

# Beyond Conversion: Factors Behind the Growing Number of Mualaf in Sabah and the Challenges of Religious Integration

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10200086>

Received: 09 February 2026; Accepted: 14 February 2026; Published: 25 February 2026

## ABSTRACT

The Muslim population in Malaysia has continued to increase over time. One of the contributing factors to this growth, particularly in the state of Sabah, is the rising number of mualaf. This observation is further supported by official mualaf statistics released by the Sabah State Islamic Religious Affairs Department (JHEAINS), which indicate a consistent year on year increase in the number of formally registered mualaf. Sabah has also been recorded as the state with the highest increase in the number of mualaf compared to other states in Malaysia.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the factors that contribute to the increase in the number of mualaf in Sabah, as well as the challenges encountered after embracing Islam. This study adopts a qualitative approach through a literature based research design. By employing a literature review approach, the study engages with scholarly texts, da'wah related articles, and other relevant sources to synthesise current understandings related to the topic. The study summarises that the primary factors contributing to the increase of mualaf in Sabah include active da'wah efforts, admiration for Islamic moral conduct, interfaith marriage, and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental agencies. Meanwhile, the major challenges faced by mualaf across most areas in Sabah relate to financial constraints and issues of accessibility.

**Keywords:** Mualaf, Muslim, Sabah, da'wah, Islamic.

## INTRODUCTION

Islam in Malaysia has experienced significant growth over the past few decades, reflecting an increasing interest in the religion among the local population. This growth is particularly driven by the rising number of mualaf, individuals who choose to embrace Islam. This phenomenon not only adds diversity to the country's religious landscape but also reflects the evolving cultural and social dynamics within Malaysian society.

The increasing number of mualaf has become a notable phenomenon across various regions, including the state of Sabah, Malaysia. This development has attracted the attention of researchers, da'wah practitioners, and local authorities seeking to understand the factors contributing to the growth of the mualaf community in the region. As the only state in Malaysia located in the northern part of the island of Borneo, Sabah occupies a unique position within the nation's religious dynamics.

Previous studies on mualaf in Sabah have been conducted, however, most of these works primarily focus on the historical development of Islam in the state and several issues related to the mualaf community. For instance, studies by Sintang (2005), Abd Hadi Borham et al., (2021), Sintang et al., (2019), Imam Basirun et al., (2020), Hajimin & Ibrahim (2019), and other scholars largely discuss the early arrival of Islam in Sabah and subsequently emphasise the role of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) in increasing the Muslim population in the state since the 1970s. Discussions on the factors contributing to the increase in mualaf in Sabah within these studies remain largely confined to historical narratives and institutional roles.

In addition, other related studies have examined religious conversion to Islam and Christianity among the Kadazan Dusun community (Sintang, 2003), Christianisation strategies in the Kota Marudu district (Lazimin,

2018), zakat assistance schemes for mualaf in Sabah (Abd Malik et al., 2022), and issues related to religious knowledge and understanding (Adul, 2014; Adul et al., 2015). Based on the foregoing discussion, it is evident that studies specifically and comprehensively addressing the contemporary factors contributing to the increase of mualaf in Sabah, as well as the challenges currently faced by the mualaf community remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature, particularly within the context of Sabah, by examining the factors that drive the increase in mualaf and the key challenges encountered by mualaf in the state. By understanding these dynamics, more effective approaches can be developed in designing religious education programmes and da'wah activities that are responsive to the needs of the mualaf community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the factors influencing conversion to Islam among indigenous communities and other social groups in Sabah and Malaysia has emerged as a critical field of inquiry, shaped by the region's complex socio-religious landscape and the dynamic interaction of cultural, political, and religious forces that influence social identity and cohesion. In the context of Sabah, the increasing number of mualaf has further expanded the scope of scholarly discussion beyond the motivations for conversion, drawing attention to the broader post-conversion experience and the processes of religious adjustment and integration within diverse social settings.

Among the relevant studies is the research conducted by Kamaruddin & Mokhtar (2024), which found that the three most influential factors driving conversion to Islam among the Orang Asli community are inspiration derived from Islamic teachings, the desire to learn about Islam, and interest in Islamic beliefs. In contrast, conversion motivated by marriage and financial assistance was identified as relatively fragile. According to the researchers' observations, conversions driven by marriage or financial considerations often occur due to specific motives rather than sincere personal conviction to embrace Islam.

The findings of Pasiran & Mokhtar (2024) are largely consistent with those of earlier scholars. However, their study identified an additional factor contributing to the increase of mualaf in Sabah, namely conversion based on social imitation or peer influence. The researchers observed that mualaf who embraced Islam due to this factor did not demonstrate any noticeable changes in their lifestyle as Muslims. Many continued to practise behaviours inconsistent with Islamic teachings, such as consuming alcohol, gambling, engaging in superstitious or syncretic practices, neglecting religious obligations, and other similar behaviours. This situation is attributed to conversion based merely on following others, rather than genuine guidance or attraction to Islamic teachings.

A study by Awang & Hambali (2015) focusing on Chinese mualaf in Terengganu identified five main factors that motivated conversion to Islam: social interaction with Muslim friends, reading and studying Islamic teachings, interfaith marriage, receiving divine guidance, and encouragement from family members who had already embraced Islam. Among these factors, social interaction with Muslim peers recorded the highest percentage, indicating that close social relationships with Muslim communities play a significant role in attracting non Muslims towards Islam.

Within the Sabah context, Tabari (2024), in his study of the Murut ethnic community in Tenom District, Sabah, found that the competence and character of da'wah practitioners play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of da'wah efforts among non Muslim communities. The study revealed that preachers who were able to live harmoniously within the community, respect local cultural practices, and refrain from making premature judgments successfully attracted non Muslims to the beauty of Islam. As a result, members of the Murut community became more open to embracing Islam without feeling threatened. These findings are consistent with the study by Borham & Abdul Kadir (2017), which emphasised that noble character and da'wah bil-hāl significantly contribute to the growth of the mualaf population in a given area.

Additionally, the study by Rasip & Ab Razak (2024) found that among the factors contributing to conversion to Islam in Sabah are the role of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) in disseminating Islam throughout the state, the implementation of systematic da'wah movements in the contemporary period, interfaith marriage, and family relationships (Rasip et al., 2025). Although the rate of increase in the number of mualaf varies across different localities depending on contextual conditions, these factors generally serve as common motivations for individuals to embrace Islam.

Research on the challenges faced by mualaf in Malaysia has also attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly among researchers in the fields of Islamic studies and da'wah. For instance, Awang et al., (2022) examined the challenges encountered by mualaf couples involved in mixed marriages and found that such couples frequently experience social discrimination, resistance from family members, difficulties adapting to new norms of life, communication problems, and other related issues. Similarly, Aliakbar & Rasip (2024) and Che Abah et al., (2019) explored, in a more general manner, recurring issues and challenges faced by mualaf across Malaysia based on findings from previous studies.

Meanwhile, Sh. Othman et al., (2021) conducted a study on the challenges faced by mualaf in Pahang, focusing on identifying appropriate approaches for engaging and supporting them. Ahmad Zaluki & Abdul Rahman (2019) examined challenges and issues faced by mualaf in Kedah and proposed potential solutions, while Abdul Rahman & Mustapha (2020) investigated challenges in implementing da'wah initiatives among Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia. Numerous other studies with similar orientations have also been conducted within the Peninsular Malaysian context.

Studies on mualaf in Sarawak have likewise been undertaken by several researchers. For example, Kawi & Tan Abdullah (2020) examined issues and challenges faced by mualaf based on reports from the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department. Abdullah et al., (2022) investigated the strategies adopted by mualaf in adapting to their new lives as Muslims, while Mohd Mazlan & Mohad (2022) explored how mualaf in Mukah, Sarawak, navigate their daily lives as Muslims and the challenges they encounter.

Furthermore, research on the challenges faced by mualaf has become a particularly prominent topic in Sabah, given that the state consistently records the highest annual increase in the number of mualaf in Malaysia. For instance, Rasip et al., (2025) examined factors contributing to the growth of the mualaf population and the challenges they face. Khoza et al., (2025) highlighted several challenges related to Islamic education among mualaf in Sabah and the roles of implementing agencies. Sintang et al., (2019) identified several critical issues affecting mualaf in Sabah, including confusion surrounding religious identity, while Mohad et al., (2016), based on fieldwork findings, reported that some mualaf in Sabah continue to experience difficulties in fulfilling basic religious obligations in Islam.

In summary, this study focuses on the main factors contributing to the increasing number of mualaf in Sabah in the contemporary period, as well as the key challenges that constitute major issues faced by a significant proportion of the mualaf community in the state.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach through a literature-based research design to identify and examine previous studies related to the factors contributing to the increase of mualaf in the state of Sabah, as well as the challenges they face after embracing Islam. Research materials comprising both primary and secondary sources including academic journals, articles, magazines, books, and theses are systematically reviewed and analysed using a descriptive approach to support the objectives of the study. In addition, this study examines findings from previous research on the challenges faced by mualaf in Malaysia, before formulating conclusions and recommendations based on the information gathered.

### Objectives Of The Study

1. To analyse the main factors contributing to the increase in the number of mualaf in Sabah within the context of contemporary socio-religious dynamics and da'wah initiatives.
2. To examine the role of da'wah activities, the embodiment of Islamic moral conduct, interfaith marriage, and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental agencies in shaping the pattern of mualaf growth in the state of Sabah.
3. To analyse the post conversion challenges faced by mualaf in Sabah, particularly in terms of financial constraints and accessibility to religious guidance, and their implications for the process of religious integration.

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## The Historical Arrival of Islam in The State of Sabah

The state of Sabah, located in eastern Malaysia, is a region rich in ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. As one of Malaysia's multi ethnic states, Sabah plays a significant role in enriching the country's socio cultural landscape. The ethnic diversity of Sabah reflects a long standing reality of coexistence and relative harmony among the various communities residing in the region.

The state is home to more than 33 indigenous groups, including the Kadazan Dusun, Bajau, Murut, and many others (Sabah State Government Official Website). Each ethnic group brings with it a unique cultural heritage, encompassing arts, traditions, languages, and customary practices. The evolving social dynamics in Sabah thus serve as a reflection of the harmonious coexistence among diverse ethnic communities that collectively contribute to the formation of Malaysia's national identity.

Historical records indicate that the indigenous inhabitants of Sabah did not originally adhere to any organised religion. Instead, they are commonly categorised as practising paganism, with animism forming the basis of their belief system prior to the introduction of organised religions. Animism refers to the belief that all entities existing in the natural world possess a soul or spirit (Nasir & Hasan, 2018). Consequently, the increase in the number of mualaf in Sabah can be traced back to the pre independence period.

According to early sources, the arrival of Islam in Sabah is believed to have begun around the tenth century. Islam is said to have spread to Sabah through influences from the Sulu Archipelago. Majul (1973) explains that several Arab traders migrated to a location known as Mai (Mindoro) in the Sulu Archipelago. Historical accounts also record that Canton (present day Guangzhou), China, was visited by Arab traders originating from Mai. These accounts suggest the existence of an established Muslim community in Mai during that period. This assertion is further substantiated by the discovery of a gravestone dated 1310 CE in Bud Dato, Jolo. The date indicates that Islam had spread earlier than suggested by the study of Tom & Harrison (1970), which proposed that Islam was introduced to the Sulu Archipelago through the arrival of Sharif Awliya' Karim al-Makhdum in 1380 CE (Yusin, 1990).

The development of Islam became more pronounced during the 1970s under the leadership of the Right Honourable Tun Datu Mustapha. The establishment of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) on 16 August 1969 had a substantial impact on increasing the Muslim population in Sabah (Sintang, 2005). USIA functioned as a structured and strategic da'wah organisation with the objective of strengthening the Muslim presence in the state while safeguarding the rights of the Muslim community. Its da'wah initiatives were implemented across Sabah, encompassing both urban and rural areas. Tun Mustapha's efforts not only increased the number of Muslims among the general population but also attracted non-Muslim political figures to embrace Islam (Hajimin & Ibrahim, 2019). As these da'wah efforts were carried out continuously, an extraordinary phenomenon occurred, widely recognised as mass conversion to Islam (Sintang et al., 2019). The success of these initiatives became evident when the proportion of Muslims, originally a minority at 38.7% in 1967, increased to a majority of 53% by 1976 (Hajimin et al., 2020).

In the contemporary period, da'wah efforts in Sabah continue to be strengthened through collaboration with various government agencies, including the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, JAKIM), the Sabah State Islamic Religious Affairs Department (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Negeri Sabah, JHEAINS), the Sabah Islamic Religious Council (Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah, MUIS), as well as numerous non governmental organisations actively engaged in da'wah activities throughout the state.

### Definition Of Mualaf

Generally, an individual is referred to as a mualaf when they were originally non-Muslim and subsequently decide to embrace Islam. Scholars in the psychology of religion define mualaf as individuals involved in religious conversion, referring to a process of transition, change, or transformation in religious affiliation. An individual is formally recognised as a Muslim upon the completion of the pronouncement of the two testimonies of faith (shahadah) in the presence of two witnesses whose testimony is deemed valid (Sintang, 2005). The term mualaf has become commonly used within Malaysian society to describe individuals who have newly embraced

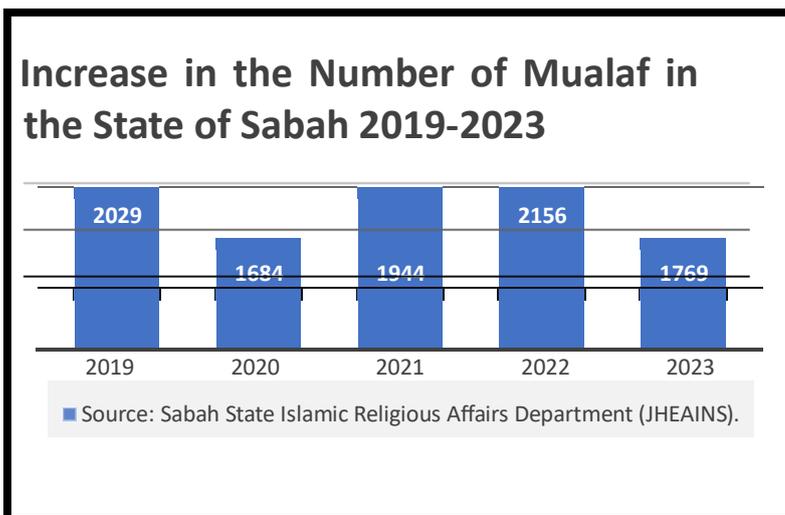
Islam. It can be said that the majority of Malaysians understand the meaning of this term, even among those who are not Muslims.

Furthermore, individuals who embrace Islam and are not of Malay descent continue to be referred to as mualaf even if they have been Muslims for an extended period, such as 10 to 15 years (Irwan et al., 2015). This practice has become a common social norm within the state of Sabah, as there is currently no formal temporal classification defining the duration of mualaf status in the state. Consequently, any individual in Sabah who was originally non Muslim and has embraced Islam is referred to as a mualaf, regardless of how long they have been practising Islam.

### Statistics on The Increase of Mualaf in The State Of Sabah

Referring to the Statistics on Conversion to Islam from 2010 to 2018 released by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), the total number of individuals who embraced Islam nationwide during this period amounted to 89,102. Of this total, 20,115 mualaf were recorded in the state of Sabah, representing the highest number compared to other states in Malaysia (Tan Abdullah, 2021).

This trend is further substantiated by more recent mualaf data released by the Sabah State Islamic Religious Affairs Department (JHEAINS) for the period from 2019 to 2023, which similarly demonstrate a consistent annual increase in the number of mualaf. Figure 1 illustrates the pattern of mualaf growth in Sabah during this period, highlighting a sustained upward trend in religious conversion within the state.



Based on the figure, it can be observed that the number of mualaf in the state of Sabah has increased consistently from year to year. Beyond this general upward trend, the annual increase in the number of mualaf has consistently exceeded 1,000 individuals, with certain years recording increases of more than 2,000 new mualaf. An examination of the data further reveals that the cumulative increase in the number of mualaf from 2019 to 2023 amounts to 9,582 individuals. This represents a substantially high figure, approaching 10,000 new mualaf within a period of approximately five years. The growing number of mualaf in Sabah inevitably raises questions about the challenges they encounter. This development calls for closer examination of the primary challenges faced by the mualaf community in the state.

### Factors Contributing to The Increase of Mualaf in The State Of Sabah

The state of Sabah is unique due to its population, which comprises diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The pattern of growth in the Muslim population in Sabah also differs from that of Peninsular Malaysia. For instance, mualaf in Peninsular Malaysia are predominantly from non Bumiputera groups, such as the Chinese and Indian communities, whereas in Sabah, the mualaf population is largely composed of the indigenous people of Sabah, also referred to as the Bumiputera of Sabah (Sintang, 2005). This observation is further supported by mualaf data from 2010 to 2023 released by JHEAINS, which indicate that the Kadazan Dusun ethnic group

consistently records the highest increase in the number of mualaf each year, followed by the Murut, Rungus, Sungai, and other indigenous groups (JHEAINS, 2024).

A range of factors has been identified in the literature as contributing to the increase in the number of mualaf in Sabah. These include active and sustained da'wah efforts, exposure to and appreciation of Islamic moral conduct, interfaith marriages, as well as collaboration between governmental and non governmental agencies.

### **Vibrant Da'Wah Efforts in The State of Sabah**

Sabah has experienced rapid development since attaining independence in 1963. This progress has not only been material in nature but has also encompassed spiritual advancement. This can be observed through the continued growth and vitality of da'wah efforts in the state. Such efforts cannot be sustained by individuals alone, rather they require collective and organised engagement through coordinated and communal initiatives.

Accordingly, during the period when Islam began to develop more rapidly in Sabah, particularly in the early twentieth century, numerous Islamic religious figures worked collaboratively to formulate strategies for the expansion of Islam in the state. Among the early da'wah movements were the Putatan Islamic Association (Persatuan Islam Putatan, PIP), founded by Haji Ag Sahari Abd. Latif; the Tawau Islamic Association (Persatuan Islam Tawau, PIT), led by Orang Kaya-Kaya (OKK) Zainal Kerahu; and the Sabah Islamic Association

(Persatuan Islam Sabah, PIS), spearheaded by Datuk Haji Mohd Kassim bin Haji Hasyim (Nasution & Ghofur, 2017). However, these movements did not endure for long, as they operated independently of one another. Recognising this situation, the Right Honourable Tun Datu Mustapha convened religious leaders from various Islamic movements in Sabah to deliberate on the future direction of da'wah in the state. As a result, these da'wah movements were revitalised and unified under the establishment of the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) in 1970.

Religious educational institutions have also expanded rapidly in Sabah. The increasing number of mosques and surau, together with religious classes organised by JHEAINS, has formed an important support system in strengthening Islam in the state (Sintang et al., 2009). Religious schools, pondok institutions, and madrasahs have likewise grown at a remarkable pace, often described metaphorically as flourishing "like mushrooms after the rain." Strong demand from parents to enrol their children in religious schools has led, in some cases, to institutions having to reject hundreds of additional applications due to a shortage of teaching staff.

In addition, religious programmes are now actively organised across various areas of Sabah. Mosques and surau have become increasingly vibrant with the introduction of regular monthly lectures and structured daurah (intensive study) sessions. These institutions are able to function actively due to the growing number of preachers who are committed to disseminating religious knowledge within the community. These da'wah practitioners include not only local Sabahan preachers but also individuals from Peninsular Malaysia, as well as invited speakers from Indonesia, the Philippines, and other regions (Hajimin et al., 2022). Some of these preachers are also actively involved in engaging with non Muslim communities. A variety of activities have been organised to foster goodwill and attract non Muslims towards Islam, including social visits, the distribution of gifts during festive occasions, assistance to those in need, and informal activities aimed at strengthening social bonds. The diversity and vibrancy of da'wah efforts in Sabah have contributed to the continuous increase in the number of mualaf from year to year. This observation is consistent with a statement by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Religious Affairs), who described Sabah as a vast and fertile field for da'wah activities (Harakah Daily, 2022)

### **Exemplifying Islamic Moral Conduct**

In addition to the formulation of specific strategies aimed at disseminating Islam to non-Muslim communities, one of the factors identified as attracting individuals to embrace Islam is admiration for the moral conduct promoted by Islamic teachings. The importance of demonstrating noble character towards people of different religious backgrounds is frequently emphasised in religious lectures delivered at mosques and surau. However, a segment of the Muslim community remains insufficiently aware of the significant role that moral conduct plays in the broader effort of da'wah.

Borham & Abdul Kadir (2017) demonstrate in their study that one of the contributing factors to the increase of mualaf among the Sabahan community is the appeal of Islamic moral values, such as compassion, social visits, mutual assistance across religious boundaries, and the provision of material support within one's means. Such moral practices lead non-Muslim communities to feel respected and, at the same time, to develop admiration for the conduct of Muslims towards individuals of different faiths.

A case in point can be observed in Kampung Pensiangan, Sabah, where the majority of mualaf in the area embraced Islam through the efforts of Mohd Fadli Yusof, an active da'wah practitioner in the region. His approach to da'wah did not focus solely on religious lectures or sermons. Rather, it began with the cultivation of positive relationships with village residents (da'wah bil hāl). He demonstrated commitment by participating in the construction of a mosque, visiting non-Muslim friends, frequently offering gifts, providing care for sick villagers, inviting residents to communal feasts, assisting those in need, and consistently displaying good moral conduct towards non-Muslim community members. As a result, non-Muslim villagers were deeply attracted to his character, particularly due to his kindness and respectful treatment of others despite religious differences.

In some instances, village residents contacted him specifically to inquire about the process of embracing Islam.

Findings from interviews conducted by Borham & Abdul Kadir (2017) further reveal that non-Muslims in Kampung Pensiangan greatly appreciated the exemplary conduct demonstrated by Mohd Fadli Yusof. His gentle manner of speech and the Islamic moral values he embodied served as key factors that opened the hearts of non-Muslims towards Islam.

### **Interfaith Marriage**

Another factor contributing to the increase in the number of mualaf in the state of Sabah is the prevalence of interfaith marriage, which has become a common social practice among a large segment of the population. According to Sintang (2003), Sabah records the highest rate of interethnic and interfaith marriages in Malaysia and is possibly among the highest globally. As a result, this pattern of interfaith marriage has contributed to the growth of the Muslim population and, at the same time, given rise to new Muslim lineages within ethnic groups that were originally non-Muslim, such as the Kadazan Dusun community.

The significance of interfaith marriage as a contributing factor to the increase of mualaf in Sabah is further supported by findings indicating that between 1994 and 2004, a total of 20,074 individuals in Sabah embraced Islam, with interfaith marriage identified as the primary factor behind this substantial figure (Sintang, 2019).

Similarly, Jominal (2020) found that marriage was one of the key reasons motivating mualaf in Sabah to embrace Islam. This observation is consistent with Islamic teachings, which recognise marriage as one of the avenues through which da'wah may be conveyed.

From a historical perspective, prior to British colonial rule in Sabah, one of the methods employed by Arab preachers and traders was to marry into ruling families. This approach yielded significant positive outcomes, as Muslim spouses were able to assume influential political roles within local governance structures (Abd Hadi et al., 2021). These historical accounts further reinforce the notion that marriage has functioned as a da'wah method with long term and sustained impact.

### **Collaboration between Governmental and Non-Governmental Agencies**

Mualaf constitute a group that requires particular attention, as they are an integral part of the Muslim community in Malaysia. They need to be properly guided and supported to ensure that they do not feel marginalised or treated as second class members of the community. Accordingly, the relevant authorities are expected to carry out their responsibilities effectively so that mualaf can be appropriately supported and guided, even when they reside in remote rural areas.

In Malaysia, individuals who decide to embrace Islam are required to be officially registered with designated government agencies. For example, in the state of Sabah, new converts to Islam are required to undergo a formal

conversion registration process with JHEAINS to ensure that their conversion is properly recorded in the system (Abu Bakar & Ismail, 2018). More specifically, JHEAINS has established a dedicated unit known as the Conversion Unit, which is responsible for managing mualaf affairs, beginning with the registration of conversion and extending to the coordination of religious guidance classes attended by mualaf.

Although each state in Malaysia has a State Islamic Religious Department (JAIN) or a State Islamic Religious Council (MAIN) responsible for managing mualaf affairs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also actively involved and assigned roles that correspond to their respective capacities. This arrangement is consistent with the findings of Mohd Amin & Don (2021), who argue that the development of Islam and da'wah efforts are sustained through collective and organised movements. For instance, all states in Malaysia utilise zakat funds allocated under the asnaf mualaf category as a primary source of funding. While these funds are administered by JAIN or MAIN, both institutions face certain limitations, particularly in terms of manpower and the availability of religious instructors. As a result, portions of these funds are channelled to NGOs that apply to implement programmes and activities for mualaf (Abu Bakar & Ismail, 2018). In Sabah, several NGOs are actively involved in organising mualaf related programmes and guidance classes, including the Hidayah Centre Foundation (HCF), the Pertubuhan Kadazan Dusun Murut Muslim Se-Malaysia (KDMRS MUSLIM), among others.

Collaboration between JAIN, MAIN, and NGOs in each state has been established to facilitate the implementation of mualaf guidance classes. Such cooperation primarily focuses on curriculum coordination and the dissemination of information. NGOs play a particularly important role in circulating announcements issued by JAIN or MAIN, as they often have extensive branch networks and regularly conduct mualaf related activities in remote areas. In summary, collaboration between governmental agencies and non-governmental organisations exists across all states in Malaysia. A similar pattern is evident in Sabah, where JHEAINS works closely with various Islamic NGOs that have long been active in implementing mualaf focused programmes. As a result, shortages of instructors at the JHEAINS level are partially mitigated through the involvement of NGO volunteers, enabling mualaf guidance classes to be conducted more extensively throughout Sabah, both in urban centres and rural areas.

### **Key Challenges Encountered by Mualaf in Sabah**

Newly converted mualaf inevitably encounter various challenges and trials following their acceptance of Islam. Such experiences are not unique to the contemporary context, but can be traced back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad during the early propagation of Islam. Historical accounts indicate that the Prophet and his family were subjected to insults, defamation, social exclusion, and various forms of persecution. Similarly, the Companions of the Prophet were not spared from severe trials and hardships.

One notable example is the account of Habib ibn Zaid, a young Companion who demonstrated strong commitment to Islam and actively supported the Prophet. He was captured and tortured by Musaylimah alKadhdhab in an attempt to compel him to renounce the Prophet. Despite enduring severe torture, Habib ibn Zaid remained steadfast in his faith and ultimately died after his hands and feet were severed (Othman, 2017). These historical narratives illustrate that embracing Islam has long been accompanied by significant personal and social challenges.

Drawing on findings from previous studies, mualaf in Sabah likewise face a range of challenges following their conversion to Islam. Among the various challenges identified in the literature, two emerge as particularly critical and recurrent within the Sabah context, namely financial constraints and issues related to accessibility.

### **Financial Hardship**

One of the most critical challenges faced by many mualaf is financial hardship. As discussed earlier, newly converted mualaf often experience various forms of social pressure, including family ostracism, social boycotts by close acquaintances, ridicule, and being perceived as traitors. These circumstances frequently have a direct impact on their sources of income and overall financial stability. For instance, some mualaf who previously received financial support from their families reported that such assistance was completely withdrawn following their conversion to Islam (Muhamat, 2016). Others face financial difficulties due to job loss or the death of a

spouse (Ab. Rahman et al., 2015). Widowed mualaf women, in particular, are compelled to assume the role of single parents and primary breadwinners for their families. As a result, they often lack the time to attend mualaf guidance classes, as participation in such programmes may entail the loss of daily income (Kamarulzaman & Nur A'thiroh, 2020).

Findings from Fakhruddin & Awang (2020) further reveal that some mualaf respondents reported persistent anxiety over securing sufficient income to support their families. Their daily concerns were dominated by financial survival, particularly in cases where they bore primary responsibility as heads of households. Owing to these financial constraints, they were unable to allocate time to attend mualaf guidance classes or to pursue religious learning in a more focused manner.

Another factor contributing to the loss of income among mualaf is the necessity to resign from previous employment. This situation arises when their former occupations are deemed impermissible (haram) under Islamic law, such as employment in gambling establishments, alcohol retail outlets, nightclubs, and similar sectors. In other cases, mualaf are compelled to leave their jobs after embracing Islam due to strong opposition from non-Muslim employers (Fatimah et al., 2018). Additionally, disputes over inheritance rights are also reported among mualaf. Such situations occur when family members strongly oppose Islam, often based on the perception that Islam is exclusively associated with Malay identity (Kamarulzaman & Nur A'thiroh, 2020). Consequently, assets that would otherwise be inherited are withheld, despite the individual being a legitimate family member.

### Accessibility Challenges

State Islamic religious authorities throughout Malaysia have made considerable efforts to provide Islamic education to mualaf through guidance classes conducted at selected training centres. In Sabah for instance, the Sabah State Islamic Religious Affairs Department (JHEAINS), through its da'wah division, has implemented specialised guidance classes for mualaf. Among the centres provided is Teratak Fitrah in Kota Kinabalu, alongside other mualaf guidance centres established in various districts through collaboration between JHEAINS and selected da'wah organisations.

Nevertheless, the locations of mualaf guidance classes are often situated at considerable distances from remote rural areas (Mohd Mazlan & Mohad, 2022). Consequently, previous studies have found that accessibility challenges among mualaf are particularly pronounced in Malaysia's two largest states, Sabah and Sarawak, largely due to geographical conditions that differ markedly from those of Peninsular Malaysia.

Among the key challenges identified is the limited capacity of mualaf residing in rural areas to attend guidance classes held in urban centres, as participation frequently entails high transportation costs (Sintang et al., 2018). In addition, critical deficiencies in basic infrastructure such as unreliable water supply, poor road conditions, limited access to electricity, and remote geographical locations further constrain the implementation of Islamic education programmes in rural areas. As a result, some mualaf place considerable expectations on government agencies to extend religious education services directly to interior and remote communities in order to meet their religious learning needs.

### CONCLUSION

This article has examined the factors contributing to the increase of mualaf in the state of Sabah based on existing literature. The discussion indicates that this growth is influenced by several key factors, including sustained da'wah efforts, the exemplification of Islamic moral conduct, interfaith marriage, and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental agencies. These factors reflect the distinctive socio religious context of Sabah, where ethnic diversity and organised da'wah initiatives play an important role in shaping patterns of religious conversion.

At the same time, the growing mualaf population in Sabah is accompanied by post conversion challenges, particularly financial hardship and accessibility constraints. These challenges affect mualaf's ability to sustain religious learning and participation, especially in rural and remote areas. In this regard, greater attention from relevant agencies is needed to ensure that existing support mechanisms remain responsive to the evolving needs of mualaf communities. Strengthening inter agency collaboration, enhancing outreach to underserved areas, and

improving access to religious guidance may help address these challenges more effectively. Overall, understanding both the drivers of conversion and the challenges faced by mualaf is essential for developing more inclusive and context sensitive approaches to mualaf support in Sabah.

### Funding

Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) through Fundamental Research Grant Scheme FRGS/1/2025/SS10/UMS/02/1

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