status.

"Often, I feel I don't belong at mosques once people discover that I am a single mom. They presume men will approach me not for sincere, interested companionship, but simply because I am a single mom."

In these dual settings of a workplace and a worship space, Carelle faces layered and intersecting forms of marginalization as a woman, a mother, a convert, and a worker. While Carelle's resilience is not about glorious acts, it is about small and habitual acts of devotion: making a corner of her house a prayer space, searching for Islamic content online, and finding strength in the stories and lives of pious women in Muslim history.

Carelle's experience reflects the argument made by Islamic feminist scholars such as Kecia Ali[191] that patriarchy in religious spaces often marginalizes women, especially if they do not fit into patriarchal spaces. Carelle's journey disrupts some of these boundaries and reimagines what dignity in Islamic practice looks like outside an ideal context.

Fadia journey adds another layer to the theme, from professional liminality to domestic negotiation. Growing up in a culturally Catholic household in General Santos City, Fadia had no intention of converting to Islam. However, during her high school days, she met a Muslim classmate, and her worldview changed. A class visit to a mosque for a school field trip, as part of a project, became a spiritual pivot.

"Hearing the Adhan gave me chills… I couldn't explain it, but something inside me stirred."

She began to read, listen to Islamic lectures, and challenge the religious assumptions of her upbringing. Though she faced emotional opposition from her

[191] Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*, with American Council of Learned Societies (Oneworld, 2013).

family, Fadia secretly and solemnly took her shahāda on June 13, 2023, by phone, marking her entrance to Islam as a solemn act of will.

However, her transformation took place within a household of suspicion toward Islam. Every day, acts of worship, prayer, modest dress, and dietary restrictions became silent struggles and quiet battles. Her religious expression had to be hidden to maintain domestic peace.

“I would wear my abaya and hijab only after I left the house and remove them before I arrived home to avoid conflict."

Fadia’s liminal position as a young, religious Muslim in a Christian family illustrates the emotional and spiritual weight that falls on female converts. She had to suppress certain parts of her identity to avoid confrontation, exemplifying Turner's liminality in its most natural form, neither fully accepted in the old Christian faith nor accepted entirely in the new one.

Fadia found salvation in the community at her local mosque. At the mosque, she found not only a place to pray but also emotional and material support.

"The community not only supported me emotionally but also provided help in practical ways… That made me feel like I had found my true family in Islam."

Her story reinforces the need for conversion programs like hers to include families and have youth-specific support structures for young women, so they feel they can explore Islam without feeling like they have to choose between faith and family. Fadia's strength comes from her ability to hold onto an Islamic identity while at the same time existing in a space of silent resistance with faithfulness, as faithfulness carries a strong code of ethics even when under pressure.

Suppose Carelle's struggle occurs in a public space, and Fadia's struggle takes place in domestic secrecy. In that case, Amina's story exemplifies the tendencies to the deep vulnerabilities faced by converts who are unsupported in their struggles regarding emotional, legal, and spiritual support. Without da'wa or being part of a collective event to welcome her, Amina checked into Islam. Her conversion identity was a reflection and an observation of the Muslim individuals she first encountered in Cagayan de Oro City, who reflected a quiet dignity that inspired her.

"When I embraced Islam, I was completely alone."

Without mentors, her learning was reliant on self-study and online sources. However, the "consequences" of her conversion began to reveal themselves after she married a Tausug Muslim man. It was only while she was pregnant that she discovered he was already married, and that he had hidden this fact from her. After she found out, he abandoned her completely.

"I accepted it. What's done is done. I believed it was part of Allah's qadr… But since then, he has completely abandoned me."

Now in the maternity ward alone, Amina finds herself grappling with religious uncertainty, legal confusion, and spiritual isolation in facing childbirth. She does not know anything about talaq, what rights she may have to any inheritance, or the nikaah or religious implications of separation. Her situation serves as an example of how gendered betrayal and institutional neglect work together to impact female converts.

"I have no mentor. My Muslim friends live far away and have families of their own. I'm afraid of being a burden."

Her vulnerability is enhanced by cultural isolation, and a lack of assistance and support systems to understand her needs as both a convert and a woman. And yet, her connection to Islam remains unshaken.

"I always return to how I started. Quiet. Alone. But true."

Her story calls for immediate reforms, accessible Islamic legal advice, community-based marital support, and formal systems of post-conversion support, especially for women who do not have family and cultural connections to the ummah. Amina's strength is her convictions, and that conviction was dictated by her own relationship to Allah rather than institutions.

The narratives of Carelle, Fadia, and Amina illustrate a broader reality: the experience of women who are Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao, particularly in the non-BARRM areas, is not just a spiritual reorientation but a gendered negotiation of faith, identity, and belonging. The women are not just adjusting to a new religion; they are transforming that religion within themselves, under pressure, and often alone.

Their experiences illustrate Rambo's "consequences" stage in bold relief. The

costs of conversion are not just theological; they are social, emotional, and institutional. Each of the women grapples with the disparity between belief and belonging, often without the support they need. Turner's theory of liminality deepens this reading: these women are living in a threshold space, disoriented, uncomfortable, yet profoundly transformative.

In summary, Theme 5 suggests that the conversion experience for Muslim women in Mindanao is deeply situated within gendered considerations, shaped not just by spiritual transition, but by multiple struggles that are either familial, legal, or communal. The women characterizing experiences of gradual enculturation deal with complex understandings of their realities within their conversion cycle: experientially, they have faced workplace discrimination, family abandonment, spousal betrayal, institutional losses, etc. Their struggles advance their resilience, propelled by their piety and spiritually rooted.

What Rambo refers to as the "consequences" phase emphasizes that the newness of conversion requires emotional and structural change; both of which are especially challenging because women often do not have male sponsors nor the protection of their community. Turner also pointed to the significance of liminality here, suggesting that many females convert exist in a liminal space, given that they are neither completely recognized and included within the Muslim community nor completely separated from their previous lives. Their faith is not theoretical; it is embodied, intimate, and quietly revolutionary. Theme 5 suggests not only complex recognition but also urgent actions, including inclusive mosques, legal advocacy, mentoring opportunities, and family-sensitive support systems. Overall, the narratives provided by individual participants illustrate that the strength of these women, who acknowledged and experienced power, did not exist independently of their struggles but because of them.

4.6 Digital Ummah: Finding Belonging in the Margins of Post-Conversion Life

While the previous theme focused on the gendered challenges and resistance strategies of Muslim women converts, this theme shifts focus to the broader landscape

of post-conversion belonging. For Balik-Islam converts in particular, this transition to Islam was not only a spiritual realignment but also a socially embedded process filled with challenges related to finding acceptance, connections, and legitimacy in digital and physical spaces.

This process of adjustment is not only personal or spiritual for many converts. Rather, it requires some change in boundaries as they navigate their new religious self within a wider public and community context[192]. For example, Singh recognized the importance of this negotiation because conversion for converts is often a complex adjustment process where the responses they encounter fall outside the typical academic narratives[193] For younger converts, the post-conversion phase usually also requires an evaluation of their subjectivity as they work to articulate their prior selves with their new conversions.[194]

As a growing number of Balik-Islam converts in non-BARMM locations grapple with notions of religious identity and belonging, many seek out digital platforms for guidance, learning, and connections. Such platforms function not only as resources for Islamic knowledge but also as spaces for meaning-making and self-construction. Saenong utilizes Hall's encoding/decoding theory in his study of online Islam in Indonesia as a way to unpack the potentiality of critical reception of religious messages through platforms like YouTube. Audiences are not simply passive recipients of da'wah content but act with agency in the interpretation, negotiation, or even opposition to messages being communicated to them. This level of reception clearly resonates with the experiences of Balik-Islam converts in Mindanao who follow online scholars selectively, customize teachings, and embrace social media to legitimize their spirituality. Their relationship with digital da'wah was not one of passive consumption

[192] Rebecca A. Karam, "Becoming American by Becoming Muslim: Strategic Assimilation among Second-Generation Muslim American Parents," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 2 (2020): 390–409, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1578396.
[193] David Emmanuel Singh, "Adaptation and Change among Asian Muslim Immigrants in the West," *International Journal of Asian Christianity* (Leiden, The Netherlands) 5, no. 1 (2022): 45–68, https://doi.org/10.1163/25424246-05010004.
[194] Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine, "Hyphenated Selves: Muslim American Youth Negotiating Identities on the Fault Lines of Global Conflict," *Applied Developmental Science* 11, no. 3 (2007): 151–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/10888690701454658.

but of actively shaping an identity to belong to in a decentralized ummah, where religious authority has become augmented through algorithmic visibility and personal connectedness over traditional institutional authority.[195]

In recognizing their new identity, there exists an interaction between individual experience and social narratives in ways that influence how reverts narrate their life stories and grow into new meanings about their changing identities[196]. As this theme will demonstrate, the process of negotiating belonging occurs not only in local mosques and Islamic communities but also increasingly within digital spaces, where many reverts find their first real experience of the ummah. The following accounts, based on direct interviews and interpretively adjusted as needed, demonstrate actual patterns of lived experience among Balik-Islam converts.

Fatima **(pseudonym)**, a young Filipina who had identified as part of the LGBTQ community, gave a very spiritual narrative of how she came to Islam through a series of powerful dreams. In one dream she described, she saw three Bibles on a table. When she picked one of them up, she realized that the words in that book were not from the Bible but rather from the Qur'an. In another dream, she was preparing for a test and found two Qur'ans in her bag. But the dream that impacted her most dramatically showed a man dressed in white robes who led her into a building that she thought was a church. It was a masjid full of Muslims, praying. "*Follow them*," the man told her. She followed them and began praying, crying, and asking Allah for forgiveness, and then she said,

"When I opened my eyes, the man was gone. Deep in my heart, I knew he was an angel—that Allah was calling me."

Fatima eventually converted to Islam, accepted her shahāda, and devoted herself to her new spiritual pathway. But, like so many converts, the pronouncement of her faith did not protect her from struggles. Her parents, stating they felt betrayed,

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[195] Farid F. Saenong and Academic Publishing, "Decoding Online Islam: New Religious Authorities and Social-Media Encounters," *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 11, no. 2 (2020): 161–78, https://doi.org/10.5840/asrr202192874.

[196] Tomas Lindgren, "The Narrative Construction of Muslim Identity: A Single Case Study," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 26, no. 1 (2004): 51–73, https://doi.org/10.1163/0084672053598049.

dropped her and condemned her for abandoning her religion. Left to support herself, she worked while studying just to survive. She anticipated support from the Muslim community, but she found suspicion, hatred, and exclusion.

"Some born Muslims would insult me. They would tell me, 'We are going to Jannah, but you? You are not a real Muslim—you were not even born into it. And it stabbed me like a knife."

Even her work was a site of struggle. Although she had free housing, she was counselled for passively listening to an Islamic lecture and Qur'anic recitation on her phone. The boss dismissed her religious interests as "just useless," in addition to the stress she felt from other sides. Nevertheless, she valued her calm moments with Allah.

"I was scared most of the time, but I still would listen. Just hearing the Qur'an made me feel calm."

Fatima experienced insult in both her family and community. However, she found comfort in many unexpected situations, particularly in the digital space. Fatima discovered a sense of connection and belonging through online da'wah forums, group chats with other reverts to Islam, YouTube lectures, etc. Fatima felt that these online spaces provided a sense of belonging that her surrounding community did not seem to provide. The digital world acted as a virtual mosque for Fatima, allowing her to learn about Islam and receive emotional support from other reverts.

"I turned to the digital world when the physical world did not welcome me. I found people online who understood the loneliness, the rejection, and the beauty of finally finding the truth. It felt like a digital ummah."

Even while fulfilling religious obligations—praying five times a day, observing Ramadan—she still has a nagging sense of difference in physical spaces like the masjid, where stares and silence reinforce, she is "not quite one of them." In digital spaces, she feels her legitimacy is recognized.

"Online, I found people who listened. Who reminded me I am Muslim—fully, truly, completely."

Fatima's testimony illustrates Turner's liminal state; she is in the "in-between," having left her earlier self behind, yet not fully embraced by the mainstream Muslim

community. This void creates emotional isolation, yet creates resilience. In addition, while it is clear that Rambo's consequences stage is evident in the ruptured family bonds, the financial strain of independence, and the evolving sense of self forged through digital interaction and spiritual growth.

Her story also affirms how digital spaces exist as pivotal sites of belonging for Balik-Islam converts in the Philippines. When acceptance is not present in physical mosques and communities, the online ummah inhabits a space nourished by no cultural gatekeeping, language scrutiny, or sectarian biases. For Fatima and numerous others like her, digital spaces are not a secondary or alternative option, but their first experience of belonging in religious kinship.

Being a Balik-Islam is difficult. But it is beautiful. I may still be stuck in two worlds right now, but I know my direction. And I know that even if the world turns its back on me, Allah never will."

While Fatima transitioned to Islam through vivid dreaming and yearning for closeness to God, Azzahra's transition to Islam began when she read an online post that caused her to self-reflect and change her lifestyle, demonstrating that social media can act as a vehicle for self-reflection and transformation.

Azzahra **(pseudonym),** a Filipina Balik-Islam convert, transitioned to Islam through social media, a medium she was already familiar with, rather than a religious institution. Azzahra was an active Facebook user, often uploading personal snapshots; none of these images reflected her former lifestyle as much as the ones of her previously wearing shorts and not wearing a hijab. As for the hijab, at the time, she wore one occasionally - only on Friday and saw that as something she could switch on and off.

Her change began unexpectedly in 2019 while scrolling through her Facebook feed. She saw a post from a family acquaintance that served as a religious reminder to Muslim women about the enduring impact of posting inappropriate photos on the internet. The post explained that a person could be held accountable for those photos long after they die, as long as they are still visible. That night, she couldn't shake that message. She said it was like a spiritual jolt.

“That post really resonated with me. I couldn't sleep. I felt like Allah was calling me. The next day I deleted over 2,000 photos, with hijab and without, and said to myself: 'Be conscious of Allah.'”

This moment was a spiritual turning point. From that day onwards, Azzahra intentionally committed to avoiding the practice of posting pictures of herself on social media, not only for her own modesty but also to avoid implicating others, friends, and family, by what she viewed as a source of moral distraction. Soon after, Azzahra found a Facebook page (QTMO) that offered a Qur'an Tajweed class and enrolled despite not knowing any Arabic. She studied for 5 months and began following da'wah videos and Muslim scholars on social media.

"Alhamdulillah, I have never studied formally in a madrasah; however, I never stopped learning through online studies. I am still learning."

Azzahra’s experience shows how digital platforms can serve as effective initiators of religious transformation, particularly for converts who had limited access to traditional Islamic learning. While social media initially functioned as an avenue for self-expression, it became her means of developing spiritually and holding herself accountable ethically. In addition to representing a form of dress, her transition from a variety of ways to "occasionally" wearing hijab to wanting to wear the niqab indicates a more developed and potentially more complicated change.

"From being a hijabi, I now want to wear the niqab. I am also trying my best to avoid the relationships that are impermissible and be patient until Allah sends what is meant to be."

Yet, while she sought spiritual growth, there was social rejection. As someone who grew up in a devout Roman Catholic home and had an active part in church life, her conversion shocked and repulsed people. Many people doubted her sincerity, reducing her change to a fleeting phase. Some used her past against her, questioning the point of wearing modest clothing now when they remembered her differently.

"People said things like, 'What a waste—Azzahra became Muslim.' Others expressed disbelief and mocked me: 'You used to be so open, and now, you're covered? It just won't last.' But they don't know how much I've thought this through—a thousand times."

Still, she stuck to her decision. Her exploration of Islam had begun in high school when she saw her close classmates wearing hijab and was curious about it. But she pushed those feelings down for a long time because of her concern about being misunderstood and because she feared her family would not approve. However, her curiosity never subsided. In college at MSU General Santos, which is a really multicultural space with lots of different cultures and practicing students, her curiosity only intensified. She also remembered getting goosebumps any time she heard the adhān, and she recognized that her heart had always yearned towards Islam.

"I saw then—I have always loved Islam. I just was too afraid to admit it."

At first, her parents had a hard time acknowledging her choice. But over time, there was some small support. Her mom would buy her hijabs, and her dad would prepare halal food while she was home. These were not blatantly out in the open space, but were their quiet and subtle way of tolerating her choice. For Azzahra, this was all the product of continual prayer, patience, supplication, and putting her trust in Allah's plan for her.

Her position is still complex. She continues to dwell in-between her past and her present. In some family circumstances, she takes off her hijab so as to not make a scene, a choice she admits she is taking with humility.

"Be patient with me, I am still learning. I am trying to live in ways that I believe are right."

Azzahra's experience is illustrative of Turner's liminality because she embodies a space of religious identity, neither fully part of her Christian background nor always accepted by the born-Muslim community. Azzahra's journey also demonstrates Rambo's "consequences" stage, which refers to the lasting effects of conversion on one's social relationships, identity, and everyday practices.

Azzahra's sense of belonging centered more on the community, which exists not in physical form but online. The online ummah even provided solace when all her real-life relationships did not; she was offered emotional support, religious education, and an embrace, which were often absent in her physical surroundings. Her experience reinforces the broader theme of how the act of negotiating belonging and community

becomes important in a person's life. Although Azzahra has yet to find complete acceptance from the people in her life, she has found meaning and comfort in online communities, religious sites, and fellow reverts. Although she has not physically met with these groups of women, it has provided her with not only guidance and mentorship but also sovereignty over a unique church where, instead of being questioned, her Muslim identity is acknowledged, understood, and publicly celebrated.

While Azzahra's shift was sparked by a digital encounter, for Farah, her experience is one of the quiet resilience of spiritual yearning, to which she became aware amidst some of the painful isolation, and ultimately, along with the healing solace of Islamic teachings, she accessed digitally.

Farah (pseudonym) is a young Filipina from the Eastern Visayas who was raised in a very Catholic family and involved with her parish as a youth leader. Throughout her childhood, she was engaged with the parish and participated in the youth group and Bible study, and enjoyed singing in the choir. But following the unanticipated death of her oldest sister, she began to lose interest in her faith and experienced some doubt about the meaning of suffering. These emotional struggles remained covert while she continued to pursue her degree in nursing.

Farah spent more time online during more COVID-19 lockdowns. One night, she had been watching a YouTube video, and out of the blue, a Filipina Muslim convert shared her reversion story. This unexpected encounter led her to other Islamic content, lectures about the character of the Prophet, videos about Tawheed, and short da'wah clips on TikTok. The more she watched, the more her interest grew.

"It was basic curiosity to begin with, but as I listened, I felt more and more at peace. This was the first time that a religion felt right with my heart."

She started by following Muslim content creators and joined a private Facebook group for Filipino reverts. After a few months of studying online and reflecting privately, Farah took her Shahadah secretly on June 30, 2022, with the help of a revert support group on video call.

But becoming a Muslim was only the beginning of the journey for her; Farah kept her conversion a secret from her family for nearly a year. At home, she prayed

silently in her bedroom and practiced Ramadan without publicly announcing it, just skipping breakfast and dinner without mentioning it. Farah felt challenged by trying to practice her faith privately while engaging in school and attending family engagements.

She struggled to connect with the local Muslim community. The nearest masjid was a jeepney ride away and, as a new person who didn't know the first thing about appropriate behavior in the mosque, she was reluctant to go alone. On her first visit, she observed that everyone seemed to know everyone else. Nobody spoke to her. She attended to the prayer, left quietly, and never went back.

"I didn't feel judged. But I also didn't feel noticed. Everyone had their group. I was just the new girl with a soft voice and mismatched hijab."

With limited opportunities for face-to-face support, Farah returned to the online world, in which she found comfort and community. She signed up for a free Qur'an reading class on Messenger, received da'wah reminders on Telegram, and watched weekly talks by female scholars on YouTube. It was through this "digital ummah" in which she learned to make du'ā, memorize short sūrahs from the Qur'an, and gradually develop her identity as a Muslim woman.

"It was online that I felt I could ask questions without being judged. It was where I found sisters who said it was okay to take small steps."

However, upholding her public image was difficult; friends from the past remarked on the differences in her appearance, asking leading questions. She wore the hijab publicly only in places where she was far away from home, out of fear of what her family would think of her. There was one time when she made an anonymous account online to write about her thoughts and connect with other people about her reflections on becoming Muslim.

Eventually, her mother discovered her prayer mat and Qur'an books and had a frank, yet somewhat tense conversation with her. Even though her family did not fully adopt her reversion, they stopped publicly opposing it as well. Her mother began to ask softer questions, and her father started calling her the "Muslim girl" and smiling.

Farah's story illustrates the emotional and social negotiations many converts make in their post-shahādah lives. She exists in a liminal realm, as described by Victor

Turner, being situated between her previous life and her new faith, and also between the constraints of her family and the unknowns of the Muslim community. Instead of traditional religious institutions, her sense of belonging is developed in digital spaces, where integrity, collective struggle, and a virtual sisterhood helped develop her new identity.

From Rambo's "consequences" phase, Farah's experience reflects the delayed consequences of conversion, shifting her family dynamics, self-concept, and social and spiritual scaffolding. Her account highlights the important role of contemporary da'wah movements, especially via the internet, as sources of support for converts who are struggling through spiritual development and identity change in isolation.

"I'm still finding my place. But I know who I am now, and even if I don't show it all the time externally, Allah sees the commitment. That's good enough for now."

The stories of Fatima, Azzahra, and Farah offer a wonderfully thick account of the ways that Balik-Islam converts in the Philippines navigate belonging after accepting Islam. Each example is evident in different ways - one case led to family abandonment and stigma, another case demonstrated modest lifestyle change through social media, and the final case was of secrecy related to composition for prayer and anonymous practices online. Still, there are shared experiences across their narratives: conversion does not equate to acceptance or belonging in the community.

A recurring theme across their stories is the need for active and continuous negotiation of belonging. This need is particularly pertinent when viewed with suspicion, because converts are judged for their pasts or are not given proper institutional support. Fatima's case demonstrates that cultural gatekeeping still exists in certain born Muslims who do not allow reverts full inclusion in their Muslim identity based on their lineage. Azzahra's case represents both internal and external conflict as she negotiates a reformed spiritual life with her social and digital past. Finally, Farah's quiet reversion brought light to a widespread and somewhat overlooked issue: practicing Islam in secret, a private, intimate reversion wherein she is solitary, navigating religious anticipatory anxiety and familial pressure.

Together, their lived experiences vividly illustrate Turner’s conceptualization

of liminality as a state of "in-betweenness," where the convert is temporally situated at the threshold between the old and new, at the threshold of rejection and recognition, and between spiritual certitude and social exclusion. Some converts likely feel the conditions of their liminality are not ephemeral, and that they will exist in that state for many years while they continue to validate their legitimacy, membership, and spirituality. Nonetheless, the threshold also appears to cultivate considerable resilience, clarity, and forms of self-making in religious identity.

Similarly, Rambo's "consequences" stage is a critical framework for understanding these paths. The outcomes of conversion are not simply a matter of belief change, but an extreme renegotiation of identity, interpersonal relationships, and lifestyle organized around a changed frame of reference. The costs of conversion are often overt: severed family ties, loneliness, unarticulated exclusions in mosques, and the stress of spiritual negotiation and re-invention. This stage also highlights possibilities for transformation, especially with the emergence of the digital ummah.

Online platforms are increasingly both a means of survival and a sanctuary. In physical contexts where converts might encounter silence, scrutiny, or indifference, online spaces offer something local mosques sometimes do not: accessibility, compassion, peer teaching, and a community free of judgment. This trend reflects wider-ranging transformations in Southeast Asia, where digital religious engagement is augmenting or replacing traditional forms of religious involvement. As Khafidz and Kurniasih point out, even significant da'wah entrepreneurs are engaging with YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram to exert authority and reach others[197] For Balik-Islam converts such as Fatima, Azzahra, and Farah, those same technologies are not just a source of knowledge but also a life-supporting one.

Overall, Theme 7 demonstrates that for many Balik-Islam converts in the Philippines, the path to belonging does not end with the shahādah but begins there, underpinned by emotional negotiations, social rejection, and a search for acceptance,

[197] Apri Kurniasih and Moch. Khafidz Fuad Raya, "Digitalizing Da'wah and religious authorities in contemporary Indonesia: After the Fall of Religious Leader," *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 6, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.30821/jcims.v6i1.9660.

both online and in person. While conversion may entail a spiritual commitment, the implications reveal themselves as realities lived in relational exchanges: tense family dynamics, social exclusion from mosques, and the daily work of establishing one's sincerity. Turner's state of liminality establishes the context of traditional faith conversion in these women's lives: each emerges in some space between their prior selves or traditional identities and their newly established Muslim selves or identities, and the complex spectrum of recognition, rejection, disconnection, and solidarity that surrounds the shift. Similarly, Rambo's "consequences" phase characterized another moment of emotional, psychological, and structural impact of their conversions when the social reality of their converted faith had to be reconciled with their faith. Most central to this theme is the important role these online spaces played as a primary, not secondary or stand-in space for belonging to an ummah, as often these women were looking for belonging sans any institutional support. Their lived experiences show they had both meaningful validation and mentoring, and a sense of spirituality when their fleshly lived experiences of belonging were failing. Their stories were invitations to rethink the structure of Muslim community-based living and how to construct belonging through sincerity, not kin.

4.7 The Role of Religious Leaders: Between Support and Structural Fragility in Post-Conversion Integration

The post-conversion journey of Balik-Islam in Mindanao is shaped by not only their resiliency or the community attitudes that they encountered, but also the presence or lack of continued overall institutional support. This includes any presence of religious leaders, mosque-based educators, and da'wah centres, and this theme will explore the institutions through **Sheikh Andang (pseudonym),** Executive Director of the Muslim Religious Advisory Council of General Santos City and Vice President for Mindanao of the Salaam Police Advocacy Group (SPAG)

Sheikh Andang (pseudonym) stated that reverts should be treated over time just as one treats a newborn. *"We should treat our brothers and sisters who revert to Islam like newborn babies*. *An infant cannot stand by themselves and must be guided and taught over time, step by step."* This perspective coincides with Rambo's

"consequences" stage, which emphasizes the affective, cognitive, and behavioral changes that occur after the instant of conversion[198]. This view also aligns with Turner[199], who describes liminality, where converts, suspended between two identities, require social and spiritual scaffolding in a structured manner to support their transition to full membership of the ummah.

Historically, Masjid Arabiya has had 1- to 3-month reorientation programs in the form of Qur'an classes, counseling, temporary housing, and family mediation, especially to converts disowned by their families due to their conversion.

"Some of the reverts you interviewed earlier came to Islam through this center," Sheikh Andang emphasized, indicating that personal transformation is tied to institutional reach. These programs exemplify a form of compassionate, relational da'wah based on lived experience, not abstraction.

Despite this, his narrative exposed considerable institutional fragilities. The center's educational program and shelter had been placed on hold due to financial issues and limited manpower. More importantly, there is no formal connection to zakat institutions that could support indigent converts.

"Many leave Islam and face financial problems; they are often tempted to revert back to their old ways. When we catch it in time, we can help them stay, but some are lost no matter what," he said. This reality indicates a material dimension of post-conversion vulnerability, one of the recurring themes within this study.

Sheikh Andang also stressed the disproportion between Islamic da'wah infrastructure and Christian missionary infrastructure. *"They are building churches in the remote. If they can do it, why can't we? We have the truth; we just need a better strategy."* Sheikh Andang's critique brings to attention the lack of logistical and strategic planning needed to make Islamic institutions in the Philippines responsive to the demands of converts in their social and geographical landscapes. While the faith of Islam has deep-seated and historical roots in the Philippines, the contemporary Islamic institutional base has not caught up to the demands of increasingly larger communities

[198] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*.
[199] Turner, *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*.

of converts.

In addition to education, the center is involved in interfaith programs and civic engagement through partnerships with barangays and the City Mayor's Office Integrated Cultural Affairs Division (CMO-ICAD). Sheikh Andang, as the chair of the Muslim Religious Advisory Council (MRAC), perceives da'wah not simply as proselytization, but as public moral formation, including character and example. He states: *"Let your change be seen, let the talk be less."* His ethic resonates with the desires of many Balik-Islam converts featured in this chapter, who are interested in proving their faith through everyday life.

However, institutional da'wah remains fragile and inconsistently funded. Programs depend on volunteerism, partnerships, and intermittent donations. Without foundational investments from zakat organizations or non-existent governmental integration into social services, many are inevitably sidelined. This creates a dichotomy: Islam may be historically embedded in the Philippines, but many of its new adherents are left to navigate the faith in isolation, between cultural exclusion and institutional neglect.

Theme 7 illustrates how leaders such as Sheikh Andang exemplify the importance of compassionate leadership in religion, while also highlighting the need for community involvement and policy changes to support their efforts effectively in Balik-Islam's identity transformation following conversion.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a qualitative, human-centered examination of the post-conversion experiences of Balik-Islam converts in non-BARMM regions of Mindanao. Through a thematic analysis of fifteen participant narratives, I demonstrated the relational dynamics between marginalization, identity-making, and spiritual renewal. By utilizing Rambo's "consequences" phase and Turner's definition of liminality, the chapter has shown that conversion is an extended, relational process influenced by institutional neglect, intra-ummah discrimination, gender performance, and digital mediation.

Converts frequently find themselves caught between their former identities as

Christians and their new identity as Muslims and encounter rejection from their families, scrutiny from their social circles, and cultural gatekeeping from born Muslims. Still, many find service in creating grassroots da'wah, building online communities, and constructing their spiritual journeys with honesty and in service to others. The stories that emerge in this context reveal a paradox: while Islam is diacritically located in the region's history, converts often experience it alone.

Therefore, this chapter proposed a new way of visualizing conversion and its support. Faith is not merely an internal conversion, but it is a lived, contested, and structurally conditioned experience. Thus, effectively supporting Balik-Islam converts will take a multi-dimensional approach involving community-based mentoring, gender-responsive programming, digital literacy, and sustained investments in a variety of institutions. Only then will they be able to occupy the ummah fully, not only as believers but also as full and equal members in a spiritually and socially inclusive Islamic community.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Concluding Remarks

Change, tension, and resilience determine the post-conversion lives of Balik-Islam reverts in Mindanao. Although there is a deep-seated historical connection that Mindanao has with Islam, reversion here is not just about revisiting roots. Reversion starts a long process of identity negotiation in most Balik-Islam, and this process is characterised by social exclusion of their previous Christian lives, institutional marginality, and, to some degree, acceptance by other born-Muslim communities who tend to define religiosity through ethnolinguistic parameters.

The idea of conversion to Islam comes out as not just a spiritual affair but as an institution of a continuous policy to deal with the dislocation of emotions, suspicion towards the social environment, and displacement in culture. In the areas beyond the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region (BARMM), including Davao City, General Santos, and Sarangani, a revert still needs to build a religious life in an area with no Islamic infrastructure, and kinship support or spiritual guidance. The religious practice is transformed into a daily improvisation, extended by a community of friends, self-education, and digital dawah.

The concept of Balik-Islam in this study is based on the stages of consequences developed by Rambo and Farhadian and the liminality concept developed by Turner, which explains that Balik-Islam spans an extended transition period. These converts feel disconnected from their previous social networks but are not entirely accepted by the born-Muslim community. This liminal state of religious identity is a space of trauma and possibility, where converts struggle with invisibility yet also find ways to strengthen themselves and reinvent the community. Within these margins, they develop a unique form of spiritual discipline; they are also inspired by sympathetic patriarchs such as Sheikh Andang (pseudonym) and Sheikh Abdul Baki (pseudonym), creating a new kind of Muslim identity that is both individual and communal.

This analysis's gendered and generational aspects also reveal that reversion is

experienced variously along the social lines. Women especially voiced greater stigmatisation by both their families and the institutions. Hijab, as is often the case with any other phenomenon, turns out to be not just the indicator of a spiritual concept but also the sign of difference, which always causes a misunderstanding in social life. These personal experiences can also be cemented into their perceptions of power and validation. However, in comparison, long-term converts possess mentoring capabilities and cultural and spiritual mediating roles in the faith development process that are developed through hardship and personal progress.

This research reveals that reversion is not about reaching a specific place but rather an ongoing journey. Testimonies from the actors show that religious identity is not merely an internal, personal thing; it is continuously created, challenged, and negotiated within family, community norms, and political contexts. The lasting impact of regional conflicts, especially the legacy of the Marawi Siege, has heightened public suspicion toward Muslim converts, making their reversion an obvious act that is often interpreted through security concerns and political motives. For reverts, the display of religious authenticity is under intense scrutiny, and they all seek moments of silence where they can belong and enjoy spiritual fulfilment.

Nevertheless, in many respects, Balik-Islam participants could be viewed as absolutely agentic and determined people amid all these burdens. Most of them created their community variants and kept their faith alive by meeting regularly in informal spaces and practising online or in other small groups, where they mentor others. Their action is a personal commitment toward a wider need for inclusion at an institutional and communal level. In a world where there is no formal support and where it is most likely absent in the non-BARMM regions, then it is the convert who will become the architect of his or her religious life.

Overall, this study argues that the Balik-Islam experience in Mindanao is a sign of religious belief and a powerful lens through which to understand the intersection of religion, marginalisation, identity, and resistance. Conversion is an act of reclaiming oneself, but it is also an act of survival. For these reverts, the journey to Islam is not a return to certainty but an ambitious exploration into a complex spiritual realm that is

constantly contested. In this thesis, there is a need for support systems—social, institutional, and spiritual—that are intentional and long-term, considering Muslim converts' unique needs and contributions in such diverse and post-conflict societies as those in Mindanao.

5.2 Recommendations

This study contributes significantly to the scholarship surrounding religious identity, marginalisation, and conversion to Islam in Southeast Asia, paying special consideration to the understudied Philippines setting. Placing the voices and life experiences of the Balik-Islam converts in the non-BARMM regions, the study will be a primary source of information in understanding the extent to which religious identity is attributed to contestation, negotiation, and redefinition of this identity in the pluralistic and postcolonial world.

That conversion to Islam is conditioned not only by theological belief but also by the transverse movements of ethnicity, gender, geography, and historical memory underlines the findings. Where Islam is indigenous and marginal at the same time, as in regions beyond the BARMM, reversions are particularly complicated. The type of experience found in Balik-Islam conveys the message that the converts may need to struggle in a situation where there are rival legacies of legitimacy and may be regarded as alien in both their former Christian circles and their born-Muslim circles.

Sociologically, the research contributes to knowledge of how religious identity can be created in the scarcity of communal support, the lack of infrastructure, and social ambivalence. It demonstrates the results of religious liminality and how people create meaning, belonging, and continuity with uncertainty and exclusion. It also demonstrates the relevance of online environments to be locations of spiritual development, but also possible ideological dispersion, therefore implying a necessity for future studies of the role of online Islamic practices on the post-conversion paths in modern contexts.

The study also presents theoretical issues concerning the sustainability of the liminal religious identity. This leads to one question: How do converts maintain faith daily, create support networks where they lack serious organisation, and how does their

agency redefine ideas in the Muslim community as marginal actors? In this way, participants of the Balik-Islam are also subjects of religious change, but also play the active role of authors in the development of the textures of Filipino Islam.

Future academic inquiry can look at inter-regional comparative studies, including BARMM settings or even settings where there is a greater extent of Islamic institutional solidity. Further gender-specific research may also discuss the declaration of Muslim women converts regarding attending the public presentation of religiosity, family, and views on piety. In this regard, they should consider the knowledge of Muslim women converts regarding their visibility and concrete actions of religiosity. The religious identity across generations could also be studied in a longitudinal research among the children of Balik-Islam reverts.

The thesis finally gives a situated and empirical explanation of Balik-Islam in Mindanao. It indicates that reversion is not only a theological event but a process that is dynamic socially and spiritually, challenging, and made-determined. Their narratives provide an insight into the intricacies of religious conversion, its nuances and the long-lasting intricacies of preservation and praxis on the fringe of religious life.

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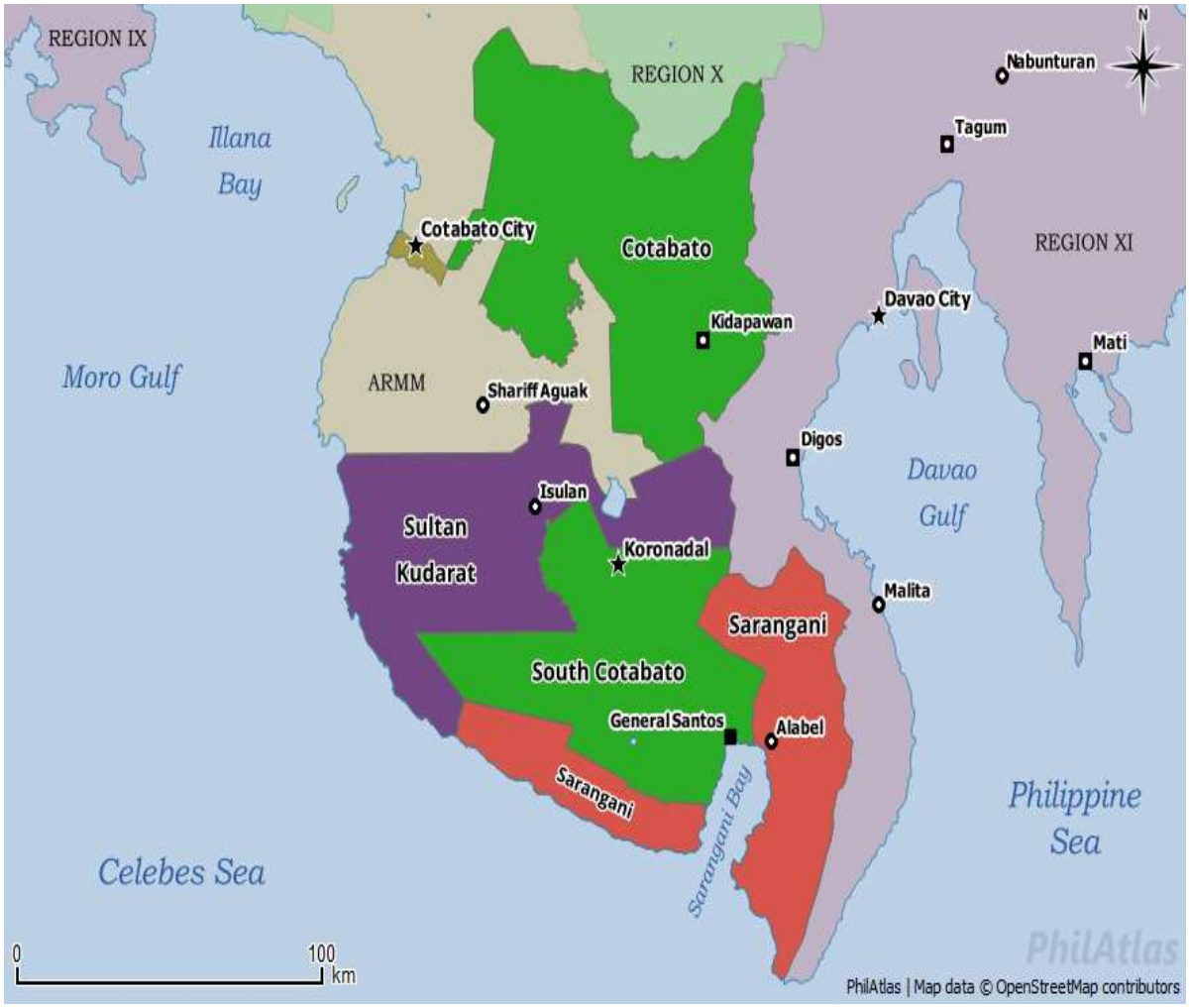
APPENDIX

A. Map of the Philippines

B. Map of BARRM

C. Map of SOCCSKSARGEN (outside BARRM)



D. Letter of Research Permit

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia | Faculty of Islamic Studies

Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia
Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia
Jalan Raya Bogor KM. 33.5
Cisalak, Sukmajaya, Depok, West Java 16416
islamic.studies@uii.ac.id
uii.ac.id

LETTER OF RESEARCH PERMIT

Ref. No : 76/Dek/FSI/UIII/SIP.02/08/2025

Depok, August 4th, 2025

Attachment : -

Subject : Request for Research Permit

Dear,

Balik-Islam Participants, Sheik Abdul Baki Pangolima, Sheikh Ibrahim Andang

Assalamu'alaikum wr. wb.,

We hereby certify the following student:

Name	:	Charlene Angkay
Student ID Number	:	01212320003
Faculty	:	Islamic Studies
Study Program	:	MA in Islamic Studies

Is conducting research for her thesis with the following details:

Thesis Title	:	Balik-Islam in Mindanao: The Religious Identity Transformation among the Reverts in Southern Philippines
Research Duration	:	April-May

We respectfully request your assistance in granting research permission to the student. The research data will only be used for academic purposes and will not be disseminated for other purposes.

This request letter is made for its definite intent. Thank you for your kind attention and cooperation.

Wassalamu'alaikum Wr. Wb.,

Kind Regards,
Dean of the Faculty of Islamic Studies

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia | Faculty of Islamic Studies

Prof. Yanwar Pribadi, Ph.D.