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Mothers behind? Women, Tablighi Jemaat al-Dahwa in south Thailand and the introduction of new gender segregation.

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“How can these young men drop their households and leave for six month in the wilderness? These men are savage. How about their responsibility for the family?”

These are some of the voices, when asked to comment on the travelling culture of the Tablighi Jemaat al-Dahwa, an Indian Muslim movement which is active in more then 200 countries, covering probably every country where Muslims live.

Pressed hard, Tablighi are giving ready justifications for the necessity to proselytise in Thailand or abroad. Men are actively encouraged to sign their names and the amir remember them if the time is ripe. Once they decide to join a jemaat, these men will prepare themselves, as they have to pay for their provisions themselves. For a six-month *chilla* (tour) to India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, at least 10.000 Baht is required. “We have to work anyway. Our purpose of work has changed. We are now working for the jemaat.” When I inquire about the poor: “We have fellowships at the mosque for those who are determined, but who cannot afford to pay on their own.

Yet, poor villagers, such as Abdullah, don’t join the long chilla, but participate in the many short three-day or one-week outings in Southern Thailand or further into the country. Abdullah invites me to his fishing village near the port, to the local mosque and to his modest hut. He introduces me to his wife, cooking, shortly, who is all veiled and I can hastily see her eyes. Abdullah wears a white turban and a long robe all day. He says, “30 years ago, outsiders couldn’t distinguish between Muslims and Buddhists, as they would not differ in dress. But now, with the Tablighi Jemaat, people are much more conscious about their religion and want to display their Muslim identity.”

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We sit in the shadow of the mosque with the Imam, his assistants and the crowds. “We Muslims live a simple life”. We like to have large families, and every child is a gift of God, prevention is a sin.” “Women should not mix with unknown men. Women’s legs should never be visible beyond the knee.” At home, men perceive women’s sexuality as causing trouble for the harmony of Muslim society, so Tablighi men are encouraged to marry early. It is always men who speak out. It is obvious that women of Tablighi husbands stay at home. These women are also out of touch for me as a male anthropologist.²

Although the TJ presents itself with a wholly masculine face (Metcalf 2000: 45), although it is men who go from door to door in small groups and dressed in simple long white shirts, women in the Tablighi movement are not as passive as they appear on the first sight. Women facilitate and enable their husbands to go out for a jemaat. They are expected to engage in Dahwa within their own sphere of women and family members. Women’s Jamaat do go out, accompanying their menfolk, but this is largely the exception. There are invariably jamaat’s of women at the large annual meetings. Women fulfil important part of the dawa, as men are not supposed to talk to non-kin women or in the presence of unknown women. During the jemaat, gender relations are turned on their head, as men have to prepare meals for themselves. Women stay in private houses; they go to the mosque on Fridays between the noon and the afternoon prayer to meditate, to pray and to exchange news while preparing to leave.

In the last 6 years or so, the Tablighi Jemaat al-Dahwa, an Islamic missionary movement of Indian origin (Masud 2000; Metcalf 2002), has made massive inroads in many villages in Southern Thailand, covering every village. In the two communities of Tumpat and Singhanakorn, which I have selected for fieldwork, some locals made religious careers, constituting the leadership of the Tablighi Jemaat in Thailand, and in Tumpat, locals who have become Tablighi have gradually taken control of the mosque.

In a recent interview, Wan Kadir Che Man, a Pattani Malay intellectual, stated that the population in Pattani stubbornly insists on a conservative Islam that is embedded in the Sufi tradition and that efforts of the Whahabi to control the Pondok and the mosques were largely rejected by the local population (Wan Kadir 2005). Similarly, efforts from India would also not bear fruit in Southern Thailand. My research indicates that in recent year, the Tablighi

² All data, if not indicated otherwise, are drawn from my own fieldwork in southern Thailand during the last 10 years. I am grateful to my assistant and friend Sayan Madmarn (Walailak University)

Jemaat have changed the figurations of Muslim communities in Southern Thailand and has now members in the hundreds of thousands. But this success story, probably similar to other efforts of religious purification in the past, does not replace the local cosmology nor does everybody accept the new concept. After some time in the village, I learned that the presence of the Tablighi is in fact dividing the village and is engendering real struggles in the organization of everyday life and especially on the management of religion in the village.

As such, two-questions rose in my fieldwork: What makes the Tablighi Jemaat so attractive for many Thai Muslims? And second, why does the Tablighi Jemaat engender such a polarization in the village?

The main principle of the Tablighi Jemaat is proselytising Islam by being constantly on the move. In the short three days outings and the long six-month chilla, fellow Tablighi develop a simple lifestyle by being together for prayer, meditation, and listening to the lectures. The life in the Jemaat is tightly organized, the authority of the amir is total and questioning of the amir is severely discouraged. Everybody is welcome to the Jemaat and every newcomer will receive generous support from all sides for choosing the Dawa-way. Every new member reconfirms the mission of the Jemaat and contributes to its success. By participating in the three day outing, in which the Jemaat will travel to another village and will invite Muslims to join his prayer, new members are socialized within the Tablighi ideology. Once the new member takes part, he has to follow the directives of the amir and the rules of the Jemaat.

According to its founder, the main motivation is not the change of Islam among the Muslims, but the development of piety among the missionary themselves. Joining the travels of the Tablighi means leaving all worldly matters and committing all his time and indeed his life to the movement. This total commitment for the utopia of an egalitarian Islamic society, to religion and to Allah is a very powerful alternative for many.

The demand of total commitment does also engender the most virulent critique against the Tablighi Jemaat: The men would drop their families for long travel, leaving wives and children behind without income to sustain the family. Those crazy fanatics would abandon all achievements for the sake of proselytising among strangers. If their wives fell ill, their child would be abducted or their mothers are without a breadwinner, the Tablighi would not even return. The main trouble between divided villagers thus goes in the heart of gender relations.

Mothers are left behind by husbands who out of a sudden would leave the house and the 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 gender segregation. The Tablighi also discourage Muslim women from friendship with Buddhist neighbours, as they believe that the exposure to another religion than Islam would only confuse the concentration of Muslims on Allah. Being a movement of religious purification, the Tablighi Jemaat vehemently forbids and sanctions 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 the basic functions are strongly against any expenses or display of wealth. The performance of arts, music and dance is disencouraged, as is the performance of shadow puppet (*Nang Talung*) or Manoora.

With such a radical break with the indigenous traditions, it is no wonder that the Tablighi Jemaat is polarizing the village. Whereas in Tungpa, many of the Malay traditions were vanishing, in Sighanakorn, the coexistence with Buddhist neighbours is reproduced and reconfirmed in ritual exchange that emphasizes the unity of the living and the ancestors (*Taayai*) whose spirits are reactivated in the Manoora performance (Horstmann 2004). In the Manoora performance, it is possible for present family members to request a merit, which is reciprocated in the ceremony to the ancestors. The Manoora performance is able to establish the contact with the ancestors, to entertain, feed and appease them and the power of the spirits can be used for healing or for avoiding bad luck. Again, women have important positions in the Manoora dance, in the preparation as well as in the performance.

Tablighi Jemaat is exercising pressure on the life-cycle rituals and ceremonial life. Rather than censoring its performance, Muslims are encouraged to stop all ritual by themselves. For many Muslims, 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 are loosing their appetite or when their children fell ill.

After returning from the Thai Studies Conference at Northern Illinois University I had a chance to talk to Amporn Marddent, a native of Phuket. Amporn is a research fellow at Mahidol University, researching into the violence and sexual abuse in Southern Thailand. She

introduced me to the branch of another Islamic missionary movement, Daraul Arqam, which has a Madrasah in Phuket town. Again, the Tablighi Jemaat is established in Phuket and the islands in the Andaman Sea. She stated that her father, an entrepreneur, joined the Tablighi Jemaat and has since sojourned with the Tablighi, spending time in India. At first, Amporn was also attracted by the piety, purity and the sincere approach to the Qur'an of the Tablighi. She became an enthusiastic supporter by joining a global movement, participating in the mass meetings and travelling to the centre in India. She finally left the movement by complaining that as a woman, it was not possible to pursue her career while committing herself to the Tablighi life. Interestingly, she suggested that the Tablighi way is focused on proselytising activities and has very little basis on texts. In the end, the Tablighi could not serve Amporn's thirst for Islamic knowledge. Second, she stated that the Tablighi have introduced a rather rigid gender segregation in their home villages, suggesting that many villagers have misunderstood the Tablighi's position on gender relations. She found out that Indian Muslim women in Delhi are much less focused on gender segregation, less focused on veiling, more concentrated on *dahwa*, Islamic piety and praying, more visible in the public sphere.

In other words, the new pattern of gender segregation may well be an outcome of the indigenisation of *Dahwa* in Southern Thailand. This indigenisation follows from a very intense debate in Thai Muslim communities on the negotiation of Islam and Islamic discourse in everyday life. In fact, many people, while rhetorically supporting the Tablighi, and joining the jemaat, still keep to traditions that are considered deviant in the eyes of the Tablighi. This stubbornness of local Muslims shows that the new ideology is far from replacing the local cosmology altogether. A fieldwork sequence of a funeral in Tungpa nicely illustrates the contradictions in which people catch themselves. The Imam who is called in the late evening decides that the burial is carried out in the morning of the following day. After close family members stayed with the dead body and kin and friends visit the family in the evening, the Imam opens the ritual. After burying the dead, the villagers construct a small wooden shack in which the Imam, his assistants, and close family members, can stay for seven nights to read from the Al Qur'an and to share food with the dead person. The Tablighi elder who did not assist the burial, but visited at the house at night told me that according to the Tabligh, the dead person should be buried immediately and no ceremony is required. The tradition to stay with the dead on the place of the burial is a useless practice according to him. And yet, he was not able to stop the people from doing what they believe is obligatory service to the dead.

Women were washing the body, preparing him for burial and receiving guests in the evening for Islamic chanting and sharing *kao tom* (a rice soup).

Although the Tablighi have incorporated the Imam in Tungpa, marginalized another Imam, who is called lazy by the Tablighi, because he does not wake for the early morning prayer, the Tablighi Jemaat is not able to impose its regime on the whole village. Those who enter its fold are discouraged from many pastimes activities of the villagers, especially gambling and cockfighting. These vices are largely confined to men. Another fieldwork experience may illustrate this point. After being familiar with the Tablighi people in Tungpa, I can join a three-day outing in another village in the neighbouring district. In this village, there is no *dahwa* as yet. The jemaat is this time accompanied by male children who are dressed in the *dahwa*-way. The jemaat is very much seen as a training for the young and inexperienced members, who get tasks from the amir to prepare themselves for future outings. Before visiting the villagers for the first time, a ritual is carried out whereby the members stand in a circle, holding the hands of the fellow members, saying: “We bring the life of the Prophet (*nabi*) to the people who are not yet familiar with the Prophet and who have only limited knowledge about his ways. That is why we are here.”

The local Imam joins the TJ for their first meeting, discussing the state of Islam in the village. Villagers are occupied by seeking jobs outside of the village, praying at the mosque on Fridays. “These villagers are pitiful”, a Tablighi member tells me, “the mosque does not get enough attention and villagers miss their obligatory prayers. They are only Muslims by name, but have to be guided to the principles of Islam.”

After the first reunion, the amir appoints 10 to 12 members for the first touring of the local community (*gasht*). Before, the amir ritually confirms that they are coming for the sake of religion to spread the word of the *nabi* among the people. They knock on doors of every house– not missing a sole house– to involve villagers in debate and invite them for the next prayer.

Then, the members visit individual houses in order to involve villagers in religious discussions. While the Tablighi Jemaat are turning social hierarchies upside down, and everybody can become a volunteer, brother or sister, many villagers do not feel at ease with the uninvited Tablighi, their outfit and their moral authority. In this interface of incoming

Tablighi and ordinary villagers, women play a very important role in bridging the ice to the families.

For women's jemaat, there are special conditions. Each woman should be accompanied by a mahram, ideally the husband and after him, the son, father, brother, maternal uncle or maternal grandfather. A jemaat should be composed only of married women. Women as a rule do not settle at mosques, but in houses inhabited by women. Barbara Metcalf discusses the relationship of women and Tablighis favorably, stating that women in Indian society have enough female spaces for meditation, prayer and study. Women have the same right and obligation to *dahwa*- hence journeying. Besides their daily neighborhood groups, women receive visitors from as far as England or France, being a global sisterhood.

If men change, women change as well. Metcalf (2000: 50) argues that women, although expected to conform to rules of modesty and seclusion, "are included in a common model of shared commitment to Tabligh." In the course of travel, men experience some redrawing of gender roles as they learn to cook and wash clothes. In the same way, women left at home gain merit for managing the household so that men can go on tour; in the neighborhood circles, women become educated in religious teachings.

As the example of Amporn shows, some women may be disillusioned by having to submit themselves under the authority of some young, relatively poorly educated firebrand men who try to impose seclusion and *purdah* on educated freedom-loving Muslim women. While many women may be attracted at first sight by the piety and *zikir* of the Tablighis, not all women are ready to pay the price for long absences of their husbands nor may they like the total withdrawal to the religious sphere. Many women do not agree to eliminate all ceremonial and ritual life or traditional education in the Pondok or mosque for the new ideology. As a way of resistance, these may do as the older women in Singhanakorn, who joined the Patani-educated Imam who constructed a small mosque behind his house in frustration to the changes in local Muslim society. As the Imam put it: "Why our men and women have to tour and disturb other Muslim communities who have already their local Imam?"

While women in Indo-Muslim society find new female spaces to congregate, we need much more research on the localization of a global movement and on the way spaces of local Muslim women in everyday life are limited by the global movement, TJ and other

movements. The tours that form the nerve of the Tablighi teaching are meant to transform participants in their fundamental relationship to other people. The quietist character of the TJ may invariably mask their political character, as the massive inroads of the TJ 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 also changed: Muslim women in the TJ emphasize their religious relations and describe them in kinship terms ('sister'), while they de-emphasize their kinship relations to Buddhist women or men.

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