Nurturing an Islamic Identity Throughout Familial Conflict Among New Reverts: A Critical Review

Pembangunan Identiti Muslim dalam Kalangan Mualaf yang Melalui Konflik Keluarga: Satu Sorotan Kritikal

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Abstract: In regard to the integrated fields of psychology, da'wah and the Islamic studies, little research have been conducted to examine the areas of identity sustainment and/ or psychological dissociation in the process of Islamic reversion. Admittedly, while a few studies have broached on the difficulties of reverts adapting to an Islamic lifestyle, there is a gap in understanding how their very identities are affected by the factors of Islamic reversion and psychological dissociation due to conflict. In light of the above, this paper aims to investigate the phenomenon of nurturing an Islamic identity throughout the existence of familial conflict among new reverts to Islam by critically reviewing the literature of various researches to examine three main influences in conjunction to the research phenomenon above. The first is the influence of a familial misconception of Islam on the existence of familial conflict. The second is the influence of familial conflict on a difficulty sustaining an Islamic identity, and the third is the influence of psychological dissociation on sustaining an Islamic identity. Consequently, this critical review was conducted by analyzing and discussing the findings from both locally Malaysian and international researches concerning the three specified fields mentioned above. In conclusion, this paper was written with the hopes of opening up new approaches of dialogue between the global models of religion in the human psyche and their Muslim counterparts, with the ultimate aim of inducing a dialogue which would enrich both perspectives, and advance the fields of psychology, Da'wah and the Islamic studies.

Keywords: nurturing; identity; familial conflict; revert; dissociation.

Abstrak: Berhubung dengan integrasi antara bidang psikologi, dakwah dan pengajian Islam, tidak banyak penyelidikan yang telah dijalankan bagi mengkaji pemeliharaan dan kelestarian identiti dan/ atau pemisahan psikologi sepanjang proses pemelukan agama Islam. Walau pun terdapat kajian yang mengulas tentang kepayahan-kepayahan dalam kalangan mualaf untuk menyesuaikan diri dengan cara hidup Islam, masih terdapat jarak di dalam memahami bagaimana identiti mereka dikesan oleh faktor-faktor pemelukan Islam dan pemisahan psikologi yang disebankan oleh konflik keluarga. Oleh yang demikian, tujuan kertas kerja ini adalah untuk mengkaji fenomena pengasuhan identiti Muslim sepanjang wujudnya konflik kekeluargaan dalam kalangan mualaf baru, dengan melihat kembali secara kritikal beberapa kajian terdahulu yang mengkaji tiga pengaruh utama dalam fenomena penyelidikan di atas. Pengaruh yang pertama ialah: pengaruh daripada salah faham terhadap Islam di kalangan keluarga yang mencetuskan konflik kekeluargaan; kedua, pengaruh daripada sokongan sekeliling ke atas kebolehan mualaf untuk mengasuh identiti Muslim; dan yang ketiga: kesan pemisahan psikologi ke atas pengasuhan identiti Muslim. Oleh sebab ini, kajian yang bersifat kritikal ini telah dibuat secara menganalisa dan berdiskusi tentang dapatan daripada kajian dari dalam dan juga luar Malaysia berhubung dengan tiga bidang pengkhususan tersebut. Sebagai kesimpulan, penulisan ini dibuat dengan harapan untuk membuka ruang dialog yang lebih luas, yang selama ini kurang diberikan perhatian, antara model global penukaran agama dengan kesan psikologi ke atas jiwa manusia, dengan

tujuan untuk mendorong dialog yang lebih progresif, yang akan memperkayakan lagi bidang psikologi, dakwah dan pengajian Islam.

Kata kunci: mengasuh; identiti; konflik keluarga; mualaf; pemisahan psikologi

Introduction

The acceptance of Islam by thousands worldwide indicates that Islam has undeniably become a focal point of interest internationally. As a matter of fact, Islam holds the title of being the world's fastest growing belief, with a projected increase rate of 70 percent in the upcoming decades (Lipka & Hackett, 2017). This projection is found to be noteworthy, especially in the case of Islam, which is a religion often related to acts of terrorism and negativity (Mohamed & O'Brien, 2011; Lawrence, 2002; Iqbal, 2010). The very fact that a statistic like this exists is paradoxical to the negativity surrounding Islam in the modern, global context. In fact, whether positive or negative, this interest is significant as it has led to the conduction of many investigations into Islam and the Islamic lifestyle, which has ultimately resulted in the reversion of many of Islam's greatest scholars and intellectuals (Van Koningsveld, 2016; Awang & Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2014; Ahmad Mian, 2010). To this day, Islam remains as one of the world's most influential religions. Then what exactly draws so many people to Islam? Why are hundreds of thousands of people embracing the Islamic life style despite the negative associations they will be connected to, and the general mistrust they will get from the public?

Overall, people revert to Islam for a variety of reasons, both internal and external. When explored generally, external reasons might include factors like environmental influences, an exposure to the Al-Qur'an, and marriage, while internal reasons might include spiritual emptiness, a search for the truth, and divine guidance (Ahmad Mian, 2010; Ryad, 2017; Van San, 2015; Gupta, 2009). In light of this, while it is clear that each individual has varying reasons for reverting to Islam, whether for personal, logical or political factors, it is also clear that each reversion is relatively similar, as individuals are generally seen to revert when an actual understanding of Islam is achieved. This understanding newfound belief in Islam and its truth, is one of the main reasons behind why people revert even though they would have to adopt a completely different identity, and face challenges they did not have to before; as understanding is a state of consciousness which affects perception, once it is attained, going back to a time of ignorance is difficult if not consciously impossible (Awang & Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2015). This is where the 'conflict' factor comes into play. With challenges coming from both internal and external sources, nurturing and sustaining a newfound religious identity, then becomes challenging, and often results in the buildup of an internal identity conflict (Muhamat Kawangit, 2016). According to the American Psychological Association (2013), if left unresolved, this internal conflict could result in the development of mild to serious stress, trauma, and even psychological illnesses like the Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), which is a type of dissociative disorder (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). Consequently, having a strong belief system and environmental support is crucial for reverts to sufficiently nurture and sustain their newfound Islamic identity throughout the challenges they face.

In light of the above, there have been many studies conducted to investigate the phenomenon of religious conversion, Islamic reversion, and new reverts to Islam both locally and internationally. While some international studies investigate the reasons behind an individual's reversion to Islam, others investigate the effects this newfound religiosity has on various aspects of their lives, like on familial structures and suicidal tendencies (Awang & Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2014; Krauss et al., 2006; Yi Foo, Mohd Alwi, Ismail, Ibrahim, & Jamil Osman, 2014). Similarly, there have also been studies that examine religiosity in relation to other life aspects like psychology and daily living, like Cann et al's study in 2009 and Preston and Epley's research in 2005, which showed the importance of religious beliefs and practices on managing psychological trauma and general stress (Cann et al., 2009; Preston & Epley, 2005). Comparatively, local research in regards to reverts in Malaysia focused on the areas of Muslim/non-Muslim marriages, da'wah methods and activities, challenges in lifestyle adaptation, the understandings of fate and fatalism in Islam, and the conversions of Muslim reverts to other religions (Sintang & Hambali, 2010; Abdul Hak, 2012; Nair & Chuan, 2017; Abdullah, Abdul Kadir, Tibek & A. Abdullah, 2012; Ismail, 2016). It is interesting to note that when reviewing the trends of research in the field of Islamic reversion and reverts, it can be seen that international studies focus more on the reverts themselves and the influence reversion has had on their lives, while local studies tend to focus more on the revert community as a whole.

Extensive research on religious reversion notwithstanding, it was observed that little research has been conducted to examine the areas of nurturing an Islamic identity, the influence of familial conflicts, and/ or the influences of dissociation pertaining to a revert's adaptation to their new lifestyle and identity. Admittedly, while a few studies have broached on the difficulties of reverts adapting into an Islamic lifestyle, there is a gap in understanding how their very identities are affected by factors of identity sustainment, familial conflict, and psychological

dissociation (Musal Kassim, Yeoh Abdullah, & Baba, 2013; Draman, 2010). Since these variables affect the very structure of a person's Islamic faith, especially among the new brothers and sisters in Islam, developing the academic field of these variables are of the utmost importance for the Ummah. In light of the above, the aim of this critical review is to expand the knowledge available on reverts to Islam by examining their external and internal circumstances. By building on the findings of previous works, this paper analyzes the available researches and reviews to examine both external stressors like familial opposition, and internal stressors like the occurrence of psychological dissociation, to better understand the circumstances surrounding a revert's reversion to Islam and their adaptation of a new identity.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research design as it aimed to investigate the specific phenomenon of nurturing an Islamic identity throughout familial conflict among new reverts. As the field of da'wah in Islamic studies deals directly with humans, their interactions, and their social processes, the qualitative design was employed to explain specific phenomena relating to small and specific sample groups (Neuman, 2013). Similarly, as the core issues being investigated in this research study are contextually sensitive, the employment of an analytically qualitative design is justified as it comprehensively captures the complex social processes surrounding new reverts and their identity integration (Mullen, 2006; Pinker 2004; Rutter 2002).

For the qualitative data analysis, this research adopted a critical review approach which examined three main relationships in conjunction to the research phenomenon above (Hodges, Kuper & Reeves 2008; Walker & Moore, 1997). The first is a familial misconception of Islam on the existence of familial conflict. The second is the influence of familial conflict on a difficulty sustaining an Islamic identity, and the third is the influence of psychological dissociation on sustaining an Islamic identity. Therefore, the analysis in this study both critically analyzes and discusses the findings from existing researches concerning the three specified fields mentioned above to understand the ways which the participants took in nurturing their Islamic identity.

Result & Discussion

Misconception, Reversion & Conflict

There are various misconceptions about Islam in the contemporary world. People who are unexposed to Islam think all Muslims are Arab, and that the religion itself is a part of culture (Geertz, 1973). Others who have minimal exposure to Islam through the media and social network platforms, think all Muslims are troublemakers and terrorists, and are linked to the keyword's 'beard', 'terrorist', 'extreme' and 'violence' (M. Mohamad, 1997; Mohamed & O'Brien, 2011). Similarly, in the diversity of cultures that is Malaysia, while the non-Muslim public do not exactly associate Islam and Muslims with violence, there is a cultural barrier present, whereby the non-Malay non-Muslim community equivalate being Muslim to being 'Malay', which would make non-Malay Malaysian reverts to Islam forsakers of their traditions and familial values (Awang & Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2015; Muhamat Kawangit, 2014; Shaharuddin et al., 2016). Contrastingly, there are still others, the intellectuals who have studied Islam and their lifestyle, who profess the Islamic civilization to be one of the most advanced and civilized that history has ever seen, and have consequently reverted to the righteous path (Awang & Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2015; Van Koningsveld, 2016).

This then raises the issue of why there are so many different conceptions found about Islam, and how they have become so widespread. One of the reasons for this spread of misconception could be due to the communicative devices found today, which enable the fast spread of information without verification. Another reason for this misconception could be due to Muslims themselves, who do not display good examples to the public. Either way, it is an undeniable observation that many seem to be influenced by these misconceptions, whether consciously or subconsciously.

As of today, there has not been much research conducted on familial conflict occurring due to an observed misconception of Islam either locally or internationally, as it appears as though no study has investigated this phenomenon specifically. Accordingly, it should be noted that while there is a gap in literature on examining the relationship between the variables mentioned above, various studies conducted on reverts have observed either one or both of these phenomena present in many of the families of reverts; for example, in Nur A'thiroh Masyaa'il's 2009 study, which examines the necessity of understanding the psychological needs of reverts, and Razaleigh Muhamat's 2014 study, which examines the da'wah conducted on Indian reverts in Malaysia (Abdullah @ Tan Ai Pao & Md Sham, 2009; Abdul Rahim & Zakaria, 2014; Muhamat @ Kawangit & Saringat, 2014; Mohd Khambali et al., 2017). Aside from these two, other noteworthy researches which observe conflict factors in revert familial environments include Marlon Guleng et al's study in 2014, which investigated the adaptation of PERKIM reverts in the general society, and Khadijah Khambali et al's 2017 study, which investigated the religious tolerance among Muslims and non-Muslims (P. Guleng, Muhamat @ Kawangit & D. Mohamad, 2014; Mohd Khambali et al., 2017).

Pertaining to the above, although these studies do include familial objection towards a family member's reversion to Islam in the findings of the research investigation, the reasons behind why the conflict occurs is not investigated in depth (Abdullah @ Tan Ai Pao & Md Sham, 2009; Abdul Rahim & Zakaria, 2014; Mohd Khambali et al., 2017). To clarify with an example, although the findings of Nur A'thiroh Masyaa'il's 2009 study shows that reverts exhibit psychological pressure due to familial opposition through actions such as disownment, isolation and an outright rejection of the individual, other than stating that psychological pressure is received from these actions, the study does not investigate the reasons behind the familial opposition and conflict, how it develops, and how it affects the religious identity and psychological mentality of the revert (Abdullah @ Tan Ai Pao & Md Sham, 2009). There are thus observed gaps between the presence of the familial conflict in a revert's life, the psychological stress received by the individual, and the corresponding influence this stress has on the individual.

Correspondingly, although the findings from these studies do imply a relationship between a misconception of Islam, familial conflict and reversion, they do not sufficiently investigate two main aspects. The first aspect is whether or not there was a preliminary presence of a misconception of Islam in the families of reverts who experienced eventual familial conflict. The second aspect is whether the familial conflict observed was formed as a result of the individual's specific reversion to Islam, or as a result of extraneous variables like a general inability to accept the individual's disregard of familial and cultural traditions, and familial reputation. Due to these factors, an accurate examination into the relationship between the presence of a familial misconception of Islam and the existence of familial conflict cannot be conducted. As such, a misconception of Islam could very well be one of the influences which shape the familial conflict found in the families of reverts. Thus from these findings, it can be argued that there does seem to be a relationship between a familial misconception of Islam and the existence of familial conflict due to religious reversion to Islam.

Familial Conflict & Identity

To be Muslim is not just the clothes worn, the language used or the places inhibited. It is a lifestyle, not a culture, and comprises of 2.18 billion people in the world; people from all walks of life, all sorts of cultures, and varyingly different backgrounds. There are Chinese Muslims and American Muslims, rich Muslims and poor Muslims, practicing Muslims and non-adhering Muslims. It has even been said that Islam is the most misunderstood religion even amongst itself, as there are so many different sectors, or groups, in Islam (M. Mohamad, 1997; Hossein Nasr, 1997). What makes a person a 'Muslim' then is their identity, and what they choose to portray to the world. What many do not seem to understand however, is that an individual does not only hold one identity, but comprises of various social identities they identify with, depending on the environment they are in (Howard, 2000). This is seen to be a significant reason as to why individuals reflect a few social identities depending on the social groups they are a part of, and the social statuses that they hold (Knudson & Stojanowski, 2008). For example, an individual could identity his or herself as a middle-class, reverted, Chinese Muslim, which would ascribe four varying identities to that individual, which are in regards to gender, socioeconomic status, revert status, ethnicity and religious affiliation. An individual's sense of 'Self', and thus ultimate identity, would then be developed from all of the variables he or she identifies with.

As such, the process of reversion to Islam, also colloquially known as religious conversion, usually carries with it some sort of conflict, whether externally, internally, or a combination of both, as an individual is essentially developing a new identity (Oestergaard, 2009). To name a few, the more obvious problems would be in regards to familial adaptation, the renegotiation of cultural tradition, and the effort to familiarize to new religious rituals and practices. For example, international reverts might face difficulty in nurturing an Islamic identity due to the social culture found in many globalized countries today. As most globalized societies like Japan and Great Britain socialize through the consumption of alcohol, navigating a social life with their newfound faith might create initial difficulties for some reverts. Similarly, local Malaysian reverts might find it hard to sustain an Islamic identity as the Islamic belief prohibits certain cultural or traditional practices which induce shirk, or the sin of practicing idolatry, like the belief in, displaying of, and praying to, talismans made for various reasons like luck, fortune and so forth.

Accordingly, the less obvious conflicts would occur internally, like an identity crisis due to the adoption of a new religious identity, and a development of psychological dissociation due to the internal and external conflicts faced. That said, it should be understood that the renegotiation of a stable identity, whether in regards to an individual's past, present, personal, and/ or religious identity, is not as simple as it seems (Lopez, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2011).

Recent studies into the field of Islamic reversion have shown that there seems to be a significant influence of family, culture and tradition on identity, which coincidentally heavily influences the nurture and sustainment of an individual's religious identity (Awang & Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, 2014; Knudson & Stojanowski, 2008; Howard, 2000; Smith & Sikkink, 2003). While it is true that studies show that it is entirely possible for a strong religious identity to be nurtured and sustained in any individual with the proper determination and support, it is also true that conflicting factors like familial opposition through actions like disownment, isolation and an

outright rejection of the individual, negatively affects its development (Sahad, Chu Abdullah & A. Abdullah, 2013; Preston & Epley, 2005; Rahmawati & Ratri Desiningrum, 2018). That said, it can be argued that familial conflicts should then be taken into account as a hindering factor of identity development. Overall, these findings tie in to the belief that when examined, a significant influence between the presence of familial conflict and a difficulty nurturing an Islamic identity might be found in reverts to Islam.

Conflict & Psychological Dissociation

Psychological dissociation in regard to reverts and the reversion process has been a field left relatively unexplored by both local and international research. Understood as an alteration in consciousness, dissociation occurs when there is a disruption or breakdown in psychological and sensory information systems like memory, awareness and identity (Dorahy & Alan Lewis, 2001). As the field of dissociative psychology is relatively underdeveloped in Malaysia, it is still regarded suspiciously, as local belief attribute its occurrence with the supernatural and mystic (Jambunathan, Gill, Kanagasun-Dram, & Hui, 2008). Cultural beliefs aside however, what is not as commonly known is that dissociation can exist in two major forms, which are pathological and non-pathological dissociation. To clarify, all forms of dissociation are characterized as either pathological or non-pathological through the use of a measuring scale like the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES) or the Tellegen Absorption Scale ("Dissociation," 2009). As such, all forms of dissociation are assumed to be benign and 'normal' unless it scores highly on the applied measuring scale (Butler, 2006; Wright & Osborne, 2005). With this in mind, it is unsurprising to find little information present concerning the phenomena of religious psychological dissociation in regards to reversion conflict, as not many people receive psychological help when experiencing religious conflict.

Correspondingly, this lack of information or attention towards psychological dissociation could be due to a number of social factors left unaccounted for regarding this situation in Malaysia. The first is the noteworthy fact that psychology is still developing in Malaysia, and therefore seeking psychological help for any mental related health issue is still regarded as taboo to the local public. In explanation, as mental illness, or '*sakit jiwa*' as it is called in Malay, is considered taboo, Malaysians are less likely to associate themselves to anything remotely psychological (Hanafiah & Van Bortal, 2015; Ab. Razak, 2017). Thus, even if it was just related to general mental health and not mental illness, Malaysian families would choose to avoid the necessary psychological counsel or treatment in order to distance themselves from negative stigma, and maintain familial reputation (Ab. Razak, 2017). These ties in to the reason why familial conflicts are kept in the in-

ternal family, as most times in Malaysia, religiosity is often seen to be closely tied to culture and tradition (Miller & Kelly, 2005). Examples of this close integration are the acts of praying to the family ancestors and displaying various talismans believed to bring luck or ward negativity, which are actions conducted by many Chinese Malaysians due to a mix of religion, family tradition and Chinese culture. As religion is a sensitive subject matter, reverts might avoid expressing familial conflicts and seeking psychological help due to feelings of pride, shame, embarrassment, or sadness towards the familial opposition and conflict they experience.

The second social factor is the general assumption that experiencing a conflict situation upon religious reversion is natural, and thus normal. To clarify, reverts who experience familial opposition and undergo mental stress from their reversion might not seek professional help as they assume that undergoing psychological stress from a 'conflict situation' is expected in the reversion process (Sahad, Chu Abdullah, & S. Abdullah, 2013; Abdullah @ Tan Ai Pao & Md Sham, 2009; Muhamat Kawangit, 2016). Accordingly, the eventual development of dissociation could thus be mistaken as normal or harmless by the revert, as the individual might assume some dissociative symptoms like detachment and self-isolation are natural as an 'escape' method from the conflicts they face. This could in turn result in the individual ignoring the problem and turning a blind eye towards the mild to serious symptoms developed.

The third social factor is the assumption that having psychological illnesses are due to a lack of religiosity (Power & McKinney, 2014; Abdullah @ Tan Ai Pao & Md Sham, 2009). This is actually a common misconception found among many Muslim, and even non-Muslim, societies, as religiosity is tied closely to an individual's overall wellbeing, whether physically or mentally (Miller & Kelly, 2005). What should be mentioned here however, is that while increased religious actions and belief might improve mental health and thus reduce the risk of developing mental illnesses, mental illness is still an illness once it has developed, very much like that of cancer or other physical illnesses (Pajevic, Sinanovic, & Hasanovic, 2005; Sahraian, Gholami, Javadpour, & Omidvar, 2013). The only difference between these two illnesses is that one is physical while the other is mental; proper treatment should thus be obtained to treat and cure mental illnesses, just like any other illness.

Overall, while there is not much research information available on psychological dissociation as a result of religious familial conflict, the findings drawn from related studies indicate the presence of a relationship between these two phenomena (Abdullah @ Tan Ai Pao & Md Sham, 2009). Correspondingly, according to studies of psychological dissociation and its causes, it can be presumed that the effects of familial and external conflict

could significantly lead to the development of psychological dissociation (Abdullah @ Tan Ai Pao & Md Sham, 2009; Miller & Kelly, 2005).

Conclusion

With so much misrepresentation surrounding Islam and the Islamic lifestyle on the news, social media platforms and the television, embracing Islam and becoming a new Muslim is not easy, especially when an individual is adopting a whole new way of living. In light of this difficulty, a strong support system for reverts and the availability of reliable sources of information to refer to becomes all the more important. Consequently, this necessity is the main motivation behind the research and publication of this paper, which critically examines the main aspects of previous research studies conducted on Muslim reverts and their Islamic identities. Again, while this critical review does not include any obtained data or analysis, it does clarify the purpose of further research into the phenomenon of nurturing an Islamic identity throughout familial conflict among new reverts, and stresses the importance of investigating the correlations between the fields of psychological dissociation, Islamic reversion and identity for future reference. It is hoped that through the publication of this paper, more research would be conducted to induce a dialogue which would enrich both global and Islamic perspectives, and further advance the fields of psychology, Da'wah and the Islamic studies.

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