

WHEN LOVE AND FAITH COLLIDE

Women's Conversion to Husband's Religion in Flores

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Abstract: This paper explores the religious conversion of women along with their struggle during the marriage and its implication to broader the community in Flores, East Nusa Tenggara. It considers four cases of women who have converted both from Islam to Catholicism and vice versa. It finds that the complexities and problems arising from interfaith marriage in Indonesia become the main reason for women's conversion to their husband's religion. Besides, in a patriarchal system, women are more often subjected to forced conversions than men. Individuals, especially women, undergoing a religious conversion for the sake of marriage 'convenience' often feel burdened and guilty for trading their religious and personal beliefs for political convenience. In the process, women require time to come to terms with and accept their new religious identity. It is not an easy process - one with countless identity struggles and societal, religious, as well as political burdens. Nevertheless, some women can remain faithful to their original belief that conversion does not necessarily motivate them to transform their identity to the new religion. This study shows that conversion, marriage, gender equality, and religious identity in Indonesia, especially in Flores, are interconnected and complex.

Keywords: Religious conversion, love and faith, woman, Flores.

Introduction

A woman in Manggarai, Flores, who had just converted from Catholicism to Islam to follow her husband, recalled her experience in one of the government offices while processing a document. A staffer whom she and her family knew well came to her service and asked for her identity card. The staffer appeared surprised upon seeing her card and exclaimed loudly, "Are you a Muslim?" At that moment, she felt equally surprised by the question, but this question kept ringing in her head—"Is she indeed a Muslim?"

The staffer and her question may seem simple enough, but this kind of question is, in reality, crucial and even complex, especially in Indonesian societies. This sort of question has implications on one's social, religious, and political identity. For a newly converted woman, this question is not merely demanding an answer to her new religious identity—there is a more complex implication on her marriage, gender status, and religious conversion issues. This study aims to explore precisely the struggle of a woman's religious conversion during the marriage on her status identity and its implication to broader the community.

Previous studies about religious conversion have highlighted its complexity. There are various reasons and motivations for religious conversion. A classic study by Lofland and Skonovd¹ introduced six categories of motivation in religious conversion: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. A more contemporary study by Lakhdar² has added three other motivations: negativist (opposing my family), *alloic* mastery (fighting on the poor's side), and *alloic* sympathy (sharing possessions). These categories emphasize on conversion as a personal motivation or as an active choice of an individual.

Other studies focusing on women's religious conversion, especially to Islam, are also hinged upon the idea of personal and active individual motivation. For example, studies by Maslim and Bjorck and Snook et al.³ about an American woman's conversion to Islam suggest that the nature of religious conversion is active and personal rather than passive and social. A similar context is in a study by Nieuwkerk⁴ in the Netherlands, which concluded that a woman's conversion is based upon a rational choice. Such studies have suggested that in

¹ John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1981): 373-385.

² Mounia Lakhdar et al, "Conversion to Islam among French Adolescents and Adults: A Systematic Inventory of Motives," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 17, 1 (2007): 1-15.

³ A.A. Maslim & J.P. Bjorck, "Reasons for Conversion to Islam among Women in the United States," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 1, 2 (2009): 97-111; See also Daniel W. Snook, Scott M. Kleinmann, Gentry White, and John G. Horgan, "Conversion Motifs among Muslim Converts in the United States," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2019).

⁴ Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "Biography and choice: Female Converts to Islam in the Netherlands," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19, 4 (2008): 431-447.

religious conversion, women have the autonomy and free will to convert into a new religion, especially to Islam.

On the other hand, studies in Indonesia have shown that religious conversion can be forced upon an individual for the sake of convenience and smooth administration process.⁵ This often occurs because the marriage of people of different religions in Indonesia involves an utterly complex administration process. Indonesia's Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage dictates that the legality of a marriage is determined only when religious institution(s) involved are agreeable to the marriage. This can easily be an issue in an inter-religion marriage because one religious institution or another typically demands marriage procession to proceed according to their practice. It is even familiar for religious leaders to encourage the individual of another religion to consider religious conversion. A study by Seo has discovered that marriage is the main reason for religious conversion in Indonesia.⁶

This sort of religious conversion can be categorized as the conversion for convenience. There is an irony as this study has discovered that religious conversion practice is marked by compulsion, difficulty, identity crises and inequality. Individuals, especially women, undergoing a religious conversion for the sake of marriage 'convenience' often feel burdened and guilty for trading their religious and personal beliefs for political convenience.

Interestingly, in such religious conversion cases, women are more often subjected to forced conversion than men. This is a hint to a larger issue beyond strict and inflexible marriage law: an issue of gender inequality. Many cultures in Indonesia adopt patriarchy. A patriarchal society believes in a system where women are subordinate to men. Moreover, religious institutions often enabled the system that marginalizes women and diminishes their beliefs.⁷ As a result, there is

⁵ Ratna Lukito, "Trapped between Legal Unification and Pluralism: The Indonesian Supreme Court's Decision on Interfaith Marriage," Gavin W. Jong, Che Heng Leng, and Maznah Mohammad (eds), *Muslim-non-Muslim Marriage: Political and Cultural Contestations in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009), 33-58.

⁶ Myengkyo Seo, "Falling in love and changing Gods: Inter-religious marriage and religious conversion in Java, Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 41, 19 (2013): 76-96.

⁷ Sylvia Walby, "Gender Mainstreaming: Productive Tensions in Theory and Practice," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 12, 3 (2005): 321-343; K Klingorová and T Havlíček, "Religion and Gender Inequality: The Status of

a common notion that a woman's religion is less important than a man's religion. A woman must abandon her religion and follow her husband's one.

There is an unwritten expectation towards a woman from the law and the society to abandon her belief system and convert to her husband's religion for the sake of harmony between the two religions and two families. Even a woman's family would often expect their daughter to be willing to convert – that is just the norm. The family member often dismissed a woman's opinion and emotions. As this study has discovered, this puts women in a difficult situation, which becomes a source of great worry and dilemma.

However, the problems do not end once a woman has converted. Women have shared that more identity crises and dilemmas arise as they attempt to adapt to the new religion. It is not easy to have a new belief system and a 'new God' when they have been conditioned differently by their old religion. Some struggle with the idea of trading God for love⁸. There is also a lot of questions and judgment from the society that these women have 'abandoned.' Some women face rejection from their old religious community and are labeled irreligious (e.g., apostasy in Islam).⁹

What are some of the complexities in women's experiences upon converting to their husband's religion? How are these personal experiences relate to society's and the state's construction of the role of religion, gender, and identity? These are the main questions explored in this study. This study is based on four case studies, two cases of Catholic women converting to Islam, and two remaining cases of Muslim women converting to Catholicism. All respondents are based in West Flores, East Nusa Tenggara. This study focuses on the relationship between religious conversion in marriage and Muslim-Catholic relations in Flores, and how the minority-majority dynamic in general plays a part.

Women in the Societies of World Religions," *Moravian Geographical Reports* 23, 2 (2015): 2-11.

⁸ Myengkkyo Seo, "Falling in Love and Changing Gods: Inter-religious Marriage and Religious Conversion in Java, Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 41, 119 (2013): 76-96.

⁹ Euis Nurlaelawati, "For the Sake of Protecting Religion: Apostasy and its Judicial Impact on Muslim's Marital Life in Indonesia," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 10, 1 (2016): 89-112.

Muslim-Catholic Relations in Flores

Catholicism is the majority religion in Flores with a long and unique history. In the 16th century, Dominican missionaries from Portugal started their mission in East Flores. Their mission was later carried on by Dutch and other European missionaries, and Catholicism began spreading to the west and throughout Flores.¹⁰ Besides carrying out evangelization, the missionaries were also actively involved in various community development works in the various economic, social, and political sectors including in education, healthcare, and agriculture.¹¹

As a result of their significant involvement in community development, locals in Flores grew sympathetic to Catholicism. To this date, Catholicism is the most significant institution for people in Flores. In the mid of the 20th century, over 90% of people in Flores have been converted to Catholicism. These people originally adapted various traditional/pagan beliefs. This number accounts for 75% of the Catholic population in Indonesia. Today, Flores is still known as the Catholic Island of Indonesia, a country with the largest Muslim population in the world. This has been illustrated accurately by Webb,¹² who wrote that Flores is an island where even birds, trees, and rocks are Catholic.

On the other hand, Islam is a minority religion in this island, even though it came earlier than Catholicism in some parts of the island. When the Portuguese missionaries set foot in Flores in the mid-16th century, it was likely that some Muslim traders from Ternate and Java had already settled down in the coasts of Flores. The spread of Islam in Flores was closely linked to its spread in Sulawesi. Muslim traders

¹⁰ Fransiska Widyawati, *Catholics in Manggarai, Eastern Indonesia* (Geneva, Swiss: Globethics.net, 2018); Fransiska Widyawati dan M. Purwatma, "The Development of Catholicism in Flores, Eastern Indonesia: Manggarai Identity, Religion, and Politics," (Unpublished Dissertation – Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, 2013).

¹¹ Maribeth Erb and Fransiska Widyawati, 2018. "Missionaries and Mining: Conflicts Over Development in Eastern Indonesia," C. Scheer, P. Fountain, and M. R. Feener (eds), *The Mission of Development, Religion and Techno-Politics in Asia* (Netherlands and Boston: Brill, 2018), 82-106; Fransiska Widyawati and Yohanes S. Lon, "Mission and Development in Manggarai, Eastern Indonesia in 1920-1960s," *Paramita: Historical Studies Journal* 29, 2 (2019), 178-189.

¹² Paul Webb, "Rural Development and Tradition: The Churches in Bali and Flores," *Centre of Southeast Asian Studies Working Papers* 65 (Center of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990).

from Sulawesi had already settled in Ende, a region in central Flores, since the beginning of the 17th century. In Western Flores, Muslim traders from Gowa, Bugis, and Bima had also settled down in the 17th century. After Malacca fell to Portuguese occupation in 1511, trading activities in Java and Sumatra faced significant difficulties. Many trading routes were diverted into the eastern parts of Nusantara, centered around Gowa-Tallo, South Sulawesi. Traders came from many places around the world, such as India, Persia, Arab, China, and Europe. The presence of Muslim traders from Arab was deemed to be one of the main factors that sped up Islamization in Sulawesi and surrounding areas.¹³

Sultanate of Gowa in Sulawesi had been Islamized in 1603.¹⁴ As Gowa was the trading center, many traders explored nearby areas in search of commodities and consumers, including in Flores. Inevitably, Islam was also spread along.¹⁵ However, spreading Islam was not their primary goal, especially in the isolated and mountainous Flores. Due to topographical difficulties, many regions in central Flores were not easily accessible. As a result, Islam became limited to coastal areas or Flores, and the people were mostly descendants of the Muslim traders from outside Flores. In addition to traders from Gowa, Islam in Flores especially in the western part was also introduced by people from Bima. These Bimanese people came from Makassar. The Islamization of Bima was also top-down in nature.¹⁶

After the Dutch defeated the Sultanate of Gowa, Manggarai, a region in western Flores, was taken over by the Sultanate of Bima. This marked the beginning of the expansion of Bima's business monopoly in western Flores. However, the Bimanese traders were not well-received by locals in Manggarai. The monopoly and injustice practices performed by the Bimanese traders caused the locals in

¹³ Anzar Abdullah, "Islamisasi di Sulawesi Selatan dalam Perspektif Sejarah," *Paramita* 26, 1 (2016): 86-88.

¹⁴ Syamsuez Salihima, "Peta Politik di Sulawesi Selatan pada Awal Islamisasi," *Jurnal Rihlab* 7, 1 (2015), 33-34.

¹⁵ Muhamad Murtadho, "Jejak Kerajaan Islam Enda dan Sejarah Keagamaan di Flores," *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 13, 1 (2015), 237-264.

¹⁶ M. Fachrir Rachman, "Kontroversi Sejarah Kehadiran Islam di Bima," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, 1 (2005): 20-34; Saidin Hamzah, M Ahmad Sewang dan Syamzan Syukur, "Kondisi Dana Mbojo (Bima) Pra Islam dalam Tinjauan Historis," *Diskursus Islam* 5, 1 (2017), 16-29; Noorduyn, "Makasar and the Islamization of Bima," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 143, 2/3, (1987): 312-342.

Manggarai to resent them. As a result, Islam was also not well-received by the locals.¹⁷

On the 17th of April of 1784, Sultan Abdul Hamid Syah made an ultimatum which prohibited people from Bugis, Makassar, and Bima from staying near locals of Manggarai, Flores, as he believed that the Manggaraian culture posed a threat to Muslim faith.¹⁸ The influence of Islam also weakened after the eruption of Mount Tambora in Sumbawa in 1815. Many of the officials and influential people of the Bima Sultanate died in the eruption. The influence of Islam had further weakened by the arrival of the Dutch to West Flores in 1907. Several years after, Dutch missionaries came to evangelize the region and prevent the spread of Islam. The locals in Flores welcomed the Dutch missionaries because they did not only introduce the new religion but also brought along improvements in infrastructure such as roads, irrigation, housing, healthcare, and education. As a result, the locals grew fond of Catholicism. Not long after, Muslims became a minority religion in Flores.

Early Muslim communities in Flores were familiar with Catholicism and its domination in the public sector. Even after Indonesia gained its independence in 1945, the Catholic Church in Flores still held a major role in the public sector – evident from the number of Catholic schools and hospitals around. The role of the government in terms of development and improvement of public facilities was only apparent or in par with that of the Catholic Church in the 1980s.

The late 1970s mark the start of a new era of Islamization in West Flores. During this time, the central government began expanding bureaucracy and sending civil servants/*Aparatur Sipil Negara* (ASN) from outside Flores (typically from Java, where Islam was the majority religion) to work in this region.¹⁹ These civil workers brought along

¹⁷ Karel Steenbrink, "Dutch Colonial Containment of Islam in Manggarai, West-Flores, in Favour of Catholicism, 1907-1942," *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 169, 1 (2013): 104-128.

¹⁸ Fransiska Widyawati and Yohanes S. Lon, "Mission and Development in Manggarai, Eastern Indonesia in 1920-1960s," *Paramita: Historical Studies Journal* 29, 2 (2019): 178-189.

¹⁹ In other place of the country during the New Order period, the regime's policy of officially recognized religions has resulted in religious conversions of indigenous religion believers. See for instance Muh. Fathoni Hasyim, et al, "The Walagara

their family members and started a new life in Flores. More Muslim families from outside Flores started migrating upon seeing the new developments and new opportunities in Flores, this includes traders and cooks. They typically came from Java, Bima, Sumatra, and Sulawesi. The Muslim-Catholic relations started to be apparent, and they tend to be harmonious.²⁰ This phenomenon can still be observed today in cities of West Flores, such as in Labuan Bajo or Ruteng, where many traders, business owners, and cooks have come from those regions. Up to this date, Flores remains one of the most harmonious and tolerant regions in Indonesia Flores.²¹ As the Muslim population in Flores grows, the possibility of marriage between a Catholic and a Muslim also grows. Besides, many locals in Flores have started venturing out or working outside of Flores, where Muslims are the majority religion, adding to the occurrences of Muslim-Catholic weddings.

Case Studies of Women's Conversion to Husband's Religion

This study analyzes case studies of women in Flores who have converted to their husband's religion, both from Islam to Catholicism and vice versa. The names used in this study are not the respondents' real names.

Case 1

Bunga (25) was born and raised in Sumbawa. She described her family as a "Muslim fanatic," who believed in the ultimate truth of Islam and who regarded people of other religions as *kaafir*. Her family was a devout Muslim who devoted their life to adhering to Muslim laws. She always enrolled in a Muslim school – right from elementary school to high school. Living in a Muslim community in Sumbawa, she was also not familiar with people from other religions. Her first encounter with non-Muslim people was when she studied her undergraduate degree in Yogyakarta. Two of classmates were a Protestant and a Catholic. During her third year in university, she dated

Marriage Ritual: The Negotiation between Islamic Law and Custom in 'Tengger," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 14, 1 (2020), 139-162.

²⁰ Yohanes S. Lon and Fransiska Widyawati, "Pork in Communal Dining: Muslim-Catholic Relations in Flores, Eastern Indonesia," *Studi Islamika* 26, 3 (2019): 445-474.

²¹ <https://tirto.id/daftar-skor-indeks-kerukunan-beragama-versi-kemenag-2019-engH;http://simbi.kemenag.go.id/pustaka/images/materibuku/survei%20nasional%20kerukunan%20umat%20beragama%20di%20indonesia-2013.pdf>

a Protestant guy who often invited her to attend services at his church. Although she agreed to the invitation, she would often regard the religion and its teachings about Jesus with derision and disbelief. She believed that Islam was the most righteous religion. Their relationship did not last long.

After completing her Bachelor's degree, she enrolled in a public graduate school in Yogyakarta, where she met Frans, a Catholic guy from Flores. They started dating in the third semester. During the time they dated, religious differences were frequently the root of their arguments and debates. The arguments became more frequent as their relationship was getting serious. After graduation, Frans decided to return to Flores and worked as an academic.

On the other hand, Bunga also decided to move back to her childhood home in Sumbawa. Despite the distance, they still maintained their relationship. However, Frans kept pressuring Bunga to move with him to Flores to prove her love. At this time, Bunga had not informed her parents about dating a Catholic guy out of fear. She was sure her parents would be outraged if they ever found out. The thought of having to convert to Catholicism also loomed in her head.

Frans refused to convert to Islam. It would be a complicated process before Frans could be converted to Islam as he would have to learn many foundations of Islam and its teachings. On the other hand, it would be relatively more straightforward for Bunga to convert to Catholicism. Another reason he presented was that they would settle in Flores where all the family members were Catholic, and it would only make sense if Bunga adopted Catholicism. Frans argued that because he had already gotten a job in Flores while Bunga had not gotten a job, it only made sense for Bunga to move to Flores instead of him moving to Sumbawa.

After a long period of consideration, Bunga gave in and agreed to move to Flores. The Catholic Church was confident that Frans could help her learn and integrate well into the religion as Frans used to study Catholic philosophy. She did not wait long for her baptism. After converting to Catholicism, she gathered her courage to inform her parents finally. Her parents did not receive the news well. Her father was outraged and cut all forms of contact with her. Her mother was also furious. None of her families turned up for her wedding.

Even after her baptism, Bunga never truly felt Catholic. She was thankful that her husband was not bothered by that. Her husband

would still let her do Islamic prayers/*shalat*, fast, and practice *dhiker* (litany). When their first child was born, Bunga even performed Islamic prayer to their child. Bunga would go to church with her husband every Sunday, but she admitted that her heart still felt Muslim. At the point of the interview, she shared that she taught her one-year-old child Islamic prayers despite herself being officially a Catholic. She sincerely shared that she did not know when or if she would truly feel Catholic, as written on her identity card. However, she did not feel too worried because her husband did not make a big deal out of this, and she would like things just to go as it was.

Case 2

Zania (33) was born in Manggarai, Flores, from a Muslim family. Her father came from a Muslim background, but her mother was a Catholic who converted to Islam upon marrying her father. Because she grew up surrounded by many Catholic people, she was highly familiar with Catholicism. She enrolled in a Catholic elementary to high school. She also learned about Catholicism from Catholic religious classes in school. Even so, her father taught her about Islam and taught her Muslim prayers at home. She also practiced Muslim prayers religiously.

Zania pursued her undergraduate studies in Java, where she met more Muslim people and started dating some. After graduation, she moved back to Flores, where she met Andi, a Catholic man. They started dating, and inevitably, religious differences started becoming a source of worry for the couple. Zania was especially worried because she was aware of the unspoken rule that in an interfaith marriage, it was natural for the woman to follow her husband's religion. She knew that Andi could not convert to Muslim because he was a male, and they lived in a Catholic-majority community. She also knew that it was easier to convert into Catholicism than into Islam.

Soon she became pregnant, and marriage was inevitable. Both families agreed that they should get married as she had become pregnant. Both their families were already aware of their relationship. Zania's father initially disapproved of Zania of converting to Catholicism. As time passed, he became more accepting as his wife once did the same for him. Zania's mother was very supportive of Zania's conversion. She even regarded it as an excellent opportunity to 'repay' for her conversion from Catholicism to Islam.

Her parents' support eased Zania and took away her worries. After all, she was familiar with Catholicism all her life. She testified that there were not a lot of mental burdens regarding her conversion. She shared that on her baptism day, she assured herself that this conversion was an opportunity for her to transform and live a new life. She added that despite feeling ready, there were some things that she found rather tricky at first, such as consuming pork. As an essential dish in Catholic Manggaraian culture, pork was almost like a staple. It took her several years before she could bring herself to consume pork.

After conversion, she completely abandoned her Muslim practices, such as Muslim prayers and fasting. Even so, her Muslim family had a good relationship with her husband's Catholic family. She felt that the religious differences were uniting rather than disconnecting the two families.

Case 3

Ani (35) was born in Flores and raised by a single mother. Her mother was known to be strict. As a single-parent family, Ani's family was marginalized by the community. Both Ani and her mother frequently attended Sunday mass but rarely joining other religious activities. Ani later enrolled in a Catholic junior high school and joined a Catholic teenager prayer group in her parish. However, during one of the activities in Church, Ani was sexually harassed by the parish priest. She testified that the priest sat her on his lap and kissed her. She was traumatized and started avoiding Catholic activities. She never told about this incident to anyone. She still went to Church to pray, but she stayed away from any other religious activities. She preferred a personal relation with God rather than participating in communal activities.

After high school, Ani moved to Java to start her undergraduate studies, where she started meeting up with Muslim people. Upon graduation, she moved back to Flores and became a civil servant (ASN), which was considered a prestigious occupation in Flores. She dated a few Catholic men in Flores, but none were successful. She finally dated Ahmad, a Muslim man whose father was an influential Muslim figure in Flores. Ahmad was her neighbor and a good friend. Both their families knew each other.

Ahmad was the head of one of the Islamic political parties in Flores. While dating, both Ani and Ahmad were worried about their religious differences. Although Ani would not consider herself as a pious Catholic, the idea of converting sounded overwhelming, it is

primarily because her families would likely marginalize her even more. On the other hand, she knew Ahmad could not convert to Catholicism as his family was known Muslim figures who was revered not only by Muslim people but Catholic people as well.

Ani became pregnant before marriage. Both their families thought marriage was the only way to salvage from embarrassment and keep the baby. It is evident that as a woman and one from a powerless family, Ani would have to convert to Islam to be able to have a legal marriage. Ani felt powerless but still went on with the conversion. Ani's family were disappointed, but they understood the circumstances and were able to let go of their anger. If anything, they were mostly confused about the marriage procession, as in a Catholic Manggaraian tradition, marriage would take place in the bride's house. They were also hesitant to attend a Muslim wedding. Ahmad's family decided to arrange the marriage ceremony to be held in Bali, far from Ani's extended families. In a way, this was to respect Ani's family so as not to pressure them to attend the wedding ceremony. Ani's family agreed to this as their absence would be more convenient.

After their marriage, their life in Flores went back to normal. Ani's Catholic families were able to accept Ahmad as a part of the family too. However, Ani insisted on her husband to never force her to learn and practice Islam. She made it clear that she would not practice Muslim prayers. She shared that it was difficult to change her prayer habits, and she would still pray in a Catholic way, even though she no longer went to the Catholic Church. She also admitted that she would still eat pork whenever she went to her family's home, albeit secretly. Even after her first child was born, she still refused to practice Islam.

Changes started to emerge when she had her second child. She was clouded in a dilemma, as she was officially a Muslim, but she lived like an agnostic. She felt terrible for denying her new identity as a Muslim. She also felt guilty for not being active in her children's growth in faith. From then on, she started reading up on Sufism works and began practicing personal *dhikr*, even though she admitted that she did not follow the proper way of Islamic prayers. Her prayers were more of the form of personal communication to God; she called it 'freestyle prayers.' She had also stopped eating pork.

She was grateful that her husband and his family never once force her to practice Islam comprehensively. They only asked her to wear dress that resembles Islamic dress code in public and avoid eating pork

in public. The husband's parents did request her to participate in their Muslim family gatherings in a modest clothing/wearing a hijab, to which she agree.

Case 4

Cici (50) was born in a Catholic family in Manggarai, Flores. She grew up very near a Catholic Church, and her parents were active members of the church. She was also active in church activities ever since she was a kid. She still actively participated in church activities in her 20s when she was working as a civil servant.

While working in Ruteng, she dated a Muslim policeman, Ismail. His families were all living in Java. They had always struggled with their religious differences while they were dating. Cici had also discussed this matter with her parents, and they showed strong disapproval for her conversion. However, Cici had become pregnant, and her family decided it was best if Cici and Ismail were to get married. They finally gave in and let Cici convert, because it was almost natural for a woman to convert and follow her husband's religion, especially in this case where Ismail was a policeman.

Cici was willing to go through the conversion, but she made it clear to her husband that this was only for the sake of administrative purposes. She insisted that she would still practice Catholic prayers and rituals. Her husband agreed. After all, they lived amongst Catholic people, and Ismail's Muslim family was all based in Java. Cici insisted on enrolling their children in Catholic schools and participated in Catholic activities. Her husband did not mind this either. However, her children were legally registered as Muslims in their legal documents. The children moved to Java when they were of college age, and that was the first time they started exposing to Muslim cultures and teachings. Their children started learning about Islam and became proper Muslims.

Meanwhile, Cici was still living in Flores, feeling like a Catholic deep down. She put statues of Catholic figures and crosses in her house. She stopped going to church after her conversion, but she still prayed in a Catholic way. In her workplace, she was often in charge of leading Catholic prayers for her colleagues. She often tells people that she is a Catholic. Islam was just her religious status on paper. She did not mind that her children chose to become Muslims. She even often reminded them and her husband to pray in a Muslim way at home.

Polemics against Interfaith Marriage in Indonesia

The complexities and problems arising from interfaith marriage in Indonesia is arguably the main reason for women's conversion to their husband's religion. Interfaith, interracial, and intercultural marriages are common phenomena in many parts of the world for a long time, including in Indonesia. Even though differences in background can fuel problems, many studies have also shown that plural communities have established strategies to live harmoniously in the face of diversity.²²

In Indonesia, public, law, and political discourse regarding interfaith marriage becomes a more complex and conflictual issue, particularly during the new order period and after. The regime had placed a great emphasis on religious identity beyond personal matter into the public and political sphere. Religious differences thus became a big issue, especially within a family unit. The Marriage Law of 1974 aggregated the issue.²³ It emphasized the nature of marriage as a religious affair: “the marriage ceremony shall be performed according to the laws of the respective religion and faith” dan every marriage must be “registered according to the regulations of the legislation in force” (art 2 #1). A marriage is only legal when it is acknowledged by religious institutions and registered to the state office.

Many religious institutions have exclusively forbidden inter-faith marriage. For example, in 1980, the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) issued a fatwa against interfaith marriage. It forbade marriage between a Muslim man and a woman of the *Ahl al-Kitāb*, while many people interpreted that the Quran 5.5 and Shafī'i school of law, permitted it. The marriage law encumbers on interfaith marriage and the possibility of marriage legalization outside of religious institutions, interfaith marriage became almost impossible or challenging from a legal point of view. Interfaith marriage is thus discouraged. Studies have shown that interfaith marriage had led to issues in the

²² G.W. Jones, CH. Leng, M. Mohamad, *Muslim-non-Muslim Marriage, Political and Cultural Contestations in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009), 3.

²³ The 1974 Marriage Law itself was seen as contestation between Muslims and Catholics. See for instance Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened: Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia's New Order* (Leiden/Amsterdam: ISIM/Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 160-169.

community.²⁴ Marriage becomes a state affair rather than a family or personal affair.

As couples of different religious backgrounds find it difficult to legalize their marriage, alternatives are conventional. Some couples choose to end the relationship or leave their partner even after having children. Some couples feel the need to convert to their partner's religion. Some couples convert to a different religion altogether. Some couples choose to get married overseas. Some couples choose to live together without being legally married. A study by Cholil²⁵ has shown some of the alternative solutions to get around interfaith marriage.

The respondents in this study have shared similar experiences. As interfaith marriages were almost impossible, they circumvented it by converting to their husband's religion. All respondents had expressed their hope that interfaith marriage would be made more accessible by the law and would not be too frowned upon by societies. The reality they faced was one where families, religious leaders, and society, in general, were opposing the interfaith marriage. The community is indeed generally unsupportive of interfaith marriage. Religious institutions also tend to promote conversion rather than interfaith marriage. Perhaps there is a sort of ego attached that causes religious institutions to favor conversion into their religion. Even among couples of different religious backgrounds, there tends to be a hope for their partner to follow their religion.

Interfaith Marriages Concerning Gender and Pregnancy

There have not been any studies that show the statistics of religious conversion among women as compared to men when it comes to marriage. However, based on a simple observation in many communities in Indonesia, it is safe to say that there are likely more cases of women converting to their husband's religion. It is highly

²⁴ S. Butt, "Polygamy and mixed marriage in Indonesia: the application of the Marriage Law in the courts," T. Lindsey (ed.), *Indonesia: Law and Society* (Sidney: Federation Press, 1999), 122–144; J.R. Bowen, *Islam, Law and Equality in Indonesia: An Anthropology of Public Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); M. Cammack, "Legal Aspects of Muslim–non-Muslim marriage in Indonesia," G. Jones, et al, (eds), *Muslim–Non-Muslim Marriage: Political and Cultural Contestations in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2003), 102–138.

²⁵ Suhadi Cholil, "The Politico–religious Contestation: Hardening of the Islamic Law on Muslim–non-Muslim Marriage in Indonesia," G. Jones (eds.), *Muslim–Non-Muslim Marriage*, 139–158.

likely that this is no coincidence but linked to the social hierarchy in a patriarchal society. Many communities in Indonesia adopt patriarchy. In such a society, a woman's choice is rarely indicative of individual free choice but rather is linked to the social construct of what is expected of a woman. A woman in a patriarchal society is considered as second-class individual with social status lower than a man. Important decisions in the community are usually made by male roles. Properties are also generally owned by men, while women can only access such properties through marriage.²⁶

This study has discovered that in terms of religion in marriage, people tend to prioritize man's religion as than a woman's one. It has become a norm for a woman to abandon her religion and establish a new religious identity that matches her husband's. Many religions place importance on the role of a man in his family's religious journey. In this study, the two religions in focus are Islam and Catholicism – both religions place essential leadership roles on male figures. In both religions, the presence and physicality of women have also been linked to un-holiness, sacrifice, and temptation for men.²⁷

This perception and ideology have been passed down and instilled for a long time that they are rarely challenged or frowned upon. It is then no surprise that in many cases of interfaith marriage, women are expected to convert into their husband's religion. That is just the way it has been, and that is just the way it is. Similarly, in this study, our respondents have expressed that their families and spouses had already assumed that they would convert if they wished to get married. This was not regarded as a big issue; it was only natural. After all, these women were not 'imams' or leaders of their religion, unlike the men. It would not be a problem for them to convert.

From a cultural point of view, women in Manggarai are not considered heirs of the family. Females in Manggarai are also known as *ata pé'ang* which means outsider.²⁸ In marriage, a woman would leave her family and her clan to become a part of her husband's clan. This perception parallels the issue of interfaith marriage, so it is natural for

²⁶ Walby, "Gender Mainstreaming.

²⁷ Jane Bayes and Tohidi Nayerch (eds), *Globalization, Religion and Gender: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

²⁸ Lon and Widyawati, "Pork in Communal Dining; Idem, "Cultural Aspects on Child's Development and Parenting in Manggarai, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia," *Guidena Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan, Psikologi, Bimbingan dan Konseling* 7, 1 (2017), 130-9.

people in Manggarai to believe that upon marriage, a woman would leave her family's religion to join her husband's new religion. Moreover, women in Manggarai do not have any say in any communal decision. Marriage is seen as a communal affair rather than a union of two mere individuals. Similarly, in the context of religion in marriage, women do not have a say about her conversion. They are supposed to follow what the community has designed for them.

In this study, in addition to patriarchy, another factor that prompts a woman's conversion is her pregnancy, leading the family to force the couple to get married quickly just to save family honor. It appears that a woman's pregnancy outside of marriage has diminished her bargaining power. This is closely linked to the fact that traditional societies, including Manggarai, regard sex and pregnancy outside of marriage as taboo.²⁹ However, men do not seem to bear most of the consequences—women do. Many families believe that it is an absolute embarrassment for their daughter to be pregnant outside of marriage. Communities also tend to look down on such women and their families. To avoid humiliation or to save honor, families tend to force their pregnant daughter to get married before the birth of the child, sometimes even when knowing there is no love or when the pregnancy is unwanted, i.e., in the case of rape. Besides, society does not accept single mothers. Children from single mothers tend even to be considered *haram* (illegitimate).

The situation is more complicated for couples of different religious backgrounds. Families want to choose convenience and avoid complications, so the obvious option is to make the woman convert to her husband's religion and initiate the wedding. The woman's opinion is rarely considered. The woman's opinion is compromised to save the family honor and the baby's legality. This includes her opinion on her religious identity.

Moreover, this study has also highlighted some cases where the woman's financial dependence on the man has spurred the woman's conversion. On the other hand, a woman with a better financial status could be seen as being able to negotiate a situation that would also benefit herself. Unemployed women tend to be powerless and were left

²⁹ Linda Rae Bennett, "Single women's experiences of premarital pregnancy and induced abortion in Lombok, Eastern Indonesia," *Reproductive Health Matters* 9, 17 (2001), 37-43.

with no option but to follow the decision made by her husband and his family.

Conversion and Identity

Originally, a conversion is a form of identity transformation. A converted person is in the process of changing a sense of his or her root reality. He or she is in a conscious shift in sense of grounding. A study by Horton and Nachman³⁰ has emphasized on “assumption of new identities” as a critical factor in conversion. One can be considered successfully converted when he or she is actively and fully able to associate himself or herself with a new identity. It means that substantially, religious conversion to fulfill administrative purposes cannot be considered a true conversion as a person merely changing the “out-skin” of his or her belief.

A woman's conversion to her husband's religion just to have her legal, religious status changed is not considered automatically true conversion. Conversion can take a long time. Some women require time to come to terms and accept their new religious identity. It is not an easy process – one with countless identity struggles and societal, religious, and political burdens. Women are subjected to societal and familial pressure, which causes them to suffer much. However, women are active agents in this process of identity conversion. Only women themselves can find the motivation to transform her religious identity to match her public identity on paper. Women are energetic beings who can find the strength from within to do just that and to negotiate and find her dynamic.

On other side, this study shows some women can remain steadfast and clear in her belief system that conversion does not necessarily motivate them to transform their identity. The law and the family may change their identity on paper, but not their belief system. They can maintain their “old and original” religious identities and practices. However, the question is for how long? Could they continue “survive” maintaining their personal original religious identity in the context of Indonesian society which emphasize on public and political identity rather than on personal religious journey?

³⁰ R. Horton, “On the Rationality of Conversin,” *Africa* 45 (1975): 219-235; Michael Adi Nachman, *The Messiah in Us the Hope of Glory* (USA: lulu.com, 2017), 36-40.

The Influence of Family, Environment, and Majority-Minority Relations in Conversion

Women's conversion to her husband's family, as seen in the cases suggested earlier, depends significantly on the societal context and the relation between two religious groups in question. The family's and society's attitude towards converted women determine how challenging the conversion is. Families and communities who are more tolerant or accepting towards the other religion favor conversion, their support takes the mental burden away from the converted woman. On the other hand, families who are stricter and less open to the other religion tends to give the woman a hard time in her decision to convert.

As seen in some cases, unsupportive families act as the primary source of distress for women who had chosen to convert. The same families tend to view religion conversion as a considerable taboo linked to moral deviation or even sin. They also regarded conversion as a great humiliation for the family. Although they tend to be against conversion, they would only reluctantly allow it because their daughter was already pregnant. In some other cases, the family would disown their daughter when they found out about her conversion. In any case, the lack of family support in conversion added a more significant burden for the women.

However, this study had also discovered that over time, when the couple had settled down and had children, the relationship between the husband's and wife's families gradually improved. It appears that with time, familial ties and kinships become more tied. Some respondents agreed that their marriage eventually became a way to understand and respect each other's religion. Even though it may take time, the families eventually became more tolerant of their relatives from a different religious background.

In two cases of women converting from Catholicism to Islam, this study has discovered that no serious conflicts were arising from the conversion even though this took place in a Catholic-majority community. Although these families were disappointed at first, they eventually supported their daughters' decision to convert. This is not the case for two women converting from Islam to Catholicism whose families were living in Sumbawa (case 1) and both were Muslim-majority communities. In these cases, the women and their parents were shunned from the Muslim community, even though the married families were far away in Flores. Could it be that people in Flores are

more accepting and tolerant towards religious differences than in Jakarta and Sumbawa? A survey by the Ministry of Religious Affairs across Indonesia has shown that East Nusa Tenggara is amongst the most tolerant regions when it comes to religious differences. Perhaps a good majority-minority dynamic³¹ such as in Flores creates a safe space for those choosing to undergo religious conversion. It could be the further topic of research.

Conclusion

Religious conversion is a personal right. In theory, every individual has a free choice to adopt whatever religion one sees fit and a choice to convert to another belief system. Ideally, religious conversion is one where the individual plays an active role in the process of conversion and where the individual has the ultimate choice to embrace his/her new identity. Similarly, marriage is also a personal right. In theory, every individual has the choice to marry anyone or even to marry at all. Love should not be bounded by differences in the background, such as religious and cultural differences.

However, this study has shown that the love affairs of a couple from different religious backgrounds in Indonesia are not merely a matter of individual choice. Interfaith marriage in Indonesia is a complex and challenging issue. The state, religious institutions, traditions, and communities are still not accepting of interfaith marriage, which leaves couples, or more specifically women, often with no choice but to undergo religious conversion if they wish to stay together. This study has discovered that women are usually subjected or even forced to convert to their husband's religion, as expected in a patriarchal society. Patriarchy places women's status below men's, which leads to women having less bargaining power than their husbands. There is gender inequality in marriage and the relationship between men and women within the community and religion. Their financial and employment status can aggravate women's powerlessness. When a woman has excellent financial independence and an excellent social and economic status, she tends to be able to articulate her right clearly in front of her husband, his family, and the community at large.

³¹ Syamsul Arifin, et.al., "Minority Muslims and Freedom of Religion: Learning from Australian Muslims' Experiences," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 9, 2 (2019), 295-326.

This study has also shown that religious conversion is a cause of the great struggle of identity for women. Religious conversion as a transformation from an old identity to a new one takes place through a complicated process. Women are active agents who can negotiate and adapt to the new identity, environment, and belief system. This study shows that women's conversion to their husband's religion is an indication that Indonesia is still not accepting of interfaith marriage and pluralism of religions in Indonesia. The state should be able to actively protect every individual's right to marry and to subscribe to a religious belief.

Finally, this study calls for the revision of the marriage law to embrace religious differences and support interfaith marriage. Similarly, we hope communities can be more accepting of religious differences and open towards freedom of religion and personal right to marry. []

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