

Navigating Faith and Identity: Support Systems and Experiences of Japanese Converts in the Muslim Community

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ABSTRACT

The Muslim population in Japan has steadily grown, yet academic coverage of Japanese converts' experiences remains limited. This paper explores the journeys of Japanese individuals who convert to Islam, emphasizing their faith journeys, identity negotiation, and integration into the Muslim community. The study uses qualitative content analysis with a thematic approach based on existing literature, academic works, published interviews, autobiographies, and memoirs, rather than primary fieldwork. Results indicate that Japanese converts choose Islam for various reasons and face cultural and social challenges during integration. Support systems like mosques and Muslim associations play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and religious continuity. By analyzing these experiences through secondary sources, this paper aims to enhance understanding of Islam in Japan and promote the growth of inclusive, supportive Muslim communities.

Keywords: Japanese converts, Islam in Japan, Muslim community, social integration

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

In recent decades, the Muslim population in Japan has grown gradually, influenced by factors such as globalization, labor migration, and the expansion of cultural exchange. Although Muslims remain a small minority within Japan's largely secular and religiously diverse society, their visibility has increased through the presence of mosques, cultural centres, and community activities. Historically, Islam and Muslim communities in Japan have been understood through complex and evolving perceptions shaped by Japan's socio-historical development, Western intellectual and cultural influence, and changing geopolitical relationships.

Studies by Levent (2020) and Bibik (2022) show that pan-Asianist ideas and cross-border connections helped shape how Islam is seen and integrated in Japanese society. Since the late 19th century, Japan's contact with the Muslim world, through diplomacy, trade, and knowledge sharing, has influenced how Islam is understood in the country. But after global events like 9/11, media coverage and security concerns have often created negative stereotypes, making it harder for Islam to be accepted and understood in Japanese social and cultural discussions (Bibik, 2022; Karaoğlu & Acar, 2024).

In this context, Japanese converts to Islam are a unique group, yet their reasons, experiences, and ways of living as Muslims remain relatively limited in scope within existing scholarship, despite the presence of several important empirical studies. Research by Kocalan (2022) and Qintani & Surajaya (2018) shows that many converts find meaning and support by joining mosques and Muslim groups, where they gain religious knowledge and community. However, they often struggle to maintain their Muslim identity because Islam is sometimes seen as foreign or incompatible with Japanese culture, which makes their position difficult in wider society. Discussions about Islam being perceived as 'foreign' to Japanese culture are based on scholarly observations rather than a universal social reality; studies such as Kocalan (2023), Moriya (2021) and Shinohe (2019) demonstrate that convert experiences are shaped by specific social contexts, stereotypes and cultural expectations.

To maintain Islamic practices and community life, Japanese Muslims often depend on help from Muslim-majority countries and international networks, which provide resources, training, and support (Qintani & Surajaya, 2018). This global connection is important because local facilities are limited and Japanese society is still not very familiar with Islam.

At the same time, Japanese converts face recurring social challenges, including stereotyping, cultural misunderstandings, and subtle forms of exclusion, particularly in gender roles, religious attire, and the perception of Islam as a foreign tradition (Kocalan, 2023; Moriya, 2021). Female converts are especially vulnerable to tensions arising from the intersection of societal expectations and religious commitments (Kocalan, 2023; Shinohe, 2019).

Despite these difficulties, many converts contribute actively to reshaping the image of Muslims in Japan by engaging in community activities and promoting interreligious dialogue (Yulita & Ong, 2019).

Mosques and Muslim associations remain central to this process of integration by offering spaces for worship, educational programs, and cultural adaptation that align religious practice with Japanese social realities (Kotani, Tamura, & Katsura, 2023). These institutions serve not only as religious centres but also as hubs of community support, where converts find belonging and empowerment. As their integration deepens, such networks help to challenge stereotypes and encourage the development of a culturally sensitive form of Islam in Japan, one that acknowledges and responds to the unique experiences of Japanese converts (Kotani et al., 2022; Bibik, 2022).

1.2 Research Objectives

Given the growing scholarly interest in Muslim minorities in Japan, this study focuses specifically on Japanese converts to Islam, a group whose experiences and narratives remain relatively underexplored, particularly in terms of how converts reconcile cultural identity with religious practice and how community networks contribute to their sense of community belonging. The objectives of the study are threefold:

1. To explore the faith journeys of Japanese converts, examining how they come to embrace Islam and the spiritual, intellectual, social, and practical motivations that shape their decisions.
2. To investigate the processes of identity negotiation that converts experience, particularly the cultural, social, and psychological challenges involved in reconciling Japanese identity with Islamic faith.
3. To analyze the integration of converts within the Muslim community in Japan, with attention to the roles of supportive networks, mosque activities, and empowerment strategies that promote inclusion and affirmation.

Through these objectives, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics involved in religious conversion and identity formation within the context of a minority faith community in Japan.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Islam in contemporary Japan by focusing on Japanese converts, a group often overlooked in research that usually emphasizes immigrant Muslim populations. By examining their faith experiences and social interactions, the

study highlights how Islam is adopted and adapted locally, while also shaping broader societal perceptions of the religion.

Addressing stereotypes and social challenges, such as Islamophobia, religious prejudice, and exclusion, is essential for promoting intercultural dialogue and strengthening community cohesion.

Yamashita (2022) explains that many people in Japan are not particularly interested in religion, and this lack of concern often masks hidden negative feelings toward Islam. This makes it harder for Muslims to fit into Japanese society. Likewise, Kocalan (2023) shows that Muslim women who convert to Islam often experience small but hurtful acts, like stereotypes or subtle discrimination, which create real social challenges for them.

At the same time, this study highlights strategies that empower Muslim converts, stressing the role of mosque communities, educational programs, and civil society initiatives in countering negative perceptions and supporting the development of religious identity (Yulita & Ong, 2019; Kotani et al., 2023). By placing these findings within both local and transnational contexts, the study provides insights that can guide future policy development and strengthen community support systems.

The inclusion of Japanese converts' perspectives broadens the current discourse on Islam in Japan, moving beyond immigrant-centered narratives to acknowledge the diversity within the Muslim population. This wider approach not only deepens academic understanding but also fosters social integration and multicultural coexistence, which are increasingly vital in Japan's globalized society.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts qualitative content analysis using a thematic analytical approach. Coding procedures involved identifying repeated patterns across secondary sources and categorising them under four themes: motivations for conversion, identity negotiation, community integration and empowerment implications. This approach allows for an interpretative examination of diverse textual and narrative materials concerning Japanese converts to Islam and the broader Muslim community in Japan. By drawing on existing literature, personal narratives, academic articles, and multimedia sources, the study seeks to capture the complex social, cultural, and psychological factors that shape religious conversion and identity negotiation.

2.2 Data Sources

The data sources for this study are diverse and multi-layered, designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Japanese Muslim converts. They include the following:

1. **Academic Journals and Articles:** Peer-reviewed journal articles provide the foundation for understanding established knowledge and ongoing scholarly debates concerning Islam in Japan, the experiences of converts, and wider social dynamics. Key contributions include Kocalan's (2022) analysis of conversion motivations and community participation, Shinohe's (2019) examination of Japanese Muslim women's perspectives, and Kotani et al.'s (2022, 2023) studies on the roles of mosques in supporting Muslims.
2. **Personal Narratives and Memoirs:** First-person accounts, interviews, and autobiographical writings of Japanese converts offer important insights into individual faith journeys, identity negotiations, and strategies for managing social challenges. These narratives are drawn from academic articles and NGO reports that incorporate qualitative interviews as well as published memoir collections (Bibik, 2022; Kocalan, 2022).
3. **NGO and Civil Society Reports:** Reports produced by organizations working with Muslim communities in Japan provide socio-cultural analyses and document efforts to foster a Muslim-friendly environment. Such reports also contextualize the processes of social integration and highlight community-based support mechanisms (Yulita & Ong, 2019).
4. **Mosque-Related Documentation:** As mosques play a central role as community hubs, documents detailing mosque activities, educational initiatives, and responses to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic constitute an important data source. Studies by Kotani et al. (2022, 2023) in particular illustrate how mosques serve not only religious purposes but also provide social support for both Japanese converts and foreign Muslims.
5. **Government and Policy Materials:** Although limited in scope, certain governmental publications and policy frameworks—such as those concerning the halal industry and cultural exchange—offer supplementary insights into the broader structural context of Muslim integration in Japan (Qintani & Surajaya, 2018).

Taken together, these sources provide a textured empirical foundation for the study, combining individual narratives, community activities, and structural influences to build a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of Japanese converts to Islam.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The study employs thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes across the collected data. The analysis is organized around four key themes:

1. Motivations for Conversion including spiritual, social, intellectual, and pragmatic factors that lead individuals to embrace Islam (Kocalan, 2022).
2. Identity Negotiation and Challenges focusing on how converts reconcile Japanese cultural identity with Islamic religious practice, while managing experiences of microaggressions, stereotypes, and broader societal pressures (Kocalan, 2023; Shinohe, 2019).
3. Community Integration and Support examining the role of mosques, associations, and transnational networks in fostering a sense of belonging and providing empowerment (Kotani et al., 2023; Qintani & Surajaya, 2018).
4. Empowerment and Social Implications analyzing how community participation strengthens resilience, encourages intercultural dialogue, and challenges Islamophobia (Yulita & Ong, 2019; Karaoğlu & Acar, 2024).

Thematic coding was applied systematically across all sources to ensure consistency and reliability. In addition, interpretive readings of personal narratives and memoirs were used to provide deeper insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of conversion experiences, allowing the analysis to capture both structural and individual perspectives. The term ‘personal narratives’ in this study refers specifically to published memoirs, autobiographies, and interview-based accounts documented by previous researchers, NGOs or media outlets, rather than primary data collected by the author.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Motivations for Conversion

The process of conversion to Islam among Japanese individuals is complex, shaped by social, intellectual, psychological, and practical factors. Social motivations often reflect a desire for inclusion within the Muslim community and an admiration for the warmth, solidarity, and cohesion found in Muslim social life. As Kocalan (2022) notes, many converts encounter Islam through personal relationships and by engaging in mosque activities or Muslim associations, such as the Tokyo Mosque and the Japan Muslim Association.

These spaces not only provide a sense of belonging but also deepen their appreciation of the communal spirit that characterizes Muslim societies.

Intellectual motivations are usually shaped by personal conviction that develops through engagement with Islamic teachings and principles. Many converts describe their attraction to the theological clarity and moral framework of Islam, which they consider to be coherent, consistent, and meaningful (Kocalan, 2022). This intellectual process often goes beyond a superficial acceptance, as it involves critical reflection on religious ideas and the deliberate decision to align oneself with Islamic values and worldviews.

Psychological motivations are characterized by the search for protection, stability, and spiritual security. A number of converts express the need for a protective and guiding God who provides comfort and reassurance in the midst of an increasingly complex and sometimes isolating social environment. Islam offers them a structured spiritual foundation that responds to these existential concerns through ritual practices, prayer, and community support, which in turn transform feelings of anxiety and uncertainty into a sense of peace and spiritual strength.

Practical motivations are also important and include considerations such as marriage, business opportunities, and access to educational scholarships. In many cases, marriage to a Muslim partner becomes the first step toward conversion, while economic and educational opportunities frame Islam as supporting cross-cultural interaction and the development of meaningful relationships (Kocalan, 2022).

These motivations show that conversion is not based on one single cause but is typically a combination of personal conviction, social influence, and practical needs. This complexity highlights the need to view conversion as a process rather than a one-time event.

3.2 Identity Negotiation and Challenges

3.2.1 Social and Cultural Challenges

Japanese converts to Islam navigate a complex social environment that is marked by both acceptance and discrimination, with experiences often differing according to context and social setting. One of the most prominent challenges they face is exposure to microaggressions and stereotyping, as documented by Kocalan (2023) and Moriya (2021).

These subtle yet persistent forms of discrimination include being perceived as outsiders within their society, having their agency undervalued, and facing biased assumptions about Muslim beliefs and practices. For Japanese Muslim women, such microaggressions often involve being mistaken for foreigners, experiencing cultural bias in everyday interactions, and coping

with offensive jokes or questions rooted in stereotypical misunderstandings of Islam (Kocalan, 2023).

Besides facing discrimination, Japanese converts also struggle to balance their Japanese cultural identity with their Islamic faith. Pratama (2018) notes that some converts believe Japanese culture and Islam do not have to conflict, so they try to build a “hybrid identity” that combines both. However, this is often difficult because Japanese society strongly values conformity and adherence to a primary social norm, which leaves little room for religious minorities to be fully accepted.

The difficulties faced by Japanese converts are made worse by common misunderstandings about gender roles and Islamic practices. Shinohe (2019) explains that Muslims in Japan often face criticism, shaped by Western views, about Islamic teachings on women, especially dress codes and divorce. These criticisms are not just theoretical; they create real social pressure on converts, particularly women, who must balance their faith with negative stereotypes and hostility toward Islam in Japanese society.

3.2.2 Emotional and Psychological Experience

Published interviews and memoir-based testimonies document that many Japanese converts to Islam describe feeling isolated, frustrated, and excluded. Since Islam is still not well known and often misunderstood in Japan, converts may feel separated not only from mainstream Japanese society but also, at times, from the wider Muslim community. To cope, some choose to hide their religious identity in certain situations to avoid prejudice or conflict. Although this strategy can protect them from rejection, it also creates emotional stress and an ongoing sense of inner conflict (Kocalan, 2023).

Japanese converts to Islam often experience tension in balancing authentic religious expression with the social need for acceptance and belonging. This negotiation between faith and societal expectations shapes their identity and emotional well-being, underscoring the complex interplay between religious commitment and life in Japanese society. Identity negotiation is a continuous process that involves both resilience and compromise, shaped by societal attitudes and personal faith commitments.

Recent Islamic psychological literature further demonstrates that emotional instability among Muslims can emerge when their lifestyles or social environments force them into situations that contradict their religious values. When individuals are unable to live in accordance with Islamic moral and ethical principles, feelings of anxiety, guilt, and psychological distress tend to accumulate, whereas religious consistency and halal-compliant living contribute to emotional balance and spiritual calmness (Zaman, Saleh & Ab Hamid, 2025).

3.3 Integration within the Muslim Community

The role of mosque activities and Muslim associations is essential in guiding and supporting Japanese converts as they adjust to life within the Muslim community. As Kocalan (2022) explains, mosques and organizations such as the Japanese Muslim Association not only provide spaces for worship but also function as venues for social interaction, religious education, and cultural exchange. Through participation in community events, study circles, and social gatherings, converts develop a stronger sense of belonging and affirm their religious identity in a supportive environment.

In addition to hosting religious activities, mosques serve as important centers of social support by creating networks that help converts manage the complexities of living as Muslims in Japan. Kotani, Tamura, and colleagues (2022, 2023) have shown that mosques often operate as communal hubs, offering services such as language assistance, gender-sensitive facilities, and health-related support, particularly during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. These initiatives play a significant role in strengthening integration by reducing barriers related to communication, gender expectations, and social isolation, thereby making religious life more accessible and inclusive for converts.

Support from the international Muslim community plays a key role in the integration of Japanese converts. As Qintani and Surajaya (2018) note, assistance from Islamic countries and diaspora networks provides both resources and a sense of global solidarity, reinforcing religious identity and practice. This transnational support complements, rather than replaces, local efforts, offering additional strength to Muslims navigating life in a non-Muslim majority context. In this study, the term diaspora refers to communities living outside their homeland who maintain connections to their cultural or religious identity across borders (Brubaker, 2005).

Integration relies on both local and transnational Muslim networks, with mosques functioning as key bridges between Japanese converts, immigrant Muslims, and the wider society.

3.4 Empowerment and Implications

The empowerment of Japanese converts to Islam emerges gradually through both their social inclusion and their sense of spiritual fulfillment within the Muslim community. By actively engaging in mosque-led programs and wider community networks, converts acquire confidence, religious knowledge, and social capital that enable them to sustain their religious identity while strengthening their participation in communal life.

Mosques serve more than just as places of worship; they also function as vital community centers with roles that go beyond religious activities alone. As Kotani and colleagues (2022, 2023) observe, mosques in Japan have increasingly evolved to serve as hubs for social services, disaster relief, educational programs, and public health efforts. These expanded roles not only address the needs of Muslim minorities but also help them become more visible within Japanese society, fostering intercultural exchange and strengthening the community's ability to empower itself. Researchers have also emphasized that empowerment within Muslim minority societies is strongly connected to the presence of Islamic-based social capital, which promotes trust, solidarity, mutual support, and shared ethical values across the community. Such principles not only strengthen interpersonal relationships and resilience but also contribute to wider governance and social cohesion by cultivating collective responsibility and ethical conduct among members of society (Mahmud & Mohamad, 2024).

Japanese converts to Islam continue to face challenges related to Islamophobia and limited cultural understanding. Karaoğlu and Acar (2024) explain that prejudice toward Muslims in Japan is partly influenced by historical Christian traditions and Western-style modernity, which shape negative social perceptions. Despite this, several initiatives have helped to improve public awareness. Educational programs led by NGOs and local community dialogues have been effective in presenting more accurate and positive views of Islam (Yulita & Ong, 2019). Furthermore, the active role of Muslim communities in areas such as disaster relief and public health has contributed to breaking stereotypes and fostering greater social acceptance (Kotani et al., 2023).

The experiences of Japanese converts are shaped by the interaction between their faith, personal identity, and participation in society. This underscores the need for strong community networks and a more inclusive social environment. Moving forward, approaches that emphasize education, intercultural dialogue, and inclusive policies will be vital in helping Japanese converts gain empowerment and recognition within Japan's changing religious landscape. Empowerment is closely linked to active participation and social engagement. When Japanese converts are included, they not only strengthen their own identity but also challenge stereotypes about Islam.

The role of mosques and Muslim associations is not examined here as an empowerment intervention, but as support systems identified in existing literature that contribute to converts' sense of belonging, confidence and community participation.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that Japanese converts to Islam experience different and unique journeys when embracing the religion. Their reasons for conversion are influenced by social interactions, personal reflection, emotional needs, and sometimes practical life situations. For many converts, Islam offers a new sense of direction, spiritual peace, and moral guidance. Conversion also gives them access to new friendships, support networks, and a feeling of belonging within the Muslim community. Through mosque involvement, religious classes, and community programmes, they develop stronger confidence and a clearer sense of identity as Muslims.

However, the study also highlights several challenges faced by Japanese converts. As Islam is often seen as unfamiliar in Japan, converts sometimes experience negative reactions, subtle discrimination, and misunderstandings from society. They may also face internal struggles as they try to balance their Japanese cultural identity with their new identity as Muslims. These challenges show the need for supportive environments that help converts adjust and remain strong in their faith.

Mosques and Muslim organisations in Japan play an important role in this process. They provide spaces for worship, learning, and social support. They also carry out activities that help build positive understanding of Islam among the wider society. At the same time, support from Muslims outside Japan, including scholars, Islamic centres, and online networks, gives converts additional guidance and encouragement.

Although current research offers useful insights, studies on Japanese converts are still limited. Many works rely on general information and secondary sources. More primary research, especially interviews and field observations, is needed to understand their real experiences more deeply. In conclusion, this study emphasises the importance of community support, cultural understanding, and accurate information about Islam. By listening to the voices of Japanese converts, Muslim communities and Japanese society can work together to promote respect, cooperation, and better social understanding.

5. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources such as academic works, NGO reports, and published narratives. While these materials provide useful insights, they do not fully capture the diverse and evolving experiences of Japanese converts to Islam. Many available accounts are mediated through researchers or organizations, which may introduce interpretive bias. In addition, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish clearly between the experiences of immigrant Muslims and ethnic Japanese converts, which can

affect the analysis. Language barriers and limited access to unpublished or community-level documentation also restrict the depth of available data.

Future research should prioritize primary data collection, especially through qualitative methods such as interviews, surveys, and ethnographic studies. These approaches would provide more direct insights into the lived experiences of Japanese converts, including the perspectives of women, young people, and second-generation Muslims. Comparative studies with other minority Muslim contexts in East Asia could also broaden understanding of how Islam is localized in non-Muslim majority societies. Such research would contribute to a fuller picture of identity, integration, and empowerment among Japanese Muslims.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the writing and editing of the manuscript. Corresponding Author provided leadership for decisions of content, framing, and style, and led the creation of the figures and tables. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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