Male Wives and Female Husbands:
Reconfiguring Gender in the *Tablighi Jama'at* in the Gambia

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Abstract

The Tablighi Jama'at – a transnational Islamic missionary movement that propagates greater religious devotion and observance in the Gambia – opens the door to a new experience of gendered Muslim piety. *Tabligh* or Islamic missionary work results in novel roles for women, who are now actively involved in the public sphere – a domain usually defined as male. To provide their wives with more time to engage in *tabligh,* Tablighi men share the domestic workload, although this is generally considered 'women's work' in Gambian society. Contrary to the conventional approach in scholarship on gender and Islam to study such inversion of gender roles in terms of Muslim women's 'empowerment' and Muslim men's 'emancipation', in the Gambian branch of the Jama'at the reconfiguration of gender norms seems to be motivated by Tablighis' wish to return to the purported origins of Islam. Following the example of the Prophet's wives, Tablighi women actively engage in *tabligh*, and, taking Muhammad as their example, Tablighi men have taken over part of their wives' household chores. Paradoxically, by reconfiguring gender norms Gambian Tablighis eventually reinstate the patriarchal gender order.

Keywords

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Gender and Islam 'intertwine in complex ways', Bernal (1994: 56) points out in her study of changing Muslim traditions in northern Sudan. Pro-feminist scholarship on gender and Islam has long analysed this intertwining by focusing on women's status and roles in religious practice (Mernissi 1987; Hawley and Proudfoot 1994; Moghadam 1994; Gerami and Lehnerer 2001; Alidou 2005). As Bracke (2003: 337) puts it: 'Muslim women have been, and continue to be, particularly prone to be considered as "victims of false consciousness" – with the veil as a symbol *par excellence* of ideological deceit – or victims *tout court*, when they are represented as constituted by domination only'. The notion of 'false consciousness' explains why feminist scholars often find it difficult to understand and theorise Islamic fundamentalist formations,[1] framing women's involvement in them as a 'paradox' (for example, Saghal and Yuval-Davies 1992; Hardacre 1993). To effectively undermine the notion of 'false consciousness', such biased studies ask for an interpretation of gender beyond the all-too-popular focus on Muslim women who 'resist' the dominant patriarchal order, or, who 'liberate' themselves from the yoke of a conservative gender ideology. Although recent anthropological scholarship on Muslim piety has effectively addressed the shortcoming of such binary thinking (Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006; Masquelier 2009; Augis 2012; Schulz 2012), most studies focus only on Muslim women's subjectivities and tend to overlook men.[2] An exclusive focus on women is inadequate if we want to grasp how fundamentalism's moralizing idiom reconfigures stereotypical views of Muslim gendered identities. In line with claims by the new 'Men's Studies', my point here is that we should develop gender studies more rigorously into a study of women *and* men, and of the differences among men (see also Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Connell 1995; Morrell and Ouzgane 2005; Miescher et al. 2007; Uchendu 2008; Broqua and Doquet 2013).

To undermine the ingrained notion of 'false consciousness', I will present an ethnographic case study of the Tablighi Jama'at[3] – a transnational Islamic missionary movement that has its origins in the reformist tradition that emerged in India in the mid-nineteenth century and that propagates greater religious devotion and observance – which sheds light on the dynamic expressions and multiple understandings of gender among the movement's adherents in the Gambia. This case study has been recorded during approximately one year of ethnographic field research conducted between 2003 and 2007 in Kombo, the urban area around the Gambia capital Banjul.[4] As I have elaborated on elsewhere (Janson 2014: 26-34), conducting fieldwork on the Gambian branch of the Jama'at was quite

an undertaking. At first I was seen as a spy and an enemy and Tablighis were reluctant to talk with me. To legitimize my research, I argued that the image of 'fundamentalist' Islam in the West is distorted and that my research could help to give a more nuanced picture. This had some effect: a number of particularly young Muslim men were willing to talk to me, probably induced by curiosity and the idea that it was their religious duty to convey their knowledge of Islam to me. I eventually started receiving interview appointments and invitations to take part in Tablighi activities – invitations I eagerly accepted. Although I lived in Tablighi households during my field research, my interlocutors' interaction with me remained marked by a shifting interplay between approach and detachment. Although at times frustrating, this attitude was easy to understand when taking into account Harding's (1987) observation that among 'fundamentalists' (in her case American Baptists) there is no such a thing as a neutral, participant-observer position and no place for an ethnographer who seeks 'information'. Like Harding, I was considered 'a lost soul on the brink of salvation' (1987: 171). At the end of my fieldwork I learned that, because of my perseverance, I was called the 'iron lady' by my interlocutors. Although this was probably not meant as a compliment, I took it as one. My endurance in conducting field research on Tablighis, who see publicity as threatening and discourage researchers from writing about them, was somewhat similar to my interlocutors' perseverance in practising their faith in an environment that was often hostile to them. I think that because perseverance is considered an Islamic virtue, my interlocutors finally allowed me to participate in their lives and to record their narratives.

While participating in Gambian Tablighis' lives, I was confronted with a paradoxical situation: Tablighi women were encouraged by their husbands to attend learning sessions (*ta'lim*)[5] in which the ideal Muslim woman is portrayed as she who is confined to the house, while at the same time they were being summoned to leave their houses in order to impart good morals to other Muslim women during missionary tours (*masturat*).[6] *Tabligh*, or Islamic missionary work, results in new roles not only for women, who as missionaries are actively involved in the public arena – a domain usually perceived as 'male' – but also for men. While women engage in *tabligh*, their husbands perform household chores and take care of the children, although this is generally considered 'women's work' in Gambian society.

This situation resembles what Martin (2001: 53) calls a 'gender paradox'. Scholars of religion have tried to unravel this paradox by illustrating that the apparently regressive character of certain overtly patriarchal religious movements masks a very different reality in which women find important arenas of religious expression and achieve individual autonomy.

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By maintaining the commonplace of Muslim women as 'empowering' themselves through 'resisting' male dominance, these pioneering studies often sustained rather than resolved the gender paradox. For instance, in her study of Nigerien Muslim women Alidou claims:

> Women's more prominent participation in religious structures and discourses can, of course, be read as a resort to a conservative terrain under the control of men, implying that women are consenting to patriarchy. However, given the power of Islam in the national consciousness of the majority of Nigeriens, women's subjectivities in the religious terrain become a critical mode of quest for *empowerment* within the cultural frameworks that shape their identity (2005: 158; my emphasis).

Instead of contesting the established patriarchal gender discourse, this article attempts to illustrate that Gambian Tablighi women and men actually transcend and eventually reinforce it through their particular constructions of Muslim piety.

The 'gender paradox' characterising Tablighis' involvement in the Gambian branch of the Jama'at explains why I have entitled this article 'Male Wives and Female Husbands', a reference to two ground-breaking books in African studies: Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) and *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* by Roscoe and Murray (1998). Challenging the ethnocentrism of Western anthropology and the chauvinist stereotypes of Western feminism implicit in many studies of gender in Africa, these authors point out that sex and gender do not necessarily coincide, leaving women and men assuming roles usually monopolized by the opposite sex. For example, Amadiume shows that in the political-economic system in pre-colonial Igbo society in south-eastern Nigeria, specific categories of females could be incorporated into male categories. Wealthy women, for instance, could 'marry' wives and benefit from their productive and reproductive activities – hence the reference to 'female husbands'. Amadiume concludes that 'through the manipulation of gender concepts and flexible gender constructions in language, the dual-sex barrier is broken down or mediated' (1987: 89). Although I focus on a different historical and geographical setting and although, unlike the Igbo, Gambian Tablighis stick to a dualistic gender ideology that advocates segregation between men and women, what Amadiume's and Roscoe and Murray's studies teach us is that gender roles and norms are not fixed but are constantly being renegotiated; they change over space, time, and also during the lives of individual men and women.

Instead of conceiving of gender as a structure of fixed relations, I therefore interpret it as a fluid and relational process in which masculinities and femininities are performed in specific contexts (see also Butler 1990). In my heuristic approach I am inspired by Connell

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(1995), who presents masculinity as a social construction that is achieved within a gender order that defines masculinity in opposition to femininity and in doing so sustains a power relation between men and women as groups. As such, there is no single thing that is 'masculinity' or 'femininity'. Power relations among men and women, as well as different patterns of personality development, construct different masculinities and femininities (see also Kandiyoti 1994: 198). Before going more deeply into the Jamaʻat's patriarchal gender ideology and the mutually constitutive, malleable, and dynamic relationship between Tablighi constructions of masculinity and femininity, I begin with a brief history of the movement and its expansion to the Gambia.[7]

Historical Overview

The emergence of the Tablighi Jamaʻat as a movement for the revival of Islam can be seen as a continuation of a broader trend, which started in northern India in the wake of the collapse of Muslim power and the consolidation of British rule in the mid-nineteenth century. One manifestation of this trend was the rapid growth of *madrasas* (Islamic schools). The Jamaʻat evolved out of the teachings and practices of the founders of the orthodox Dar-ul ʻUlum *madrasa* in Deoband, a town near the Indian capital of Delhi. This *madrasa* was established in 1867 for the renewal of faith among Muslims. Mawlana Ilyas (1885-1944) was a disciple of the leading Deobandi Islamic scholars. After his graduation in 1910, he taught the Meo peasants in north India about correct Islamic beliefs and practices at mosque-based schools. Despite the fact that he established more than one hundred *madrasas*, he became disillusioned with his teaching approach, realising that Islamic schools were producing 'religious functionaries' but not zealous preachers who were willing to go from door to door to remind people of the key values and practices of Islam. He then quit his teaching position to begin missionary work through itinerant preaching. To make Muslims 'better' believers, that is, self-conscious Muslims strictly abiding by the fundamentals of the faith, Ilyas insisted that it was the duty of not just a few learned scholars but all Muslims to carry out *tabligh*. Missionary tours by lay preachers became the hallmark of the Jamaʻat, which was officially established by Ilyas in 1927 in Delhi (Ahmad 1995; Masud 2000b; Sikand 2002).

Over the years, the Jamaʻat has expanded from its international headquarters in India and has grown into what is probably the largest Islamic movement of contemporary times. Yet, in spite of its worldwide influence on the lives of millions of Muslims, scholars have paid little attention to the spread of the movement in sub-Saharan Africa. An explanation for

this indifference is that this region is frequently perceived as the 'periphery' of the Muslim world, in terms of both geography and religious influence. Moreover, the recurrent idea of an 'African Islam', reflecting the Sufi bias typical of scholarship on Islam in Africa, hampers a better understanding of the emergence of Islamic reformist movements like the Tablighi Jama'at. The idea that there is a specifically 'African Islam' (referred to as *Islam noir*, literally 'black Islam', by French colonial authorities; see Monteil 1980), which differs fundamentally from 'Arab' Islam, formed the basis of colonial policy with regard to Islam in West Africa from the second decade of the twentieth century onwards. Although the concept of *Islam noir* has been severely criticized (Launay and Soares 1999; Brenner 2000; Triaud 2000), there is still a tendency to depict Islam as practised in Africa as less 'orthodox' than in the Arab Middle East. For example, Westerlund and Rosander (1997) describe 'African Islam' as more flexible and adaptable than what they portray as 'Islam in Africa', thereby reviving the French tradition of *Islam noir*.

To redress the balance I focus on the Gambia, which, despite its small size,[8] has become a booming centre of Tablighi activities in West Africa since the late 1990s. Adherents from other West African countries regularly assemble in the Gambian city of Serrekunda to exchange ideas on the proper Tablighi method.[9] The Gambia's heritage from British colonial rule is one factor that has helped facilitate the spread of the Tablighi ideology, which was disseminated by South Asian missionaries who preached in English, the national language of the Gambia. The appearance of South Asian Tablighi missionaries coincided with the recent political Islamic resurgence in the country. Captain Yahya Jammeh assumed power in 1994 and invoked Islam to enhance his political legitimacy. This provided fresh scope for the creation of a public discourse on Islam in the Gambia (Darboe 2007; Janson 2014: 47-52). As a result, an increasing number of Gambians (and young Muslims in particular) seemed to be receptive to a new interpretation of their faith. Thus, conditions in the Gambia provided fertile soil for the Jama'at to take root.

The history of the Jama'at in the Gambia began with Imam Dukureh, who studied in Saudi Arabia for several years.[10] In the early 1980s, he returned to his native village, Gambisara – a Serahuli settlement in eastern Gambia[11] – and set out to make the villagers more aware of their religion by denouncing their traditional ways of worship and popular forms of piety. His former students remembered how Dukureh preached against the sinful activities taking place during the life-cycle rituals associated with Islam, such as drumming, singing, and dancing. He condemned these rituals as a form of 'cultural Islam' and

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summoned his students to perform their rituals in a simple way without any aspect of entertainment or ostentatious gift-giving. This had major implications for especially women who, of old, were the central protagonists in naming ceremonies and weddings. Except for a few likeminded men, the villagers did not embrace the reformist ideas of Dukureh, whom they considered to be 'anti-social'. Dukureh's followers realized that Gambisara was too provincial for their leader's innovative ideas, and they built a compound for him in Serrekunda.

Dukureh found the ideas of a group of itinerant South Asian Tablighi missionaries congruent with his own beliefs, and he lodged them in his compound. Over the years the compound has expanded, and today a two-storey building accommodates South Asian and other visiting missionaries disseminating the Tablighi ideology. In the early 1990s, a mosque was constructed adjacent to Dukureh's compound. The fact that the Jama'at has its own mosque is exceptional because Gambian mosques normally do not make denominational distinctions. The mosque's size is particularly striking: it can seat two thousand people, an enormous number by Gambian standards. Until his death in 2000, Dukureh continued spreading his ideology in Serrekunda in the mosque that came to be known as the *Markaz* ('Centre'), where he was appointed imam. Since the late 1990s, the Markaz has grown into the pivot of the Jama'at in the Gambia. It is the place where large numbers of particularly young Muslims gather daily to perform prayers, immerse themselves in constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*), listen to sermons, read aloud from the Tablighi literature, and discuss faith with the aim of bringing about a religious transformation in Gambian society.

Local Features of the Tablighi Jama'at in the Gambia

Different from South Asia, a striking feature of the Jama'at in the Gambia is that it is popular among particularly lower-middle class youth between the ages of roughly fifteen and thirty-five. Elsewhere the movement appears to hold greater attraction to middle-aged men who have more time, and probably also more money, to invest in *tabligh* (Moosa 2000: 212). In the Gambia, by contrast, it seems that youth of all ethnicities[12] have adopted the Jama'at to carve out a space for themselves in Gambian society in the absence of alternative means of reaching social maturity and a fulfilling life. At a time when a school diploma is no longer considered sufficient to secure upward social and economic movement with the promise of a more successful life, young Gambians have found in the Jama'at ways to make Islam compatible with newly emerging configurations of progress, morality, and intergenerational

and gender relationships. As a university student aptly remarked, 'a university degree is the highest degree one can get, but we don't have trust in it. Therefore we engage in *tabligh*, in order to reclaim our lost identity. We derive comfort from our religion'.

A factor explaining the attraction of Gambian youth to the Jama'at may be the current socio-economic hardship. The Gambian economy has gone into a downward spiral since the 1990s. The rate of unemployment has risen, and inflation has sharply increased the cost of living. It appears that educated youth in particular are hit hard by the Gambian crisis. Explaining the link between the current socio-economic crisis and the expansion of the Jama'at among Gambian youngsters, my research assistant Sainey, who at one time wanted to join the movement, said:

> Many Gambian young people do not have an easy life. They want to work but there are no jobs, or they want to travel to Babylon [a term derived from reggae music referring to the West] but they don't have papers. It's not easy for them to get what they want. Some start smoking *ganja* (marijuana) and go mad, while others start praying more regularly. The preachers tell them that they will be rewarded for their prayers. These youths fall in love with the new religion; all they do is follow Allah's commandments and say '*ma sha' Allah*' (what God wishes). My old friend is a good example. He worked as a manager for a bank, but lost his job. He got a loan, but, because he couldn't pay the money back, he was arrested. In order to overcome his problems he became a hardliner [a local designation for Tablighis].

Sainey's observation suggests that Gambian youth have found in the Jama'at a framework that allows them to cope with socio-economic wrongs. But although the hardship youngsters are confronted with contributed to the proliferation of the Jama'at in the Gambia, it does not fully explain the movement's expansion. During my field research it appeared that the Jama'at also appeals to Gambian youth because it offers them a new sense of belonging to a transnational religious community, beyond the control of the established Muslim elders and their parents. By turning their back on the established authorities and their 'flawed' religious practice, youths gained greater independence, a new sense of moral selfhood, and a ritual perfection that they felt brought them a higher level of piety – and thereby a step closer to God.

In addition to its appeal to youth, another local feature of the Jama'at in the Gambia is its popularity among urban, lower-middle class Muslim women in their twenties and early thirties. The majority of these women have not received a formal religious education but attended only Western-style education and are married.[13] Although unmarried women can participate in weekly learning sessions, in order to set out on missionary tours a Tablighi

woman must be married. Since the Jamaʻat has abolished expensive bride-prices – arguing that the value of the bride-price is of minor importance compared to the marriage as an act that fulfils God's commandments – Tablighis are able to marry young. Marrying young is important for Tablighis, who consider marriage a major turning point in their struggle for moral perfection. Whereas Gambian Tablighi women resemble other reformist Muslim women in West Africa in terms of their age, class, marital status, and educational background (for example, see LeBlanc 2000a; Alidou 2005; Gomez-Perez 2005; Augis 2009, 2012; Masquelier 2009; Schulz 2012), their active involvement in missionary work distinguishes them from their female counterparts elsewhere.

The little that has been written on the Jamaʻat gives, according to Sikand (1999) and Metcalf (2000), the impression that women barely exist in the movement. In Metcalf's view the Jamaʻat presents itself with a 'wholly masculine face':

> [In this] quietist movement of internal spiritual renewal, it is men who go from door to door in college hostels, men who approach other Muslim men to invite them to pray in airports, men who can be seen travelling in small groups by bus or train in Indian cities as part of their monthly or yearly sacrifice of time for proselytization or *Daʻwa*. It is men one sees in sub-continental cities, dressed in simple white loose pants, long shirt, and cap, modest bedding on their back, disappearing into a mosque where they will spend the night (2000: 44).

The perception that missionary work is a male activity in South Asia contrasts sharply with the case of the Gambia where women are actively involved in *tabligh*. Whereas South Asian Tablighi women set out on missionary tours only sporadically or not at all (Sikand 1999: 44; Metcalf 2000: 50), Gambian Tablighi women go out every two months for a three- or fifteen-day *masturat*. Recently, Gambian Tablighi women have obtained permission from the movement's leadership to set out on tour for maximum forty days. In addition, they attend weekly learning sessions or *taʻlim*.

A theme that comes to the fore in much of the recent literature on women's involvement in Islamic reformist movements is sustained attention to women's religious education (Torab 1996; Gomez-Perez 1998; Mahmood 2005; Huq 2008, 2009; Schulz 2008, 2012; Masquelier 2009; Augis 2009, 2012). But whereas the pattern of women being instructed to organise their daily conduct in accord with reformist principles and virtuous behaviour is common in the Muslim world, female missionaries taking to the streets to disseminate their faith certainly is not. The term *daʻiya* (literally, 'female bearer of *daʻwa*')

usually has the connotation of 'teacher' (Mahmood 2001: 218). In the Gambian setting, however, the pedagogical and missionary roles of Tablighi women are closely related.

Thus, although Gambian Tablighi women have lost traditional achievements, especially during the life-cycle rituals associated with Islam that have always been the prerogative of women (Janson 2002), they have gained access to new socio-religious space. In the following section it will appear that *tabligh* results in new roles for women, which simultaneously subvert and confirm the traditional, patriarchal gender ideology.

Representing Gender: Tablighi Conceptions of Gender Roles

Several Tablighi women told me that in order to receive religious education, they were initially welcomed into the women's wing of the *Markaz*, but since they disturbed the sessions by their chatting and later by their noisy use of mobile phones, they were subsequently banned from the mosque. The control of women's use of the mobile phone – the epitome of connectedness, freedom, and modernity in the Gambia as elsewhere on the continent (De Bruijn et al. 2009) – is symptomatic of the supervision the Jama'at exercises over women's life. On the one hand, the movement provides its female adherents, by means of *ta'lim* sessions, with a setting outside the home to assemble with other Muslim women and learn more about Islam. On the other hand, it tries to restrict their freedom of movement by restoring their traditional gender roles as (house)wives and mothers. Since women were banned from the *Markaz* in 2003, special *ta'lim* are held for Tablighi women every Sunday morning between 10 and 12 in the houses of five active 'sisters' in Serrekunda and its surroundings.[14] These houses, which are centrally located, serve as so-called *ta'lim* centres.[15]

Before going more deeply into the simultaneous liberating and curtailing role of *ta'lim*, it should be noted that men have their own *ta'lim*. Because women are believed to play a key role in effecting moral reform, these learning sessions are considered to be more important for women than for men. Because of the importance attached to *ta'lim* for women, the sessions attended by women are organised according to stricter rules than that attended by men. In addition to the ban on the use of their mobile phones, during the *ta'lim* that I attended women were told to sit up straight, not to lean on the wall, and to listen attentively since this would increase their religious zeal. These rules are to be understood as disciplinary practices through which women's pious dispositions are cultivated (see also Mahmood 2005: 128). Despite these restrictions, my female interlocutors felt they had to participate in *ta'lim* to 'reach a higher level of piety' that would bring them 'closer to Allah'.[16]

As noted above, learning sessions for Muslim women are not unique to the Jama'at, nor to the Gambia. Huq (2008, 2009) points out that, as a result of the Islamic revival, women's study groups have proliferated. These study groups have grown into a key site for the production of a particular form of devout Islamic female subjectivity that subscribes to reformist standards of piety. Women study groups, including *ta'lim*, aim at embodying a range of Islamic ethical virtues in their female participants, teaching them how to morally reform the self and secure a pious ambience in total submission to Islamic principles (Torab 1996; Mahmood 2005; Haniffa 2008; Schulz 2008, 2012). In their focus on proper Muslim womanhood, the Gambian *ta'lim* also resemble the Tablighi learning sessions observed by Sikand (1999: 44-45) and Metcalf (2000: 51-52) in South Asia, which serve as neighbourhood learning forums, focusing on the need for women to strengthen their faith, improve their practice of Islamic ritual, and bring Islam into their personal lives.

Unlike in many other countries where the Jama'at has established itself, Islamic education for adult women through weekly learning sessions is a new development in the Gambia. Muslim girls usually attend a traditional Qur'an school (*majlis*) for a couple of years to learn the basic skills considered necessary to becoming a good wife and mother – performing ablutions, praying, and taking care of themselves as proper Muslim women. My neighbour Fatu, for example, attended *majlis* for a few years during her childhood, but she complained that she only learned how to pray and memorise some short *sura*s (Qur'anic verses) and that her *majlis* education did not contribute substantially to her Islamic training. Several mainstream Muslim women[17] blamed their lack of Islamic knowledge on their fathers, who kept them ignorant of Islam by marrying them off at a young age, and, in this way, restrained their opportunities to enhance their Islamic knowledge. Gambian Tablighi men, by contrast, encourage their wives to have religious education in the form of *ta'lim*.

Ta'lim constructs women's religious identities in line with the Jama'at's discourse on gender. They portray the ideal Muslim woman as she who obeys her husband and is confined to the house, where she performs household tasks and is responsible for her children's moral upbringing. The *ta'lim* sessions that I attended stressed typical feminine virtues like *malu* (shame/modesty), *baturoo* (obedience), *sabaroo* (patience/endurance), and *munya* (self-control/submissiveness). Although these virtues apply to some extent also to men, they are more closely associated with female behaviour (see also Schulz 2008: 84). For example, *malu* is considered to be one of the most feminine of Islamic virtues. For a woman, dressing properly, obeying her husband, concentrating on inculcating moral values in her children, and

staying indoors are ways to show *malu*. Taking into account that women's reputations are not self-inflicted but are considered to be the responsibility of both their father and husband, the consequences of female shamelessness (*malubaliyaa*) are far-reaching (see also Mahmood 2005: 156, 182). My interlocutors argued that a 'shameless woman' (*musu malubaloo*) would discredit her husband and her entire family and would eventually 'burn in hell'. Thus, women and men are believed to operate in rather distinct spheres of morality. Embodying the Jama'at's notion of modest behaviour in their roles as obedient wives, self-sacrificing mothers, and dedicated housewives is a means for Gambian Tablighi women to cultivate a pious self that would bring them 'closer to Allah'.

The traditional female virtues underlined in the *ta'lim* are explained in the *Faza'il-i a'mal* ('The Merits of Practice'). During *ta'lim* preachers read from this standard corpus of Tablighi texts that offers guidance for everyday life. Among the most favourite texts are the 'Stories of *Sahabas*', which is the first text in the *Faza'il-i a'mal* and emphasizes the strong moral character of the Prophet's companions. The ideal woman is presented here as a good mother. It is argued that the 'lap of the mother is admitted to be the best field of instruction' (Zakariyya n.d.: 174). In addition, she must be a good housewife. For example, Fatima – the Prophet's beloved daughter – is described as a hard-working housewife (Zakariyya n.d.: 174-175). By recounting the *Sahabas*' piety, these stories encourage Gambian Tablighi women to follow in their footsteps with as reward 'closeness to Allah'.

The *ta'lim*'s goal is to assimilate women into what the Jama'at sees as the normative Islamic standard, and, as a result, it emphasizes the importance of female seclusion or *purdah* (Metcalf 1993: 592). During *ta'lim* I heard a preacher proclaiming: 'Fatima was better than all the other women during her time since she stayed indoors. She even pounded rice in her room. Take Fatima as your example and remain in your homes where you concentrate on doing the housekeeping.' The home is considered to be the rightful place for women and is imagined to be free from intrusions of the vulgar outside world.

Given the Tablighi Jama'at's restriction of women's role to the realm of the home, all the more surprised I was when at the end of the *ta'lim* the preacher passed round – from behind a curtain so that he could not see the female participants nor could they see him – a sheet of paper on which they had to write their husbands' names and the number of days they intended to go on *masturat*.[18] Strikingly, although women are expected to consult with their husbands on the number of days they intend to set out on tour, their own voice is decisive. Musa, an influential figure within the Gambian organization of the Jama'at, explained to me

why the women's voice is so decisive: 'Women are emotional and they involve themselves in petty things, but when they have the right attitude towards *tabligh*, they can achieve a lot. They can become stronger in it than men, because it's easy for them to influence others.' Because of their social influence, Tablighi women are encouraged to recruit their husbands to set out on missionary tours. Also when men set out on tour without their wives, the latter have an important voice. Musa explained that a man can set out on tour only with his wife's permission. His friend added: 'My wife must forgive me when I want to go on tour, because maybe she needs me during that period. If I set out without her permission, I commit a sin.'

Similar to *ta'lim,* women's participation in *masturat* should meet certain conditions. First of all, my female interlocutors explained that when setting out on tour, women should dress strictly according to the *Sunna* (the Prophetic traditions)*,* implying that they cover their whole body, including the face, hands, and feet. Moreover, only married women are allowed to engage in *masturat*, and they must travel in the company of their husbands. Third, unlike male Tablighis, female missionaries are not allowed to go on tour for more than 40 days because of their household work and family responsibilities. Finally, taking into account the *hadith* (Prophetic saying) that says that 'the best place for a woman is in her house', female missionaries try to create a home while on tour. This implies that they spend most of the tour inside their hostess's house, while the male missionaries are lodged in the local mosque and travel around the neighbourhood. Despite these limiting conditions, my interlocutors underlined the importance for Muslim women to join *masturat* because it lifts them to a higher level of morality and thereby a step 'closer to Allah'.

Paradoxically, during *masturat* Gambian Tablighi women take to the streets to instruct other women that the best place for a Muslim woman is in the home. While women engage in *tabligh*, their husbands take over part of their domestic workload. In the remainder of this article I will elucidate that this inversion of gender roles is less paradoxical as it seems at first sight when we abandon our essentialist conception of gender and focus instead on the dynamic process in which gendered Muslim subjectivities are constantly being (re)negotiated.

Doing Gender: Shifting Practices of Gender in the Tablighi Jama'at

Whereas the Tablighi gender ideology prescribes women to act as homemakers and nurturers, and men as providers and sources of authority, in practice the Jama'at sometimes has the opposite effect in that gender roles and relations are being reconfigured. This section

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illustrates that in the process of reconciling the conflicting demands of *tabligh* and Muslim gender norms, Tablighi women and men reformulate the boundaries between the public and the domestic domain and, correspondingly, between gender-specific spheres of action.

Whereas the focus in this article has so far been on notions of proper Muslim womanhood, these notions are constructed in relation to conceptions of masculinity. The Jama'at's articulation of the ideal gender role for a Muslim woman is based on the assumption that the Muslim man controls and protects his family and provides for it.[19] While stressing women's role in *tabligh*, such a view of ideal masculinity presupposes a femininity that is weak and needs support. But although the Jama'at's masculine ideology frames experiences of female subordination, it does not completely define them. Just as femininity is not monolithic, so masculinity has multiple and ambiguous meanings, and the boundaries between the two are constantly renegotiated and redrawn (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994: 17; Berger et al. 1995: 3, 7). Cornwall and Lindisfarne argue:

> Being masculine can involve a range of behaviour which elsewhere would be termed feminine or not considered relevant in gendered terms at all. … Being masculine need not be an exclusive identity. It can involve self-presentations which include behaviour conventionally associated with *both* masculinity and femininity. (…) There are male *and* female versions of masculinity and, equally, female *and* male versions of femininity (1994: 15; emphasis in the original).

What this quote illustrates is that masculinity and femininity do not have a stable essence, present throughout a lifetime or a stage of life, but should be seen in terms of a series of negotiated identities, performances, and fragments of a person who at other times and in other contexts may have other gender attributes (see also Cornwall 1994: 128-130; Broqua and Doquet 2013: ix-x). Challenging the dichotomy in mainstream gender discourse, Cornwall and Lindisfarne approach gender as a continuum of qualities found in both males and females. Such a mutability of gender constructions may help us to grasp the reconfiguration of gender roles and relations in the Gambian branch of the Jama'at.

Whereas women's role as educator of children supports traditional gender ideology, the Tablighi extension of this role into the public domain, as instructor of their female counterparts, is innovative. Similarly, whereas men's role as provider ties in with the traditional patriarchal set-up of Gambian society, the Tablighi interpretation of this role as nurturer in the literal sense of the term renegotiates the established conceptions of

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masculinity. Bubacar, a Tablighi man in his early thirties, explained the division of labour between male and female missionaries as follows:[20]

> During a missionary tour there is a task division between the missionaries: one leads the group, another reads from the Tablighi literature, and a third goes out shopping at the market and cooks. When our wives travel with us, they will cook but we are responsible for the shopping. Market vendors often laugh at us. However, it's our duty to do the shopping since it's not good for women to mingle with men at the market. When we have finished inviting Muslims to pray with us in the local mosque, we fetch water to wash our clothes. Afterwards, we are tired and go to bed.

This narrative suggests that men are engaged in household activities during missionary tours, including shopping, fetching water, and doing laundry. Other domestic tasks in which male missionaries are engaged are serving food, sweeping, cleaning the toilets of the mosque used as residence, and repairing clothes, although these activities are generally associated with women's work in Gambian society. In addition to household chores, Tablighi men are involved in childcare. During *ta'lim*, men are encouraged to take care of their children so that their wives can concentrate on the preachers' sermons.

The active involvement in domestic work and childcare by Gambian Tablighi men seems to be a local phenomenon. In the Tablighi manual the *Faza'il-i a'mal*, women are exhorted to engage in domestic work in order to assist their husbands and give them the opportunity to do missionary work: 'Make their household duties lighter for them so that they may do religious work without any hindrance. If the women do not cooperate in this direction, they will be the victims of becoming a trap of Shaytaan [Satan]' (Zakariyya n.d., 'Six Fundamentals': 38). However, the Gambian branch of the Jama'at has inverted this gendered fundamental by summoning men to take over part of their wives' household tasks.

During previous field research I never observed Gambian men engaging in domestic work. When my host's cousin saw me doing laundry and I asked him whether instead of staring at me he could help me, he responded: 'Men can't do laundry; their hands aren't made for it.' Indeed, one of the motivations given by a single interlocutor why he wanted to marry was that he was 'tired of doing laundry' by himself. As Grosz-Ngaté notes, for West African men it is 'shameful' to perform 'feminine' tasks such as household chores (1989: 172). Many Gambian men were afraid that once they engaged in domestic work they were no longer seen as 'manly'. Tablighi men, on the contrary, believed that it is men's religious duty to engage in household tasks. Bachir, a thirty-year-old Tablighi man, explained: 'During missionary tours we humble ourselves by doing menial tasks, so that Allah will elevate us.'[21] Similar to

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Bachir, many other male interlocutors believed that engaging in domestic work can bring about a spiritual experience of closeness to God. Irrespective of whether they are performed by women or men, Bachir noted that household tasks have many virtues: 'Household tasks are a form of worship. For example, sweeping the house while doing *dhikr* (remembrance of God by recalling His names) has the same reward as sweeping the Ka'aba (one of the most sacred sites in Islam).' His friend added: 'The Muslim woman is a queen and the husband is her servant who should work for her.' Here it should be noted that Tablighi men's non-chauvinist behaviour does not automatically stem from the high esteem for women in Islam, but also from the Jama'at's ideology of rigid gender segregation.

Tablighi men's household labour contributions raise the question of family structure and organization in Gambian society.[22] Like in other West African contexts, the multi-generationality and extensiveness of mainstream Gambian family residences means that even if the wife is absent, there are co-wives, sisters, sisters-in-law, and other women who can take on household tasks. Instead of the extended family, Tablighis' reference point had become the nuclear family. This means that they cannot depend on other women but need to actively engage in domestic work themselves in the absence of their wives. For example, Bubacar's ideal was to move with his nuclear family to the countryside, where he would earn a living as a farmer and lead an isolated and quiet life far away from his relatives. Bubacar often sighed that life in a family compound is difficult:

> It's not good to mingle too much with others because we must profess our religion in our own way. . . . As I'm still young, this is the best time to migrate. When we [Bubacar and his nuclear family] move to the countryside, I will not inform others when my wife delivers. Even my parents would not know that my wife had delivered. We would live our lives in accordance with the *Sunna*.

Because he did not earn enough to build his own house or rent a room for his nuclear family, Bubacar continued to live in his family compound. In order not to be bothered too much by his relatives and their 'corrupt' ways of practising their faith, he moved to a two-room apartment at the far end of the compound where he ate together with his wife, played with his daughter, and listened to tape-recorded sermons. That Bubacar stopped eating with his relatives is revealing in a society where 'eating from the same bowl' (*domoroo ke booloo kiling kono*) expresses kinship. This withdrawal from extended family life had far-reaching social consequences: his relatives saw Bubacar as 'arrogant' and 'anti-social'.

Gambian Tablighis' rupture with cultural traditions is illustrated not only in their family structure but also in their performance of the life-cycle rituals. Bubacar noted that his female relatives cried bitterly when he decided to celebrate his daughters' naming ceremonies and his wedding modestly, because this meant that they had lost the opportunity to entertain on a lavish scale:

> People with money like to show off, but we [the Tablighis] do not want that. If we organise a *kullio* (naming ceremony), we don't invite many guests and we don't spend much money. . . . I celebrated my daughters' naming ceremonies in a simple way by naming the babies and sacrificing a ram. When Allah makes us happy with a baby, we should express our happiness by sacrificing a ram. That's all. … I organised my children's naming ceremonies early in the morning so that they would not be attended by many people. After the naming I left for the *Markaz*, where I stayed the entire day. My family was angry at me because they had wanted to invite many guests and cook a lot of food. I told them that if they would dare to do this, they would see what was going to happen. My stepmother cried the entire day and finally left for her sister's home. I didn't care; I care only about Allah and the Prophet.

Bubacar explained his striving for austerity in religious practice as an attempt to achieve 'greater piety' that would bring him 'closer to Allah'. Since Tablighis emphasize the importance of frugality in the performance of weddings (and other life-cycle rituals), they are able to marry young without saving money for an expensive bride-price first. During interviews, many male Tablighis indicated their willingness to marry only one wife because for them polygamy expresses 'backwardness'. A Tablighi of long standing told me: 'All the Muslim brothers who I know have just one wife, except for those who joined the Jama'at after their marriages. I think it's very hard to marry more than one wife. Polygamy often creates many problems, you know. Moreover, it's an old-fashioned practice.' Gambian Tablighi men's preference for monogamy accommodated the wishes of their wives, for whom polygamy usually was a source of great concern. Tablighi men's involvement in domestic work thus has both religious significance and social and cultural implications.

Gambian Tablighi men not only perform alleged women's work, but in the opinion of many mainstream Muslims they also dressed somewhat like women since, following the *Sunna*, they apply kohl on their eyes and some dye their beards and nails with henna.[23] When a cousin asked Bachir why he used 'make-up', he explained to her:

> Since the Prophet applied kohl, we should also do it. Furthermore, it has a therapeutic effect; it protects the eyes against eye infections. As soon as my beard

turns grey, I will dye it with henna. If a man dies his hair and/or nails with henna, he
will go to paradise straight.

Furthermore, to the malicious pleasure of his relatives who thought that wearing a skirt is
reserved to women, Bachir often wore a *lungi* – a wrap-around skirt that is worn by South
Asian men. It is noteworthy that Tablighi men look down upon the Gambian beach boys who
grow dreadlocks or plait their hair and wear earrings and other jewellery, because they
consider it *haram* (unlawful in Islam) for a Muslim man to dress like a woman. When the
local football team had won a match, a group of boys walked around the streets dressed like
women, trying to stir up some fun. Bachir was not amused by the sight of the boys' cross-
dressing. Like his male counterparts, he interpreted his own appearance not as effeminate but,
rather, in terms of a return to the Prophetic model.

According to several mainstream Muslim men, Tablighi men also acted 'feminine'
because they expressed their emotions in public.[24] Often when they listened to audiocassettes
with preaching or recited Qur'anic verses, Tablighi men burst out in tears and hugged each
other to find emotional relief. Although many mainstream Muslims regarded Tablighis as
'cry-babies' who find themselves in a state of 'being lost' – just as babies, in strange
surroundings, cry for their mothers – my male interlocutors did not explain crying as a gender
marker but as a marker of piety, which puts the believer on a higher spiritual level in his
search for God. In his study of cassette sermons and their auditors in Egypt, Hirschkind
(2006: 76-80, 97-100) points out that when male listeners weep it is a gestural and
kinaesthetic response, defined by him as 'hearing with the heart', which is linked to a
particular moral state. This morality is premised on a notion of affect as integral to action. In
such a view, weeping is a means by which virtuous behaviour is honed in accord with models
of Islamic moral personhood. Like the Egyptian auditors, Gambian Tablighi men give
weeping an important place within moral practice: it is the outward sign of their devotion to
God and the internalization of piety. Remarkably, this moral disposition seems to apply less
to Tablighi women than to men. In order to be considered pious, Muslim women must, as
mentioned before, show *munya*, that is, self-control. This virtue is antagonistic with
weeping.[25]

Fatu, a Muslim woman in her early twenties, did not understand why I was so interested
in Tablighis: 'Don't mind them; they are just half big,' she told me. Calling them 'half big'
was a way of saying that they are not 'real men'. Since Tablighi men sleep together in local
mosques during missionary tours, they are sometimes also called 'gay', a characterization

that – although they strongly oppose homosexuality as 'immoral' and 'anti-Islamic' – does not seem to hurt them and which they dismiss as a sign of 'ignorance of Islam'. Nevertheless, calling someone 'gay' is a strong imputation in a country whose president has threatened to behead homosexuals.[26]

Although mainstream Muslim men often were critical of the Jama'at, many non-Tablighi women were appreciative of Tablighi men's involvement in domestic work. A middle-aged woman said: 'Although I don't like Tablighis, I have to admit that I admire the way they take care of their wives and children. Imagine, they even help their wives shopping! Our husbands would never do that.' Women like her saw in Tablighi men's engagement in domestic work a sign that they were more caring for their families. Aisha, a spirited Tablighi woman in her early thirties, told me that other women envied her because her husband respected her wish for a monogamous marriage. She emphasised that she had an 'open marriage' (in the sense that she and her husband communicated a lot) in which they 'shared many things', ranging from their children's education to what they were going to eat for dinner.

In the Jama'at's moral discourse, marriage is considered an action that furthers the goal of spiritual perfection. Because marriage is regarded as a 'divine contract', Tablighi men see it as their religious duty to treat their wives well and to listen to their wishes. A newly-wed Tablighi woman, for instance, told me that when her husband proposed to her, she first gave him a list with marriage articles, which he uncomplainingly accepted. During the *ta'lim* sessions that I attended, the Tablighi preachers underlined the importance of marrying young as a protection against 'engaging in dirty things' (that is, sex before marriage). Although extra-marital sex is considered among the greatest sins, my interlocutors regarded the pursuit of sexual pleasure within the bounds of marriage a necessary virtue for both men and women. For example, an ardent Tablighi told me that he likes having a long foreplay to show his wife how much he loves her. Although in the literature on gender sexuality is often seen as playing a dominant role in the construction of masculinity, this example suggests that sexuality not always defines a hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995).

Male Tablighis' involvement in domestic work and childcare, their display of 'feminine' behaviour, and their adoption of a 'female' dress code suggest that missionary tours could be analysed in terms of what Turner (1969) calls anti-structural 'liminality', during which other rules and modes apply than in daily life. Because missionary tours produce a space and time that differ from everyday living – a 'sacred' setting so to say

(Masud 2000a: xvii) – my male interlocutors felt they could fully submit to Allah and imitate the Prophetic model while on tour. As with neophytes in a rite of passage, they become liminal beings during missionary tours, detached from their family compound and worldly occupations and disassociated from status, property, and other insignia indicating rank. It is striking in this context that my interlocutors described the Tablighi dress as a 'uniform' that makes missionaries look similar.[27] In addition, there is no hierarchy of assigned roles during missionary tours, and roles rotate between the missionaries, making them equal. Because missionary tours are a liminal moment in Turner's classical sense, distinct from everyday living, men may obey their wives when they tell them to go on tour, satisfy their wives' needs, engage in domestic work and childcare, apply kohl on their eyes, wear a skirt, and weep when listening to sermons without undermining their masculinity. Along similar lines, because *masturat* is part of a temporary rather than the normal order of things, women may go out in public and preach without losing their status as respectable Muslims.

Turner's work on ritual action and liminality draws attention to the dimension of performativity. To the earlier anthropological conception of ritual as symbolic action, Asad (1993: 62-65) opposed an understanding of 'rites as apt performances' and 'disciplinary practices', a view he argues can be seen in medieval Christian conceptions of the monastic life. Something similar applies to the primary Tablighi ritual – the missionary tour – in which missionaries enact an Islamic ethics. Bubacar explained to me:

> In a *jama'at* [travelling party] consisting of seven people, every participant contributes only 10 *dalasi* [about 25 Euro cents] a day to pay for the daily meals. We consume three meals a day, but we train ourselves to eat less than usual during tours. To keep down our expenses, we travel on foot.

By disciplining themselves to eat and spend less through acting modestly, Tablighi missionaries cultivate a pious disposition. As we have seen above, modesty has a strong gender component. During an Islamic conference I heard a Gambian Muslim scholar preaching that women, because of their 'valuing a *dunya* (worldly) over a *dini* (religious) life', are 'the kindling wood of hell'. To overcome such stereotypes and be regarded as pious Muslims, women have to display respectability (in dress and behaviour) and invest more in *tabligh* than men. The performative aspect of missionary tours sheds light not only on the Jama'at's disciplinary programme in creating a Muslim gendered subject that is pious in its formation (see also Mahmood 2005: Chapter 5), but also helps us to understand that gender roles and norms are not fixed: they can be thrown into question or subjected to what Butler

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(1993) calls 'resignification' in the liminal context of the missionary tour.[28] But by temporarily inverting gender roles, missionaries eventually reinforce standard norms and roles when the mission is over. In other words, the ritual (that is, the Tablighi missionary tour) does not put normativity at risk; it rather strengthens it. This endorses the structural-functionalist view in anthropology (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown) that rituals are ultimately sources of order in a hierarchical society: they clarify the structure by the process of reversing it.

However, the Tablighis with whom I worked tried to extend the ritual's anti-structure also beyond the liminal moment of the missionary tour. And thus Gambian Tablighi men also engage in household chores when they are not on tour. For instance, Bachir claimed to be a better housekeeper than his wife: 'When my wife irons my clothes, they are still creased afterwards. When I do it, they are glossy'. When his baby was ill he carried her in a sling to the hospital, disregarding the sardonic looks from non-Tablighi men on the way. Furthermore, he changed his daughter's nappy as aptly and expertly as he recited a Qur'anic verse. Although Gambian Tablighi men are more involved in domestic work and childcare than their fellow countrymen, their 'domesticity' remains limited. From the fact that during the missionary tours in which I participated the men responsible for the shopping forgot half of the ingredients written down by the female cooks on a shopping list – to the dissatisfaction of the latter who sent them back to the market – I concluded that they probably do not often engage in shopping in daily life. My male interlocutors legitimized their omissions in shopping (and other household tasks) in everyday living by saying that they were too busy with wage labour, earning money to support their families and pay for missionary tours.[29] Still, the fact that Gambian Tablighi men engage in household tasks suggests the extent to which they are willing (temporarily at least) to stretch the boundaries of gender roles and norms in their efforts to become 'true Muslims' whose piety brings them 'closer to Allah'.

That the boundaries of gender roles and norms are stretched in the Gambian branch of the Jama'at is revealing in the light of stereotypical assumptions that women's rights are uniformly violated by men in 'fundamentalist' circles. The ingrained conception of male domination and female subordination explains why feminist scholars have long found it hard to understand women's involvement in so-called fundamentalist movements. For instance, Hardacre (1993: 141) asks herself despairingly:

> Why do women become such staunch advocates of fundamentalist creeds, when those same creeds seem to deepen their subordination to men and require them to relinquish power and authority to men? This is perhaps the most difficult of all questions concerned with fundamentalism, the family, and interpersonal relations.

The fact that women collude with and seek comfort within fundamentalist movements is described by Moghadam (1994) as 'theoretically vexing and politically perplexing' (in Bracke 2003: 336). The Jamaʿat's appeal to Gambian women is not that vexing and perplexing if we take into account that although they endorse virtues that curtail their freedom of movement, they are not passive pawns in the movement's moralising discourse. After all, submission to God's will is, as Mahmood (2005) stresses, not a sign of passivity but of an actively sought ability (see also Schulz 2012: 145-152). In a similar way as the discourse of Muslim women's subordination does not hold true in the case of the Tablighi Jamaʿat , the discourse of Muslim male domination is shaken by Tablighi men's increased domesticity.

Conclusion

We have seen that *tabligh* has opened up new possibilities for women by providing them access to Islamic education and outgoing missionary work – spheres that have long been dominated by men – but also for men who are expected to undertake a range of activities associated with women's work and adopt fashions generally considered 'feminine'. In addition, Tablighi men have developed new ways of relating to their wives, whom they consult more often and whose wishes they meet to a larger extent. The image of the housework-sharing, groomed male Tablighi and tender husband, who needs permission from his wife to go on missionary tour, collides with ingrained conceptions of Muslim manhood in terms of 'religious machismo' and Muslim womanhood as 'submissive' (Hawley and Proudfoot 1994). Indeed, in the Gambian branch of the Jamaʿat the observance of Islamic principles leads to more balanced gender roles.

Although gender roles have become more balanced, they have not necessarily become more equal. The case study presented here shows that the reconfiguration of gender relations has not breached all traditional gender boundaries, since many of the conventional ideas of patriarchal command are still intact. Although Tablighi men are more involved in domestic work than mainstream Muslim men in Gambian society, their wives are still largely responsible for running the home. Similarly, although Tablighi women in their role of missionaries have entered the public sphere, they spend most of the *masturat* indoors, listening to sermons delivered by men. The Jamaʿat's gender discourse has thus equivocal implications, seeming to reinforce patriarchal dispensations on the one hand and to enhance

women's religious participation and men's involvement in domestic work on the other hand. This leaves us with the final dilemma of how to interpret Tablighi women's participation in *tabligh* and men's engagement in household chores, which have seemingly altered the basis of conventional understandings of gender.

Sikand sees in the Jama'at's reconfiguration of gender roles a hidden critique of traditional notions of femininity and masculinity: 'Within the sternly patriarchal discourse of the TJ, one can discern a faint critique of certain traditional structures of male supremacy' (1999: 51). Following a similar line of thought, Faust (2000: 157-158) and Reetz (2004: 296) consider Tablighis' questioning of established gender roles as having potential for emancipation. These viewpoints correspond with a general tendency in scholarship on gender and Islam to equate women's involvement in religious affairs with female 'empowerment' (Pang 1997; Ask and Tjomsland 1998; Jeffery and Basu 1998; Alidou 2005; Ahmad 2008). As Mahmood (2001: 223; 2005: 10-14) points out, the notion of female empowerment is problematic because it is dictated by an assumption that puts feminism, agency, and power on a par, and is situated historically within a Western secular-liberal idiom. The notion of female empowerment rests on a notion of masculinity that is dominant and needs to be contested. These assumptions represent a pitfall since they gloss over other forms of female and male subjectivity found in religious discourses on piety, which do not display an innate desire for empowerment or domination respectively.

Indeed, the Tablighi women with whom I worked did not strive for female empowerment, nor did my male interlocutors interpret their engagement in domestic work as a critique of the established gendered task division in Gambian society or a sign of 'emancipation'. In fact, both female and male Tablighis were highly critical of local gender activists' plea for 'fifty-fifty', the local designation for an equal division of household tasks between the sexes. In their opinion this plea was dictated by transnational NGOs' striving for gender equality. A Tablighi woman addressed me critically: 'You *tubab*s ("white people" or Europeans) believe in fifty-fifty. We believe that men are in charge of the household.' Her friend's argument that '*Tubab*s always talk about women's rights. We don't talk about women's rights, since we know that Allah is right,' suggests that Tablighis do not struggle for gender equality because they perceive the social order as divinely ordained. Like Gambian women do not join the Jama'at to liberate themselves from the yoke of the traditional gender ideology, Gambian Tablighi men do not partake in domestic work to 'modernize' themselves. My male interlocutors legitimized their domestic work not in terms of an emancipatory,

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modern move but as a return to the Prophetic normative model, quoting a *hadith* that says 'the Prophet has said that the best among men are those who have mercy on their wives and children and help them'.

Thus rather than a critique of the patriarchal gender discourse, at stake in the Tablighi mindset is a reorientation towards a novel form of piety that Tablighis understand as a means of realizing a virtuous life that brings them 'closer to Allah'. The quality of nearness to God, comprising a manner of being and acting that suffuses all of one's acts – be they religious or mundane – can be acquired by following in the footsteps of the Prophet and his companions, the *Sahabas*. Following the Prophet's wives and female *Sahabas*, Tablighi women actively engage in *tabligh*, and, taking Muhammad as their example, Tablighi men have taken over part of their wives' domestic workload. It may be concluded then that the case of the Tablighi Jama'at in the Gambia highlights the dynamic interplay of normative discourses of gender with 'de-gendered'[30] subject positions taken up by Tablighi men and women during missionary tours. Somewhat paradoxically, although Tablighis in their search for a new Muslim piety reconfigure taken-for-granted conceptions of masculinity and femininity, in the end the Jama'at reinstates an essentialised notion of gender that is divinely ordained and is therefore irreversible.

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Notes

[1] After the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the term 'fundamentalism' became popular in the West as a designation for certain Muslim groups that blame secularism for society's moral degradation and that, in order to restore the moral order, enforce female domesticity and modesty (Riesebrodt 1993). Despite these common characteristics, fundamentalism is a loaded term because it has a Christian connotation. Moreover, the term has become defiled in the media to the point where it stands for religious extremism and 'terrorism'. Although 'fundamentalist' is not a designation many Gambian Muslims use when speaking of themselves, the Tablighi Jama'at can be described in terms of a fundamentalist movement because it aims at purging Islam by returning to the purported fundamentals of the faith. According to the Jama'at's founder, Mawlana Ilyas, Muslims have abandoned the correct path of Islam. Hence, he stressed that they should go back to their faith, which alone would move God to grant them success in this world and the hereafter.

[2] Under influence of the third wave of feminism in the 1990s, more emphasis has been put on the construction of gender, the variety of gender positions (away from a focus on heteronormativity), and gender relations. It became clear that women's identities have to be studied in relation to that of men, and that gender intersects with other forms of identity, including religion, ethnicity, age, class, educational background, etc. (Moore 1994). For the

study of religion this meant that the focus on religion as either oppressive or liberating for women gave way to a focus on the construction of religious subjectivities. Despite these developments, few works have addressed how shifting meanings of gender have affected men, and how understandings and practices of masculinity have been molded and transformed through religious reform (but see Kandiyoti 1994; Ouzgane 2006; Gomez-Perez et al. 2009).

[3] Parts of this case study have been published elsewhere (Janson 2008; 2011; 2014), but although some material overlaps the analysis differs. Whereas my other publications concentrate on shifting notions of Muslim womanhood, the focus in this article is on Tablighi versions of masculinity and how these relate with other versions of masculinity as well as with femininity. As such, it contributes new perspectives on the possibilities for gender roles in Muslim settings, including not only for women but also for men, an angle that tends to be overlooked. This article has benefited from the helpful suggestions of Dorothea Schulz, Sian Hawthorne, the participants in the Religion and Masculinities in Africa workshop at SOAS, University of London, and two anonymous reviewers.

[4] My field research between 2003 and 2005 was funded by a grant from the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden, the Netherlands. The research between 2006 and 2007 was funded by a grant from the German Research Council (DFG) under the auspices of the *Zentrum Moderner Orient* (ZMO) in Berlin.

[5] *Ta'lim* is an Urdu concept meaning 'learning' or 'teaching' and refers to a weekly meeting held to instruct women in 'proper' Islam.

[6] *Masturat* is derived from the Urdu *mastur*, meaning 'veiled', 'covered', or 'concealed', referring to a veiled or chaste woman. The fact that female missionaries are completely covered may explain why this term is used in Gambian Tablighi discourse for a missionary tour in which women participate. A missionary tour in which only male missionaries participate is referred to as *khuruj*.

[7] For a more detailed history of the Tablighi Jama'at in the Gambia, see Janson (2014: Chapter 3). This history has also been recorded in Janson (2008: 14-20) and Janson (2011: 150-155).

[8] The Gambia has a population of approximately 1.8 million inhabitants of which more than 95 per cent is Muslim.

[9] For instance, Lecocq and Schrijver (2007: 149) write that during the late 1990s, Malian Tablighis who intended to go on a forty-day missionary tour were sent to the Gambia for training.

[10] As I have explained elsewhere (Janson 2014: 83), because Dukureh studied for a long time in Saudi Arabia, his followers were disparagingly called Wahhabis – adherents of the eighteenth-century Saudi Arabian reformist movement of Mohammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. The term 'Wahhabi' was introduced in West Africa by French colonial administrators who were convinced that Wahhabiyya was the new Muslim threat to their policies (Kaba 2000; Brenner 2000). Although labelled as Wahhabis in the Gambia, Dukureh's followers never referred to themselves this way because they considered it a term of abuse. In addition to being pejorative and rejected by those it names, the term Wahhabi is also misleading because Dukureh's followers have no direct connection to the historical Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia. Although Dukureh studied in Saudi Arabia, and in this way acquired knowledge of the Wahhabi teachings, for his followers the itinerant South Asian Tablighi missionaries who visited the Gambia were more influential.

[11] The Serahuli have been propagators of Islam, spreading the religion during their trade missions in West Africa.

[12] Tablighis have been moving away from ethnic identity as marker of belonging; for them ethnicity has been superseded by a Muslim identity constructed around piety (see also LeBlanc 2000b: 85-87).

[13] That many Gambian Tablighis have only little formal Islamic education is not atypical. Gomez-Perez (2005: 19, 22) argues that throughout sub-Saharan Africa the new generation of reformist Muslims has attended Western-style schools. Despite their secular education, many Tablighis are stricter in their religious observance than Muslims who attended *madrasa*, a characteristic common to adherents of other reformist movements as well (Loimeier 2003: 253-254).

[14] I was told that Sunday was selected for *ta'lim* because it is weekend and people are less busy with work and other obligations than during the week. The Nigerian scholar Amidu Sanni explained to me that *ta'lim* takes place on Sunday in Nigeria as well, not only because it is weekend but especially as a counter-balance to the Christian prayer meetings taking place that day (personal communication, December 2006). Although Christians form only a small minority in the Gambia, the choice of Sunday as *ta'lim* day could have a symbolic meaning in the Gambia as well.

[15] For an account of Gambian Tablighi women's participation in *ta'lim,* see also Janson (2008: 20-27); Janson (2011: 155-159); Janson (2014: Chapter 6).

[16] In a similar vein, the Senegalese reformist Muslim women with whom Augis (2012) worked framed their religious discourses on the practices of veiling, prayer, and preaching as means to achieve 'closeness to God'.

[17] For want of a better word, I use 'mainstream' to distinguish between reformist tendencies and older Islamic expressions.

[18] For an account of Gambian Tablighi women's participation in *masturat*, see also Janson (2008: 27-34); Janson (2011: 159-164); Janson (2014: Chapter 7).

[19] Although the male-as-breadwinner model is prevalent in moral discourses throughout the Muslim world, it does not only have a religious origin but has also been influenced by a colonial discourse on modernity (Lindsay 2007).

[20] For Bubacar's biographical narrative, see Janson (2014: Chapter 5).

[21] For Bachir's biographical narrative, see Janson (2014: Chapter 8).

[22] I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to the Tablighi social organization.

[23] The use of kohl and henna is not reserved to Tablighi men. Throughout the Muslim world, men use them for cosmetic, ritual, and prophylactic reasons and their virtues are proclaimed in many *hadith*.

[24] Strikingly, although Tablighi notions of masculinity and femininity are malleable, many mainstream Muslims had fixed ideas about men's and women's 'proper' conduct and physical appearance. This suggests that – following Moore's (1994) distinction between 'gender as it is constructed' and 'gender as it is lived' – we should distinguish between ideals of masculinity and femininity and actual experiences of masculinity and femininity. Masculine ideals are associated with assertiveness, virility, and strength, whereas feminine ideals are associated with modesty, self-sacrifice, and compliance with the directives of the husband and elders.

[25] The gender-specific dimensions of modes of religious experience deserve further research.

[26] See http://en.afrik.com/article13630.html.

[27] In line with the *Sunna*, Tablighi men dress in kaftans, trousers cut at ankle-length, turbans, and grow beards, and Tablighi women wear body-covering veils.

[28] Comparing ritual practices to linguistic practices, for Butler (1993) resignification stands for the propensity of utterances and speech acts to break from their prior significations (in Hollywood 2002: 94-96, 95n.11).

[29] Believing that the Prophet Muhammad advocated self-help, Tablighis are reluctant to impose on others during their missionary tours and therefore pay for their own tours, sleep in local mosques, and cook for themselves.

[30] I have borrowed this term from Agadjanian, who in his study of men's work in traditionally female jobs in Maputo, Mozambique, points out that the changes of gender identities in the workplace involve a 'dynamic and dialectic combination of de-gendering and re-gendering' (2005: 264).