

# The Prophet's Path

## Tablighi Jamaat in The Gambia

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On our way to visit a local Islamic scholar, my research assistant Fatu ran into her cousin. Whereas normally she was exuberant, she greeted this young man, called Lamin, in an almost shy manner. I was surprised not only by Fatu's attitude but also by Lamin's appearance. During their short conversation, Lamin criticized Fatu for wearing a ponytail, which made her "look like a camel," and he urged her to put on a veil. When we continued our journey, Fatu told me that since her cousin is a *Mashala*

he wears the "*Mashala* uniform." This term is derived from the Arabic *Ma sha' Allah* (what God wishes), an expression that is frequently exclaimed by people like Lamin. Fatu explained that, following the Prophet Muhammad's example, *Mashalas* wear a turban

and trousers above the ankles in order to scare off Satan and prevent their feet from burning in hell. After I invited him to talk more about Islam, Lamin visited Fatu and me in the compound where I was staying. My surprise grew when my host, an elderly Muslim man educated in the Sufi tradition, greeted him in the following way: "Is your father not at home? Where is your mother? Don't you have a wife? How do you feed these people? It is better to support them than to sit the whole day in the mosque and call people to Islam." Lamin reacted to this offensive greeting by saying that it is his duty to worship Allah and "to invite people to follow the Prophet's path." When my host had left, Lamin sighed that he had expected to hear such a thing from the "old grandpa."

This incident, illustrating the competing Islamic discourses in The Gambia, has to be seen against the backdrop of the proliferation of the Tablighi Jamaat. This transnational Islamic

**Over the years, the Tablighi Jamaat has expanded into what is probably indeed the largest Islamic movement of contemporary times. Despite its magnitude, its impact in sub-Saharan Africa has been largely neglected. This article, based on ethnographic field research, focuses on the Jamaat in The Gambia (West Africa) where particularly youth convert to Tablighi ideology, in what could be seen as a form of rebellion against the authority of their elders. In the process, established religious and social values are redefined.**

missionary movement, which originated in the reformist tradition that emerged in India in the mid-nineteenth century, encourages greater religious devotion and observance. Its founder, Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas, strove for a purification of Islam as practised by individual Muslims through following more closely the rules laid down in the sunnah. In order to make Muslims "true believers," Ilyas insisted that it was the duty of not just a few learned scholars but

of all Muslims to carry out Tablighi work. Missionary tours by lay preachers became the hallmark of the Jamaat, established officially in 1927 in Delhi.

Over the years, the Tablighi Jamaat has expanded into what is probably the largest Islamic movement of contemporary times. Despite its worldwide influence on the lives of millions of Muslims, scholars have paid almost no attention to its spreading in sub-Saharan Africa. An explanation for this indifference is that this region is frequently, but unjustly, seen as the "periphery" of the Muslim world. I focus on The Gambia, which, despite its small size, has turned into a flourishing centre of Tablighi activities in West Africa during the last decade. Adherents from other countries regularly assemble here to exchange ideas on the proper Tablighi method that is, missionary work aimed at the moral transformation of Muslims.

### Jamaat's rooting in The Gambia

South Asian missionaries reached West Africa in the early 1960s,<sup>1</sup> but their ideas did not find a fertile breeding ground in The Gambia until the 1990s. A factor that has facilitated the spread of Tablighi ideology in this country is its colonial heritage. The ideology has been disseminated mainly by Pakistanis, who preached in English (which had become the national language in colonial times). Due to the recent Islamic resurgence, a process that coincided with the assumption of power in 1994 by Yahya Jammeh—who appealed to Islam to enhance his legitimacy and to establish closer relations with the Islamic powers in the Gulf States—a growing number of Gambians seemed to be receptive to a new interpretation of their faith, and the Pakistani preachers took advantage of this need.

The history of the Tablighi Jamaat in The Gambia started with Imam Dukureh, who studied in Saudi Arabia for several years. After his studies, this imam returned to his native village and set out to make the villagers more aware of their religion by denouncing their traditional ways of worship. The villagers did not agree with his reformist ideas, except for a few young men. The latter realized that the village was too small for Dukureh's innovative ideas, and built a compound for him in the city of Serrekunda. The ideas of a group of itinerant Pakistani preachers fitted in with Dukureh's, and he lodged them in his compound. Over the years the compound has expanded, and nowadays a two-storey building accommodates Pakistani and other visiting preachers disseminating the Tablighi ideology. In the early 1990s a mosque was constructed adjacent to Dukureh's compound.

The striking features of the Jamaat in The Gambia are its popularity among the local African population and youth in particular. In South and East Africa the Jamaat appeals primarily to Muslims of Indian ancestry.<sup>2</sup> In The Gambia this group is very small. After training by mainly Pakistani preachers, the Tablighi effort has been adopted especially

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The walls around the Jamaat's mosque in The Gambia add to the movement's 'obscure' image

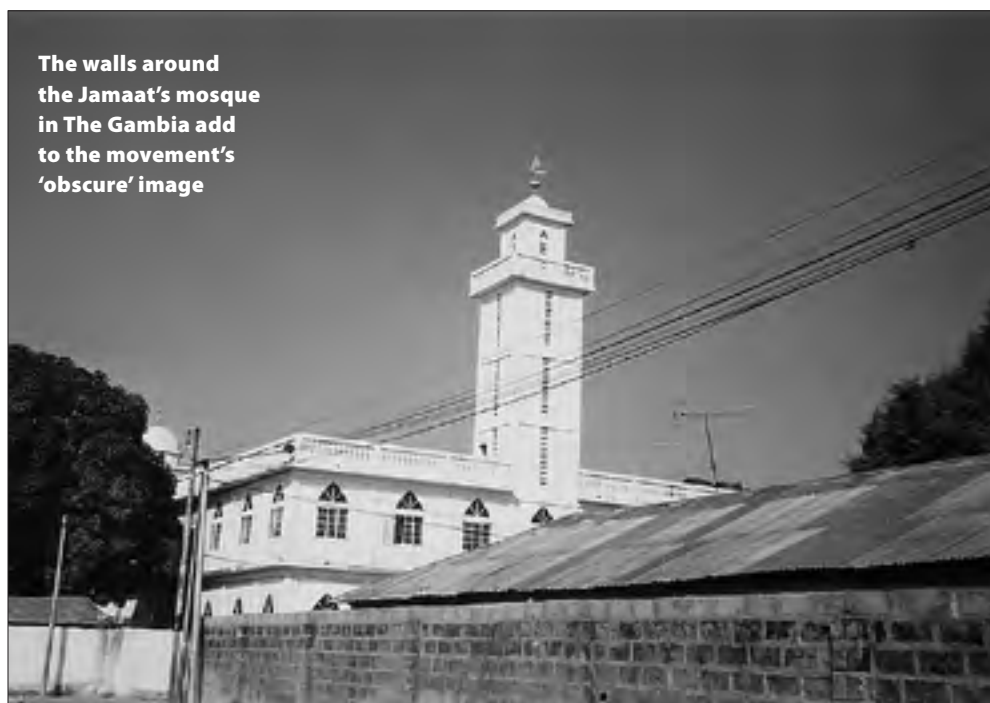


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by Mandinka, who form the largest ethnic group in The Gambia. Nevertheless, these local Muslims are frequently considered “outsiders” by the more “mainstream” Muslims on account of their ideas, practices, and dress code. This applies particularly to the female followers; because their faces and bodies are usually completely covered, many Gambians assume that Saudi Wahhabi women are hidden behind the body-covering veils.

The Tablighi Jamaat holds special attraction for middle-class Gambians in their twenties, who had a modern, secular education. Its appeal to young people—both men and women—could be explained by the current economic depression in The Gambia and its drastic social effects, which influence the ways they perceive their lives. In order to stand up to the malaise, a growing number of youth, who are based primarily in the urban area, invest in Tablighi work. Although they do not get a material reward out of it, they are assured, they believe, of a spiritual reward.

Although the Jamaat’s followers are proliferating in The Gambia, they still form a relatively small group. I estimate the number of adherents at a few thousand (less than one percent of the Gambian population), but in the absence of membership records it is hard to calculate the exact number. Despite its small size, the Jamaat is not an insignificant group in The Gambia, as it is largely responsible for bringing about a religious transformation in the society, especially in the celebration of life-cycle rituals. Tablighi religiosity is a protest against the religious festivities of the “old” and their conspicuous consumption. Because of the movement’s success in transforming ritual practice, a member of the Supreme Islamic Council told me he suspected that “the *Mashalas* will dominate The Gambia within a period of five to ten years and will eventually destroy the country.”

## “Conversion” stories

Sikand rightly remarks that in the literature on the Tablighi Jamaat attention is paid primarily to explicating the movement’s worldview and its fundamental tenets, while the question as to how the Tablighi ideology plays itself out in the lives of individual Muslims is neglected.<sup>3</sup> In order to gain insight into how doctrine is put into practice, I have recorded the “conversion” stories of several young Gambian Tablighi devotees. Conversion does not refer here to the transition from one religion to another, but to the turning towards a new form of piety.

Lamin, whom we met in the introduction, described his conversion to Tablighi ideology as a process of enlightenment to me:

“Islam means only two things, that is following the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad and doing good. There is only one path in Islam: the path of the Prophet. When I became aware of this, my life changed completely. I have seen the light, and I want you to see the light too. In fact it is very simple. In order to become enlightened, you have to read the Quran and hadith. But one should not only read hadith, one also has to practise the sunnah.”

Before Lamin joined the Jamaat about three years ago, he spent his time listening to music and going to nightclubs, but he stopped these activities upon his conversion. Furthermore, he stopped smoking and cut his dreadlocks, which were the outward sign of his preference for reggae music. Finally, he stopped dating girls and entered into the obligations of a married man. When I asked him what caused this transformation, Lamin replied:

“My friend and I attended a naming ceremony in the town of Brika-ma. During the ceremony we were invited by a visiting jamaat to participate in a congregational prayer in the mosque. An old friend, who I got to know as a very stubborn boy, preached about our purpose on this earth. I was impressed by his change of behaviour and I decided to be like him. After the congregational prayer I changed my life. I joined the Jamaat for three days in order to learn more about the faith. Even after one day, I noticed a difference: I was less occupied with worldly affairs. Before the khuruj [Tablighi missionary tour] I prayed and fasted, but I did not know much about Islam. I conceived Islam as my right and not as a favour from Allah. After the khuruj I tried to observe the sunnah more strictly. Nowadays even when I am sleeping I observe the sunnah. I worship Allah 24 hours a day.”

Lamin’s narrative illustrates that youth’s conversion to Tablighi ideology has far-reaching social consequences.<sup>4</sup> Because of his limited financial means, Lamin lives in his family’s compound, but his relatives hold different ideas of Islam than he and do not accept his lifestyle. Therefore his ideal is to move with his wife and child to the countryside,



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where he would earn a living as a farmer. He would grow his own food crops, so that his wife does not have to leave the home to go to the market. In the countryside they would lead an isolated and quiet life:

“It is not good to mingle too much with others as we must profess our religion in our own way. I will not inform others when my wife delivers. All I would do is sacrifice a ram, shave the baby’s head and name him. Even my parents would not know that my wife had delivered. The Prophet incited us to respect our parents, but when they become like a millstone round one’s neck, we have to be on the alert.”

## Intergenerational conflict

Other young Gambians also noted that their conversion to Tablighi ideology resulted in conflicts with their families, and I even heard about youth who broke off with their parents. Yet, these youngsters felt strongly they had to convert in order to become genuine Muslims. During my field research it emerged that Tablighi adherents validate the “authenticity” of their beliefs and practices by contrasting them with those of the older generation, and the Jamaat can therefore be seen as the younger generation’s rejection of their parents. They equate being old with being rigid and holding on to sinful customary practices. As appeared in the introduction, the older generation finds it in their turn hard to take that inexperienced “children” tell them how they should profess their religion.

As such, the Gambian branch of the Tablighi Jamaat represents a new expression of religiosity of young Muslims, which could be seen as a form of rebellion against the authority of the old. This rebellion is expressed in religious terms and assumes the character of conversion from the established Sufi expressions of Islam toward new expressions of Islam, which cultivate modesty in dress and demeanour, austerity, and greater social equality between the age sets. This shows that although “youth” can generally be thought of as the period between childhood and adulthood, it is also an emergent category,<sup>5</sup> which is being conceptualized and experienced through Islamic reform in The Gambia.

## Mural at a youth meeting place in The Gambia

### Notes

1. Marc Gaborieau, “The Transformation of Tablighi Jama’at into a Transnational Movement,” in *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama’at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal*, ed. M. Khalid Masud (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 129-31.
2. Ebrahim Moosa, “Worlds Apart’: Tablighi Jama’at in South Africa under Apartheid, 1963-1993,” in *Travellers in Faith*, 206-21; Goolam Vahed, “Contesting ‘Orthodoxy’: The Tablighi-Sunni Conflict among South African Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2003): 313-34.
3. Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi-Jama’at (1920-2000): A Cross-Country Comparative Study* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002), 10-12.
4. For Lamin’s full conversion story, see Marloes Janson, “Roaming about for God’s Sake: The Upsurge of the *Tablighi Jama’at* in The Gambia,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35, no. 4 (2005): 450-81.
5. Cf. Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck, eds., *Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (Oxford: James Curry; Trenton: Africa World Press; Dakar: Codesria, 2005).

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