Seeking sanctuary in ‘the age of disorder’: women in contemporary Tablighi Jamā‘at

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Abstract This article addresses the novel phenomenon of the attachment of women from privileged backgrounds to the Tablighi Jamā‘at movement in Indonesia. How to understand the involvement of these urban wealthy women who eventually give up their high-class lifestyles for the sake of their *new* understanding of Islam? The common stereotype of Tablighi Jamā‘at women is that they are oppressed, cannot exercise agency, and do not contribute to the development of the movement. However, based on an ethnographic study of middle and upper-class Tablighi Jamā‘at women, I found that their passion to return to the true path of Islam and the commitments it embodies have made them aware of their capacity to exercise agency within the movement’s structuring conditions. The women’s privileged social background has enabled them to embrace the meaning of being active in a religious group. The most notable contribution of these women is their effort in undertaking recruitment and sustaining this religious network of shared meaning with their colleagues. Within these activities they are social agents, not just tools of the movement’s men.

Keywords Indonesia · Muslim women · Tablighi Jamā‘at · Pious · Agency

Introduction

Before entering the house where the *ta‘līm* (religious study group)¹ was held, I was afraid that I was about to enter the wrong house. The atmosphere outside the

¹ *Ta‘līm* among Tablighi in Indonesia can refer, in particular, to reading out their books.

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house was different from the other *ta'lim* I had visited. Luxurious cars were parked outside the house. The owner had a *satpam* (security guard). After entering the house, I was amazed once more by the fancy appearance of most of the members of the *ta'lim* congregation. Many wore very fine *'abāya* (a head-to-toe wrap covering almost all parts of the body) purchased in Dubai, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, carried designer handbags (Louis Vuitton, Prada, Hermès, Fendi, Yves Saint Laurent, and Gucci), and some of them even wore heavy makeup. In the *ta'lim* that I had visited earlier in my research, I formed an impression that all the women who attached themselves to the Tablighi Jamā'at² were from lower middle classes, even the poor. However, this initial impression was challenged upon finding this privileged group. For example, in many other *ta'lim*, Tablighi women often ride motorcycles to go to *ta'lim* with their husbands and children. In addition, the initial *ta'lim* I visited were mainly held around *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) with special connections with the Tablighi Jamā'at. The inhabitants of villages around these *pesantren* are mostly poor and are not *penduduk asli* (native to the area). They come from diverse parts of Indonesia. By living near *pesantren*, they intend to assist the schools, or get some assistance, particularly when their husbands have to leave them for the obligatory *khurūj*³; the defining practice of the Tablighi Jamā'at's teaching. They live in simple rented houses, and in conditions very different from the affluent group that I have introduced above. My earlier assumption about the attachment of lower class women to the Tablighi Jamā'at was because Tablighi Jamā'at followers in general are mostly depicted as coming from the lower levels of society (Noor 2007). Also, the origin of the movement initially engaged with reforming the practice of Islam by peasants living in rural areas (Marwah 1979).

The phenomenon of the Tablighi Jamā'at in Indonesia has been widely studied (Aziz 2004; Horstman 2006; Noor 2009a, b, 2010). However, the scholars who have focused their research on the Tablighi Jamā'at in Indonesia have not addressed a crucial perspective, that is particularly the involvement of women, let alone the involvement of upper class women whose number has risen significantly since 2000. These scholars tend to focus on lower class Tablighi men.⁴ There have been some studies on the presence of women in this movement in other countries where the Tablighi Jamā'at has had a much longer presence, such as by Metcalf (1998, 2000, 2003), Sikand (1999) and Jasani (2008). However, little has been

² The term “Tablighi Jamā'at” or Jamā'ah Tabligh or JT (Je-Te), as often used in Indonesia, was created by outsiders. The followers prefer the term “Muslims” for the people active in this group. For their activities, they prefer terms that refer directly to the activities. Thus, the terms often used are *kerja da'wah* or *usaha da'wah* (the work of proselytization), *rombongan da'wah* (da'wah group), *jamā'ah da'wah* (da'wah congregation), or *rombongan silaturahmi* (bonding and close ties group).

³ The concept of *khurūj* in the Tablighi Jamā'at can be regarded as its distinguishable element of *da'wa* (proselytization). *Khurūj* is an Arabic term which refers to an activity of *da'wa* that involves going out from the followers' houses to diverse destinations either inside the country or outside the country for certain periods of time.

⁴ According to Kepel, up to the mid-1980s, the followers of the Tablighi mostly came from the level of society which was not well-educated, were jobless, or were youth who felt that they did not have a prospect for their life (alcoholics and drug addicts) (Kepel 2004).

written on the significance of the presence of more affluent groups in this movement. In this article, I focus on the role of Indonesian upper class women in this transnational Islamic movement.

Throughout this article, some questions explored are: How and why do women from higher classes join this *ultra-conservative* religious movement? And how does one account for women's activism in this religious revivalist movement?⁵ The first section of this article presents an overview of women in the Tablighi Jamā'at, particularly the establishment of women's *jamā'at* (group) in Indonesia, and the principles of the Tablighi Jamā'at for women. This is followed by a discussion of the success of the Tablighi in winning the hearts of well-educated urban women from middle to upper class backgrounds. The third section takes up the discussion of how they have become the committed supporters of the movement and how these women exercise agency, which is intertwined with their contribution to the development of the movement. I argue that, by being part of the movement, they have been embedded with a sense of belonging to the movement that leads them to contribute to its development. I am inspired by the concept of collective identities by a social movement theorist, Alberto Melucci. Melucci (1989, 1995) points out the importance of interaction among individuals, who share a similar belief, within the movement. Further, this bond of collective identities has made these women feel responsible for the future of the movement. This network is also essential to the building of solidarity among the followers. Through their peer-based activities, these affluent women have successfully created new forms of sociability based on religious bonds. Marloes Janson (2006b) notes that the Tablighi and their activities are like a 'petrol station' that fuels its followers with religious energy.

In the last section, I also argue that the involvement of these privileged women in this self-funded movement has contributed to the movement's development. Their financial condition has provided them with a greater capacity to be active agents in a movement which appeals to its followers to spread religious mores in every part of the world. Myriad efforts by the poor to spread the words of Islam, including their eagerness to spend their limited money to go from one place to another to invite Muslims to return to the true path of Islam, have made them aware that they should do even more for the sake of religion. With regard to the involvement of more privileged believers in religious activities, Rodney Stark has also noticed how the ascetic impulse is more prevalent among persons of privilege. One of the reasons they become so keen to dedicate their life to the movement, as argued by Stark (2003), is a sense of guilt about having wealth, and most importantly, it reflects their awareness that wealth is not everything. The experiences of privileged Tablighi women are indeed in line with the arguments put forward by Stark.

⁵ Here in this article, I employ the term religious revivalist movement to designate the Tablighi Jamā'at movement. The term religious revivalist movement is in line with the spirit of the movement itself, which tends to emphasize the revival of strict practice of Islam or normative Islam and to purify Islam from any acculturations or inclusions of any external elements. Some scholars, such as Farish A Noor (2009b), argued that they were inspired by the *Wahhabi* movement in Saudi Arabia. However, apart from this inspiration, the movement has special connections with Sufism (see Haq 1972; Metcalf 1982, 2002).

I employed qualitative methods of data gathering, particularly participant observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews.⁶ During my fieldwork, I also attended and actively participated in their activities, such as *mastura ta'lim* (religious study group for women), *nusra* (local help or visiting a group of women who perform *khurīj*), and *mastura khurīj* (leaving one's own neighborhood in order to proselytize). I was also invited to some of these women's private events, such as weddings, which helped me in understanding the background and the lives of these women. Of the total 86 participants who were particularly involved in this study, 57 can be classified as urban well-educated upper class women, 17 were female senior followers⁷ from less privileged families who did not receive a high school education, 9 were male Tablighi followers, and 3 previous female followers who have now become outsiders. It is noteworthy that most of the affluent women with whom I worked are young married women. They do not yet have children or have small children. Mostly, they are between the ages of 26 and 37. Their attachment to a religious group which is different from their parents' demonstrates how kinship is not the basis of religious group membership, particularly that of revivalist groups, such as the Tablighi Jamā'at and Salafi groups (see Meijer 2009). Most of their activities can be seen as peer-based ones.

Among the Tablighi, there are several terms used to identify their informal levels of coordination from the highest one to the lowest: *markaz*, *zone*, *ḥalaqa*, and *maḥalla*.⁸ However, not all these groupings exist in all locations; in Jakarta, there is no *zone* classification. This article focuses on three *maḥalla* or *muhalla*, an informal unit of coordination at the lowest level in the Tablighi Jamā'at, usually a mosque at the village level. These three *maḥalla* belong to Kebun Baru *ḥalaqa*,⁹ a Jakarta subdistrict, which is one of the most elite parts of Jakarta. These three *maḥalla* were

⁶ This article is only a small part of my anthropological fieldwork in Indonesia carried out over almost a year and half on the wider coverage of the involvement of women in diverse religious revivalist groups, namely Salafi groups and the Tablighi Jamā'at. My focus on women in the Tablighi Jamā'at is not confined only to women from the middle to upper classes, as I also cover Tablighi women from diverse backgrounds, particularly the majority of them who come from the lower class. It is noteworthy that both these movements (Salafi and Tablighi Jamā'at) strive hard to claim themselves as the true followers of *al-salaf al-Ṣālih* (literally means the righteous or pious predecessors). *Al-salaf al-Ṣālih* refers to the first three generations of the Prophet Muhammed's followers. The characteristic of these movements is almost identical, namely to practice Islam in the most proper way according to the true normative Islam as practiced by *al-salaf al-Ṣālih*. However, these movements often appear to be in rigorous competition with each other. The tension between these two groups can mainly be seen from some publications made by diverse Salafi groups, such as Abdullah (1997), Abdat (2007), and al-Madkholi (2002). Since in Indonesia publications by the Tablighi are rarely found, except some translations of their programs and small books on Tablighi guidance, it is almost impossible to find any particular book that clarifies other groups' misjudgments of the Tablighi, except that of Tasykhilie (n.d.).

⁷ I was not initially comfortable using the term *senior* (senior) and less *senior* in this article. However, since during my fieldwork, either among more privileged or less privileged women, I often encountered this term *senior* in these women's explanations to distinguish those who have a longer involvement in the movement, I decided to also use this term. Seniority among women usually does not refer to the experience of performing *khurīj* as in the case of male Tablighi.

⁸ As in most religious traditions, women are excluded from positions that represent official status, such as that of the *amīr* (leader), who exists in almost all these levels of organization.

⁹ All the names of the places have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

established in the 2000s: Kebun Anggur *maḥalla* in 2000; Kota Raya *maḥalla* in 2004; and Kampung Nangka *maḥalla* in 2007.

The history of the Tablighi Jamā'at in Indonesia

The growing popularity of this transnational Islamic movement, the Tablighi Jamā'at, in Indonesia can be seen through the growing number of Muslims joining its annual *ijtima'* (gathering).¹⁰ The 2009 annual meeting was attended by more than 800,000 Muslims from all parts of Indonesia, as well as Muslims from other countries, especially neighboring countries (Zam 2009).¹¹ Farish A. Noor (2010) even argued that there is “no spot left in Indonesia where the *Tabligh* has not established itself”. Their annual international congregations in Tongi (Bangladesh) and Raiwind (Pakistan), are often claimed, both by analysts and by the Tablighi themselves, as the second largest congregation of Muslims after the *hajj* (Ahmad 1994; Sikand 2002; Noor 2007; Metcalf 2009).

It was under the second *amīr* (leader) of the Tablighi Jamā'at, Mawlana Muhammad Yusuf Kandhalawi (1917–1965),¹² the only son of the founder, Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas (1885–1944) (Masud 2000), that the Tablighi Jamā'at expanded its influence to other regions (outside South Asia), including Southeast Asia in 1952 (Masud 2000; Aziz 2004). Upon strengthening their influence in other Southeast Asian countries, the Tablighi Jamā'at arrived in Indonesia in 1952 (Razak 2008).¹³ The first *jamā'at* were from India and led by Miaji Isa (Razak 2008). Their first destination in Indonesia was Medan, North Sumatra (Aziz 2004). In 1955, they arrived in Jakarta. In the following years, some Tablighi groups continued to perform their *da'wa* (propagation of the faith) in Indonesia. In 1956, for example, 12 Singaporean male Tablighi led by Prof. Djamil Ahmad came to Indonesia for four months. During 1965–1972, however, foreign Tablighi did not come to Indonesia. This was explained to me by some Tablighi *asātidh* (religious teachers) as being because of political unrest in the country, particularly due to the Thirtieth of September Movement/Indonesian Communist Party (G-30-S/PKI).¹⁴ In 1972,

¹⁰ To facilitate more people attending its annual gathering, since 2008 the *ijtima'* has been held in the area of a coconut plantation measuring around 55 hectares in Serpong, Banten (Zam 2009). The then vice-president, Jusuf Kalla, also visited this annual meeting. He even visited Indonesian Tablighi *markaz* (headquarters) in Kebon Jeruk several times.

¹¹ The success of *ijtima'* (gathering) for this *jamā'at* (group) does not refer to the huge number of attendees but their success in inviting Muslims to perform *khurūj* (go out for the purpose of *da'wa*/proselytization) (Haq 1972). In the 2009 *ijtima'*, they successfully sent 5,000 groups of *da'wa* to perform *khurūj*.

¹² For detailed explanation on the history of Mawlana Ilyas's efforts to establish the Tablighi Jamā'at, see Haq 1972; Troll 1985; Hasani 1988; Metcalf 1993; Ahmad 1994; Aziz 2004; Kepel 2004; Masud 2000.

¹³ Some studies, such as Nasrullah's (2005), mentioned that it was in the period of Mawlana In'amul Hasan (1918–1995), the successor of Mawlana Yusuf or the third *amīr* of the Tablighi Jamā'at, that the Tablighi Jamā'at came to Indonesia (Nasrullah 2005). However, as it is known that the Tablighi came in 1952, this means that it was still the period of Mawlana Yusuf. In addition to this, Mawlana In'amul Hasan's first Tablighi expansion abroad was to Sri Lanka in 1967 (Masud 2000).

¹⁴ G-30-S/PKI is the New Order's official designation of the abortive coup d'état masterminded by the Indonesian Communist Party. For more extensive coverage on the study on G-30-S/PKI, see Anderson and McVey (1971); Crouch (1978); Anderson (1983); Heryanto (2006).

foreign Tablighi Jamā'at groups started strengthening their influence on Indonesian Muslims by way of a group from Pakistan.¹⁵ The Tablighi Jamā'at started to become more popular in Indonesia only from 1974 (see Aziz 2004; Azra 2006), and that particular year is often mentioned as an important moment for the Tablighi Jamā'at in Indonesia, namely: Tablighi Jamā'at started to get some ardent followers, including the head of Kebon Jeruk mosque, H. Zulfakar, appointed as the first *amīr* (leader) for Indonesian *jamā'at*; and Kebon Jeruk mosque was officially chosen as the headquarters of the Tablighi Jamā'at in Indonesia.¹⁶ The first *jamā'at* to perform *khurūj* was formed in 1975 and consisted of 12 men. After this first *khurūj*, they started to strengthen their influence in the Kebon Jeruk mosque¹⁷ and in Indonesia generally.

According to senior followers of the Tablighi Jamā'at, initially the main stimulus for the establishment of the movement in Indonesia was because the agenda of the Tablighi Jamā'at itself was suitable to the conditions of Muslims in Indonesia. Their desire to return to the true path of Islam and to prevent Muslims from leaning towards deviant groups is particularly suitable in Indonesia where, from their point of view, most Muslims have left the practice of normative Islam. The history of the Tablighi Jamā'at also demonstrates how Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas wanted to follow his predecessors, who had also strived hard to purify the practice of Islam in India that had been mixed with Hindu mores (Ahmad 1994; Aziz 2004; Kepel 2004). Muhammad Ilyas then set the main rule of the movement that all the followers of the Tablighi must follow the examples set by the Prophet and his male and female companions in every area of their lives, from small things like the way to dress, eat, and sleep, to how they see the world. For women in the Tablighi, in particular, the lifestyle of the Prophet's wives and his female companions has become their role model.¹⁸

¹⁵ According to some Indonesian Tablighi *asātidh*, early Tablighi who came to Indonesia tried to get significant support from Muslims of Pakistani and Indian descent in Indonesia to become their ardent followers, who could then help them spread the Tablighi teachings. It was especially hard for them to find Indonesian '*ulamā'* (religious clerics) who had studied in India to be intermediaries for their *da'wa* to Indonesian Muslims who do not speak the same language (Masud 2000). Usually, for female followers, the role of the interpreters could be felt only when they interpreted the speeches or *bayan* delivered by the male Pakistani or Indonesian followers, while these women's day-to-day communication during their stay in Indonesia depended on their ability to speak English. This, then, means that sometimes the communication did not go really well, since most female Tablighi's ability to speak English is still limited. This was often mentioned by Tablighi *asātidh* as part of the Tablighi Jamā'at's difficult journey coming to Indonesia. For more discussion on the role of Indian Muslims during the advent of the Tablighi Jamā'at in Indonesia, see Noor (2009b).

¹⁶ Kebon Jeruk mosque was chosen after a group from Bangladesh consisting of 12 people led by Mawlana Lutfurrahman had unpleasant experiences during their three-day stay in al-Mubarak mosque in Krukut. This *Jamā'at* then tried their luck to get support from the head of the Kebon Jeruk mosque. After asking for support from H. Zulfakar, they were allowed to stay in this mosque for four months.

¹⁷ Kebon Jeruk mosque itself was built in 1718. It was just a *muṣalla* (a place for prayer, smaller than a mosque). In 1786, it was transformed into a mosque by the financial assistance of a Muslim couple from China, Chau Tsien Hwu and his wife, Fatimah Hwu. This mosque is also regarded as the first mosque built around Glodok and its surroundings. For a study on this mosque and other ancient mosques in Indonesia, see Anom (1998).

¹⁸ The rule set in such a movement is not only confined to Islam. There are some movements in other religions which have more or less the same model of practice, like Lubavitch in Judaism, as has been studied by Kepel (2004).

When affluent Indonesian women become Tablighi followers, it is evident that they begin to internalize a purer version of Islam, one which is different from that of their parents. As a consequence, they wholly submit themselves to all its teachings in order to craft themselves to be true believers. This can be seen through the adoption of strict dress practices, such as face-covering. In this context, I am inspired by Saba Mahmood's concept of piety that it is not part of false consciousness but it is indeed a conscious act of embedding religious teachings (2005). Therefore, these women can still exercise their agency in such a male-dominated religious group. Throughout this article, it is demonstrated how urban affluent women become docile upon receiving religious teachings for the sake of becoming pious subjects. In following Saba Mahmood to think about agency, what has to be taken into consideration is the context of the performance itself. Therefore, what seems to be docility can indeed be regarded as a form of agency (Mahmood 2001). The work of Marcel Mauss, a French sociologist and anthropologist, on the training of the body is also important in this regard. In techniques of the body, Mauss argued how the body is trained, and that "in every society, everyone knows and has to know and learn what he has to do in all conditions" (Mauss 1979). All of the new activities and lifestyles adopted by these affluent urban Tablighi women are part of their effort to train themselves to reach their main aspiration: to be true Muslims. The new lifestyle adopted by these women also demonstrates how techniques of the body are, as argued by Julius Bautista, "a goal-oriented, reasoned, and calculative decision making" (Bautista 2008).

It is important to point out that Mawlana Ilyas and his missionary activities did not focus on the conversion of non-Muslims to be Muslims (Marwah 1979). The target of their *da'wa* is the same as that of Hasan al-Banna's movement, the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) (Mahmood 2005). Al-Banna (1906–1949) focused his *da'wa* on reforming Muslims themselves. He did not focus his *da'wa* on non-Muslims as did the movement of Rashid Rida (1865–1930) (Mahmood 2005). The movement focuses on asking its followers to perform its basic tenets which consist of six principles. The first is *kalima* or the article of faith that Muslims should really understand the content and the meaning of the declaration that "there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger" (*Lā Ilāhā Illa Allāhu, Muḥammadan Rasūl Allāhu*). The second principle is prayer (*ṣalāt al-khushū' wa al-khuṭb*) and that every Muslim should realize the importance of *ṣalāt*. The importance of *ṣalāt* is emphasized in the Tablighi Jamā'at's program, particularly through *gasht* (going from door to door to ask Muslims to observe religious teachings, including prayer in congregation). The third is *'ilm* (knowledge) and *dhikr*, which means that every Muslim should possess knowledge about the basic Islamic teachings. They should also occupy their daily life by reciting *dhikr* (praising God/prayer to God). The fourth is *ikrām al-muslimīn* (all Muslims are obliged to respect other fellow Muslims) which means that every Muslim should understand the importance of Islamic brotherhood. The fifth is *tashīḥu al-niyya* (declaration of intention and sincerity that everything is done because of Allah), which refers to the importance of directing any activities with the main intention of pleasing God. The sixth principle which can also be regarded as a defining feature of the Tablighi Jamā'at is *da'wa wa al-tablīgh* or *tafriq al-waqt* (sparing time), which pertains to the formation of groups of Muslims to perform *da'wa* tours (Faruqi 1971; Haq 1972; Marwah 1979; Chakrabarti 2006).

Mastura in Indonesia

Mastūra in Arabic literally means “something being covered.” Among the Tablighi, *mastūra* or *mastura* is a significant term referring to a woman, or for some of them, only a woman who has performed *khurūj*. The term used to define women’s *khurūj* is *mastura khurūj*, sometimes referred to in Indonesia as *masturahan*, and a women’s *ta’līm* (religious study group) is called *mastura ta’līm*.¹⁹ Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas strived hard to support women to be active in the movement. Apart from the challenge proposed by senior Muslim clerics, the first *mastura jamā’at* (group of women) was created in the late twentieth century (Metcalf 1998). The Tablighi emphasize the responsibility of female followers to bear *da’wa* tasks. The modus operandi of the Tablighi Jamā’at revolves around *da’wa*, particularly *khurūj*²⁰ which enables every Muslim to dedicate small amounts of their lifetime to learn more about Islam and to perform *da’wa* (Haq 1972; Cesari 2004). Mawlana Ilyas himself suggested that the responsibility of teaching Islam is not only for ‘*ulamā*’ (meaning *far al-kifāya*) but for all individual Muslims (meaning *far al-’ayn*) (Metcalf 1998, 2009).²¹

The first *mastura jamā’at* came to Indonesia in 1985, and were from Pakistan. Their first destinations were important places of Tablighi Jamā’at in Indonesia, namely Jakarta, East Java (Temboro, Magetan) and South Sulawesi (Makassar). After their visit to Indonesia, nine couples (husbands and wives) of Indonesian Tablighi then went to Pakistan. These nine couples, in particular their wives, were expected to learn how to correctly perform *mastura khurūj*, because they were required to transfer their knowledge upon their arrival to other prospective Tablighi women in Indonesia. The following year (1986), for the first time, women could attend the Tablighi Jamā’at’s national gathering (*zur*) in Ancol, Jakarta. After the establishment of the first Indonesian *mastura jamā’at*, the number of women performing *khurūj* with their *mahram*²² started to grow. What is quite unique in Indonesia is the existence of some *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) which have a special connection with the Tablighi that organize a program of *khurūj* for female students each year, for example *pesantren Al-Fatah* Temboro, East Java, established in 1953, and Sunanul Husna Al Jaiyah in Banten established on November 15, 1982.²³ Besides *khurūj*, *mastura ta’līm* can be found easily in all parts of Indonesia. Usually

¹⁹ It is important to note that the term *mastura* is one that is used most usually by other Muslims, but the Tablighi Jamā’at are using it in a specific way, while the term *ta’līm* in *mastura ta’līm* is used as is commonly understood by all Muslims.

²⁰ The term *da’wa* refers in general to propagation of the faith (to invite others to the path of God), while *khurūj* is considered by the Tablighi as their means or strategy to fulfill the duty of performing *da’wa*.

²¹ *Far al-kifāya* is a concept that is common to all Muslims. It refers to religious duty addressed to the Muslim community, but which, when it is performed by certain members of the community, is then no longer obligatory for individual Muslims. On this discussion, see also Cook (2000).

²² The term *mahram* is an Arabic term which is in widespread use among Muslims. It refers to close male kin including a woman’s immediate family, her husband, and her husband’s immediate male kin, and any male who was breastfed by her mother.

²³ The influence of the Tablighi Jamā’at doctrines in both *pesantren* started to be seen around the same time, in 1983. Although the relationship between these *pesantren* and the Tablighi Jamā’at movement is informal, like the relationship between Madrasatul Niswan in New Delhi and Tablighi Jamā’at, people, whether affiliated to the Tablighi or not, in Indonesia mostly refer to these *pesantren* as being Tablighi Jamā’at’s. For a comparative study on the connection between the Tablighi Jamā’at and girls’ education in India, see Winkelman (2005, 2006).

they meet on weekends, Saturday and Sunday (not Friday, as Metcalf 1998 found in Karachi).

The principles of the Tablighi Jamā'at are such that women also have to be active in *usaha agama* (religious effort)²⁴ including *mastura khurūj* like their male counterparts (As-Sirbuny 2009).²⁵ This is justified on the basis that the number of Muslim children is growing significantly and that only women know best how pious children, even a pious generation, can be produced (Manshur 2001; Sayani 2007). This implies that, as for many other religious revivalist movements, some of the Tablighi clerics initially favored defining women's homes as their principal domain and emphasizing women's ultimate role as guardians of the family.²⁶ The main target of the involvement of women in *usaha agama* is to prepare them to be *dā'iya* (proselytizer), *'ābida* (pious believer), *muta'allima* (teacher), *murabbiya* (educator), *khādima* (she who must be able to serve herself and others), and *zāhida* (she who must be able to manage her life simply).²⁷ These six characteristics, for them, are the main criteria for forming pious women. Drawing on the work of Bryan S. Turner (2008), piety, in this regard, refers to excellence in religious activities.

Gender arrangements which are introduced by the Tablighi Jamā'at can also be seen through three main *da'wa* domains for *mastura*: performing *da'wa* among women, *da'wa* towards their *mahram*, and *da'wa* towards their children (As-Sirbuny 2009). However, initially, during the early establishment of women's *jamā'at*, as the majority of *mastura* come from less privileged families, their *da'wa* had been mostly limited to the third domain: *da'wa* towards their children. This demonstrates that women in the Tablighi Jamā'at were also used to sustain patriarchal understandings of Islamic orthodoxy on women's status and gender roles, namely their responsibility to employ *usaha agama* in the domestic sphere.

At the advent of the establishment of women's *jamā'at*, the second *da'wa* domain for *mastura*, *da'wa* towards their *mahram*, also never happened. This was because at that time, in Indonesia, the activities of *usaha agama* were performed by men. Women who finally joined this *usaha agama* did so, indeed, because of *da'wa* performed by their husbands. One informant, Ibu Mariyani,²⁸ recounts her story as follows:

Initially, I did know anything about this *usaha agama*. After one year of my husband's involvement, he then asked me to start joining this *usaha agama*. As a good wife, I have to listen to my husband. Therefore, I directly became active in this *usaha agama*.

²⁴ *Usaha agama* is the most common Indonesian Tablighi Jamā'at term referring to their *da'wa*. *Usaha agama* for them is the same as the Prophet's effort to teach religion (Islam) to all human beings. Since there will be no prophets after the Prophet Muhammad, they believe that all Muslims are responsible for this prophetic duty that has to be continued until the judgment day comes (As-Sirbuny 2009).

²⁵ For a comparative study on Malaysian women's active support in the Islamization process, see Sylva Frisk (2009).

²⁶ In terms of their public domain, women, living under religious fundamentalist groups, are often regarded as second-class citizens (see Bayat 2007a).

²⁷ These terms, *dā'iya*, *'ābida*, *muta'allima*, *murabbiya*, *khādima*, *zāhida*, are Arabic terms which may be used by other Muslims, but are applied in a specific way by the Tablighi Jamā'at.

²⁸ All the names of the informants have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

Ibu Mariyani's story is typical of the women I interviewed, particularly among senior female followers coming from the lower classes. In general, these women's background, including limited economic opportunities and educational experience, has made them dependent on their husbands. Further, their high dependency towards their husbands has led them to obey almost all their husbands' commands, including joining this kind of religious group. It is also noteworthy that, since the advent of the Tablighi Jamā'at in Indonesia, it was men who had been active. Therefore, the easiest and even the only way to get support from Muslim women was through their male followers who were married.

These less privileged women's *da'wa* towards other Muslim women has been limited. Almost all my female informants coming from relatively poor families and having only minimal formal education admitted that they feel uncomfortable and unconfident to approach other women and ask them to follow the Tablighi Jamā'at. They experience significant 'provincial insecurity' (*minder*), to borrow Smith-Hefner's term (2007). Ibu Tatik for example says:

Before, around the late 1980s, the number of women joining Tablighi was very few. This was because we were shy to approach others to join us. *Mba'* Eva, up to this time, the majority of *mastura* that I know did not dare approach people that we really do not know to join us. I can even say that the increasing number of female followers nowadays is mainly because the successful recruitment done by upper class women. I think their success is because they have all the facilities and have a very high confidence and an overwhelming spirit to support this *usaha agama*, compared to women like me.

Ibu Tatik's view demonstrates the importance of having sources of economic capital (wealth) and cultural capital, to borrow Bourdieu's (1986) concept.²⁹ It also illustrates that the women in this study, who come from relatively affluent families, are the source of human capital for the Tablighi Jamā'at. The following section focuses on the attachment of current Tablighi women from middle class to upper class social backgrounds and their experience living under the banner of the movement.

Urban middle and upper class women who seek sanctuary

The narratives and findings presented here are specific to Kebun Baru *halaqa* and cannot necessarily be generalized to all *mastura halaqa* in Indonesia. While I did not initially focus on urban upper class female Tablighi, this issue emerged as salient when doing my research. Why do these women gather in the three *maḥalla* (Kebun Anggur, Kota Raya, and Kampung Nangka) of Kebun Baru *halaqa*? Firstly, these *maḥalla* are located in an up-market area of Jakarta where most of these women also live. The proximity of their houses to these *maḥalla* becomes one of the most important factors leading them to attach to these *maḥalla*. Secondly, the women's family backgrounds are linked by an academic institutional network (university or high school friends). In this *halaqa*, 13 women have had postgraduate education; 44

²⁹ For further discussion of Bourdieu's concept of capital, see Dumais (2002); Webb et al. (2002); Emirbayer and Williams (2005).

of them have had undergraduate education,³⁰ while the remaining 17 were from lower class families.³¹ Their occupational networks (friends from offices or colleagues from business)³² have also been pivotal in gathering them in one specific religious group. In Kebun Baru *halaqa*, for example, there are 31 women with degrees in such professions as accounting, medicine, law, public relations, and private business. In general, friendship networks play a significant role in these professional women's attachment to the Tablighi Jamā'at. The importance of peer-based networks leading women to enter religious movements has also been emphasized by some scholars like Wichkam (2004) in her study of Islamist women in Egypt. The nature of the *jamā'at* in this *halaqa* is almost identical with women's *nadwa* (Qur'anic study groups) in Sana'a Yemen (Clark 2004a) where women in the same circle are of similar status in terms of education and families.

The initial attachment of the women whom I worked with was different from the more senior followers. Their narratives of how they got to know the Tablighi Jamā'at did not emphasize a directive from their husband, as was the case of their seniors. Some of them, for example, still strive hard to persuade their husbands to join the Tablighi Jamā'at. The absence of financial insecurity and their lack of financial dependency towards their husbands allowed them to find the personal motives that led them to the Tablighi Jamā'at. These women's participation in the Tablighi Jamā'at challenges the common assumption that active participants of the Islamist agenda are mostly from the lower middle class (Blaydes and Linzer 2008; Horstmann 2007) or even lower class (like Laskar Jihad fighters; Hasan 2005, 2006), or are less educated women,³³ such as the case of Islamist women in Iran (Gerami and Lehnerer 2001).

The fundamental stimulus which motivates these women to join is the nature of the movement. As mentioned above, there is a simple structural hierarchy at the higher level, although at the lower level (followers) it is not hierarchically structured. This means that an individual's status is often undefined. At the lower level, everyone has the same chance to perform *da'wa*. In addition to this, the humble nature of the majority of deprived followers make them realize that living in dreadful conditions does not make these women feel miserable, because what is important for them is not accumulating a great amount of wealth but accumulating God's rewards by being religious.

The apolitical and gradualist character of the Tablighi movement has also enhanced its appeal to these women.³⁴ One of the codes of conduct of the Tablighi

³⁰ Nine of them also graduated from foreign universities.

³¹ This is not to say that uneducated and poorer women never attend this *halaqa*. These less privileged women who come to these *maḥalla* do not live around Kebun Baru, but in other parts of Jakarta. Their seniority has led them to visit other *halaqa* outside their region. This is particularly to monitor the activities and provide some guidance to these middle and upper class women who can be mostly classified as newcomers. In addition to this, usually when those who perform *mastura khurūj* are from their *maḥalla*, they will come to these privileged *maḥalla* to perform *nusra*.

³² Many new followers are still active in their careers and have a significant position in their working places such as general manager (one of them is a general manager in the World Bank), lawyer (quite a number of them are lawyers), and manager (one of them is a manager in Deutsche Bank).

³³ However, as proven currently, the supporters of purist or revivalist teachings are mostly those who have higher levels of education, particularly a scientific background, like Laskar Jihad fighters (see Hasan 2005, 2006).

³⁴ For an interesting study of Tablighi Jamā'at and their political vision, see Yoginder Sikand (2002, 2003, 2006).

Jamā'at is that it is forbidden for the followers to talk about politics and engage in any religious controversies during any of the Tablighi programmes (Faruqi 1971; Troll 2008). For example, Alia, one of my informants, says:

My journey to find the true Islam ended up with Tablighi Jamā'at. For me, what is offered by the Tablighi is very simple: mainly to guide us to be better Muslims. Its teaching is clear, that we have to conform to Islamic practices as performed by the Prophet and His companions. However, it is different from other current religious groups in Indonesia, such as diverse *Salafi* groups which often enter into severe debates and often judge other groups, like my group, as deviant.

Alia's concern is in line with Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas' words on tolerance:

You should make sure that our movement and Islamic *tabligh* do not allow hurting someone's feelings. Nor do we want to hear the words *fitna* and *fasad* (disturbance). You have called some people *bid'ati* (heretics). You should avoid such words in future that incite disturbance (Masud 2000).

Alia's and Mawlana Ilyas' words reveal the distinct nature of the Tablighi Jamā'at for its followers, that is low profile and modest, and also indicate how the Tablighi situate themselves in Indonesia. The Tablighi Jamā'at in Indonesia can currently be seen as one of the most popular religious revivalist movements which has strived hard to win the hearts of Muslims in Indonesia. Nowadays, the Indonesian Islamic landscape can be regarded as very hectic with diverse Islamic groups competing against each other to gain better positions and accumulate more followers. This phenomenon is in line with Pattana Kitiarsa's argument that religion can be a market commodity (2008). The Islamic package offered by the Tablighi Jamā'at has successfully attracted these women which in turn has led them to be committed supporters of the movement. The same goes for other reform movements, such as the Salafi movement. Mohamed-Ali Adraoui in his study of Salafism in France notes that Salafism is a strong 'product' which has successfully convinced its consumers that what has been brought by Salafism is the true Islam (Adraoui 2009).

With regard to the commodification of religion in Indonesia, Greg Fealy points out an important aspect in the increasing popularity of young *dā'i* (preacher) who become celebrities. These young *dā'i* have successfully created their own market, particularly among young middle class Muslims (2008; see also Watson 2005). However, these young *dā'i* and other well-known *dā'i* in Indonesia do not hold special attractions for the well-to-do urban Muslim women with whom I worked. They feel disappointed in this type of preacher who, according to them, does little with regards to reforming the life of Muslims in Indonesia. Ummu Rohana, says:

I am deeply disappointed in *dā'i* who is busy preaching but he himself actually lives in a non-Islamic way of life. Look at these *du'āt's* (pl. preachers) wives. They cannot even teach their wives to cover their bodies properly. How can they teach Muslims the pure teachings of Islam, if they themselves cannot practise Islam in their life. When I see this humble group, it is so different. They practise carefully every detail of Islamic teachings as practised by the Prophet Muhammad. In addition to this, they are actively looking for us; for a

person like me who is thirsty for the words of Islam. Not us chasing them. Really, I can find the beauty of true Islam in this group.

Ummu Rohana's concern implies that, although it is true that Islam is central to Indonesian everyday life, gaining access to Islamic guidance is rather difficult and expensive. Muslims have to be proactive by either visiting religious gatherings, religious teachers, or buying religious products, such as religious sms (short messaging system). For its followers, the Tablighi Jamā'at presents a hopeful alternative. Through the activities and the efforts of the Tablighi, religious guidance is always 'on the move,' to borrow Christian W. Troll's (2008) words. Muslims will not feel it as difficult finding Islam, as it is easily accessible to its followers through their diverse programs, such as *gasht*.

The other common stimulus for these women, who were mostly not raised to be religiously observant, is their spirit to return to what they believe to be the true path of their religion. They mention their overwhelming disappointment with their previous '*jāhiliyya*' lifestyle:³⁵ particularly their failure to live morally; their career ambitions; the condition of the country; and their dissatisfaction with Islamic teachings introduced by other groups, when they analyze why they have attached themselves to the Tablighi Jamā'at. The language of moral decadence is particularly prevalent among these women. However, what they mean by this notion of moral decadence is unclear. Mostly, they refer to an attitude far from meeting religious demands, such as adopting clothing which is not in accord with the rules of dress according to normative Islam. This is often used as the barometer of this moral decadence. Therefore, for women who have children, their attachment to the Tablighi is seen as an investment for bringing up their children according to the true Islam.

The Tablighi Jamā'at is like an answer that will rescue them from this threatening environment. It offers a new life style which they believe can balance their worldly activities and save them from devastating catastrophes caused by their presumed former sinfulness. Ami, for example, says:

Before joining this *usaha agama*, I felt I had a *jāhiliyya* lifestyle. I just focused on earning a living and being hip in front of my friends, very far from any religious activities. Until all of a sudden, I realize that my life is very dry. I need a guidance to rescue me.

Ami and my other informants' self-confession of their failure to live in accord with what they perceive to be true Islam has made them realize that being far away from religion is a source of stress while living in what they often mention as the age of disorder. Ernesto Braam (2006) has argued that the Tablighi Jamā'at "can be seen as a safe haven from worldly affairs". Therefore, the agenda offered by the Tablighi Jamā'at for these women can be regarded as similar to the women's mosque movement which is also part of the larger Islamic revival in Egypt studied by Saba Mahmood (2005), namely "a relief from the opulent and consumerist aura". In addition to this, I realized that the most often mentioned rubrics of women's narratives on their attachment to this typical religious revivalist movement are the same as those

³⁵ The term *jāhiliyya* lifestyle was often mentioned by these women to refer to their past, the moment of ignorance of the period before they attached themselves to the Tablighi Jamā'at.

of women under the women's mosque movement, namely fear of God's retribution, hope for God's mercy, and love for God (Mahmood 2005). The Tablighi Jamā'at's position on their *da'wa* focus also accords with that of the women's mosque movement (Mahmood 2005). They do not have significant ambitions to fight for the formalization of *sharī'a* (Islamic law) as do other religious movements in Indonesia. They do not involve themselves in any kind of public debates like other revivalist groups. They focus on calling Muslims to the true path of Islam as practised by the Prophet Muhammad and His companions. The Tablighi Jamā'at's teachings emphasize that its followers should embrace the true meaning of becoming true Muslims.

Besides the nature of the movement itself and the pure intention of the members to be closer to the true teachings of Islam, for some new members the motive is just for spending their time or even for fun. When some of their friends have asked them to visit the Tablighi's *ta'lim*, for example, and they had never before been exposed to a religious gathering, they feel that it is worthwhile to do so. Dita, one of my informants, for example, says:

It is so much fun when we can spend our time in these kinds of religious activities. It is a new thing for me, but I enjoy being here, particularly to join a religious study group together with people that we have known before, rather than suddenly join a group that is alien to us.

Once they join, however, the Tablighi Jamā'at plays a central role in orienting these women. Dita's statement can invite a question concerning the real motives of their attachment to the movement, whether it is just a matter of a trend or a matter of prestige or because of their real deep interest in transforming themselves to be more pious. Based on my research, only very few of them tended to join because of adopting the trend to be more religious. This can be assessed through their lack of commitment to the movement: they come to the *ta'lim* as they wish, never dare to perform *mastura khurūj*, and are still reluctant to respect the standard rules of attending the *ta'lim*, namely to cover their hair properly with the veil or *jilbab*, not *kerudung*.³⁶ However, most of them, who have committed to their involvement in the Tablighi Jamā'at genuinely strive to really embrace the feeling to be more religious. Below, we can see how these women start to really make their attachment to the Tablighi Jamā'at the objective of their life in this world.

Exercising agency: efforts to be a pious woman

As the product of the revivalist movement, the Tablighi Jamā'at focuses on the process of re-Islamization from below by following some binding rules. In this regard, many scholars, such as Barbara D. Metcalf (1998) and Hala Shukrallah (2001), argue that women have more responsibility to be cultural bearers embodying the norms and teachings upheld by the movement. In order to be valued as good and pious women, for example, they have to maintain some expected authentic values, such

³⁶ In Indonesia, these two terms may be used interchangeably. However, *kerudung* usually refers to a long transparent shawl which covers a woman's hair and *jilbab* is a longer piece of cloth that almost completely covers a woman's body except for her face and hands (Amrullah 2008).

as covering women's 'awra (part of the body that must be covered) by donning proper attire. What constitutes a proper way of living ethically and piously in the world is always the major concern of women followers of revivalist movements. What Saba Mahmood discusses under the rubric of “performativity” has a certain resonance with my focus on understanding these women’s contributions to the development of the movement and their self-transformation to be pious women. Mahmood (2005), who recommends us to think of agency as a modality of action, for example, suggests that it is inescapable for a person who wants to be pious to train herself to overcome the disjuncture between a religious norm and actual performance. Since these women have chosen to be pious women as their life’s goal, then the way we understand their decision to leave their jobs and to support this movement totally should not be in terms of subordination but as their constant efforts to live in the true path of Islam.

In the Tablighi Jamā‘at, the expectations for pious women can be seen clearly through rules of conduct that govern their lives. One rule maintained strictly by these women concerns interactions between men and women not related by immediate kin ties, or *ikhtilāṭh* (literally, mixing). To prevent *ikhtilāṭh*, they always maintain *hijāb* (literally, curtain or cover), which in this regard refers to any elements that can maintain strict separation between men and women, on every occasion, such as *ta‘līm*. Even the cars used to bring these women to their *khurūj* destination must have *hijāb* so that the male driver and the women passengers cannot interact. One of them commented:

Sometimes, it is so funny [while giggling] when we are heading to our *tempatan* [place where they stay for certain period of times for *khurūj*], we really do not know the driver who brings us to our *khurūj* area.

When the notion of *ikhtilāṭh* has been thoroughly embraced by these women, they try to re-arrange their life according to it. Those truly committed to the Tablighi Jamā‘at lifestyle resign from their workplaces, where men and women mix. They do not want to choose a work environment that fails to support their quest to live piously.

The effort to prevent *ikhtilāṭh* can be seen through the way they design their houses to be conducive to the Tablighi norms. For example, the prerequisite for two main women’s activities, namely *mastura khurūj* and weekly women’s *ta‘līm*, which can consist of listening to *mastura bayan* (religious speech or talk for women), is that their houses have to have separate entrances to give access for male and female Jamā‘at. Inside the house there should be two or three indoor bathrooms (see Metcalf 1998), particularly for the houses which will welcome *mastura khurūj* or *karkun*.³⁷ The house should have good air circulation, too, since when there is *mastura khurūj*, then there will be many Tablighi who will visit them (*nuṣra*). In addition to this, usually before *mastura jamā‘at* (women’s group) come, there is an inspection by two male followers who are responsible for the *jamā‘at* (As-Sirbuny 2009). This implies that these women are expected to take a big part in this *da‘wa*, particularly if it is related to women’s presence. During my fieldwork in Jakarta, I was quite amazed to find that some big houses, even city apartments, are especially designed to welcome their guests who will stay in their houses for usually three

³⁷ *Karkun* is a term which tends to be only used in Indonesia by the Tablighi Jamā‘at. It refers to male followers who have performed or are performing *khurūj*. Sometimes, male followers in general in Indonesia are called *karkun*.

days. Some houses are even intentionally designed with a number of taps that can facilitate their guests to take *wu ū* (ritual ablution) before performing *‘ibāda* (religious observance).

While these elite women focus on managing their residential arrangements in an appropriate manner, the less privileged women prefer to stay in proximity to each other, as this provides great benefit for them in the absence of their husbands who perform *khurūj*. Residential proximity is common for lower class followers in some areas where the Tablighi has a long presence, particularly near *pesantren* that have connections with the Tablighi. Indeed, a couple who leave their children is supposed to not to worry, because other followers will look after them.³⁸ For the elite women, however, residential proximity is not really important since they have facilities, such as cars, that can make their mobility easy. As noted by Patricia Jeffery: "...women's access to education and income give some women more opportunities for mobilization than others" (cited in Basu and Jeffery 1998).

The other strict rule of conduct that they observe is the rule of donning certain outfits when they perform *khurūj*, such as *purda*, a face-veil that covers the entire woman's body including eyes, and not only the *cadar*, which covers women's faces but not their eyes. According to the basic rule of Tablighi Jamā'at, there is no excuse for disregarding any rules set when one performs the duty of *da'wa* (proselytization) or *mastura khurūj*. They must be in "the line of *taqwa*" (*garis taqwa*)³⁹ which means no violation at all of the rules in the movement. The line of *taqwa* for women includes wearing *purda*, socks, and gloves when they perform *mastura khurūj*; some regions even add that their *purda* and *'abāya* must be plain, without any ornaments. In order to train the young generation of Tablighi Jamā'at living by this rule, in all boarding schools that have a strong connection with the Tablighi Jamā'at, female students are required to wear the face-veil, such as in al-Fatah (East Java) and Sunanul Husna al-Jaiah (Banten).

Objectives of *Usaha Mastura*⁴⁰

All the activities of women in the Tablighi Jamā'at originate in the Tablighi Jamā'at's goal to produce women with six ideal characteristics: to be *dā'iyā*, *'ābida*, *muta'allima*, *murabbiya*, *khādima*, and *zāhida*. Here, I focus on their role as *dā'iyā* and *khādima* as these are the most often mentioned as the practices that make them feel their attachment to the Tablighi Jamā'at is really meaningful. All Tablighi women should be able to proselytize or to be *dā'iyā* even in the most trivial form, like behaving in a good manner so that others can copy this good deed. The demand for all women to be *dā'iyā* is supported by the practice in weekly *mastura ta'līm*

³⁸ The type of relationship they build is like that of Muslim women in Iran during the war with Iraq when many Iranian women supported each other in ways such as minding each others' children during demonstrations or providing comfort when one of them had to accept the fact that she must suffer from the loss of her husband or sons (Poya 1999).

³⁹ *Garis taqwa* is a term which is only used by the Tablighi Jamā'at. According to them, *garis taqwa* refers to Islamic teachings written in religious texts (al-Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*) that have to be obeyed strictly as they are, without any further interpretations.

⁴⁰ *Usaha mastura* is a term which is only used by the Tablighi Jamā'at. It has almost the same meaning as *usaha agama*, only *usaha mastura* emphasizes more on women's efforts to be active in *da'wa*.

where the person who is in charge of reading the book of *ta'lim*⁴¹ or delivering explanations on themes like *muzākara* (memorizing or, sometimes, referring to discussion), the six principles of the basic tenets of the movement mentioned above, can be anyone. In turn, those who have had no previous access to religion are suddenly provided a privileged opportunity to exercise authority in the religious groups. Suddenly, these women are asked to explain some Tablighi doctrines in religious words in the standard way. The discourse remains high scriptural and explanations are mostly copied from the work of male Tablighi clerics and published by the Tablighi community. During my observation of diverse Tablighi Jamā'at *ta'lim*, I heard identical explanations of certain religious themes. Since the advent of the movement in India, Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas emphasized that his followers should keep their speeches and explanations precise and to the point (Haq 1972).

Based on my involvement in their *ta'lim*, I also realized that women in the Tablighi Jamā'at who do not have any religious background often suddenly feel excited and have significant energy to perform *da'wa*. They become fond of talking casually about religion, which can also be regarded as their method of *da'wa*. This has led them to be part of a religious elite among their *new* religious circle.⁴² What is somehow missing from the Tablighi Jamā'at's followers, especially from these women who are excited to perform *da'wa*, is arguably a deep understanding of Islam. These women's lack of either formal or informal education in matters of Islamic studies, such as *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), *ḥadīth* (prophetic tradition), and *fiqh* (Islamic law), has made them unable to talk or discuss any religious themes outside those written in their 'sacred Tablighi books.' Women in other movements, like *Salafī* groups, on the other hand, have to really master their religious understanding before performing *da'wa*. As a result, Muslim women of different groups tend to criticize them for being immature *dā'iya* (female preachers).

The other important role of women in the Tablighi Jamā'at is to be a *khādima* (a person who is able to provide service). One of these women's concerns is their *khidmat* (service or providing service which involves physical labor) towards the movement, like their willingness to be part of the recruitment of activists. These women's recruitment activity supports Bayat's concept of 'active piety' (2007b) in which they are not only active practising their faith but also want other sisters in Islam to follow their path (Bayat 2007b; Howell 2008). Following Janine A. Clark's analysis of women's social networks in Yemen, it could be said that being active in the recruitment process for these Tablighi women also gives them a strong sense of worth and self-satisfaction (Clark 2004a).

It is worth mentioning that, based on my field research, the most active women involved in recruiting other women to be part of the Tablighi Jamā'at are upper class newcomers, as mentioned earlier by Ibu Tatik, who mostly still do not have enough religious knowledge. Although the senior participants also exercise efforts to recruit followers, most of the time, their approach is 'softer' than that of the newcomers who are still very enthusiastic to ask others, especially their families, friends,

⁴¹ The most common book read by Tablighi are *Fa ā'il al-Tabligh* (1977), *Fa ā'il Al-A'māl* (2003), *Fa ā'il al-ṣadāqa* (n.d.), all of which were written by Shaykh Mawlana Muhammad Zakariya (Haq 1972).

⁴² Good scholarly accounts of the religious hierarchy can be found in Howell (2008), Muzakki (2008), and Hasan (2009).

servants, nannies, and drivers, to join the group. These women actively recruit selective targets,⁴³ and particularly use their existing social networks. The women from less prestigious families do not do this. This is because the recruitment of selective targets in the Tablighi Jamā'at is mainly the duty of male Tablighi, which is known as *jawla* or *jawla khuṣuṣi*.⁴⁴ According to the doctrine of Tablighi, the women's duty is only to assist their husbands who perform this *jawla khuṣuṣi* by reciting certain *dhikr* (literally means remembrance of God, consisting of a litany formula) while asking God's assistance for the success of their husbands' missions. Therefore, these young affluent women's efforts to recruit selective targets is mainly their own creativity which is born of their enthusiasm to strengthen the movement. In addition to this, these women's privileged position has made their mobility faster. They have nannies and servants, for example, who can take care of their children while they are away and drivers who can also assist their mobility.⁴⁵ This is totally different from the majority of Tablighi women from less privileged backgrounds. Ummu Aisyah, in her words:

We really want to be extremely active in this *usaha agama*, but what we can do *Ka' Eva*? We do not have appropriate transportation, such as a car, that can bring us, my five children, my husband, and I, to the *ta'lim* or to perform *nusra*. I really want to perform *mastura khurūj*, too, as many as I want, but, again, what I can do? I have to take care of all my five little children by myself. In addition to this, we do not have enough *bekal* (money) for performing *khurūj* as often as we want.

Ummu Aisyah's narrative demonstrates again how having economic capital is considered by most of Tablighi women as the most important aspect that can smooth their mobility in this *usaha agama*.

Jebakan Batman (Batman's Trap)⁴⁶

This section demonstrates vividly how young affluent women started constituting an important part of the Tablighi Jamā'at's most dedicated supporters. The narrative of the privileged women's efforts to recruit their sisters in Islam reveals how deeply they embrace the sense of belonging to this movement. I employ social movement

⁴³ For more discussion on the recruitment and selective targeting, see Clark (2004b).

⁴⁴ *Jawla khuṣuṣi* is an Arabic term which tends to be only used by the Tablighi Jamā'at. *Jawla khuṣuṣi* refers to visiting some houses of prominent figures in certain areas like '*ulamā*' (religious clerics), government elite, head of the kampong, etc., to invite them to join the Tablighi Jamā'at.

⁴⁵ The newcomers who seem to have no significant obstacles in recruiting new participants also do not even hesitate to use modern technology like phones, mobile phones, and e-mail to smooth their efforts, while, on the other hand, many others try to distance themselves from modern technology. The previous husband of Utama Dewi, a well-known Indonesian singer, for example, asked her to get rid of the television because he believed it could have bad effects on the viewer. Some declare war on modern technology and others indeed adopt it and even use it as their means of *da'wa*. The position of mobile phones in the Tablighi Jamā'at is, I think, quite dilemmatic. This is the most favored means for Tablighi women to ask their friends to join *ta'lim*. However, while in the *khurūj* period, mobile phones ideally should be kept away because it is believed that this technology will break the concentration of *karkun* or

⁴⁶ The term *Batman* refers to a fictional character which was also produced as an American animated television series. These Tablighi women use the term *Batman* to describe the fact that they are active in catching other Muslim women to follow them into being active in the Tablighi Jamā'at.

theory to analyze the involvement of these affluent women in the recruitment effort. Many social movement theorists, such as Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, emphasize the importance of interpersonal ties in the process of recruitment (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). The initial recruitment by these affluent Tablighi also begins with their most convenient circle, their friends' circle.

They have even created a specific term for their recruitment efforts; *jebakan* Batman (Batman's trap), which refers to the *mastura ta'lim*. When they have successfully invited an outsider to come to their *ta'lim*, they have effectively placed her in their *jebakan* Batman. The term *jebakan* Batman is a unique term which is used particularly among these well-to-do urban Muslim women. It is noteworthy that this term is mostly only used by privileged Tablighi women. This can be understood to occur because they live and embrace popular culture. Their habitual access to popular culture has allowed them to combine elements of what can be perceived as popular culture with the relatively new concept of religion as presented to them in the Tablighi Jamā'at. *Jebakan* Batman can also be regarded as part of the cool slang of Jakarta or *bahasa gaul* (language of sociability for young Indonesians). The purpose of *bahasa gaul* itself as argued by Nancy J. Smith-Hefner (2007) is to emphasize the sense of belonging amongst the speakers. Therefore, despite the attempts of these privileged women to assimilate to the vast majority of Tablighi women who come from lower-middle classes, the class distinction is still evident, not only from their outward appearances but also from the language being used. For lower class women, the term *jebakan* Batman is still regarded as a sophisticated term. As one informant says:

How can I know about this *jebakan* Batman and what can I say about it? I do not know anything about Batman and his *jebakan* (trap). I do not have TV in my house. I think this term belongs, especially, to the rich.

Further, when a woman agrees to come to the weekly *ta'lim* after their first call, or to borrow their language, "when the woman has been successfully caught in this *jebakan* Batman", they, particularly those who are responsible for *istiqbāl*,⁴⁷ arrange a special service for them so that their first visit will be unforgettable and will give them some good impressions which ensure that they will want to return. When they know that there are new visitors who have been successfully caught in their *jebakan* Batman, they will treat these new visitors as special guests, even as queens (As-Sirbuny 2009). Those who are responsible for *istiqbāl* will show them the place to sit and they will start their *da'wa infirādi*⁴⁸ before the *banyan mastura* which consists of giving some encouragement (*targhīb*) to join this *usaha agama*. After *bayan mastura* (speech for the women's congregation), the program is continued with *tashkil*,⁴⁹ which entails persuasion to invite the followers to sacrifice themselves and their money for the sake of religion. During *tashkil*, the more experienced women will, especially, tell

⁴⁷ *Istiqbāl* is an Arabic term which is applied in a specific way by the Tablighi Jamā'at. It refers to the activity of welcoming the guests.

⁴⁸ *Da'wa infirādi* is an Arabic term which is used in a specific way by the Tablighi Jamā'at. It refers to performing *da'wa* individually to one targeted Muslim.

⁴⁹ *Tashkil* is a term which tends to be only used by the Tablighi Jamā'at community. *Tashkil* refers to a period which entails the process of registration and identification of followers who will go out for *khurūj* and organizing *ta'lim*.

them a story about the joy of performing *mastura khurūj*. Mostly, they use some persuasive and compelling words such as “let’s join *mastura* activities!”, “it is unbelievable and enjoyable”, “you will feel different every time you perform *khurūj*”, “your relationship with your husband becomes warmer after you both perform *khurūj*”,⁵⁰ “I bet you will be addicted”. Those who do not have any interest may see this as a silly effort. One of my informants who was an insider and who has now become an outsider, says:

The words they use to recruit people are, for me, like offering a candy to a small kid. The kid, who is not critical, like them, will accept it without any questions. However, smart kids, like me, will take time to think before directly deciding to join ‘this club.’

What is critical in regard to their *da‘wa* is that, because the desire of these women to perform *da‘wa* or, in this context, recruitment is significantly high, sometimes they just do not care about the background of their targets. One of my informants was a woman whom had a strong religious background and had at one point been invited to join the Tablighi Jamā‘at. By ‘strong’, I mean that she knows well the basic tenets of Islam because she went to an Islamic boarding school and attended Islamic university. She says:

It is very funny Eva, once I attended Tablighi *ta‘līm* just to accompany my friend who is also eager to know what the *ta‘līm* of Tablighi Jamā‘at looks like. Suddenly, a woman came to me and started talking about the sweetness of being close to religion and the importance of joining Tablighi Jamā‘at. She even started to give me ‘a short speech’ on some basic tenets of Islam that I have known since I was in primary school.

Her story directly reminded me of my first meeting with the hostess of one of the *ta‘līm* in Kebun Baru *halaqa*. When I asked her permission to be a participant observer in her *ta‘līm*, she informed me of some prospective targets of *da‘wa*. In her words:

We are quite confident to introduce our group or our *ta‘līm* to people who were previously far from religion or only know religion on its surface. But it is very hard for us to approach those who already have a quite solid knowledge of basic tenets of religion, in particular those who have graduated from Islamic university and non-Tablighi Islamic boarding school. It is like filling a glass already full of water. So the water that we add won’t fill the glass, but will be spilled. On the contrary, when we approach the first group that I have just mentioned, it is like filling an empty glass with the water. So, you can imagine...it is very easy and the target will be fulfilled.

The zeal of these urban privileged women to become committed supporters of the Tablighi Jamā‘at’s mission can be assessed through Alberto Melucci’s (1989) concept of “networks of shared meaning”. According to Melucci, through “networks

⁵⁰ Women must perform *khurūj* with their husbands or sometimes close relatives (*mahram*). But if unmarried, they can join either their fathers and mothers or their married sisters.

of shared meaning” the people involved are active in accepting and internalizing as well as endorsing accepted values in the community. The characteristics of the movement have made these women feel ‘feel at home.’ They internalize their ‘new’ belief through actively engaging and spreading the message of the movement. Through the collective identity that has been built among the followers that can be seen from *jebakan* Batman, for example, they have embedded the feeling that it is their religion that really matters.

Collaboration for the sake of religion and ‘healthy’ family life

Women’s contributions to the improvement of the Tablighi Jamā‘at have also been acknowledged by their male counterparts. In the Tablighi Jamā‘at, there is a *niṣab* (time limit) or requirement for men that they must perform *khurūj*: 3 days in a month, 40 days in a year, two months or four months in their lifetime. For the ‘*ulamā*’, they are expected to perform one year in their lifetime.⁵¹ This means that a wife must be willing to accept the fact that her husband will leave her often. It has been said that, although men often leave the family, it is in fact the women or wives who make a greater sacrifice. When men perform *khurūj*, they will be served properly by *anṣār* (people who welcome them), while their wives must struggle to raise the children, run the daily home *ta’līm*, whilst often thinking about their daily expenses. This movement will not survive without significant contributions from women. As a consequence, to ‘cheer-up’ these women, there are many *ḥadīth* quoted in Tablighi books on the virtue of women’s willingness to support their husbands’ activities. The importance of spiritual reward has been always the major concern of these women (Janson 2006a). One of them states “if a woman is willing to be left by her husband for *khurūj*, she will enter heaven 500 years earlier than her husband” (Bambang n.d.; Abidah and Navisah 2007). To emphasize the importance of the spiritual rewards of sustaining the movement, *Fa ā’il Al-A’māl*, the most popular book used by Tablighi followers, explains the role of women’s struggle to spread the message of Islam throughout Islamic history. One of its chapters consists of a story about the role of the Prophet’s female companions in *da’wa* activities.

In addition to this, women who have a strong conviction with the movement will even urge their husbands to go out (Manshur 2001). The support of wives to persuade their husbands to perform *khurūj* is regarded as their most significant contribution to the movement. The impact of husbands’ experiences in performing *khurūj* in turn can benefit wives and can change gender arrangements in their households. Most of these women argue that, when their husbands start to join the Tablighi Jamā‘at, they feel that there is a very significant change brought about in their lives. Husbands begin to take on household duties, partly due to the fact they have had similar experiences with doing domestic chores whilst performing *khurūj*. The tradition of *mushawarah* (consultations) in all Tablighi programs is also embraced by the followers. All Tablighi programs are always based on *mushawarah*. This affects

⁵¹ For women, there is no time limit for performing *khurūj*. The number of days for performing *mastura khurūj* is also different from men. For women, it is 3 days, 15 days, and 40 days (in Indonesia), and two months to IPB (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh).

their household arrangements. A husband always consults his wife when deciding every matter concerning their family life. They give more space, more freedom and more opportunity for their wives to perform religious activities. Every week, for example, it is not surprising to see husbands playing with their children in a male room, while their wives participate in religious programs. Ayma, for example, says:

Every week, my husband always gives me the opportunity to join *mastura ta'lim*. He drives me to the *ta'lim*. We usually bring our children to the *ta'lim*, so during the women's program he often takes care of our children and plays with them in a separated space for male followers.

The husbands who are followers of the movement also experience second-hand benefits. Their wives' involvement in Tablighi programs provides an environment conducive to harmonious family life that is based on a strong Islamic foundation. Further, it means that they are ready to bring up their children according to Islamic teachings.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated a unique strategy of returning to the core of religion by well-to-do urban Muslim women in order to confront and deal with the personal challenges they experience. The excitement of these women to engage in self-reformation by joining the Tablighi Jamā'at is a testament that the movement has successfully engaged with its followers. For most of these women, the beauty of the movement is its emphasis that all Muslims, men or women, the poor or the rich, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds, have the same responsibility to participate in religious activities, and also its focus on Muslims' self-reformation. It is also evident that strict religious practices find a welcome reception among the young affluent Muslim women I met. The attachment of these women to a religious group vastly different from the worldview of their parents reveals that religion, for many believers, is not a traditionally handed-down institution. These Tablighi women are active believers who keep on searching for the true Islam. The way of life introduced in the Tablighi Jamā'at has challenged their reliance on the material aspects. Further, the movement has successfully convinced them that what matters in life can be found in accumulating God's rewards (*pahala*) by being active in these religious activities.

The fact that these women gather in certain *maḥalla* has raised questions concerning their real intention for attending the *ta'lim*. Very few of these women consider their attendance as only part of their efforts to follow the religious trend among their existing social networks. On the other hand, drawing on the general pattern of these privileged women's involvement in the Tablighi Jamā'at, the majority of them consider their decision to join as their final journey to find a haven in the age of disorder. Based on the data presented in this article, there are some long-term and short-term tentative conclusions on these women's involvement in the Tablighi Jamā'at that can be drawn. Their aspiration to be true Muslims by joining the Tablighi Jamā'at can be assessed as part of a long-term goal. On the other hand, the short-term goals may range from trying to create a distance from luxurious life,

trying to find a way out from their personal life crises, partaking in the latest trend to raising their social status. The choice of the latter signifies how religion can be part of the commodity that can be picked up within diverse Indonesian religious markets. The involvement in the Tablighi Jamā'at of these young women who come from privileged backgrounds is a recent phenomenon in Indonesia, particularly in the above-mentioned field site. Since their involvement is relatively new, the long-term impact of their attachment to the movement remains to be seen.

These women's background has given them more opportunities for mobilization in this self-funded movement. Their involvement in the Tablighi Jamā'at, which upholds the patriarchal system, does not mean that they totally become the oppressed party and subject to the authority of male relatives, particularly their husbands. On the contrary, for them, their choice to be part of this movement is evidence that they have the right to make decisions concerning their lives. They also believe that this patriarchal order with its strict rule of segregation has empowered them and opened up opportunities for them to enter *da'wa* activities with their own strategies. For them, Islamic teachings introduced by the movement do not discriminate against them with respect to their male counterparts. In fact, through the Tablighi teachings, they realize the importance of their support for the sake of their religion. Through the bond of collective identities and the network of solidarity, they internalize the responsibility to be active agents in this movement. Their sense of belonging to the Tablighi Jamā'at has not only led them to be active in crafting themselves to be true Muslims but also to be creative in finding their ways to spread the message of Islam and to preserve what they perceive to be the true Islamic teachings upheld by the movement.

The activities of privileged women who eventually become committed supporters can eliminate the widespread stereotype that women living under such a movement experience the oppressive effect of the religious ultra-conservative agenda. Listening to their voices, what matters for them is that they enjoy their full participation in strengthening the glory of their religion, including being active in the recruitment process. The recruitment, which involves conveying religious words and showing good deeds, for these women has assisted them to reinforce their commitment to their religion and inculcate a sense of worth and self-satisfaction. They use their interpersonal ties strategically to invite their friends into the movement. The language of these women after attaching themselves to this kind of movement, which is also often used to attract new recruits, is strongly attached to their psychological feelings. Their narratives of transformation to be part of the Tablighi Jamā'at, for example, often mention that it is the feeling of comfort and optimism to live in this world that has been offered by this movement that draws them. Disappointment at the modern world's promise has even made these urban middle and upper class women feel that there is no other way to live in the world except to return to what they believe to be the true Islam. Their self-transformation to live strictly under the Tablighi Jamā'at's teachings is further understood by them as the steps that can help them to build and create piety within themselves.

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