

Dynamics of Religious Conversion from Islamic Education Perspective: Study at the Central Sulawesi Regional Center for Mualaf Foundation

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ABSTRACT: This research aims to discuss the dynamics of religious conversion of converts to Islam and their coaching patterns at the Central Sulawesi Regional Mualaf Center Foundation. This study uses a qualitative method. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, direct field observations, and written document reviews. This research interview involved administrators of converting foundations, converts, and local religious department officials. This research shows that the conversion of converts to Islam at the Central Sulawesi Regional Mualaf Center Foundation occurred because of guidance and marriage. The purpose of receiving guidance is that the informants studied religion before taking the shahada because of God's guidance, while religious conversion was due to marriage, and the informants studied religion after marrying a Muslim partner. The religious conversion process occurs through seven stages: (1) Macro and micro context stages. In the macro context, informants experience pressure from family, the people closest to them, and the family's economic situation. There are two patterns of coaching for converts to Islam at the Central Sulawesi Regional Mualaf Center Foundation, namely: Pre-syahadat coaching, where the Mualaf Center Foundation programs pre-syahadat coaching or what is known as pre-syahadat discussions which are carried out through question and answer sessions about Christianization and the basics of Islam. After the discussion process, the individuals decide to embrace Islam, and then the foundation carries out the prayer process and indicates that the individual has officially converted to Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Lewis Ray Rambo suggests that religious conversion involves a shift from a system of beliefs to a more profound faith commitment held by the individual (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014). This view emphasizes that changes in beliefs held by each individual result from a strong commitment to faith based on internal struggles, which become the basis for individuals to stand on in making decisions. This makes individuals confident in their decision to embrace a new religion, thus impacting religious teachings, sociology, and individual psychology.

In the context of this research, the religious conversion discussed focuses on the conversion of beliefs from other religions to Islam, known as "Converts." Converts are individuals who have recited the shahada and are officially part of the Muslim community (Lacar, 2001). They often require unique guidance and attention from individuals who understand Islam more deeply. Converts, as people who have embraced Islam, certainly face various problems, including a need for more knowledge about the new religion. After making a religious conversion, individuals experience different reactions from their previous religious environment, such as intimidation, ostracism, severance of family ties, and so on (Carrothers, 2010). Therefore, religious coaching or guidance tailored to individual problems and backgrounds is needed so that coaching can be carried out optimally and well organized.

Islam is the religion with the most significant number of followers in Indonesia, spread from Sabang to Merauke. With a percentage of around 87.18%, the Muslim population reached 207,176,172 people. This figure makes Islam the majority religion in Indonesia and places this country as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world (Nurdin & Maddini, 2018; Rasyid & Nurdin, 2021). The development of Muslims in Indonesia is influenced by two main factors, namely heredity factors and religious conversion factors from non-Muslims to Muslims (converts). Pew Research Center suggests that Islam is the religion with the highest growth rate in the world. This increase was driven by the large number of people who were not previously Muslims choosing to embrace Islam (converts). This phenomenon also occurs in Indonesia, as recorded in data from the Indonesian Mualaf Center, the institution that manages the development of Muslim converts in Indonesia. At the end of 2018, 3,581 Indonesians converted to Islam. Based on this data, it is estimated that the number of converts to Islam increases by around 5-6% yearly (Atkinson, 1983).

Data from the Indonesian Mualaf Center proves that the number of converts to Islam in Indonesia has increased significantly yearly. Since 2003, more than 50,000 people have converted to Islam. This figure continues to grow, especially in the last two years compared to the previous two years. Chinese are the most dominant group among converts, around 27% of the total

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converts. Every year, the number of Chinese converts to Islam increases by around 18%, from 2,800 to 35,000 in one year. The total number of Chinese in Indonesia is estimated to be five million people, with 25,000 embracing Islam throughout Indonesia. Research results from the Directorate General of Population and Civil Registration of the Ministry of Home Affairs stated that the population of Central Sulawesi is 3.05 million people, with 2.41 million people (78.94%) of whom are Muslim. This research proves that the most significant number of converts to Islam is also in Central Sulawesi. These results do not include converts not officially registered with the Population and Civil Registration Service (Ulya, 2020).

Based on the background of this problem and the results of observations and interviews, the author and the chairman of the Central Sulawesi Regional Muallaf Center Foundation stated that there are also converts to Islam at the Sulawesi Regional Muallaf Center Foundation. There are 71 assisted converts, 62 actively in guidance at the foundation. This number excludes converts not registered with the Central Sulawesi Regional Muallaf Center Foundation. This is following the results of the author's research through one of the journals, which stated that in Tagari Lonjo, Pengawu Subdistrict, South Palu, several converts have not been registered in the civil registry or at the Religious Affairs office but have made religious conversions and admitted to embracing Islam. The number of converts is estimated at around 200 people from the Kaili (Da'a) tribe who live in Pemantuma Village in the Palu mountains. They moved to Palu City not because of spiritual awareness but because of economic pressure. Their lives became difficult; they were displaced and became beggars. Currently, they are being fostered by a foundation that is managed individually.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious Conversion Concept

In general, religious conversion can be explained as a transformation of the beliefs of a person who converts to become a follower of a new religion, which makes them have different beliefs than before. The following will explain the concept of religious conversion from experts: Lewis Ray Rambo, in his view, says that religious conversion is considered a simple transition from one system of belief to a new faith commitment held by the individual. Changes in religions or beliefs held by everyone, which result from a solid commitment to faith, become the basis on which the individual stands in making decisions, making the individual confident in his decision to embrace a new religion (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014). A strong commitment to faith is based on inner struggle. The meaning of religious conversion is very diverse. Scholars defines religious conversion as a process of change that occurs (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). In the dynamics of the scope of life of religious converts: events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations. Conversion is not a single event – there is not one cause, one conversion process – but many factors influence it and are interconnected; apart from that, paying attention to cultural, social, personal, and religious elements is necessary. In his model and method for understanding conversion, Rambo explains that conversion is "pure" for those who convert sincerely and without coercion.

Each religious conversion of converts can be identified based on six motives, including intellectual motives, mystical experiences, experimental motives, affective motives, revivalist motives, and coercive motives (Lakhdar, Vinsonneau, Apter, & Mullet, 2007). In this research, the author identifies converts' conversion motives based on intellectual, experimental, and affective motives. **First**, intellectual motives. Before converting, converters seek knowledge about religious or spiritual issues through books, television, articles, lectures, and other media that do not involve significant social contact. **Second**, experimental motif: this motive is caused by religious freedom, which is starting to spread widely. This motive involves active exploration of religious choices. **Third**, affective motives emphasize interpersonal ties as the main factor in religious conversion. Direct experiences occur in converts' lives, such as emotional bonds due to love and compassion.

Factors Causing Religious Conversion

Religious conversion does not happen without a cause. Every religious conversion involves a series of events or occurrences that occurred previously and are interrelated in the conversion process. Thus, religious conversion is not a single event that suddenly appears but is influenced by various factors. The following are several views on the factors that cause religious conversion.

Lewis R., Rambo (2014) states that five main factors cause people to convert religion:

- 1) Culture, building intellectual forms, norms, and situations of spiritual life. Various forms of myths, rituals, and symbols of culture guide life, which are often unconsciously adopted and taken as collateral.
- 2) Society, the social and institutional aspects of various traditions (customs) in the ongoing conversion are at issue here. Various social conditions at the time of conversion, various meaningful relationships and institutions of potential converts, and various characteristics and processes of religious groups in converts are connected with the occurrence of conversion. The relationship between various individual relationships with their matrix environment and group expectations in interrelated relationships is also the center of attention.

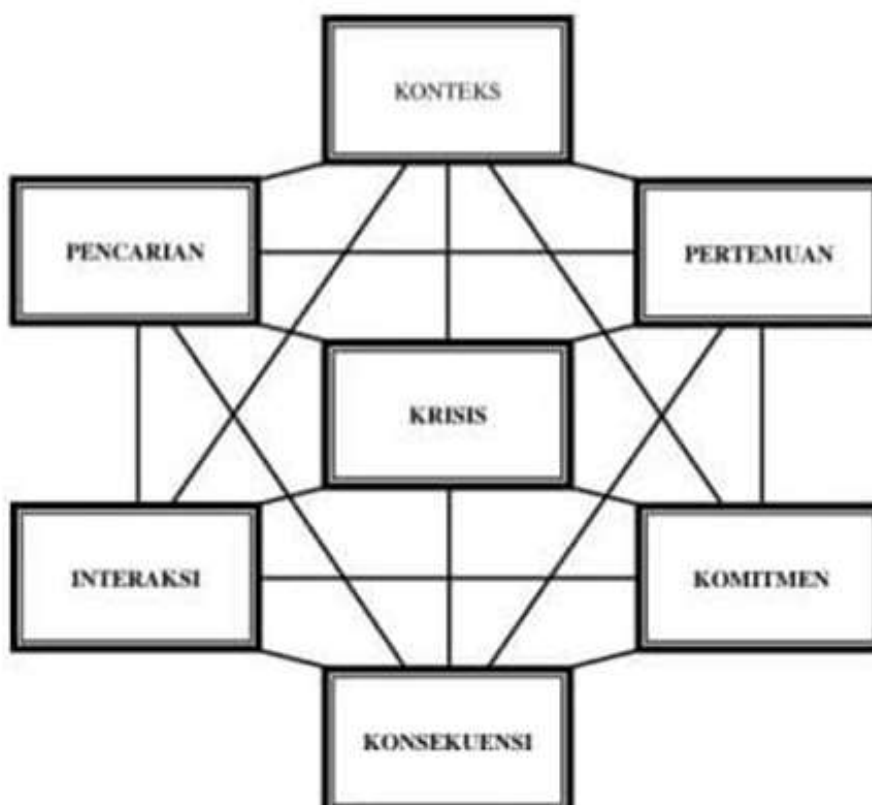
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- 3) Person, this factor includes psychological changes, namely thoughts, feelings, and actions. Self-transformation, awareness, and experience in both subjective and objective aspects are considered to be related to conversion. A classic study shows that conversion is often preceded by sadness, turmoil, despair, conflict, feelings of regret (guilt), and other difficulties.
- 4) Religion is the source and destination of conversion. Individual religious beliefs make it clear that the purpose of conversion is to enter into a relationship with the sacred (Divine) and give new meaning to life.
- 5) History, shows that conversions can vary depending on time and place. Individuals who convert may have different motivations depending on the context of time and specific events. Nevertheless, the structure and form of conversion are generally similar. The conversion process may also vary depending on different conditions and contexts.

Religious Conversion Stage

In this case, the process of religious conversion, hope, happiness, calm, and confidence will experience differences and changes in direction. This process causes individuals to experience regret, guilt, worry about the future, doubt, and others. This is part of the complex psychological process experienced by individuals during religious conversion (Maslim & Bjorck, 2009). Lewis Ray Rambo (2014) said that the religious conversion event experienced by converts goes through seven stages: context, crisis, search, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. The seven stages can be seen in the “Systematic Stage Model,” which is described below.

Picture 1. Systematic Stage Model



The model is generally interpreted as a period during the change process. Each stage has its theme, process, and pattern. The “Systematic Stage Model” above is process-oriented and not only multidimensional and historical. The conversion is recognized as a series of interactive and cumulative parts over time.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study method (Nurdin Nurdin & Sagaf Sulaiman Pettalongi, 2022; Yin, 1981, 2003).. In qualitative research, the theory is only a guide, so the research focuses on the facts in the field (Nurdin Nurdin & Sagaf S Pettalongi, 2022; Nurdin, Stockdale, & Scheepers, 2016). The data was collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and written document analysis at the research site (Rusli, Hasyim, & Nurdin, 2021; Rusli & Nurdin, 2022). This research was carried out at a mualaf centre in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The choice of location for this research was based on the reason

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that the mualaf centre has managed converts for more than ten years. The interviews involved ten converts and three staff of the organization. . Data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which begins with open coding, iterative coding, and finally, theoretical coding to build theoretical constructs from the data. Before analysis, the data was transcribed, and the results of the transcripts were consulted with the participants to obtain their consent (Nurdin, Scheepers, & Stockdale, 2022; Nurdin, Stockdale, & Scheepers, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dynamics of Religious Conversion of Converts

Religious conversion of converts refers to the process or change in religion in which a person embraces Islam. In a more specific research context, it examines in depth what causes individuals to convert to religion and traces the process that converts go through in carrying out religious conversion. The following will be explained in detail:

Religious conversion usually occurs when someone decides to change their beliefs. Religious conversion does not just happen without a cause; it is not a single event that suddenly appears by itself, but some factors influence it (Mulyana, 1997). The Religious Conference at the Central Sulawesi Regional Mualaf Center Foundation had two primary causal factors: divine influence (guidance) and the influence of marriage. To obtain data in this research, the author searched for data in the field by visiting informants who could provide data.

Religious Conversion due to Guidance from God

Divine guidance is something humans need in various aspects of life, which provides clear direction and goals so that they can make significant changes to their lives; this is what (Zakiyah Darajad, 2005) calls guidance. Guidance does not just come like that, but through events or occurrences that happen to individuals so that individuals try to find a way out to overcome them through guidance or signs that can be understood by reason. Several informants at the Central Sulawesi Regional Mualaf Center Foundation experienced this. The following are the results of an interview with Jefri Gunawan, the perpetrator of the religious conversion due to guidance from Catholic Christianity as follows:

In 2009, I was still in my second year of high school when I started looking for “Where are we going, where are we going in the end?” Is this really what my previous religious leaders said or the religion that I will believe in later? At that time, I liked listening to Ustad Jefri Albukhori’s lectures. There was a lot of conflict within me in my previous religion, namely that the last religion taught that we already have someone to atone for our sins; indirectly, we like to make sins with Allah because there is already someone to atone for. That doesn’t make sense to me; according to my logic, whatever we do, we have to be responsible for ourselves; for example, “If I steal, the first punishment is me and then my family.” That’s my logic.

Observing the interview results, the author understands that the informant became interested in Islam in 2008, and his desire to find the truth became stronger. Many things conflict with him; for example, the Lord Jesus, whom he believes in, is the redeemer of sins, the redeemer of the sins of his people who make mistakes. In his mind, it didn’t make sense. Logically, if someone makes a mistake, an impact or reward must be received directly or indirectly. And others about the trinity of God, why more than one? Why not just God, Jesus?

The results of the author’s observations are that the informant, when he was chairman of the Central Sulawesi Regional Mualaf Center Foundation, was very productive in studying religious knowledge and regularly attended religious studies held by other institutions. The informant also managed the foundation very wholly, even the branch that had been opened outside the city of Palu, which the informant did as a form of implementation of the values of Islamic education that had been imprinted in the informant.

These findings can be concluded that the informant has received divine guidance, which has provided an understanding of religion and made the informant a caliph on earth as a servant of Allah SWT for the benefit of other human beings. Not everyone finds this divine guidance; this strengthens the theory (Zakiyah Darajad, 2005), which says that humans, as God’s creation, have a soul as a means of seeking guidance from Allah SWT. The human soul is in the same condition in accepting two excellent and bad choices. However, Allah Almighty gives a significant gift in the form of reason, which allows humans to think about and weigh these two options wisely. By using this rational mind, humans can recognize and follow the instructions given by God and avoid temptations and misguidance that may come their way. This emphasizes the importance of using reason and wise thinking in seeking and following God’s guidance in human life.

The author’s observations also found that the informants actively participated in science councils and actively empowered the Central Sulawesi Regional Mualaf Center Foundation. The informant currently also attends religious studies held by other institutions and the informant is also active in *taklim* assemblies with teenagers to strengthen relationships and deepen knowledge of the Islamic religion, and is also active in helping other Muslim brothers in dealing with natural disasters both held by foundations and in the environment where the informant lives.

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These findings strengthen the theory (Mubarak, 2000), which states that supernatural influences dominate individuals' or groups' religious conversion process. This happens through association with Muslim people who have good morals. Interaction with individuals who practice Islamic teachings well and deepen their understanding of Islam through literature can be a channel to receive Divine guidance and ultimately choose to embrace Islam. Adrianus Ordinary also experienced something similar. The perpetrators of religious conversion due to divine guidance from Protestant Christianity are as follows:

I became interested in converting to Islam when I was at college in 2017. In elementary school, I got a book about the story of the apostles Prophet Isa and Prophet Musa. The Prophet Isa, whom Christians consider to be God; at that time, I had no intention of taking the book home because, at that time, I didn't have any thoughts about it. When I was in middle school, I accidentally rediscovered this book. The book explains the differences between the Prophet Isa and Jesus, especially regarding their birth and death.

The informant's interest in Islam began with regularly reading books about the stories of the apostles Prophet Isa and Prophet Musa. In this case, the informant compares what is spoken in the Qur'an and the Bible. The difficulties that the informant previously experienced began to be answered clearly after carrying out a comparative search for the contents of the two holy books. After starting to find a bright spot regarding the search for truth, the informant became more deeply aware of Islam and increasingly believed that Islam was the true religion, thus growing in his belief in embracing Islam. The description above provides a very comprehensive explanation that has proven that the Al-Qur'an and Al-Hadith contain absolute truths that are transcendental, universal, and eternal so that they remain relevant to meet human needs wherever and whenever (Abuddin Nata, 2005).

Religious Conversion Due to Marriage

Religious conversion due to marriage is a frequent phenomenon. Marriage is a choice and freedom in life status and life partner, which is the fundamental right of every individual. The following is the author's interview with Melani Wongkar:

I asked my boyfriend, now my husband, to get married. To be precise, our wedding was in 2011. I urged my husband to marry me in the hope that I could overcome the inner turmoil I felt and that someone would protect me. I previously went to school with my mother at a state school; three months before I got married, I went with my father to a Christian school; there was a difference that I felt when I went to those two schools. The view of Christians towards Islam is terrible. In their eyes, Islam is synonymous with thieves, rapists, criminals, etc. After getting married, I still didn't dare to show my Islam because I was still under the supervision of my father. My father is wealthy, and with that situation, he took advantage of and controlled me. The earthquake incident was the turning point for me to study Islam and start looking for someone who could guide me in studying Islam. At the direction of my Muslim friend, Alhamdulillah, I met the chairman of the Central Sulawesi branch of the Center for Muallaf Foundation, especially Palu City, through social media, who at that time was looking for converts to be trained. Finally, I joined the Foundation by following the spiritual training that the Foundation had programmed. I am entrusted to be treasurer at the Central Sulawesi branch of the Muallaf Center Foundation, especially in Palu City.

To overcome her inner turmoil at that time, the informant invited her boyfriend, who is now her husband, to be precise, in 2011, when they got married. The informant urged him to marry in the hope that she could overcome her inner turmoil and protect her from family pressure.

Patterns of Guiding Converts to Islam

Converting to Islam can be interpreted as a systematically carried out effort to improve, increase, and develop abilities/skills, commitment, responsibility, and confidence for people who have just converted to Islam or have the desire to embrace Islam so that they become firm adherents of Islam on spiritual and physical aspects (Euis Sri Mulyan, 2012). In the context of this research, the foundation programs two forms of coaching for converts, namely pre-shahada and post-shahada coaching.

a. Pre-shahadah coaching

Pre-shahadah coaching, in this case, prospective converts come directly to the Foundation to discuss the new religion they will embrace, hoping to get enlightenment about it. The following is an interview between the author and Jefri Gunawan, chairman of the Sulawesi Muallaf Center Foundation and also a mentor for converts to Islam, saying:

The Central Sulawesi Muallaf Center Foundation programs pre-shahadah coaching or pre-shahadah discussions, where prospective converts ask questions about Christianization and the basics of Islam. Most are embarrassed to ask the ustad directly for fear of making mistakes in their words and actions. For this reason, they are more comfortable asking questions directly to fellow converts who have long embraced Islam.

Looking at the results of the interview, it can be understood that the pre-shahadah discussion is that prospective converts, before they are sure of their hearts, carry out a religious conversion, first carry out questions and answers or discussions with their relatives who have already converted to Islam intending to gain enlightenment and strengthen the new religion of Islam that they will embrace. Considering this matter is very private, most still need time to be brave and ask the Ustad or Ustadzah about it. The Foundation provides a particular space for these discussions.

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Based on the author's observations, the Foundation prepares a particular space and time to serve prospective converts to Islam. Most prospective converts discuss with the chairman rather than the ustad and cleric. This is because the chairman of the Foundation is also a convert. After gaining enlightenment, strengthening, and strong desire due to consideration of various aspects, the informant is then given a confession by the supervisors or chairman of the Foundation.

Post Syhadah Coaching

This training is more specific in spiritual development for converts. The Foundation does not limit it; people who want to study religion can also take part, but the main target is converts, with the main aim of converts understanding Islamic teachings with the correct understanding and being able to practice them in their daily lives in a *Kaffah* manner. The following is the author's interview with the ustadzah who guides female converts to Islam at the Central Sulawesi Muallaf Center Foundation:

After the informants embraced Islam, they were guided on how to perform the shahadah; after becoming legal converts, they began to teach Islamic teachings such as how to bathe in *janabah*, perform ablution and perform prayer movements, and read prayers in prayer. Those who come to me are ready to say shahada. For converts who cannot read Arabic, I teach Alfatihah reading in Indonesian. When converts have been declared able to pray alone, take a janaba bath, complete ablution, and pray with recitation of the movements, they are then given a certificate as a form of appreciation.

The interview results show that the coaching pattern implemented by the ustadzah involves guiding worship. In this case, considering that the converts are people who have just embraced Islam, of course, their understanding of the religion still needs to be improved. Therefore, the coaching is adjusted to the convert's background and ability to understand religious knowledge.

The description above provides a comprehensive explanation that the guidance pattern for converts to Islam is carried out systematically to fulfill the converts' spiritual and physical needs. Because converts, after officially embracing Islam, certainly need spiritual strengthening and some of their physical needs. In Euis Sri Mulyan's view, coaching for converts is genuinely adapted to the conditions and capabilities of the converts. The first thing that needs to be done is to instill Islamic religious values with teaching methods that convert can easily accept and understand so that they can apply them in their daily lives, such as purification (bathing *janabah* and ablution procedures) and daily prayers. Furthermore, it provides a space to discuss the problems that convert face to find the best solution. Converts to the Euis Sri Mulyan theory are given guidance in the field. Hence, the author concludes that the Euis Sri Mulyan theory follows the results of the author's research.

The Muallaf Center Foundation prioritizes the development of converts by programming spiritual formation. This program is really needed by converts, and so far, it is running smoothly. Spiritual formation includes *Tawheed* studies, Islamic jurisprudence studies, Muslim women's Islamic jurisprudence studies, and Qur'an studies for mothers and children of trained Muslim converts.

The Foundation aims to develop the self-development of converts materially and spiritually, which is the converted converts' primary need. The Foundation does all of this purely to hope for the blessing of Allah SWT, without expecting reciprocity from the converts carried out by the Foundation; in fact, the Foundation does not charge any fees for any activities held by the Foundation. If donors receive gifts, the converted converts will be the main priority. Equipment to support worship, such as the Al-Qur'an, Iqro, and monthly rice rations, are all somewhat given to the trained converts.

After the shahada coaching program, informants who have officially converted to Islam are given essential religious guidance such as ablution, prayer, reciting the Qur'an from the basics, learning monotheism and aqidah, and learning basic Muslim etiquette. The coaching activities are scheduled and adjusted to the agreed time. Furthermore, fulfilling the advocacy for converts to Islam is legal protection. It requires various Islamic information such as certificates, statements of having converted to Islam for changes to religious data on identity cards, marriage books, and so on related to converts.

CONCLUSION

The religious conversion of converts at the Central Sulawesi Regional Muallaf Center Foundation occurred because of guidance and because of marriage. Due to guidance, the informant studied religion before taking the shahada, while because of marriage, the informant studied religion after making the shahada, precisely after awakening to death. The religious conversion process of informants goes through seven stages: (1) Macro and micro context stages. In the macro context, informants experience pressure from family, the people closest to them, and the family's economic situation. There are two types of coaching for converts to Islam at the Central Sulawesi Regional Muallaf Center Foundation: pre-syahadat and post-syahadat. (1) Pre-syahadat coaching, also known as pre-syahadat discussions, is where individuals, before the conversion process, undergo a question-and-answer session about Christianization and the basics of Islam. In this case, the Foundation provides a particular space to handle this. After going through lengthy discussions and the individual is sure of their decision to embrace Islam, the Foundation then carries out the conversion process. It indicates that the individual has officially embraced Islam.

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