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978-1-107-04057-1 - Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at

Marloes Janson

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Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama'at

This monograph deals with the sweeping emergence of the Tablighi Jama'at – a transnational Islamic missionary movement that has its origins in the reformist tradition that emerged in India in the mid-nineteenth century – in the Gambia in the past decade. It explores how a movement that originated in South Asia could appeal to the local Muslim population – youth and women in particular – in a West African setting. By recording the biographical narratives of five Gambian Tablighis, the book provides an understanding of the ambiguities and contradictions young people are confronted with in their (re)negotiation of Muslim identity. Together these narratives form a picture of how Gambian youth go about their lives within the framework of neo-liberal reforms and renegotiated parameters informed by the Tablighi model of how to be a 'true' Muslim, which is interpreted as a believer who is able to reconcile his or her faith with a modern lifestyle.

Marloes Janson is a lecturer in anthropology at SOAS, University of London, and was previously a researcher at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (Centre for Modern Oriental Studies) in Berlin, Germany. She is the book reviews editor of the *Journal of Religion in Africa*. Janson has conducted extensive ethnographic field research in the Gambia, Senegal, and Nigeria. She received her PhD from Leiden University.

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To my mother
In memory of my father

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Several of the young Gambian Muslim protagonists in this book compared their joining the Tablighi Jama'at to a 'spiritual journey'. They told me that during their journey they achieved a higher level of spirituality that brought them closer to God. In many respects, writing this book resembled a spiritual journey for me as well; a journey during which, by trial and error, I learned more not only about the Tablighis in the Gambia but also about myself. My journeys were made possible by generous research grants provided by the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden, the Netherlands, and the German Research Council (DFG) in Bonn, Germany, under the auspices of the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, Germany.

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Note on Language and Quotations from Interviews

The majority of the population in the Gambia is Mandinka. Their language, also called Mandinka, is not written and this explains why the orthography is not fixed. I have taken into account the orthography used by Gamble (1987) and W.E.C. International (1990). Tonal markers are omitted for easier reading. For the sake of simplicity, English plurals are followed (*jalis*, for example) except for those plurals that have become standardised (such as *‘ulama*). As the Gambia has been an English colony, English loan words can be found in Mandinka. Because of the country's location in Senegal, a former French colony, French loan words have also penetrated into Mandinka. An example is *etijango*, a term derived from the French word for student – *étudiant* – and used by the Islamic scholars referred to in this way to distinguish themselves on account of their formal Islamic education. Besides Mandinka, the majority of my interlocutors spoke English and a small minority were (semi-)literate in Arabic and/or Urdu. Sometimes they mixed these languages in what can be called ‘Tablighi English’ (see Chapter 8). Arabic and Urdu words were not always used in their standard definition, but at times given new meanings. For example, the Arabic term *ziyarah* refers to a visit to the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad or that of a saint or holy person, but was used by my interlocutors in the sense of visiting people for conducting *tabligh* or Islamic missionary work.

Unless indicated otherwise, all interviews from which I quote in the text were conducted by me in the periods November 2003–April 2004, April–June 2005, March–July 2006, and May–July 2007. Most interviews took place in Kombo, the urban area around Banjul, the Gambia's capital. I use pseudonyms to refer to many of my interlocutors. To protect their anonymity, place names for the interviews have been omitted. Most interviews with Tablighis were conducted in English, and are rendered as spoken.

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Glossary

In addition to terms in the local languages (Mandinka and Wolof), this glossary includes Tablighi vocabulary (in Urdu and Arabic).

- Aadoo* (derived from the Ar. *adat*) Tradition, custom
Abaya Body-covering gown worn by Muslim women
Ahmadiyya Islamic missionary movement founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in India in the 19th century, which is often suppressed as heretical in the Muslim world
‘Alim (plural *‘Ulama*) Islamic scholar
A‘mal Pious or good deed
Amir Leader
Ataaya Green tea
‘Awra Part of the body that needs to be concealed
Baturoo Obedience, worship
Bayan Inspirational talk reciting religious principles and instances from the Qur‘an and *hadith*
Bid‘a Unlawful innovation, deviation from the Prophet Muhammad’s path
Bumster (Pidgin English) Beach boy
Burqa‘ Body-covering gown, including head-covering, worn by Muslim women
Chhe Baten Six Points which form the foundation of the Tablighi Jama‘at
Choosaanoo Tradition, custom
Da‘wa Invitation or call to Islam
Dhikr Remembrance of God by recalling His names
Dinoo (derived from the Arabic *din*) Religion
Du‘a Blessing, supplicatory prayer
Dunya Worldly or secular
Etijango Reformist scholar
Faza‘il-e-a‘mal ‘The Merits of Practice’; title of the Tablighi Jama‘at’s Islamic manual
Fiqh Islamic law
Fitna Disorder, ‘seduction’

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xviii Glossary

Fondinkeo Young man

Gammu Muslim festival held on the occasion of the Prophet

Muhammad's birth or a Sufi saint's birthday or death

Ganja Marijuana

Hadith Account of what the Prophet Muhammad said or did

Hajj Pilgrimage to Mecca

Halal Lawfulness, practices allowed by Islamic law, legitimacy

Halqa 'Ring' or 'circle', referring to the regional unit in which Tablighi activities take place

Haram Unlawfulness, practices forbidden on religious grounds

Hijab Veil

Hijra Emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, withdrawal

'Ibadat Worship

Ibadu 'Servant of God', referring to a veiled woman

Ibadu jama'at Muslim women's association

Ijtimā' Annual Tablighi congregation, weekly programme taking place in the *Markaz*

Iman Faith

Jahiliyya Pre-Islamic beliefs and practices, often used in the sense of ignorance of Islam

Jali Griot, referring to a praise singer or musician

Jama'at Assembly, travelling party

Jihad Holy war, spiritual warfare

Jinn Spirit

Kafir Unbeliever

Kafoo Age group

Keebaa Elder

Khidmat Rendering of domestic service

Khuruj Tablighi tour in which male missionaries participate

Kullio Naming ceremony

Madrassa Islamic school

Majlis Traditional Qur'anic school

Malu Shame, modesty

Malubaliyaa Shamelessness

Marabout (French) Local Sufi cleric

Markaz 'Centre', referring to the Tablighi Jama'at's mosque

Mashala Local term for a Tablighi, derived from the Arabic *ma sha'*

Allah: what God wishes

Mashwara Consultation

Masturat Tablighi tour in which both male and female missionaries participate

Mihram Male companion whom a woman is forbidden to marry under Islamic law

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- Muhadara* Islamic conference
- Munya* Self-control, submissiveness
- Muqami* Local unit in which Tablighi activities take place
- Nafs* Self or soul, but often used in the sense of 'desire' or 'temptation'
- Niqab* Face veil
- Purdah* Curtain, female seclusion
- Qabd* Praying with the arms crossed
- Qadi* Islamic judge
- Qadiriyya* The Sufi order founded by 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani in the 11th century in Baghdad, Iraq, which spread to Senegambia at the end of the 18th century
- Sabaroo* Patience, endurance
- Sadaa* (derived from the Arabic *sadaqa*) Alms
- Sadl* Praying with the arms outstretched
- Sahaba* Companion of the Prophet Muhammad
- Al-Salaf al-Salih* The pious predecessors who lived at the time of the Prophet Muhammad
- Salafiyya* Islamic reform movement initiated by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani at the end of the 19th century in Egypt
- Salat* The five daily prayers
- Shari'a* Islamic law
- Shaytan* Satan
- Shirk* Idolatry
- Shura* Consultative committee in charge of the Tablighi Jama'at
- Sila keebaa* 'Old style' Muslims
- Sila kutoo* 'New style' Muslims
- Sita Sifat* Six Qualities which form the foundation of the Tablighi Jama'at
- Sunna* Prophetic traditions as recorded in the *hadith*
- Tabligh* Conveyance of divine guidance, Islamic missionary work
- Ta'lim* Tablighi learning session
- Taqwa* Fear of God, but often used in the sense of 'absolute faith and piety'
- Tariqa* Sufi order
- Tijaniyya* Sufi order established by Ahmad al-Tijani in Fez, Morocco, in the last decade of the 18th century, which spread to West Africa in the mid-19th century
- Tuubi* Conversion
- Umma* Global Muslim community
- Ustath* Islamic teacher
- Wahhabiyya* 18th-century Saudi Arabian reformist Islamic movement named after its founder Mohammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab
- Wird* Prayer litany distinctive of a particular Sufi order
- Ziyarah* Visit to the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad or a Sufi saint's tomb, but used by Tablighis in the sense of visiting people for *tabligh*