

Challenges facing Muslim converts in the Republic of Kenya: A case study of Mumias-Kakamega county

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ABSTRACT: Converts are a significant group within Kenya's Muslim population. If converts are handled in the right way, they may play a big role in the spread of Islam to non-Muslims. If converts are treated properly, they could have a significant impact on the propagation of Islam among non-Muslims. In Mumias, Kakamega County, Kenya, converts face so many challenges as they navigate through their new-found faith. The aim of this study was to investigate the problems that convert in Kakamega face. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews as primary data. For the interviews, a sample of 25 participants was selected. There were 15 men and 10 women. Converts face physical assault, derogatory language, neglect by family and friends, difficulty finding a scholar, social integration, difficulties acquiring Islamic knowledge, difficulties learning the Quran, humiliation, identity issues, marital problems, and other problems, according to the findings. The study recommends a systematic process of educating converts for a better understanding of Islam and providing them with self-efficiency projects that will enable them to be self-reliant.

Keywords: Islam, society, religious conversion, Muslim community

1 INTRODUCTION

Muslims view Islam's mission as a fundamental virtue found in its religious teachings. With wisdom and teachings, one of the methodologies used in Islamic missions is an invitation to all to the way of the Lord. Religious conversion and reversion are part of the mission of Islam, and new Muslims go through various phases. Religious reversion or conversion marks an entry into a new relationship that is characterized by Islamic brotherhood. During conversion into Islam, a new member has to say affirmations to Islam before an imam. The individual must be made out of free will. In the post-conversion phase, there are significant changes that happen in the life of an individual. This is the time when an individual learns how to live like a Muslim and practice the faith (Razick & Rushana 2018).

Convert persecution began in the early days of the Prophet Mohammad (Pbuh) in Mecca, and spread across East Africa before reaching the Arabian Peninsula. Africa was the first continent to receive Muslim converts fleeing the Arabian Peninsula (Zaki 1974). In 615 AD, they fled to the Christian kingdom of Aksum, which is now part of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Abyssinia took the lead in welcoming the first immigrants since it is the closest African country to the Arabian Peninsula. The Companions' migration, which included Prophet Muhammad's daughter Ruqayyah and his son-in-law Uthman ibn Affan, among others, and lasted fifteen years, was a divine will and prophetic guidance to honor the countries of Abyssinia, including East Africa, with this religion since the beginning of the revelation (Al-Mubarak furi 1996).

Studies conducted in Britain have shown that newly converted Muslims face rejection, starting from their immediate family members, with the increased visibility of their faith in public spaces. For instance, close relatives of the newly converted Muslims may even turn away from them. New converts have mixed feelings because they have the joy of practicing and learning the new faith

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while at the same time experiencing anxiety while mingling with their community. They also have concerns about losing their previous social life (Brice 2010).

In Kenya, and particularly in Kakamega, the county is divided into 12 sub-counties, 60 wards, 187 village units, and 400 community areas. Furthermore, the county had a population of 1,660,651, comprising 800,896 males and 859,755 females, giving a population distribution of 48% male and 52% female. This population is projected to be growing at an annual growth rate of 2.5%. The county labor force is projected to be 1,033,512 in the year 2018, consisting of 485,383 males and 548,129 females. This population is projected to be 1,086,501 and 1,142,207 by 2020 and 2022, respectively. This high labor force implies that the county government should put appropriate policies in place to create employment and encourage the setting up of private enterprises to absorb this labor force (Kakamega County: 2022). The number of Muslims recorded in the county is 88,412 (City population: 2022), and the majority were found in Mumias. Conversion to Islam is a gradual process and mostly happens during the Ramadan period. In Kenya, initiation into Islam is associated with a warm welcome from the community members. After the welcome phase, the new converts are left on their own to navigate through the faith. This leaves the individuals burdened with obligations about the new beliefs (Sahad et al. 2013).

In general, the word convert refers to a person who changes from one religion to another (Alalwani 2012). In scholarly works, the word convert means someone who has converted to Islam based on the notion of “al-Fitrah.” According to this concept, everybody is born a Muslim, but it is only the parents or environment that cause one to become a non-Muslim. The Prophet (Pbuh) said, “Every child is born with a true faith of Islam (i.e., to worship none but Allah Alone) and his parents convert him to Judaism or Christianity or Magianism, as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal. Do you find it mutilated?” (Bukhari 1385).

Converts have an important role to play in our society. For instance, converts are required to practice Islamic teachings and encourage others to do the same. Converts have made a profound contribution to the spread of Islam in Kenya and globally. In Kenya, conversion to Islam has a very long history and has happened alongside the spread of Islam (Kilonzo 2001). Although recent Muslim converts contribute toward the development of Islam, they face numerous challenges, ranging from discrimination to assault and neglect from their family members. The study by Brice in the UK addressed some of the reasons that make people join Islam. He states that people convert to Islam because of acceptance based on conscience and convenience. With the route of conscience, an individual is persuaded to join Islam based on the explanations provided about Islam and its benefits. For convenience, people join Islam because of individual needs that must be met. For instance, the need for marriage may push an individual to convert to Islam. A business contract may also be a pressing need that will cause some people to join Islam.

The work of Rashida Alhassan analyzes the reasons that Islamic converts had while trying to convert to Christianity. The study revealed that converts experienced challenges such as parents attempting to kill their children because of their decision to join Christianity. The study also reports some parents subjecting their children to torture for wanting to leave Islam. As the challenges continue to manifest among Muslim converts, formal structures provide no significant support.

1.1 *Problem statement*

New converts experience some dilemmas in balancing their religious practice with their cultural heritage. It is therefore a challenge for the new converts to navigate their way through the new religious faith communities. Perceptions about new Islam converts being at a high risk of joining extremist groups such as ISIS and Al-Shabaab also have a psychological impact on new Muslims. Within the prism of risk, it is perceived that new converts are a threat to public safety because of perceptions about engaging in acts of violence and bomb plots. Past studies have shown that Muslim converts are more likely to be attached to terrorism and extremism in media coverage. Little research exists on the support that mosques and Islamic organizations provide to newly converted Muslims. The lack of guidance for newly converted Muslims puts them at high risk of exposure to extreme ideas that are shared on the internet. The goal of this study was to look into the issues that new Islam converts in Mumias face and make recommendations on how they can be helped to strengthen their faith and protect themselves from extremist ideas spread on the internet.

2 METHODS

2.1 *Theological approach*

The challenges that convert experience can be understood from the theological approach, which is in accordance with Islamic teachings. Theology is more concerned with transcendence, doctrine, and faith interpretation. There are four perspectives that are associated with each tradition. Descriptive theology allows one to describe doctrine in a functional way. Systematic theory entails summaries of the theological doctrines of faith in a professional way. There is also a theory of dialogue in which there is an attempt to understand other people for their own sake. The descriptive theology was the best fit for this research.

A qualitative approach was selected because issues of religious conversion involve relationships between individuals and their families, friends, or members of the community and may be challenging to discuss in open forums. Participants would want to maintain confidentiality when discussing such matters. Therefore, qualitative techniques were the most appropriate. To achieve the objectives, the snowball or chain technique was used, and it allowed access to the participants that were difficult to reach. As alluded to by Creswell, the snowball technique is useful in identifying interesting cases from individuals who can be contacted to provide useful information. Purposeful sampling was also a reliable technique used in this study as it led the researcher to mosques and other Islamic institutions to collect data about the challenges facing converts.

Banerjee and Chaudhury (2010) defined a target population as all the subjects involved in the study. The sample size comprised three categories of participants. The first group consisted of converts, while the second group comprised Muslim converts who had gone back to their previous religion. There was interest in finding out the reasons for converting to their previous religion. The third group had Islamic religious leaders who had knowledge about the challenges that converts experience. The sample consisted of 15 males and 10 females aged between 18 and 40 years. The choice of this age was informed by the fact that it is regarded as the adult age group where individuals are expected to be responsible for their actions.

2.2 *Data collection*

A qualitative approach was used to study the problems faced by new Islam converts in Mumias. Data was collected using observations, interviews, and a review of secondary sources.

2.3 *Observations*

The study involved observations as one of the methods of collecting data. Selected Islamic preaching was observed with the aim of understanding the different ways in which non-Muslims are attracted to Islam. Muslim clerics provided an important source of information about the converts and the role they were supposed to play once they started practicing the new faith. More observations were made on some of the programs that are designed for participants in the mosques.

2.4 *Interviews*

Qualitative data was collected through informal interviews that were conducted among selected Muslim leaders from mosques in Mumias. Relevant questions about problems facing Islam converts were asked during the interview sessions. The leaders were first approached and informed about the objectives of the study, and they gave consent for interview sessions. The data from the informal interviews were categorized and analyzed under several headings based on the major themes that emerged during the discussions (Jessica & others: 2020).

2.5 *Secondary data sources*

The study also collected secondary data from the mosques within the area of study. Some of the data collected from the secondary documents included the age, gender, level of education, and

previous religion of the converts. These variables have a big impact on the post-conversion life of converts.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After a rigorous thematic analysis of the data, three themes emerged concerning the converts in Kakamega County. The first theme is the “outside challenges,” and the second is the “inside challenges.”

3.1 *Challenges from outside faith*

Physical assault: The result found cases of physical assault directed at the respondents because of their stand on Islam. The researcher interacted with Mr. F, who is a young man working as a construction worker. The young man described an incident where he was involved in an argument with other men at a construction site, and he had been physically assaulted by acts of pushing by his coworkers, who called him names and claimed that he was foolish to join Islam, yet most of his family members were non-Muslims. He explained that the incident had made him shy away from discussing his new faith with his coworkers.

Derogatory language: The use of derogatory language was found to be common among the new converts in Mumias. Some of the sentiments recorded from the participants include: “That religion you’ve joined is for terrorists” Do you want to become one?” This is what one of Miss J’s male friends told her when he noticed that she had started wearing Muslim attire. Miss J, a student at a local computer college in Mumias, narrated how she had experienced derogatory language after joining Islam. She explained that she had joined Islam after completing her high school education, and she had one male friend who had invited her to join Islam. She also claimed that one of her friends told her that she had only gone into Islam to hunt for a rich boyfriend from the Arabs.

Neglect by family and friends: Converts often experience neglect from their family members and friends when they join Islam. In some cases, family members may stop supporting one of their own financially or socially once they realize that he has joined Islam. Mr. J, who is a college student, gave some insight into how his sister stopped supporting him while in college because of his joining Islam. He claimed that her sister is a born-again Christian, and she used to support him with pocket money and other materials during his college life. When she got word that he had joined Islam, she started avoiding him and had a negative attitude toward him. Mr. J claimed that he had once heard his sister say that she did not want to be converted to Islam, a faith that has extremists.

3.2 *Challenges from within Islamic faith*

- a) *Difficulty in finding scholars:* The study observed that converts had difficulty getting scholars to teach them Islam. It was established that the Imams who had initiated converts into Islam had neglected them. As responded by Mr. T, who is a carpenter, he was converted while in the village and was left to grow on his own. He had not seen anyone to offer assistance in learning the basic principles of Islam. He had tried getting someone to assist him, but his efforts were fruitless. The lack of support had made this respondent and others unable to recite the opening chapter of the Quran. To make matters worse, he did not live near a mosque where he could go to pray and engage in some studies, even if he found an Islamic scholar.
- b) *Social integration:* Social integration was identified by some converts as a major social problem that affected them when they joined Islam. It was stated that integration problems were felt from the mosques to the larger community. To some converts the environment in the mosque was new to them and they did not understand the norms about

standing and so on. Mr. K, who is a welder and a new convert, complained that he did not know what to do in the mosque and feared asking other worshippers. He claimed that his second day at the mosque had a lot of confusion and he felt like leaving. He also claimed that some of the people in the mosque were looking at him like he was in the wrong place. For Mr. N, language was a major problem that affected his integration within the Muslim community. Ethnic differences within the Muslims in Mumias made him not feel comfortable in the environment. He had problems communicating with fellow Muslims because of the differences in language. He expressed fear that he was going to have a very difficult time attending the community activities because of the communication problems.

- c) *Difficulties in acquiring Islamic knowledge*: From the interviews, it emerged that participants do not have a sufficient understanding of Islamic principles. Some of the participants do not know how they will gain knowledge about Islam. For instance, Miss B. was a new convert who was recently married to a Muslim, but she expressed her lack of knowledge about Islam. She claimed that she was interested in learning the faith but did not have a clear way of understanding it. For some of the participants, they had tried to put in their own efforts to learn Islam, but they did not get support from their family, friends, or mosques.
- d) *Difficulties in learning Al-Quran*: A few of the respondents in this study mentioned that they had problems understanding the Al-Quran. They understood that it was their responsibility to learn and adapt their lives according to the Quran. Some did not have an understanding of the basic principles and chapters in the Quran, and some were even ignorant about knowing the Quran. For some of the female participants, their husbands did not have good knowledge of the Quran, yet they depended on them to learn about Islam. The inability of the husbands to recite some important parts of the Quran was a major obstacle to the learning of their wives. Outside the home environment, some converts claimed that it was more difficult to study the Quran since they were preoccupied with work or studies. The converts did not give the Quran more priority compared with their work or studies.
- e) *Humiliation*: From the sermons I observed, humiliation of fellow Muslims was one of the issues that was preached about. The preachers asserted to their worshippers that it was wrong to humiliate fellow Muslims. Examples of cases where converts were humiliated were highlighted in such preaching, and it was a behavior that was abhorred because it was against the principles of brotherhood in Islam. An observation was also made about Muslim events such as weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies. The converts invited to such events claimed that they felt lost and isolated from their community. It emerged that there is a differential treatment of Muslims by birth and those who have converted to Islam.

The results from interviews also showed that converts suffer from expressions of Islamic identity. There is difficulty among the converts in expressing their Muslim identity. This is because they regard Islam as a minority in the community. Some of the converts feared revealing their identity through their dress when they were in the company of other people in the community. The differences between Muslim dressing and traditional cultural practices were also making some converts fear expressing their identity. Some of the converts feared that expressions of their identity could result in their complete exclusion from the previous community.

3.2.1 *Marital problems*

The issues of marriage were prominent among the converts in Mumias. Some of the converts were worried about the strict rules that Islam has for marriage. Converts who are married and have Christian partners complained that it was sometimes difficult to strike a balance between the two diametrically opposed religious faiths. Some of the converts opened up and stated that they had gotten into marriage in complete opposition to Islamic practices. For instance, there are men who

have married women who are non-Muslims, and they felt that they had gone against the teachings of Islam.

3.2.2 *Mixing Islam and traditional practices*

From the interviews, it emerged that converts had problems mixing Islamic practices with their previous practices. According to the teachings of Islam, a Muslim is not supposed to mix traditional practices with Islamic practices. The converts therefore find themselves in difficult situations when they are required to go back to their traditional practices when they are in the company of non-Muslims. When converts mix their traditional practices with Islam, they are likely to come into conflict with the Muslims who were born Muslims. They are also likely to be perceived as jokers in their faith.

4 DISCUSSION

A significant number of challenges were identified, and there are reasons that explain them within the region and within the larger Islamic faith. The finding that Muslim converts are vulnerable to rejection, assault, and neglect is consistent with other studies that have been done globally about conversion to Islam and its effects. In Malaysia, a study by Faisal Azni and Md. Yusoff (2019) concluded that misconceptions surrounding Islam as a religion contribute to the resentment and conflict that family members have toward converts. For instance, misconceptions exist about Islamic teachings and ideology, and they are present on social media networks (Rink & Kunaal 2018). When family members listen to misconceptions, they become negative and will resort to assaulting, neglecting, and resenting their members who have converted to Islam. Another finding was that converts experience family conflict and identity crisis, as has also been found in other previous studies. Being a Muslim is more than just wearing attire, going to mosques, and reading the Quran; but it is a deeper lifestyle change that an individual is supposed to go through, as indicated by Faisal Azni and Md. Yusoff (2019). Islam is the most widely misunderstood religion, which means that it is not an easy journey for converts. It is expected that clashes may happen anytime between the traditional practices of previous religions and those of Islam. Once an individual has converted to Islam, it is expected that a new lifestyle, different from the former, will be adopted. For instance, if an individual was involved in taking alcoholic drinks, then he or she is expected to abandon such a life and live a different one. (Shahid 2019).

The study also found that a lack of knowledge about Islam is a major problem for the converts. Previous studies in Ghana have also shown similar results among the Islamic communities. The lack of knowledge about Islam is an issue that troubles so many young people who convert to the religion, and they become easy targets for misinformation and radicalization by extremists (Rahman 2015).

There is keenness among the new converts to gain Islamic knowledge. When anxiety is accompanied by feelings of isolation and disappointment, the results are that converts become vulnerable to online resources. They are also predisposed to the slippery slope effect that can sweep them toward extremism, as underscored by Karagiannis (2012). Efforts should be made to meet the needs of the new converts by providing good scholarly courses that can help them gain significant religious knowledge and awareness about Islam and its cultural context.

Brice (2010) found that the lack of support networks is one of the most challenging problems that new converts face. The implication for the new converts, especially for those who are single, is that it becomes difficult to get married. This is further complicated by the fact that new converts are making efforts to try and follow their new religious values and instructions, while at the same time they are expected to have issues in their work and occupation. For instance, those who do not have alternative sources of finance may find it difficult to follow Islamic instructions. Women are more vulnerable to the cultural shift that happens, and they require counseling to manage their careers and get finances to support their faith in Islam. Career counseling is one of the needs that can help converts help themselves as they struggle to integrate into Islam.

Brice (2010) also demonstrated that new converts feel under pressure to abide by Islamic cultural norms. This is where they need more knowledge and help, and where they don't get it, they

turn to the internet. Mosques are viewed as not being well equipped to provide converts with adequate support and guidance. It has been found that the scholars with knowledge are too busy to attend to the converts. There is also a lot of reference to online resources to get knowledge about Islam, but this tends to be confusing to the converts, and it is also difficult for the converts to find what is relevant and good for themselves.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Muslim converts face numerous challenges, both from their families and their newfound faith. From the interviews conducted, converts suffer from assault, rejection, humiliation, marital conflict, and neglect because of their involvement with Islam. The converts also face problems related to the lack of knowledge of their new faith, lack of social integration, lack of knowledge of the Al-Quran, identity problems, and mixing practices. According to the findings of the study, there are no adequate support structures in Mumias to assist converts and guide them through their newfound faith. Mosques and community organizations should keep good records of converts. Well-kept records are useful in following up on converts and finding out the individual problems they face and how they can be assisted to remain in their new faith.

The findings of this study show that converts are aware of the problems they face and the needs they have in their new faith. Organizations that are run by converts and are supported by the community should be established. This should be informed by the fact that converts know their needs and the journey they are going through. The study recommends the establishment of programs to support Muslim converts in Mumias. For instance, there should be programs to offer social, emotional, and psychological support to converts. The converts also need material support in terms of clothes and other attire that they can use to smoothly integrate into the Muslim community. Programs should also be established to provide Islamic literature to the converts so that they gain knowledge about their new religion and grow spiritually to spread Islam to more people.

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