



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i8/14391>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i8/14391

Received: 17 June 2022, **Revised:** 19 July 2022, **Accepted:** 02 August 2022

Published Online: 23 August 2022

In-Text Citation: (Awang et al., 2022)

To Cite this Article: Awang, A., Mat, A. C., & Ghani, R. A. (2022). Challenges of *Muallaf* in Building Muslim's Identity in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(8), 1240 – 1252.

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Vol. 12, No. 8, 2022, Pg. 1240 – 1252

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



www.hrmars.com

ISSN: 2222-6990

Challenges of *Muallaf* in Building Muslim's Identity in Malaysia

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Abstract

Identity is related to a nation's culture, belief system, and language. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country inhabited by various races and religions. Every year there is a conversion to Islam among non-Muslims on the influence of various factors. It becomes a challenge to certain ethnicities to maintain their identity and build a genuine Muslim personality. This study aims to identify the challenges faced by groups who embrace Islam (*muallaf*) in building their identity as Muslims. This descriptive study uses an interview method on five important people who are directly involved in the management of *muallaf* in Malaysia. This study was conducted in five selected zones, namely Kedah (Northern Peninsula Zone), Terengganu (Peninsular East Coast Zone), Selangor (Peninsular West Coast Zone), and Sabah (West Malaysia Zone). The results of the study found that the factors of lack of understanding and appreciation of religious teachings, embracing Islam because of marriage, less moral support from Born-Muslim partner, continuing living in the non-Muslim community, the huge gap with the Muslim community, and difficulty to eliminate old habits are challenges faced by *muallaf* in building Muslim themselves-identity. This study is important because it provides early information to the relevant institution in Malaysia to take prevention worse, such as apostasy among *muallaf*.

Keywords: Challenges, Building, Self-Identity, *Muallaf*, Malaysia

Introduction

Malaysia is a country populated by groups of various ethnicities, races, and religions. All Malays are Muslims, most of the Chinese are Buddhists, Confucianists or Taoists, Indian are Hindus while most Sabah and Sarawak natives indulged with Christians, various forms of animistic and tribal belief systems. Every ethnicity has an identity that originated from hereditary ancestors since long-lived. Indeed, the practice of values either in terms of way of life, their thinking, and their self-identity is a manifestation of the ethnicity's identity tradition. The diversity and difference of living cultures make the goal of developing a Malaysian-shaped identity quite difficult to implement. This is because some of the ethnicities want to practice their own culture regardless of the sensitivities of other ethnicities.

Muallaf is a group that has just converted to Islam through a period of re-development identity. This group rebuilds the identity of the nation by adapting it according to the framework required by Islam. In 2012, the number of *muallaf* registered with the Islamic Religious Department of Malaysia (JAKIM) was 106,747 people (Adibah & Zubaidah, 2018). This number is constantly increasing every year with an average conversion of about 10,000 individuals per year (Noreha et al., 2019). However, the failure to build an identity as a Muslim has caused the *muallaf* in pressure, be in conflict, and more worryingly dismay is that they will revert to the old religion (apostasy). The study conducted by Suariza et al. (2018) explained that a total of 823 individuals including a group of *muallaf* applied to leave Islam (apostasy) in Malaysia in 2011. The issues of apostasy that occurred among *muallaf* in Malaysia were associated and related with failure to apply identity as a Muslim. What exact factors make *muallaf* in Malaysia fail to build their identity as Muslim, what are the challenges they face? Therefore, this study discusses the challenges faced by *muallaf* in Malaysia in developing the Muslim identity as recommended by Islamic teaching.

Research Objectives

- to identify the challenges faced by groups who embrace Islam (*muallaf*) in building their identity as Muslims

Literature Review

The word 'identity' gives the meaning of a special and unique character that signifies the value of a person's personality or ethnicity. Conventionally, the terminology 'identity' also refers to custom, culture, language, and religion (Kamus Dewan 2015). Identity is used to refer to a person's expression of his or her intimacy of country, race, and appreciation in his or her religious life (Adibah et al., 2020). Whereby Zakaria Stapa et al (2012) stated that identity is '*huwiyyah*' which is a trait that must be possessed by an individual or a nation and it becomes a character to that nation. The identity that exists in a nation becomes a catalyst to the spirit of belonging and the point that distinguishes between groups and other groups of people (Zurina and Yasran, 2020).

Various factors influence the development of personal identity including the living environment, natural conditions, beliefs, and historical experiences. However, religion or belief is the most dominant factor that influences the development and advancement of personal identity (Adibah et al., 2020). On the other hand, Nur Diyana and Berhanuddin (2019) view that religion is capable to open a person's view of itself to life which can further change his soul's more meaningful values of identity. A famous Islamic thinker, Muhammad Iqbal, stated that a Muslim in developing his identity must nourish his personality by avoiding things that can erode him. Thus he stated that a Muslim must be a servant of God (Allah) who is obedient to his teachings, not materialistic, there must be tolerance in respecting the others' religion and have a creative attitude in developing themselves. In building the Muslim identity, he also suggested that the individual should have a courageous nature in upholding the truth and avoid any arrogant nature (Rahmad, 2018). From another perspective, the identity of a Muslim can be expressed as a Muslim who needs to have a life based on the guidelines outlined as stated in the Quran and the Sunnah (the way of life prescribed as normative in Islam). In talking about this, the Qur'an displays many stories that can be used as lessons in shaping Muslim personal identity (Nurzatil and Yaakob, 2019). In short, the views presented above show that in building the Muslim identity, religious values are paramount to be applied to build the Muslim's character.

Regarding to this, Quraish Shibab (1988) states that the revelation of the Qur'an aims to develop a human identity in line with the goal of human creation as caliphs and servants on this earth. In other words, the Qur'an as the main source of knowledge in developing the identity of Muslims is not only conveying the method of *tarbiyah* (education) to human beings to be exemplary, teaching human beings from ignorance to knowledge, advocating doing all that is good and avoiding all things that come from evil even he also explains aspects that touch on legal issues such as *halal* (permitted), *haram* (prohibited), *Sunnah* (as exemplified by Prophet PBUH) or *makruh* (discouraged) in building Muslim's character. Thus, in building this Muslim identity, the continuous and repetitive process of *tarbiyah* cannot be separated in the life of a Muslim. *Tarbiyah* is a process to develop and expand one's potential optimally with the method of preserving, nurturing, improving, treating, and arranging things in a planned and continuous manner (Ridwan, 2018). This means that a Muslim who succeeds in building his identity is entitled to know, understand and appreciate religious value accurately.

In Malaysia, the term '*muallaf*' refers to the Chinese, Indians, and other ethnicities who previously are non-Muslims converted to Islam as a new religion. *Muallaf* has also been referred to as new brothers, our brothers, or becoming Malays (Azman et al., 2020). Even so, *muallaf* has faced many new challenges in continuing his survival as a faithful Muslim. Among the challenges often faced by this community are conflicts with non-Muslim families, the perception of the Muslim surrounding community, adapting and adjusting their life based on Islamic law, financial problems, feeling isolated, and so on (Zamani et al. 2021). Undoubtedly, *muallaf* in Malaysia have been through and experienced living together with their communities respectively. Therefore, in the face of daily activities, it is found that practices derived from the old culture to a certain extent affect their new life (Azarudin and Azman, 2020). This culture encompasses aspects that are related to beliefs, knowledge, arts, customs, morals, rules, and all the creativity performed by a nation (Zuhidayah et al., 2019).

Strengthening and defending culture are closely related to the development aspects of the of a nation's identity (Adibah et al., 2020). Islam allows any form of cultural practice and the retention of the original identity as long as the culture does not conflict with the faith and must respect the boundaries of its religious teachings. In other words, the practice of culture needs to consider aspects of *halal* or *haram*, the degree of harm, and its implications to others. Among families and non-Muslim communities' common perceptions of the *muallaf* who convert to Islam is to 'become Malay' and be accused as a traitor because their relatives who convert are perceived of leaving all legacies inherited by the family such as discarding descendants in new names, severing ties with the family, setting aside the cultural practices by the family and so on. In short, among the factors that cause the greatest anger of non-Muslim family members is when the identity of the nation is thrown away in the new life of *muallaf* (Azarudin and Azman, 2020).

There are some past studies carried out by some previous researcher's study shed light on identity. Among the previous studies is conducted by Ramlah (2005) among IPT students on the National Principles (*Rukun Negara*). She found that there was leakage, reduction, and fading of understanding, appreciation, and practice of the National Principles among students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. Furthermore, the study conducted by Yusuf et al (2010) found that only 54.6% among students regardless of race and religion in HEIs still have a sustainable identity. Among the more specific studies on race is the study conducted by Hashim (2008) who found that most Malays began to fade away from their values of identity, but they are still intact in aspects of knowledge, religion, and education. While a study conducted by Hussin (2021) explained that the identity in the Malay

community of Terengganu is built from two inherited important elements, namely Islam as the belief and acceptance of the Malay community of sultanate as rulers. Other studies that related to Muslim identity are looking at the value of *taqwa* (piety) as an element in the construction of identity (Abu Zarrin Selamat et al. 2021), developing faith (*iman*), the legal system of Islam (*Syariah*), and Islamic morals (*akhlak*) (Nur Diyana and Berhanudin 2021), the role of the social environment (Ismah et al., 2018), appreciation of the use of *Jawi* writing and Islamic calligraphy (Zurina and Yasran 2020, Razi et al., 2020). Based on the above studies, it can be stated that the study of identity building in Malaysia looks at various aspects. However, there is notwithstanding a study to look at the *muallaf* identity building. Therefore, this study is important because it can add to the treasures of findings related to *muallaf* in developing their identity as a new Muslim. Even so, past studies have to some extent been a reference for the authors to construct the preference theme.

Research Methodology

This research is considered the qualitative approach in collecting the data of the respondents. Husaini and Purnomo (2022) mentioned qualitative research could be used to elaborate on the current situation or phenomenon that happened. Regarding the matter, interviews were held to examine the phenomenon of human behavior. Najib (2010) explained this subjective approach highlights the roles of humans whose wills and emotions are capable of creating their own interpreted civilization in accordance to time and place. Based on interviews, the researcher was able to get detailed and specific information. Thus, this kind of research design provides detailed information and a clear picture of perception and understanding to answer the research questions.

A set of questions was formed according to the themes and theory identified by the researcher. Then it was further checked by the experts of the subject matter. A detailed interview was done through several sessions based on the availability of the respondents as well the suitability of the data. The interview involved 5 important people who are directly involved and understand the reality of *muallaf's* life in Malaysia. The data collection ended when it reaches saturation (Creswell, 2005).

The process of data collection was done through the semi-structured and focused interview, which these aimed at ensuring of sharing experiences between researcher and respondents (Sunawari, 2009). The guideline for handling interviews can be set as a checklist to avoid any missing information. Before the interview, the pilot study was done to assist the researcher in the planning of data collection such as adapting the items according to the comments given by the respondents, deciding on the specific kinds of the required process during data collections.

In addition, a pilot study helps researchers to check the instruments' validity and find out the existing constraints during the data collection process. The answers were recorded using the tape recorder and were thoroughly transcribed. To facilitate the research, the researchers classified the answers based on the desired categories.

The Result and Discussion

Based on the research done through the interview conducted, it can be stated that among the factors that led to the failure to develop his identity as a Muslim are as follows:

i. Lack of basic Islamic Knowledge

As a new Muslim convert, *muallaf* should always be explained with the choices of doing or ignoring the right thing based on the framework of Islamic law in their daily lives. Hence, one of the factors towards *muallaf* inability to practice Islamic teaching and do improper Islamic practice is lack of religious knowledge. Related to this Zamri (2020) states that:

for instance, whilst the *muallaf* bumps into us (teacher) he will hold our feet as *ihitiram* (respect in Hinduism), if the Siamese do, he will respect us as the way the Siamese worship (as they worship the monks). They got used to it. He thought people whose matters related to religious affairs should do that.

Regardless of the long period of religious conversion, the *muallaf*, are still unable to practice Islamic teachings very well and they still take a stance that is contrary to the Islamic teachings such as drinking alcohol, gambling, and so on. The failure of *muallaf* to attend classes organized by the Religious Department, caused them to fail to master the Islamic teaching of Islam perfectly. Among the basics of Islamic education provided to *muallaf* are the basics of the Quran which includes the method of recognizing the letters of *hijaiyyah*, the way of Arabic pronunciation, and *tajwid* (rules of recitation), the memorization of surah *al-Fatihah*, the common verses, and so on. For a *muallaf*, attending a Quranic class is important as a basis for them to know, understand and appreciate the implementation of ibadah (to perform the duties of a Muslim) (Zamri, 2020). About this, Abdul Halim (2020) stated the identified factors that caused *muallaf* to be unable to attend classes where the location of residence is far from the class, hustle and bustle of work commitments, a language barrier in understanding the medium of instruction, got no permission from the couple and the attitude problem of *muallaf* himself.

The lack of Islamic education has implications on both implementations of the Islamic practice itself and the strength of their faith. There is a need for a balance of the spiritual and material in pursuit of progress and human happiness. The efforts of the religious departments and NGOs of *muallaf* not only to give basics of Islamic teaching but also ensure them to follow the right teachings. Indeed, Islamic education aims at providing *muallaf* with more understanding of Islamic teaching to achieve happiness and perfection in life, nourish good values, love family and race, have a good speech, and so on. Thus, Ridwan (2018) stated that Islamic education has a great impact on the development of *muallaf's* identity. In other words, Islamic education can flourish the emotions of *muallaf* while facing conflict with the family due to his conversion to Islam, re-adjusting life according to the Islamic framework and the Muslim community, and changing the value of life by Islamic teaching. Education is also defined as an effort to build his personality by the values and culture of society.

ii. Converting to Islam for Marriage

One of the important contributions of embracing Islam, of course, is the marriage of inter-ethnic in Malaysia. Interreligious interaction teaches some non-Muslim people to know and analyze Islam, it enables people a greater understanding of Muslim partner's religions. There are several different situations in encouraging the marriage of *muallaf* in Malaysia, namely converting to religion because of marrying a Muslim couple, marrying a Muslim couple after having a religious conversion, or retaining the original couple for having a religious conversion together (Ghazali, 2020). From the aspect of Islamic law, any non-Muslim who decides to marry a Muslim, he/she must convert to Islam. Hence, there are cases among *muallaf* who

converted to Islam because they wanted to marry a Muslim, without doing extensive research and studying on Islam. Even though they are married to a Muslim, their interest in learning the religion is less. With regards to a low level of Islamic knowledge, it is unsurprising that *muallaf* still practiced activities that contradict the true norms of Islam (Zamri, 2020).

Despite *muallaf* converted to Islam for a long period, among of them still does not fulfill the complete requirement of performing good *solat* (Muslim praying), eating in non-halal restaurants, and exposing *awrah* (part of the body in a Muslim person that is required to conceal or protected from the sight of non-mahram). Abdul Halim (2020) stated that the factor of converting to Islam because of solely deciding to marry with Muslim caused some *muallaf* cannot avoid the old contradict habit with Muslim lifestyle even though they have long embraced Islam. When there is a conflict between *muallaf* and his Muslim partner, cases are showing that *muallaf* reverted to the original teachings. Zamri (2020) explained that *muallaf* who were upset with the couple eventually reverted to the original teachings, as well as some of them, were persuaded by the immediate family members to return to the old religion. The situation becomes more difficult when *muallaf* is a foreigner who is married to a local citizen. In this regard, the foreigner *muallaf* who divorced would return to their home country by bringing the children together. Thus, the religious department or NGOs no longer have the authority to monitor the *muallaf* family.

The factor of divorce is often related to the physical or psychiatric disorder aspects (Faezah et al., 2020). For the newly Muslim community, the 'failure' to maintain harmony in the household will cause *muallaf* to feel disappointed and live again with the non-Muslim family and slowly loosen or let go of religious teachings. According to Ghazali (2020), there are cases of divorced *muallaf*, returning to Christianity because of frustration, yet the rule in this country is that when one of the spouses leaves Islam, then custody of the child will only be given to the ex-spouse who is a Muslim. The divorcee eventually decided to re-convert to Islam and marry her ex-husband for their interest in children. She explained that the second phase of *muallaf's* life as a Muslim made her more committed to the religion and carefully avoided indulging in apostasy. In a state of faith that is not yet strong and lacks understanding and appreciation of Islamic teaching, *muallafs* may face various challenges when they live with non-Muslim families, including the risk to revert to the old belief (Kamariah, 2021).

In fact, in going through married life, the role of Muslim couples is very important to provide guidance, give a good example and explain the basics of religion that can enhance the level of understanding of the *muallaf* so that they can become Muslims who truly appreciate Islam. The challenges faced by *muallaf* such as the family breakups happen, the frustration and weakness of the faith often led *muallaf* to decide on returning to the old religion. Some of the *muallaf* felt 'being forced' to practice the teachings of Islam because the main intention of converting Islam was marriage without a clear explanation about Islam. They have the potential to apostasy when there is a conflict in the household. Suariza et al (2018) state that the applications to revert from Islam among *muallafs* who married with Muslim Malay partners are usually due to frustration towards Muslim couples for the failure to provide proper education or their spouses who have cohabitated with others. Although there have been cases of *muallafs* who divorced a Muslim couple still admitting to adhering to Islam, the decision to re-live with the non-Muslim family revealed things even worse.

iii. Lack of Support from Muslim's Partner

Due to the marriage based on love, there are cases of *muallaf* who do not receive guidance from their Muslim spouses to deepen their Islamic knowledge. The *muallaf* couples did not

only failed to guide the true values of Islam but also exhibited practices that contradicted to Islamic teaching. Among them are not giving livelihood (*nafkah*), not having a fixed income, asking his wife for money, and extravagant lifestyle. There are some cases in which *muallaf* involve in the original teachings of her non-Muslim family, the couple let it alone because of his ignorance (Maisarah, 2021, Abdul Halim, 2020). In this situation, *muallaf* will face various dilemmas in finding and obtaining the truth. In the end, throughout this process of truth-seeking, the support from the closest person which is often her partner indispensable. *Muallaf* will face a situation of ambiguity, distrust, confusion, and distrust in themselves which ultimately leads to spiritual challenges in the search and determination of a religion that is in line with his nature (Wan and Najwa, 2020). The ignorance of the spouse causes many *muallaf* to be neglected, feel bland, mis-approached, and eventually reverted to the original belief. In reality, *muallaf* has a different educational background, culture, age, and level of thinking which this requires different methods of delivery to ensure the guidance and education process received is as much as possible.

Besides being unable to provide education and a good example to his partner (*muallaf*), there are cases among *muallaf* not getting permission from the husband to leave the house to get Islamic knowledge needs in classes organized by the religious department. This is stated as follows;

“The majority of Chinese convert to Islam because of getting married, before marriage, there is a promise that all can be done. After 5 or 6 years old, there is the issue of breakups. He (born Muslim) blames the couple (*muallaf*) ... but one of the reasons is that the couple (original Muslim) don't want to spend time teaching their spouse” (Maisarah, 2021).

Although the Religious Department provides *fardhu ain* classes, some married women do not get permission to attend the class. Therefore, among other measures taken by the religious department is to make a friendly visit to the *muallaf's* house that faces this problem so that information about Islam can be reached even at an unfavorable level (Abdul Halim 2020).

The above findings explain that the poor treatment and support of the born Muslim couple towards *muallaf* in some way could tarnish the good name of the religion. The failure of the couple to show a good example caused *muallaf* and non-Muslim families to have a negative perception of Islam. Taking into account that *muallaf* is a 'new' as Muslim, the husband or vice versa should not compare the *muallaf* with born Muslims who practiced Islam as the way of life and were brought up with an Islamic education from an early age. It should be understood that a good period of developing a Muslim identity for a *muallaf* is about five years while after that it will reach maturity in understanding Islamic teachings (Rasinah, 2012).

iv. Living in Non-Muslim Environment

For *muallaf*, the decision to embrace Islam is not being taken lightly. Most of them feel of division to convert to Islam. If they fail to live in the Islamic life perfectly, *muallaf* will have situations that are frustrated, isolated, never feel good, angry, and be in depression. Unfavorable environmental factors are one of the reasons why *muallaf* practice their Islamic life as not expected. Indeed, *muallaf* will face difficulties in adjusting to practice Islam when they lived with non-Muslim families and at the same time, the family strongly opposed his/her decision to embrace Islam. Even among of them persuaded *muallaf* to return to the original teachings. *Muallaf* is a group that has just moved in Islam, surely their faith will be easily shaken when dealt with pressure.

There is a case of a Filipino *muallaf* who decided not to live with his Christian family and community because she was worried about being influenced with daily life non-Muslim norms, providing halal food, feeling unhappy with his family members if he practices the teachings of Islam and so on. The other case was of a *muallaf* who had converted to Islam for 18 years, living in a non-Muslim community environment, often went out with non-Muslim friends to bars, and still drank beer. Despite having a long time embracing Islam, *muallaf* rarely attended the Islamic guidance classes organized by the Religious Department and make them still fail to recognize the letters of the Quran perfectly. There are also some cases of *muallaf* who embraced Islam at a young age, for which they still depend on the necessities of life as such place, education, clothing, and finances from family. Thus, some *muallaf* who kept their conversion to Islam secretly for a long time to family members to avoid financial restrictions, especially from their parents. For that, *muallaf* will not face constraints in doing Islamic practice when he/she keeps his conversion to Islam secretly to his family (Ghazali, 2020).

Based on the results of the study, it was found that some *muallafs* felt that they can maintain the momentum of their faith (*iman*) by no longer living together in the old community, moreover, their conversion to Islam does not get blessings from the family. This is because, some families will feel embarrassed, ridiculed by the community, or are isolated if there are Muslim family members who practice Islamic teachings and obedience such as wearing a hijab (the head covering Muslim women Muslim wear), doing salat, fasting, and so on. The results of this study are in line with the study conducted by Kamarulzaman and Athirah (2018) who explained that most *muallafs* living with non-Muslim families are excluded from all aspects of life and they also no longer get the same privileges as other family members. Emotional abusive words given by their non-Muslim family can weaken their faith and cause them to despair and then, trouble comes. Eventually, some of these *muallaf* tried to return to their old religion

iv. Stay away from the Muslim Community Environment

As the dominant group of Muslims in Malaysia, anything done by the Malays is a reflection of the Muslim lifestyle to the *muallaf* community in all aspects. Islam, which is often expressed as 'the way of life', becomes the backbone of the Malay culture of life which is Muslim. The application of Islamic values can be seen from small things to the relationships that affect the community such as doing gotong royong (the culture of helping the neighbor who will hold a wedding party), *kenduri-kendara* (daily life and Malay social customs), festival celebrations and so on. However, there are among *muallaf* who take the approach do not mix with the Malay community which causes them to fail to adapt to the Islamic values well (Zamri, 2020). In other words, the failure to interact well with the Muslim Malay community has caused the *muallaf* to fail to assimilate and understand the aspects of Islamic culture such as the implementation of covering the *awrah*, taking halal food, and so on perfectly.

Kamariah (2021) stated that there are among the *muallaf* who have difficulty implementing Islamic necessary practices such as doing *solat* (Muslim praying) and fasting in Ramadan month in *istiqamah* even though they embraced Islam for a long time. Since *muallaf* is a group that has just converted to Islam and there are some of the marginalized by the non-Muslim family and community, they need constant motivation for the actions or behavior as 'Muslim' from the surrounding Muslim community. Otherwise, a *muallaf* will face prolonged depression and something worse can happen to her/him. The results also show that *muallaf* who live with Muslim adoptive families can learn Islamic values more easily. Related to this

(Zamri, 2021) stated that the experience of *muallaf* living with Muslims or in Muslim communities accelerates the process of development of Muslim identity because the Malay Muslim community or good Muslim friends also show the real Islamic values and knowledge practically. He further explained that there are cases of *muallaf* (Ibanese Converts) who grew up in the community in Sarawak moving to Kedah and living with a Malay-Muslim adoptive family. The role of the foster family to further accelerate the process of developing a *muallaf* Muslim identity as such taught him/her a lot about how to perform daily *solat*, brought her to the mosque for how doing the congregational praying and taught him to recite the Quran every day.

In developing Muslim identity, the word 'motivation' has become a value term to *muallaf*, their self-motivation to deepen and strengthen Islamic knowledge are in various stages, from the lowest to the highest level. *Muallafs* who are less motivated need support and help from the surrounding Muslim community. *Muallaf* who are living in dominant Muslim society can learn indirectly how the values of the religion are applied in life more easily and spontaneously through a process known as a dialogue of life. Dialogue of life is a process of learning, understanding, and appreciating other religions through the sharing of life that takes place on a daily interaction. This means that every participant of dialogue can obtain information about the belief or culture of the other spontaneously and voluntarily (Azarudin et al., 2018).

vii. Difficulty of Changing the Old Way of Life

Indeed, every Muslim should be a well Islamic educated. Yet in practice, home and the influence in the surrounding community generally, do a systemic developing the good and bad values of a person. In the process of developing the identity of a *muallaf*, good values are one of the foundations for the well-being of life in this world and the hereafter. To build the good noble values (*akhlak*) can only be done through the appreciation of the human role as a servant of Allah by optimizing all the potential functions spiritually and physically so that it becomes a habit in the individual. However, there are some the *muallaf* face some difficulties to abandon their old habits and traditions. Regarding to this, Ghazali (2020) states that, in such circumstances, *muallaf* is quite difficult to make drastic changes, and sometimes this process takes a while before it becomes a new habit. Among the old habits that are quite difficult for *muallaf* to abandon are drinking alcohol, gambling, taking non-halal food, and so on. Maisarah (2021) explained, most of the bad values are noticed by *muallaf's* close friends or family members. This is stated as follows:

"Most of his/her close friends and some from family members, although his family is not Muslim they know that Islam requires prayers, and cannot drink alcohol ... sometimes his close friends or family members do report".

In this regard, Kamariah (2021) stated that there are two steps taken in developing the identity of *muallaf*, namely the management of thoughts and emotions, as well as ensuring that they are always consistent in doing Islamic practice. In the context of the self-development of *muallaf*, the first step taken is to trigger a sense of desire to develop the essence of Islamic values through maturity of the soul and clearer thinking. Since *muallafs* are and often face self-conflict, this first step can help *muallaf* to better known themselves and God according to Islam, correct all false understandings and thoughts, understand the true meaning of life, build and strengthen faith; and form a more comprehensive life plan. However, good values are difficult to build if there are still bad traits that have become a habit

in life. Even so, some *muallaf* find it difficult to abandon the habits and customs that were practiced before the time of Islam.

Based on the above statement, it can be stated that the conversion to Islam in Malaysia is an early chapter from *muallaf's* life as a new Muslim. The adjustment from the previous culture to the Islamic lifestyle is a big challenge for them in which a way of life is hard to adapt to, but it's entirely possible to adapt it. Furthermore, *muallaf* will have an identity crisis that can make them feel lost or frustrated with themselves. Related to this, Paiz and Anuar (2020) mentioned the concept of tolerance in Islamic law which is divided into two parts, namely '*uruf sahiih*' and '*uruf fasid*'. *Uruf sahiih* is anything that is a habit and practice in a society that does not contradict with al-Quran and al-Sunnah. While *uruf fasid* is common in society that is contrary to Islamic law. In the context of developing the identity of Muslim *muallaf*, only practices that match with the criteria of *uruf sahiih* can be continued by the aboriginal community while the opposite requires shariah-friendly modifications.

Conclusion

The concept of Muslim identity is close and can be related as adherence to containing inner the Qur'an and the Sunnah teaching. For *muallaf* or a group that has just embraced Islam, one of the most urgent tasks is to develop their identity to become Muslim. This essentially means that *muallaf* must learn, understand honestly, and fully to strengthen their religion.

The study found that among *muallaf's* challenges related to identity development as a Muslim, particularly lack to understand and appreciate Islamic teachings, lack of support from Muslim spouses to practice Muslim lifestyle, living in non-Muslim communities, isolated from the dominant Muslim community, and the attitude of the *muallaf* who refused to abandon old traditional practices that rooted in the life and at the same time they're acted contrary to the Islamic teachings.

Generally, these challenges should be addressed by government departments related to the care in the *muallaf* community welfare in Malaysia. Based on the six factors discussed, this study concludes that three main dimensions are at the root of these challenges as described in figure 1 below:

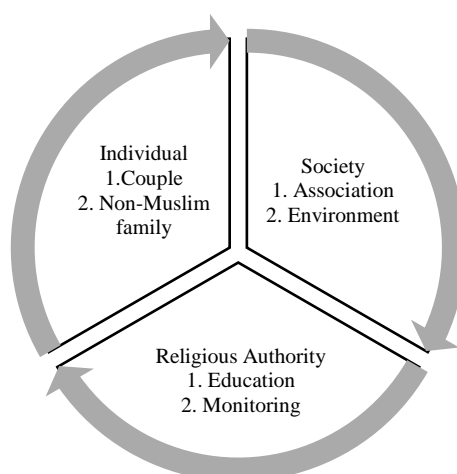


Figure 1: Challenges in Developing the Identity of *Muallaf* in Malaysia

Acknowledgment

The researcher team would like to thank 600-IRMI/FRGS/5/3 (473/2019) under Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) and the Ministry of Higher Education (FRGS/1/2019/SSOB/UITM/02/10) for providing funds for research to be successfully conducted.

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