FEMALE MISSIONARIES AND WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN SOUTHERN THAILAND’S CHAPTER OF THE TABLIGHI JAMA’AT

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Introduction

In this contribution, I discuss the participation in, and support for, what is probably the largest global Islamic missionary movement in the world today, the Tablighi Jama’at. I argue that the Tablighi Jama’at not only provides opportunities for men, but also for women who join the Mastura Jama’at, or female unit of the Tablighi Jama’at. The community-building in the Mastura Jama’at provides an unusual space for the congregation of Muslim women in a secular society. While veiled women are still confronted with problems in Thai workplaces and Thai public colleges, the Mastura Jama’at provides an almost secluded space in which a thoroughly Islamic way of life can be realized, or at least imagined. Although fully veiled, the women are not supposed to be seen by strange men. At the same time, the veil is also a sign to other women encouraging them to don the veil. The veil thus serves the paradox function of making women invisible to men and more visible as Muslims to fellow females.

Women in the Mastura Jama’at are included in a common behavioural model of embodied Muslim dispositions of modesty as well as in a shared commitment to the spread of Islam (tabligh) (see also Metcalf 2000:50). Remodelling one’s own habitus and daily actions after the model set by Fatima, the favourite daughter of the prophet Muhammad, gives purpose and meaning to everyday life, providing new and exciting transnational social venues and maximizing well-being for a self-chosen identity that prioritizes religion. Thus, participation in the Tablighi Jama’at brings Muslim women in Thailand closer to transnational Islamic networks. They perceive these transnational Muslim spheres as a space of modernity which they contrast with backward society at home. Secondly, I argue that in becoming self-reliant pious Muslim female subjects, the participation of Muslim women in the Tablighi Jama’at affects the relationship of these women with the Buddhist majority. The participation results in the withdrawal of women from multi-religious rituals and in the construction of cultural boundaries
between themselves and Buddhist women, who are either secular or espouse Buddhist nationalism.¹

Academic studies of the inner life, ideology, or dynamic of any type of Islamic revivalist or reformist movement are still very rare. The gendering of these movements, the specific goods and services they provide for women—certainly a crucial dimension of their development—have hardly been researched. This essay on the everyday politics of the Tablighi Jama‘at should thus be seen as an initial study that does not claim to fully explore the subject. It should also be noted that the researcher, being white, male, and European, had obvious limitations in appearing before veiled female Tablighi preachers. The researcher was welcomed by the Tablighi Jama‘at local unit to stay and travel with a male Jama‘at in Tha Sala, Nakhonsrithammarat province, and to visit the Islamic centre (markaz besar) in the border town of Yala.²

I am interested in the ongoing debates in local society and in how Muslims discuss the presence of women in the public sphere and in the dakwah movement in particular. My thesis is as follows: Muslim communities are not just challenged and transformed by the growing impact of transnational movements such as the Tablighi Jama‘at, but are increasingly divided into new disciples and their opponents who keep to the old ways. In everyday life, the new ideology and the new rituals thus coexist with the old ways and old beliefs. Tensions between the two belief systems grow whenever the Jama‘at objects to the old rituals, for example if they involve the presence of ancestor spirits. At the same time, the Tablighi Jama‘at exerts social pressure as the movement operates in Thai society where shari‘a law is applied only to a very limited extent, or is only present as a discourse and normative order or guideline.

Women are heavily involved in this Islamization process as they construct cultural boundaries distinguishing themselves from the Buddhists. But the participation of women in the movement also has considerable impact on their relations with those Muslim women who keep to the old ways, because

¹ Farzana Haniﬁa (2006 und 2007) argues in the case of Sri Lanka that the manner in which piety is propagated among Muslims must be understood as located within Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. By propagating piety, Muslim women actively draw boundaries between themselves and the Singhalese Buddhist women, whose chauvinist Buddhism has strong anti-Muslim elements. Likewise, in Thailand the new visibility of Muslim women and veiling reﬂect the growing separation between the Buddhist and Muslim public sphere in Thailand and the growing ultra-nationalism and anti-Muslim feelings in the Thai Buddhist Sangha.

² Fieldwork on dakwah movements and the Tablighi Jama‘at in Southern Thailand and in Northeast Malaysia was conducted in 1995–1996, 2001, and 2004–2007 (Horstmann 2007). In 2009 and 2010, fieldwork on the Tablighi Jama‘at was also done in Northwestern Thailand.