

Religious Conversion and Conflict: The Struggles of Chinese Muslim Converts in Indonesia's Harmonious Society

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Abstract

The conversion of Chinese individuals to Islam reveals a range of rejections that are normalised through acceptance statements from both Chinese and Muslim communities. These acceptance statements create the impression of a harmonious interfaith relationship within a strong cultural community. This research seeks to identify the challenges faced by Chinese converts in establishing their social position within society, influenced by various forms of latent conflicts. Employing a qualitative method, the research utilises a conflict formation theory analysis model that frames conflict as a natural part of social action. Data were gathered from nine respondents within the Chinese *muallaf* community. This study involved nine participants from the Chinese *muallaf* community. The study finds that the emergence of conflict accompanying the phenomenon of religious conversion through marriage, adoption, and awareness is perceived by the Chinese converts as a metric for defining conflict. The conflict that is mitigated through negotiation among families and the surrounding community to foster harmony does not eliminate stigma or resolve various contradictions. Instead, it perpetuates perceptions of suspicion, discomfort, and distrust among community members, further straining familial relationships and marginalising individuals from various societal traditions. Consequently, the Chinese converts become subjects of these actions, positioning them in a liminal space that limits their connections to both their Chinese families and the Malay Muslim community. The existing relationships create an impression of seemingly harmonious interactions that could potentially erupt into new forms of violence.

Keywords: Chinese converts, illusory harmony, Islamisation of Bangka Island

Introduction

The seemingly harmonious socio-religious reality of multi-ethnic Bangka society¹ masks underlying conflicts stemming from partial religious conversions. This concealment is rooted in the normalisation of differing goals arising from choices to embrace Islam through marriage, adoption, or personal conviction. The family's rejection of religious conversion within the Chinese community is often expressed through verbal aggression, highlighting the emergence of conflict during the conversion process. This reality is corroborated by Zakirman et al., who found that Chinese Muslim converts often experience isolation from their families.² This familial isolation, indicative of underlying tensions, is often not perceived as a conflict, leading to a normalisation of such situations. Furthermore, the resistance to the establishment of the State College of Confucian Studies reveals that perceived harmony on Bangka Island cannot be taken at face value.³ Overlooking potential conflicts, often disguised by peace narratives rooted in state and religious moral standards,⁴ effectively conceals latent tensions that remain hidden beneath the surface.

Various studies on religious conversion in a plural societies, including shifts between religions or within a single religion, reveal diverse conflicts,⁵ but overlook the contradictions and stigmas tied to differing objectives post-conversion. Zakirman et al.'s research assumes non-violent normalcy, focusing on

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¹ Rika Theo and Fennie Lie, *Kisah, Kultur, Dan Tradisi Tionghoa Bangka* (Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2014), 5.

² Al Fakhri Zakirman, Musa Musa, and M. Sholeh Marsudi, "Problem Muallaf Tionghoa Bangka Pasca Konversi Agama," *Ri'ayah: Jurnal Sosial Dan Keagamaan* 8, no. 1 (2023): 63–74.

³ Heru Dahnur and Gloria Setyvani Putri, "Pembangunan PTN Khonghucu Di Bangka Tengah Ditolak Kelompok Masyarakat," *kompas.com*, accessed on June 2, 2022, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2022/06/02/110345378/pembangunan-ptn-khonghucu-di-bangka-tengah-ditolak-kelompok-masyarakat>

⁴ Stefanie Kam, "China's Security Imperatives and Violence in Xinjiang," in *Normalization of Violence: Conceptual Analysis and Reflections from Asia*, ed. Irm Haleem (Routledge, 2019), 50–63.

⁵ Michal Kravel-Tovi, "Making a Difference: The Political Life of Religious Conversion," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52, no. 1 (2023): 19–37.

adaptation challenges while neglecting underlying tensions.⁶ Other studies identify three trends: First, they depict Chinese Muslim community relationships as inclusive, fostering harmony with locals⁷ as seen in in Padang and Makassar,⁸ or exclusive in Madura, where assimilation involves adopting local language and architecture;⁹ Second, they highlight Chinese Muslims' vulnerabilities as a minority, facing issues like limited political rights,¹⁰ historical marginalisation,¹¹ access to halal food,¹² and restricted freedom of expression¹³; Third, they explore how the immigrant status of Chinese Indonesians shapes their nationalism¹⁴ and local identity¹⁵. However, these studies often downplay the potential for conflict, which the Chinese-Muslim communities have normalised as peaceful.

Previous research challenges the notion of harmonious religious conversion, highlighting conflicts faced by Chinese converts, such as rejection from family and ethnic communities in Malaysia, as noted by Yee et al.,¹⁶ and from the indigenous Muslim community,¹⁷ forcing converts to forge new social and religious frameworks.¹⁸ Elizabeth et al.'s study in Semarang identifies three conflict forms—indifference, verbal hostility, and overt animosity—often escalating to psychological violence,¹⁹ underscoring persistent tensions despite assumed harmony. On Bangka Island, this study examines how conversion reshapes relationships, revealing conflicts driven by shifting goals and hidden tensions that challenge converts' social positioning. It provides three key pieces of evidence: first, stigmas from negative expressions by various groups; second, contradictions marking the onset of conflict; third, counter-responses from communities to the actions of surrounding population toward the Chinese converts, collectively exposing the structural conflicts disrupting the narrative of normalized harmony within the Bangka community.

This research is premised on the argument that conflict and harmony are two different sides of the same entity. Conflict can be a nebulous reality that requires further identification to establish its existence definitively. Johan Galtung describes conflict as a hypothesis that manifests in vague, ambiguous, and non-consensual ways.²⁰ This description suggests that perceived chaos and harmony cannot definitively determine the nature of conflict. This is because the behavioural manifestations of conflict, as measured through violence, differ from the underlying entity of conflict, which may manifest in emotions and perceptions embedded in its deepest structures. Conflicts embedded in these deep structures are particularly potent in intimate social relationships such as family.²¹

⁶ Zakirman, Musa, and Marsudi, "Problem Muallaf Tionghoa Bangka Pasca Konversi Agama," 63–74.

⁷ Gusti Muzainah and Firqah Annajiyah Mansyuroh, "Integration of Islamic Law and Banjarese Customary Law of Inheritance System Tionghoa Muslim Community in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 6, no. 2 (2022): 678.

⁸ Hanura Rusli and Rois Leonard Arios, "Interaksi Etnis Tionghoa Muslim Dan Non Muslim Di Kota Padang Propinsi Sumatera Barat," *Pangadereng: Jurnal Hasil Penelitian Ilmu Sosial Dan Humaniora* 6, no. 2 (2020): 159–71; Nurhayati Nurhayati and Aksa Aksa, "Tionghoa (Muslim) Di Makassar: Studi Atas Pembaurannya Dalam Bidang Budaya Dan Ekonomi Pada Masa Orde Baru," *Yupa: Historical Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (2020): 93–102.

⁹ Akhmad Siddiq and Mutamakkin Billa, "Tionghoa Muslim Di Madura: Asimilasi Budaya Dan Interaksi Sosial," *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 17, no. 1 (2023): 87–102.

¹⁰ Z. Hale Eroglu Sager, "A Place under the Sun: Chinese Muslim (Hui) Identity and the Constitutional Movement in Republican China," *Modern China* 47, no. 6 (2021): 825–58.

¹¹ Achmad Ubaedillah, "The Minority and the State: Chinese Muslims in the Modern History of Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 61, no. 1 (2023): 107–36.

¹² Meechee Hong et al., "Chinese Muslim's Choice of Halal Products: Evidence from Stated Preference Data," *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 25, no. 4 (2020): 696–717.

¹³ Luwei Rose Luqiu and Fan Yang, "Anti-Muslim Sentiment on Social Media in China and Chinese Muslims' Reactions to Hatred and Misunderstanding," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 13, no. 3 (2020): 258–74.

¹⁴ Ahmad Alwajih, "The Discourse of Tionghoa Muslim Identity in Indonesia After the Reform Order: A Critical Discourse Analysis of 'Komunitas' - 'Cheng Hoo' Magazine," *Asian Journal of Media and Communication* 4, no. 2 (2020).

¹⁵ Yusliani Noor and Rabini Sayyidati, "Tionghoa Muslim Dan Dunia Perdagangan Di Banjarmasin Abad Ke-13 Hingga Ke-19," *JUSPI (Jurnal Sejarah Peradaban Islam)* 3, no. 2 (2020): 182.

¹⁶ Loo Tuck Yee, Nadiyah Binti Elias, and Mariny Abdul Ghani, "The Religious Conversion Process of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Converts," *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economic, and Development* 4, no. 32 (2019): 164–73.

¹⁷ 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-Thaqafah* (2024): 49–66.

¹⁸ Yee, Elias, and Ghani, "The Religious Conversion Process of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Converts," 164–73.

¹⁹ Misbah Zulfa Elizabeth, Sholihan, and Zainudin Hasan, "Religious Conversion, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution: A Case of Study of Chinese Families in Semarang, Indonesia," *Man in India* 97, no. 17 (2017): 133–46.

²⁰ Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (SAGE Publications, 1996), 72.

²¹ Lewis A. Coser, "Social Conflict and the Theory of Social Change," *The British Journal of Sociology* 8, no. 3 (1957): 197–207; Jasmani, Nur Izzati. "The Role of Islam In The Formation of Malcolm X's Identity and Thoughts". *Al-Muqaddimah: Online Journal of Islamic History and Civilization* 9, No. 2 (2023): 1-17.

This structure forms an iceberg phenomenon that is deeply rooted and can suddenly emerge to create new perceptual events.²² Conflicts hidden beneath the surface of seemingly harmonious relationships, particularly those involving religion, require in-depth investigation, treating conflict as a hypothetical reality that needs to be proven.

Research Method

The study delves into the seemingly harmonious relationships formed through religious conversion on Bangka Island, Indonesia, a region marked by its diverse multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities, in contrast to the more uniform Belitung Island. Focusing on the intricate historical ties between the Chinese community and the local population,²³ the research employs a qualitative method, using a phenomenological model to capture the nuanced experiences of nine Chinese Muslim converts,²⁴ selected purposively for their connection with non-Muslim Chinese families, new Muslim families, and the wider Chinese community. Through in-depth interviews, semi-structured interview, the study uncovers the hidden contradictions and social tensions beneath these relationships, as analysed through the conflict theory, which highlights how interactions with dominant groups can mask underlying disagreement for disadvantaged faced by minority converts.²⁵

Result

Historical Background of Chinese Community Relations in Bangka Island: Existence, Interaction, and Acculturation

Bangka Island, named after the Sanskrit word "Vanga", meaning tin or lead²⁶ has been a key settlement for the Chinese ethnic group, who made up 48.73% of its population in 2019, with their history closely tied to tin and pepper-based economic activities.²⁷ Since the early eighteenth century, Chinese migrants, likely from Canton,²⁸ worked as tin miners under the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) and the sultan of Palembang, forming distinct colonies, particularly in western Bangka and Belitung Island,²⁹ which later spread with new mining site.

Figure 1: Ethnic Chinese Colony in Bangka



Source: Unger (1944)

²² Ben H. Knott, "Social Conflict: Implications for Casework Practice," *The British Journal of Social Work* 2, no. 4 (1972): 435–443.

²³ Deddy Mulyana and Agustina Zubair, "Intercultural Communication Competence Developed by Chinese in Communicating With Malays in Bangka Island, Indonesia," *Sino-US English Teaching* 12, no. 4 (2015): 299–309; Ibrahim, Nizwan Zuhri, and Rendy, "Between Natural Tourism, the Booming of Laskar Pelangi Film, and the Image of Environmental Damage: Measuring the Perception of Regional Tourist on Bangka Belitung Tourism," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1351, no. 1 (2019): 121.

²⁴ John W. Creswell, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* (Pearson Education, 2012), 16.

²⁵ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.

²⁶ Mary F. Somers Heidhues, *Timah Bangka Dan Lada Bangka Dan Lada Muntok: Peran Masyarakat Tionghoa Dalam Pembangunan Pulau Bangka Abad XVIII s/d Abad XX*, trans. Asep Salmin and Suma Mihardja (Yayasan Nabil, 2008), 2.

²⁷ Mary F. Somers Heidhues, *Bangka Tin and Mentok Pepper: Chinese Settlement on an Indonesian Island* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992), xiii.

²⁸ Heidhues, xiii.

²⁹ Leonard Unger, "The Chinese in Southeast Asia," *Geographical Review* 34, no. 2 (1944): 196–217.

These communities, shaped by long-standing involvement in tin mining and adaptations to various Indonesian regimes,³⁰ predominantly hold middle-to-lower-class economic status,³¹ fostering interactions with locals that have created new social structures. In Belinyu, Bangka, the Hakka (a Chinese subgroup) and the Malay communities have forged a harmonious cultural integration through language and tradition, as evidenced by Heidhues' finding of a mixed Hakka-Malay language and acculturated customs,³² embodying the principle of *tong ngin fan ngin tjit tjong* (indigenous Malays and Chinese descendants are all equal).³³ This assimilation, described by Abdullah Idi, spans cultural, structural, marital, nationalistic, and prejudice-free dimensions,³⁴ enabling the Chinese minority, despite their economic prominence, to blend seamlessly into the local fabric without losing their distinct identity. Scholars highlight Bangka as a model of social integration in Indonesia, where intercultural communication fosters stable,³⁵ harmonious societies,³⁶ and religious practices,³⁷ as Hidayatullah notes, adapt to cultural contexts without disrupting societal bonds,³⁸ uniting diverse communities effectively.

Visible Stigma to the Chinese Muslim Converts

The religious conversion of some Chinese individuals in Bangka creates a new identity that deviates from traditional community norms, leading to an "abnormal" situation where families struggle to maintain inherited beliefs and traditions. This deviation, as Erving Goffman suggests, results in stigma³⁹ due to a mismatch between individual identity and community expectations, causing conflict and disrupting social relationships.⁴⁰ Families often respond with disappointment and rejection, leading to strained communication within the community. As R6 stated:

My family initially forbade and regretted [the choice to] convert to Islam... I left home for Jakarta because I saw the situation at home was not conducive. When I first arrived in Jakarta, I met my grandmother's relatives. My grandmother was angry, and she said, 'Why did you convert to Islam?'... In Bangka, there was a high level of resistance because [I] had not been in touch for a long time... Communication is no longer as strong with the non-Muslim family. The relationship with the local community is very good (R6)

Various forms of resistance to the Chinese Muslim conversion can take verbal actions, ostracisation, and the act of exclusion that may start from the early stage of the conversion process. Participant R1 explained his experience:

[Response] from the non-Muslim family, we faced pressure at the beginning [of converting to Islam]... we were also ostracised, and they questioned our decision to embrace Islam... there were some hurtful words, but I've forgotten them. However, [in terms of] attitude, it was very clear that [they] shunned us. Despite this, we still tried to maintain a relationship with [them], even though we have different religions (R1)

The ostracisation that followed, leading to the decision to leave the original community, was a consequence of choosing Islam as the new religion and abandoning the old one.

³⁰ Ibrahim Ibrahim, Arief Hidayat, and Herza Herza, "Adaptation of the Political Economy of the Grassroots Tionghoa Ethnic in Bangka Island, Indonesia," *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan Dan Politik* 35, no. 4 (2022): 540–53.

³¹ Sandy Pratama et al., "Chinese Poor Social and Economic Transformation in Bangka (An Overview Between Stigma and Reality)," in *Proceedings of the Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Social and Political Sciences, ICSPS 2019, 12th November 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia*, ed. Ali Munhanif et al. (EAI, 2020).

³² Mary Somers Heidhues, "Bangka in the 1950s: Indonesian Authority and Chinese Reality," *Indonesia*, no. 103 (2017): 1–14.

³³ Ibrahim Ibrahim et al., "Fan Ngin Tong Ngin Tjit Jong The Assimilation Face of Grassroot of Chinese Ethnic in Bangka Island, Indonesia," ed. R.H. Setyobudi, J. Burlakovs, and R. Kala Mahaswa, *SHS Web of Conferences* 76 (2020): 01013.

³⁴ Abdullah Idi, *Cina-Melayu-Cina Di Bangka* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2009), 17; Abdullah Idi, "Harmoni Sosial: Interaksi Sosial Natural-Asimilatif Antara Etnis Muslim Cina Dan Melayu-Bangka," *Thaqafiyat : Jurnal Bahasa, Peradaban Dan Informasi Islam* 13, no. 2 (2014): 383.

³⁵ Mulyana and Zubair, "Intercultural Communication Competence Developed by Chinese in Communicating With Malays in Bangka Island, Indonesia," 299–309; Ibrahim, Zuhri, and Rendy, "Between Natural Tourism, the Booming of Laskar Pelangi Film, and the Image of Environmental Damage: Measuring the Perception of Regional Tourist on Bangka Belitung Tourism," 7.

³⁶ Ibrahim, Hidayat, and Herza, "Adaptation of the Political Economy of the Grassroots Tionghoa Ethnic in Bangka Island, Indonesia"; Hew Wai Weng, "Archipelagic Chineseness: Competing Ways of Being Chinese Muslims in Contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia," *Asian Ethnicity* 24, no. 1 (2023): 132–50.

³⁷ Novendra Hidayat, Budi Darmawan, and Putra Pratama S., "Political Penetration on Nuclear Power Plan Issues in Bangka Islands," *EScience Humanity Journal* 4, no. 2 (2024): 147–59.

³⁸ Ahmad Syarif Hidayatullah, "Glocal Islam in Rural Muslim Society of Bangka Island (Indonesia)" (Western Sydney University, 2023), 4.

³⁹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on The Management of Spoiled Identity* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 3.

⁴⁰ Greg Smith, *Erving Goffman* (Routledge, 2006), 84.

In addition to acts of ostracisation and exclusion, verbal violence from other Chinese community members was directed at the Chinese Muslim converts, taking the form of mocking nicknames for their new identity and ridiculing of their Islamic practices.

Grandma's assumption [of Muslims] is low caste... many Muslims go to jail. Non-Muslim friends, [often] take my hijab, I don't get angry (R6)

The ostracisation and exclusion from family members are not easy for the converts to solve, although varied efforts have been conducted to improve family relations. R4 states:

At the beginning of converting to Islam, there was rejection from the family... the sentence issued by the parents when there was rejection was, if possible, only marry within the same religion and do not change religions... efforts made to continue to re-establish kinship with the family [I do], although [they] still forbid [me] to visit the celebration (R4)

The rejection of converting to Islam comes not only from the families of the Chinese converts but also from the Chinese community at large. Since religious conversion is a multifaceted phenomenon which includes religious, cultural, social, and political dimensions, the resistance to the Chinese conversion to Islam involves the stereotypes of Malay Muslims as a lower social class (R6). The Chinese ethnic group referred to themselves as "*Tenglang*"⁴¹, implying their superior position in terms of tradition and belief. The study finds the association of religion with ethnicity or the ethnicisation of Islam in the Chinese community.

The negative stereotypes of the Chinese Muslim converts may also come from members of the Muslim Community. Participant R7, for instance, reported his experience of verbal violence:

There is verbal language that comes out [from their mouths] to make fun of me, for example the words "*woi muallaf woi muallaf,*" but I do not take it seriously (R7)

Friends from non-Chinese or other non-Muslim circles have never taken issue with my conversion to Islam, at most they only make fun of me (R3)

This stigma and stereotype were due to doubts among members of the Muslim community about the Islamic status of newly converted Chinese, not only in terms of low-level religious comprehension but also the excessive practice of Islam. As new Muslims, they do not practice Islamic teachings properly. R2 stated:

[Muslim] neighbours feel uncomfortable if there is a Chinese Muslim family that practices Islam excessively, such as wearing the veil (R2)

Similarly, when a Chinese convert practised Islam differently from Malay Muslims, trying to demonstrate excessive devotion, they faced scrutiny. This experience was narrated by R1:

But the old community where we worshipped [at] the temple when we were not converts, [i.e.] in the non-Muslim Chinese community, did not really show a good attitude or respond positively to us being Muslim. Before we became Muslim, sometimes there was bullying because we were a minority (R1)

Various responses of rejection and negative stigmatisation, both from indigenous Muslims questioning the Islamic identity of Chinese Muslim groups and from the non-Muslim Chinese community, reveal the underlying seeds of conflict that are overlooked through the process of normalisation.

Chinese converts' perceptions of their families' acts of disappointment reinforce the pattern of normalising potential conflict. The conflict becomes evident due to the discrepancy or incongruity between the virtual social identity reflected in the family's expectation to maintain the original belief

⁴¹ This term is applied to Chinese people worldwide, drawing on the Tang Dynasty's global influence. As such, the term carries connotations of pride and grandeur in relation to their ancestral homeland.

and the actual social identity formed through religious conversion.⁴² This discrepancy gives rise to a sense of shameful difference, a hallmark of stigma, which has the potential to spark social conflict. This shameful difference emerges from the lowering of initial expectations, rooted in the disappointment felt by Chinese converts from their close family members. However, this tension is alleviated through sympathetic expressions from Malay Muslims, who help manage the strain. The comforting responses received during interactions with Malay Muslims foster a courteous form of stigma, which, in turn, contributes to the normalisation of conflict among Chinese converts.⁴³ The normalisation of potential conflicts is driven by complex social factors that help mitigate the disappointment experienced by Chinese families whose members have converted to Islam.

Contradictions in the Chinese Muallaf Actions

The religious conversion of Chinese individuals in Bangka leads to behavioural changes in social interactions as they blend traditional Chinese cultural elements with Islamic values,⁴⁴ selectively adopting practices to maintain social standing. These adjustments, aimed at aligning with community expectations while reflecting personal choices, create tensions and contradictions.⁴⁵ Such changes in beliefs significantly alter family dynamics, with three main patterns of relational shifts emerging due to the mechanisms of religious conversion. Firstly, contradiction in ritual involvement. The shift in religious beliefs, necessitating changes in behaviours to align with religious teachings, has resulted in a decreased involvement in Chinese traditional practices that are considered contradictory to Islam. Those who have converted to Islam tend to avoid participating in rituals such as visits to ancestral tombs and tea ceremonies during traditional Chinese weddings.

I still go to non-Muslim families in Bangka, but I don't participate in prayer ceremonies [according to] their beliefs, because I am already a Muslim. We show tolerance, that's the important thing [and] not violating my beliefs (R6)

We still go on pilgrimage to my mother's grave, and it is a gathering place for her family and grandchildren. However, we do not join in the prayers, only the gathering (R4)

This avoidance is rooted in the belief that such traditions are incompatible with Islamic teachings and out of caution regarding the food and drinks offered during these events.

Secondly, contradiction of cultural identity. Chinese individuals who have changed their religious beliefs have expressed reluctance to use their clan names. R1 revealed, "*nama non-muslim (marga) sudah tidak digunakan lagi, sesuai KTP [menggunakan nama muslim]*" [Non-Muslim names [clan names] are no longer used, according to the KTP [using Muslim names]]. This shift in identity has also impacted subsequent generations, leading to the obscurity of clan names that were traditionally passed down within Chinese families. R3 stated:

If our clan, both girls and boys are treated equally and accepted in the family, but in Hok Lo Chinese culture, there is still a distinction between the status of girls and boys. Boys are usually more favoured if they are Hok Lo Chinese. My children no longer use clan names anymore (R3)

The traditional use of clans, which characterises the Chinese community, has diminished with the adoption of a naming system that aligns with Islamic identity. The inheritance rights of converted Muslims have been severed due to their religious shift. R5 stated:

Within the non-Muslim family tree, particularly regarding inheritance, my mother never brought it up again. The inheritance ties have effectively been severed, and there is no longer any connection concerning this matter (R5)

⁴² Susie Scott, *Negotiating Identity: Symbolic Interactionist Approaches to Social Identity* (Polity Press, 2015), 23.

⁴³ Chihling Liu and Robert V Kozinets, "Courtesy Stigma Management: Social Identity Work among China's 'Leftover Women,'" ed. Linda L Price, Markus Giesler, and David Crockett, *Journal of Consumer Research* 49, no. 2 (2022): 312–35.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Erving Goffman*, 42.

⁴⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (University of Edinburgh, 1956), 66.

They also leave their Chinese community and become a member of the Muslim community. In the conversion process, Chinese converts usually change their names to Arabic-Indonesian names, such as Asen becoming Hasan. In the Malay world, conversion to Islam is identical to becoming Malay, and in Bangka, it is sometimes called 'becoming human' (*menjadi urang*). This situation is the result of Chinese Muslims adopting new traditions in order to align with Islamic values.

Thirdly, contradiction in social relations. Changes in theological beliefs have resulted in altered patterns of communication within families, characterised by a growing distance. R6 asserted that their conversion to Islam has led to a breakdown in family communication, despite their persistent efforts to reconnect. He (She) mentioned, "*di Bangka cukup tinggi resistensi karena sangat lama tidak berhubungan kembali (R6)* [in Bangka, the resistance is quite high due to the long period of no reconnection]. Communication is often limited to formal occasions (celebrations) or distant interactions through technology, such as low-engagement WhatsApp groups. R1 and R4 revealed:

However, we still try to keep in touch with the family from the father's lineage through the WA Group, even though they follow different religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Confucianism (R1)

The efforts made to continue re-establishing kinship with the family are shown because this marriage is based on mutual love, so the parents are more accepting. Even during religious celebrations, we help each other and visit one another to celebrate (R4)

Frequent family visits, a common practice within Chinese traditions, have significantly decreased since embracing Islam.

The changes in relationship structures suggest a shifting mechanism of action, driven by the desire to maintain the impression of each group as a reflection of a particular definition of the situation. Involvement in certain Chinese traditions attempts to establish virtual relationships, and the abandonment of clan names all create the impression of influencing how diverse communities perceive the choice to convert through tangible actions.⁴⁶ This occurs because perceptions act as barriers, separating the formation of impressions related to the preservation of tradition and religious observance. The refusal to engage in Chinese family traditions or the adoption of traditions that conflict with Islam represents threats that can alter perceptions, leading to contradictions. These threats require individuals to be skilled in impression management, balancing engagement with diverse traditions while avoiding those that contradict the teachings of their new religion.⁴⁷ The preservation of family bonds and adherence to Islamic teachings act as safeguards to maintain favourable impressions, which are perceived differently due to conflicting goals.

Struggling for the New Muslim Identity: Perceptions of Difference

Chinese converts to Islam in Bangka form a new Muslim identity, requiring significant efforts to reduce stigma through actions aimed at reconciliation and impression management.⁴⁸ These efforts involve adopting behaviours that counter negative societal perceptions, projecting specific identities to manage stigma and maintain favourable impression.⁴⁹ The adaptation to new religious practices, particularly in conversions through marriage, often faces scrutiny over sincerity, shaping ongoing process of religious conversion. Participant R8 shared:

My wife's family also questioned my reasons for converting to Islam, [thinking] I only converted because I wanted to marry my Muslim wife... they believed it wasn't my own desire (R8)

⁴⁶ Neil O'Boyle, *Communication Theory for Humans* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 103–25; Katrin Lehmann et al., "Dramaturgical Accounts of Transgender Individuals: Impression Management in the Presentation of Self to Specialist Gender Services," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 50, no. 8 (2021): 3539–49; Nur Afni Khafsoh et al., "The Shifting Social-Religious Behavior of the Minority Muslim Jama'ah Tabligh COVID-19 Cluster in Wonosobo, Indonesia," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 12, no. 2 (2022): 149–65.

⁴⁷ Songqi Liu et al., "Effectiveness of Stereotype Threat Interventions: A Meta-Analytic Review.," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 106, no. 6 (2021): 921–49; Melina Grahlow, Claudia Ines Rupp, and Birgit Derntl, "The Impact of Face Masks on Emotion Recognition Performance and Perception of Threat," ed. Thomas Suslow, *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 2 (2022): e0262840.

⁴⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 133.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Erving Goffman*, 45.

In the early stage of becoming Muslim, the Chinese converts certainly do not have knowledge about Islamic teaching and practices. They cannot practice prayers and other Islamic rituals properly. As a result, the Islamic status of the Chinese converts is doubted by members of the Muslim community, as experienced by participants R4 and R3. They might have bad experience of being mocked by certain people.

The reason I became Muslim was because of marriage; it was a requirement from my wife and her family that I must be Muslim... When I first became Muslim, I didn't know the procedures, which led to doubts about my Islamic status (R4)

The reason I converted to Islam was because of my Muslim spouse through marriage. When I first got married, I wasn't truly practising Islam... I hadn't prayed or performed other acts of worship... [and] many people mocked me for it (R3)

Doubts about the Islamic status of the Chinese converts prompted a need for significant effort to have good knowledge about Islamic teaching in their struggle for full acceptance from the majority Muslim community. R4 demonstrates concrete steps taken to address these doubts about his Islamic status.

I made an effort to learn the practices of Islam and was provided with resources, even placing a card behind the door so I could see it while studying (R4)

The improvement of Islamic knowledge is a key effort to address the doubts cast upon their Islamic status and to become full members of the Muslim community. Religious conversion is a never-ending process that involves religious learning, participation in rituals and ceremonies, and engagement in social activities. Therefore, for Chinese converts, this journey entails a prolonged effort to become good Muslims and full members of the majority Muslim community.

The process of becoming full members of the Muslim community is complicated by the need to navigate between their Chinese cultural traditions and customs and Islamic doctrines and norms, particularly in an effort to maintain good family connections. R4 shared that her parents' response, "*selain itu karena kamu anak paling tua seharusnya memberikan contoh yang tepat untuk adik-adik kamu*" [besides, since you are the eldest child, you should set the right example for your younger siblings], reflects a restriction on the influence of Islam on other family members. Chinese adherence to their cultural traditions, which influence how they practice Islam, may often be seen as contradictory to established Islamic principles. R1 recounts:

All three of us siblings are confident in the true essence of Islam. However, our father still believes in superstitions tied to the lifestyle he had before converting. This is because his environment has not yet provided a proper example of Islam according to its teachings (R1)

The traditional connection of the Chinese community to their ancestral heritage creates a new form of Islamic identity and practice, which may be perceived as distinctive or different from the general Malay Muslim identity and practice on the island. It is a continuous negotiation between traditional customs, family relations, and Islamic norms that forms the new Chinese Muslim identity.

The attempt to become a good Muslim while maintaining social ties and ancestral traditions leads to new patterns of involvement in various rituals. This new pattern emerges from a restriction mechanism, where the preservation of social ties is considered through the example set by others. They, for instance, visit their parents' tombs only to maintain good family relations without performing Chinese prayers (R4). This is a valid, never-ending process of becoming a good Muslim as a part of the majority Muslim community.

Efforts to maintain relationships with non-Muslim families continue, such as attending a Chinese event to pray at the grave. We participate, but not fully—just by attending (R3)

We continue to make pilgrimages with non-Muslim families to show respect for our relatives, while limiting rituals that go against Islam (R1)

The negotiation process also includes dietary taboos and social connections. While the Chinese Muslim converts continue to attend Chinese celebrations and festivals, they adhere to halal food, which is a fundamental dimension of their Islamic identity. Therefore, communal eating at traditional ceremonies is avoided by the Chinese converts. R1 shares:

During kongnyen celebrations [food is provided] and said that the food served is halal, [but] we choose [not to] consume it (R1)

Similarly, they continue to participate in family gatherings, marriage ceremonies, and other social activities to establish intimacy and social ties while conducting dietary adjustments in accordance with Islamic norms, namely halal food.

We gather [with] [non-Muslim] families and the food we eat [is] only halal food (R3)

Chinese people who get married during the wedding procession honour their elders by [pouring] a cup of tea... I remember that my mother, although she is of Chen [Chinese] descent, is very considerate. The tea was brought from home and put in the pot, the glass was brought from home, and the food was brought from home (R5)

The Chinese tradition inherent to them is still preserved by selectively adjusting certain aspects to ensure they do not conflict with Islamic teachings.

Chinese Muslim converts in Bangka face a conflicted identity in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, encountering stigma for either not fully adhering to Islamic teachings or abandoning Chinese traditions, creating tensions and contradictions as described by Johan Galtung's conflict theory of assumption (A), behaviour (B), and contradiction (C).⁵⁰ These arise when conversions disrupt the Chinese non-Muslim community's aim to preserve original belief and challenge the Muslim community's strict sharia expectations, leading to verbal ridicule (B) that signals manifest conflict,⁵¹ while assumptions (A) fuel latent conflict.⁵² Convert counter stigma through self-promotion, ingratiation, and exemplification, adopting traditions and Islamic norms to reshape their self-image,⁵³ distinct from Goffman's passing or covering strategies.⁵⁴ However, these efforts often fail to gain full acceptance from the Muslim majority, who view converts as different, highlighting stigma visibility's role in response intensity. Despite compromises, which Galtung notes offer only temporary relief,⁵⁵ convert selectively preserve Chinese traditions by aligning them with Islamic teachings to prove their commitment as Muslims, yet unresolved stigma and contradictions leave potential for ongoing conflict.

Efforts to rebuild the positive image of Chinese Muslim converts in Bangka through reconciliation often mask underlying conflicts, leaving tensions unresolved with the potential to resurface, akin to an iceberg where only the surface is visible. These efforts, rooted in negotiations to minimise violence, create a pseudo-harmony that denies contradictions,⁵⁶ mirroring superficial tolerance prioritized to avoid conflict. This negotiated acceptance, similar to artificial harmony fostered by peace agreements⁵⁷ or

⁵⁰ Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, 72.

⁵¹ Galtung, 70–71.

⁵² Galtung, 71.

⁵³ Bruno Lefort and Vadim Romashov, "Becoming 'More like a Finn': In-visibility and the Struggle for Belonging in Finland," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* (2024): 123; Benno Herzog, "Managing Invisibility: Theoretical and Practical Contestations to Disrespect," in *Migration, Recognition and Critical Theory: Studies in Global Justice*, ed. Gottfried Schweiger, vol. 21 (Springer, 2021), 211–27; Graham Scambler, "Perceiving and Coping with Stigmatizing Illness," in *The Experience of Illness*, ed. Ray Fitzpatrick et al. (Routledge, 1984), 203–26.

⁵⁴ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 103; Daphna Yeshua-Katz and Natalia Khvorostianov, "'Only My Husband and My Doctor Know. And You, Girls': Online Discussions of Stigma Coping Strategies for Russian Surrogate Mothers," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 21 (2021): 11325; Ella Perry et al., "Understanding Camouflaging as a Response to Autism-Related Stigma: A Social Identity Theory Approach," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 52, no. 2 (2022): 800–810.

⁵⁵ Johan Galtung, *Transcend and Transform: An Introduction to Conflict Work* (Pluto Press, 2004), 14.

⁵⁶ Sylke Meyerhuber, "Theme-Centered Interaction for Educating Future Leaders. Applied Social Psychology for Teaching Academics to Act Socially Sustainably in Organisations," in *Theme-Centered Interaction (TCI) in Higher Education: A Didactic Approach for Sustainable and Living Learning*, ed. Sylke Meyerhuber, Helmut Reiser, and Matthias Scharer (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2019), 37; Suhaila Abdullah et al., "Implementing a Digital Profiling System for Enhanced Support and Integration of Muslim Converts in Malaysia," *International Journal of Religion* 5, no. 1 (2024): 592–605.

⁵⁷ Andi Markarma, Juraid Abdul Latif, and Adam, "Post Harmony and the Role of the Elites in Reconciliation Based On Restorative Justice in Sigi District (Social Conflict in the Perspective of Islamic Education)," *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research* 5, no. 10 (2022): 4450–57.

government interventions⁵⁸, perpetuates underlying discriminatory practices,⁵⁹ risking new forms of violent conflict. As seen in Agbobia and Okem's finding in Nigeria, such state-imposed harmony creates a false sense of peace,⁶⁰ echoing the fragile reconciliation in Bangka, where converts' selective adaptation of Chinese traditions to align with Islamic teachings fails to fully resolve stigma and contradictions, leaving latent conflict poised to re-emerge.

Previous research has often overlooked the subtle contradictions and stigmas lurking beneath the surface of apparently cohesive societies, particularly in the relationships between minority and majority groups. Efforts to maintain peace⁶¹ have frequently resulted in a superficial "negotiated harmony," where minority groups, such as Chinese Muslim converts, adapt to fit within the broader community, often at the expense of their fundamental rights.⁶² These adaptations mask underlying tension that, while not openly expressed, persist and create fragile social harmony vulnerable to disruption, especially by acts of religious intolerance. If these hidden conflicts and stigmas remain unaddressed, they risk intensifying social tensions. To foster lasting harmony in multicultural and multi-religious societies, a shift from reactive measures to proactive, preventive approaches is essential.⁶³

Conclusion

The claim of social and religious harmony between Chinese and Malay communities in Bangka, as commonly perceived, is challenged by this research. The perceived harmony in Bangka society is often attributed to the absence of overt violence, which is considered the primary indicator of conflict. However, this perspective overlooks the underlying stigmas and contradictions arising from the impacts of religious conversions. These contradictions and stigmas, latent aspects of conflict that often remain hidden, are embedded within the societal structure, placing Chinese Muslims in an intermediate position between the Chinese and Malay Muslim communities. This intermediate position forces Chinese Muslims to engage in various forms of negotiation to be accepted by both communities, resulting in a facade of harmony. The illusion of harmonious relationships conceals ongoing contradictions and stigmas beneath the surface, which are poised to generate new forms of violence that necessitate preventive measures. Hidden tensions from the religious conversion of Chinese individuals to Islam arise due to differing societal goals, as explored through a conflict formation perspective. This study focuses on these goals disparities but leaves negotiation patterns for maintaining harmony as a future research area.

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⁵⁸ Alwi Dahlan Ritonga et al., "Political and Legal Improvisation on the Issue of Religious Politicization: A Study of the Forum for Religious Harmony in Indonesia," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105, no. 1 (2023): 1–14.

⁵⁹ Kandung Sapto Nugroho et al., "The Arrangement of Indonesian Religious Harmony: Lessons from Cilegon Banten," *Journal of Governance* 7, no. 1 (2022): 24–36.

⁶⁰ Sunday Paul Chinazo Onwuegbuchulam and Khondlo Mtshali, "To Be or Not to Be? A Theoretical Investigation into the Crisis of National Identity in Nigeria," *Africa Today* 64, no. 1 (2017): 74–97; Daniel Egiegba Agbibia, "At War against Itself: Religious Identity, Militancy and Growing Insecurity in Northern Nigeria," *Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security* 4, no. 1–2 (2014): 43–67.

⁶¹ Muzainah and Mansyuroh, "Integration of Islamic Law and Banjarese Customary Law of Inheritance System Tionghoa Muslim Community in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan"; Wai chi Chee, "Navigating Islamic Enclosure and Cosmopolitan Space: Young Chinese Female Muslim Converts in Hong Kong," *City, Culture and Society* 36 (2024): 100564.

⁶² Eroglu Sager, "A Place under the Sun: Chinese Muslim (Hui) Identity and the Constitutional Movement in Republican China," 825–58; Ubaedillah, "The Minority and the State: Chinese Muslims in the Modern History of Indonesia," 489.

⁶³ Fawaizul Umam, "Measuring Religious Freedom in Indonesia: The Reconstruction of State's Role, the Revitalisation of Faith's Inclusiveness," *Asia-Pacific Journal on Religion and Society* 5, no. 1 (2022): 51–59; DB Subedi, "Early Warning and Response for Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism," *Peace Review* 29, no. 2 (2017): 135–43; Karemah François et al., "The Nature of Conflict in Palliative Care: A Qualitative Exploration of the Experiences of Staff and Family Members," *Patient Education and Counseling* 100, no. 8 (2017): 1459–65. See also Wang, Yunyan, and Poh-Chuin Teo. "I Know You: User Profiling on Social Media Usage of Chinese Private University Students". *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 12, No. 1 (2024): 71-98.

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