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DISUNITY, DISTANCE, DISREGARD:
THE POLITICAL FAILURE OF ISLAMISM IN LATE
COLONIAL INDONESIA

Robert E. Elson

THE TAO OF ISLAM: CHENG HO AND THE LEGACY
OF CHINESE MUSLIMS IN PRE-MODERN JAVA

Sumanto Al Qurtuby

THE AUGMENTATION OF RADICAL IDEAS AND
THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA

Mohd Kamarulnizam Abdullah

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Alexander Horstmann

Gender, Tabligh and the “Docile Agent”: The Politics of Faith and Embodiment among the Tablighi Jama’at

Abstraksi: Sebagai sebuah komunitas, Jamaah Tabligh memiliki jutaan anggota yang telah tersebar baik di Eropa, Amerika, Afrika, Australia, bahkan lebih khusus di Asia. Di wilayah Asia Selatan, seperti di Raiwind (Pakistan) dan Tungi (Bangladesh), komunitas yang didirikan Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885–1944) pada sekitar tahun 1920an di Banglewali, New Delhi, India ini memiliki anggota yang cukup besar yakni sekitar 2 juta jamaah. Pun demikian di wilayah Asia Tenggara. JT berekspansi tidak hanya di wilayah yang dihuni oleh mayoritas muslim, tapi juga di wilayah-wilayah minoritas muslim seperti di Kamboja dan Mindanao, Filipina. Sementara di Eropa, dibangunnya Masjid Tablighi di Dewsbury, Inggris, tahun 1978—selanjutnya menjadi markas besar jamaah tabligh—menjadikan komunitas ini semakin cepat berkembang di berbagai wilayah dunia. Dan seiring kuatnya relasi Jamaah Tabligh dengan madrasah Dar al-Ulum Deoband, India—didirikan oleh Muhammad Qasim Nanaotawi (1832-1879) dan Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1829-1905) pada 1866—pada perjalannya komunitas ini turut memfokuskan gerakannya pada wilayah pendidikan Islam.

Umumnya mereka dapat diidentifikasi melalui beberapa karakteristik utama mulai dari penampilan (memelihara janggut bagi laki-laki), cara berpakaian (menggunakan gamis atau jubah serta surban bagi kaum laki-laki dan kerudung yang menutupi seluru tubuh atau cadar (penutup wajah) bagi perempuan), metode berdakwah seperti jaulah (berkunjung secara rutin ke rumah-rumah ummat Islam di sekitar masjid), khuruj (bepergian selama 3 hari dalam satu bulan, 40 hari dalam satu tahun, atau 4 bulan selama seumur hidup), ataupun upaya mereka yang selalu menjauhkan diri

dari perbincangan politik ataupun hal-hal yang masih menjadi khilafiyah (soal agama yang memancing perdebatan/beda pendapat).

Artikel ini berupaya menyoroti peran perempuan pada komunitas *Jamaah Tabligh* di beberapa wilayah Asia. Dengan beberapa pengamatan mendalam—terfokus pada wilayah Thailand Selatan khususnya daerah Nakhonsrithammarat dan Songkhla—penulis mensinyalir bahwa perempuan memainkan peran kunci pada proses tumbuh dan berkembangnya gerakan ini. Melalui merekalah transformasi nilai keislaman berjalan efektif dari satu generasi ke generasi selanjutnya. Memang, institusi keluarga dalam batas tertentu sangat besar pengaruhnya bagi sebuah pembentukan karakter pribadi seseorang. Dan ini akhirnya melekatkan sebuah fungsi penting perempuan, yakni mereka berperan menjaga moralitas, ketaatan, dan lebih jauh kesalehan anggota keluarganya, terkhusus anak-anak. Hal ini menurut penulis sesuai dengan beberapa ajaran serta rujukan publikasi yang diyakini oleh para jamaahnya.

Dalam pandangan mereka—didasarkan pada kitab *Faza'il-e-A'maal* (*Virtuous Deeds*) karangan Muhammad Zakariya Kandhlawi—standar nilai bagi seorang perempuan adalah bahwa seyogyanya ia hanya menjadi istri ataupun ibu yang selain merawat anak-anak mereka, juga melayani suami mereka yang notabene merupakan pemberi nafkah dan pelindung keluarga. Tempat utama mereka bukan di ruang-ruang publik, tapi di rumah, tempat mereka tinggal. Andai pun mereka pergi, maka utamanya adalah mengunjungi markaz—pusat aktivitas keislaman kalangan *Jamaah Tabligh*—untuk mengikuti Bayan / *Ta'lim* (ceramah, pengajian) dari para guru mereka. Fenomena atas fungsi paten perempuan inilah yang dalam analisa penulis terlihat penuh ambiguitas. Di satu sisi, perempuan diberi ruang kebebasan untuk mengemansipasikan perannya—meskipun dalam lingkup yang lebih mikro, keluarga—namun di sisi lain melalui peran itu terlihat bahwa nyatanya relasi patriarchal semakin menguat.

Perkembangan gerakan ini di Asia Selatan setidaknya dapat menjelaskan pandangan ini. Di wilayah tersebut, meskipun perempuan turut serta menyebarkan ajaran *Jamaah Tabligh* melalui berbagai cara terutama melalui pendekatan persuasif kepada para anggota keluarga serta teman-teman terdekat mereka, namun tetap saja peran tersebut ternafikan oleh dominasi kalangan jamaah laki-laki. Kalaupun para wanita dianjurkan untuk melakukan khuruj, itu karena mereka difungsikan sebatas menemani suami-suami mereka, bukan untuk melakukan aktivitas keagamaan layaknya komunitas laki-laki. Inilah mengapa kebanyakan jamaah perempuan—setelah mengikuti program masturat, pembinaan bagi para istri terkait pentingnya khuruj—lebih memilih berdiam diri di rumah untuk mengurus keluarga mereka.

Alexander Horstmann

Gender, Tabligh and the "Docile Agent": The Politics of Faith and Embodiment among the Tablighi Jama'at

الخلاصة: تملك جماعة التبليغ التي أسست في التسعينات ببانجلو إلى الهندية على أيدي مولانا محمد إلياس (١٨٨٥-١٩٤٤)، مليونات من الأعضاء المنتشرة في أوروبا وأميركا وأفريقيا وأستراليا، خاصة في آسيا. وفي منطقة آسيا الجنوبية مثل راوييند في باكستان وتونجلى في بانجلاديش للجماعة عدد كبير من الأعضاء وهو مليونان عضوا. كذلك في المناطق بجنوب شرقي آسيا التي لم تقتصر توسعها على المناطق ذات أغلبية المسلمين، بل أيضا في الولايات ذات أقلية المسلمين مثل كامبوجا ومينداناو في الفلبين. ومن أنشطتها في أوروبا، قد تم بناء مسجد "تبليغي" في ديوسبورى بانجلترا سنة ١٩٧٨ ويتحول فيما بعد إلى مركز رئيسى لها الذى يساعد على انتشار جاليتها في أنحاء العالم. مع تعزيز علاقتها مع مدرسة دار العلوم في ديوباند الهندية التي أسسها محمد قاسم ناناوتاوى (١٨٣٢-١٨٧٩) رشيد أحمد جانجوهى (١٨٢٩-١٩٠٥) عام ١٨٦٦، تركز أعمال الجماعة في تطورها على مجال التعليم الإسلامى.

ومن بعض الأوصاف العامة لأعضاء هذه الجماعة إطلاق اللحية ولبس الجلاية والطاقي للرجال والحجاب والخمار للنساء، ومن مناهجهم في الدعوة ما يسمى بـ "الجولة" هي زيارة منتظمة لبيوت المسلمين التي تقع حول المسجد، و"الخروج" للسفر من أجل الدعوة لمدة ٣ أيام من كل شهر، و٤٠ يوما من كل عام أو ٤ أشهر من العمر، الابتعاد عن الحديث في الأمور السياسية أو في المسائل الخلافية المثيرة للجدل. وبعض المبادئ التي تم تعليمها وتبذل جهدا في تنفيذها داخل أعضائها (١) الفهم في معنى التوحيد والشهادتين (٢) تعظيم أسماء الله الحسنى بأداء الصلاة خشوعا (٣) طلب

العلم مع مداومة الذكر (٤) إكرام الناس (٥) الإخلاص في النية (٦) ضرورة لكل مسلم على القيام بالدعوة أو التبليغ (الخروج) من أجل الجهاد في سبيل الله.

تسعى هذه المقالة على القاء النظر في جالية جماعة التبليغ في بعض الولايات الآسيوية. بالتركيز على مناطق التايلاند الجنوبية خاصة في ناخوسريتهامارات وسونجلا، يلاحظ كاتب المقالة أن المرأة تلعب دورا أساسيا في انتشارها وتطورها. وعلى أيديها قد تم انتقال القيم الإسلامية بطريقة فعالة من جيل إلى آخر. تؤثر الأسرة في حد معين على تكوين شخصية أفرادها التي ترجع إلى أهمية دور المرأة فيها وهو دور الحفاظ على الأخلاق الكريمة والطاعة، بل يمكن أيضا في تكوين صفة صالحة لأفرادها خاصة لأولادهم. ذلك في رأى الباحث يتمشى مع التعاليم والمراجع التي يعتمد عليها أعضاء الجماعة.

إن قيم المرأة المعتمدة في آرائهم المستندة من كتاب "فضائل الأعمال" للمؤلف محمد زكريا كنداوى أن لا تكون زوجة أو أما لرعاية أطفالها فحسب، لكنها أيضا تخدم زوجها باعتباره مسئولاً عن نفقة الأسرة وحمايتها. ومكانها الأساسى لم يكن في مكان عام، بل في البيت. إذا كانت تخرج من البيت فأول ما تقصدها هو مركز الجماعة لتابعة التعليم أو "البيان" من خلال معلميهن. يتبين للباحث من ظاهرة لمترلة المرأة الثابتة هذه أن هناك غموض للغاية فيها، إذ قد تعطى للمرأة الحرية في مساواة دورها من ناحية، رغم في المجال الصغير مثل الأسرة، من ناحية أخرى من خلال هذا الدور تظهر علاقة رجولية أكثر قوة فيها.

تبين لنا هذه الآراء من خلال تطور جماعة التبليغ في المناطق الآسيوية الجنوبية، ورغم أن المرأة فيها تساهم على نشر تعاليم جماعة التبليغ من الوسائل المختلفة خاصة بالطرق المقنعة لأفراد الأسرة والأصدقاء، لكن دورها المذكور ما يزال محجوبا من سيطرة الرجال. رغم من المرأة مدعوة للقيام بالخروج فلا بد ذلك من ضمن مرافقتها لزوجها ولم تكن كأنشطة عامة مثل ما يقوم بها الرجال. وهذا سبب ما تؤدي تلك المرأة إلى اختيارها البقاء في بيتها ورعاية أسرتها، رغم مشاركتها في برنامج "مستورات" المقررة في طريقة الدعوة "الخروج". بناء على الفرق في الدور، يتبين لنا أن أعضاء الرجال في الجماعة يسيطر على أدوار وهم أكثر مقاما وأعلى المناصب الاجتماعية كمسلم.

Introduction

The Tablighi Jama'at presents itself to outsiders with a wholly masculine face (Metcalf 2000: 44). Members are men that one can see in buses, at airports, walking down the streets in small groups, and in the mosques of Patani, Mindanao, Cambodia, Aceh, Java, Kelantan and numerous other places all over Southeast Asia. Wearing long beards and dressed in Arab-style simple white clothes, flowing robes (*jalabiyya*), loose pants right to their ankles (*isbal*), long shirts, and turbans (*imama*), Tablighi men travel in small groups as part of their monthly sacrifice of time for *da'wa* activities. Men approach other Muslims and invite them to join them in prayer, go from door to door in villages, college hostels or (social welfare) Housing Development Board apartment blocks in Singapore, or congregate for mass reunions in Bangkok or Jakarta. Women barely exist either in the public spaces of these movements or in the scholarly reports of the academic community.

In Southern Thailand, the covering of women from head to foot in enveloping black veils (*niqab*), including a face veil, is a fairly recent phenomenon. Clearly, in public spaces the Tablighi Jama'at focuses on the symbolic display of the male and female body to highlight the distinction between *haram* (the forbidden) and *halal* (the allowed). The veiling of women and their confinement to their houses is a case in point to differentiate this Islamic order from the sinful society around them that *da'wa* aspires to wipe out. The Tablighi Jama'at introduces strict gender segregation and has done away with many ceremonial spaces where women were prominently present by arguing that Islamic rituals like weddings and funeral ceremonies involve indulgences (money spending, drum playing, singing) to such an extent that they can only be considered *bida'a*.

Yet, if one looks closer, it is obvious that not only men but also women join the movement in large numbers and of their own choice. The following questions therefore arose during my fieldwork: What is in it for women to join a movement that presents itself with "a wholly masculine face"?

I think that the question should be answered along two lines. One line is the position women have in the gender ideology of the Tablighi Jama'at and in everyday life. Questions arise such as: How are women represented in Tablighi teachings and publications? But also: How does the Tablighi Jama'at conceive of the role of women in Islamic society? The second line concerns the more activist part of the Tablighi Jama'at ideology. To what extent can women participate

in the movement's work and how? If women bear a special burden in the Islamic order, how do women represent values like religious piety, modesty and honour, and other Islamic norms and teachings? But I am also interested in the question whether the gender ideology of the Tablighi Jama'at generates resistance from the part of women. That is, most studies about the Tablighi Jama'at and other *da'wa* movements primarily discuss why these movements have been successful in finding an audience. But the process of transformation in local Muslim society is an ongoing process. The dynamics of this process include women who reject the patriarchal conception of women's agency, their confinement to their houses and the movement's negative attitude towards tradition. Some women may rhetorically support the Tablighi Jama'at's gender ideology as an example of high Islam, but may find themselves to disagree when they have to stick to social obligations. In this article, I hope to explore some aspects of the complexity of the subject. Engagement in the Tablighi movement is neither a mere act of emancipation nor the complete subordination of women's agency to the rule of men.¹

I suggest that the answer to the attraction of the movement to women lies between these two lines. I propose that the women who choose to ally themselves with the movement are prepared to submit themselves to the rules of the gender ideology in return for the extended agency that women receive as active members of the movement's ideology and activities.²

Background of the Tablighi Jama'at

The Tablighi Jama'at al-Da'wa is an Indian Muslim movement that dates back to the 1920s. Since then it has grown active in more than 150 countries, covering probably every country where Muslims live. The core element of the movement is the obligation for its members to proselytise in order to win the hearts and minds of Muslims around the globe (Horstmann 2007; Masud 2000; Metcalf 1998, 2000).³ The movement's goal is *tabligh*: specifically conveying *shari'a* based guidance.

The Tablighi Jama'at attracts millions of Muslims by concentrating on the improvement of the inner life of the individual Muslim, the strengthening of the faith by refocusing one's life on religious piety. The movement can thus be conceptualized as a ritual movement, because the program emphasises that every little ritual in everyday life is an opportunity to please Allah and to obey the *Sharia*. Tablighi members believe that they reinvent the tradition of the

Prophet to go out and preach. The novelty of the Tablighi Jama'at is the permanent circulation of small groups (*jama'at*) that travel around the Islamic world, including Muslim migrants in Europe. The movement focuses much less on Islamic education, although it is closely associated with the Deobandi educational network and its founder was a student of the Dar'ul Ulum in Deoband. However, the movement puts great weight on the book entitled "The Merit/Reward of Good Deeds/Action" written by Maulana Zakaria, the paternal uncle of the movement's founder, Maulana Mohammad Ilyas. This heavy and expensive book was originally published in Urdu and was subsequently translated in many foreign languages and is used in *bayan* study sessions during *khuruj* outings. The book is a collection of selected Hadith. Metcalf argues that the traveller preachers not only feel that they closely follow the Hadith, but embody it, so that they have become literally "living Hadith" (Metcalf 1993: 605). The Tablighi Jama'at regards mission as a non-negotiable duty on which hinges nothing less than one's own ultimate fate at the Day of Judgement. It is not enough to study, pray, and engage in Sufi practices: The individual "must be effective in the world". In other words, the body is being shaped in ever-new rounds of exercise to become an effective tool of missionary work. The physical work includes the limitation of the body to the necessary and the uniform. The emotional work includes the hagiographic telling of the sufferings and endless pains of the first travellers who are widely regarded as martyrs.

Women play a key role in the production of the effective body by transmitting key values of character building, devotion and missionary zeal to family, friends and their children. Women exemplify devotion, piety and moral behaviour by knowing their appropriate place in the house and in their public presentation. The *Faza'il* texts identify women as a prime audience and stress their important role in nurturing children, girls and boys alike. Through repeated recounting of selected Hadith and travellers' tales (*kaarguzaari*) women inculcate an inclination in the hearts of the children towards religious piety, respect and love for the Companions. If, and only if, women create passion for religion and enthusiasm for good deeds at an early age, the results will be incredible both in this (short) world and the (long) hereafter.

In the two communities of Nakhonsrithammarat and Songkhla, which I selected for fieldwork, some people made religious careers and rose to leadership positions in the Tablighi Jama'at' chapter in Thailand. In Nakhonsrithammarat, local Tablighi members have also

gradually taken control of the mosque. While travellers in principle are encouraged to visit mosques for rest and prayer, the Tablighi Jama'at have literally occupied some of the mosques: A calendar posted at the front of the mosque lists the incoming and outgoing *jama'at*, incoming from "IPB" (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh), outgoing to IPB, China and Cambodia. The local chapter of a government-registered mosque has become a centre of Tablighi operations and hybrid, globalized spaces.

The Tablighi Jamaat's focus on spirituality and piety appeals to both women and men, attracting them to change their life drastically and to devote as much time as they can to Islam. The aspects that appeal to new members are religious certainty, social security and access to religious networks that span the globe. As Muslims in Thailand are part of a marginal community in a country where ethnic Thai and the Theravada Buddhist tradition prevail, they are confronted with pressures of modernity that cause frustration and religious insecurity.⁴ Joining the Tablighi Jama'at in Southern Thailand can be seen as an adaptation to the minority situation, the marginal position of Muslims and the fraction of personal identity. Joining one of the biggest Islamic movements in the world provides an enormous emotional boost to footloose Muslim self-identity.

The Jama'at welcomes everybody and every newcomer will receive generous support from all sides for choosing the *da'wa* way. Every new member reconfirms the mission of the Jama'at and contributes to its success. By participating in three-day outings, in which the Jama'at travels to other villages to invite Muslims to join their prayer, new members are socialised within the Tablighi ideology. Once a new member takes part, he has to follow the directives of the *amir* and abide to the rules of the *jama'at*.

According to its founder, the main target of "going outside" is not to change Islam among the Muslims visited, but the development of piety among the travellers themselves. Joining the travels of the Tablighi means abandoning all worldly matters and committing one's time, and indeed one's life, to the movement. This all-out commitment for the utopia of an egalitarian Islamic society, to religion and to Allah is a very powerful alternative to traditional society for many Muslims in Thailand. By joining Friday prayers at the Tablighi's *markaz* (centre), and by meeting *jama'at* from India, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, local Tablighi are able to connect to the Tablighi Jama'at's global network. Everybody can join and everybody is equal before Allah.

This equalization has greatly contributed to the expansion of the Tablighi Jama'at in the marginal Muslim societies of Southeast Asia, such as those in Cambodia and Mindanao.⁵ The Tablighi Jama'at is very attractive to the poor and underprivileged but also to the urban lower-middle class. The *da'wa* work in the Tablighi Jama'at is a very attractive option for the lower class (women and men alike) since worldly life does not promise them anything. Therefore, it makes much sense to downgrade worldly life as full of decadence and vice, and to upgrade *da'wa* activities in preparation for reward after life. Women gain equal prestige for their activities in *tabligh* as men do. As the investment for expensive rituals and communal meals becomes a real problem for women, and they cannot afford the costs, they lose face, and become increasingly marginalized. For these women, *da'wa* work becomes a very attractive alternative and moving freely in translocal networks boosts their psychological wellbeing. Suddenly, they experience social recognition and gain the presence in the public space that they were losing in the transition of the economy and the marginalization of Muslims in the imagined community of the Thai nation-state. While government service becomes an attractive option for Thai Buddhists, Muslims eagerly join Islamic networks that have become available through the intensification of global networks and ties and the Cultural Revolution in the Islamic world.

The Tablighi Jama'at in Southern Thailand

The Tablighi Jama'at is part of the much broader phenomenon of the globalization of Islam and the negotiation of different identities offered in Southeast Asia. The Tablighi Jama'at is now by far the most influential. In Thailand, the Tablighi Jama'at has been able to establish itself in every Muslim community and to establish a *markaz* in every province where Muslims live. The *markaz* symbolizes Islam as a totality of life in which the mosque, home, and school are totally integrated. In Yala, the huge complex of the *markaz* is a small city in itself. More than one-hundred families stay here permanently; the children are socialized with the Tablighi from early age on and have little contact with the world outside. Women who stay in the *markaz* are expected to wear full *purdah*. When I visited the *markaz* in Yala with a French colleague, Agnès de Feo, women would speak only about their children and about household matters. Women in the *markaz* engage in many pious activities, like praying, reading Zakaria's book, studying the Qur'an and listening to the sermons

(*bayan*) of Tablighi male preachers during preaching sessions for women behind a curtain.⁶

The Islamic centre (*markaz*) in Yala is the most important place for congregation of members in the South of Thailand. The *markaz* receives *jama'at* from abroad, especially from the centres of the movement in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and sends *jama'at* from Thailand to these places. Malay-speaking Muslims from the provinces of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat use the *markaz* in Yala as their meeting-point and go there every Friday.

For men, more than for women, the Tablighi Jama'at offers possibilities to enhance their status and prestige as Muslims. The Tablighi Jama'at, more than any other movement, is able to attract very different people and it is easy to hide behind the garments of the movement. Let us take Patani Province as example. In Patani, nearly every Muslim has visited the *markaz* in Yala and some of the most faithful supporters are found here, who may come from all kinds of different backgrounds. They may be a politician and his family of the Tambon council, the district head, *kamnan*, the gangster and influential godfather, the designer who returned from Bangkok, and the shopkeeper and are all comfortable in the *jubah*, the long sleeved gown of Middle Eastern origin. For many women, seeing their husbands getting educated as good Muslims in a pious Muslim movement is a very attractive option and much preferable to a husband who is involved in drugs or gambling. Although the Tablighi Jama'at strongly emphasises "giving", engaging in *tabligh* is not an obstacle to worldly enterprises. Many use the Tablighi Jama'at's networks and extensive contacts in the South Asian diaspora to do business along this axis. They not only gain prestige, social capital, but also material benefits from their access to the Tablighi Jama'at transnational Islamic networks.

The practice of the Tablighi Jama'at represents a dramatic intervention in the traditions of the community. Deeply involved in invented Islamic ritual and educational texts, the supporters of the movement end their participation in traditional ritual life. Once a Muslim joins a Jama'at, he or she is deeply socialized within the movement, engendering a process of mutation, in which the overall regulation of everyday life and daily propaganda call for youthful commitment and radical militancy. Slowly, a member adapts to the Tablighi lifestyle, to dressing in *da'wa* attire, to join in praying, sessions and meetings, and in long and regular periods of travelling. This intervention not only questions prevailing ritual practices, the new ideology challenges the very premises and reproduction of

the community. The Tablighi Jama'at is a non-violent movement, but with a radical outlook. The movement's disregard for tradition makes it one of the strongest engines in the dissolution of the traditional belief system and of the logics of exchange that are involved in that system.

This intervention led in many villages to real struggles for the space Tablighi members occupy in the mosques. While mosques are registered under the authority of the central committee for Islamic affairs headed by the chief Islamic community leader (*Chularatchamontri*)⁷ in Bangkok, some have virtually been taken over by Tablighi groups. This impacts women sometimes even stronger than men, as women in full *pardah* refuse to communicate with Muslim women who are unprepared to submit themselves to the lifestyle-regime of the Tablighi Jama'at.

The questioning of ritual exchange and ritual knowledge also concerns the relationship between women of different religions. Until 30 years ago, Muslim and Buddhist women in the Songkhla Lake region looked much alike. This is no longer the case. The common belief in the spiritual force of the ancestors is again the key. In the past was not uncommon in Southern Thailand that Muslim women "converted" to Buddhism after marrying a Buddhist partner. The Tablighi factor now leads women to end communication with their Buddhist neighbours and kin. Women under the influence of transnational *da'wa* argue that belief in spirits is not only false, but is the practice of Satan. They strongly disagree with traditional rituals, as they involve the veneration of idols (in Islam amounting to *shirk*), which is strictly prohibited in Islam. They believe that they have to help other women to abandon this world of wilderness and to bring them into the civilized world of the Tablighi Jama'at. The questioning of tradition paves the way for stronger demarcations and boundaries between Muslims and Buddhists.

The gender ideology of the Tablighi Jama'at

According to the teachings and publications of the Tablighi Jama'at, the place of the woman is in the house and in the kitchen. The standard virtues of a woman as a good wife and mother are also explained in the *Faza'il-e-A'maal* (Janson forthcoming: 11). Women would get the same kind of otherworldly rewards as men in return for their services to Allah. A good woman stays at home, looks after the children and pleases her husband. The seclusion of women requires that their husbands act as providers and protectors. A good Muslim not only provides for his wife and children, he also puts aside time to worship Allah in the *markaz* and to go on *khuruj*. In

South Asia, women are expected to engage in missionary work primarily in their own circles of family members and female friends (Metcalf 2000: 50). While the emphasis on women's conduct and appearance seems to provide them with a fairly passive role, the important weight that women play in *tabligh* suggests a different, more active role for women in public spaces.

In For instance, in The Gambia and Mauritania also women are encouraged to go out for a missionary tour every two months.⁸ In Southern Thailand, women are allowed to accompany their men on travelling, provided they dress in *purdah*. The best colour for women's dress is black, because more bold colours would only attract the eyes of strange men. Women should therefore dress from head to foot and they have to wear the face veil that covers mouth and nose. Moreover, women cannot reside in the mosque, but have to stay in prepared housing, where women prepare bedding. The *ijtima* congregations in Yala or Bangkok are again mainly for men.

Women are encouraged to attend educational sessions called *ta'lim*. The *ta'lim* is delivered by preachers behind a curtain, so that they avoids any contact with the women. The women who attend the *ta'lim* are dressed in black *burqas* and lift their face veil only after having entered the room. The preacher of the *ta'lim* requires his female audience to observe the six points which form the foundation of the Jama'at. Women have a decisive voice in their husband's *khuruuj*. They receive countless blessing by Allah for exhorting their husbands to join Tablighi activities and for supporting the house during his absence. More, there is an interesting reconfiguration of gender roles in the context of the proselytizing tours (Metcalf 46ff.).

Tabligh as conceived by Ilyas was meant to do nothing less than to overturn social hierarchy (Metcalf 2000: 46). His position assumed that any sincere Muslim, by going out to offer guidance, undertakes what had been the privilege of men distinguished by education, achievement, and notably, by birth. The egalitarianization of relations is a radical innovation in the hierarchical societies of South and Southeast Asia and permits the poor and humble to join the movement at the same status level as the rich and powerful.

A tour consists of ten or so men who go out for a prolonged journey. The tour is the occasion for a break with all the habitude of intense face to face hierarchies of family and work. That break allows for the far-reaching change Ilyas had in mind. The key value that the journey inculcates in the minds of the journeyer is *humility*.

The insecurity of travel and the potential rebuff during proselytisation every participant may experience encourage humility. All participants dress in the simplest of garments; all cultivate the use of simple language. Everyone carries his own bag with cooking utensils and bedding; everyone does the most menial of tasks. Among those on tour, decisions are made through a process of consultation known as *mashwara*. The group also chooses their own *amir*. He ideally should be distinguished by the quality of his piety and experience, not by his worldly rank. In the mission, different roles are assigned to each member. Key to these roles is the concept of service. The focus on divine reward motivates this service - as it does all else. Journeymen on tour learn to cook, to wash and repair clothes, to nurse the ill, to serve food etc. - all of them tasks that are activities heavily associated with women. The gender reversal lasts only for the duration of the journey. However, the sacred journey does not only reverse class relations, but also gender hierarchies. The gentleness, self-abnegation and modesty of the Tablighi mark them as inculcating values that are culturally defined as feminine. Male Tablighi are also said to act in feminine ways, as they burst out crying and hug each other, while listening to the sermons, show tenderness towards companions during their travels and they use make-up since they apply kohl on their eyes and dye their beards with *henna*. These feminine practices of gentle Tablighi men are considered as "gay" behaviour by mainstream Muslims, while for Tablighi men it is a devotional, "embodied disposition" that is a condition for the reception of Allah's message and to enhance religious piety.⁹ This perception is reinforced by the practice of Tablighi men of sleeping together in the local mosque during *khuruj*.

As men cook and wash, women left at home may take on a range of male responsibilities. They sustain the household so that men can go out. They grant the permission to their husbands to go out on *khuruj* in the first place. Collectively, they note down the names of their husbands and hand them over to the preacher. They convince their husbands that *tabligh* work is not negotiable, but a prerequisite to enter heaven. However, it is important to note that this reversal of class and gender roles is only limited to the regular outings.¹⁰ As these outings are crucial in Tablighi Jama'at philosophy, men and women may change in the process. In particular, women hope that their husbands become better humans. As they involve their husbands in religious activities and in the Islamic lifestyle of the Tablighi Jama'at, they aspire that their husbands would not be in-

volved in the vices of the male domain such as drinking, gambling, or having affairs with other women. They hope that their husbands will become transformed during the *khuruj* and that they change into newborn Muslims. These newborn Muslims who learned the values of humility and fear of God abandon the machismo of mainstream Muslims and strongly condemn the world of drinking and gambling as being the work of Satan. Women are thus able to enhance their own religious knowledge and their piety by encouraging their husbands to go out on *khuruj*, by joining neighbourhood meetings, by making themselves at home when following their husbands on travel, by participating in *ta'lim* educational sessions and by reading aloud the Faza'il-e-A'maal "Rewards of good Action" every evening for her children to listen to. Thus, they can begin a new life that is directed at taking time for devotion and worship, by conveying guidance to "ignorant" Muslims and by joining the communal spaces of the *khuruj*, the *ijtima*, the *markaz*, the *ta'lim*, although in a very limited role.

Women as participants in the *da'wa* movement

During Friday prayers in the *markaz*, during prayers in the local mosque and during missionary tours, preachers virtually cry out their sermons in a very emotional way, raising piety for and fear of God. The *markaz* has a female wing where women congregate for educational sessions (*ta'lim*) and listen to the male preacher while seated behind a curtain.

Although it is men who go from door to door in small groups and dress in simple long white shirts, women in the Tablighi movement are not as passive as they might appear on first sight. Women facilitate and enable their husbands to go out for a *jama'at*. They are expected to engage in *da'wa* within their own sphere of women and family members. Female *jama'at* are allowed to participate in *khuruj* outings, accompanying their men folk. Men stay at local mosques, women stay in pre-arranged housing and are not allowed to talk to anybody outside the house. There invariably are *jama'ats* of women during large annual meetings. Women fulfil important parts of the *da'wa*, as men are not supposed to talk to non-kin women or even to talk at all in the presence of women they do not know.

Conversion to the Tabligh way is a crucial transition and there is an important gender dimension to it. Although women go out on travel in very limited spaces only, participate in congregations only in pre-arranged housing and are invariably accompanied by

their husband or the next male relative, and are less visible in the *markaz*, women are nevertheless active participants in all Tabligh spaces. Women accumulate merit and status by doing central work in missionary agency, by supporting the religious work of their husbands, and by laying substantial groundwork in the reproduction of Tabligh ideology for husband and family.

The construction of femininity is an important part of gaining consciousness in the process of becoming a Tablighi activist. The Tablighi dress code is part and parcel of the transformation and the presentation of the body. Tablighi activists, male and female, put themselves on display by wearing conspicuous clothes. The donning of the veil and eventually the *burqa* is a crucial transition on the way for women of becoming "new-born" Muslims. In Southern Thailand, women cover themselves by wearing batiks and veils in many colours, women wearing full-length body-covering black robes are a recent phenomenon, sticking out in public. The Tabligh dress code applies not only to women, but also to men: Muslim men should wear trousers above the ankles; just like women, Muslim men are not allowed to go outside without headwear. They should wear Muslim headwear, preferably a *turban*. Tablighi men on tour are on constant display by walking the streets, not unlike Buddhist monks begging for alms. Janson's (2005: 19) account of a conversion in The Gambia closely resembles the Thai context and points to a rapid globalisation of the Tablighi pattern:

"As the Prophet's wives dressed this way, we also have to do it. The best colour for the face veil is black, but a green or brown one is also allowed, as long as it is not a flashy colour. Some women like to embellish their hands with *henna*. That is the reason why Muslim women should wear gloves because it is not to be seen by outsiders. A woman's hands are beautiful and this beauty is only meant to attract the husband. The same applies to a woman's feet."

The beauty of a woman's body is meant for her husband, socks and gloves cover feet, hands and jewellery.¹¹ Female activists wear either imported clothes from Saudi-Arabia or hand-tailored black clothes bought in the market. After initiation into the movement, women activists strengthen their belief in Allah by visiting and living in the *markaz*, by listening to lectures and by travelling with their husbands as part of a Jama'at. The purpose of proselytising (*khuruj*) for male as well as for female missionaries is to recite the Qur'an and *hadith*, to perform *dhikr* (remembrance of God), to teach people, and to learn from them. While men go out to invite people to the

mosque, women teach other women in their host compound how they should behave as proper mothers, wives, and house wives.

"We talk about how married women should dress, how they should take care of their compounds, how they should perform their domestic chores, and how they should raise their children. Because a mother is responsible for her children's moral upbringing she must teach them to pronounce *La ilah-a-illa illah* even before they are able to talk. At a young age, she should instruct them in *tajwid* (the correct pronunciation and recitation of the Qur'an). Furthermore, a mother has to instruct her children in how to dress and behave by telling stories about the children of the Prophet's Companions. With the help of Allah, the children will grow into devout Muslims. During our *bayan*, we talk about all such topics that give women a stronger *iman* (faith)."

Coming back to the curious contradiction in the beginning, the appeal of the Tablighi movement for women becomes clearer as we move beyond the rhetoric of the ideal Muslim woman who stays indoors.

The account of female informants in Southern Thailand illustrates that *tabligh* opens up interesting public spaces for women, who are more involved in and better informed about Islamic matters. Women think it is a blessing to receive a religious education and to pass it on to other women and to their children. Despite the limiting conditions for women's involvement in missionary tours, they felt that they acquire merit by participating, to achieve a higher level of piety and fear of God, all draws them closer to Allah and to their husbands and family. This is a win-win situation as they also gain access to Tabligh networks, experiences and "sisters" in more than 150 countries. Even when they do not go on a *jama'at*, women tend to play crucial role in *tabligh* work. By tolerating the husband's absence and by supporting the family, women receive enormous blessing.¹² Women encourage their husbands to join the *tabligh* and to go on *khuruj*. Moreover, men and women have similar tasks during *tabligh* tours. Ironically, women come to the fore and deliver public speeches as senior *tabligh* workers by emphasizing virtues such as modesty, diligence, and obedience.

Everyday Politics in Muslim Communities

This demand of total commitment has also engendered the most virulent critique against the Tabligh: The men simply drop their families for long travel, leaving wives and children behind without

means to sustain them. These "fanatics" abandon all achievements for the sake of proselytising among strangers. If their wives fall ill, their children would be abducted and their mothers are without a breadwinner, the Tablighi would not even return. The main trouble between divided villagers thus goes to the heart of gender relations. Mothers are left behind by husbands who, all of a sudden, leave the house and their family for travelling in the country or even abroad for long periods of time.

Not only do the Tablighi leave mothers behind, they also introduce new forms of gender segregation. The Tablighi also discourage Muslim women to entertain friendship relations with their Buddhist neighbours, as they believe that the exposure to another religion than Islam would only hinder the concentration of Muslims towards Allah. Being a movement of religious purification, the Tablighi Jama'at vehemently forbids and sanctions participation in ceremonial and ritual life in the village that is dubbed pre-Islamic and heretic. Women used to be dominant in many ceremonies and life-cycle rituals, in birth rituals, especially in marriages and in funerals. The Tablighi who want to reduce everyday life to its basic functions are strongly opposed to any expenses or display of wealth. The performance of arts, music and dance is discouraged, as is the performance of shadow puppet plays (*Nang Talung*) or *Manora* dance drama.

With such a radical break with indigenous traditions, it is no wonder that the Tablighi Jama'at is polarizing the village. Whereas in Nakhonsrithammarat, many Malay traditions are vanishing, in Sighanakorn, the coexistence with Buddhist neighbours is reproduced and reconfirmed in ritual exchange that emphasises the unity of the living and the ancestors (*Taayai*) whose spirits are reactivated in the *Manora* performance (Nishii 2001, Horstmann 2004, Guelden 2004).

For many Muslims in Southern Thailand, it is rather painful to break with the ancestors, and many believe that the spirits will punish them. Villagers are reconfirmed of the presence of the ancestors when they lose their appetite or when their children fall ill. Conversion to Tabligh ideology often results in conflict with the family, and in some cases children may even break with their parents. Tabligh activists validate the authenticity of their practices by contrasting them to the Islamic ideologies of the older generation. This generational conflict is a crucial aspect of Islamization in Southern Thailand and other parts of the Islamic world. The elder generation has the choice either to support the Tablighi movement

(by joining the *jama'at*) or to resisting, very much depending on the balance of power in the community. By giving an opportunity to juvenile Muslims, the Tablighi movement seriously disrupts hierarchies of seniority. Now, the "children of the *sunna*" suddenly tell the elder generation that they are not practicing Islam the right way and demand from their *imams*, who have led prayers for decades, to sit and to listen to them. There is also an important gender dimension to this generational conflict as young women wearing the *burqa* distinguish themselves drastically from their mothers and grandmothers, whom they regard as misguided by the old rituals.

Yet, the regime of the *Jama'at* and the ritualisation of everyday life create a kind of utopian community or a sort of surrogate family. In this context, it is interesting to note that the followers of the movement address each other using the terms "brother" and "sister". By using these kinship terms, they create a family-like intimacy of the family within the sharp boundaries of their own group. By so doing they clearly distance themselves from other Muslims whom they do not consider to be true Muslims. The painful generational confrontation is partly compensated by the solidarity of the surrogate family as members see each other as brothers and sisters regardless of their Thai, South Asian, or even European origins.

Concluding remarks

The movement's renegotiation of gender roles is ambiguous. On the one hand it reinforces patriarchal relations while opening up emancipatory space on the other. Tablighi women do take their share in *tabligh* and are able to educate their husbands. By doing Tabligh work in the domestic sphere, Tablighi women acquire social recognition, something they were about to lose in the violent and rapid transformation of the society and the economy. During *khuruj*, a radical break allows for the temporary construction of an ideal Muslim society in which gender and class reversal takes place.

By joining the Tablighi *Jama'at*, women and men shed their marginality, acquire huge Islamic networks, gain new opportunities, and become members of a global *ummah* of the faithful enabling them to live an exemplary Islamic lifestyle. The Tablighi *Jama'at*, while conscribing to a very conservative image of female gender opens up a very important role to women in Tabligh. Thereby, they are open to women to construct and build their religious piety by

regularly participating in the exciting activities of the transnational movement. Further, the adoption of Tabligh ideology means that they do not spend their precious resources to pay for rituals as they used to. Finally, women hope that men become good Muslims and faithful husbands who, in their modesty, are even prepared to adopt female tasks like cooking and washing clothes during their "outings". Most significantly, women can also join *khuruuj*, although they have to go with their husbands or close male relatives, and are prohibited from staying in the mosque. Spaces open up and networks become available as women participate in outings to India and as they participate in the educational *ta'lim* sessions to seek religious knowledge.

As a way of resistance, they may do as the older women in Songkhla did, who joined a Patani-educated Imam who constructed a small mosque behind his house out of frustration with the changes in local Muslim society. As the local Imam says: "Why do our men and women have to travel to other Muslim communities that already have their own Islamic chapter?"

While women in Indo-Muslim society find new female venues to congregate, we need much more research on the localization of global movements such as the Tablighi Jama'at and on the way they limit and extend local Muslim women's spaces in everyday life. The tours that form the key of the Tablighi teaching mean to transform participants in their fundamental relationship with other people. The quietist character of the Tablighi Jama'at may mask their political character while the massive inroads of the Tablighi Jama'at and other Muslim movements are accompanied by rather dramatic transformations in gender relations. These concern the relation of new-born Muslims with other Muslim women who like to stay where they are as well as the relation of new-born Muslims with Non-Muslim women, e.g. Buddhist women and the new boundaries between them.

Meanwhile, the meaning of kinship relations has changed as well: Muslim women in the Tablighi Jama'at emphasize their religious relations and describe them in kinship terms ('sister'), while they de-cultivate the kinship relations they have with non-members and Buddhist women. Likewise, the meaning of friendship is also transformed. While Muslim women used to have intimate friendship relations with other women - conceptualized in Southern Thailand as "twin" relations - friends are now sought in the globally-turning female Jama'at from any place in the Islamic world at large. Relations

with Buddhists are now considered a waste of time since any contact with non-Muslim women might be construed as implying less commitment or even may be regarded as transgression or meditation. Joining the Tablighi Jama'at thus means the end of participation in a cultural micro-cosmos where Muslims and Buddhists are part of a general system. In other words, ardent followers of the Tablighi Jama'at believe that Muslims only should live in the kind of Islamic society for which the Jama'at provides the model.

Let us now return to our initial question: What is in for women to join a movement that presents itself with a wholly masculine face? Participation in the Tablighi Jama'at gives purpose and meaning to everyday life in alienating societies, and provides exciting transnational venues and clear directions for its members to become true believers of Islam. For some, *sukun* ("peace") provides a foretaste of paradise and participation in mass congregations a feeling of power. Maulana Muhamaad Ilyas is remembered as encouraging *da'wa* among women from the very beginning, although this movement was regimented in very constrained spaces. Women began work among women, each member accompanied by a close male relative. It is told that Ilyas had to overcome the resistance of religious elders who were worried about new forms of women's agency (see Metcalf 2002). Women not only play a crucial role in *tabligh*, the missionary work also involves a feminization of men who are doing women's domestic chores and a masculinization of women who become the breadwinner of the household during their husband's absence.

Be it as it may, the Tablighi Jama'at remains a patrimonial movement with dramatic interventions in gender relations and the space of women in this order. In this sense, the Tablighi Jama'at, while avoiding politics, is a very political movement as the negotiation of private spaces has become greatly politicized. In raising the conscience of being Muslims, the Tablighi Jama'at has greatly contributed to the symbolic display of Islamic-ness in public space.

In this contradictory and vulnerable move, women and men make use of the democratization of Islamic education, the emergence of a Muslim consumer market and the availability of new lifestyles. By turning to the individual improvement of the self, they also influence communal spaces at the societal level. Women are active actors in the shaping of subjectivity, on the other hand, they also become susceptible to critique from society as well as from other Muslim social movements.

Endnotes

1. I gratefully acknowledge the discussions and access to the publications of Agnès de Feo and Marloes Janson and their comments on my paper in a workshop on Tablighi Jama'at and Gender at the Center for Modern Orient in Berlin, 06.-07.12.2008.
2. The female Tabligh agency will thus be elucidated in the perspective of Mahmood's interesting thesis about the "docile agent", in which women pursue practices and ideals embedded within a tradition that accords them a submissive status and at the same time creates a new form of piety for themselves from which they derive a sort of religious empowerment (Mahmood 2001).
3. As Marloes Janson (2005: 3) notes, almost no mention has been made of the involvement of women in the movement.
4. In this context, Susanne Schröter (personal discussion) notes that the traditional ritual cycle constitutes a heavy burden especially for women. As the Tablighi Jama'at rejects the luxury of ceremonial life, the ideology of merit-making in tabligh provides a viable alternative.
5. Very few empirical studies based on fieldwork exist on the Tablighi Jama'at in Southeast Asia. On Cambodia, see de Feo (2005), on Southern Thailand, Horstmann (2007).
6. For a detailed account of the *ta'lim* preaching sessions, see de Feo (2006), Janson (forthcoming) and the section below.
7. The Chularatchamontri or Shaikhul-Islam is appointed by the king from among prominent Muslim scholars of the kingdom. He is responsible for overseeing the administration of Islamic religious life throughout the country.
8. I refer to the pioneer research of Marloes Janson (2008). The Tablighi Jama'at has established a firm presence in The Gambia and officially encourages women to go on *khuruj* to influence women about the obligation of *tabligh*.
9. I am grateful to Marloes Janson for pointing out this gender reversal in rich detail in her paper. The first scholar mentioning the important practice of gender reversal during preaching is Barbara Metcalf (2000). Her observation inspired me to look at the gender roles as part of the public ritual.
10. Janson notes that Tablighi men in The Gambia have become good husbands who continue domestic work at home even after the *khuruj* experience. In Southern Thailand, the *khuruj* constitute liminal, exceptional spaces where hierarchies are changed for the period of the travel only.
11. Agnès de Feo (2006: 9) argues that in this sense, women find eroticism in the *burqa*, which cover the erotic body and makes it a mystery for men. Covered women are able to gaze at potential husbands, but the men are unable to see even a small part of female skin.
12. This enormous merit that women are thought to receive by their participation in *tabligh* is counted in points. The points accumulate to a decent sum that is considered by God after death. By encouraging their husbands to perform the prayer in the mosque, women can accrue more points than men who perform their prayers in the mosque.

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