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Beyond Theological Negotiation: Charismatic Authority, Structural Violence, and Intra-Religious Reconversion from *Shīʿah* to Sunni in Sampang, Madura

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The intra-religious reconversion of 319 former *Shīʿah* adherents to Sunni Islam in Sampang, Madura, represents a complex process of changing religious affiliation following an earlier shift from Sunni to *Shīʿah*. This study examines how religious authority, individual religious perceptions, and structural conditions interact throughout the reconversion process. Employing a qualitative field research design, data were collected through observations and in-depth interviews with 17 former *Shīʿah* adherents and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis shows that the reconversion process cannot be explained solely by doctrinal considerations. For most participants, affiliation change was primarily associated with trust in charismatic religious leaders rather than independent theological deliberation. In contrast, theological reflection emerged predominantly among the two former *Shīʿah* leaders, whose perceptions of *Shīʿah* doctrines developed through their own religious experiences. The study also demonstrates that reconversion occurred within broader structural conditions shaped by prolonged displacement following the 2012 conflict. Aspirations to regain access to their homes, livelihoods, and social acceptance constituted important situational contexts accompanying participants' decisions, although these structural circumstances should be analytically distinguished from the reasons explicitly articulated by the participants themselves. This study argues that intra-religious reconversion in Sampang constitutes a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of charismatic authority, religious identity negotiation, and structural constraints, rather than a purely theological transformation.

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Public Interest Statement

This study examines the sensitive issue of intra-religious affiliation change between *Shīʿah* and Sunni communities in Sampang, Madura. Beyond theological differences, these changes affect family life, community relations, and social cohesion. By exploring how individuals negotiated their religious identities within a context of prolonged conflict and displacement, the study highlights that changes in religious affiliation were shaped not only by religious beliefs but also by social relationships, charismatic authority, and structural conditions. The findings provide insights into the dynamics of religious diversity, conflict, and coexistence in contemporary Muslim societies, contributing to broader discussions on peacebuilding and religious reconciliation in contexts of sectarian tension.

Introduction

Diverging understandings of Islamic theology and political ideology between *Shīʿah* and Sunnis are thought to make it difficult for the two sects to live together (Adrahtas & Milani, 2021; Nuruzzaman, 2017; Siradj, 2013), even after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, to be precise in the pre-period of the caliphate of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān and ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib until now the *Shīʿah*–Sunni conflict keeps increasing with various factors behind it (Abdo, 2017, p. 11; Finnbogason et al., 2019), Several researchers have also diagnosed this reality by offering diverse findings. The lack

of religious dialogue between Sunni–*Shīʿah* has made the two sects continue to maintain differences and divisions (Krause et al., 2019) especially when faced with issues of faith conversion from Sunni to *Shīʿah*, which has the potential to generate psychological, social, and political tension (Blanga, 2022; Elad-Altman, 2007; Othman et al., 2022), this is in line with the findings of Harun state that there is a significant relationship between the occurrence of conflict and faith conversion (Harun et al., 2012).

Case studies in Jepara, Central Java, and Sampang, Madura, show that the variations in local culture and the perspective of religious leaders are the primary factors in *Shīʿah*–Sunni conflict and harmony relations in these two areas (Rahmat et al., 2024). Religious tradition remains an object of controversy among *Shīʿah* and Sunnis (DH & Said, 2024), while findings from Dani Muhtada confirm that Madurese religious resistance and the lack of the state's role in handling conflicts are seen as the prominent triggers that create barriers to *Shīʿah*–Sunni relations to live in harmony (Muhtada et al., 2022). In addition, the idea of Islamism echoed by religious elites in Madura, according to the observations of Abd A'la and Ahwan Mukarrom, tends to produce intolerant religious views (A'la & Mukarrom, 2020).

The study of *Shīʿah*–Sunni relations has attracted much attention from local, national, and international researchers (Panggabean, 2016). The *Shīʿah* community in Indonesia is reported to have existed since the entry of Islam into the archipelago (Syarif, 2023). However, sectarian relations involving *Shīʿah* communities in several regions of Indonesia have been associated with episodes of social tension and conflict (Syahnan et al., 2024). One prominent example is the sectarian conflict in Karang Gayam Village, Sampang, Madura, in 2011–2012, which resulted in the prolonged displacement of approximately 319 *Shīʿah* adherents to the Puspa Agro flats in Sidoarjo (Miichi & Kayane, 2020). Various parties have pursued reconciliation as a peace initiative, but only succeeded after ten years. Over the years, Sampang's *Shīʿah* adherents chose to flee and maintain their beliefs to remain affiliated with the *Shīʿah* faith. However, they finally decided to return to the *ahl al-sunnah wa-l-jamāʿah* (Sunni) beliefs.

This study examines the intra-religious reconversion of 319 former *Shīʿah* adherents in Sampang, Madura, who experienced repeated changes in religious affiliation within Islam. The participants were initially affiliated with Sunni Islam before identifying with *Shīʿah*, and after approximately ten years, they subsequently re-affiliated with the Sunni community. The study develops a conceptual framework to explain the factors and considerations underlying this process of intra-religious reconversion, with particular attention to the interaction between religious perceptions, charismatic authority, and structural conditions that shaped participants' decisions to change religious affiliation. It also explores the motives and experiences that informed their subsequent religious re-affiliation.

Literature Review

Studies on the reconversion of faith that repeatedly occur from Sunni to *Shīʿah* and vice versa from *Shīʿah* to Sunni have received relatively little attention in Islamic theology research. Most studies on *Shīʿah* tend to focus on aspects of mystical discourse in *Shīʿah* theological understanding (Reisi et al., 2024), the construction of theology and sectarian disputes within Islam (Demirel, 2011; Haddad, 2021), as well as issues of discrimination experienced as a minority group within Muslim societies (Achmad, 2021; Syed & Ali, 2021; Uygur et al., 2025). While such focuses are important, they often overlook the theological dynamics that arise in the context of socio-religious interactions between *Shīʿah* and Sunni communities. As a result, the aspect of reconversion of faith as both a theological and social phenomenon has not received sufficient analytical space, even though it holds great relevance for understanding patterns of relations, identity negotiations, and religious transformations in contemporary Muslim societies.

Zulkifli's research confirms that the anti-*Shīʿah* movement in Indonesia is influenced by religious ideology and the majority mindset that views the presence of *Shīʿah* as a threat (Zulkifli, 2024). A study conducted by Nadia Farabi also reached a similar conclusion, although it emphasized case studies of the *Shīʿah* and Ahmadiyya sects (Farabi, 2025). More specifically, Cekli Setya Pratiwi interpreted the phenomenon of violent conflict against *Shīʿah* in Sampang, Madura, as a form of structural violence that requires a more transformative conflict resolution approach (Pratiwi, 2024). The existence of the *Shīʿah* sect in Malaysia also shows a tendency similar to that in Indonesia, where the Sunni Muslim majority perceives *Shīʿah* teachings as potentially causing public security issues, such as creating disharmony among Sunni Muslims (Othman et al., 2022).

Numerous studies have highlighted the dynamics of *Shīʿah*–Sunni conflict in Indonesia. For example, Amal (2020) examined the case of conflict in Bondowoso, while Jamarudin and May (2021) traced similar sources of tension. Both emphasized that doctrinal and theological differences are fundamental factors that make it difficult for *Shīʿah* and Sunni communities to coexist peacefully within a single social order. These sectarian differences extend into the domestic sphere, such as inter-sectarian marriages between *Shīʿah* women and Sunni men. Rizvi Jafree (2024) shows that although such marriages are often based on love, they in reality bring serious consequences, including social

pressure from family and in-laws, differences in religious practices and legal rulings, and even inner conflicts related to religious identity, particularly when children follow the father's faith. This finding demonstrates that differences in religious affiliation and the social meanings attached to them extended beyond episodes of open conflict to affect family relationships and community life. It underscores the importance of examining how religious identities were negotiated within the broader context of intra-religious affiliation changes under conditions of prolonged sectarian tension and structural constraints, as observed in Sampang, Madura.

Although previous studies have substantially advanced the understanding of the Sampang case by examining sectarian conflict, religious intolerance, state policies, structural violence, reconciliation, and the repatriation of displaced *Shīʿah* communities (Amal, 2020; Kayane, 2020; Miichi & Kayane, 2020; Muhtada et al., 2022; Pratiwi, 2024; Zulkifli, 2024), relatively little attention has been devoted to the process of post-conflict intra-religious reconversion itself. Rather than revisiting the dynamics of conflict, this study examines how charismatic religious authority, subjective religious perceptions, and structural constraints interacted in shaping affiliation change among former *Shīʿah* adherents after prolonged displacement. By shifting the analytical focus from sectarian conflict to post-conflict intra-religious reconversion, this study contributes both empirically and conceptually to the growing scholarship on the Sampang case.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative field research design was employed to investigate the faith reconversion experiences of former Sampang *Shīʿah* adherents. This study seeks to understand how participants interpreted their reconversion experiences within the social and religious contexts in which they occurred. To interpret the findings, this study adopts the Lofland–Stark Conversion Theory as the theoretical framework for explaining the dynamics and stages of religious reconversion (Lofland & Stark, 2018).

Researchers utilized observation, semi-structured and informal in-depth interviews, and regular documentation to obtain the data. At the same time, purposive sampling selected 17 former *Shīʿah* adherents as informants in two different locations: ten in Karang Gayam Omben (Sampang) and seven in Puspa Agro Flat in Jemundo Sidoarjo. The 17 informants (five women and 12 men) were selected based on reputation, role, and educational background.

The interview guidelines focused on three main aspects: (1) the participants' religious background, including their initial experience of converting from Sunni to *Shīʿah*; (2) factors triggering their reconversion from *Shīʿah* to Sunni; and (3) their experiences in negotiating religious identity and making the decision to return to Sunni. Each participant was interviewed in multiple sessions, and all interviews were supported by field notes and audio recordings to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data. All interviews were conducted in Madurese by the first author, a native speaker fluent in Indonesian and English. Interview excerpts were translated into Indonesian and subsequently into English by the authors. To preserve semantic equivalence, particularly for theological terminology, translations were repeatedly checked against the original recordings and prioritized participants' intended meanings rather than literal wording.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, organize, and interpret recurring patterns across the participants' accounts. The analysis proceeded through four iterative stages: familiarization with the data by repeatedly reviewing interview transcripts and field notes; initial coding of meaningful data segments; development and refinement of themes relevant to the research questions; and interpretation of the themes using the Lofland–Stark Conversion Model as the analytical framework. This process enabled the researchers to identify patterns in the participants' experiences while relating them to the dimensions of intra-religious reconversion examined in this study. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing the interview data with field observations and documentary sources. Member checking, repeated interviews, and peer debriefing were also conducted to ensure the credibility and consistency of the participants' accounts.

Given the sensitivity of Sunni–*Shīʿah* relations in Sampang, the researchers recognized that their presence and interpretation could influence the research process. Although the researchers did not participate in either religious group, field access was facilitated through community networks and local gatekeepers who had established trust with the participants. To minimize potential bias, the researchers maintained reflexive field notes throughout the data collection, conducted member checking during repeated interviews, engaged in peer debriefing among the research team, and continuously compared interview narratives with field observations and documentary sources. These procedures were intended to enhance analytical transparency and ensure that the findings reflected the participants' perspectives rather than the researchers' personal assumptions.

Before conducting the interview process, the researchers confirmed the consent of the potential informant participants after explaining the interview guidelines to ensure that they understood the purpose and objectives of the

research. The researchers also emphasized the topic to obtain a full explanation. In subsequent interviews, they asked different and repeated questions to ensure the validity and consistency of the data required. In this study, we have kept the identities of prominent informants to encourage their openness and honesty, as well as to ensure protection from social risks that might impact informants because it is essential to consider in conducting field research related to the Sunni–*Shīʿah* divide (Petersen, 2023). Publicly documented events and official records were used solely to provide contextual background for the Sampang case, whereas all empirical findings and interpretations presented in this study are based exclusively on interview data and field observations. Although some key actors have been publicly identified elsewhere, all participants are referred to using numerical identifiers, and personal identifiers were omitted from interview excerpts to preserve confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

Experiences of Intra-Religious Reconversion among Former *Shīʿah* Adherents in Sampang

Based on the interview findings, the experiences of intra-religious reconversion among former *Shīʿah* adherents in Sampang are organized into three interrelated themes: (1) the initial transition from Sunni to *Shīʿah*, (2) the experience of sectarian conflict and prolonged displacement, and (3) the subsequent reconversion from *Shīʿah* to Sunni faith. These themes emerged from recurring patterns identified through semi-structured and informal in-depth interviews conducted across three interview sessions with 17 former *Shīʿah* adherents from Sampang, Madura (Figure 1). The analysis further distinguishes between participants whose affiliation changes primarily reflected trust in charismatic religious leaders and those who described more extensive theological reflection, indicating that doctrinal deliberation was not uniformly experienced across participants.

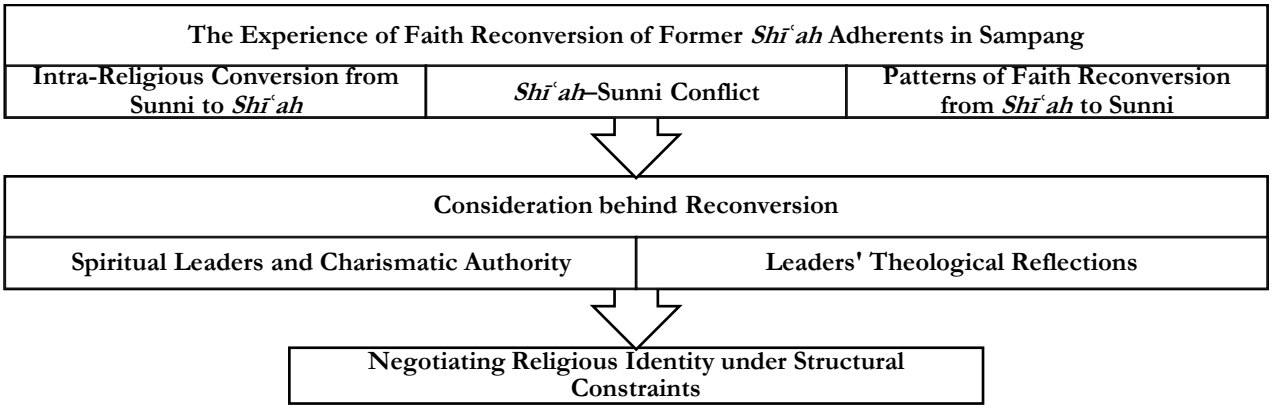


Figure 1. Three Prominent Themes

Intra-Religious Conversion from Sunni to Shīʿah

This theme describes the participants' accounts of their initial transition from Sunni to *Shīʿah*. Across interviews, the participants consistently emphasized the influence of two key religious figures in introducing *Shīʿah* teachings. Most participants explained that their decision to follow *Shīʿah* was closely associated with trust in these leaders rather than with an independent examination of doctrinal differences.

> "We were Sunni adherents and did not know about *Shīʿah* beliefs. We only became acquainted with the *Shīʿah* term and beliefs after the "*Lora*" (the son of *Kiai*) returned from Mecca. The beliefs of *Shīʿah* were introduced to us gradually as the teachings of *ahl al-bayt* lovers and were considered the purest teachings. We were then invited to affiliate with the teachings and beliefs of *Shīʿah*." *(Informant 3; translated from Madurese language)*

> "Actually, it was *Lora* who invited and convinced me to become a *Shīʿah*. He often visited people from one place to another to follow the *Shīʿah*, so I felt confident that *Shīʿah* was the correct teaching." *(Informant 4; translated from Madurese language)*

Shīʿah ideology was socialized through a persuasive approach to the Karang Gayam Society in Omben village, Sampang. Informant 1 recounted.

> "After I returned from Mecca to Karang Gayam, Omben, Sampang, the people were economically disadvantaged. Most of them were impoverished and paid little attention to education. At that time, I felt summoned to teach a religious pedagogy that was pure, based on my beliefs." *(Informant 1; translated from Madurese language)*

Across the participants' narratives, the transition from Sunni to *Shīʿah* was commonly associated with the authority of respected religious leaders and the social conditions surrounding the community at that time. Participants frequently described their trust in these figures as the primary reason for following *Shīʿah* teachings, while detailed doctrinal considerations were mentioned only by key religious leaders. These findings indicate that charismatic authority played a central role in the initial religious transition process.

Shīʿah–Sunni Conflict

According to participants' accounts and publicly documented events, tensions between Sunni and *Shīʿah* communities in Sampang intensified after local religious institutions—including the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) Sampang, Pengurus Cabang Nahdlatul Ulama (PCNU) Sampang, and Badan Silaturahmi Ulama Pesantren Madura (BASSRA)—publicly characterized *Shīʿah* teachings as deviant. These institutional positions contributed to broader social polarization surrounding the *Shīʿah* community.

> "At the end of 2011, there was a conflict escalation in Karang Gayam village, Sampang, between Sunni groups and *Shīʿah* adherents. Masses from various villages, such as Belu'uran, Karang Gayam, Telambah, and other villages, gathered in anarchist action. The action involved various groups and ended with the burning of the house and Islamic boarding school belonging to the *Shīʿah* leader, along with his two brothers who stood with him." *(Informant 5; translated from Madurese language)*.

> "On August 26, 2012, the conflict in Karang Gayam village, Sampang, peaked on a larger scale than before. In this incident, there was more severe violence, resulting in one *Shīʿah* victim. Besides, six other people had to be brought to hospital in critical condition. The angry mob also burned down 46 houses belonging to *Shīʿah* adherents." *(Informant 6; translated from Madurese language)*.

The interviews consistently described the 2011–2012 conflict as a turning point in participants' lives. Beyond the immediate violence, participants experienced prolonged displacement after being relocated from Sampang to temporary shelters and subsequently to the Puspa Agro flats in Sidoarjo. These experiences became an important social context for understanding the later reconversion process. Rather than interpreting reconversion solely through religious motivations, the findings suggest that participants' decisions unfolded within broader structural conditions marked by displacement, uncertainty, and restricted access to their homes and livelihoods.

The Sampang district government took preventive measures by evacuating *Shīʿah* adherents to a more secure place in response to the increasingly uncontrollable situation. All Sampang *Shīʿah* adherents stayed in *Gelanggang Olahraga* (GOR) of Sampang Regency for one year before being permanently relocated to Puspa Agro, Jemundo Village, Sidoarjo Regency. This decision prevented further escalation of the conflict. The experiences of the participants indicate that despite prolonged displacement and repeated offers to return to Sunni, several former *Shīʿah* adherents remained committed to their religious affiliation during the conflict. As reflected by one participant:

> "After the tragedy, we, the adherents of *Shīʿah* Sampang, remained steadfast in our chosen faith. For us, this is part of the *jihād* to defend our beliefs." *(Informant 7; translated from the Madurese language)*.

Participants' narratives also indicate that, despite experiencing violence and displacement, many continued to identify strongly with *Shīʿah* during the early years of displacement. This finding suggests that later reconversion should not be understood as an immediate consequence of the conflict itself. Instead, it developed gradually within a prolonged post-conflict context that involved religious authority, changing social relationships, and structural conditions affecting everyday life.

Patterns of Faith Reconversion from Shīʿah to Sunni

This section describes the participants' accounts of the gradual process through which former *Shīʿah* adherents in Sampang returned to Sunni affiliation. Rather than representing a single or purely doctrinal event, participants described reconversion as a process shaped by religious leadership, personal interpretations, and the broader social conditions they experienced following years of displacement.

> "The intention to return to *ahl al-sunnah wa-l-jamāʿah* (Sunni Islam) did not happen spontaneously. It was a long process and journey, especially for me as the leader of *Shīʿah* Sampang." *(Informant 1; translated from the Madurese language)*.

> "When I conveyed my intention to return to Sunni to my friends, they split into two groups. Some immediately welcomed it, while others doubted it. However, after I explained my views on Sunni beliefs, they

accepted to return to Sunni, except for a few people who still wanted to remain *Shīʿah*." *(Informant 2; translated from Madurese language)*

In November 2020, former *Shīʿah* adherents in Sampang submitted an official letter to the Regent of Sampang requesting the local government to facilitate their return to the Sunni community. This account was consistently confirmed by several participants. Informant 9 described the event as follows:

> "On Thursday, November 5, 2020, *Shīʿah* Sampang adherents and I pledged allegiance to return to *ahl al-sunnah wa-l-jamāʿah* at the Trunojoyo Sampang Hall. On two different occasions, 319 people pledged allegiance to return to being Sunni." *(Informant 9; translated from Madurese language)*.

The interviews indicate that the decision to return to Sunni developed gradually rather than immediately after the 2011–2012 conflict. Participants consistently described a prolonged process involving discussions with religious leaders, interactions within the displaced community, and aspirations to resume everyday life in Sampang. These accounts suggest that reconversion was shaped not only by religious considerations but also by broader social and structural circumstances that evolved during nearly a decade of displacement. The implications of these findings are discussed further below.

Consideration behind Reconversion

Participants described two distinct patterns underlying their reconversion to Sunni. The first pattern, reported by 15 participants, was characterized primarily by trust in charismatic religious leadership. These participants consistently stated that they followed the decisions of their religious leader and did not claim to possess a detailed understanding of theological differences between Sunni and *Shīʿah*. The second pattern was found among two key informants, who explained their reconversion through personal theological reflection and experiences of studying *Shīʿah* literature and visiting *Shīʿah* communities abroad.

This view was consistently expressed by multiple participants. One representative statement is as follows.

> "We are ignorant people; we do not understand the *dalīl* (guide). For us, following the teacher is the way to find salvation in the hereafter. We still uphold it today." *(Informant 10; translated from Madurese)*.

The consideration of the former Sampang *Shīʿah* leader departs from the results of an in-depth search and observation of theological-philosophical arguments accompanied by empirical evidence of *Shīʿah* beliefs. Meanwhile, two informants shared the basis for their reconversion of belief from *Shīʿah* to Sunni in the following interview:

Informant 1 consideration

According to Informant 1, "his subsequent study of *Shīʿah* literature led him to conclude that several *Shīʿah* doctrines were inconsistent with his understanding of Sunni theology and with the positions adopted by Indonesian Sunni religious authorities." *(Informant 1; translated from the Madurese language)*.

Empirical experience of Informant 1

After managing a *Shīʿah* library in Jakarta and visiting Iraq, Informant 1 stated that these experiences reinforced his personal conviction that several *Shīʿah* doctrines differed fundamentally from his Sunni theological understanding of them. These interpretations represent the informants' own perspectives developed through their personal experiences.

Empirical experience of Informant 2

Informant 2 explained that his visits to Iran and Iraq prompted him to reassess several doctrinal issues, including *imāmah*, *mutʿah*, *taqiyyah*, and discussions concerning the Qurʾān. He regarded these doctrines as incompatible with his own Sunni theological framework. These interpretations should be understood as the participant's subjective assessment rather than as objective descriptions of mainstream *Shīʿah* theology, which offers different doctrinal interpretations of these concepts.

The findings reveal two distinct patterns of reconversion, rather than a single mechanism. The first pattern, observed among most participants (15 of 17), was characterized primarily by obedience to a charismatic religious authority. These participants consistently stated that they relied on their religious leaders' guidance rather than independent doctrinal evaluations. The second pattern was found among two religious leaders who described a more extensive process of theological reflection supported by personal reading and travel experiences, which included: Consequently, theological negotiation cannot be generalized to all participants but is more appropriately understood as a feature of the experiences of the key informants.

Taken together, these findings suggest that reconversion in Sampang was shaped by the interaction of charismatic religious authority, individual religious interpretations, and broader structural conditions following prolonged displacement. For most participants, the decision to return to Sunni Islam reflected trust in religious leadership and aspirations to regain social acceptance and everyday security, whereas explicit theological reflection was largely confined to the two key religious leaders. Accordingly, the findings indicate that reconversion is better understood as a process of intra-faith religious realignment embedded within post-conflict social conditions than as a uniformly theological process.

Spiritual Leaders and Charismatic Authority

The interviews consistently indicated that the decisions of most participants were closely associated with their trust in charismatic religious leadership rather than with independent theological reasoning. Fifteen participants explicitly stated that they possessed limited knowledge of doctrinal differences between Sunni and *Shīʿah* and relied primarily on the guidance of their religious leader.

One participant explained this as follows:

> "We joined *Shīʿah* because we followed the *Kiai*. We did not understand the religious arguments either. We simply obeyed what *Kiai* taught us. If the *Kiai* had not returned to Sunni, we would probably have remained *Shīʿah*." *(Informant 11; translated from Madurese).*

Another participant expressed a similar perception:

> "Had our leader not guided us back, I would probably have remained *Shīʿah* because I believed he understood the correct religious path." *(Informant 17; translated from the Madurese language).*

Rather than indicating extensive doctrinal negotiation among ordinary followers, these narratives suggest that religious affiliation was largely mediated through charismatic authority and interpersonal trust. Consequently, for most participants, reconversion reflected continuity in religious leadership rather than an independent reassessment of theological doctrines. This finding is consistent with broader scholarship emphasizing the role of social networks, trusted authorities, and communal relationships in religious affiliation and religious change.

Leaders' Theological Reflections

Unlike the majority of participants, Informants 1 and 2 described their reconversion as the outcome of prolonged personal study, interaction with religious literature, and visits to religious institutions in Iraq and Iran. They explained that these experiences reshaped their understanding of Sunni and *Shīʿah* teachings.

Informant 1 stated:

> "After studying *Shīʿah* literature and reflecting on my experiences, I became convinced that returning to Sunni was the appropriate decision." *(Informant 1; translated from the Madurese language).*

Likewise, Informant 2 described several doctrinal issues that, from his perspective, influenced his decision to reconvert to Islam. Importantly, these statements represent the personal interpretations of two key informants rather than objective assessments of *Shīʿah* theology. Many of the doctrinal issues they mentioned—including *imāmah*, *taqiyyah*, *mutʿah*, and interpretations of Qurʾānic authenticity—remain subjects of substantial scholarly debate and are understood differently within Twelver *Shīʿī* scholarship (al-Jīzāwī 2010, 35; Jannouf 2013, 15–27). Accordingly, the present study treats these accounts as participants' subjective narratives that informed their reconversion experiences rather than as theological conclusions.

Because only two participants articulated extensive doctrinal reasoning, these findings should not be generalized to represent the experiences of all former *Shīʿah* adherents.

Negotiating Religious Identity under Structural Constraints

The findings suggest that reconversion in Sampang cannot be understood solely through doctrinal transformation. Instead, participants' narratives reveal the interaction of theological interpretations, charismatic authority, prolonged displacement, and broader structural conditions following the 2012 violence. For the majority of participants, reconversion was closely associated with trust in religious leaders who had previously guided both their conversion to *Shīʿah* and their subsequent return to Sunni. Their accounts indicate limited engagement with doctrinal debates and instead emphasize loyalty to respected religious authority.

By contrast, informants 1 and 2 described reconversion as involving sustained theological reflection based on personal study and religious experience. Therefore, theological negotiation appears primarily among these key actors rather

than across the broader participant group. Moreover, the interviews demonstrate that reconversion occurred after nearly a decade of displacement following the violent conflict of 2012. Participants repeatedly referred to aspirations to return home, regain social acceptance, restore community relationships, and recover access to livelihoods. These accounts indicate that reconversion was shaped not only by religious considerations but also by the structural circumstances surrounding prolonged displacement.

From the perspective of structural violence (Pratiwi, 2024), the participants' stated motivations should be distinguished from the broader conditions under which those motivations emerged. The prolonged refugee situation, social exclusion, and restricted access to their villages constituted structural pressures that formed an important context for reconversion decisions. Consequently, while participants emphasized religious reasons, their narratives also reveal how theological interpretations interacted with social vulnerability and institutional conditions.

Therefore, the present findings complement earlier studies of the Sampang conflict, which primarily examined sectarian violence, state responses, and reconciliation processes (Amal, 2020; Kayane, 2020; Muhtada et al., 2022; Pratiwi, 2024). Rather than viewing reconversion as purely voluntary theological transformation, the findings indicate a multidimensional process in which religious authority, social relationships, and structural conditions jointly shaped participants' decisions.

Unlike most studies on intra-religious conversion, which primarily describe affiliation change as an outcome of intellectual exploration, religious learning, marriage, or organizational socialization (Hegazi, 2009; Imran et al., 2023; Lubis & Rahmah, 2022; Mirshahvalad, 2020; Snook et al., 2021), the Sampang case reveals a more complex trajectory. Participants experienced repeated shifts in religious affiliation—from Sunni to *Shīʿah* and later back to Sunni—within the same Islamic tradition. Rather than representing a purely doctrinal transformation, these affiliation changes unfolded through the interaction of charismatic religious authority, prolonged displacement, and aspirations for social reintegration following years of sectarian conflict. This finding suggests that intra-religious reconversion should be understood not merely as an individual theological choice but as a socially embedded process shaped by changing religious authority, collective identity, and structural constraints.

The Sampang case reflects these broader patterns while revealing distinctive experiences among former *Shīʿah* adherents. Based on the narratives of the two former *Shīʿah* leaders, their process of religious exploration and reinterpretation of different Islamic traditions contributed to changes in religious affiliation between Sunni and *Shīʿah* religions.

According to the conversion theory developed by John Lofland and Rodney Stark, the reconversion of former adherents of *Shīʿah* Sampang is a gradual conversion process because the reconversion is not the result of a single event but a series of gradual steps (Lofland & Stark, 2018). It can be analyzed through the seven stages of religious conversion of Lofland-Stark, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Selective Mapping of the Lofland–Stark Conversion Model in the Sampang Case

	Lofland–Stark Dimension	Predisposing factors	Situational factors	Empirical Evidence
1.	Tension	Religious uncertainty and reliance on charismatic leadership	Sectarian differences, structural violence and prolonged displacement.	Religious uncertainty and sectarian conflict preceded affiliation changes.
2.	Problem-Solving Perspective	Desire for religious and social stability.	Structural violence, displacement, and aspirations for social reintegration.	Religious re-affiliation was accompanied by expectations of social reintegration into the community.
3.	Seekership	Religious dissatisfaction, search for religious certainty, and reinterpretation of previous religious affiliations.	Prolonged displacement, religious authority, and aspirations for social reintegration.	Former leaders actively sought alternative religious interpretations, whereas most followers relied on trusted religious leaders.
4.	The turning point	Trust in Charismatic Religious Leaders and Openness to Religious Change.	Continuous interaction with religious leaders during displacement.	Decisions were made through sustained interactions with trusted leaders.
5.	Cult affective bonds	Emotional attachment and loyalty to religious leaders.	Shared displacement and collective solidarity	Participants emphasized loyalty to religious leaders over doctrinal reasoning (fifteen participants).

	Lofland–Stark Dimension	Predisposing factors	Situational factors	Empirical Evidence
6.	Extra-Cult affective bonds	Gradual reinterpretation of previous religious identity	Social reintegration opportunities	Previous religious affiliation was gradually reinterpreted (two former *Shīʿah* leaders).
7.	Total identification with new beliefs	Commitment to a renewed religious identity	Formal reconversion and community acceptance	Religious re-affiliation was followed by formal and social reintegration processes.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Lofland and Stark (2018).

Based on the analysis conducted, the process of intra-religious reconversion in Sampang partially corresponds to several dimensions of the Lofland–Stark conversion model rather than representing a complete replication of its original seven-stage sequence. Although the model has been criticized for its emphasis on conversion to new religious movements and its relatively linear assumptions, it remains analytically useful for explaining how Predisposing factors and Situational factors interacted throughout changes in religious affiliation (Timol, 2022, p. 287). Accordingly, this study employs the model selectively and interprets it alongside Rambo's Process Model of Religious Conversion, which conceptualizes religious change as a multidimensional and context-dependent process (Rambo, 1999, p. 267). This perspective is particularly relevant to the Sampang case, where intra-religious reconversion cannot be attributed to a single theological cause but emerged through the interaction of multiple factors. The experiences of the fifteen ordinary participants demonstrate that their decisions were shaped by relational commitment to charismatic religious leaders, the negotiation of religious identity, aspirations for social reintegration, and the broader structural conditions resulting from prolonged displacement. This interpretation is further complemented by Snow and Machalek's perspective, which conceptualizes conversion as a process of religious identity transformation rather than merely doctrinal change (Snow & Machalek, 1984, p. 185). Rather than assuming that all seven stages occurred uniformly, the analysis demonstrates that only those dimensions supported by the empirical evidence were manifested differently across participants.

For the two former *Shīʿah* leaders, the reconversion process was preceded by prolonged religious exploration, engagement with religious literature, and personal theological reflection. Their narratives suggest that they gradually reinterpreted their previous religious affiliation after comparing Sunni and *Shīʿah* theological traditions. Importantly, their assessments of doctrines such as *imāmah*, *taqiyyah*, and other aspects of *Shīʿah* theology should be understood as their subjective interpretations emerging from their own religious experiences rather than as objective evaluations of *Shīʿah* doctrine. Since these doctrines remain subjects of theological debate within Islamic scholarship, the present study focuses on how such perceptions influenced the leaders' reconversion decisions rather than evaluating the validity of the doctrines themselves.

In contrast, the remaining 15 participants reported limited engagement with theological arguments. Their accounts consistently emphasized trust in religious leaders and long-standing loyalty to charismatic authority rather than independent doctrinal deliberation. Consistent with Rambo's multidimensional understanding of religious conversion and Snow and Machalek's emphasis on identity transformation, the analysis indicates that affiliation change among ordinary followers was shaped by the interaction of relational commitment, religious identity negotiation, aspirations for social reintegration, and structural constraints associated with prolonged displacement, rather than individual theological deliberation alone.

Conclusion

This study argues that the intra-religious reconversion of former *Shīʿah* adherents in Sampang cannot be adequately explained as a purely theological transformation. Instead, the reconversion process emerged through the interaction of charismatic religious authority, individual perceptions of religious teachings, and structural conditions shaped by prolonged displacement following the 2012 sectarian conflict. While two former *Shīʿah* leaders described reconversion as resulting from sustained theological reflection and personal religious exploration, the remaining participants consistently emphasized trust in religious leaders rather than independent doctrinal deliberation. These findings indicate that theological negotiation characterized only a limited group of participants, whereas relational commitment to charismatic authority constituted the dominant mechanism underlying affiliation change among ordinary followers.

The findings further demonstrate that participants' stated reasons for reconversion should be analytically distinguished from the broader structural context in which these decisions were made. Nearly a decade of displacement, limited access to housing and livelihoods, and aspirations for social reintegration created situational conditions that accompanied the reconversion process. Rather than treating these structural circumstances as merely background

factors, this study shows that they interacted with religious authority and identity negotiation in shaping participants' decisions. Consequently, the case of Sampang illustrates that intra-religious affiliation changes developed through the intersection of religious, social, and structural processes rather than through doctrinal considerations alone.

This study contributes to the literature on the Sampang conflict by shifting attention from sectarian violence and conflict dynamics to the largely overlooked process of post-conflict intra-religious reconversion. Conceptually, it also demonstrates that the Lofland–Stark model remains analytically useful when applied selectively to intra-religious affiliation change, particularly in explaining how predisposing conditions, interpersonal relationships, and structural constraints interact throughout the reconversion process. At the same time, the findings suggest that not all dimensions of the model are equally applicable, especially where affiliation change is shaped more by charismatic authority and structural pressures than by individual doctrinal transformation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This study is based exclusively on interviews with former *Shīʿah* adherents who had already reconverted to Sunni, and therefore does not capture the perspectives of individuals who remained affiliated with *Shīʿah* or those of other stakeholders involved in the reconciliation process. Moreover, although five female participants were included, gender-specific experiences of reconversion were not examined separately. Future research would benefit from incorporating multiple perspectives and comparative post-conflict settings to develop a more comprehensive understanding of intra-religious affiliation change under conditions of sectarian conflict and structural violence.

Author Contributions: Choirur Rois was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, development of the theoretical framework, data analysis, and preparation of the original manuscript draft. Agus Irfan contributed to field data collection, including interviews and observations, as well as contextual data interpretation and manuscript revision. Akhmad Fauzi contributed to the literature review, research methodology design, data validation, and refinement of the findings and discussion. Ahmad Muhsin assisted in the critical review of the manuscript, interpretation of the findings, improvement of the academic argumentation, and final editing of the manuscript. All authors made substantial intellectual contributions to the study, participated actively throughout the research process, critically reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

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Informed Consent Statement: All participants involved in this study provided their informed consent prior to participation. The informants were fully briefed regarding the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. They were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity in the use of their personal information and narratives. Informed consent was obtained both verbally and in written form, ensuring that participants clearly understood the scope of the study and the ways in which their contributions would be utilized.

Ethics Statement: This study involved voluntary interviews with adult participants and did not include medical interventions or procedures requiring formal ethical review under the institutional regulations applicable to the researchers. Accordingly, the study was considered exempt from formal ethical approval. Prior to data collection, all participants received information regarding the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed and pseudonymous numerical identifiers were used throughout the manuscript.

Declaration of Generative AI: During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to assist with English language editing, grammar correction, and improving clarity and readability. The AI tool was not used to generate, interpret, or analyze research data, nor to formulate the study's findings or conclusions. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors, who accept full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the content of this manuscript.

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