



## Double Marginality in New Muslims' Relationship With Born Muslims and Non-Muslims

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**Abstract:** This study aims to elucidate the experiential aspects of Muslim converts who face the problems of double marginality in their relationship with Muslims and non-Muslims, and the progressive change in their familial relationship from strained to neutral. The method used is qualitative which is undertaken by examining biographical narratives of Muslim converts living in the western minority country and ethnographic case studies in Sabah, Malaysia as a representative majority Muslim country. The findings conclude no matter how long the duration of the dilemma, Muslim converts finally managed to deal with the situation and maintained a harmonious relationship with their non-Muslim families, and they are integrated well with the other Muslims. This study contributes to the understanding of the dilemma face on Muslim converts in whatever situation they are living in and their roles as a bridge builder in the Muslim-non-Muslim relations.

**Keywords:** *Double marginality, new Muslim, inter-religious dimension, familial relationship*

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### INTRODUCTION

Choosing to be a Muslim at a certain stage of one's life is different from those who are born Muslim. The former who is known as a Muslim convert or new Muslim faces the dilemma of retaining a harmonious relationship with their non-Muslim family and, at the same time, taking a long effort to integrate with members of the Muslim community. In other words, new Muslims encounter double marginality during their post-conversion i.e. being isolated in two situations: being a filial child and an obedient Muslim, which requires them to put things in balance. Some studies on conversion Anway (1996), Cheng (2015), Lindenberg (2009), Roald (2004), Shaharuddin, Usman, and Marlon (2016), and (Sintang & Hambali, 2016) showed the new Muslims' dilemma on facing the problem of double marginality, and encounter bitter experience and full of difficulty. It starts from deciding to embrace Islam until fulfilling the commitment of being a practicing Muslim. This dilemma is obvious in the relationship among Muslim converts with born Muslims and non-Muslims. The studies also showed that in the context of inter-religious dimension, it shapes four patterns of associations between the new Muslims and the non-Muslim families: starting from a strained relationship to an accommodative, neutral and supportive relationship. However, those studies have not specifically discussed the dilemma faced by the Muslim converts in the situation of living in the countries where Muslim are majority and minority ones. The objective of this study is to elucidate the experiential aspects of Muslim converts in facing the problems of double marginality in their relationship with Muslims and non-Muslims, and the progressive change in familial relationship from strained to neutral.

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## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method used is qualitative which involves the content analysis of biographical narratives both from literature of Muslim converts in the West representing those living in minority Muslim country and ethnographic studies from several cases in Sabah, Malaysia representing those living in majority Muslim country. The different scenario of the countries where the Muslim live as majority and minority are designed to be the subject area of the study. This is for the purpose to know whether the situation they are living in have influenced the problem of double marginality they are facing in their relationship with Muslim and non-Muslim. Sabah becomes the focal study area as it is one of the largest states in Malaysia which gives an account of the highest number of Muslim converts (Sintang et al., 2014).

In order to understand the experiential aspects of Muslim converts who face the problems of double marginality in their relationship with Muslims and non-Muslims and the progressive change in their familiar relationship, this study conducted a face-to-face in-depth interview with selected Muslim converts. The purposive sampling of Muslim converts was chosen as the interviewees based on those who attended the religious class at Kota Kinabalu and those who had already been known by the researcher through personal inter-county. Three cases are presented in this paper from the selected respondents of various ethnic groups of people in Sabah. Although the number of study cases involved is limited, the data gathered is enough to describe the experience of Muslim converts in the connection to the problem of double marginality.

## DOUBLE MARGINALITY IN THE LIFE EXPERIENCE OF NEW MUSLIMS

Double marginality refers to a situation in which individuals are viewed with suspicion from both sides. Those who are marginalized would feel they are situated on the two borders. In term of social integration, it means being excluded from social activity as an “outsider”. According to Rutledge (2007), the word marginality typically refers to people or groups of people being excluded for something in society. Marginality is simply a position in which a group of people or individual are at the outskirts or likely to be excluded. The concept of marginality was first introduced by Robert Park in 1928 when he explained the causes and consequences of human migrations. Park refers to those who are marginalized as the one that faces a “new type of personality” whereby he is living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples. In other words, the man on the margin of two cultures and two societies. In the context of the life experience of New Muslims, the concept of double marginality can be referred to the situation of being excluded from living and sharing the cultural life and traditions of two distinct society. They are isolated to be getting involved in any social activities as they are perceived to be suspicion from both parties either from the circle of born Muslim or non-Muslim side.

As study done by Van Nieuwkerk (2006), the converts experience stigmatization, failure or disintegration within their context, and they articulate these experiences concerning a “foreign” religion. Sintang and Hambali (2016) further argue that the converts face the problem of integrating certain cultural values with an Islamic identity, and this leads to a new identity as Chinese Muslim, British Muslim and European Muslim. It is to say that embracing Islam involves changes in the certain belief system and require the formation of change in new identity to fit the society he/she lives in. This can be implied in the case of conversion into Islam in Malaysia where the Muslim converts have always been associated with becoming Malay. In Chinese perception, those who choose to be Malays are those who enter the ways of an uncivilized race. Thus, embracing Islam would rather mean entering the “Malay way”, than accepting Islam as a universal religion.

In Western society, as Brice (2011) points out that converts are a minority within a minority group i.e. the Muslim community. They have assimilated a “non-indigenous” religious identity and have joined a minority group that is generally perceived in negative terms and is seen to be inferior to the majority. These are examples of marginality that the converts encounter when they are in a minority within a larger minority group. Being minority and having limited understanding in Islam would cause the converts to be victimized for the struggle in the name of Islam. This can be the case of the converts in the West who joined the foreign fighters of ISIS (Van San, 2015). The converts are being marginalized because of the new religion they are affiliated to as Islam has always been perceived negatively by the West and associated with the criminal involvement in terrorism activities.

The problem of being marginalized continue to happen when dealing with the new-Muslim relation with their non-Muslim family of origins as Zebiri (2014) states that the new Muslims are being isolated by two situations either to be integrated with the Muslim community or to gain acceptance from the non-Muslim family of origin. Therefore, new Muslims usually face the dilemma of fulfilling their commitments as Muslims and children, as they are required

to maintain a harmonious relationship with their non-Muslim families and to fulfill their obligations as practicing Muslims. The problem of double marginality in the relationship of the new Muslim with their fellow born Muslim and non-Muslim family of origin has been considered by Anway (1996) as among the most intense form of trauma in their family life and may cause separation. The problem of double marginality is not only related to telling the decision to the families and friends rather it becomes the hardest thing about converting to Islam when dealing with the identity issue of changing names and appearance.

The effects of religious transformation have been shown to be extraordinarily powerful in the lives of Muslim converts, their families and friends. The studies on conversion to Islam show that the process of conversion has traditionally stirred controversies in various social spaces, such as within the family and friendship circles (Sebastian & Parameswaran, 2007). It is not only telling the decision to the families, and friends become the hardest thing about converting to Islam, yet changing names and appearance are the central and controversial identity issues for Muslim converts (Allievi, 2006; Zebiri, 2014).

In the Malaysian context of Muslim converts, the situation of double marginality is illustrated by Shukri, Salam, et al. (2008) that Muslim converts always feel marginalized, as they are not able to fit into the community of their previous religion, and they cannot easily integrate into the new Malay Muslim community. Their religion is no longer that of their ethnic group, but they have also become a new member in the Islamic ummah. The situation of being marginalized becomes more difficult when sometimes their knowledge about Islam is underestimated by born Muslims who think they are more knowledgeable than the Muslim converts. This creates the dilemma when Muslim converts socialize with born Muslims to gain understanding about Islam since they are being isolated as a new-comer in the Muslim community. In this case, they most probably choose to stay with their non-Muslim families and friends, even though they might face more difficulties to practice some of their Islamic obligations and to abstain themselves from breaking certain religious boundaries. This is the situation of double marginality that the new Muslims usually encounter when they embrace Islam compared to the conversion to other religions in the Malaysian context of a majority Muslim country.

Shaharuddin et al. (2016) also highlighted the problem of double marginality in Malaysian Chinese converts. The things happen when the Chinese converts become less favored by their people who are different from their religious affiliations. They think choosing Islam is similar to becoming Malay which from the point of politics, they considered this case as a betrayal and an insult to the descendant and their struggle. Most of them are not feeling comfortable with the Malay Muslim lifestyles as they normally perceive the Malay as the people in the poor conditions on various aspects of social phenomena. They perceive the Malay Muslims always involve in bribery and various kinds of negative elements which had led non-Muslims did not seem interested in the religion of Islam.

Muslim converts have not been brought up in a Muslim family, and, therefore, their ethnic and cultural background would not be associated with Islam. In comparison to born Muslims, the Muslim converts are mostly not familiar with the dos and donts in Islam, as well as the rules of religious obligations and religious boundaries. Since they have not abided to the rule of Islam in their previous life, they have to weigh everything in balance. Once they have embraced Islam, they face the challenges of obeying the rule of Islam and also maintaining the harmonious relationship with their non-Muslim families. Never socializing with a Muslim family also means that the converts would have been more fully exposed to the impact of the dominant culture from their non-Muslim families. In other words, Muslim converts cannot run away from their non-Muslim families, because the influences from their families are ingrained in them. At the same time they have to learn many things about Islam, as a new religion they are affiliated to, as the way to be integrated with the Muslim community. This is the example of double marginality that they encounter during post-conversion, which most of them feel they are in a dilemma to put things in balance.

Therefore, choosing Islam as a new path of life and the journey towards practicing Islam are more challenging compared to those who are born Muslims. The situation becomes more challenging when it comes to the Muslims converts' relationship with their non-Muslim families. This could lead to the dilemma for the Muslim converts whether they are able to maintain a harmonious relationship by staying together with their previous families and, at the same time, learning to be a practicing Muslim by observing the role model from the born Muslims. Hence, the dilemma of being marginalized between the two situations is an unpleasant journey for most of the Muslim converts in whatever context of society they are living in, either being part of a member of a Muslim majority or staying as a minority within the Muslim minority. To present the actual situation of double marginality, this study examines some of the experiential biographical narratives of Muslim converts both collected from the Western and Malaysian converts experiences. Subsequently, based on ethnographic research with some selected Muslim converts in Sabah (Malaysia), an attempt is

made to provide some cases of progressive change in the familial relationship.

### ***The Problems of Marginality in the Relationship Between New Muslims and Born Muslims***

Generally, it is after conversion that new Muslims develop a fuller and more wide-ranging critique of society. Studies on conversion show that new Muslims always face problems relating themselves to born Muslims and their non-Muslim families and friends. A large number of studies show that new Muslims had difficult experiences with born Muslims at some point following their conversions (Robert, 2005; Anway, 1996; Roald, 2004; Zebiri, 2014). Those living in a Western society where Muslims form the minority group would have most likely gone through the similar experience with those living in a Muslim-majority society. For example, Zebiri (2014) points out that many Muslim converts in Britain had been quite warmly received initially, but they encountered problems later on as one of his interviewees said, “the reactions are strange because a lot of people assume that you don’t know anything, this is from Muslims.”

In the case studies of converts living in a Muslim-minority country like Britain, some researchers have highlighted certain crucial points. Zebiri (2014) argues that the converts are sometimes dismayed to discover that they have to cope with prejudice not only from British society but also from born Muslims. For example, the converts may find themselves excluded from influential positions in mosques and Islamic organizations. The converts have been often considered as second-class Muslim by many of the older generations of particularly Asians who see themselves as the real Muslims. The perception as the second class Muslim implies that whatever done by the converts, it does not express the real truth of Islam as compared to the things that have been done by the older generation of Muslims from Asian countries. This leads to the common source of unease among converts as they feel that some born Muslims especially the older generation confuse religion with culture.

In another study whereby the converts feel marginalized in their relations with born Muslim, Roald (2004) states the converts complained that born Muslims expected them to discard their cultural baggage while they (the born Muslims) held on to theirs. In other words, the converts often wish to combat cultural practices that they see as unIslamic, but they are often criticized or dismissed when they try to do so. For example, in the case one of his interviewee said that when she tried to tell some African Muslim women about the need to cover their arms they didn’t want to listen because she just a new Muslim and doesn’t know anything. These are among the cases of relationships between new Muslims and born Muslims, whom the former are regarded as second-class Muslims who are neither fully equipped with the Islamic teaching nor they are experienced with the Islamic practices.

Another problem arises when converts are often more knowledgeable about Islam than born Muslims, whom many are not familiar with the content of the Quran or the Hadith. This situation places converts in an awkward position of not knowing whether to correct them or to maintain a diplomatic silence. Even if they do not encounter actual hostility or prejudice, many converts complain about a general lack of support. Emerick (2004), a prominent American convert writes, “The convert experience is one of the isolation which can then lead to loneliness and, in the worst cases, their learning Islam altogether. Many are quietly ignored and beyond a few pleasantries and handshakes they may never be made to feel welcome or accepted”.

The most similar cases can be seen among Muslim converts in Kelantan, a state in Malaysia where Muslims are the majority in the community. Based on the field study by Lindenberg (2009), one of the interviewees explained:

After several months...May be four months, or so, it became difficult. The parents-in-law, the mental picture they have of Chinese is still different they think that the Chinese’s hands are still full of impurity (haram) with pork, they will not let their daughter-in-law cook. My mother was checking her. She felt uncomfortable when my wife prepares food.

The above statement from a Muslim converts experience shows the negative attitude of the Muslim family that not only jeopardized the image of Islam, as it gave the wrong impression about Islam it also indicated that born Muslims, in many cases, still have negative feelings of any negative perceptions on other non-born Muslims who choose Islam as their new religion in the later phase of their lives. It seems the choice to be a Muslim does not change anything to purify them. Rather, they are perceived to be permanently impure and do not deserve to touch and prepare any halal food for the born Muslim family. These feelings and perceptions still exist between the relationship of new Muslims and born Muslims in Malaysia, and this would also be the case in other countries with Muslim minority. Stigmatization also happens in Malaysia, regarding the relationships between Malay Muslims and Chinese Muslim converts. Cheng (2015) points out that the Malay perceives a Chinese converting to Islam as always associated with getting married to a Malay Muslim spouse. In Malay perceptions, it is not common for a Malaysian Chinese to embrace Islam without getting

married to a Malay. This can be exemplified in the situation when male Chinese converts to Islam and meets another male non-Muslim Chinese, one favourite question the former most likely asked is, "So, you have a Malay wife?" If he says that his wife is not a Malay or he is not married, he will be asked rather curiously or confusingly, "Why do you want to be a Malay?" compared to "Why do you want to be a Muslim?" Following from this perception, all things Chinese are seen as all things not Islamic, and a Chinese who embrace Islam should leave behind his Chinese roots in favour of the Islamic-Malay roots. That is why most of the Malaysian Chinese believe that Islam belongs to only for the Malays and those who choose Islam as a new religion is considered becoming Malays and not Muslim.

This situation shows the difficult relationship between the non-Muslims and born-Malay Muslim, as they have problems to distinguish between the true tenets of Islam and its differences from the attitude of the adherents who do not fully understand Islam. This is one of the causes of misunderstanding and misconception in the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. As the previous studies have shown, non-Muslim Chinese see Islam as a religion that belongs exclusively to the Malays, and they assume the Malay culture and customs, as well as the behaviour of the Malays, are depictions of the real teaching of Islam. The confusion in differentiating between the Malay customs and the Islamic teachings often leads to unpleasant circumstances between the Muslims and non-Muslim; the Muslim converts who are marginalized continue to struggle to be a practicing Muslims and to gain acceptance as members of the Muslim community without losing their cultural roots.

In other situation, Muslim converts continue to encounter problems when dealing with their non-Muslim families, in many cases, who neither welcome nor accept the Muslim converts. This causes more problems of double marginality in the life of Muslim converts in their relationship with non-Muslim families and friends.

### ***The Problems of Marginality in the Relationship Between New Muslims and Non-Muslims***

Most case studies noted that one of the main issues in new Muslim relationship with non-Muslim is how to live harmoniously with their families who are still living together under one roof. The problem arises when the non-Muslim family members would not only possess a limited understanding of the teachings of Islam but would probably worried about the change of identity of their newly converted family member. They view their Muslim family member's new lifestyle as strange and unusual. The daily routine that they once shared as a family is now limited by Islamic laws, which they have little understanding such as eating halal food, wearing the hijab (headscarf), performing the solāt, fasting during Ramadan, and reciting the Qur'an. They consider these practices odd, worrying, and a drastic change.

A study by Ibrahim (1995) on Muslim converts in Malaysia shows that harmony in a family is increasingly affected when the efforts of the Muslim converts to become practicing Muslims, while living with the non-Muslim families, are considered as attempts to influence the beliefs of the non-Muslim family members. As a result, the latter dislike the situation and is greatly concerned about the presence of Muslim converts in the family, who are now separated by their religious beliefs and practices. Sometimes it reaches a point where they see their Muslim family members as a threat to the family. As a result, most Muslim converts find it difficult to present the news of their conversion to their family, because many non-Muslim family members feel dissatisfied, doubtful, worried, and prejudiced towards their Muslim relatives who have begun to lead lives different from those whom they were accustomed to. Even though converting to Islam is often about becoming a "better person" or a "decent citizen" for the converts, in contrast, their relatives perceive it as more of a tragedy. Relatives of converts may feel hurt and mournful over their relative's conversion to Islam. None of the converts reported their family had congratulated them on their conversion or admired their decision.

The studies on conversion show the family starts to react aggressively when the converts decide to wear hijab as part of their efforts of fulfilling the Muslim identity. In the case of Muslim women's choice to wear the hijab, most of the studies on conversion to Islam show that the family's reaction to Muslim converts in the Western society is more likely similar to some cases of Muslim converts in Malaysia. This can best be described by Anway (1996) in the study on American new Muslim women, as she points out that the family was reasonably accepting of their conversion until they put on the hijab, at which point the attitude changed. Anway (1996) highlights some of the case studies among American new Muslim women as follow:

i) “I have worked out with my parents and other family members my choice to be Muslim. The main point of stress has been hijab or the Islamic dress. I think this is a constant reminder and embarrassment for them. If I were Muslim but did not cover, I think they could accept it more readily.”

ii) “When I became Muslim, I had guidelines to express the beliefs I already had. These changes were tough. It was hard to excuse myself from class or work to pray. When my clothing changed (covering my hair) I lost a lot of friends.”

iii) “Due to hijab, there are a lot of prejudices out there. I definitely can’t hold a very public ‘meeting people’ job”.

iv) “I have been denied jobs because of my hijab and have been otherwise openly discriminated against. Nonetheless, I am truly grateful for hijab. I feel honored to represent Islam in such a powerful way as to be recognized as Muslim whenever I venture out.”

The experiences of the women Muslim converts above indicate that most of them are in a dilemma between their choices on wearing the hijab and getting an unpleasant response from their non-Muslim families. This is probably because most of the family members are upset and frustrated, and confused about relating to each other, because the converts now look different and strange than their family members had known them before. That is why [Anway \(1996\)](#) argues that the extreme change in dressing is probably the hardest shift for the parents and relatives to accept when a daughter becomes a Muslim. A Muslim convert’s change in dressing seems to present an extreme statement about their choice of religion. This is significantly supported by other studies, in which the converts reported that their relatives were tolerant of their new religious identity but the converts kept their faith private ([Moosavi, 2015](#)). These relatives claimed they did not mind their relative being a Muslim, but they were worried how others might respond. [Gudrun Jensen \(2008\)](#) highlights the problem of Danish converts:

The [family] conflict peaks when the son or daughter begins to mark their Muslim identity in public, especially in the case of Danish women who start wearing the hijab (veil). These incidences of staging difference, not the conversion in itself, may result in the family choosing to cut ties to the convert for a while.

The converts frequently mentioned on the issue of the hijab, whereby even the most supportive relatives objected to it, not on the basis that they dislike it but others will dislike the hijab. For example, Laura explained the following: “My sister doesn’t mind so much about me becoming a Muslim up to a point [But] when I told her over the phone I was starting wearing the scarf, she got borderline hysterical and thought I’d get sacked from my job.” Similarly, Julie, a 26-year-old mother, spoke about her mothers reaction to her wearing a hijab:

She’s not too happy with me wearing it but she’s a kind accepted it. My mum was just like: ‘Oh I don’t wanna be walking out with you with that on your head’. And she was worried about her friends and what her friends thought... When I first started wearing hijab, my mum said something like: ‘People are just going to call you a white Paki... but if my mum’s thinking that, you can imagine what other people are probably thinking cant you?’

The above discussion shows that the hijab is considered a controversial issue among the lifestyle changes that the converts have to adapt after embracing Islam. For instance, [Haddad \(2006\)](#) writes, “Consistently the hijab seemed to be a bigger issue for families and friends than the conversion itself. This visible display of Islam was seen as too radical. Family members were often concerned about what neighbours and other people would think about the change in wardrobe”. In another study by [Haifa \(2006\)](#), he states that wearing the hijab for converted women brings not only outside rejection and hostility; it also jeopardizes family ties, which are already under strain as a result of the conversion. [Zebiri \(2014\)](#) illustrates the case of his interviewee who said that three years after her conversion her family still could not decide whether they wanted to speak to her or not; she could not attend family events because her parents refused to see her in the hijab. She found that their role in the family had completely changed. It can be said that most of the families and relatives of the converts could not accept the latter wearing the hijab even though the converts consider the hijab as their new identities in order to be more easily recognized as Muslims. The issue of wearing the hijab that leads to a strained relationship between new Muslims and their non-Muslim family is not the only problem that converts living in a Muslim-minority country experiences; a similar situation also happens in Muslim-majority country. The ethnographic data as collected below are the biographical narratives of the extract from the interviews that were conducted with selected new Muslims in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The backgrounds of the respondents are varied in term of ethics, gender and social status of education. The extracts of the selected interviews are shown as follow:

i) I was wearing hijab when I was in the workplace. In order to avoid my father to get angry, I wore hijab not at home but parking lot. My father dislikes me wearing hijab. He eventually understood my situation now and he didn’t care anymore of myself wearing hijab. He only reminds me to wear hijab when I went outing and not at home. I used to wear hijab once to three times when outing together with family. (Source: Interview with respondent on Sept 9, 2017

at the Teratak Fitrah religious class, Chinese/Female/clerk)

ii) My mother got angry at me and said that there were many Muslim women outside there did not wear hijab and look sexy more than the non-Muslim. She queried that you were Chinese and had just embraced to Islam, why your wife wore hijab? (Source: Interview with respondent on Sept 7, 2017 at the researcher's office, Chinese/Male/teacher)

The experiences of the converts above show that the post-conversion transition period is reflected to be the most challenging part of their life, particularly in getting support and acceptance from their non-Muslim families. They are in a dilemma in their journey to become practicing and observant Muslims by abandoning practices that are prohibited in Islam and adopting the religious obligation of five daily prayers. In addition, they have to struggle to form a new Muslim identity by wearing the hijab. It is believed that wearing the hijab enables the Muslim convert to easily integrate with the Muslim community, although the hijab could also become a social barrier in their relationship with their non-Muslim family members. Most of the Muslim converts reported that their families overwhelmingly opposed their conversion to Islam mostly because they disagreed with the converts' decision to wear the hijab. For most of the women Muslim converts, wearing the hijab is a way to be easily recognized as a Muslim. Unfortunately, the changing of lifestyle affects their relationship with their non-Muslim circle of families and friends, as they do not only respond to the conversion with displeasure but even with disgust.

Therefore, most of the converts kept their conversion private before finally revealing their real identity as a Muslim. This is the problem of double marginality that most of the converts have gone through in their journey as new Muslims either in their relationship with born Muslims or non-Muslims. However, the study shows that no matter the duration of the dilemma, they have finally managed to deal with the situation and retain a harmonious relationship with their non-Muslim family. This occurred in some of the case studies of Muslim converts in Sabah, in which familial relationship has shown progressive change from a strained to the accommodative, neutral and supportive relationship.

### ***Progressive Changes in Familial Relationship Among New Muslims in Sabah***

The inter-religious dimension shapes four patterns of association between the new Muslim and non-Muslim families: starting with a strained relationship to accommodative, neutral and supportive relationship. This model of familial relationship that was introduced by [Sebastian and Parameswaran \(2007\)](#) becomes the main back up to explain the form of new Muslim familial relationship. [Sebastian and Parameswaran \(2007\)](#) states that the strained (contentious) interaction involves high levels of conflict and low levels of consensus. This was a common reaction where converts have not always been welcomed by their family members at the early stage of conversion. [Lindenberg \(2009\)](#) argues that one of the causes of parents rejection or uneasiness towards their children's conversion to Islam was the parents liken of the conversion to a loss of their credibility; they thought that people would accuse them of not being able to take care of their children. However, this conflict would only last for a few months or between one to two and several more years; or having a new member in the family such as getting birth, or displaying certain achievement in life and so on. Sometimes, only one member of the family might react negatively to their decisions to become Muslims. The negative reaction is indicated by several expressions, attitudes, and manners. The same situation could also be seen in some cases that involved Muslim converts in Sabah, as shown in the following extracts from the interviews:

**The case I: Contentious relationship progressively changes to the accommodative relationship:** Accommodative relationship refers to two types of interactions that are recognized in this respect. Family members usually express the consensus of certain aspects of the Muslim convert's faith, while disagreeing with others. Negotiation and engagement result in accommodative interaction, which highlights high conflict and high consensus ([Sebastian & Parameswaran, 2007](#)). As shown in the case study above, the non-Muslim family opposed the conversion on the basis of marrying a Malay Muslim spouse. The relationship had gradually changed to being accommodative when the parents started to accept the Muslim convert's baby as their grandson. However, they have not fully accepted the change, as shown in their conflict with the Muslim identity of wearing hijab that is noticeable to others. This shows the family can tolerate certain religious obligations in Islam, but it is difficult to compromise on other things when they feel it humiliates them.

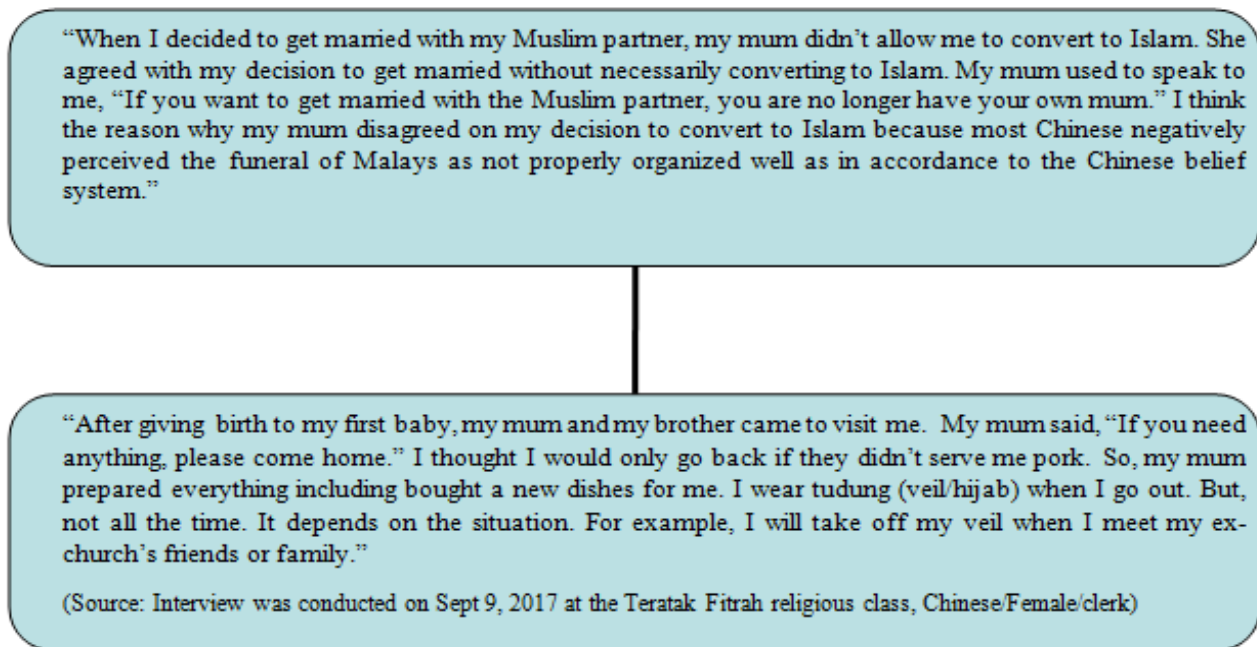


Figure 1 *Contentious Relationship Progressively Changes to Accommodative Relationship*

**Case II: Neutral relationship progressively changes to supportive relationship:** Neutral interaction refers to the other non-extreme interaction that is characterized by low conflict and low consensus. Family members were neutral towards the conversion, and the convert was glad that she/he has at least been given enough space to do what she/he wants, while simultaneously wishing for more support. [Sebastian and Parameswaran \(2007\)](#) say that neutrality could arise because family members do not know enough to decide if the converts new faith has a positive or negative impact on him/her. In the context of conversion to Islam, the neutrality is possible due to the consideration of Muslim convert’s age and beliefs. The above case shows the progressive change in familial relationship from the neutral interaction to the supportive one. The supportive interaction is a kind of relationship that contradicts the contentious interaction as it refers to (low conflict, high consensus) ([Sebastian & Parameswaran, 2007](#)). The support from family comes in a variety of ways, either by moral or material support. As in the case above, the family gave their support by encouraging the convert to wear the hijab and providing halal food, as the way to practice the Islamic teaching. It can be summed up that not all of the non-Muslim family members rejected the conversion to Islam, as they would probably believe that every religion has its advantage and it guides its followers to the path of truth.

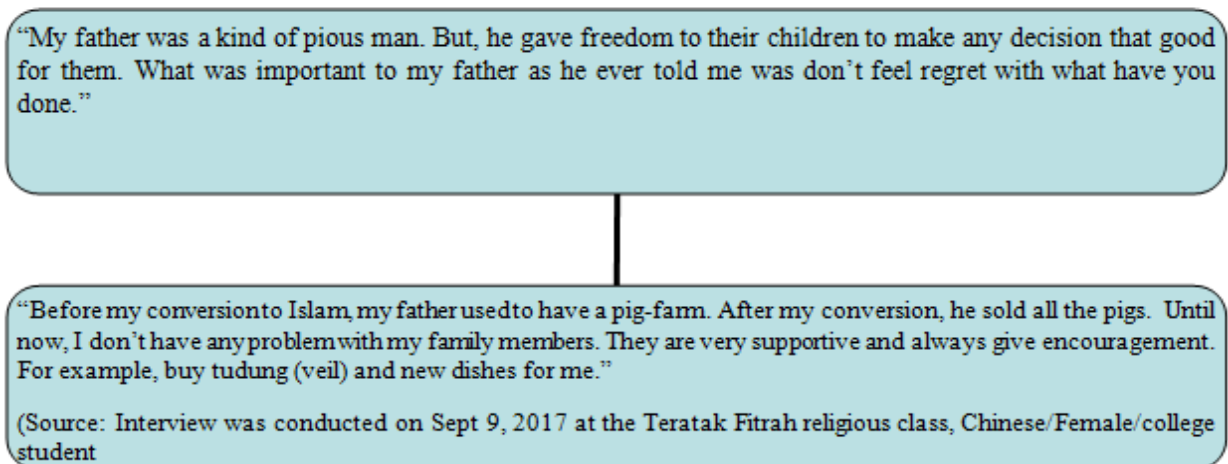


Figure 2 *Neutral Relationship Progressively Changes to Supportive Relationship*



**Case III: Accommodative relationship progressively changes to the supportive relationship:** Case III shows the progressive change in familial relationship from an accommodative relationship to a supportive one. Although the relationship has positively formed at the early stage of conversion, it gradually improved and became more constructive when the Muslim converts gained support from their non-Muslim family members. This situation indicates that not all of the converts were objected by their non-Muslim families and friends. There is still a rare case of conversion to Islam where the Muslim converts gain acceptance and support, not only in their relationship with non-Muslim families but also their relationship with born Muslim counterparts.

“My family didn’t express any surprise when I told them I wished to convert to Islam. They asked me, “Was that really your own decision? Didn’t you felt regretted?” My brother had ever talked to me about the situation if one of our family members died, would you come to visit the funeral ceremony? I was afraid the things would happen to you as what your cousin did to her father. She didn’t wish to see the corpse of her father since she felt not appropriate to do so because she was no longer the same religion as her father. So, my family thought that when you had converted to Islam you were no longer permitted to see the corpse of other religions. My brother worried that different religious affiliation would segregate the members of family.”

During the time of my confinement, my sister-in-law from non-Muslim family took care of me. I got support from both sides of my family either Muslim or non-Muslim.

(Source: Interview was conducted on Sept 9, 2017 at the Teratak Fitrah religious class, Murut/Female/university graduate)

Figure 3 *Accommodative Relationship Progressively Changes to Supportive Relationship*

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It can be summed up that the journey to be a Muslim convert is not easier than the process to convert to other religion, as Islam has detailed prescription on God and human relation. At the post-conversion, the converts face problems of double marginality in their relationship with Muslims and non-Muslims. The problems begin when the Muslim converts have to wisely weigh everything in balance between being a practicing Muslim and being an obedient child as he/she is still responsible for retaining a harmonious relationship with the non-Muslim circle of families and friends. In their relationship with born Muslims, the converts have to find ways to be integrated with born Muslim since they are considered to be a new member of society and have to assimilate themselves with a non-indigenous religious identity. This is the situation when they are marginalized between the two situations; being a minority within the born Muslim majority group, and at the same time they cannot avoid themselves from being influenced by the impact of the dominant culture from the non-Muslim circle of family and friends. Hijab becomes the main issue which leads to the problem more complicated in new Muslim relation to the non-Muslim family. The choice of wearing hijab is not only for the purpose of presenting their new Muslim identity, but also believed to be part of the way to be easily integrated with the Muslim community. The study also indicates some findings of the progressive changes of familial relationship, whereby not all the cases of conversion causes strained relationship. There are some cases of the converts getting moral and material support from their non-Muslim family. Hence, the study concludes that the new Muslims are members of the community that have much to offer to both Muslims and non-Muslims, as they play an increasing role around integration and bridge builder for communities in the future.

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