

Kinship Relations and Geographic Constraints in the Social Integration of Meratus Muslim Converts: A Case Study from Patikalain, Indonesia

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Abstract

Religious conversion in remote indigenous communities involves both changes in religious affiliation and the reorganization of social relationships and access to religious resources. Previous studies of Meratus Muslim converts have examined religious guidance, economic empowerment, and cultural adaptation, but the interaction between kinship relations and geographically constrained institutional access remains less clearly understood. This qualitative single-case study examines how these conditions shaped the social integration experiences of Muslim converts in Patikalain, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. Data were collected between February and March 2026 through semi-structured interviews with two converts, a customary leader, and an Islamic preacher, supplemented by four field visits and a review of the 2024 local profile. The data were analyzed through iterative coding, categorization, data display, and theoretically informed interpretation. The two converts described different kinship-mediated pathways to Islam: gradual parental socialization and social validation through observing relatives and community members. The customary leader reported no open conflict over conversion, while field observations and the preacher's account indicated that difficult access, long distances, and limited communication constrained the regularity of formal religious guidance. The findings identify kinship relations as an immediate source of social connection and geographic conditions as a constraint on institutional religious access. These patterns are context-specific and support the need for regular, culturally responsive guidance rather than a standardized model of intervention.

Keywords: *Geographic Constraints; Kinship Relations; Meratus Muslim Converts; Religious Conversion; Social Integration*

A. Introduction

Religious conversion in indigenous communities involves more than a formal change in religious affiliation. It may also reshape personal identity, family relationships, participation in customary life, and access to religious institutions. These dimensions are particularly important in geographically remote communities, where kinship networks often mediate everyday social participation while limited infrastructure may constrain sustained access to

formal religious guidance. Studies of indigenous religious communities in Indonesia and Dayak societies in Kalimantan have shown that religious change is shaped by institutional recognition, cultural reinterpretation, and changing social and material relations rather than necessarily producing an immediate break with the past (Atkinson 1983; Schiller 1996; Soehadha 2018; Kumoro 2020). Social integration after conversion should therefore be understood as an ongoing relational process rather than as a completed transition from one religious identity to another.

Previous studies have documented several dimensions of conversion among the Meratus Dayak. Research on religious guidance has identified the importance of sustained assistance and culturally responsive approaches for Muslim converts living in remote areas (Baderun and Rani 2021). Other work has examined economic empowerment among Meratus converts in Papagaran Hamlet, indicating that post-conversion support may involve material and social needs in addition to religious instruction (Erziaty et al. 2021). More recent research has similarly emphasized that religious outreach among the Meratus Dayak depends on gradual communication and sensitivity to local customs (Arafat, Guntoro, and Witjaksono 2024). Together, these studies demonstrate that conversion unfolds through the interaction of family relations, customary structures, religious guidance, and geographic conditions.

Nevertheless, existing research has generally examined religious guidance, economic empowerment, or broader cultural transformation as separate issues. Less attention has been given to how kinship-based support and geographically uneven access to religious institutions operate simultaneously in the everyday integration of Meratus Muslim converts. This relationship is important because family networks may facilitate acceptance and religious learning, while distance and limited institutional contact may restrict the continuity of formal guidance. Examining these forces together can clarify both the resources available to converts and the constraints surrounding their post-conversion religious participation.

This study draws primarily on Peter L. Berger's sociology of knowledge and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital. Berger's framework helps explain how close social relationships can sustain the plausibility of a newly adopted religious worldview, whereas Bourdieu's framework directs attention to unequal access to socially recognized religious knowledge, networks, and legitimacy (Berger 1967; Bourdieu 1986). Durkheim's account of social solidarity and Weber's concept of meaningful social action are used as supporting perspectives for interpreting communal cohesion and individual accounts of conversion. In this study, the terms *centripetal* and *centrifugal* are used as analytical descriptions: the former refers to relationships that support social connection, while the latter refers to conditions that may limit sustained

participation and institutional access. These terms do not imply causal forces that can be generalized beyond the case examined.

Accordingly, this study examines how kinship relations and geographically conditioned access to religious guidance shape the social integration experiences of Muslim converts in Patikalain, Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency, South Kalimantan. It specifically considers how family and community relationships supported the conversion and post-conversion experiences described by the participants, and how geographic conditions affected the continuity of religious learning and institutional contact. Based on a qualitative case study involving two converts and two contextual informants – a customary leader and an Islamic preacher – the study offers a context-specific account of the interaction between informal kinship support and formal religious access in a remote Meratus community.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative single-case design to examine how kinship relations and access to religious guidance shaped the social integration experiences of Muslim converts in Patikalain, Hantakan District, Hulu Sungai Tengah Regency, South Kalimantan (Yin 2018). Fieldwork was conducted between February and March 2026. Participants were selected purposively according to their direct experience of conversion or their contextual knowledge of local social and religious relations (Creswell 2007; Patton 2015). The four informants consisted of two Meratus Muslim converts, aged 24 and 51; one customary leader, aged 61; and one Islamic preacher, aged 42. The two converts had embraced Islam seven and twenty-three years before the study, respectively. The small and role-diverse sample was used to develop a context-specific account of the case rather than to represent the wider Meratus population.

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, four field visits, and document review. INF-01 participated in one interview lasting approximately 30–40 minutes; INF-02 participated in two interviews lasting approximately 20–35 minutes each; INF-03 participated in one interview lasting approximately 60–70 minutes; and INF-04 participated in two interviews lasting approximately 25–30 minutes each. The interviews addressed conversion experiences, family involvement in post-conversion adaptation, community responses, and the accessibility of religious guidance. Field observations focused on road conditions, distances between settlements and places of worship, communication access, and community activities. The document review was limited to the 2024 profile of Patikalain obtained from the local administrative office. Official schedules of preacher visits, reports from religious outreach organizations, and program-allocation records were not available. Statements concerning the frequency and distribution of religious guidance are therefore

based on the interviews and field observations and are treated as indicative rather than institutionally verified. The interview excerpts presented in this article were translated from Indonesian with attention to preserving their original meanings.

The data were organized and analyzed through iterative reduction, display, categorization, and interpretive review, following the interactive approach to qualitative analysis developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Informant statements and observational records were first assigned descriptive codes and then grouped into categories related to kinship-mediated conversion, community acceptance, geographically constrained guidance, and institutional access. Berger's sociology of knowledge and Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital guided the main interpretation, while Durkheim's account of solidarity and Weber's concept of meaningful social action were used as secondary analytical perspectives. Because the study involved only four informants in one locality and lacked institutional records, the analysis does not claim empirical generalizability beyond the case.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Kinship-Mediated Conversion and Community Acceptance

The accounts of the two converts indicate that kinship relations played an important, although not identical, role in their conversion experiences. INF-01 described entering Islam during childhood by following their parents and gradually developing a deeper understanding of the religion. INF-02 followed a different pathway:

"I converted to Islam because, after seeing my relatives and other community members, I felt that there was truth in Islam."

These accounts suggest two distinct processes within the case. INF-01's experience involved gradual religious socialization through parental authority, whereas INF-02 described social validation through observing relatives and other community members. The available evidence therefore does not establish a single conversion pattern. It shows that close relationships provided an immediate setting in which Islam was encountered, interpreted, and gradually incorporated into the lives of the two converts.

The customary leader, INF-03, described the local response to religious difference and conversion as follows:

"We do not make an issue of it. So far, matters of belief and people changing religion have remained safe and peaceful."

This statement indicates that the customary leader did not perceive open conflict over conversion in the locality. It does not, by itself, demonstrate complete harmony or the absence of subtle pressure in family and community

relations. Within the limits of the interview, it provides evidence of practical acceptance at the level represented by this informant.

These accounts are consistent with relational approaches that understand conversion as a contextual and temporally developing process embedded in interpersonal networks rather than as an isolated change of belief (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Machalek 1984; Rambo 1993, 1999). Berger's concept of a plausibility structure is useful here because family relationships can provide the social setting through which a new religious worldview becomes credible and sustainable (Berger 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1966). The two conversion accounts also support a limited Durkheimian interpretation: kinship and shared community membership continued to organize social connection after conversion (Durkheim 1984). The evidence does not, however, support a claim that the entire community exhibits a particular form of solidarity.

A relational interpretation should not reduce conversion to passive family influence. Weber's account of meaningful social action directs attention to how individuals interpret their own conduct within available social relationships (Weber 1978). INF-02 presented conversion as an assessment developed through observing others, while INF-01's childhood compliance was followed by gradual religious learning. These narratives suggest different degrees and forms of agency. Because both are retrospective accounts, the study cannot determine precisely how childhood authority, personal conviction, family expectations, and later reflection interacted at each stage.

This qualification is important because conversion does not necessarily follow a linear path from initial affiliation to a stable religious identity. Gooren (2007) argues that religious participation may move through different levels over the life course, while Peek (2005) shows that religious identity is variable and develops through changing social contexts. Research in Central Borneo also indicates that decisions to adopt, retain, or alter religious practices may be shaped by social hierarchy and material relations, not only by theological conviction or harmonious kinship (Ardhianto 2017). The present interviews do not provide enough evidence to determine whether kinship functioned exclusively as support or also carried implicit normative expectations. The family should therefore be interpreted as a site of religious learning and identity negotiation, rather than simply as an unqualified source of cohesion.

2. Geographic Constraints and the Continuity of Religious Guidance

Debates in the anthropology of conversion caution against assuming either complete rupture or uncomplicated cultural continuity (Robbins 2007; Chua 2012). Studies of Dayak religious change similarly show that conversion may involve both transformation and continuity. Field observations recorded difficult road access, considerable distances between settlements and places of worship, and limited communication signals in parts of the study area. The

interviews also indicated that contact with formal religious guidance was not consistently available. INF-04 described the approach used when working with Meratus Muslim converts:

“Religious outreach must be conducted gradually and adjusted to their culture and customs, while continuing to observe Islamic legal principles and being careful with sensitive issues to avoid misunderstandings about Islamic teaching.”

The statement shows that the preacher favored a gradual and culturally responsive approach. It does not establish the effectiveness of that approach or the frequency with which it reached converts. When read alongside the field observations, it suggests a distinction between the intended form of religious guidance and the practical conditions under which it was delivered.

Previous research on Meratus Muslim converts has similarly identified distance, dispersed settlements, limited religious knowledge, and the need for sustained and culturally responsive guidance (Baderun and Rani 2021; Arafat, Guntoro, and Witjaksono 2024). Comparable research among Dayak Muslim converts in another remote border setting reports that limited mentoring and constrained access to religious resources can complicate post-conversion religious learning (Masri et al. 2025). Research in Sarawak likewise shows that converts’ adaptation involves support systems, institutional assistance, and personal strategies rather than doctrinal instruction alone (Abdullah et al. 2022). These comparisons support the relevance of geographic and institutional access, but they do not prove that the conditions or effects are identical across locations.

Berger’s framework helps explain why regular interaction may matter for maintaining a religious worldview. Religious meaning is socially sustained through repeated communication and participation rather than secured by formal affiliation alone (Berger 1967). In Patikalain, irregular contact with religious educators may limit opportunities for repeated instruction and collective practice. The evidence does not show that the converts’ faith weakened or that customary practices necessarily displaced Islam. It supports only the more cautious inference that geographic conditions restricted the regularity of some forms of formal religious contact.

This interpretation also cautions against the stronger assumption that conversion necessarily produces a complete rupture with previous cultural life. Soehadha (2018), for example, found that the adoption of Islam and Christianity among Dayak Loksado was connected to changes in ritual and agricultural practices, while Kumoro (2020) showed that conversion among Dayak Kaharingan in Central Kalimantan was intertwined with changing household, ecological, and economic relations. Such studies caution against describing local customs merely as obstacles to a new religion. In the present case, the preacher’s emphasis on cultural adjustment suggests that customary affiliation and Islamic

learning were approached through accommodation. The interviews do not provide sufficient detail to identify which practices were retained, modified, or discontinued.

Geographic distance must also be distinguished from verified institutional exclusion. Ribot and Peluso (2003) define access in terms of the practical ability to benefit from resources, not merely the formal right to use them. Applied cautiously, this perspective suggests that formal availability of religious services does not ensure that residents of remote settlements can regularly benefit from them. Nevertheless, this study did not obtain official schedules, budget records, program reports, or interviews with responsible institutions. It therefore cannot conclude that government or religious organizations deliberately prioritized accessible areas or systematically excluded remote communities. Such claims require institutional evidence beyond the data collected here.

3. Informal Kinship Support and Institutional Religious Resources

The combined data indicate an asymmetry between readily available kinship relations and less regular contact with formal religious guidance. Family and close community relationships were present in the conversion narratives of INF-01 and INF-02, whereas geographic conditions constrained access to some forms of institutional religious learning. Within this case, kinship networks functioned as an immediate relational resource, but they were not equivalent to formal instruction, administrative recognition, or institutionally certified religious knowledge.

Bourdieu's concept of social capital provides a way to distinguish between resources embedded in personal relationships and forms of recognition controlled by institutions (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). His account of the religious field further directs attention to the unequal distribution of religious authority and competence (Bourdieu 1991). However, the present study did not investigate competition among preachers, customary leaders, state agencies, or religious organizations. Patikalain should therefore not be characterized empirically as a competitive religious field on the basis of these data alone.

Verter's (2003) development of spiritual capital offers a more precise interpretation of the observed difference. Religious knowledge and competence can have different values depending on whether they are recognized within family, community, or institutional settings. The converts' kinship relations may support participation and belonging, but the data do not show that these relations automatically provided sustained doctrinal instruction or formal legitimacy. This is an analytical distinction rather than a measured transfer between forms of capital.

Existing studies demonstrate that institutional intervention can take forms not documented in the present case. Erziaty et al. (2021), for example, reported

an organized economic empowerment program for Meratus Muslim converts in Papagaran. Such programs show that economic and institutional support is possible, but the current interviews do not establish whether INF-01 or INF-02 participated in, benefited from, or even had access to comparable initiatives. Scholarships, Islamic economic networks, and administrative services should consequently be presented as possible policy directions, not as findings of this study.

The interaction between the two organizing themes can thus be described as dialectical only in a limited analytical sense. Kinship relations appeared to facilitate conversion, learning, and continued community membership, while geographic conditions limited the regularity of some institutional contacts. Family-based support may partly compensate for irregular formal guidance, but the evidence does not show that it can replace sustained religious education. Conversely, institutional expansion that disregards local relationships and customs may fail to address the social setting in which conversion is experienced. Research on culturally sensitive outreach among the Meratus supports the value of gradual engagement rather than standardized intervention (Baderun and Rani 2021; Arafat, Guntoro, and Witjaksono 2024).

The terms *centripetal* and *centrifugal* summarize this interaction without implying a universal model. Kinship-mediated social connection operated as a centripetal condition in the accounts examined, whereas difficult access and irregular institutional contact operated as centrifugal conditions. With only two convert narratives, one customary leader, one preacher, and no institutional records, these categories remain case-specific analytical descriptions. Comparative research across Meratus settlements would be needed to determine whether the same relationship appears under different geographic, generational, and institutional conditions.

D. Conclusion

This study found that social integration among the Muslim converts examined in Patikalain involved the interaction of kinship-mediated support and geographically constrained access to religious guidance. The two converts described different pathways: one entered Islam through parental socialization during childhood, while the other associated conversion with observing relatives and other community members. The customary leader reported no open conflict over religious change, and the preacher described a gradual approach adapted to local culture. Within this case, kinship relations provided an immediate setting for encountering and learning Islam, whereas difficult access, long distances, and limited communication reduced the regularity of some forms of formal religious contact. These findings are limited to the case examined and should not be generalized to all Meratus Muslim converts.

The centripetal-centrifugal formulation is best understood as a case-specific analytical distinction. Kinship relations may support social connection and religious learning, but they do not necessarily provide the formal knowledge and institutional resources available through sustained religious services. The study is limited by its four informants, including only two converts, its focus on one locality, its reliance on retrospective accounts, and the absence of official records concerning religious outreach. Future studies should compare settlements with different levels of accessibility, include relatives and converts from different generations, and examine institutional schedules and program records. For practice, the findings support regular and culturally responsive religious guidance, but the form and allocation of such assistance should be based on further consultation with converts, customary leaders, local religious educators, and the responsible institutions.

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