

## 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.

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

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*and*



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*To my mother*  
*In memory of my father*

Contents

<i>List of Map and Figures</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Note on Language and Quotations from Interviews</i>	xv
<i>Glossary</i>	xvii
1 'Life Is a Test, the Hereafter Is the Best'	1
2 'Welcome to the Smiling Coast': Muslim Politics in the Gambia	35
3 The Global Meets the Local: The Tablighi Jama'at Contextualised	69
4 Back to the Ghetto	99
5 A Jihad for Purity	131
6 Learning to Be a Good Muslim Woman	161
7 Male Wives and Female Husbands	193
8 Hungry for Knowledge	225
9 'Muslims Are Sleeping and We Have to Wake Them Up'	255
<i>References</i>	271
<i>Index</i>	293

Map and Figures

Map

1	Research locations in the Gambia	<i>page 33</i>
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Figures

1	President Jammeh’s ‘Operation No Compromise’	36
2	Recording studio in Serrekunda	45
3	<i>Ibadu jama’at</i>	66
4	Imam Dukureh’s destroyed mosque	85
5	The <i>Markaz</i>	86
6	Youth ghetto	118
7	Slogan at a ghetto: ‘Whatever BBC Say They Are Telling Lices’	125
8	Tablighi women returning from <i>ta’lim</i>	175
9	Tablighi woman in ‘full <i>hijab</i> ’	190
10	Students at <i>majlis</i>	238
11	Slogan at a ghetto: ‘Is Too Stress to Live in Africa’	256

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xiii

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## Note on Language and Quotations from Interviews

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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.

## Glossary

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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

*Choosaano* 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’

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

*Madrasa* 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

*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*