

Review Paper

Issues and Challenges in the Implementation of the Harakah Islamiah (HIKMAH) Da'wah Program for Muslim Converts (Muallaf) in the Rural Area of Sarawak

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the key issues and challenges in the implementation of the da'wah programs by the Harakah Islamiah (HIKMAH) for Muslim converts in the rural areas of Sarawak. A qualitative approach was employed through document analysis and content analysis of journals, conference proceedings, program implementation reports, policy documents and relevant HIKMAH publications. The findings reveal that the implementation of these programs faces various challenges, including logistical constraints due to difficult geographical access, shortage of trained da'wah personnel, cultural and language gaps, as well as limited financial resources and basic infrastructure. Furthermore, social pressure from the converts' original communities and the absence of a structured support system have also affected the process of religious internalization and commitment among the converts. Despite the importance of rural da'wah, limited scholarly focus has been given to the contextual and structural challenges Islamic institutions in Sarawak face in serving diverse muallaf communities. This study fills that gap by examining internal programmatic limitations through institutional documents. The study suggests that a more holistic, inclusive and locally grounded da'wah approach should be strengthened through cross-agency collaboration involving religious departments, higher education institutions, NGOs and local community leaders. The findings of this study provide important implications for the development of more realistic, contextual and impactful da'wah strategies in enhancing Islamic identity and the overall well-being of Muslim converts in the rural regions of Sarawak.

Keywords: Muslim converts (muallaf); Harakah Islamiah (HIKMAH); da'wah program; da'wah challenges; rural Sarawak

Introduction

The Islamic Revivalist Movement Organization or Harakah Islamiah (HIKMAH) is the oldest Islamic missionary NGO established in Sarawak. The organization is actively involved in conducting educational and welfare-based missionary programs aimed at attracting non-Muslim communities to Islam and guiding

Muslim converts (muallaf) toward a proper understanding and practice of the Islamic faith. Formerly known as the Angkatan Nahdah al-Islam Bersatu (BINA), HIKMAH is the most prominent non-governmental missionary organization in Sarawak. It focuses primarily on missionary efforts in rural and remote areas. The organization has been considered a key partner in the state government's aspirations to spread the message of Islam in these areas, utilizing local human resources in its outreach efforts. HIKMAH was officially registered on April 3, 1969 (Abdul Ghani & Jaya, 2018; Kamal Basir et al., 2024).

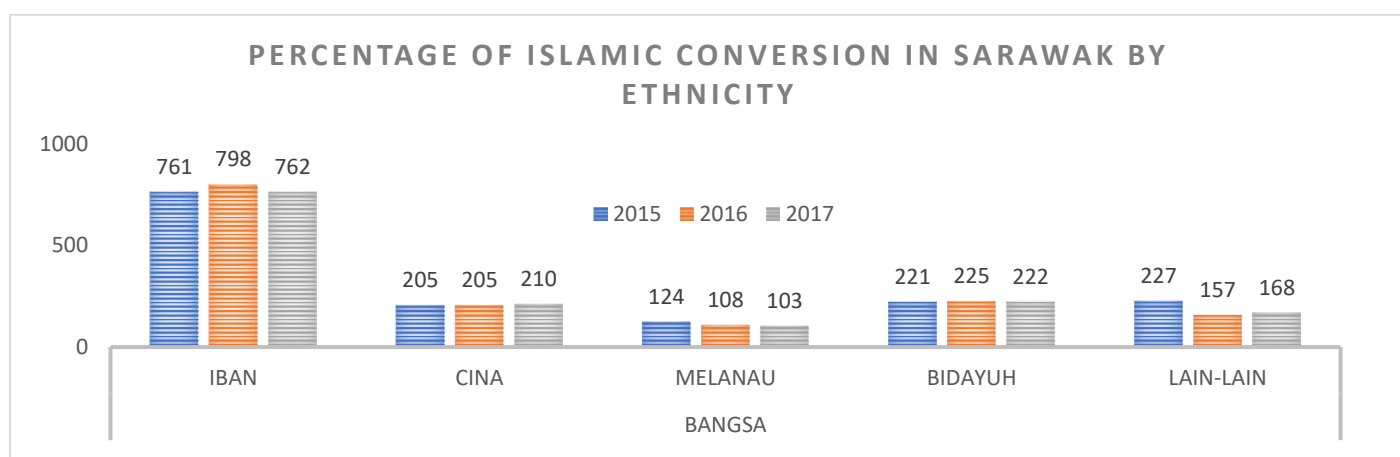
Initially, BINA was seen as an ideal platform to pioneer Islamic training and leadership development among the youth, who were expected to become future advocates of Islamic continuity in Sarawak. In 1993, the organization changed its name from BINA to Harakah Islamiah (HIKMAH), a resolution passed during its 11th General Assembly in Petra Jaya, Kuching. The renaming was officiated by Tun Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib bin Mahmud, who was then the president of BINA (Abdul Kadir, 2010; Abdul Kadir et al., 2023). This rebranding did not signify a significant shift in the organization's mission and vision but rather symbolized its transformation into a moderate, non-partisan movement with aspirations for international cooperation through partnerships with government bodies and Islamic nations. HIKMAH currently has a missionary network that extends across all regions and divisions in Sarawak, with a specific focus on youth, women and Muslim converts (muallaf).

Since the establishment of BINA-HIKMAH, there has been an observable upward trend in Islamic conversions among Sarawak's indigenous communities, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1982, official reports noted approximately 11,000 individuals had embraced Islam, largely through outreach efforts in the interior areas (Narawi et al., 2018; Kamal Basir et al., 2024). During this period, BINA's missionary committee introduced a range of community-based programs including seminars, training and social support initiatives such as assistance for death, marriage, accidents and medical needs that contributed to the strengthening of Muslim community life. Yusoff (2019) highlighted that Islam represented a significant proportion of Sarawak's religious demography in the 1980s, particularly among Malays (77.2%) and Melanau (12.2%). In recent years, conversion patterns show slight fluctuations across rural and urban divisions, with some regions indicating a modest decline while others report gradual increases.

Table 1. Percentage of Islamic conversions in Sarawak by Ethnicity

No.	Ethnicity	Years			Total
		2015	2016	2017	
1.	Iban	761	798	762	2321
2.	Chinese	205	205	210	620
3.	Melanau	124	108	103	335
4.	Bidayuh	221	225	222	668
5.	Others	227	157	168	552

Source: Sarawak Islamic Religious Department Records (2015–2017)



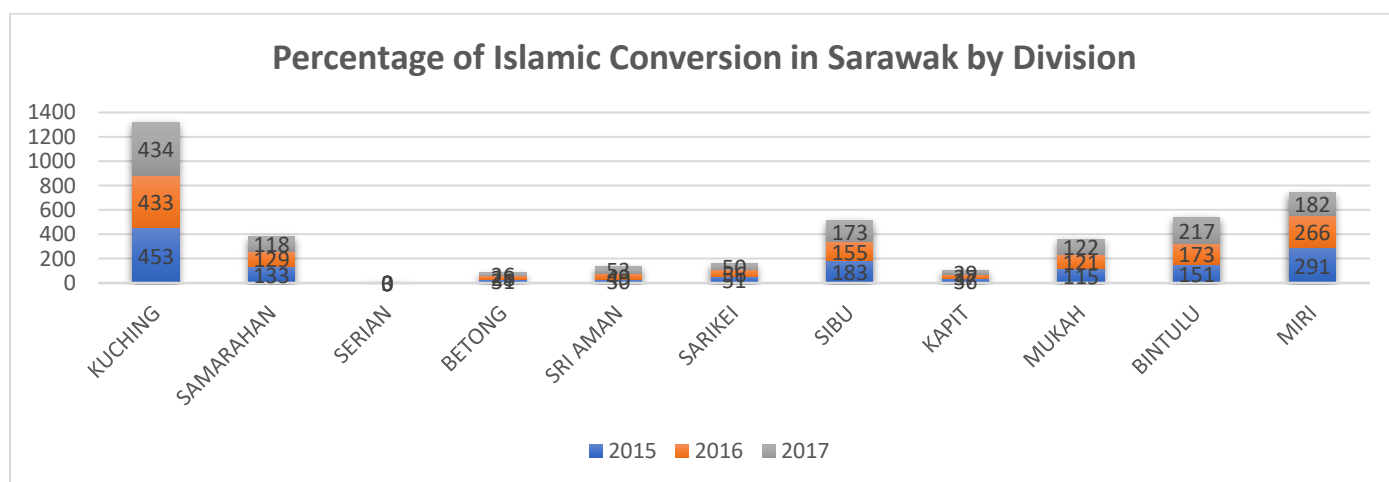
1. Trends of Islamic Conversions in Sarawak (2015–2017)

Statistical records from the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) indicate variations in the number of Islamic conversions across divisions in the state between 2015 and 2017. The distribution is shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Percentage of Islamic conversions in Sarawak by division

No.	Divison	Years			Total
		2015	2016	2017	
1.	Kuching	453	433	434	5060
2.	Samarahan	131	129	118	1344
3.	Serian	3	0	0	53
4.	Betong	31	28	26	376
5.	Sri Aman	30	49	53	523
6.	Sarikei	51	56	50	704
7.	Sibu	183	155	173	2047
8.	Kapit	36	37	29	452
9.	Mukah	115	121	122	1240
10.	Bintulu	151	173	217	1935
11.	Miri	291	266	182	2420
12.	Limbang	61	40	55	601

Source: Sarawak Islamic Religious Department Records (2015–2017)



Based on table 2, statistical records from the Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) provide insights into the pattern of Islamic conversions across the state. Between 2015 and 2017, the total number of conversions varied across divisions, with Kuching consistently recording the highest figures (5,060 cases), followed by Miri (2,420), Bintulu (1,935), and Sibu (2,047). In contrast, divisions such as Serian (53) and Betong (376) registered relatively small numbers (Table 2). These variations can also be observed in the comparative distribution shown in Figure 1, where conversions are more concentrated in urban divisions compared to the rural interior. The data suggests that while major towns such as Kuching, Miri and Bintulu are key centres of Islamic conversions, smaller divisions face challenges in attracting non-Muslims to embrace Islam.

2. The Contextual Realities of Da'wah and Muslim Converts in Sarawak

The decline in the number of Muslim converts in some interior regions indicates that Islamic missionary programs by Islamic NGOs in Sarawak have not fully achieved their objectives in attracting non-Muslims to the faith. The BINA-HIKMAH organization faces implementation and management challenges similar to those encountered by Islamic missionary NGOs in Peninsular Malaysia. This scenario indirectly affects the effectiveness and acceptance of the implemented programs.

However, the convert ecosystem in Sarawak is quite different from that of Peninsular Malaysia, which mostly consists of Chinese, Indian and Orang Asli Muslim converts. These differences are evident in three aspects: geographical and demographic structure, socio-cultural characteristics and a unique and complex local political landscape. Christianity is the predominant religion among Sarawak's population, while some continue to adhere to traditional and ancestral beliefs, particularly paganism (Abdul Rahman, 2018; Ibrahim, et al., 2024). As a result, issues concerning the welfare and development of Muslims in Sarawak are often less visible within the broader Bumiputera development agenda. This is partly because political leaders tend to adopt a cautious approach in addressing religious matters, given the state's plural society where Christianity constitutes a significant portion of the Bumiputera population (Ellin et al., 2024). Consequently, discourses on Islam and da'wah are usually framed within broader themes of social harmony, unity and inclusive development to avoid heightening religious sensitivities.

Accordingly, Muslim missionaries are expected to carry out their da'wah work with sensitivity to Sarawak's cultural context and to invite non-Muslims to Islam sincerely and voluntarily, without any form of coercion (Abdul Rahman, 2018). This ecosystem has a significant impact on the performance of Sarawak's largest Islamic missionary NGO, Harakah Islamiah (HIKMAH), particularly in managing Muslim convert outreach programs in rural areas. Despite numerous da'wah programs by Islamic institutions in Sarawak, their effectiveness in rural areas remains uncertain due to the state's complex social realities, ethnic diversity, language barriers and difficult geography which hinder access and limit lasting impact on muallaf, especially in internalising and strengthening Islamic identity. This study aims to identify key challenges in implementing Harakah Islamiah's (HIKMAH) da'wah programs for muallaf in Sarawak's interior and to propose context-sensitive strategies that align with local realities, community needs and cultural diversity for more inclusive, effective and sustainable initiatives.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore key challenges in implementing Harakah Islamiah's (HIKMAH) da'wah programs for Muslim converts in rural Sarawak. Data were gathered through document analysis and examined descriptively using content analysis, allowing for in-depth understanding based on secondary sources (Ismail & Ali, 2020), without the need for direct interviews (Abdul Rahman et al., 2017). The study analyzes scholarly journals, conference proceedings, annual reports and internal policy documents on HIKMAH's da'wah efforts, selected purposively for relevance, credibility and availability particularly from 2009 to 2024. Inclusion focused on materials discussing the planning, implementation and challenges of rural da'wah programs for muallaf in Sarawak. The study analyzes scholarly journals, conference proceedings, annual reports and internal policy documents on HIKMAH's da'wah efforts, selected purposively for relevance, credibility and availability particularly from 2009 to 2024. Inclusion focused on materials discussing the planning, implementation and challenges of rural da'wah programs for muallaf in Sarawak.

Data were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) approach, involving content familiarization, coding and theme identification. Key themes like program design, logistical constraints, sociocultural barriers and institutional limitations emerged through an inductive coding process. The documents used are deemed reliable, with verifiable sources and consistency across institutional records. Triangulating various document types enhances the credibility of findings. However, the absence of primary data limits direct stakeholder validation. Future research should incorporate fieldwork or interviews to strengthen data triangulation and depth.

The Findings

1. Review on the Implementation of HIKMAH's da'wah to the Muallaf Community in Sarawak

The development of Islamic da'wah in Sarawak has gone through its own historical phases of progress and setbacks, especially influenced by the organization of the East Malaysia Islamic Congress and the waves of Islamization from Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore (Abdul Kadir, 2010; Abdul Ghani & Jaya, 2018). Many da'wah activities have been systematically and methodically planned, with methodologies tailored to suit the environment and ethnic demographics in Sarawak. The content of the programs mainly focuses on Islamic teachings such as prayer and Qur'anic recitation (Che Mat et al., 2009).

Educational da'wah has expanded through the establishment of institutions like the Madrasah al-Quran (MAQ) and the active involvement of Islamic NGOs in promoting knowledge-based religious life among Muslims in Sarawak (Rambli et al., 2005; Abdul Mutalib, 2017). Government-based da'wah agencies such as Sarawak Islamic Religious Department (JAIS), Sarawak Islamic Council (MIS), Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM), Islamic Information Centre (IIC) and the Islamic and Moral Education Division (BPIM), supported by NGOs like HIKMAH, Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) and mosques, have played a significant role in implementing community-based educational programs. These include courses, workshops, forums, goodwill visits, Islamic celebrations, sports, Islamic arts activities and specialized religious classes for the muallaf community (Yusoff, 2018).

However, da'wah efforts in Sarawak face challenges due to the region's religious and ethnic diversity, which affects how non-Muslims perceive Islam. External challenges include geographic constraints, Christian missionary threats, Islamophobia, poverty, a shortage of qualified preachers and negative role models among Muslims themselves (Wan Ahmad et al., 2018). These issues have internal repercussions, such as the limited jurisdiction of the Sarawak Islamic Affairs Council (USK), bureaucratic hurdles in the conversion process, marriage registration problems and the lack of follow-up programs (Mohamad et al., 2014). One of the most significant challenges is upholding an Islamic way of life and embracing personal transformation toward complete religious adherence (Hashim, 2017). In Sarawak, many da'wah programs have focused on welfare, social engagement and volunteerism (Abdullah et al., 2016). This practical and community-centered approach has received positive responses from muallaf communities through proactive engagement such as talks and home visits (Mohd Yusoff, 2019).

Accordingly, several studies have examined the extent of Islamic knowledge, understanding and practice among the muallaf in Sarawak. Past research indicates a generally good level of basic Islamic understanding and worship practices to fulfill their spiritual needs, core religious duties and religious as the way of their life (Bujang, 2012; Guleng et al., 2019, Abdullah et al., 2018). However, less attention has been placed on monitoring the actual implementation of worship practices compared to assessing the understanding of Islamic knowledge among muallaf children in Sarawak (Abdul Jalil et al., 2017). Similar findings were noted among rural muallaf communities, such as the Penan people, who, despite understanding the core beliefs of Islam, still struggle with consistently performing obligatory and voluntary prayers (Mohd Yusoff, 2010).

Previous studies on the development of HIKMAH's da'wah in Sarawak have been largely in the form of historical and biographical research or surveys on the acceptance of HIKMAH programs among muallaf. Historical and biographical studies highlight key figures who contributed to HIKMAH's leadership and fieldwork such as Datuk Haji Abdul Kadir Hassan (Yasin, 2005), Abdul Rahman Ya'kub (Sebli, 2015) and Dato' Seri Pehin Abdul Taib Mahmud (Romji, 2018). Research on the historical development of muallaf da'wah in Sarawak has focused on HIKMAH's role in increasing conversion rates in Kuching between 1994 and 2017. One example is the Muallaf Settlement Project, which created communities with proper infrastructure and spiritual programs carried out collaboratively by residents and the government (Razali, 2017). Other studies examined the role of the HIKMAH Da'wah Training Institute, which served as a platform for nurturing leadership skills among muallaf (Mustapha, 2018). HIKMAH's community programs reflect the organization's wisdom-based approach (*bi al-hikmah*), particularly in its social and welfare efforts (Narawi et al., 2018; Ibrahim & Mohd Nasir, 2018).

Early studies revealed that muallaf under HIKMAH's supervision lacked a clear grasp of core worship concepts and were inconsistent in observing prayers and fasting (Peri, 1990). Additionally, the involvement of muallaf women in HIKMAH's HELWA unit appeared minimal, mainly due to time constraints and an inclination toward Islamic art-related programs such as nasyid (Tibek, 2018). Therefore, the adoption of modern approaches using technology, along with effective communication and language skills, is essential for HIKMAH's rural da'wah missions (Bujang et al., 2012). Preachers must be skilled in engaging with local cultures and selecting appropriate, focused learning materials that align with the flexible schedules, locations and occupations of their target groups (Kamal Basir et al., 2019). However, existing studies have mostly relied on the perspectives of da'wah practitioners and do not fully represent the views of the target groups themselves.

The recent study by Kamal Basir et al. (2024) examined the contributions of HIKMAH in strengthening da'wah programs for Muslim converts in the rural areas of Sarawak. The findings revealed that HIKMAH is committed to planning and implementing muallaf programs in the interior regions with due regard for its the political landscape and cultural climate of Sarawak. Thus, one critical gap in the literature is the lack of attention to the problems and challenges encountered during the actual implementation of da'wah programs. Previous studies have not comprehensively addressed the on-the-ground obstacles faced by Harakah Islamiah (HIKMAH), especially in rural areas of Sarawak. Most of the existing research focuses only on the historical development and general roles of NGOs in Sarawak, without examining the practical challenges faced during implementation. Therefore, this study aims to carry out in-depth analysis of these implementation challenges, to ensure that HIKMAH's da'wah efforts are more effective and better aligned with the actual needs of the target muallaf communities.

2. Issues in Implementing HIKMAH's Da'wah Programs for Muslim Converts (Muallaf) in the Interior of Sarawak

Document analysis revealed several recurring issues in HIKMAH's da'wah program implementation for muallaf in rural Sarawak, as summarized in Table 3:

Table 3. Key Issues in Implementing HIKMAH's Da'wah Programs for Muallaf in Rural Sarawak

Main Issue	Source / Reference	Issue Description
Program content lacks contextual relevance.	Yusri. & Abdullah (2015); Puteh et al. (2009)	The curriculum is not suited to the muallaf's education level, relies on traditional methods and lacks a formal module.
Delivery methods are misaligned with learners' comprehension levels.	Abdullah & Yasin (2013)	Lessons are too complex and not tailored to muallaf backgrounds, hindering understanding of Islamic teachings..
Shortage of qualified da'wah personnel.	Mohd Yusoff (2019); Abdul Mutalib (2017); Tibek et al. (2018)	Overreliance on untrained, inexperienced volunteers with poor communication skills weakens da'wah delivery.
Language and cultural barriers	Aini et al. (2018); Omar & Norahim (2020)	Linguistic and cultural diversity hinders effective communication between da'wah workers and muallaf.
Rigid schedules and remote locations.	Abdullah et al. (2014); Bokhari et al. (2019)	Weekday programs at distant venues hinder attendance by working muallaf.
Lack of dedicated Islamic learning centers	Rahman et al. (2018); Kawi & Abdullah (2020)	Lack of multilingual centers hinders access to structured Islamic education
Commitment and motivation issues among muallaf	Basir et al. (2019)	Distance, work schedules and transport costs hinder regular participation in religious programs.
Post-conversion cultural and religious conflicts.	Abdul Ghani (2017); Guleng (2014); Mohd. Mazlan & Mohad. (2022)	Social and cultural norms (e.g., alcohol, dogs, rituals) hinder muallaf adaptation to Islam.
Apostasy or return to former religions	Pei Pei (2018)	Lack of post-conversion support leads to apostasy, questioning institutional effectiveness.
Distorted image of Islam among non-Muslim communities	Ali & Abdullah (2020)	Inadequate da'wah programs weaken the perception of Islam and reduce public confidence in Islamic institutions.

Table 3 highlights key issues in HIKMAH's da'wah programs for Muslim converts, including unsuitable content and approach, limited credibility of da'wah personnel and low participant engagement and internalisation. One of the main challenges lies in the quality of the content and delivery of the da'wah programs for muallaf. Most programs conducted in the interior areas are implemented without first obtaining feedback or input from the participants. These programs often focus solely on objectives and targets, without carefully assessing the suitability of the curriculum and the chosen methods according to the educational background and intellectual capacity of the muallaf. Consequently, the generalised, incomplete curriculum and overly traditional teaching methods leave the instructors without clear and specific guidelines, forcing them to rely on their personal discretion and prior experience (Che Kassim et al., 2013; Yusri & Abdullah, 2015; Yasin et al., 2018). Teaching techniques and guidance approaches which are inappropriately selected may negatively affect the religious development of muallaf, especially when religious teachings are delivered in ways that are too complex or do not correspond with the learners' current understanding (Abdullah & Yasin, 2013). Previous studies have also highlighted the lack of a comprehensive teaching and learning module developed by state Islamic organisations in Sarawak to guide muallaf in understanding and internalising Islamic teachings (Puteh et al., 2009).

Moreover, the shortage of da'wah personnel has led HIKMAH to rely extensively on voluntary contributions. This has become more difficult by a declining trend in volunteer involvement in field da'wah activities. Da'wah efforts in remote areas often depend on youth, civil servants and freelance preachers around Sarawak, who voluntarily share their religious knowledge with muallaf (Yusoff, 2019; Abdul Mutalib, 2017). However, issues such as varied academic qualifications, limited field experience (Che Mat et al., 2009; Mohamad et al., 2014), lack of trained da'wah personnel (Tibek et al., 2018; Bujang et al., 2012) and communication barriers due to diverse local languages (Aini et al., 2018; Omar & Norahim, 2020) can hinder program effectiveness. These issues also lead to ineffective coordination between headquarters and branches, confining most programs to urban areas and potentially creating competition among da'wah organisations diminishing HIKMAH's perceived role.

Another key challenge is the low participation and engagement of muallaf in HIKMAH's programs. This is mainly due to rigid schedules and poorly located program venues. Many muallaf struggle to attend weekday programs due to work commitments, with weekends being their only option. They also tend to prefer venues near their homes such as local suraus, mosques, or Islamic education centres (Abdullah et al., 2014; Bokhari et al., 2019). Some muallaf require dedicated education centres in each district, supported by instructors who are proficient in various languages (Abdul Rahman et al., 2018; Aini & Don, 2020; Kawi & Abdullah, 2020; Radhir Sham et al., 2024). As a result, muallaf often lack commitment to regularly attend structured daily religious classes. This impedes their motivation to deepen their Islamic understanding and strive towards becoming better Muslims. In Sarawak's context, preachers face difficulties in maintaining regular contact with muallaf due to their unpredictable work schedules and distant residences with limited access to infrastructure and infostructure. Long travel times and high costs further reduce the willingness and motivation of muallaf to participate in the programs (Kamal Basir et al., 2019).

Another concern is the religious disposition of muallaf after participating in HIKMAH's da'wah programs. This issue is closely tied to the challenges of personal adjustment and continued attachment to prior religious beliefs, rituals and practices. From the early stages of conversion, muallaf often face challenges adapting to Islamic dress codes, social interactions and dietary restrictions. Cultural differences also hinder family members from understanding these changes, causing some muallaf to feel awkward or hesitant to openly display their Islamic identity in public (Abdul Ghani, 2017; Abdullah & Sham, 2009; Guleng, 2014; Don et al., 2017; Mohd Mazlan & Mohad, 2022).

Muallaf in Sarawak also struggle to maintain an Islamic lifestyle due to the dominant cultural practices of majority ethnic groups like the Dayak, whose celebrations often involve pork consumption and alcohol (tuak), issues of aurat, dog ownership and customary festival rituals (Hashim et al., 2017, 2019). Some are pressured to participate in animistic rituals and refusal may result in social exclusion (Abdul Rahman, 2018). The prevailing culture of tolerance over religious sensitivity in Sarawak often hinders muallaf from fully

committing to their religious obligations. More concerning, some may gradually return to practicing their former traditional beliefs despite still identifying as Muslims (Ali & Abdullah, 2020).

These four primary issues raise concerns about the perception of Islam and Muslims among non-Muslim communities. The absence of constructive, holistic, comprehensive and effective da'wah programs may result in declining participation, lack of religious internalisation and most alarmingly increased cases of apostasy. In 2007, apostasy cases among muallaf in Sarawak were recorded when three individuals filed requests with the National Registration Department (JPN) to remove the word 'Islam' from their MyKad and officially revert to Christianity (Pei Pei, 2018). While such incidents are rarely discussed publicly in Sarawak, they raise concerns about the state's Islamic institutions' ability to care for and educate muallaf. Hence, HIKMAH faces the critical challenge of designing and implementing context-sensitive programs tailored to the diverse ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds of Sarawak's muallaf. These programs must consider existing constraints in terms of preacher availability, funding, logistical feasibility and universal, inclusive objectives all of which are essential to strengthen both the image of Islam and the reputation of da'wah institutions in the eyes of the wider non-Muslim community.

3. Challenges in Implementing HIKMAH's Da'wah Programs for Muslim Converts in the Rural Areas of Sarawak

Location and Settlement Issues

Geographical factors significantly hinder the consistent implementation of da'wah programs, particularly in remote areas. Sarawak's topography is mountainous, heavily forested and connected mainly by long river routes. Settlements are often scattered and frequent disruptions in connectivity occur due to poor road quality and limited infrastructure. These conditions restrict the mobility of da'wah personnel, making it difficult to organize regular programs and monitor muallaf's understanding, appreciation and practice of Islam (Wan Ahmad et al., 2018). At times, da'wah activities are delayed due to logistical and transportation limitations. Some areas are accessible only by air or river, requiring the use of aircraft and express boats (Mohamad et al., 2014; Ismail, 2021). Consequently, some da'wah workers are compelled to use their own transportation, shouldering the associated cost, time, physical strain and risk involved in reaching the interior regions.

Influence of Evangelical Christian Activities

Christianity has historically been the dominant religion among the Bumiputera population in Sarawak (Mohd Yusoff, 2019). The evangelical Christian mission began in Borneo in the 1840s with the establishment of the Borneo Church Mission during the Brooke Dynasty. While initial efforts to engage the Malay community were limited, subsequent activities expanded to the Chinese and Dayak communities through education, translation of texts and community services (Abdul Rahman, 2018; Basri, 2018). Post-independence, these missionary activities continued to grow under local church leadership and with political support. Wan Ahmad et al. (2018) note that Christian evangelism in Sarawak has been structured and far-reaching, utilising platforms such as education, media and humanitarian outreach. Within this religiously plural context, Islamic organizations are also challenged to strengthen and diversify their da'wah strategies in order to remain relevant and responsive to societal needs..

Cross-Cultural Issues

Ethnographic and cross-cultural factors also complicate da'wah implementation. Sarawak is home to over 30 ethnic groups, such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Lun Bawang, Kenyah, Kelabit, Kayan and Bisayah. Each group has its own religion, customs and lifestyle. This rich cultural diversity poses challenges for converts who face complex transition from their original way of life to their new Islamic identity. Many converts endure pressure from their own families to revoke their conversion, facing opposition, threats, slander, social exclusion, or even expulsion (Kawi & Abdullah, 2020; Abdullah et al., 2022). According to Guleng (2014), negative perceptions of Islam among non-Muslim families often stem from the failure of Muslims to exhibit proper Islamic conduct. Some relatives of muallaf share negative experiences involving Muslim peers

engaging in prohibited behaviors such as alcohol consumption, theft, or illicit sex. Others fear that familial ties will be severed upon a member's conversion (Rahman & Muhamat, 2016; Ellin et al., 2024). As a result, many converts are forced to hide their Islamic identity, especially in communities dominated by traditional beliefs. They may practice Islam secretly and pretend to adhere to their previous religious practices (Abdul Rahman, 2018).

Islamophobia

Islamophobia is a Western propaganda effort portraying Islam and Muslims as violent, brutal and extremist. Western media amplifies fears by suggesting Islam permits violence under the guise of “jihad”. Incidents such as those in the West Bank are misrepresented to blame Islam, aiming to prevent its rise as a global power and to curb conversions to Islam in Europe post-9/11. In Sarawak, where Muslims are a minority, Islam is sometimes seen as a threat to the Christian majority. Western portrayals of conflicts involving Muslims, like the Arab Spring or extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, have damaged Islam’s image. These associations lead non-Muslim parents to discourage their children from converting for fear of association with extremism (Wan Ahmad et al., 2018; Abdullah, 2018).

Poverty

Many muallaf in Sarawak come from impoverished families. Limited financial support from Sarawak’s Baitulmal restricts the continuity of aid to new converts. This may affect their ability to live and fully practice Islam. Wan Ahmad et al. (2018) noted that financial incentives have been a key strength for missionaries of other religions, who offer education, books, clothing and daily necessities, potentially influencing muallaf’s commitment to Islam. Abu Bakar and Ismail (2018) explained that in Sarawak, assistance for individuals who embrace Islam is not provided on a regular basis but is instead granted based on applications. Furthermore, there is no specific allowance allocated for attending religious education classes. Such assistance is crucial in supporting the religious educational needs of Muslim converts. The experiences of da’wah practitioners in Sarawak indicate that incentives and contributions can serve as motivation for converts to participate in religious programs. Therefore, the transparent and equitable distribution of aid is crucial to strengthening the commitment of Muslim converts to Islamic teachings (Kamal Basir et al., 2019).

Shortage of Qualified Da’wah Workers

Da’wah organizations in Sarawak often face a shortage of qualified and trained da’wah workers. Most are young people, schoolteachers, or independent volunteers (Mohd Yusoff, 2019; Abdul Mutalib, 2017; Kawi & Abdullah, 2020). Many NGOs struggle to employ full-time preachers due to financial constraints (Che Mat et al., 2009; Mohamad et al., 2014; Ellin et al., 2024). This makes it difficult to coordinate da’wah activities in remote areas, as not all preachers live among the muallaf. Effective preachers must be resilient, adaptable, culturally sensitive and capable of choosing appropriate methods that suit local contexts (Tibek et al., 2018). They also need proficiency in English and digital skills to engage muallaf, particularly the youths (Bujang et al., 2012). According to Datu Abang Mohamad Shibli bin Abang Mohd Nailie, Chairman of Sarawak’s Baitulmal, preachers should embrace more interactive, tech-based approaches to enhance program participation (Anonymous, 2016).

Organizational Management Issues

A structured and strategic Da’wah plan is essential to meet organizational goals. However, several weaknesses hinder Da’wah efforts in Sarawak (Abdul Rahman, 2018):

- i. Most NGOs lack well-established headquarters despite having manpower.
- ii. Workforce quality and quantity are limited and often rely on external da’wah expertise.
- iii. Activities are constrained by financial capacity.
- iv. Funding from the state government is subject to approval by Muslim-Malay political leaders.
- v. Conflicts in roles and inconsistent Da’wah approaches among local organizations hinder progress.

In Sarawak, da'wah efforts are largely led by NGOs, while state bodies like JAIS and MIS mainly handle registration and administrative matters. Although NGOs are permitted to operate freely in rural areas, they often face ambiguous bureaucratic processes. For example, converts without formal registration may be required to repeat the shahadah (declaration of faith), even if they have been Muslim for years. Furthermore, follow-up programs are often lacking due to economic constraints, leaving muallaf without ongoing religious or social support (Mohamad et al., 2014; Ismail, 2021).

Religious Commitment Challenges Among Muallaf

Many indigenous muallaf struggle in maintaining their faith due to deeply rooted animist and dynamist beliefs. These traditional systems, passed down for generations, are sometimes intertwined with current religious practices. Converts, especially Iban and Melanau who live in longhouses with non-Muslim families, face pressure to participate in traditional rituals like Miring and Kaul. Refusal often leads to social exclusion (Kawi & Abdullah, 2020; Kamal Basir et al., 2024). Thus, da'wah programs must be sensitive to the religious and cultural context of muallaf families. If these programs fail to foster mutual understanding, muallaf risk being disowned by their families. In such cases, they may lack support and in the event of death, their bodies may not be released for Islamic burial by religious authorities (Baharudin & Mohd Kusrin, 2019).

Discussion

HIKMAH's da'wah programs in rural Sarawak face ongoing challenges, including remote locations, limited trained personnel, cultural and language barriers and weak post-conversion support. These issues cause inconsistent delivery, low muallaf participation and poor long-term engagement challenges also seen in Sabah and parts of Indonesia. A useful benchmark is Sabah's da'wah model under Tun Mustapha, who established the United Sabah Islamic Association (USIA) in 1969 to unify Islamic outreach. USIA's strategy included building infrastructure, offering education and welfare support for muallaf and recruiting external da'i from Indonesia, the Philippines and Peninsular Malaysia. These efforts raised the Muslim population from 38.7% in 1967 to 53% by 1976 (Md Rasip et al., 2024). In contrast, HIKMAH lacks such institutional centralisation and strategic coordination, often operating in silos with limited inter-agency collaboration.

Culturally adaptive da'wah in Kalimantan offers valuable insights for Sarawak, given shared Dayak ethnolinguistic ties. In Kalimantan, Islamic teachings are integrated into local customs (e.g., Gawai, Tiwah) and conveyed in indigenous languages like Ngaju and Iban, fostering trust (Ma'mun, 2025). Collaboration with customary leaders and use of cultural symbols have eased muallaf integration without eroding ethnic identity. In contrast, HIKMAH's top-down, formalistic approach lacks cultural and linguistic contextualisation, limiting its impact in rural indigenous settings. Indonesia's Pesantren An-Naba offers a structured, multi-phase model for muallaf education. It begins with a *ta'aruf* phase involving interviews and counselling, followed by a five-month program covering theology, fiqh, Qur'anic literacy and moral development. Interactive methods include discussions, audiovisual tools, community engagement and assessments (Siregar et al., 2020). Graduates receive certificates, supporting their integration and continued learning.

In contrast, HIKMAH's model is reactive and informal, lacking structured pedagogy, a consistent induction framework, or long-term evaluation. Muallaf have minimal involvement in planning and post-conversion support is weak, often leading to disengagement. Its rigid, one-size-fits-all approach overlooks Sarawak's ethnic and linguistic diversity, limiting relevance and effectiveness. Previous strategies have failed by focusing too heavily on religious instruction while neglecting the psychological, relational and socio-cultural challenges muallaf face, such as isolation, rejection and identity struggles. Additionally, poor coordination between HIKMAH, JAKIM, NGOs and local mosques results in fragmented efforts and resource duplication, weakening program impact. Moving forward, HIKMAH should adopt a hybrid, context-sensitive model that integrates religious education with socio-cultural outreach, inter-agency collaboration and community empowerment. Recommended strategic actions include:

- i. Deploy multilingual, trained mobile da'wah units;
- ii. Set up district-level muallaf support centers with local educators;
- iii. Engage muallaf in program planning and leadership;
- iv. Incorporate livelihood and social development modules into da'wah efforts.

By adopting best practices from USIA (Sabah), Kalimantan's cultural da'wah and Pesantren An-Naba's pedagogy, HIKMAH can revitalise its outreach to rural muallaf with a more impactful, inclusive and sustainable approach.

Conclusion

The implementation of the Harakah Islamiah (HIKMAH) da'wah program for Muslim converts (muallaf) in the interior regions of Sarawak faces a range of complex challenges, including logistical constraints, socio-cultural differences and bureaucratic barriers. The rugged terrain restricts access and mobility, hindering smooth program execution. Additionally, the lack of trained human resources, inadequate infrastructure and limited funding further weaken regional da'wah efforts. Cultural and linguistic gaps, along with low levels of religious literacy among muallaf, necessitate a more dynamic and context-sensitive approach. Social pressure from their original communities and the absence of structured support systems further undermine their spiritual commitment and development.

The success of HIKMAH depends on systematic planning and active collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, religious institutions, NGOs and local leaders. A holistic and inclusive da'wah model rooted in local wisdom must be implemented to strengthen the Islamic identity of muallaf. The da'wah strategy should evolve into an integrated approach that not only teaches Islamic principles but also empowers converts through knowledge development, economic support, social inclusion and psycho-spiritual reinforcement. This requires inter-agency collaboration involving the State Islamic Religious Department (JAIN), higher education institutions, local authorities, NGOs and community figures such as longhouse chiefs to create a da'wah ecosystem that is inclusive, supportive and effective.

In terms of policy, priority should be given to developing structured training modules for da'wah workers that emphasize cultural competence, linguistic adaptation and psycho-social sensitivity. Investing in mobile da'wah units can overcome geographic barriers and ensure consistent outreach. Establishing localized da'wah centers equipped with multilingual resources and community support services can foster deeper engagement. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of integrated da'wah strategies on the spiritual resilience, economic empowerment and social integration of muallaf, offering valuable insights for sustainable and contextually relevant policy development.

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