

## MUSLIM ADOPTIVE MOTHERHOOD IN BRUNEI: RECONCILING TENSIONS AND IDENTITY DYNAMICS

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### ABSTRACT

*Research about adoptive Muslim motherhood has largely been understudied, especially in the context of small Malay communities. This study explores parenthood experiences of adoption within the context of Brunei and examines the influences of societal norms and expectations towards the lives of adoptive mothers. The complex Islamic family structure and membership system, which shape individual motherhood experiences, are discussed. The lived experiences of five adoptive Muslim mothers living in Brunei were explored using semi-structured in-depth interviews and were analysed using cross-case analysis. Confronting their challenges with infertility, the participants' experiences with adoption became a gateway for an alternative life to experience motherhood otherwise unavailable to them. These women shared their stories of confronting a perceived social stigma resulting from assumptions that society only accords authentic mother-to-child bonds through biological means. This paper argues that adoption has created an alternative space for identity, connection, and separation within the context of religion and the societal norms in Brunei. Within that space, tensions and motherhood identity dynamics play out as they continue to pursue and develop authentic and meaningful relationships with their adoptive children. Findings also indicate how formal institutions regulate adoption, enabling Muslim women in Brunei to experience motherhood through 'unconventional' means. The relationship between adoptive mothers and the perceived societal acceptance of adoptive motherhood remains tenuous, producing various forms of identity dynamics to ease the tensions.*

Keywords: Adoption; adoptive motherhood; Muslim women; Brunei.

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### INTRODUCTION

This research examines the experiences of adoptive mothers and so, this section aims to introduce the concept of adoption in the context of Islam. The understanding of adoption is first defined in this research, followed by the Bruneian context of adoption and how it is practiced. Thirdly, the concept of motherhood is presented with a brief discussion and personal considerations of the selected topic.

#### Adoption in Islam

The concept and practice of adoption is a complex social phenomenon, subjected to the cultural and religious contexts within which it occurs. Within Muslim communities, childcare and living arrangements of adopted individuals are further bound by religious principles, that work to either limit or enable the process of adoption to occur. The practices of adoption in the Western context, on the other hand, can be thought of as a form of permanent childcare arrangement (Kutty, 2014). This is different in the Islamic context, which considers matters related to lineage, inheritance, and the facts surrounding kinship or ancestral ties, brought through progeny and fertility. Consequently, adoption has been defined in three ways: First, it is commonly understood in the West that it is a permanent and legal arrangement of parents and children that *severs all forms of connection and relationship* between the child and their biological parents while transferring their responsibilities and rights to the adoptive parents; Second, that it is a permanent and legal arrangement of parent and children that *does not sever and ignore the biological connection* between the child and their birth parents (Büchler & Kayasseh, 2018); and Third, overall it is an arrangement made for children to be taken care of by people who are not their biological parents.

Adoption practised in the West is typically known as *al-tabanni* which is considered prohibited [*haram*] in Islam. The classic understanding of the concept is therefore not permissible to be practised amongst Muslims, as it has been forbidden in the Qur'an and *Sunnah* [Prophetic traditions]. *Al-tabanni* relationships are prohibited to clarify the varying degrees of consanguinity as the Qur'an emphasises the maintenance of lineage and acknowledges the realities of our relationships (Kutty, 2014). To negate the differences between a biological child and an adopted child is to ignore the truth that is emphasised, along with the guidelines of relationships that individuals are supposed to have as Muslims. For this research, adoption is understood according to the one stated in the second definition, that is, it is a permanent and legal arrangement of parents and children that *does not sever and ignore the biological connection* between the child and their birth parents (Büchler & Kayasseh, 2018) which defines and guides the rights and relationships.

As in a Muslim society, Islam is regarded as a way of life, and not just a religion (Kutty, 2014). This includes all aspects of a person and their surrounding society to act within the boundaries and guidance dictated by Allah Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala.

In Islam, marriage is recommended, and the family unit is a basic unit in the society for the husband and wife to fulfil their roles as a family (Rizvi, 2013). Several verses in the Qur'an have referenced marriage and its characteristics, such as:

*"God has made for you mates from yourselves and made for you out of them, children and grandchildren."*  
(Surah Al-Nahl, The Holy Qur'an, 16:72)

*"Marry the spouseless among you...if they are poor, God will enrich them of His bounty."*  
(Surah An-Nur, The Holy Qur'an, 24:32)

*"And among His signs is that He has created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may live in tranquility with them; and He has created love and mercy between you. Verily, in that are signs for those who reflect."*  
(Surah Ar-Rum, The Holy Qur'an, 30:21)

According to Rizvi (2013), these verses from the Qur'an have suggested three things about marriage: (a) marriage is a form of God's power and blessings; (b) marriage is a highly encouraged act of virtue which reasons to avoid it should not be because of poverty; (c) the sexual urges that is placed in human nature by God's creative command. In Büchler and Kayasseh's (2018) research, there is a *fiqh* principle [rules from Islamic law extracted by jurists] which states that marriage, procreation and *nasab* are interconnected; with marriage as a link to the maintenance of genealogical clarifications. In other words, the legitimacy of children is embedded in the idea that they come from conjugal relationships; valuing kinship ties that are based on blood relations as more permanent, unbreakable, and lasting compared to those that are not. As familial relationships are considered biological kinship ties, according to Memissi (1993), *mahram* refers to people who cannot marry due to incest taboos which includes consanguineal and affinal ties. Those who are *non-mahram* are people whom they are not biologically related to and therefore could marry. In other words, the family structure can influence the relationships and interactions of an individual (Quraishi-Landes, 2009).

In Islam, the structure of lineage and inheritance are established through the paternal biological connection that binds the child's respective affiliation and rights (Büchler and Kayasseh, 2018). In accordance with Islamic principles, the lineage [*nasab*] is highly important to be maintained. As a father, they must establish their *nasab* through financial and legal responsibilities over the child (maintenance of surnames), while as a mother, her lineage is established by giving birth to the child. The differences in those duties reflect a standardised recognition of the marriage division of roles and responsibilities of each parent for their child (Büchler & Kayasseh, 2018). Thus, the standard implications of adoption from the West cannot be applicable. In the case of these conventional adoptions, this poses issues as the treatment of the adopted children is identical to their biological children.

Ul Haq (2023) research explained the concept of *awrah* or *satar* refers to the obligations of covering some parts of an individual's body which are based on the commandments in the Qur'an (Surah Al-Nur). For a man, they are to cover from their navel to their knees, while for women it is their entire body except for their hands and faces. However, the *awrah* between a woman to another is from their navel to their knees. From his research, he stated that there are some basic principles to follow on gender interaction such as: to guard their gaze, prohibit seclusion, prohibition of *non-mahram* physical touch, obligation to cover *awrah*, and concessions to be allowed when necessary. In the context of Muslim adoptions, this is highly important to consider as the relationship between the adoptive parent and adopted child is *non-mahram* which can affect their relationship dynamics within the family. And so, there is a need to explore the navigation of how adoptive families live their experiences, as research on adoptions is generally lacking (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). To be able to illustrate the unique experiences of adoptions in a Muslim-Bruneian context, the phenomena of adoption need to be examined from the viewpoint of adoptive parents first. However, for this research, mothers are particularly selected to demonstrate how adoption and motherhood are constructed which can affect their adoption experiences.

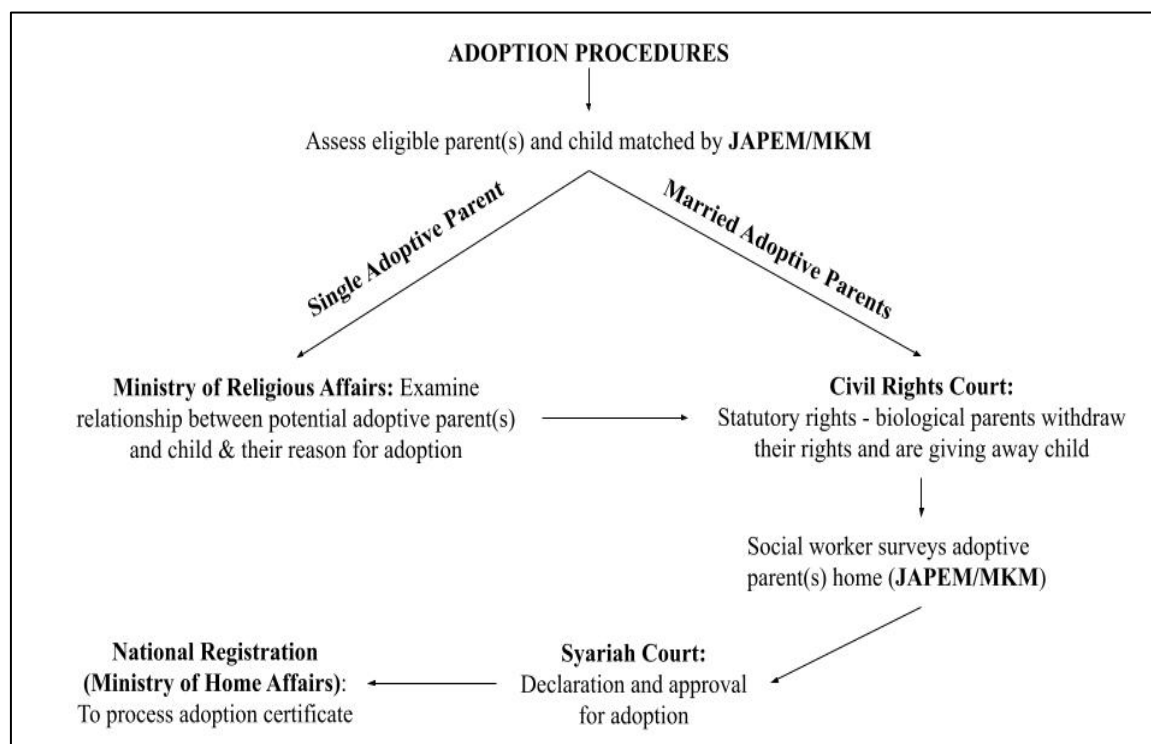
### Adoption in Brunei

For this paper, only Muslim adoptions will be discussed as they differ from non-Muslim adoptions in Brunei. According to the Islamic Adoption of Children Act of 2001, Chapter 206, adoption is defined as "to bring up, maintain and educate the child of another person like one's own child without becoming a natural child of the adopter" (Laws of Brunei, 2001, Chapter 206, p.107). Child welfare services are guided by the Islamic Family Law (2012) and the Child and Young Persons Act of 2017 are implemented through multiple institutions. Overall, there are five institutions that adoptees need to process their adoptions through to adopt their child:

- 1) Civil Rights Court
- 2) Ministry of Religious Affairs
- 3) Department of Community Development (JAPEM)
- 4) Syariah Court
- 5) Department of Immigration and National Registration.

Non-governmental organisations such as the Brunei Council on Social Welfare (MKM) can also play a role in the adoption process as a platform to aid families struggling with poverty as a mediator between adoptive parents and biological families. There are no orphanages in Brunei for people to adopt from, thus, the children that are adopted are often those that come from underprivileged families who cannot support them. NGOs such as MKM, collaborate with the main government institutions for the adoption process as a mediator to connect parents who wish to adopt, to families that seek help for their children. The adoption process through NGOs and the government can be seen in the illustration below:

Figure 1: An Outline of the Adoption Process Through its Relevant Institutions



Source: Author

### Motherhood

Motherhood as a concept and practice has been subjected to a variety of contestation, allowing for the emergence of different forms of understanding of motherhood beyond what is traditionally accepted as 'women's fate'. Motherhood is not simply an ascribed role in women's lives; rather, authors have contended that it has become a choice. The concept of motherhood has thus evolved according to experiences in familial roles, responsibilities, child-rearing, childbirth, and pregnancy to be according to cultural and temporal contexts. Gair (1996) provided comprehensive research in reviewing motherhood experiences with a sample of 50 adoptive mothers throughout their adoptive experience from their post-adoption until their adopted children turned into their teenage years. Gair (1996) managed to explore the real-life experiences of adoptive mothers to discover how the adoptive mothers consider the nature of their motherhood. She also explored how their experiences were influenced by the social workers, and support systems that are available to them. According to her, the early stages after the adoption is processed is an overwhelming experience due to the pressure and stress from the normative expectations of birth mothers to naturally raise their children in society. This activates a separation of experiences and identity of biological mothers and their role as an adoptive mother which can entice a vulnerable position. Her research has managed to highlight how different adoptive mothers may experience their adoptions differently, therefore, it is difficult to produce a comprehensive conclusion to be presented. However, one keynote is that this may be due to the varying times they adopted their children, and changes in their social attitudes and policies that were presented. Therefore, the results may question how this experience can be generalized or applicable to other adoptions and how valid these could be in different contexts. As her research is done in Queensland, Australia, her research is based on a non-religious consideration and a difference in culture may produce different results.

The literature on the ideas of a good mother has been in constant debate as to what are the qualities that mothers need to have to fit into those roles. Most discourses have noted the importance of mothers to 'act responsibly' and behaving in a way that is socially and culturally normal in their environment to prevail as an acceptable mother (Miller, 2005). However, the construction of what the most ideal type of a good mother is has yet to be established. Hence, the experiences of the identity of mother for adoptive mothers, and their motherhood is also in question as to how their experiences fit into the characteristics of a 'good mother'. Arendell (1999) suggested that a good mother is a married woman, heterosexual and in a monogamous relationship. She is also not financially independent; relying on her husband's income or her husband being responsible for their finances, and she is not employed. The woman's role is therefore structured around a domesticated role and dependent on her husband.

In an Islamic context, both motherhood and fatherhood are biologically categorised with their responsibilities. In a review by Pollack et al (2004), biological parents cannot be replaced by other people.

*"None are their mothers except those who gave birth to them"*

(Surah Al-Mujadila, 58:2)

In the Qur'an, mothers are those that have experienced physical labour in having a child. For adoptive mothers who do not, or cannot experience that, this research is interested in examining how Muslim adoptive mothers can negotiate their religious and cultural values,

how modern ideas of motherhood can be understood, and how the participants can adapt their experiences to become a mother. This paper argues that Bruneian society is governed by biological principles that influence the management of how the society functions and how people are identified according to their biological connections. This heavily influences the perception of biological families as the ideal, while others like adoptive families are unappealing. While practising Islamic principles, adoptive mothers try to accommodate their identities as a mother and validate their experiences with motherhood. Despite the contradictory norms, the society does provide services and resources to aid in their journeys with motherhood. However, the management of the adoption process should extend further than paperwork to truly aid their experiences because they are Muslim mothers.

### Research Problem

In general, the topic of adoption in Brunei is understudied. There is a very limited amount of information that explores adoption despite the formal (adoption) and informal practices (*mengasuh*) of child care. While formal adoption is legally binding and legally processed, *mengasuh* is a cultural form of informal childcare with no legal arrangements. The most recent data highlighted the increase in adoption from 100 children in 2001 to more than 200 children by 2006 (Som Sujimon, 2014). However, this data is not sufficient in the investigation of the experiences of the adoptive parents, nor does it contain a long-term record of adoptions. Because adoptions in Islam differ from the West, and the existing practice of *mengasuh* [informal childcare], an investigation is required as to how adoptions in Brunei are implemented in accordance with Islamic principles and legislation. With different layers of concerns, there is a need for an examination as to what extent the needs of adoptive families are met, including their long-term concerns in raising their children. This is to ensure the rights of the child are still maintained and discover how adoptive parents can ensure the maintenance of their rights while their parental responsibilities are transferred to them to a certain extent. This is especially for Muslim adoptive mothers who can play a huge role in easing the relationships between themselves as a representative of their family and their adopted child.

### Research Questions

The main question that this study seeks to answer is: What is Muslim adoption in Brunei? For further examinations, this study overall seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is Muslim adoption in Brunei?
2. What services are available for adoptive parents?
3. How do adoptive mothers navigate their relationship with their adopted child?

### Research Aim and Objectives

This research aims to explore the experiences of Muslim adoptive mothers in Brunei Darussalam who have adopted at least one child. By exploring the adoptive experiences, the research will be able to provide a deeper comprehension of the process of adoption, how it is facilitated and how that can influence the adoptive motherhood experience. Moreover, this research can help in improving current policies that address adoption services to enhance adoptive parents' experiences.

There are three main objectives for this research:

1. To discover what services are available for adoptive mothers
2. To explore and examine what challenges Muslim adoptive mothers may face
3. To investigate to what extent adoptive motherhood is influenced by social, cultural, and religious beliefs

### Significance of Research

Prior studies have not explored the complexities of Muslim adoptions, especially in the context of motherhood experiences. This gap in knowledge needs to be explored due to the complexities and intersections that exist between the Islamic principles in the concept of adoption, and the cultural context of Bruneian norms that shape the experiences of motherhood. This research has the potential to improve the understanding and provide insights into how Muslim mothers navigate their roles, which is invaluable to review how adoption services and policies have managed to aid the lifelong journeys of Muslim adoptive mothers in Brunei. By investigating how these mothers negotiate their roles and values in a cultural and religious framework, can contribute to the body of knowledge as an academic resource regarding adoptive parenthood from a unique background and help policymakers review and improve their services.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

### Research Design

To examine and understand the difficulties of Malay-Muslim adoptive mothers in Brunei, a phenomenological approach was used. It is defined as a method of approach to understanding social and psychological phenomena from different vantage points of people who share the same phenomena. By using this approach, it analyses rich descriptive data gathered qualitatively from their thoughts and lived experiences with adoption. For this research, the experiences of adoptive mothers are specifically used to study the phenomena of adoption.

**Research Procedures**

Due to the use of a phenomenological approach, the parents are interviewed individually or with their partners to fully utilise the data collection (Creswell, 1998). The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted informally for an interactive exchange while using a list of questions as a guide. Before the interviews began, they were all briefed about the research objectives and purposes and were made aware of their right to withhold information if they do not wish to share it. All the interviews were carried out in locations chosen by the participants that they found were comfortable and convenient such as in their office or their homes. With verbal permission, the interviews were audio recorded and were done with a mixture of the Bruneian-Malay and English language, and were later transcribed into English. There were challenges in doing so because it was time-consuming, and the use of phrases that is usually understood in Malay are not something that could be directly translated such as ‘*bunting pelamin*’ [newly-weds who got pregnant immediately after they got married]. And so, the final translations were clear but may not deliver the same level of quality of understanding that would have been illustrated in the original language. Moreover, the data analysis was also time consuming due to the different experiences in adoption amongst the respondents. Overall, transcriptions and data analysis took a month to complete.

The rationale of this method was because of the limitations of data based on the scope of research. While having the policies and laws, and literature review as a base, the semi-structured interview provided a general structure for open responses within the topic discussed. Other options such as open-ended questions would allow more variation of responses which would make it difficult to collect the pattern. No quantitative data was collected or attempted to be included because of the rich data that needed to be collected to compile the analytical responses.

The sample participants were gathered through a method of snowball sampling which is by recruiting people who share the same phenomena and were available to be interviewed with the help of current participants’ networks (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). The participants selected were Malay-Muslim adoptive mothers who have adopted at least one child from infancy with legal certification of adoption. Single mothers and married mothers are included to identify the commonalities that they may share, despite being a different form of family unit.

A total of five interviews were included in this study, which consisted of two single mothers and three married mothers. In order to protect the privacy of the participants and avoid possible ethical issues, their identities are made anonymous. They are given pseudonyms that will be used for references in the following discussions. Below are details of the participants to further elaborate the profiles of each and their significance to the research.

**Table 1: Sample of Married Mothers**

Participants	Method of Breastfeeding	No. of Adopted Children	Age of Children as of 2023	Agent of Adoption
Fatimah	Induced Lactation	1	6	MKM
Adibah			5	
Rina	None	2	25 & 23	JAPEM

**Table 2: Sample of Single Mothers**

Participants	Method of Breastfeeding	No. of Adopted Children	Age of Children as of 2023	Agent of Adoption
Aqilah	None	1	20	JAPEM
Nurul				Social Workers in Sabah, Malaysia

**Data Analysis**

The data was analysed using cross-case analysis. The data was analysed through printed transcripts for easier accessibility and was read numerous times to begin the process of analysis. There were handwritten notes made on the right side of the columns for interesting statements, and are also underlined when necessary. Once the initial stage of notation was completed, the themes that emerged were identified and developed and were then uploaded digitally to tabulate the themes. The next step was to map and link the shared aspects of each participant who were then grouped according to their legal adoption process first. The groups were color-coded according to when they adopted, how they adopted their child, and whether they had nursed their adopted child themselves. After that was categorized, their experiences were then coded into themes of shared experiences which was difficult to map and connect due to the varying experiences and backgrounds they had in their adoptions. However, the themes eventually emerged when taking into account a pattern of interest that was mentioned by the participants themselves. The use of colours managed to highlight the similarities and differences in their experiences which showed how the first step of cross-case analysis is useful. After the transcripts were analysed according to the outline mentioned, a thematic pattern was examined for a reflection of shared experiences in the group and to encapsulate the participants’ experiences in the phenomena explored (Willig, 2008). These themes were manually highlighted by colour coding to allow a visual representation of the themes categorized. The themes were later divided into subthemes and were revisited and changed when deemed necessary.



## CHALLENGES OF MUSLIM ADOPTIVE MOTHERS

### Transition to Motherhood and Motherhood Identity

The desire to become a mother was a key aspect in the women's experiences that emerged from the findings and their desire to birth a child which in turn affected how they perceived their adoptive experiences.

“Because before my child, I married back in 1980... I don't remember \*laughs\* And then after two years, I was still not pregnant. My age was already pretty high. Got married when I was 26 years old. By 28 I was still not pregnant when other people already had pregnant brides. Like they were immediately with child. So it was really sad, so very sad, so those two to three years it was stressful.”

(Nurul)

For nearly all the participants, they all expressed their desires to become a mother and create a family. For some, they have tied their transition to motherhood with the physical development of childbirth. This induced a fear of disconnect and uncertainty in their parental roles and relationships with their adopted child. Fatimah's comment may summarize this group.

“I think, me as a mother, I have this constant fear that I wouldn't be able to love her because she is not of my blood type. I was more concerned about that. Secondly, it was more into the finance part because at that time I was not working yet. My husband was the only one that was working. Third was that I had no maid and I don't know mothering stuff. Its something that is so knew, I felt like I had so much love but I didn't know who to give other than my husband, my nieces, my nephew, my family I mean. So to have a baby that is out of your bloodline is something that is alien. Quite alien for me because I come from a family who was always close with family. Everyone was with me. None of them were strangers. Having this one person, this tiny person bringing into your life considering it as your own child is a totally different world you know.”

(Fatimah)

The three married women in the sample suffered from infertility, which created discourses of motherhood being a part of their social norms and expectations, and how motherhood was linked with a natural instinct that is assumed for all women to possess. (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000). In motherhood literature, the idea of motherhood is therefore viewed as equivalent to womanhood (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000). The social construction of motherhood is significant to the mothers interviewed as the ideas of the 'realness' of their experiences as a mother was triggered by the expectations of biological motherhood based on childbirth. When these mothers experienced their transition into motherhood, the findings suggested that they experienced fear in their roles and responsibilities as an adoptive mother, while viewing that as a separate identity from 'normal mothers'. This is viewed as more challenging compared to being a birth mother which is significant for Muslim adoptive mothers due to the varying concerns and considerations they need to navigate throughout their lives with their adopted child.

When they were transitioning into motherhood, they described their preparations by using external sources to support and validate their skills such as seeking knowledge through books and other mothers who have direct experiences in child care because they did not trust themselves to have that maternal instinct that they initially believed to only be possible for biological mothers. For single mothers in particular, the responsibilities of maintaining the rights of their children fall fully on them. In Islam, the husband and wife have different responsibilities and typically, inheritance rights are through patriarchal lineage. Despite the maintenance of their rights over the inheritance from their respective biological fathers, as their adoptive mothers, they feel responsible to give everything they have as well. Due to the limitations of their inheritance, the participants such as Aqilah considered options that are available in the society which is through '*hibah*'. This service is not directly addressed and used as a tool to aid adoptive parents by formal institutions, however, it is available and can be used to access their wealth to gift their children legally so that the distribution of wealth in Islam is not done. However, not all were aware of this service existing, or how it can be done. During this adoption process, the relevant institutions were not involved in anything other than the legal procedures. These mothers and some with their husbands, were not aided in this transition period to guide the parents into adoptive parenthood. Most of the participants, despite their preparations for motherhood, expressed their feelings of being 'lost' in their Muslim adoptive parenthood. This perception is a separation between adoption and motherhood as an isolated experience and requires separate support networks to aid these mothers' transition. Darvill et al's (2010) study showed how during the transition into motherhood, mothers need high levels of support to lessen their burdens and feelings of helplessness. Thus, there is a need for not only social support, but also institutional support which is especially useful in aiding their understanding of their positions and limitations of Muslim adoptive parenting, and what alternatives they could do to try to fulfil as much of the child's rights. While acknowledging the differences between birth and adoptive mothers, different kinds of support is needed for adoptive mothers which is extensively more important for the maintenance of the child's rights when adopted by Muslim adoptive parent(s) due to the concerns related to biological lineage.

In Brunei, the regulation of identities is labelled according to their biological relations. Their identification card, passport, birth certificate and applications use the surname of their fathers. However, for adoptive parents, other responsibilities and roles are legally transferred to them once their adoption is processed. For adoptions to be secured, the 'adoption certificate' is obtained as a method of maintaining the biological parents' *nasab* and is produced to clarify the rights of the adoptive parents over the child because of their different surnames. For adoptive parents, this can affect them long-term and make them doubt their identity as parents. The social stigma persists in viewing adopted children as unfavourable compared to biological children, and so their experiences are unfortunately affected. For adoptive mothers, this makes maintaining their identity as a mother to be a long-term struggle.

“I find that the legal process haunts us back in a way that makes it sound like she’s not ours? So that really bummed me out. That really annoyed me. Because we don’t really consider her as an outsider. So we would like for her to be like our own. But because of these tedious legal matters, it came back to us that at the end of the day, we do know that the child is not ours by blood. That really creates, not really hatred? It’s more annoying. Yeah it’s just tiring to be reminded that she’s not ours. We hate it, we really hate the fact that we don’t like the legal matters that reminds us that she’s adopted.”

(Fatimah)

In a society with heteronormative family structures, having children is confined to the normalcy of married couples. For single mothers, their struggles are especially heightened due to their desire to be a mother without a partner.

“Yes.. My friend themselves told me, someone who worked in the religious department told her, “Its not that we mean to intrude on your personal details like if you’re a virgin or not and so on, there was this case that this woman adopted a boy. She married him. That has happened before. That’s why all these documents were needed, asking if the child has already hit puberty or not. My friend also told me that the child, once the wife died, the husband married the adopted daughter. For me, there is no way I would ever do that! Once I adopt, that child is mine. There’s no way I’d make him my husband!”

(Aqilah)

Motherhood identities have changed differently for adoptive mothers regardless of the amount of preparation they had. The reconstruction of identity is almost immediate or within a time constraint, as preparations for them were reliant on how long the process of adoption occurred. Choi et al (2005) in their study illustrated how adoptive mothers felt a sense of inadequacy which led to an even greater attempt to reconstruct their identities to be a good mother. With the pressure to adapt to their roles, the findings of this research have found that the recreation of identity is not tied to the biological act of birth. The transition itself, however, is not clear at what point it had begun.

### Internal and Societal Attachments

From the experiences of adoptive mothers, the absence of the physical aspects of ‘pregnancy’ is replaced by the experience of their adoption process to obtain the rights over their child. In spite of their different journeys, the creation of bonds between a biological mother and an adoptive mother is still similar in nature. The bonding experiences are created by nurturing those relationships, rather than just a form of physical reproduction. The social conditions of their journey to become a mother have stimulated discontent with how undervalued their experiences are because of the ongoing stigma and reminders of the status of their children to be different from a normal child. Motherhood as a concept in adoption is already a complex paradigm. In parenthood, the conventional idea of it is the physical experience of child-rearing through pregnancy and childbirth (Miall, 1996). Overall, the perception of childrearing is perceived as a frightening experience in which women are physically challenged for their identities as a mother. Breastfeeding or nursing has been viewed as a privilege that comes with motherhood, as the level of intimacy between a mother and infant creates a connection that women can obtain satisfaction from; fulfilling their duties or responsibilities as a mother. Breastfeeding boosts the health and survival of newborns, especially if it is from their own mothers. However, the adoption of these children was agreed before their birth to take effect immediately. And so, their biological mothers never breastfed their children, hence, the responsibility to nourish the children falls onto their new adoptive mother which can be accessed through other means such as using formula.

Although this may allow a new reconstruction of beliefs in validating their experiences in motherhood, there is another set of challenges for Muslim women who wish to have a more biological relationship with their child that can benefit them long-term through nursing or breastfeeding. However, not all of the women were able to nurse their children, or, were not able to seek help from their relatives who can nurse their children for them.

“Actually, at that time, my sister was pregnant. My elder sister. Her child is around the same age as my son. So she offered to feed my son. I was excited to accept her offer, but my husband didn’t want to. That’s how it is.”

(Nurul)

“I mean, we already tried to create that connection through ‘*saudara persusuan*’ [milk brother]. And her sister was really helpful. But it didn’t succeed. It was actually supposed to be two years. For him to be that *saudara persusuan* [milk brother], he was supposed to be fed for two years. Only then would he be considered that kind of sibling.”

(Rina’s husband)

In Brunei, breastfeeding has been made possible for mothers who are unable to through medical means. A method of induced lactation is available by consuming *Domperidone* prescribed through the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Unit. This service has been used, and enabled two out of five of the women interviewed to nurse their adopted children and essentially become ‘*ibu sesusuan*’ [milk mother]. According to the Islamic Family Law (2012), ‘*sesusuan*’ refers to a child that has been breastfed by a woman who is not their biological mother on at least five occasions before they turn two years old in the Islamic calendar. Being a milk mother creates a bridge of relations between the adopted child and adoptive mother that is similar to a biological relationship. In other words, the child becomes a relative by their consumption of their adoptive mother’s milk. This creates a [*mahram*] relationship, which allows skin-on-skin contact and prohibits marriage. This is especially important for an adoptive parent and adopted child who are of opposite genders. Kinship ties therefore could be consumed (Carsten, 1995), and not just limited to procreation through the natural way of reproduction. However, this does act as a deciding factor of not just their other kinship ties, but also influences their actions in social and religious practices. As failure to consume the milk from an adoptive parent or *ibu sesusuan*, is a failure to connect and permit the relations of the adoptive

parent and child to be permissible as related kin in the long run. This influences the religious beliefs and practices of the family. For example, due to their lack of relations, skin contact with each other would break their *wudhu* [ablution] as they are not *mahram*. Therefore, milking may provide an alternative to prevent these issues.

Nurul, Aqilah, and Rina could not nurse their child as they were not aware of the existence of induced lactation at all. One of the mothers, Rina, shared her struggle in becoming a mother and becoming a Muslim mother. This has caused some difficulties in how they navigate their familial relationship daily. As the participants of this research raised their children since they were newborns, to the children, they are their real mother who raised them and so, the limitations of their relationship through physical contact are hard to manage as they show their affection as mother and child. As mentioned before, genders of the opposite sex, especially those that are not related directly to them, have limitations in physical contact and visual appearances. One of the women, Nurul, described her experience during Hajj:

“When my son and I went to hajj/pilgrimage, we had to be careful. He went to walk first. He told me to be careful and to hold onto my friend. That if I were to accidentally touch him, it would ‘*batal wudhu*’/invalidate his ablution. So he was in front, and I was behind.”

(Nurul)

As Muslim mothers, this posed doubts about their duties in caring for their children, who have been cared for by them since their birth. They then relied on prayers and to *tawakkal* [trust in Allah]. They treated their children as if they were theirs, but set boundaries when religious practices were being held.

“As you know, an adopted child has no rights... The house or the land, its under my name. I want to change its rights or name to be under my child’s name. Because I don’t have my TAP my dear. That’s all. Because by law, my will would be my younger sibling’s rights. Because my son doesn’t have any rights as an adopted child. No rights at all. Unless we have a will. That will has to be in writing. Through the writing, the adopted child will be given this and that.”

(Aqilah)

In order to care for their children, adoptive parents, in general, would feel the need to fulfil this responsibility despite it not originally their right either. To understand this, the participants shared their opinions on how these children have been raised as their own despite the conflicting labels and difficulty in navigating their relationship with their children. Therefore, formal institutions could have played a role in guiding these adoptive parents with enough knowledge about the available services and awareness of alternatives to lessen the burdens that adoptive families may face. To a certain degree, the topic of adoption had seemed to be disclosed from their adopted children. For any adoptive parent, this is a difficult topic to discuss. With concerns of attachment, and social stigma, it seems that the women in this study come across social judgments of their adopted child. For instance, Aqilah’s comment can represent how social judgements will occur despite the close relationship she has with her family.

“My sis in law would do that. I meet her often. That’s how my son found out. She would say to him “You’re adopted”. That’s how he changed. In my heart, I said to myself that its not right to say that to him as a child. But I didn’t have it in me to stop her. Her husband is my younger brother. She’s the one that always reminds him that he’s adopted. That’s not something you should say to him at all! She shouldn’t do that. Like, what if she adopts herself? Does it have it in her heart to tell him he’s adopted? For me no, I don’t. That’s it. That’s how he knew about being adopted. But only now once he entered high school did he know what it meant.”

(Aqilah)

These women have expressed their surprise and disbelief when confronted with people’s assumptions on the concept of adoption which was evident to them, that it originated from the normative belief in the society on what constitutes real motherhood. As Muslim adoptive mothers, they are already presented as different from birth mothers. However, the implications of the social judgments they face have become constant reminders of their identity and role of being lesser than birth mothers despite raising their children with all their needs met. The response to their assumptions had led them to question how ‘real’ their role as a parent is. Brodzinsky (1987) created a psychosocial model that outlined how a key task for adoptive mothers to nurture attachments is especially important during infancy. The formation of attachment is especially important for women in this research due to their practicing identity as a Muslim. As mentioned in previous sections, breastfeeding is a key method to develop a biological attachment which can activate the incest taboos (Kutty, 2014) that ensure their relationships are like family.

### Social Stigma

The adoptive mothers shared their intentions to adopt children to complete the family. In Brunei, there is a certain standard of a family unit to classify the group as a family. Similar to the US, Andersen (1991) states that the ideology in North America is that real families consist of a heterosexual couple and biological children in a nuclear unit. Therefore, for any ‘regular’ family’ in Brunei, a married couple without a child is not a complete family. In the context of a Malay society, it is a common practice to continue their ‘*keturunan*’ [lineage] (Kerlogue, 2007). With the expectations of family to be constituted of biological ties, this poses a difficulty for infertile couples and unmarried individuals.



In the context of Brunei, there is a superstitious belief that if a couple is having issues in conceiving a child, they will have higher chances once they adopt a child. Most of the participants have intended to do the same but were not successful yet, or had medical complications. This brought attention to the ideas of infertility, and how that instigated most of these women's adoptions. Women such as Nurul and Fatimah, addressed how their infertility was socially stigmatized, especially as married women. The stigma of infertility has been socially constructed, and it reflects the strong influence of culture and biological ideology of the family (Miall, 1994). The struggle to reproduce has created access to medical and traditional treatments to aid their predicament. Majority of the respondents had medical issues that prevented them from producing an heir. For example, Fatimah tried medical interventions, traditional methods, surgery, and pills, but the results remained fruitless. As that option failed for most of the respondents of the research, adoption became an alternative to achieve their respective parental experience (Bartholet, 1993). The purpose of adoption is therefore to be artificially constructed as an institution for parental power over a non-relative to avoid the extinction of the family (Brosnan, 1922). As there are no orphanages, and no foster care systems, the official clarity of parenting is only through the legal procedures adoption could carry. Thus, the common practice of adoption in Brunei may mirror the maintenance of a certain attitude towards children in society (Smith, 1939). In support of understanding social stigma, Miall's research (1987) suggested how many adoptive mothers can be influenced by the perceptions of adoption by the surrounding community which can affect their feelings of how genuine their familial bonds are in their adoptive families. In this study, it has provided similar beliefs that exist in the society that consider adoptive motherhood as lesser than biological motherhood, including the bonds and emotions they have towards their children. (Miall, 1987).

The post-adoption mothering time is particularly an overwhelming experience, with adoptive mothers being especially vulnerable to the pressure and distress over the expectations of how birth mothers typically raise their children in the society. The concern is mainly towards the different expectations and how their knowledge of adoptive motherhood could undervalue their experiences. The adoptive mothers expressed their emotions that ranged from their anxieties, and uncertainties, to their acceptance of their respective situations. Brooks et al (1964b) used a model to describe the two ways adoptive mothers may negotiate their experiences: by acknowledging their differences in biological relation, or by rejecting their differences completely. Although there are evident and consistent reminders of their difference, mothers like Fatimah and Rina, have shown a manifestation of rejection of their differences in order to normalise their alternative form of family to avoid the social stigma that exists. The findings have shown, however, that they do acknowledge their differences from the birth mothers while also trying to normalize their feelings as a mother and believing their experience to be as genuine as 'real motherhood'. These findings suggest that despite the difference in experience as practicing Muslims as well, Brooks et al (1964b) work is still applicable in the contemporary world even in a social context.

Fisher (2003) suggested that in spite of the acceptance of the practices of adoption, the institution is still stigmatized which is a sentiment shared by all of the adoptive mothers. They had displayed their status as an adoptive parent but had still considered the social stigma as an ongoing issue regardless of the openness of adoption as a family institution (Grigoropoulos, 2022). Structurally, the adoptions in Brunei can be considered as open adoptions (ongoing contact between the adoptive family and biological family) that are typically done in the West, but in a different context. The maintenance of *nasab* [lineage] through things such as unchanging the surname of their adopted children, and a culture of close-knitted ties, allows ongoing contact with their birth families. This may have caused a negative reaction in fuelling their insecurities, and inadequacy of their parental statuses (Petta & Steed, 2005). The social stigma can influence these adoptive families this way as how it is possible for their parents to want their child back, or their child may wish to return to their biological families. Thus, this can cause the adoptive family unit dynamics to change from the stress of that situation. Thus, several factors can influence adoptive mothers that they may find it difficult to navigate their role as a mother and need different kinds of support to fully prepare and manage their relationships with their children long term.

## CONCLUSION

This study found that the experiences of adoptive mothers are shaped by the governing society's religious system and cultural norms. These mothers' experiences are different from the traditional form of motherhood; thus, their experiences are used to clarify that their alternative form of motherhood still makes them a mother because their nurturing experiences encapsulates motherhood. In other words, although adoption is an alternative way to practise motherhood, there needs to be a negotiation to what extent they can 'mother' their child compared to biological mothers which are where most of the tensions in the negotiation of a 'good mother' exists for these women. Adoptive mothers therefore have created an alternative space of identity for them to negotiate and accommodate their beliefs by relating to their ideas of what constitutes a good mother while separating their motherhood experiences from biological mothers. They manage the tensions that come along with being adoptive Muslim mothers by reconciling their identities to conform with social norms and expectations. Despite the limitations that have restricted the relationship between Muslim mothers and their children, once the paperwork is finished, the women become their bonded mothers for the rest of their lives without diminishing the realities of their unconventional state.

This research is limited to a small sample who have adopted their children in the last 25 years. In that duration, the regulation of adoptions was not as efficient as the current society. However, there is no guarantee a significant change has been made in the influence of adoption cases and processes. There is a great need to pursue further research due to the concept of adoption itself to be intermixed in Bruneian society with informal adoption. Due to cultural practices, the dynamics of adoptive motherhood are unstable. Much more extensive research would be valuable on adoptive mothers that ranges from different adoptive methods and backgrounds, along with considering the mothers of informal childcare.

Although this research is done within a specific cultural and religious context, the experiences of these adoptive mothers can be applicable in other countries as well. The struggles they faced are shared with other adoptive mothers, it is just that theirs were solidified through a religious principle. Albeit, other religions may have different restrictions and principles, the awareness of the religious limitations may cause an extra concern in their motherhood experiences. Other than that, the cultural practices of adoption through informal childcare can also be taken in another context. It is just that in this research, it is a bounded socio-cultural belief system that

is founded amongst the existing child welfare systems, although not recognised or addressed directly in legislation and laws. Within this context, the importance of child care is highlighted often in any adoptive research. Within the Bruneian society, this research may demonstrate another way that is socially acceptable for child care although more explorations are needed at how those experiences may differ or be similar to legally adopted experiences. Interestingly, despite the normalized practice of child care, there is still a social stigma that is linked to their experiences and situations.

The services, resources, and policies have shaped the relationships and lives of these adoptive mothers and children and have managed to provide the necessary resources to ease their experience in motherhood and fulfilling their children's needs. Overall, there are services available for them to access such as *hibah* and induced lactation. Despite the accessibilities that have been provided through their journey to adopt their children, adoptive parents are not guided by the formal institutions for long-term challenges such as those mentioned. Due to religious obligations and norms, they are constantly reminded and pressured of their differing status and method of motherhood and are in constant negotiation of their roles in their child's life, and as a woman and mother in the society. Thus, to also enhance the aid to children in need and support the journey of these women, there should be a collaboration between the policymakers, institutional support, and religious institutes to help adoptive mothers into integrate their experiences of motherhood to oppose the ongoing stigma and acknowledge their experiences. This can address the needs of adoptive families while still upholding Islamic values and aiding them in effectively caring for their children under the guidance and correct methods in accordance with Islam.

Overall, the study was conducted within a limited scope of research as a starting point of investigation on adoptions in Brunei. Other potential areas have not been discussed nor included in the research, but, further investigations may examine other perspectives of the adoptive family: adoptive fathers and adopted children. And, other forms of adoptions may be explored such as interracial adoptions, and perhaps informal child care within the context of Brunei. Lastly, research about adoption can be extended and explored more from the perspectives of formal institutions to provide a more thorough examination of the adoption framework.

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