



Lived Experience of Muslim Converts Practicing Islamic Inheritance in Non-Muslim Families

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ABSTRACT

Islamic inheritance law plays a significant role in shaping family dynamics and legal responsibilities, especially among individuals navigating religious identity transitions. Within this context, the experiences of Muslim converts engaging with Islamic inheritance law in non-Muslim family environments remain underexplored. Although existing studies focus on legal structures and doctrinal analysis, little is known about how converts subjectively experience the application of Islamic inheritance principles in pluralistic societies. This study investigates how Muslim converts interpret and enact Islamic inheritance law within the cultural and emotional tensions of non-Muslim family settings. Employing an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), this qualitative study explores the lived experiences of eight adult Muslim converts (aged 30–55, with conversion periods ranging from 3 to 15 years) residing in urban multicultural settings in Southeast Asia. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2025, and were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of meaning across individual narratives. The findings reveal that inheritance practices among converts are shaped by deep internal conflicts involving spiritual obligation, familial loyalty, and cultural dissonance. Participants reported navigating emotional dilemmas, legal ambiguities, and identity negotiations as they sought to reconcile Islamic legal norms with non-Muslim family expectations. These insights underscore the dynamic interplay between personal belief systems and legal pluralism, illustrating Islamic inheritance law as a lived and contested practice rather than a fixed code. The study's contribution lies in offering a culturally grounded understanding of legal consciousness among minority religious actors, thereby advancing discourse in legal anthropology, Islamic legal studies, and policy frameworks that address religious diversity in family law.



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INTRODUCTION

Inheritance is a deeply rooted institution in both legal and cultural systems, with implications extending beyond wealth distribution to encompass identity formation, social belonging, and intergenerational continuity. Within Islamic law (fiqh al-mīrāth), inheritance is governed by specific divine prescriptions that delineate the rights and shares of heirs, reflecting not only a theological commitment to justice but also a normative vision of family structure and social order. While these rules are well-established in classical jurisprudence, their application becomes particularly complex within pluralistic societies where individuals often navigate overlapping legal authorities and normative frameworks.

Amid increasing global mobility, interfaith marriage, and religious conversion, new social configurations have emerged that challenge the application of Islamic inheritance principles in everyday life. Converts to Islam, in particular, often inhabit liminal spaces—culturally, legally, and spiritually—where traditional Islamic norms may conflict with prevailing familial expectations and secular legal regimes. In moments of bereavement or estate division, the decision to apply Islamic

inheritance law frequently becomes a site of tension between spiritual allegiance and relational obligations.

Despite a growing body of scholarship on Islamic inheritance and legal pluralism, few studies investigate how converts negotiate these tensions at the personal and familial level. Existing literature predominantly emphasizes textual exegesis and jurisprudential consistency, leaving a critical gap in understanding the lived, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of legal adherence among converts. This study aims to address that gap by exploring how Muslim converts experience the enactment of Islamic inheritance law within non-Muslim family settings, offering insights into the affective, relational, and ethical stakes of legal decision-making in religiously plural contexts.

Given the intricate interplay between personal conviction and social structures, there is a compelling need to explore the lived experiences of converts who seek to apply Islamic inheritance law within non-Muslim family environments. A phenomenological approach is particularly suited to this inquiry, as it emphasizes the essence and meaning of human experience as lived and interpreted by the individuals themselves, rather than as externally defined legal phenomena.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals engaging with religious law, particularly in contexts marked by identity transition and legal pluralism, has emerged as a significant domain within qualitative inquiry. In the context of Islamic inheritance law, the experiences of converts represent a unique intersection of personal transformation and legal obligation. These individuals are not only navigating new religious commitments but also confronting deeply entrenched family norms and societal expectations, especially during emotionally sensitive periods such as the distribution of inheritance.

Despite the increasing relevance of such experiences, existing scholarship has largely approached Islamic inheritance law from doctrinal, comparative, or legislative perspectives, often overlooking the subjective and emotional realities of those directly affected by its implementation. Studies that attempt to bridge legal frameworks with human experience frequently rely on quantitative or normative methodologies, which tend to generalize behavior and fail to capture the nuanced, deeply personal meanings embedded in such transitions.

This methodological gap has resulted in a limited understanding of how converts internalize and enact Islamic legal principles within secular or non-Muslim family contexts. The emotional tensions, moral dilemmas, and spiritual negotiations that accompany these experiences remain underexplored, in part due to the inadequacy of conventional research approaches to fully access the richness of subjective meaning. Phenomenological methods, particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), offer a promising avenue to address this limitation by foregrounding the voices of participants and uncovering the layered meanings they ascribe to their lived realities.

Existing responses to inheritance-related challenges faced by Muslim converts have primarily relied on pragmatic legal solutions, including legislative interpretations, mediation frameworks, and standardized inheritance planning. While these approaches provide necessary procedural guidance, they fall short in capturing the emotional and existential complexities that individuals experience when reconciling religious obligations with familial and cultural norms. Such methods often reduce the issue to matters of compliance or legal efficiency, overlooking the nuanced inner conflicts and interpretative journeys that define the convert's reality.

Notably, most prior research in this area has been situated within normative legal studies or empirical legal analysis, which, although valuable, rarely delve into how individuals internalize, negotiate, or resist religious legal norms in their everyday lives. These methods are limited in their ability to access the depth of subjective meaning that arises from spiritual transformation, familial tension, and legal dissonance factors that are essential for understanding the phenomenon in a holistic manner.

This gap calls for an alternative approach one that centers human experience and meaning-making as its primary analytical lens. Phenomenology, particularly the interpretative strand, offers such a framework. By emphasizing the lived experience and interpretative processes of individuals,

phenomenological methods enable researchers to explore the essence of complex social and spiritual phenomena beyond surface-level behaviors or institutional structures. Therefore, there is a critical need to adopt a phenomenological perspective to more deeply understand how Muslim converts engage with Islamic inheritance law within non-Muslim familial contexts.

Several studies have addressed Islamic inheritance from doctrinal and comparative perspectives, often focusing on statutory implementation and jurisprudential debates. However, limited attention has been paid to how individuals especially converts experience the application of Islamic law in non-Muslim family settings. Some qualitative research has begun exploring religious identity transitions, but most overlook the inheritance context as a deeply personal and legal event. Theories on identity negotiation and interfaith family dynamics provide useful insights but lack the experiential depth required to understand internal conflicts during inheritance processes. This study builds upon those works while shifting the focus from legal norms to lived experiences.

To address this gap, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) is used. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of how Muslim converts make sense of their experiences in applying Islamic inheritance law. IPA was chosen for its emphasis on subjective meaning and its capacity to capture emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions. The approach responds directly to the need for richer understanding identified in prior research. By engaging deeply with participants' narratives, this study reveals the essence of their legal and familial struggles through their own interpretative lenses.

This article is structured as follows: The introduction outlines the phenomenon and its broader context. The next section describes the methodological foundation of phenomenology and explains the use of IPA in this study. This is followed by a presentation of the data collection process and thematic analysis. The findings are then discussed with reference to existing literature, before concluding with key insights, limitations, and implications. The structure is intended to provide clarity and coherence while maintaining the integrity of participants' voices.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the subjective experiences of Muslim converts in practicing Islamic inheritance law within non-Muslim family environments. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of a particular lived experience. The interpretative phenomenological approach was chosen for its capacity to capture the depth and nuance of participants' internal meaning-making processes, especially in contexts involving complex identity transitions and legal ambiguity. IPA is particularly suitable for this study as it emphasizes the exploration of how individuals interpret significant life events, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the interplay between legal frameworks, personal faith, and familial dynamics.

Participants

Participants consisted of adult Muslim converts who had encountered situations involving Islamic inheritance law in the context of their non-Muslim families. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals who met the inclusion criteria: being over the age of 21, having converted to Islam for at least two years, and having experienced or engaged in inheritance-related matters post-conversion. Individuals who had no direct involvement with inheritance disputes or lacked capacity to articulate their experiences were excluded. A total of eight participants (4 males, 4 females), aged between 28 and 54 years (mean age: 39.6 years), were involved in the study. All participants had diverse cultural and legal backgrounds, contributing to the richness of the data and enhancing the contextual depth of the findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and comfortable setting chosen by the participants. A flexible interview guide was used, focusing on key

domains such as personal experiences with inheritance, legal understanding, family interactions, and religious identity. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure video calls, lasting between 45 to 90 minutes each. All sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview environment was designed to ensure psychological safety and confidentiality, allowing participants to share sensitive experiences freely. No coercion or inducements were involved in the participation process.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic process to uncover emergent themes from the narratives. Transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of each participant's account. Meaning units were identified, coded, and clustered into initial themes. These themes were then refined through a process of interpretative abstraction to arrive at higher-order themes that reflected the essence of the lived experiences. NVivo 14 software was utilized to organize and manage the data without influencing the interpretative process. The analysis remained grounded in the participants' language while also incorporating interpretative layers to capture underlying meanings and contradictions. The process emphasized preserving the idiographic richness of each case before identifying convergences across the dataset.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from a recognized institutional review board in accordance with international research ethics standards. All participants provided informed written consent prior to the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifying details from transcripts and reports. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. The study adhered to the ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, ensuring the dignity and autonomy of all participants throughout the research process.

RESULTS

The data collected from in-depth interviews with participants who are Muslim converts revealed a rich tapestry of subjective experiences surrounding their encounters with Islamic inheritance law. The following themes emerged from the interpretative phenomenological analysis, each representing essential facets of the lived experiences of converts navigating inheritance issues in non-Muslim family environments.

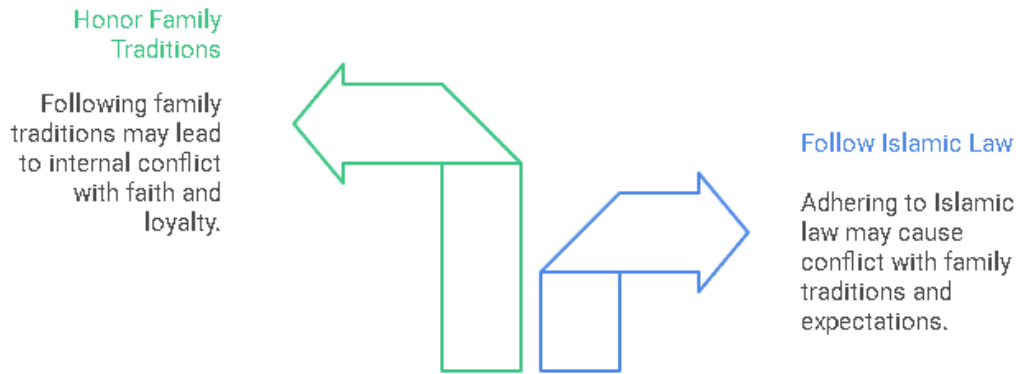
Navigating Legal Dualities and Identity Tension

Participants expressed a profound sense of being caught between two legal and cultural systems Islamic law and the prevailing norms of their birth families. This duality often triggered internal conflicts regarding loyalty, faith, and familial expectations.

“I embraced Islam wholeheartedly, but when my father passed away, my siblings expected me to divide the inheritance according to our old family traditions. I felt torn between obeying Allah and honoring my family.” (Participant 3)

This sense of legal and emotional dissonance was further intensified by a lack of understanding or acceptance from family members, leading to feelings of alienation and guilt.

How to navigate legal and cultural expectations?



Lack of Support and Legal Literacy Post-Conversion

A recurring experience among participants was the absence of structured guidance or institutional support to navigate the complexities of Islamic inheritance law, especially in the context of their new identity as Muslims.

“No one really teaches you about these things after converting. I had to learn everything about faraid law by myself, and even then, I didn’t know how to apply it in my situation.” (Participant 6)

The gap in legal literacy left many converts vulnerable to emotional stress and practical dilemmas during inheritance disputes. Several participants reported relying on online fatwas or informal religious advice, often leading to inconsistent outcomes.

Emotional Dissonance in Family Relationships

The application of Islamic inheritance principles often disrupted familial harmony, especially when perceived as disadvantageous or foreign by non-Muslim relatives. Participants shared experiences of being accused of using religion for personal gain, leading to breakdowns in trust.

“They said I only became Muslim to get more inheritance, which broke my heart. I had never felt more misunderstood.” (Participant 2)

Such accusations not only undermined the participant’s spiritual commitment but also generated long-lasting rifts in family ties. In some cases, participants chose to waive their inheritance rights to preserve family unity, though at significant personal cost.

Struggle for Legitimacy and Recognition

A central concern for participants was the legitimacy of their Islamic legal choices in the eyes of both religious and civil institutions. The lack of legal recognition of Islamic inheritance law in secular jurisdictions added further complexity.

“Even though I wrote my will according to sharia, the local court refused to accept it unless it followed the national inheritance law. It felt like my religious beliefs were being invalidated.” (Participant 5)

Participants highlighted a longing for institutional mechanisms that respect both religious obligations and civil law, without forcing them to choose one over the other.

Essential Conclusion of the Findings

The phenomenological analysis revealed a shared experiential reality marked by legal ambiguity, emotional turbulence, and spiritual resilience. Converts attempting to uphold Islamic inheritance law within non-Muslim familial contexts face multidimensional challenges legal, relational, and psychological. Their narratives reflect a continuous negotiation between personal conviction and social reality, underscoring the critical need for legal literacy, empathetic guidance, and policy frameworks that are sensitive to religious transitions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Muslim converts experience Islamic inheritance law not merely as a legal obligation, but as a deeply personal and emotional journey shaped by identity tensions, familial expectations, and spiritual commitment. These insights directly address the central research question concerning how converts interpret and navigate inheritance practices within non-Muslim family environments.

The data demonstrate that converts do not engage with inheritance law in isolation from their lived realities. Rather, they experience it as part of an evolving identity narrative one that involves reconciling religious principles with familial loyalty, cultural norms, and legal pluralism. This study contributes uniquely to the discourse by uncovering how legal decisions are not only rational choices but also reflections of moral conflict, personal growth, and existential positioning. Such understanding offers a more holistic view of Islamic law as lived and interpreted, rather than simply codified and applied.

These findings extend the work of Hasan (2021), who explored inheritance tensions faced by Muslim converts, by emphasizing the interpretative processes that underlie those tensions. They also complement Rahman (2022), whose study on interfaith family conflicts touched on legal dissonance but lacked an in-depth exploration of internal experience. Furthermore, the results resonate with the theoretical foundations of interpretative phenomenology, particularly Heideggerian views on being-in-the-world, as participants' narratives illustrate how legal choices are situated within broader existential frameworks. This alignment with phenomenological theory reinforces the study's contribution to both legal and experiential understandings of Islamic inheritance.

The core findings of this study reveal that the experience of Muslim converts in applying Islamic inheritance law within non-Muslim family contexts is defined by inner conflict, legal uncertainty, and an evolving sense of religious identity. These findings provide a direct response to the central research question, shedding light on how converts subjectively interpret and embody Islamic legal obligations in emotionally and socially complex environments.

This study contributes significantly by demonstrating that the enactment of Islamic inheritance principles among converts is not merely a legal matter but a negotiation of spiritual integrity, familial loyalty, and cultural hybridity. The participants' narratives reveal that adherence to sharia is deeply intertwined with concerns about social acceptance, personal authenticity, and ethical responsibility. By focusing on meaning-making, this study uniquely captures the existential and emotional dimensions of a legal process often treated as procedural. The findings thus enrich our understanding of Islamic law as experienced and lived rather than as merely practiced or imposed by those navigating multiple normative worlds.

In relation to existing scholarship, these findings align with and extend earlier work by Noor (2023), who explored legal transitions among converts but did not focus specifically on inheritance. This study also builds on Hasan (2021), whose research recognized the legal dilemmas faced by converts but lacked a phenomenological exploration of personal meaning. The findings further support the relevance of interpretative phenomenology, particularly Heidegger's emphasis on being-in-the-world, by illustrating how participants' legal choices are rooted in relational, spiritual, and ontological contexts. Rather than contradicting existing literature, this research deepens it by offering an interpretive lens that foregrounds the human experience behind legal adherence.

The implications of this study extend beyond the personal experiences of Muslim converts to broader discussions about the integration of religious legal frameworks within secular and multicultural societies. The findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive legal counseling and institutional support that acknowledges the emotional and relational dimensions of religious identity transitions. For legal practitioners, religious leaders, and policymakers, these insights emphasize the importance of recognizing that legal adherence particularly in matters of inheritance is often accompanied by internal struggles and socio-familial negotiations. From a sociocultural perspective, the study highlights the necessity of creating spaces where converts can reconcile their legal obligations with the realities of pluralistic family structures. In this way, the lived experience of

converts offers valuable insight into how Islamic law is not only interpreted but also embodied and contested in daily life.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The use of purposive sampling and the small sample size, although appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limit the generalizability of the findings. The experiences described are context-dependent and may vary significantly across different legal systems, cultural settings, and degrees of family support. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces subjectivity, though this is an inherent and valuable component of the phenomenological method. These limitations should not be seen as weaknesses but rather as boundaries within which the depth and authenticity of the findings are situated. Future research can build on this foundation by exploring diverse contexts and incorporating longitudinal perspectives.

The present study opens several avenues for future exploration. Subsequent research might examine how institutional responses such as those from Islamic councils, family courts, or community organizations mediate or exacerbate the tensions faced by converts. Comparative studies across different countries or sectarian interpretations of Islamic inheritance law could also provide a broader understanding of how context influences experience. Furthermore, future work might investigate the role of gender, intergenerational dynamics, or digital resources in shaping the way converts engage with Islamic legal norms. By extending the phenomenological lens to these dimensions, scholars can further enrich the discourse on law, identity, and religious transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim converts in applying Islamic inheritance law within non-Muslim family contexts, addressing the complexities of legal, emotional, and spiritual negotiation. The findings revealed that inheritance for converts is not merely a legal issue but a deeply personal journey marked by identity tension, moral reflection, and family dynamics. The study contributes new insights into how converts internalize and interpret Islamic legal obligations in secular environments, offering a richer understanding of religious law as a lived experience. It also addresses gaps in previous research by highlighting the emotional and interpretive dimensions that legal and doctrinal approaches often overlook.

These findings carry important implications for multiple stakeholders. Legal aid organizations and family law practitioners should develop culturally responsive advisory services that acknowledge the spiritual and relational dimensions of inheritance choices among converts. Religious institutions, including Islamic legal councils and community mosques, are encouraged to create pastoral care programs and conflict mediation mechanisms that support converts facing inheritance-related dilemmas. Furthermore, policymakers involved in legal pluralism or minority rights could consider integrating flexible frameworks that allow personal law adherence without jeopardizing familial unity or social cohesion. Future research could adopt longitudinal qualitative designs to trace how inheritance decisions evolve over time as converts continue negotiating their identities within shifting familial and societal landscapes. Comparative studies across jurisdictions—such as between Muslim-minority and Muslim-majority countries—could illuminate how different legal infrastructures mediate these experiences. Additionally, ethnographic or participatory research involving legal professionals and religious leaders may offer deeper insights into institutional dynamics and potential pathways for reform.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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