# 'Masuk Melayu' in The Context of Conversion to Islam

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**Abstract**

By employing Wimmer's (2008) four dimensions of variation of ethnic boundaries, this study discusses the factors and conditions that lead to the existence of the 'Masuk Melayu' identity in Brunei Darussalam. The interview data collected from 56 informants suggest that the high degree of cultural differentiation, social closure and political salience in the 1960s and 1980s highlights the 'Masuk Melayu' identity of the converts. However when the degree of these dimensions was lowered in the 1990s onwards due to the socio-cultural transformations following Brunei's independence in 1984, this study has found that the 'Masuk Melayu' identity did not occur during the period. This study also suggests that the fourth dimension, generational stability, has no impact on the 'Masuk Melayu' identity due to the converts' unchallenged recognition of their kinship and personal networks.

*Keywords:*
Masuk Melayu; religious conversion; Islam; ethnic boundaries; Brunei Darussalam

## Introduction

There has been an acceleration of interest in the recent past to study the relationship between religion and human identity development. More studies have successfully bridged the gap between these fields of religious orientation and identity formation. The study of religion and its effects was extensively explored by Mol (1976) when he argued that the chief function of religion is the stabilisation of individual and group identity. Taking Mol's view further, Gillespie (1991) identified similar effects a religious conversion could have on self and group identity. He argued that a "[c]onversion is a major source of stability and strength and possesses roles and social mores which provide one's identity itself" (Gillespie 1991: 140).

Gillespie's argument is particularly apposite in the context of conversion to Islam which not only means an end to the practices of one's previous tradition but it also means an essential adoption of a new way of life. Muslim converts must readily practice the five pillars of Islam which includes prayer five times a day and fasting during the month of *Ramadhan*. They must also fulfil other religious obligations such as adopting Islamic dietary laws and dress code as

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well as abandoning customs and traditions that are in conflict with their new faith (Kumpoh 2011).

As the patterns of behaviour of the Muslim converts break their original group norms, the converts could lose membership of their group. However, if there are other groups within the same framework or social system, the converts could seek a new affiliation with a group that has similar patterns of religious or cultural behaviour. Barth (1969) recognised the phenomenon of an identity change when there are continuous interactions along the social boundaries of different groups which could potentially result in assimilation and identity change.

## *'Masuk Melayu'*

The correlation between the conversion to Islam and changing identity has been long recognised by scholars who generally agree on the fact that the ethnic identities of Southeast Asians are flexible and this flexibility of identity depends on the circumstances in which the identity is articulated and expressed. Conversion to Islam is always pointed out as an important element that generates a subtle force on the ethnic identity of the converts. In this context, the term *'Masuk Melayu'* is generally used to refer to the realisation of this particular identity (Antaran 1995; Bala 2014; Agusti 2018; Harahap 2019). The term *'Masuk Melayu'* literally means 'becoming Malay', and King (1989:239) specifically argued that "[i]n the island world, religious conversion to Islam has usually resulted in former non-Muslims not only becoming Muslim but also over time ultimately changing their ethnic identities to become Malay".

A review of the current literature concerning *'Masuk Melayu'* reveals that what is initially a social perception, over time, becomes a hard fact as it has been repeatedly mentioned within the academic circles where it naturally became conventional wisdom. In other words, there is a widely-used assertion that Muslim converts experience identity change as a result of their religious conversion, although the assertion may not be supported by empirical evidence. Thus, this paper attempts to analyse in-depth the *'Masuk Melayu'* identity from 'everyday-defined' social reality (Shamsul 1996), that is, the actual lived experiences of the converts in order to understand factors, circumstances and conditions that lead (or do not lead) to identity change. The informants for this study are the Dusuns who have converted to Islam between the 1960s and the 2000s. The Dusuns are one of the non-Muslim ethnic groups in Brunei and in recent times, there has been an increasing number of Dusuns who converted to Islam. The Dusuns are traditionally animists and they believe the universe and their destiny is shaped by *Derato*, their God of Prosperity. The Dusuns express their appreciation towards *Derato* and seek remedies for their illness through the ritual practices of *Temarok*. The Dusuns are mostly live in Tutong District where this study was primarily conducted.

## Brunei's socio-cultural transformations

In order to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the 'Masuk Melayu' of the Dusuns, it is worthwhile to describe relevant socio-cultural transformations undergone by the country.

One of the turning points in the history of Brunei is the promulgation of the country's first written constitution in 1959 which promotes the key roles that Malay Language, Malay

ethnicity and Islam played in bolstering Brunei's nation-building efforts. The promotion of Malay Language and ethnicity, and Islam was further strengthened with the declaration of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Islamic Malay Monarchy) or MIB as the State Concept in 1984, the year Brunei gained her full independence from the British. The MIB-driven policies were evidently promoted in all spheres and dictated major developments in education, financial institutions and public service.

By the 1990s, the implementation of the MIB policies had led to the breakdown of cultural and social boundaries between different ethnic groups. The promotion of the Islamic world of Malay Language, culture and ethnicity had made Malay the mainstream culture and ethnicity in the country (Kumpoh, Wahsalfelah & Haji-Othman 2017) As a result, the cultural and religious elements which were previously exclusive to the Malay ethnic group infiltrated and influenced the daily life of the Brunei people, irrespective of their ethnic background to the point that many of the non-Malay ethnic groups have a high tendency to adopt some elements of the Malay culture other than their original culture (Saxena 2007). In the case of the Dusun ethnic group in particular, the constant exposure to the mainstream Malay culture and knowledge had produced a community that exhibits Malay-like behaviour and lifestyle and thus affected the exclusivity of the ethnic features of the Dusuns such as the native language, religion and culture.

## Theoretical Background

In his multi-process theory of ethnic boundaries, Wimmer (2008) argues that the boundary-work concept is an integral element in membership-identification within an ethnic group, as well as the construction and maintenance of differences between in-group and out-group. The theory, highly argued as "the most theoretically sophisticated synthesis of constructivist scholarship on ethnicity"(Brubaker 2014: 805), is relevant to this study as the identity of the Dusun Muslim converts relies on their membership affiliation with the Dusun ethnic group (Kumpoh 2016).

Within the main framework of his theory, Wimmer (2008) recognises three conditions which are significant in shaping the characteristics of an ethnic boundary. They are dimensions of variation, strategies and constraints. This study focuses on the dimensions of variation of an ethnic group. The theory posits four types of dimensions of variation that are the basis for characterising an ethnic boundary: cultural differentiation, social closure, political salience, and generational stability.

In terms of cultural differentiation, it is hypothesised that the level of cultural distinctiveness of an ethnic group correlates with the group's boundary whereby the more obvious cultural distinction that an ethnic group exhibits, the more impermeable the ethnic boundary would be to outsiders. Whereas members of a highly socially-closed ethnic group tend to behave in conservative manners in determining who belongs to which category, and thus they are less tolerant in accepting those whom they consider as outsiders. In fact, outsiders and those who do not conform to the culture and practice of the ethnic group tend to be discriminated against. Such high level of social closure maintained by an ethnic group directly correlates with the high level of political salience of the group where a politically salient ethnic

group identifies the 'us-ness' strictly within the ethnic boundary only. Generational stability is the last dimension of variation that determines the degree of permeability of an ethnic boundary for any boundary-crossing activities. Wimmer (1998: 984) argues that "the most stable boundaries are found among people who identify individuals through multigenerational, unilineal descent lines". Thus when an ethnic group exhibits a strong generational stability, the ethnic boundary is impermeable to outsiders.

The theory then explores the relationship between these four dimensions of variation in a path dependency perspective. It is hypothesised that at the one end of the spectrum, an ethnic group whose boundary is politically salient and socially closed, and that the group sustains a high degree of cultural differentiation over different generations is not easily permeable to outsiders. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a high degree of flexibility and tolerance towards outsiders as the ethnic group demonstrates a low level of political salience and social closure. At this particular spectrum, cultural separateness and an affiliation to ancestral line are not strongly upheld by the group. Wimmer (2008:1004) however also suggests that "[u]nder certain circumstances, a path may be abandoned and change becomes possible".

## Methods and Procedures

This study aims to provide explanations of what occurs after a conversion to Islam takes place within the ethnic boundaries of the Dusuns, and thus offers an analysis on *'Masuk Melayu'* identity. The experience of the Dusun Muslim converts were analysed from the perspective of their everyday life both before and after their religious conversion to Islam.

This study employed qualitative technique of analytic induction. As the effects of the changes in the cultural, religious and social settings that occurred in the 20th century Brunei significantly influenced the conversion experience of the Dusuns, it is crucial to select informants who converted in different decades in order to identify the patterns in the conversion experience corresponding to the wider changes undergone by the country. Thus, the study interviewed converts who embraced Islam in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in order to capture the effects of the historical period on the conversion experience of the Muslim converts. In addition, the study also sought data from non-Muslim Dusuns. It is crucial to gather data from this group as their interviews offer an insider's view on what the Dusuns consider as significant changes that occurred in their religious and cultural lives during the period under study. The recruitment strategy of the informants for this research was done through a purposive or judgment sampling to identify *information-rich* cases from which a researcher can acquire relevant data to answer the research questions (Patton 2015).

Wimmer's dimensions of variation provide the thematic framework for the examination of the informants' life experiences. In total, data was gathered from 46 Muslim converts and 10 non-Muslim Dusuns through face-to-face in-depth interviews. As the interviews were conducted in Dusun Metteng dialect and *Bahasa Melayu Brunei*, the country's lingua franca, the selected parts of the interview transcripts which are included in this paper as quotations were translated into English. All data provided by the informants are confidential. To safeguard the anonymity of the informants, this paper assigns pseudonym for each informant and only their age and year of conversion are identified.

# Findings and Discussion

This study recognises two major time periods: the 1960s to the 1980s as the period during which *'Masuk Melayu'* identity was most likely to occur, and the period of the 1990s onward when *'Masuk Melayu'* identity was no longer manifested in the everyday life of the Dusun Muslim converts.

## *'Masuk Melayu'* period

Taking Wimmer's hypotheses closer to the analysis of 'Masuk Melayu', the analysis of the interview data suggests that the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are the period where the way of life of the Muslim converts triggered obvious differences between them and the other Dusuns. The marked differences were primarily due to the high level of cultural differentiation, social closure and political salience exhibited by the Dusun ethnic group during the period. On the other hand, the analysis on the generational stability does not produce evidence similar to that is produced by the analysis of the other three dimensions.

## Cultural Differentiation

During the *'Masuk Melayu'* period, conversion to Islam not only highlighted the differences in religion but it also drew attention to every difference that the Dusun Muslim converts could possibly have with their ethnic group. For instance, the converts were no longer involved in Dusun leisure activities such as gambling and they now had different food preferences. Whereas the Dusuns were not keen on the Islamic laws, which were viewed by the Dusuns as burdensome and too difficult to accommodate. Pork and alcohol are not permissible for Muslim consumption and at that time, most Dusuns considered such dietary restriction as ridiculous. A 76-year-old male convert who embraced Islam in 1986 still remembered what appeared to be a cynical question repeatedly asked by his grandfather: "how come a religion bans its followers from enjoying such good food and imbibing good wine?" [Ali, pers. comm.]

Such cultural clashes demonstrates the high level of cultural differences between the Dusuns and Malays which played out in the everyday lives of the Muslim converts during the *'Masuk Melayu'* period. Yusof, a 64-year-old Dusun who converted in 1985, revealed his experience when he had to make sure the dishes he ate were religiously permissible. Fortunate for him, his family did not eat porcine meat so he did not have to keep separate utensils and cookware.

Another kind of cultural separateness between the Muslims and the Dusuns is the way the converts dressed themselves. The way one dresses himself or herself can "make [a] significant statement about religious belonging and commitment" and also "mark subtle differences between groups" (Cosgel & Minkler 2004: 343). As the converts began to wear Muslim attire and *hijab* for female converts, they were automatically considered as becoming more Malay than Dusun. This significantly provides a clear indication of the occurrence of *'Masuk Melayu'*.

## Social closure

During the period of *'Masuk Melayu'*, the Dusun villages were inaccessible as there were no proper roads that linked the villages with one another and the capital city. Such geographical isolation in many ways defined the mono-linguistic character of the Dusuns at that time. Many informants revealed that only a small number of Dusuns could speak *Bahasa Melayu Brunei* while others could only interact in the ethnic language. Such a geographical isolation and distinctive linguistic circumstance is a reflection of the high degree of social closure of the Dusuns and they were able to maintain the exclusivity of societal features such as native tongue, religion and culture.

Wimmer (2008) suggests that when a group's boundary demonstrates a high level of social closure, it has a strong tendency to fend off outsiders through discrimination and exclusion. The analysis of the interview data reveals that the Dusuns excluded the converts from the ethnic parameters simply because they perceived the converts as no longer sharing Dusun cultural and religious identity. Many informants who converted in the 1960s and the following two decades spoke about the discrimination they faced after their conversion and how their conversion provoked ill-feeling among their Dusun family and relatives. Fatimah, a 61-year-old housewife, shared her painful experience soon after her conversion. Her cousins kept telling her that her conversion was unnecessary and it was an ill-considered decision. The informant admitted that it was an extremely difficult time for her as she became the recipient of criticism and open ridicule from her family and relatives.

Clearly, this is the challenging situation facing the Muslim converts in the 1960s and the two decades following when conversion to Islam highlighted the differences in religion, daily life practices, food preferences and restrictions between them and their Dusun family and relatives. As the converts and the Dusuns could not compromise any of their principles, it inevitably resulted in rejection received by the Muslim converts.

## Political Salience

As mentioned earlier, the practical definition of political salience of an ethnic boundary is that the members of the ethnic group define their interests in terms of those of the entire ethnic community. Taking into account the fact that the Dusun ethnic group is a close-knit community, one can expect that the definition of political salience, from the perspective of the Dusuns, also entails personal and kinship relations. Expectedly, the Dusuns during this period identified their ethnicity as their most (and the only) politically salient identity. The high level of cultural differentiation and social closure of the Dusuns' ethnic boundary during the period allowed the ethnic group to maintain the exclusivity of the social, cultural and religious characteristics of the group which made the Dusun ethnic identity easily the most politically salient identity of the group. Thus, it is understandable that the Dusuns maintained the social cohesion of the ethnic group and demonstrated a conservative attitude towards the converts' new lifestyle through discrimination and exclusion. This is a clear illustration of how the Dusuns protected the group's closeness and the distinctive sense of the 'us-ness' of the ethnic group.

Interestingly, this study found that the high political salience of the Dusun ethnic identity did not change the communal interests of the Muslim converts. Despite the fact that cultural differences existed between them and their Dusun family, their personal interests remained within the sphere of their ethnic group, such as to protect the good name of the ethnic group and to continuously engage in communal activities. Moreover, as many of the Dusuns who converted during the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s were the first-generation of converts, they strongly considered their ties to kinship and the permissible aspects of Dusun customs and culture as fundamental to their being. They still attended family functions such as weddings and funerals despite the family rejection.

Thus, the finding shows that the *'Masuk Melayu'* identity was not manifested through everyday experiences of the converts from the perspective of political salience. In comparison to the effects of the high level of cultural differentiation and social closure of the Dusuns' ethnic boundary on the life experience of the converts, the political salience of the Dusun identity did not prevent the converts from behaving in favour of their ascribed ethnic identity. Although they experienced exclusion, their personality and life experience nevertheless still expressed Dusun cohesiveness and pride.

Looking at this unique situation, it can be argued that *'Masuk Melayu'* identity is possibly a product of an imposed categorisation of 'being Malay'. The analysis of the interview data shows how the identity persisted even though the Muslim converts did not distance themselves from the ethnic group. As an established ethnic group which strongly clung to its exclusive tradition and religion, the Dusuns expected the members of the ethnic group to respect and share similar community values and cultural norms. Because of this expectation, the Muslim converts were rejected outright by the Dusuns as they no longer professed religion similar to the rest of the community, nor could they live a lifestyle like that of their parents. Consequently, as the new lifestyle of the converts now resembled that of the Malays, the converts were seen by the Dusuns as having an instant shift towards Malay-like identity, resulting in the imposition of the *'Masuk Melayu'* identity on the converts.

## Generational stability

Wimmer (2008) argues that generational stability entails a strong adherence to ancestry and lineage. In the case of the Dusuns, they put the highest value on kin relationships and regarded family institutions as the fundamental unit of society. Accordingly, the stability of family structure becomes the ultimate source of the intergenerational transmission of values, beliefs, aspirations and self-esteem through emotional closeness and adherence to the value of filial obligation (Bengston 2001).

However in the eyes of the Dusuns, conversion to another religion inhibited intergenerational religious continuity and potentially jeopardised the stability of family structure and the multigenerational bonds. They believed that change of name which Muslim converts took following their conversion had negative impacts on familial relationships. It is common for new converts to change not only their names but also their family's name (father's name) which would be changed to *'Abdullah'* (the servant of Allah). A 53-year-old Dusun argued that the name-changing ritual somehow confirmed the Dusuns' perception that the Muslim converts had abandoned and given up their family:

> I think the reasons why the Dusuns were against Islam has something to do with the name-changing. If I convert to Islam for example, my name would no longer be 'the daughter of (anon.)' but it would become "the daughter of *Abdullah*'. [Mala, pers. comm.]

The change of name is recognised as a way to align or to facilitate one's change in social status and "to match one's changing image of self, or image that one wishes to convey to others" (Drury & McCarthy 1980: 311). For a small, close-knit community like the Dusuns, the name change as a response to religious conversion to Islam is however seen as a starting point of cultural and religious divergence from the community.

Interestingly, despite the name change, the converts on the other hand maintained the communal relationship and adhered to the ready availability of supportive networks, which are clearly one of the protective mechanisms of social belonging that promote bonds of solidarity between different generations (Clark & Dubash 1998). For instance, a 57-year-old convert who embraced Islam in 1987 expressed his commitment to kinship networks:

> While it was really a trying time for me as my father resented my decision to convert to Islam, I never ever thought of leaving. [Hassan, pers. comm.]

Thus, as the Dusuns put great value on the maintenance of family institution (Chong 1996), so did the Dusun Muslim converts. Their new religious commitment to Islam did not override the consciousness of the converts' obligation to their Dusun lineage and their loyalty to their Dusun identity. They might not be able to express their obligation through ethnic rituals but the converts maintained the existing commitment and responsibility that they had towards their Dusun family. Moreover, Islamic teachings foster kinship ties and preservation of family values and this encouraged the converts even more to maintain supportive relationships with their Dusun family and relatives.

## The Irrelevance of *'Masuk Melayu'* identity

This study found that from the 1990s onwards, the Dusuns were no longer a socially closed and culturally marked ethnic group. This finding was derived from the experience of the Dusun Muslims who converted during the 1990s onwards where their conversion no longer triggered conspicuous cultural differences between them and the Dusuns. Even those converted in the earlier decades noticed that the cultural differentiation had become significantly less in the 1990s.

## Diminishing cultural differentiation and social closure

Compared to the high degree of cultural separation between the Dusun ethnic group and the Muslim converts in the earlier decades, this study found that cultural differentiation between the two has become less conspicuous in the 1990s onwards. Particularly for the recent converts, they all agreed that they did not have to make major changes to their lifestyle after their

conversion as their former Dusun lifestyle did not differ greatly from their new Muslim way of life. For instance, unlike the earlier generation of Muslim converts who needed to be cautious with food served by non-Muslims during the 1960s and the 1980s, it was less common for those who converted in the 1990s onwards to prioritise the food restriction in their daily life, as exemplified by a 65-year-old Dusun who converted to Islam in 1998. He did not have to worry about food that was prepared by his non-Muslim relatives:

> I do not have to worry about the food. I know they [the relatives] would not deliberately serve me with non-*halal* food. In fact, I know most of my Dusun relatives prefer *halal* meat because they have Muslim children living with them. [Ahmad, pers. comm.]

Other evidence that supports the decreasing level of cultural differentiation between the Dusun Muslims and the Dusun ethnic group is the similarity in the way the converts and the Dusuns dress. Informants who converted in the 1960s and 1980s agreed that that the way they dressed is a symbolic pointer to their changing lifestyle. However, for the recent converts, their Islamic way of dressing did not necessarily set them further apart from the Dusuns. This is because non-Muslims in Brunei are already accustomed to wearing Islamic-like dress such as the headscarf or the Malay traditional costumes which comprise of *Baju Kurung*, *Baju Cara Melayu* and *Baju MIB*. Thus, a conversion and a changing dress manner of the converts no longer make them appear conspicuously different from anyone else in their ethnic group. There is nothing distinctive in the way the new converts dress themselves that could make them be regarded as outsiders.

Moreover, the diminishing level of cultural differentiation between the Dusuns and the Muslim converts had lessened the degree of social closure of the Dusun ethnic group. Any sense of boundaries the Dusuns previously felt and built after a religious conversion gradually disappeared, as perceived by a 64-year-old Dusun whose daughter converted to Islam in 2006:

> I don't feel any different after my daughter converted. Our relationship remains the same. She still lives here with us and we still have our meals together... [Gana, pers. comm.]

This confirms the effect of path dependency of Wimmer's theory where the decreasing level of cultural differentiation of the ethnic boundary of the Dusun ethnic group reduces the level of social closure of the boundary that allows the addition of new cultures, new people and new ways of life within the ethnic realm of the group. This means what that was previously seen as culturally foreign and characteristically Malay now become part of the Dusun's daily life. Thus, as the conversion does not make the convert appear exceptionally different from the Dusuns, it is now somewhat irrelevant to label the converts with the *'Masuk Melayu'* identity.

## Generational Stability and Lowering Political Salience

With the lowering level of cultural differences and social closure of the Dusun ethnic group, the ethnic realm of the group had expanded to one that accommodated Dusun Muslim converts.

Because of the changing views on the converts, the Dusuns gradually redefined the 'us-ness' of the ethnic group by including the converts within the ethnic realm. This certainly affects the exclusivity of the ethnic group which then lowers the political salience of its ethnic boundary. The re-definition of 'us-ness' helps to re-strengthen the generational stability of the Dusuns. As cultural boundaries between the Dusuns and the Muslim converts have significantly diminished, the Dusuns and the converts can easily maintain familial relationships that ensure the high degree of generational stability. The Dusuns, in their interviews, did not hesitate to regard the Muslim converts as part of their family whereas the converts continued to demonstrate their affiliation to the ethnic group and repeatedly expressed their sense of belonging to their family and villages, as shared by a 66-year-old convert who chose Islam as his new faith in 2007:

> I never wanted to move out from this village as this is the place where my parents live and I grew up here. Not even after I converted to Islam... [Hashim, pers. comm.]

Although the theory suggests that due to the path dependency effect, the generational stability is significantly affected in the way that the identification to a group becomes ambiguous, the path "is not deterministic concept" (Wimmer 2008: 1004). In this regard, one needs to take into account the fact that the Dusuns value highly family, kinship and community. Family-oriented values such as respect towards elders, filial obligation and responsibility are passed down from generations and this has laid the foundation of family structure (Chong 1996). Thus, even though the Dusuns are no longer an exclusive ethnic grouping where many Dusuns left their home village due to occupational mobility, the sense of responsibility towards family and community remain their primary interest. This helps to maintain the generational stability and thus proves the irrelevance of the *'Masuk Melayu'* identity in the 1990s onwards.

## Conclusion

The above discussion attempts to demonstrate that *'Masuk Melayu'* identity only occurs when the level of cultural differentiation, social closure and political salience of the ethnic group is at a high level. Taking into account Brunei's historical context, the *'Masuk Melayu'* identity primarily occurs during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s when there were conspicuous cultural and religious markers distinguishing the ethnic groups from one another. During this period, it is easier to distinguish observable behaviours which stem from different religions. Due to the high level of cultural differentiation between the Dusun ethnic group and the Muslims, the new lifestyle that the converts adopted after their conversions resembled to that of the Malays and thus indicates the occurrence of the *'Masuk Melayu'* identity.

In contrast, the effects of the historical period in the 1990s onwards led to the diminishing of cultural differences which were once marked and held to separate the different ethnic groups. Moreover, as the Dusuns typify a Muslim way of life as normal and understandable, the *'Masuk Melayu'* identity is no longer valid in the present context of the country.

This study also found that *'Masuk Melayu'* identity is closely bound up with the affirmation of distinct ethnic culture, and thus the identity cannot be said to exist when analysing the behaviours of the converts from the perspective of generational stability. The fact

that the converts continuously emphasised on and upheld family values and ties, no matter in what decade or period the conversion took place, the Dusun Muslim converts developed their distinctive effects of path dependency.

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