

Religious Conversion in Minangkabau People: An Analysis of Islamic and Customary Law Perspectives in Indonesia

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This research aimed to examine the tensions between Islamic and Minangkabau customary law in relation to contemporary people in Indonesia who converted to Christianity, despite the long-standing historical identity as a predominantly Muslim community deeply rooted in Islamic traditions and cultural values. Specifically, three questions were addressed, namely first, the interaction of Islamic and Minangkabau customary law; second, the factors influencing religious conversion from Islam to Christianity among contemporary Minangkabau people, and third, the challenges experienced by converts in the relationships with family members, local communities, and the broader social structure. A case study approach was adopted using a qualitative design grounded in the socio-anthropology of religion based on in-depth interviews with eight key informants. Furthermore, this research provided a broader understanding of a complex and often contested phenomenon. The results showed that the social lives of Minangkabau converts from Islam to Christianity were characterized by adaptability and tolerance. Most converts continued to maintain positive relationships with families, local communities, and customary institutions, in contrast to the widespread assumption that religious conversion transformed social attitudes and disrupted communal relationships. However, these people were not completely detached from Islamic values and cultural dispositions before accepting Christianity. The theoretical contribution of this research is in the attempt to bridge the relationship between agency and social structure in explaining religious conversion. In Minangkabau context, religious conversion constitutes a socio-legal event that challenges the normative relationship between Islamic and customary law, reporting the ongoing negotiation between personal religious agency and collective cultural obligations.

Artikel ini mengkaji perdebatan antara hukum Islam dan hukum adat bagi orang Minangkabau kontemporer yang melakukan pindah ke agama Kristen di Indonesia, yang sebelumnya mereka secara historis dikenal sebagai komunitas muslim yang kental dengan tradisi dan budaya Islam. Penelitian ini menjelaskan pertama, bagaimana hukum Islam berinteraksi dengan hukum adat Minangkabau. Kedua, faktor apa yang mempengaruhi orang Minangkabau sehingga pindah ke agama Kristen. Ketiga, mengkaji tantangan yang dihadapi setelah berpindah agama—baik dari sisi keluarga, masyarakat, maupun struktur sosial. Dengan menggunakan studi kasus dan wawancara mendalam dengan delapan informan kunci individu Minang yang berpindah agama, artikel ini bertujuan untuk memberikan pemahaman yang lebih luas mengenai isu kontradiktif ini. Metode penelitian yang digunakan kualitatif dengan pendekatan sosio-antropologi agama. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa kehidupan sosial orang Minangkabau yang pindah agama dari Islam ke Kristen cenderung adaptif dan toleran. Klaim teoritik dalam penelitian ini bahwa perpindahan agama yang selama ini dituduh sebagai sumber terjadinya perubahan sikap bagi seorang individu tidak benar. Hal ini terlihat dari interaksi sosial orang Minangkabau yang pindah agama tetap menjalin hubungan baik dengan keluarga, masyarakat, dan komunitas adat, sekalipun dalam batas-batas tertentu mereka belum bisa sepenuhnya melepaskan embrio Islam yang sudah tertanam kuat sebelum mereka memeluk agama Kristen. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada upaya untuk memunculkan titik temu antara agensi individu dan struktur sosial. Pindah agama bukan sekadar pilihan pribadi seorang Minang melainkan sebuah peristiwa yang menguji normatiftas antara hukum Islam dan adat di Minangkabau.

Keywords: *Customary law; Islamic law; Minangkabau People; religious conversion.*

Introduction

Over the past century, Minangkabau people have been reported as a deeply religious indigenous society that strongly upholds customary values (Moeis et al., 2022; Suryani et al., 2026). In this context, Islamic principles and customary (*adat*) values complement one another, collectively shaping character and behavior (Fauzi & Kumalasari, 2020). However, this pattern appears to change when Minangkabau people live outside the homeland. Some exhibit ways of life that diverge from customary norms and contradict the principles of Islam. The characteristics of people living beyond the geographical boundaries of Minangkabau are believed to be strongly influenced by interpretations of the evolving social environment (Naldo et al., 2023). A particularly distinctive phenomenon is religious conversion from Islam to Christianity. This practice is strictly prohibited under both Islamic and Minangkabau customary law. The conversion is a matter of formal legal concern and includes issues of identity, social harmony, and the dynamics of relationships within families and the broader community (Ilyas et al., 2023; Rahmawati et al., 2024; Zuhrah & Yumasdaleni, 2021). This research examines the processes of religious conversion and the ways in which converts navigate everyday life. The strategies used to maintain a positive social identity within the communities are also analyzed. In the Minangkabau context, social identity serves as a source of self-esteem and psychological security as well as a social safety net when people experience adverse or challenging circumstances.

The global literature on religious conversion reports the wide range of contexts and dimensions in which the phenomenon has been examined. For example, studies have documented the growing interest in religious conversion among people in Kazakhstan and the implications for personality development (Zhaxybayeva et al., 2024). Other studies have explored the rediscovery of spirituality within the analysis of religious conversion (Hilderbrand, 2024), the perceived benefits experienced by Protestant congregants following conversion (Pop & Pop, 2024), and the factors motivating people to convert in Vietnam (Hien, 2024). In addition, scholars have analyzed experiences of spiritual transition from traditional religion to skepticism among adults in Santiago, Chile (Calderón Villarreal, 2024), the use of religious conversion psychotherapy for adolescents recovering from trauma (Shapiro, 2024), and the role of translation in facilitating religious conversion

processes (Jong, 2023). Religious conversion has been examined as a dialogical process of self-construction among Polish women who converted to Islam (Krotofil et al., 2023), as well as in relation to the conversion and revitalization of *otera* (Buddhist temples) in Japan (Sulastri & Alleynisa, 2024). Other studies have investigated forms of life and the ontology of phenomenological conversion (Garrido, 2023), theological assessments of the credibility of religious conversion in asylum procedures (Silvola, 2023), and the household characteristics of Minangkabau families formed through interfaith marriages (Tarigan et al., 2024).

The issue of Minangkabau people converting from Islam to Christianity is more complex than the cases reported in previous studies. Instead of representing a purely religious choice, the conversion comprises a profound transformation of identity, social norms, and the broader social order. This complexity arises because the issue is embedded in the inseparable relationship between Islamic and Minangkabau customary law encapsulated in the well-known philosophical principle “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*” (custom is founded upon Islamic law, and Islamic law is founded upon the Qur’an) (Taufik, 2024). This philosophy reflects the understanding that Islam and *adat* constitute fundamental components of the social identity of the people in Minangkabau culture.

Based on the description, this research aims to explain the process of religious conversion, the factors influencing the concept, and the social lives of Minangkabau people after converting to Christianity. The central argument is that the social lives of converts can be categorized into two adaptive and tolerant patterns. The first pattern, characterized by adaptiveness, is predominantly found among Minangkabau converts living in Yogyakarta, Jakarta, and Medan. Since the cities have predominantly Muslim populations, converts are required to maintain harmonious social relations and preserve a conducive social environment. Therefore, adaptive strategies are developed to navigate differences in religious beliefs and cultural traditions. There is no preference for returning to Islam despite facing strong customary obligations, pressure from immediate family members, and persistent advice from traditional and religious leaders. The second pattern, characterized by tolerance, is more prevalent among converts residing in Ambon and Makassar. In these cities, many religious leaders adopt moderate perspectives and actively allow members to

live harmoniously and show tolerance toward people of different cultural and religious backgrounds. Linguistically, religious conversion refers to changing one's religion or beliefs, including a reversal of convictions by abandoning the teachings of a previous religion and accepting a new faith (Ferguson, 2023). Conceptually, the concept denotes a transformation in religious affiliation that reshapes both worldview and position (Cooling, 2020). Religious conversion is understood as a process through which a particular orientation is adopted while relinquishing another. This process may include a shift from one set of beliefs and religious understandings to another within the same religious tradition (Taylor, 2021). In this study, conversion to Christianity refers to the process by which people who were previously Muslims adopt Christianity as a new religion.

Historical records indicate that the conversion of Minangkabau people from Islam to Christianity dates back to the Dutch colonial period (Syamsurizal et al., 2023). During this period, four prominent figures became well known for the decision to accept Christianity. The first was I.F.M. Salim, also known as Abdoel Chalid Salim, the brother of the prominent Indonesian nationalist Haji Agus Salim. The second was Willy Amrul, known as Abdul Wadud Karim Amrullah, the brother of the renowned Islamic scholar Hamka. The third and fourth were Akmal Sani and Yanwardi Koto (Yahya et al., 2020). The decisions to convert to Christianity were influenced by the social circumstances encountered and the strong influence of the spouses. Historical evidence further suggests that some actively participated in Christian missionary activities, spreading new faith within the communities migration destinations and homeland of Minangkabau, in present-day West Sumatra Province (Damayanti & Yunanto, 2022).

In West Sumatra, Willy Amrul and Akmal Sani are identified as key actors in the spread of Christianity (Sebastian, 2022). Minangkabau people have been advised to adopt Christianity through various approaches, ranging from social welfare programs and evangelism, including the translation of the Gospel into Minangkabau language, to interfaith marriage strategies (Widyawati et al., 2025). In 1999, a case was reported in which a female student married a Christian man (Sefriyono et al., 2024). Based on the phenomenon and referring to reports from the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), there were approximately 30,000 Minangkabau people who had converted to Christianity worldwide in 2012 (Persecution,

2023). Even though there has been no official report on the number of converts in 2024, the figure has increased beyond the 2012 estimate. The assumption is based on the rapid pace of global social change driven by globalization and modernization processes.

This research suggests a phenomenon in which some Minangkabau people who have converted from Islam to Christianity exhibit a dual and coexisting identity. The people identify as Christians and continue to uphold customary values. This is reflected in continued self-identification as Minangkabau and the ongoing participation in various cultural practices that are not exclusively tied to Islamic teachings, including customary norms and kinship-based social values. The phenomenon indicates that religious and cultural identity may coexist within everyday social life without necessarily being mutually exclusive. The results suggested a contemporary pattern that differed from earlier experiences of Minangkabau converts during the Dutch colonial period, when conversion was more closely associated with sharper religious and social discontinuities.

Method

This research used a qualitative approach grounded in Clifford Geertz's perspective on the anthropology of religion (Cai, 2025) to examine the sociological life of Minangkabau people following religious conversion, with particular emphasis on the normative contestation between Islamic and Minangkabau customary law. The anthropological approach to religion was adopted to explore the negotiation and reconstruction of cultural values, religious identities, beliefs, and customary practices within social life after religious conversion (Hidayat & Muzammil, 2025). Primary data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with eight key informants from Minangkabau people who had converted to another religion.

These data were enriched through interviews with Minangkabau customary leaders (*ninik mamak*), Islamic scholars (*ulama*), community leaders, and government officials responsible for religious and social affairs. Secondary data were obtained from statutory regulations, Islamic legal literature, Minangkabau customary law, relevant previous studies, and information gathered from residents living in the vicinity of the research sites (Stokes, 2021). The data were analyzed using the perspectives of legal anthropology and religion

by positioning Minangkabau philosophical principle “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*” as the primary normative framework. This analytical framework enabled the research to explain how the interaction and contestation between Islamic law and customary law shape social acceptance, kinship status, customary rights, and the reconstruction of the identities of religious converts in the society.

The social life phenomenon of Minangkabau people who converted to religion in Yogyakarta City, Jakarta City, and Medan City

This research was conducted in three major cities in Indonesia, namely Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Medan. The locations were purposively selected to represent urban centers characterized by heterogeneous and dynamic socio-religious contexts, as well as spaces where diverse cultural and religious identities intersect (Wijaya Mulya & Schäfer, 2023). Sociologically, these cities function as metropolitan areas, centers of education, and tourism destinations, which intensify interactions among different social groups. According to Anwar Iskandar, Chairperson of Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*/MUI), interreligious relations in the urban areas are relatively harmonious. However, social vigilance and community adaptability remain essential to maintaining the stability of social cohesion. In this context, religious practices tend to be moderate, as indicated by an increasing orientation of religiosity that extends beyond ritual dimensions to include broader social and humanitarian concerns (Husni et al., 2023).

From the perspective of Clifford Geertz’s anthropology of religion, this condition can be understood as a form of a “system of meanings,” where religion functions as a set of theological beliefs and a symbolic system that shapes the interpretation of social reality (Tajdin, 2022). In Geertz’s conception, religion is a system of symbols that simultaneously constructs both *ethos* and *worldview*, making religious experience in urban spaces an arena of negotiation between spiritual values, social identity, and modern social structures (Chaplin, 2025).

Based on interview data, a central theme was identified regarding the phenomenon of religious conversion from Islam to Christianity among Minangkabau people, as well as the social adaptation strategies used to maintain social relations within new environments. This research comprised five Minangkabau informants, consisting of three women and

two men. A total of two informants reported that religious conversion was influenced by interfaith marriage, while two others interpreted religion more as a flexible form of social identity. An informant was influenced by the surrounding social environment, which led to the decision to convert to another religion.

Within a Geertzian anthropological framework of religion, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a process of symbolic transformation, in which religion is understood as a normative doctrine and living system of meaning embedded in everyday social practices. In this context, religious conversion includes a change in theological belief and transformation in the “web of meaning” that shapes social identity (Krotofil et al., 2021). Religious conversion is a process of reconstructing social and religious meanings obtained through the interaction of personal experiences, social relations, and cultural structures.

From the perspective of Islamic law, the phenomenon of religious conversion is normatively associated with the concept of *riddah* (apostasy), which in classical fiqh literature carries specific legal implications (Mujib & Hamim, 2021). In contemporary contexts, *maqāṣid al-shari‘ah* approach emphasizes the protection of religious freedom (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*) as well as respect for personal choice within modern social settings (Lathifah et al., 2022). This indicates a tension between the normative framework of classical fiqh and modern Islamic legal approaches that are more humanistic and context-sensitive.

In the context of Minangkabau customary law, religious conversion carries broader social implications since identity is culturally grounded in the principle of “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*” (D et al., 2024). In this system, Islam is understood as a religion and the foundational basis of customary identity and the social structure of the community. Therefore, religious conversion is often perceived as a disruption to the integration between religion and custom, with implications for kinship relations, social status within the *kaum* (clan), and access to customary rights such as *pusaka tinggi* (ancestral inheritance). In this context, an informant shared personal experience:

“I have known my husband since university. We were in the same class, and I only discovered that he was Christian after we started dating. At first, I intended to keep the relationship at the level of dating only. However, over time, I developed greater sympathy for him because he always helped me with academic assignments during our studies. In addition, I was often taken to his hometown in Magelang, where I was introduced to his parents” (Sari, 2024).

The excerpt indicates that the process of religious conversion cannot be separated from intentional emotional and social relationships. From Geertz's perspective, love and interpersonal relations are a "symbolic system" that shapes the meaning of personal actions within social life. The decision to convert to another religion is rational-theological and the result of the internalization of symbolic experiences within social relationships.

From the perspective of Minangkabau customary law, this condition reports a tension between personal choice and the collective structure of *adat* grounded in a matrilineal kinship system (Sulfinadia et al., 2026). In this system, women's identity in Minangkabau customary practice occupies a strategic position in inheritance and social legitimacy. Therefore, religious conversion among women often carries more significant social implications than among men, particularly in terms of social acceptance and kinship status. As another informant stated:

"I converted to another religion following my life partner. My husband comes from a Christian family, and we decided to get married after being in a relationship for several years"(Imelda, 2024).

Religious conversion occurs through complex negotiations between customary structures, family ties, and religious choices. From Clifford Geertz's perspective, this experience reflects a tension within the social system of meaning (Barrett, 2023), where religion functions as a theological belief system and a cultural identity embedded in the social structure of the society. In the initial stage, informants experienced strong resistance from extended families and customary communities since Islam has been deeply internalized as part of collective identity (Naldo et al., 2023). However, this resistance diminished, leading to limited acceptance through an ongoing process of social negotiation (Patterson et al., 2024). In everyday practice, the informants continued to maintain social relations and kinship ties with extended families as a form of adaptation to the existing social structure.

The results indicate that affective factors such as love and sympathy play a significant role in driving decisions of religious conversion to the extent of transcending the normative boundaries established by customary law and religion. From the perspective of anthropology of religion, this phenomenon can be understood as a process of symbolic system transformation, where emotional experiences function as a medium that reshapes religious meaning and social identity (Olechowski et al., 2025).

The strongest impact was observed in informant “S”, who experienced more severe social consequences compared to other informants due to the position as the eldest daughter within the matrilineal structure. In customary law, women occupy a central position in kinship and inheritance systems. Therefore, changes in religious status affect spiritual aspects and social legitimacy within the customary system (Saraswati et al., 2025). Women play a strategic role in customary structures and social rituals (Yangsen et al., 2021).

In Sari’s case, the change in religious status resulted in social exclusion, including the loss of certain customary rights, such as access to *pusaka tinggi* and *pusaka rendah* (Rajab et al., 2022). From the perspective of customary law, this reflects the strong integration between religion and cultural identity within the principle of “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*”. Islam serves as the foundation of social legitimacy. From a sociological perspective, Sari continues to maintain emotional ties with the family of origin through communication and visits to her hometown, indicating that social rupture is continuously negotiated over time.

Male informants such as Riko and Bayu experienced more limited social consequences in contrast to the cases of Sari and Imelda. In addition to relational factors such as marriage, the relatively low intensity of religious attachment from the outset contributed to the flexibility of religious identities. In the Minangkabau customary structure, men occupy a relatively less central position compared to women in the matrilineal system. Therefore, the social consequences of religious conversion tend to be less severe (Halimatussa’diyah et al., 2024). Family acceptance of religious change is relatively more open but accompanied by ongoing social negotiation.

“For me, converting to Christianity is not merely following my wife’s religion, but also a form of demonstrating my love for her. Until now, I live my life as usual even though I have become a Christian. When I was still a Muslim, I performed religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and others—similar to most Muslims. Now that I am a Christian, I also carry out Christian religious practices. Therefore, I believe that it is this sense of love that makes me not feel constrained by religion” (Riko, 2024).

In Riko’s statement, religion is a more functional and individualistic practice that does not constitute a primary boundary in his social life. This is consistent with the tendency of modern society to view religion as a matter of personal choice within the framework of rationality and subjective experience. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, this condition reflects the process of the individualization of religion in modern society,

where traditional authority experiences a decline in influence due to globalization and social rationalization (Schnabel et al., 2025).

Bayu's case reinforces the results, as religious identity appears to be more fluid and not strongly bound to any specific religious institution. In the context of urbanization and migration, religion may be subjected to deinstitutionalization, functioning more as a negotiable identity shaped by social context.

"I am a native Minangkabau, and my wife is Christian. For me, religion does not have a significant influence on my life. When I was still a Muslim, I did not perform religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and others—I was not even proficient in reading the Qur'an. This may be because I have been migrating since childhood and never formally studied religion in my hometown. Now, after getting married and becoming a Christian, I rarely attend church and only passively listen to the Gospel when my wife reads it. In the future, I am also uncertain whether I will remain Christian or return to Islam" (Bayu, 2024).

Riko explained that the decision to convert to another religion was driven by the desire to follow a spouse's religion as well as understood as a form of commitment and expression of love within marital life. In this context, religious practices are consistently observed in accordance with the religion practiced. As a Muslim, religious obligations practiced are prayer and fasting. After converting to Christianity, Christian religious observances were practiced. Love constitutes the dominant factor that transcends differences in religious identity (Riko, 2024).

This phenomenon is consistent with the processes of individualization and rationalization of religion in modern society. Globalization, social mobility, and the development of digital technology have expanded the space for people to construct religious identities based on subjective experiences, rather than following family authority or tradition. Peter L. Berger explained that modernity reduced the dominance of religious institutions as the sole source of social legitimacy. Religious practice is increasingly shaped by rational choice and personal preferences (Berger, 2022). The results reinforce the view that religion tends to be understood as a personal dimension coexisting with affective needs and social relationships among some younger generations (Siregar & Susilawati, 2026). This tendency is also evident in Bayu's experience, where religion is not a primary factor in determining life orientation. Since childhood, the informant has lived as a migrant, which led to insufficient exposure

to formal Islamic religious education. After marrying a Christian woman, he converted to Christianity, but his engagement in religious practices remains limited. Bayu continues to live a relatively passive religious life and has not reached certainty regarding future religious identity. For some people, religious conversion is a social adaptation processes than a fully established transformation of theological belief. This condition reflects a shift from a normatively defined religious identity toward a more individualistic form of religiosity from the perspective of Islamic law (Driezen et al., 2021). From the perspective of Minangkabau customary law, such a change is regarded as a deviation from the principle of “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*”. In practice, the informants continue to maintain kinship relations with the families and customary communities.

Informant Pia decided to accept Christianity based on awareness and personal volition, in contrast to the previous informants who converted due to marriage-related factors. This decision was not primarily driven by external factors, but reported from a process of personal reflection shaped by social experiences since childhood. The informant explained that intensive interactions with Christian friends, as well as observations of family life perceived as harmonious, contributed to the formation of a positive perception of Christianity. These experiences led her to receive baptism after completing secondary education. The main motivation was not a change of religious affiliation, but a search for inner peace, affection, and a sense of belonging (Pia, 2024).

From Clifford Geertz’s perspective, Pia’s experience shows that religious conversion is a process of reconstructing a system of meaning shaped through everyday lived experiences (Launay, 2022). Religion is a set of theological doctrines and a symbolic system that gives meaning to emotional experiences, social relations, and the search for identity (Wulandari et al., 2022). Therefore, Pia’s decision to convert to another religion is better understood due to the internalization of social experiences and a search for life meaning, rather than a change in religious affiliation.

The pressure did not alter the decision even though strong rejection was faced from the maternal family. This result indicates that religious choice is a personal decision from a process of negotiation between personal identity, social environment, and held beliefs. According to Islamic law, religious conversion is a normative issue associated with the

concept of *riddah* (apostasy) in classical fiqh (Sholehudin et al., 2025). In contemporary Islamic thought, this issue is understood through *maqāṣid al-shari'ah* approach, which positions human dignity, public interest (*maṣlahah*), and freedom of choice as part of social realities considered within modern society (Nasir & Samudin, 2026). Therefore, the phenomenon shows a distinction between normative legal constructions and the social practices developed within plural societies.

From the perspective of customary law, Pia's decision contradicts the principle of "*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*", which positions Islam as the primary foundation of customary identity (Darwis & Muslim, 2024). Therefore, religious conversion has the potential to affect social status, acceptance within customary communities, and kinship relations. The consequences do not necessarily lead to a permanent rupture of social ties. In practice, there remains opportunity for negotiation and adaptation, enabling family relationships to be maintained even in situations of differing religious beliefs.

This is reinforced by the statement of Romo Suryo, who accompanied Pia's religious formation process. Relations between Muslims and Christians in Indonesian context have historically been characterized by harmonious coexistence, marked by mutual respect and non-interference in each other's religious practices (Sirry, 2020). Based on the observation, Pia continues to practice religion moderately without showing hostility toward Islam. The religious education has proceeded well, while relationships with the family and wider community have been maintained through open communication and mutual respect (Suryo, 2024).

These results show that religious conversion does not lead to prolonged social conflict. The social life of converts is largely shaped by the ability to reconstruct social relationships through moderate attitudes, tolerance, and respect for local cultural values. In the framework of the anthropology of religion, this condition reports that religious identity is a social construction continuously negotiated through the interaction of personal experiences, cultural symbols, and the value systems operating within society.

The social phenomenon of Minangkabau people who converted to religion in Ambon City and Makassar City

Further research was conducted in the cities of Ambon and Makassar, representing multicultural social spaces with diverse populations in terms of ethnicity and religion

(Rohman, 2020). As regions serving as centers of trade and population mobility in Eastern Indonesia, these cities bring various cultural, traditional, and religious groups within relatively open spaces of interaction (Sumbulah et al., 2022). This condition has shaped patterns of interreligious relations that tend to be harmonious and are supported by local values emphasizing tolerance and coexistence (Agung et al., 2024). The majority of the population works as traders, entrepreneurs, and service-sector actors, leading to a very high intensity of social interaction. Boundaries of religious identity become more fluid, as people are continuously exposed to cross-religious social experiences in everyday lives.

According to Clifford Geertz, the social spaces constitute arenas in which religious symbols are subjected to processes of negotiation and reinterpretation. Religion is no longer understood as a set of normative doctrines, but as a system of meaning continuously shaped through social experience. Population mobility, interfaith marriages, and economic interactions contribute to the transformation of religious identities, leading some Minangkabau people to develop new perspectives on religion and on relations between adherents of different faiths. This is reflected in Zainal's statement, which indicates:

"For me, converting to Christianity is a decision that I accept as part of my wife's family life. I also view Christianity as originating from God. Regarding Minangkabau customary rules, I do not think it should be a problem, even though my extended family did not accept this decision and eventually excluded me from the family environment" (Zainal, 2024).

This statement suggests that Zainal interprets religious conversion as a personal decision based on religious understanding and rejection of Islam. The customary law shows that this decision carries significant social consequences. The principle of "*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*" positions Islam as the foundation of customary identity. Therefore, religious conversion is perceived as a departure from customary social system. These consequences may include reduced social recognition, limited participation in customary activities, and the loss of customary rights (Aziz et al., 2020).

The consequences do not lead to a permanent rupture of family relationships. Some informants chose to conceal religious identity when returning to hometown or to limit information about conversion as a strategy to maintain social relations with the families and customary communities. This strategy shows that religious identity and ethnic identity

do not develop linearly (Saepullah et al., 2020), but are negotiated in accordance with the social contexts encountered by people.

From the perspective of Islamic law, religious conversion is a normative issue. However, the social reality reports that the lives of converts are largely characterized by efforts to maintain family relationships and social harmony rather than by the development of religious conflict. This suggests a discrepancy between normative legal constructions and the lived social practices of multicultural societies, which tend to prioritize public welfare (*maṣlahah*), tolerance, and peaceful coexistence.

These results are reinforced by interviews with Islamic religious leaders in Ambon and Makassar. Ahmad explained that the people of Ambon have long been accustomed to living side by side with adherents of other religions. Therefore, the presence of mosques and churches within the same area is not perceived as a source of conflict.

“The level of tolerance in Ambon society is very high. Muslims can live side by side with churches, just as Christians can live side by side with mosques. Social relations remain well maintained despite religious differences” (Ahmad, 2024).

Rozi explained that in some cases, religious conversion is influenced by economic considerations and marriage.

“There is a relative of mine who converted to Christianity after getting married. According to his account, his wife’s family provided economic support, which improved their household life. Although there was initially some resistance from his family in the hometown, family relations have continued to be maintained” (Rozi, 2024).

Observations in the city of Ambon show that churches stand side by side with Muslim residential areas without generating significant social conflict. Interdependent economic life has shaped more inclusive patterns of relations, where religious identity does not serve as the primary boundary in social interaction. Therefore, social capital and shared economic interests often play a more dominant role in enhancing social cohesion than differences in religious identity.

Zainal’s experience further reinforces the results. These relationships improved through sustained communication after facing rejection from the family and Minangkabau people following religious conversion.

“At first, I faced quite strong rejection from my family and Minangkabau people. However, over time they began to understand and respect the decision I had made” (Zainal, 2024).

A similar phenomenon is found in the city of Makassar. Even though the identity of Makassar society is strongly influenced by Islamic traditions, the city’s development as a center of trade and education has expanded cross-cultural and interreligious interactions (Surya et al., 2021)(2. Population mobility from various regions in Eastern Indonesia has shaped a society more open to diversity, resulting in relatively harmonious interreligious relations. As stated by Syafuddin:

“At first, I felt guilty toward my family for converting to my wife’s religion. However, after some time, I was still able to maintain communication with my family in my hometown as well as with Minangkabau people in Makassar” (Syafaruddin, 2024).

According to the anthropology of religion, conversion does not lead to social disintegration. People are subjected to processes of adaptation through identity negotiation to maintain social relations with families, customary communities, and surrounding environments. Religion is understood as part of lived experience continuously reinterpreted in accordance with the social contexts encountered by people.

The results from Ambon and Makassar indicate that religious conversion among Minangkabau people tends to generate processes of social adaptation rather than open conflict. Even though Minangkabau customary law continues to regard conversion as a deviation from customary philosophy, there remains space for negotiation, allowing kinship relations to be maintained within multicultural societies. The perspective of Islamic law shows that this phenomenon reports the importance of interpreting social realities in a contextual manner that considers normative aspects, *maṣlaḥah* (public interest), social harmony, and respect for human dignity within plural societies.

Changes in the religious attitudes of Minangkabau People

The changes in religious attitudes among Minangkabau people who have converted from Islam to Christianity in several major cities can be understood as the result of a complex interaction between local government policies, social dynamics, and evolving religious discourse in urban areas (Asmorojati et al., 2022). Local government policies regulating

religious life also shape the community's patterns of religious and social behavior, creating spaces that allow changes in religious understanding and practice to occur (Niam, 2023). The presence of political-religious discourse in urban areas strengthens an understanding of religious practice that is more structured and open. In this context, religious authorities play an important role through the patronage of a moderate religious discourse, influencing the perspectives of people on religion. The influence is reinforced by the role of religious leaders who promote a culture of moderate religiosity within religious public spaces (Akhmadi, 2019). Therefore, changes in religious attitudes are influenced by personal factors as well as the broader socio-political environment and urban cultural context (Patriani & Burhan, 2019). Policies in urban areas can be used as a multicultural model to create social harmony in society.

Changes in social and cultural interactions

Changes in the social interactions of Minangkabau people are due to open and intensive dynamics in social life (Ratna, Ellya; Zulfikarni; Abdurrahman; Liusti, 2021). The high intensity of social interaction in urban environments enables the development of more moderate and peaceful patterns of relationships, where people more easily adapt to the diversity of social and religious backgrounds. This change is supported by the availability of various religious counseling and educational platforms that provide space for the community to remain connected to religious values (Idris et al., 2022). In addition, collaboration between the community and the government through Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) strengthens social mechanisms for maintaining harmony and preventing the development of potential conflicts within a pluralistic society (Leksana, 2021). The social interactions of Minangkabau people have also transformed due to the influence of economic factors, language, and the more complex and multicultural urban social environment. This has enabled the formation of more adaptive patterns of communication and social relations in response to differences (Auni et al., 2022). The strengthening of local wisdom in interethnic and interreligious relations is an important part of maintaining social stability in urban environments (Rasyid et al., 2023; Indrahastuti et al., 2025). In addition, moderate religious character education through formal and non-formal channels also plays a role in shaping

tolerant and inclusive social attitudes (Amilda et al., 2023). Improvements in the economic and educational quality of Minangkabau people in urban areas also contribute to reducing the potential for misunderstandings that trigger socio-religious conflicts, leading to social interactions within a multicultural and multi-religious society.

Building a positive image as part of Minangkabau People

The process of some Minangkabau people converting from Islam to Christianity is often understood as a change in personal belief and a complex dynamic of social identity, which is strongly rooted in customary and religious values (Alfurqan et al., 2025). In this context, building a positive image becomes an important strategy for maintaining social relations concerning the potential stigma from differences in religious choices (Al-Sharif, 2025). This positive image is built by emphasizing social values that remain balanced with Minangkabau philosophy, such as solidarity, politeness, and adherence to the custom “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*”, in the form of broader social adaptation, even though there are changes in personal beliefs (Yulika et al., 2026). In addition, people subjected to religious conversion tend to construct a positive self-image through active participation in social life, such as maintaining good relationships with family, inclusion in community activities, and showing a tolerant attitude toward differences (Beyer & Brese, 2024). In sociological studies, this can be understood as an effort to negotiate identity to remain accepted within the social structure, which places kinship and community relations as important elements (Ashadi, 2023). Therefore, the formation of a positive image functions as a mechanism of social adaptation and a method for maintaining the continuity of social relations concerning ongoing changes in religious identity (Morina & Ciaramitaro, 2022).

The phenomenon of religious conversion among Minangkabau people in various regions provides a conceptual framework for broader societal understanding. The anthropology of religion, as a theoretical approach, is capable of offering new perspectives in interpreting legal and social practices that have long been lived by society. The prevailing legal understanding is not necessarily accurate since religious differences in the social life of people can be a primary cause of conflict and the breakdown of family relations. Therefore, religion functions as a positive force in organizing and improving social life. The

phenomenon of Minangkabau people converting to another religion does not lead to total exclusion. In a democratic nation-state such as Indonesia, customary law lacks absolute sovereignty. The tension between personal rights and communal obligations becomes a highly dynamic arena for negotiation. According to Hefner, modern Muslim societies respond to change through reinterpreting norms and forming new agreements (Hefner, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, religious conversion from Islam to Christianity among Minangkabau should be understood as a process of negotiating religious and cultural identity rather than a change in religious affiliation. The interaction between Islamic and Minangkabau customary law is characterized by a distinction between normative principles and social realities. Normatively, Islamic law and the philosophy of *“adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah”* regard conversion as incompatible with Minangkabau identity. Converts continue to negotiate place within family networks and customary communities since social relationships are shaped more by adaptation and dialogue than complete exclusion.

Religious conversion is primarily influenced by affective and experiential factors, including interfaith marriage, interpersonal relationships, emotional experiences, and the search for existential meaning. Even though conversion often generates tensions within family and customary structures, the social consequences vary according to gender and social context. Women experience greater pressure because of the central position in the matrilineal system, while converts living in multicultural urban settings tend to experience more adaptive and tolerant social environments. Generally, the results challenge the common assumption that religious conversion leads to the breakdown of social ties since most participants continue to maintain meaningful relationships with the families and communities despite certain limitations. The principal contribution of this research is in reporting that religious conversion among Minangkabau represents a dynamic negotiation between agency and social structure. Instead of constituting a simple personal choice, conversion becomes a socio-legal phenomenon that tests the normative boundaries between Islamic and customary law while showing the capacity of people and communities

to reconstruct social meaning within a plural society.

This research is limited by the relatively small number of informants, the restricted geographical coverage, and the primary focus on socio-religious dimensions. Therefore, the results cannot fully capture the diversity of conversion experiences across Minangkabau people. Future studies should consider a larger and more diverse sample, including homeland and diaspora populations, as well as adopt interdisciplinary approaches integrating anthropology, sociology, psychology, legal studies, and economics. Comparative studies examining the long-term impacts of religious conversion on family relations, social mobility, education, and cultural identity enrich the understanding of religious conversion.

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