

Psychological Dynamics of Religious Conversion in the Boti Tribal Community, South Central Timor Regency

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Abstract. The issue of religious conversion is an ongoing concern. Problems related to conversion do not end when an individual decides to change their religion but often persist afterward. Physical and psychological violence resulting from religious conversion continues to occur. People who choose to convert are often labeled as heretics, sinners, apostates, or unprincipled. Such labels can lead to various psychological impacts, such as feelings of anxiety, fear, shame, and depression. These experiences can trigger cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal changes in individuals. This study aims to explore the psychological dynamics of the *Boti* tribe citizen who undergo religious conversion and to identify strategies to cope with anxiety and stress following the conversion. This research uses a qualitative method with observation and interview techniques. The findings reveal that members of the *Boti* tribe experience significant psychological dynamics after converting to a different religion. Participants also reported experiencing many positive emotions following their conversion.

Keywords: *Religious Conversion, Psychological Dynamics, Mental Health*

Abstrak. Isu mengenai pindah agama merupakan hal yang berkelanjutan. Permasalahan yang terjadi ini semata tidak berakhir pada saat individu memutuskan untuk berpindah agama namun terus berlanjut setelah individu berpindah agama. Terjadi kekerasan fisik dan psikis yang dilakukan sebagai akibat dari pindah agama terus terjadi. Individu yang telah memutuskan untuk berpindah agama selalu diberikan label kafir, pendosa, murtad, dan tidak berpendirian. Dengan pemberian label seperti itu, maka individu akan merasakan berbagai dampak psikologis, seperti kecemasan, ketakutan, malu dan depresi. Hal ini akan memicu individu untuk mengalami perubahan secara kognitif, emosi dan juga hubungan interpersonal. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui dinamika psikologis masyarakat suku Boti yang pindah agama serta mengetahui bagaimana cara mengatasi kecemasan, stress setelah pindah agama. Metode yang digunakan yaitu metode kualitatif dengan teknik observasi dan wawancara. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat suku Boti benar-benar mengalami dinamika psikologis setelah memutuskan untuk pindah agama. Partisipan juga mengaku mengalami banyak emosi positif setelah pindah agama.

Kata kunci: *Pindah agama, dinamika psikologi, kesehatan mental*

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Introduction

The term *conversion* in English can mean "repentance, change, shift, or adopting a religion." It also implies transitioning from one state to another or converting from one religion to another. Based on these definitions, religious conversion can be understood as an act of repentance, adopting a new religion, changing one's stance on religious teachings, or entering a new faith (Azzahra, 2022). Religious conversion is an ongoing issue, as conflicts or challenges related to it do not end once an individual decides to convert but often continue afterward.

In Indonesia, religion is highly valued and respected. Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution states: "The State is based on the belief in One Almighty God." In the same constitution said, "The State guarantees every citizen the freedom to practice their religion and worship according to their beliefs." While Indonesians are granted the freedom to choose and practice their religion, conflicts may arise when individuals decide to convert or adopt a different belief system.

In many cases, religious conversion leads to physical and psychological violence against the individuals who convert. Those who choose to convert are often labeled as heretics, sinners, apostates, or unprincipled, which can result in psychological effects such as anxiety, fear, shame, and depression. These experiences often lead to cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal changes as individuals adapt to new circumstances and environments. This process of adaptation is referred to as *psychological dynamics*.

In Indonesia, cases of religious conversion are widespread and often discussed in public discourse, both in urban and rural areas. One prominent example can be observed in the province of East Nusa Tenggara, particularly on Timor Island, where the *Boti* tribe resides. This paper explores the psychological

dynamics and social impacts experienced by individuals from the *Boti* tribe who undergo religious conversion.

The *Boti* tribe continues to uphold the traditions, values, and beliefs passed down by their ancestors. According to Laning (2020), local beliefs within the tribe are preserved through genealogical inheritance, meaning that adherence to a specific faith is passed from generation to generation. The *Boti* tribe is divided into two groups: the Inner *Boti* and the Outer *Boti*. The Inner *Boti* live traditionally, adhering strictly to customs and cultural practices handed down through generations. They reside in their area, separated by wooden fences that demarcate their territory from the Outer *Boti* tribe (Pehiadang, 2019).

The Inner *Boti*'s belief system revolves around the concept of *Halaika*, which is rooted in the vitality of nature. They worship two deities: *Uis Pah* (the Sky God) and *Uis Neno* (the Earth God). *Uis Pah* is believed to guard, oversee, and protect human life and the universe, while *Uis Neno* determines a person's fate in the afterlife, deciding whether they go to heaven or hell. The teachings of *Halaika* are deeply intertwined with nature (Suminar, 2018).

Inner *Boti* society strictly adheres to their traditions and cultural practices. Individuals who abandon the *Halaika* belief system to adopt another religion face severe consequences, including being judged, ostracized, and expelled from the Inner *Boti* area (Celotehpaja, 2021). Those who choose to adopt a new belief system are required to leave the tribe and live with the Outer *Boti* tribe. This social exclusion often leads to psychological distress, such as stress, depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. These individuals are forced to adapt to their new environment and strive to adjust to the changes in their social circumstances.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research method to provide a systematic and in-depth description of the psychological dynamics experienced by individuals. Qualitative research generates descriptive data, including spoken words,

observations, and behaviors that can be analyzed (Creswell, 2015). The participants in this study are members of the *Boti* tribe who have converted to a recognized religion, meaning individuals who have left the *Halaika* faith and adopted a new religion. The inclusion criteria for participants are as follows:

- a) Participants must be members of the *Boti* tribe who previously adhered to the *Halaika* belief system.
- b) Participants must have a personal understanding or experience of converting from their indigenous faith to a state-recognized religion and must have previously lived within the *Boti* tribe. This ensures the researcher can gather relevant and accurate data without difficulty.
- c) Participants must willingly agree to participate in the study, as documented by their signed informed consent.

Table 1.

Subjective Well-Being Differences Between Male and Female

Pseudonym	Age/S tatus	Gender	Last Education	Religion	Time Since Conversion
LK	47Years/ Father	Male	Middle School	Protestant Christian	6 Years
NM	43Years/ Mother	Female	Middle School	Protestant Christian	6 Years
BK	12Years/ Child	Female	Elementary School	Protestant Christian	6 Years
BB	56Years/ Father	Male	Elementary School	Catholic Christian	6 Years
ST	47Years/ Mother	Female	No Schooling	Catholic Christian	6 Years
QB	12Years/ Child	Female	Elementary School	Catholic Christian	6 Years

The criteria for selecting participants were based on the assumption that the chosen individuals have the ability to provide relevant information or data aligned with the research objectives. This ensures that the collected data is specific and effectively addresses the research goals. Initially, the number of participants was determined to be six; however, adjustments may be made depending on data saturation.

Result

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed manually through a thematic analysis process. The researcher began by classifying the data into five initial themes. These themes were then revised, and some were renamed or adjusted. Ultimately, the researcher identified three main themes: finding meaning and purpose in life through spirituality, education equality, and difficulties in social reintegration. These themes are closely connected to the psychological dynamics variables, which include cognitive aspects, emotional/affective responses, and conative/interpersonal relationships. In the analysis process, participants were coded as follows: LK (P1), NM (P2), BK (P3), BB (P4), ST (P5), and QB (P6).

Description:  = **Main Theme**  = **Sub Theme**

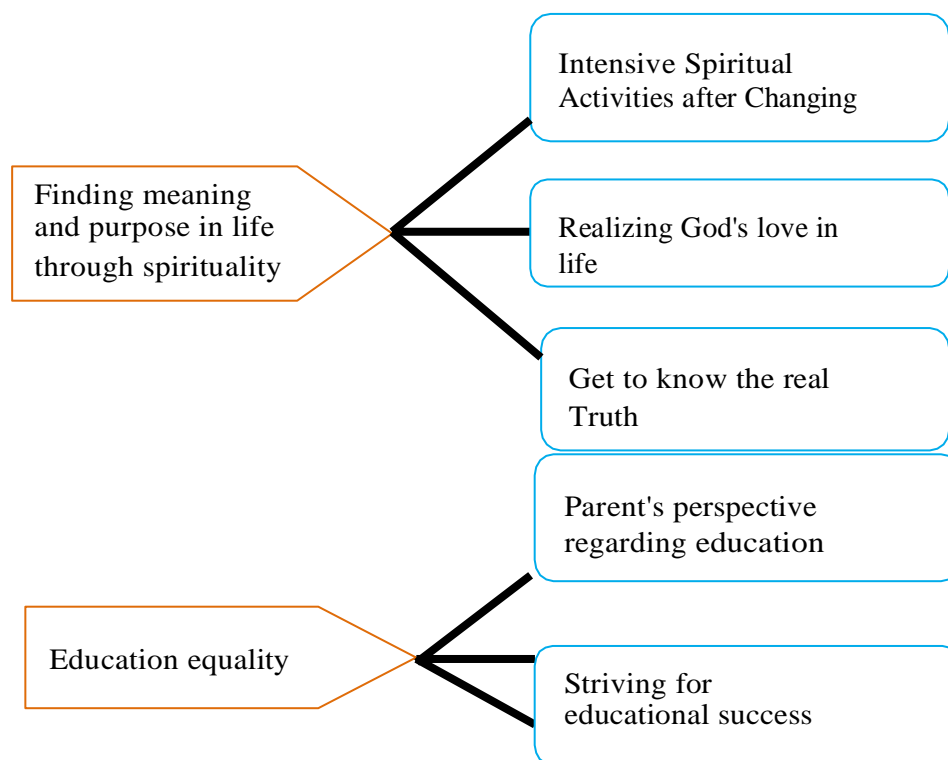


Image 1. Theme Tree

Discussion

In previous research conducted by Shofi (2021) on the dynamics of religious conversion in marriage, the results showed that there are three factors that influence a person's decision to convert. The first factor is a strong faith, which makes it difficult for the individual to completely convert; however, they also see rewards from the new religion, which encourages them to proceed with the conversion. The second factor is the freedom to follow a religion, provided by their spouse and family, offering social support that allows the individual to remain calm and confident in their decision. The third factor is the surrounding environment, as the majority religion of the community can also influence the individual's decision to convert from their original faith.

On the other hand, Indonesia as a country highly respects the religions practiced within its borders. Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution states, "The state is based on the belief in the One and Only God." In the same article, paragraph 2

reads, "The state guarantees the freedom of every citizen to embrace their religion and to worship according to their religion and beliefs." Indonesians are given the freedom to practice a particular religion. However, in reality, the rejection of individuals who decide to convert still occurs. Most of those who oppose conversion use culture and traditions as reasons for their rejection. They argue that the belief has been passed down through generations and should be preserved, so when an individual decides to convert, they are seen as violating cultural or traditional rules. As a result, after converting, individuals must face the sanctions or consequences imposed by society. This situation becomes a trigger for psychological dynamics in the individual.

According to Kartono (2014) in the *Psychology Dictionary*, psychology is the science that studies the mental processes and behaviors of living organisms, or the mental processes and behaviors themselves. In the book *Developmental Psychology* written by Marwanto in 2022, psychology is defined as the scientific study of behavior and mental processes of organisms. Three key ideas in this definition are "scientific," "behavior," and "mental processes." Psychology is scientific as a result of empirical thought and research. What psychology seeks to study is everything that provides answers to questions such as: What is a human being? Why do they act, behave, or think in certain ways? What motivates them to do so? What are the intentions and purposes behind their behavior? And so on. Therefore, all of these can be predicted and observed through psychological symptoms that trigger human actions (activities).

Psychological dynamics refers to the processes occurring within an individual, which include attitudes, perceptions, emotions, and behaviors that affect their mental or psychological state in adapting to circumstances and changes, as well as in facing and resolving daily conflicts in thoughts, feelings, and actions (Riadi, 2022). There are three aspects of psychological dynamics: Cognitive, Emotional, and Interpersonal Relationships.

Cognitive is the central process or mental process that mediates events occurring outside of an individual with what happens within the person (Iskandar, 2015). According to Saleh (2018, p. 107), emotion is a state induced by a particular (specific) situation and tends to arise in the form of behaviors that approach (approach) or avoid (avoidance) something. These behaviors are generally accompanied by physical expressions, so others can recognize that someone is experiencing emotions. Interpersonal relationships are relationships between two or more people that may vary in duration, from brief to survive (Rahmawati, 2019). In the process of fulfilling their needs, humans form relationships with others.

Some members of the *Boti* Tribe also engage in religious conversion. The *Boti* Tribe is indigenous to the island of Timor (Atoni Meto). The *Boti* Tribe is the only Atoni Meto tribe that resisted being Christianized by the Portuguese and Dutch colonizers. To this day, the *Boti* people continue to maintain their traditions and culture (Somawati, 2021). Local beliefs are passed down through genealogical lines, inherited from generation to generation. This concept makes local beliefs exclusive groups, meaning these groups do not have doctrines to spread the faith they adhere to. Local beliefs that develop grow in specific regions, and they live in communities that occupy one area (Sirait, Nafisa, D., & Jatmiko, 2015). In line with this statement, the beliefs of the *Boti* Tribe, specifically those in the *Boti* tribe, are local beliefs passed down through generations. Their beliefs and convictions are strong and firmly held (Nubatonis, 2019). They have a sacred forest where they perform rituals.

Even though the participants were born into and follow the tribal religion of *Halaika*. After inheriting the *Boti* tribe, particularly those who still adhere to the *Halaika* belief system and do not follow any state-recognized religion, are not a fully isolated tribe. The *Boti* Tribe continues to maintain existing traditions and harmonize with nature. For them, caring for nature is as important as preserving their traditions and beliefs. The *Boti* people still hold their customs and culture in high regard. Those who leave the tribe are judged, ostracized, or even expelled (Nubatonis, 2019).

This study found that the cognitive aspects, emotions, and interpersonal relationships are experienced by individuals undergoing religious conversion. The new lifestyle of those who convert to a different religion shows that changing religion results in a shift in behavior and attitudes compared to before.

Religion is known to be acquired from the moment a person is born, and since childhood, an individual cannot choose their own religion. Because they are unable to make decisions about their religious beliefs at birth, a child will adopt the same religion as their parents. According to this statement, because the children have the same religion as their parents, it becomes the parents' responsibility to develop the religion practiced by their children to instill good values and morals, so that the children exhibit good behavior.

In this study, the conflict arises when the participants wish for their children to have a better future. However, the belief system they follow does not permit all children in a family to attend school. This became the trigger for the participants, who were forced to choose between abandoning the belief system they had followed since childhood or their children to receive an education. During interviews, the primary reason expressed by the participants was their desire to see their children have a better future. Eventually, the participants were willing to make decisions that went against the wishes or commands of their parents. They knew there would be consequences to face, but for the sake of their children's education, they bravely made these decisions.

Cognitive and Emotional/Affective Aspects

Finding meaning and purpose in life through spirituality is part of both cognitive and emotional aspects. The participants in this study stated that they found meaning and purpose in life through spirituality. This can be seen through their intensive spiritual activities after converting to a new religion, which made them realize God's love in their lives and understand the true truth. After converting, a sense of happiness was always present for the participants. Many

hopes and desires emerged in the participants' minds regarding their new religion, which were connected to the meaning and purpose of life they needed to achieve. Their desires and hopes were driven by the new beliefs they had embraced and their life goals that all participants wish to achieve are evident as all of them demonstrate dedication or commitment to their new religion, which shows how the meaning of life will be attained. Once that meaning is realized, an individual's life becomes meaningful, and happiness begins to materialize within them (Hamali, 2017). Educational equality is also part of both cognitive and emotional aspects. Participants in this study stated that education is an important matter. However, some members of the *Boti* tribe have yet to experience educational equality. Educational equality is achieved when parents have a positive perspective on education and strive for educational success. One of the requirements to access educational services for the *Boti* tribe community is having a baptism certificate. A baptism certificate is obtained when an individual has an official religious identity, meaning they need to follow a religion that is recognized by the state of Indonesia. Therefore, individuals who want their children to receive education services decide to convert from their original belief in Halaika to either Protestant or Catholic Christianity.

Conative Aspects/Interpersonal Relationships

Social reintegration refers to the rejection from the family environment after conversion, causing participants to experience difficulties in the process of adjusting to social surroundings. After conversion, negative consequences inevitably emerge, and one of them stems from the surrounding environment. Social environments have a significant impact, determining whether the community can accept and support the differences, or reject them.

Conclusion

The psychological dynamics experienced by the *Boti* tribe community involve changes in cognitive aspects (knowledge/thinking), emotions, and interpersonal relationships. The first change observed in the cognitive aspect is that participants acknowledge having found meaning and purpose in life through the recognition of Jesus Christ as the true truth. Their thinking has become more open regarding the importance of education, and they desire their children to explore the outside world.

The second aspect is emotional (affective), where participants initially felt anxious when deciding to convert. However, after conversion, they confessed to feeling God's love manifest in their lives, which gave them strength and enabled them to face the days ahead. This is seen as a positive outcome experienced by participants after converting. Lastly, changes in interpersonal relationships occurred, as participants had to adapt to a new environment, which was not an easy task. This adjustment involved not only relationships with neighbors but also relationships with fellow believers within the church. Participants needed to build rapport or relationships gradually, which naturally took a considerable amount of time.

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