



The localisation of the  
transnational Tablighi Jama'at  
in Kyrgyzstan:  
structures, concepts, practices  
and metaphors

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## Crossroads Asia Working Papers

Competence Network Crossroads Asia: Conflict – Migration – Development

Editors: Ingeborg Baldauf, Stephan Conermann, Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Hermann Kreuzmann, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, Dietrich Reetz, Conrad Schetter and Martin Sökefeld.

**How to cite this paper:** Toktogulova, Mukaram (2014): The localisation of the transnational Tablighi Jama'at in Kyrgyzstan: structures, concepts, practices and metaphors. In: Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, No. 17.

Partners of the Network:



## Imprint

Competence Network Crossroads Asia: Conflict – Migration – Development

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# The localisation of the transnational Tablighi Jama'at in Kyrgyzstan: structures, concepts, practices and metaphors

Mukaram Toktogulova

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## Acknowledgements

This research project would not have been possible without the support and active interest of many people. First I would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Crossroads Asia Network, financed by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), which made possible my research at ZMO, in Berlin, between June and August, 2013. During that period, I was able to use the library, meet researchers, visit other institutions, present my research and participate in the “Mobilizing Religion” conference organised by Crossroads Asia during July 2013 in Bonn. I am grateful to the Central Asia Research Institute (CASI) at the American University of Central Asia who supported my fieldwork among the Tablighi Jama’at<sup>1</sup> in Kyrgyzstan and India in 2012.

I would particularly like to thank Dr. Dietrich Reetz for his generous support and deep interest in my work. Working with him was a true learning experience. I am grateful as well to Dr. Antia Mato Bouzas, Aksana Ismailbekova, Iris Schultz, Beutel Saboura and Christian Kübler for reading and commenting on the draft and for their generous support and cooperation in both academic and everyday matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Islamic missionary movement, lit. preaching movement (Urdu)

## Abstract

The transnational Tablighi Jama'at (TJ), which emerged and expanded outward from India and Pakistan in the early and mid-twentieth century, started to extend its missionary activities into Central Asia in the course of the 1990s. Its aim was to revive religious practice amongst post-Soviet Muslims by travelling and spreading its message through lay missionary groups which pursued a *dawat* (preaching) programme, the local term for *da'wa*, namely an invitation to prayer. The TJ focused on an 'internal mission', striving to bring Muslims back to their own faith by reconnecting them with Islamic rituals, practices and beliefs. Although, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, the Tablighi Jama'at is currently banned in four Central Asian countries and Russia, the movement has gradually increased its impact throughout the Central Asian region and has contributed significantly to the emergence of 'alternate globalities' (Reetz 2010b).

The paper discusses the modes, concepts and consequences of the localisation of the transnational Tablighi Jama'at in Kyrgyzstan, where it is shaped by socio-cultural and political conditions in response to local needs. Furthermore, it explores Islamic ideas, sources and images, all of which are promoted through the Tablighi Jama'at network in Kyrgyzstan and beyond. Based on local field research, the paper focuses mainly on two groups, namely male Tablighi preachers, *dawatchys*,<sup>2</sup> and their female Tablighi companions, *masturat*,<sup>3</sup> by analysing their practices, stories, narratives and metaphors and discussing how Islamic and traditional cultural practices are being recovered and reconsidered in a new way.

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<sup>2</sup> Kyrgyz: local term for someone who is engaged in the Tablighi practice.

<sup>3</sup> Ar.: pure, protected and covered. In Kyrgyzstan, *dawatchys* use *masturat* (pl.) to refer to female Tablighi activists. During the interview, many *dawatchys* referred to their wives as "my *masturat*."

## 1. Introduction

I was travelling in a car with five Tablighi activists in July, 2012. I was driving from Karakol, a small town in the Issyk Kul region of Kyrgyzstan, to Talap village. In the car, there were two young Kyrgyz men, two young women and a 5-year old girl, who sat beside me. The two women sitting on the back seats were dressed in a way which would be deemed uncommon according to local custom – they were clothed in long black dresses and wore a *hijab* head cover as well as a black cloth to cover their face<sup>4</sup>. The girl was wearing a white dress and a white *hijab*, which covered her head and neck. One of the women in the car was Fatima,<sup>5</sup> whom I had met the day before in Karakol, where I had come to carry out fieldwork on the Tablighi Jama'at. During our car journey, and to my surprise, Fatima completely ignored my attempts to communicate with her, turning her face away from me and looking straight ahead. Both women looked straight ahead, in fact, maintaining a silence that was broken only rarely by the girl. Sometimes she would pose a question to her mother, upon which the other woman would whisper the answer into the girl's ear so that the female voices could not be heard in the car.

The two men were also dressed in an unusual way for Kyrgyzstan. First, there was Abdullah, a 32-year-old Kyrgyz man, who drove the car and wore long grey Pakistani-style wide-cut trousers and a shirt, accompanied by a skullcap on his head. Another man, Suleiman, 26, was dressed the same way but in white. Both of them were sporting long beards. Suleiman was listening to a recording of a religious talk (*bayan*) on his mobile, in which the speaker talked about how the Prophet suffered in the struggle for faith. I all listened to that talk, and every time when the Prophet's name was mentioned, everyone except me and the small girl would repeat the prayer (*kalima*): "Peace be upon him" (*Salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*).

Families like these are known in Kyrgyzstan as *dawatchy*, or missionaries, derived in local parlance from *dawat*, which means 'mission'. They were on their way to one of the villages in the Jети Oгуз province of Issyl Kul to welcome a group of Dungan *dawatchys* from another town, Tokmok, who were conducting a family preaching tour, called Tablighis *masturat dawat*<sup>6</sup>. For them this was a specific form of Tablighi activism – a welcome tour – which they called *zeyārat* in analogy to visits to pious pilgrimage sites. I was invited to join the Tablighi journey by one of the *dawatchys*, whom I had met at the mosque the day before and introduced my research. He wanted me to learn about their experience by observing the preaching tours and to gain a 'realistic' picture of Tablighi activities; he was particularly earnest in this respect, as he was unhappy about how the local media misinterpreted their practices, very often connecting them with extremist groups.

On our way – when I approached one of the bazaars – Abdullah asked his wife what foods they would like to buy for the female preachers, whilst turning his face in another direction to avoid eye contact with the women. This practice is known among Tablighi activists as 'lowering the gaze before women',

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<sup>4</sup> Ar./Urdu: *purdah*: gender segregation, also cloth covering the face.

<sup>5</sup> Names have been changed.

<sup>6</sup> A preaching tour conducted jointly by male and female preachers.

in local parlance *közdü saktoo*. Fatima wrote her suggestions on a piece of paper and gave the list to her husband. Then the two men left the car to buy food for the Tokmok preachers.

After they had left, Fatima looked at me and asked if I was ok with such a long trip. It was the first time she had looked at or talked to me for hours. I asked why they had been silent on the way. She answered: “This is a rule (*tartip*) – women are not allowed to talk in the presence of other men, except her husband and her close male relatives such as a brother, a father or a son”. The woman’s voice should also be hidden (*aurat*), because it is soft and beautiful, and that is why it can attract a man, leading him to bad thoughts and actions. For instance, only four men could talk to and see our Fatima mother (*ene*): her father, husband and two sons. Men also follow the *tartip* rule, avoiding eye contact and face-to-face communication with other women. These rules help them to deal with ego (*nafs*), which in turn lead men to take bad actions. Instead, a man should concentrate his thoughts by repeating the prayer (*kalima*) or listening to the *bayan* whilst focusing on its content. This is the way in which men control the *nafs*, by avoiding talking about worldly matters (*dünüiönün sözü*) which attract people’s attention to worldly matters and the material elements of life, and disturbs them in their faith”. That is why, Fatima explained, “on the way our husbands did not talk very much and [instead] concentrated on the *bayan*”<sup>7</sup>. When the men came back from the bazaar with bread, melon and vegetables, I continued on our journey in silence.

Abdulla and Suleiman are familiar examples of Muslim preachers in Kyrgyzstan. Everyone can see them leaving the central mosque after Friday prayer in small groups for their *dawat* preaching tours, or when they arrive at one’s house, knocking at the door and asking to recite the *kalima* prayer. Often, they invite fellow adult Muslims to the mosque to listen to an inspirational religious talk (*bayan*). According to the report of the Dawat Department of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims (*Muftiyat*), in 2011, a total of 8,813 *dawatchys* conducted 40 days of preaching tours in Kyrgyzstan,<sup>8</sup> which is only one of many formats and durations of Tablighi tours. The number of Tablighi activists would increase significantly if I were to include those *dawatchy* who conduct international tours to other countries, attend annual congregations at national Tablighi centres (*markaz*) in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan and facilitate three-day, 15-day or four-month preaching and welcoming tours inside the country. This would also be the case if I included the numbers of female Tablighi activists, who comprise a significant part of the TJ in Kyrgyzstan. *Masturat* are involved actively in TJ preaching activities through weekly female teaching sessions (*ta’lim*) and *masturat* preaching tours conducted by women in the company of a husband or a male relative, which usually last three, 15 or 40 days.

*Dawatchys* in Kyrgyzstan are part of the global Tablighi Jama’at which reached Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan, in the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The movement plays a substantial role in re-engaging Kyrgyzstani post-Soviet Muslims in religious practices, most of who were distanced from Islam as a result of the influence of ‘scientific atheism’ under the Soviets (Shahrani, 1994). Tablighi activists contribute to a ‘re-Islamization’ process, in which different local and international actors and the state are involved. By the term ‘re-Islamization’, I refer here to the practice of reintroducing religious practices being facilitated by different local and international actors, including

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<sup>7</sup> Author’s field notes – Karakol, July 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Eratov R., October 2012.

the Tablighi Jama'at missionary movement that introduces new practices to society and teaches new ways of leading a pious life. The Tablighi way of practicing Islam has been labelled by scholars as 'Sunnaization' (Gugler 2013, 69; Metcalf 1996a). Learning about and focusing on the Prophet's tradition (*sunnah*), Tablighi activists in Kyrgyzstan contribute to the shift from 'traditional' Islam – here meaning the Soviet-era mixture of Islamic and cultural traditional customs – to its orthodox form, which appears to be the main tendency of the re-Islamization process in Kyrgyzstan today.

In using the term 're-Islamization', I am also aware of problematic aspects involved there with, which may misleadingly suggest that Islam in the Soviet Union had been lost, or what existed was not actually Islam. By 're-Islamization' I refer to both recovering former Islamic practices among Muslims in the country, i.e. previously familiar Islamic practices that were 'domesticated', and new practices introduced by global Islamic movements, without labelling them 'correct/incorrect' or 'Islamic/un-Islamic'. Instead, the paper discusses the localisation of the TJ in Kyrgyzstan and how universal features of the network have been adapted to the local socio-cultural and political contexts.

Localisation is always a significant part of any form of globalization. In our case, even 'alternative globalization' (Reetz, 2010.b), which already signifies distinctive features in opposition to western globalisation, requires different levels of adaptation in every new context whilst modifying its universal features to local demands. The need for localisation is dictated by major socio-cultural, religious and historical differences between the local culture and what global TJ activists bring to that culture. The differences between these two elements create difficulties in the integration of local Muslims into global networks. The 'alien look', an 'alien style of communication' and 'alien behaviour or practices' was central issues in the discourse<sup>9</sup> around the TJ in Kyrgyzstan. To overcome these difficulties, TJ activists developed linguistic, socio-cultural and religious adaptive strategies that enabled the global TJ movement to be localised in Kyrgyzstan. Applying the Crossroads approach "which doesn't depict a region but a research paradigm focusing on the interplay of the dynamic and the static, the flows (mobilities) and the blockades (borders)" (Mielke and Hornidge, 2014, 19) I will look at those adaptive strategies as processes of negotiation of borders which extend beyond the existing ethnic, socio-cultural and geographical boundaries in Kyrgyzstan.

The ethnographic material collected by the author in Kyrgyzstan provides a detailed picture of global and local features relevant to Tablighi practices and formats of activity in the country, such as the *dawat* preaching tour, religious talks (*bayan*), visits (*zeyārat*) and learning sessions (*ta'lim*). Other information collected in the field includes personal stories and Tablighi-specific narratives, metaphors and symbols, to provide insights into the reflexivity of Tablighi actors and illustrate the personalisation of religious practices among Kyrgyzstani Muslims. This paper will present female Tablighi practices not covered in recent publications on the TJ in Kyrgyzstan, i.e. Balchi (2010) and Nasritdinov and Ismailbekova (2012), but which nevertheless form a significant part of the TJ and play a key role in

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<sup>9</sup> Nurmatov E. Osh: kooptondurgan davatchy ayaldar, on [www.azattyk.kg](http://www.azattyk.kg), 16.05.2012; Baktybaev Z., Talash jaratkan davatchylar, on [www.azattyk.kg](http://www.azattyk.kg), 29.06.2011; Baktybaev z. Jaz jaryshta jandangan davatchylar, on [www.azattyk.kg](http://www.azattyk.kg), 09.04.2012; Olkodogu dinij opurtalduu kyrdaalga chara rorunuzdor. Kok asaba geziti. 13.03.13, Ermekov K., Ne skrytaia ugroza mirnyh propovedei. 07.03.2013, on <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1362632880>.

networking processes of the Tablighi Jama'at in Kyrgyzstan, where female preachers contribute greatly to bringing Islam to society by preaching to women, children and families. The paper also discusses the relationship between the state and the Tablighi Jama'at in Kyrgyzstan, which attests to the complex interconnectedness of globalisation, politics and socio-economic and cultural aspects.

Before moving on to the analysis of adaptive strategies, I will briefly discuss the history of the movement and the universal faith principles followed by TJ activists in Kyrgyzstan.

## 2. Brief history of the Tablighi Jama'at and its universal principles

The TJ originated as a missionary movement in India in 1926 under the leadership of the Islamic scholar Maulana Muhammad Ilyas Kandhlavi (1885-1944) as “a direct response to the rise of Hindu proselytizing movements” (Reetz 2009, 293). Over time, a number of Muslims in India stopped observing the obligatory Islamic rituals, and many of them even changed their religion, converting to Hinduism. While this process started long before the advent of British colonial rule, the process expanded further with its rise. When mosques and Islamic teachers were unable to change the situation, Maulana Ilyas Kandhlavi called on Muslims to create small groups and recover religion through ‘door-to-door’ preaching. He told them not to wait for other Muslims to come to the mosque in order to learn about Islam, but to go to their houses and carry the faith to them, asking them to recite the *kalima*, and invite them to prayer in the local mosque. The main goal of the movement was to revive religious practice among Muslims, in order to make them better Muslims.

Today, the Tablighi Jama'at has become one of the most widely spread global Muslim movements, and it is estimated to have followers numbering between at least 12 and 15 million (Reetz 2009, 293). Annual congregations (*ijtima*) in Delhi, Dhaka and Raiwind bear witness to the gathering of millions of Muslims from different countries. In the meantime, the TJ, as part of the Muslim mainstream, has developed a more bureaucratic and hierarchical administration (Reetz 2008, 2009), represented by a council (*shura/mashvara*) at local, regional, national and global levels. It is termed a ‘vertical structure’ by Nasritdinov and Ismailbekova (2012), through which Tablighi networks from different countries are connected globally.

The Tablighi movement aims at achieving its mission based on six main principles that lead to the ‘Sunnaization of Islam’ (Metcalf 1996a) and bring the Prophet’s *Sunnah* (his sayings and deeds) to Muslims’ everyday life. The first is the prayer *Shahada*, which every Muslim must be able to recite correctly: “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Messenger.” The first request Tablighi preachers ask of their fellow Muslims is to recite the *kalima*. The second is to learn to pray correctly (*salat*). The third is remembrance of God (*zikr*), which every Muslim must perform regularly while improving his religious knowledge (*'ilm*). Fourth is showing respect to fellow Muslims (*ikram*). Fifth is sincere intention (*niyat*) (Tablighis must be sincere to perform their religious duties) and sixth is practicing missionary work (*dawat*) – the call to Islam.

The preaching tour, named *dawat* by Kyrgyz Tablighi activists, plays a major role in the implementation of these six principles, referred to as *the six syfat* by the *dawatchys* in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz TJ actors perform preaching tours by moving both internationally and within the country, following all rules concerning the length of travel, organisational structure and expected outcomes of the tour. Leaving

for three-, 15-and 40-day as well as four-month tours, lay Muslims are instructed to adhere to four actions in order to increase their faith – *dawat*, *zikr*, *ta'lim* and *kyzmat*, controlling *nafs* which include avoiding worldly things by eating less, sleeping less, talking less about worldly matters and incurring less unnecessary expenses. Following the above mentioned six principles, Tablighi activists are expected to achieve self-reformation and strengthen their faith.

### 3. The localisation of the transnational Tablighi Jama'at in Kyrgyzstan

#### “Our grandfathers never wore T-shirts”: appearance and clothing style of the *dawatchys*

‘Re-Islamisation’ in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan occurred in the context of nation-building whereby the revival of ethnic history, ethnic symbols and ethnic language became the leading trend of the process. Such a revivalist context increased visibility of the Tablighi’s ‘alien’ features as seen through local eyes. The majority of *dawatchys* wear long Pakistani-style clothing and extensively use Urdu and Arabic words, Islamic greeting styles and Quranic terminology. Also, many *dawatchys* change their Kyrgyz names to ‘Islamic’ names – from Almaz to Abdullo, Suiun to Suleiman, Ruslan to Abdurahim, etc.

These changes in culture, allegedly brought about by the Tablighis, are seen by ethnic nationalists as the result of a new form of ‘colonisation’ of the region, which they term ‘Arabisation’, or ‘Pakistanisation’. From their viewpoint, *dawatchys* as the main actors in this process do not simply change their appearance and clothing style but introduce new ways of practicing Islam, which in turn has a deeply destructive influence on the traditional culture of the Kyrgyz people<sup>10</sup>. Involving ordinary Muslims in preaching tours, and teaching them to reconstruct their way of life according to the Prophet’s *sunnah*, the Tablighis’ reformist activities are directed at folk customs and traditions which Kyrgyz people have observed for many years; for example, it has been suggested that some traditional cultural elements of funeral traditions should be removed. Kyrgyz funeral traditions involve a mixture of Islamic ceremonies and traditional cultural customs. One of the required elements of the Kyrgyz funeral is lamentation by women (*koshok*) and by men (*okuruk*). Today, *koshok* is widely criticised by *dawatchys*. Tablighis interpret *koshok* as an action against the power of Allah: “One is supposed to accept the will of God, and so he or she should not grieve deeply and strongly,”<sup>11</sup> say Tablighis, who interpret the meaning of *koshok* as being contradictory to Islam. According to ethnic nationalists,<sup>12</sup> Tablighis’ ideas of being ‘good Muslims’ requires complete ignorance and destruction of Kyrgyz customs and traditions, which will lead to the death of Kyrgyz culture.

However, others see religious revival through the promotion of religious rituals and symbols as complementary components in nation-building. In this context the Islamic identity marker – as one of the markers of ethnic identity – has gained more importance for this element of public opinion. Islamic intellectuals and different international and local religious actors following this argument have started to interpret Islamic practices in Kyrgyzstan as part of ethnic symbolism.

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<sup>10</sup> Baktybaev Z. Talash jaratkan davatchylar. [www.azattyk.kg](http://www.azattyk.kg). 29.06.2011.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Bashi, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Olkodigo diniy opurtalduu kyrdaalga chara korunuzdor. Kok asaba geziti, 13.03.13.

In the *Islam Madanyaty* newspaper of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims (*Muftiyat*), the meaning of *hijab* has been discussed several times in relation to ethno-national features. The *hijab* has been compared with the Kyrgyz ethnic head dress (*elechek*) for women. The religious meaning of the *hijab* that refers to piety and modesty has also been reinterpreted in relation to concepts such as independence, ethnic nationalism and cultural tradition. This way of reinterpreting the meaning of the *hijab* by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims stresses the ‘similarities’ between traditional ethnic and Islamic clothing style.

As a continuation and part of this discourse, the Tablighi Jama’at would present its clothing style and appearance as the ‘restoration’ of the cultural tradition of Kyrgyz people that was allegedly broken by the Soviets.

“Our grandparents never wore T-shirts, Western style shirts and ties; our ethnic clothing for men was long, and all our ethnic heroes (*baatyr*) including Manas<sup>13</sup> wore a long coat (*chapan*). Can you find at least a picture of one *baatyr* who wore a short dress? No. Our tribal rulers and heroes had a long beard and wore a long dress, which shows the high moral behaviour of those people. The meaning of the beard is the same in our Tablighi practice – when I wear a beard I can’t do bad things, for instance, steal something or go to a disco (*discoteka*). It protects me from immoral behaviour”.<sup>14</sup>

Here, the *dawatchy*’s long dress and beard are reinterpreted as traditional. References to Manas, tribal leaders and respected old people (*aksakals*), are confronted with the culture of discotheques, which are associated with a Western lifestyle. *Dawatchys*, in response to critiques of their ‘alien’ image, search for similarities between their *sunnah* clothing and Kyrgyz traditional clothing, in order to legitimize their own practices.

On another occasion, in a Tablighi *bayan* talk delivered for women in one of the *ta’lim* learning sessions observed by the author, the meaning of the *hijab* and its similarity with the traditional head dress was discussed in relation to the image of one of the key female figures in the history of Kyrgyzstan – *Kurmanjan Datka* (1811-1907), the strong-willed former ruler of Kyrgyz southern regions.

“Our *Kurmanjan ene*<sup>15</sup> was a modest woman. She was a leader of the nation and a pious woman, who obeyed her husband, prayed five times and wore the Kyrgyz ethnic head dress *elechek*, covering her head in the same style as *hijab*” (male speaker who came to the female *ta’lim* session to perform the monthly *bayan* talk from behind a curtain).

During that inspirational talk, *Kurmanjan*’s name appeared several times, together with *Khadija*, *Fatima* and *Aisha*, as an exemplary modest Muslim woman who led a pious life; all of them were referred to as ‘Mother’ (*ene*). In the talk, *Kurmanjan* was regarded as the mother of the nation, who had very strong faith. Two oppositional binaries were created: on the one hand, there were the layers of ‘ethnic’, ‘Muslim’, ‘traditional’ and ‘heroic’ references; on the other hand, the ‘Western’, ‘Russian’, ‘Soviet’ and ‘atheistic’ layers. This demonstrates how ‘Sunnaisation’ is presented by *dawatchys* in

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<sup>13</sup> Manas is the name of an epic hero from the epic Kyrgyz poem ‘Manas.’

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a *dawatchy*, August 2012, Osh.

<sup>15</sup> Female tribal leader in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Kyrgyzstan, who is considered as a hero and mother of the nation.

opposition to Western globalisation, which supposedly destroys the traditional lifestyle of Kyrgyz people, and where the Tablighis' innovative practices are interpreted as the restoration of tradition.

Public engagement with the 'alien' appearance of *dawatchys*, because of their long beards, is expressed in nicknames that are used to refer to them. A frequently used reference is *sakalchandar* – the one who wears a long beard – and it has negative connotations. Not many people reflect deeply upon and analyse the consequences of the reformist ideas and practices of the *dawatchys* as much as the ethnic nationalists do. The latter highlight aspects of the *dawatchys*' activities which make them appear dangerous for society. Insinuations of doubt and fear have strong resonance because of the new, unusual and unfamiliar features of their appearance. Reflections of people about those unfamiliar, unusual features reveal the underlying Soviet discourse on 'traditional Islam' that preferred to depict the religion as part of cultural tradition, where it seemed less dangerous for Soviet power rather than as religiosity, which was considered problematic. This discourse is still alive in society and impacts on the perceptions and attitudes of the Soviet generation towards global Islamic movements.

One of the veteran Tablighi activists, Abjapar, who was the first chairman of the Dawat department in the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, described in an interview with the author how he met the first TJ group from Pakistan when it visited Bishkek in the 1990s:

"I and my friends met a Jama'at from Pakistan in 1992, during Friday prayer in the central mosque in Bishkek. After prayer they introduced themselves as preachers from Pakistan and then asked if we could help them find a place to do *dawat*. We didn't understand their ideas about preaching tours (*khuruj*) and *dawat*. We led them to the Muftiyat to consult with Mufti Kimsanabay aji, but he also couldn't understand them. Then we found a young Muslim practitioner who had graduated from a madrasa in Pakistan to help with the translation, and he was the only person who understood the meaning of the preaching tour *khuruj* and explained it to us, saying that *khuruj* is a missionary preaching tour widely practiced in Pakistan, where he spent several years being a student in one of the madrasas and where he used to join such preaching tours. That guy was from Balykchy, the northern Issyk Kul region of Kyrgyzstan, and he took them to his village to conduct *dawat* there. Two to three young people joined them, while others stayed in Bishkek expressing suspicions about the Pakistani Jama'at's visit to Kyrgyzstan and worrying about our decision to allow foreigners to preach Islam in our country. Later I learned from that Kyrgyz guy, who hosted the Pakistani Tablighis in Balykchy, that local people were very hostile toward them, which is why it was impossible to conduct the missionary walk in the neighbourhood (*gasht*);<sup>16</sup> instead, they stayed in the house and delivered an inspirational religious *bayan* talk to a small group of young people invited by the hosting person."<sup>17</sup>

Abjapar can laugh now, remembering how they were afraid of those Pakistani Tablighis only because they were from another Muslim country, their ideas on Islam were different and they sported long beards and long dresses – all of which made them look dangerous. He explains the great fear they had

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<sup>16</sup> Tablighi practice that refers to the visits of *dawatchys* to the neighbourhood, who knock on each door and invite Muslims to the mosque to join in prayer.

<sup>17</sup> Author interview with Abjapar, Bishkek, September 2012.

about 'Pakistani Islam' not fitting with 'Soviet traditional Islam'. Even after witnessing their sincere behaviour, they could not stop worrying about and suspecting them; however, according to Abjapar, the young people who joined the Pakistani Jama'at's tour to Balykchy were impressed by those Tablighis' sincere behaviour and their level of religious knowledge. It was the first time they had listened to inspirational speeches about religion, seen how a man cried, asking God to send faith (*yiman*) to his Kyrgyz Muslim brothers who were drunk, and entered a single mosque in Balykchy which was empty during Friday prayer time. Nothing dangerous was to be found by the host in the 'Pakistani' way of preaching – they did not call for the Caliphate but concentrated on the individual's spiritual experience. The story shows that the younger generation was more open to Tablighis and interested in the way Islam was practiced, while the older generation was not greatly focused on the content of preaching or on the level of their knowledge but rather on the 'foreign' features of the preachers.

The author heard this story from many *dawatchys* in Yssyk Kul, who narrated it to stress the changes that had taken place since the Tablighis' 'positive' influence on Balykchy – comparing how it was once a town with a high criminal rate and a single mosque, which was always locked. The town used to be home to young men addicted to alcohol, but now it was possible to 'imagine' Balykchy with a new outlook through a decreasing crime rate and young men who had stopped drinking and were now involved in *dawat*, by regularly attending the mosque. More than 20 mosques were built in Balykchy, and all of them are now full during Friday prayer. Some Tablighis recounted this story in order to express pride in their town, Balykchy, being the birthplace of the Tablighi Jama'at, at least in the northern part of Kyrgyzstan. The ways of retelling the same story by different *dawatchys* also depicts the complexities of local people's perceptions of the first group of Tablighi practitioners, namely their fear of an 'alien,' 'foreign' Islam that did not fit what was called "traditional Islam" during Soviet times, and also their doubts and questions about the consequences of changes in religious practices introduced by global movements. Abjapar was now a Tablighi veteran, eager to share with us the benefits he had gained from joining the TJ. He had even written poetic verses, in which he calls on people to join this movement. As an active *dawatchy* he performed the 40-day *dawat* tour to Pakistan, together with his wife Aisha, and regularly makes monthly and annual *dawat* tours within the country.

Over 20 years have passed since Pakistani missionaries first introduced Tablighi practices to Kyrgyzstan and made great efforts to overcome the suspicious and hostile attitudes of local Muslims towards early Tablighi Jama'ats. In the 1990s, *dawat* was introduced mostly by foreign Jama'ats from Pakistan, but now the main actors in the Tablighi network in Kyrgyzstan are Kyrgyz Tablighis, who are connected to transnational TJ networks not only through the *markaz* in Raiwind, and Tablighi *madrasas* in Pakistan, but also through the two other major South Asian *markaz* in India and Bangladesh. Nasritdinov and Ismailbekova (2012) reported in their paper that doors to Markaz centres in those countries for Kyrgyz Tablighis were opened at different times, and the many differences in timing and location had separate consequences in their own way. Every new door opened to Kyrgyz followers led to a new phase in the evolution of the TJ movement in Kyrgyzstan, and the characteristics of every phase correlated with the specific character of the TJ movement in those three nations.

Despite the active expansion of the Tablighi Jama'at network and its practices, perceptions and attitudes toward Tablighi missionaries and its discourses remain contested in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bayzbekov Adyl, "Tablighi jama'at – nachalo halifata v kyrgyzstane." <http://www.paruskg.info/2011/08/01/47516>, 30.11.2013.

## Introducing Tablighi Concepts: linguistic and socio-cultural adaptation

Linguistic tools have played a significant role in introducing the main Tablighi concepts to Kyrgyz Muslims. Translation, interpretation, phonetic adaptation and the borrowing of different Arabic and Urdu terms are used by *dawatchys* to express the meaning of faith concepts and core Tablighi practices. Tablighi activists in Kyrgyzstan use metaphorical language with extensive references to Kyrgyz words, proverbs, metaphors or even the rhythmical Kyrgyz style of phrases so that the Tablighi narratives appear close to the style of Kyrgyz oral traditions.

The name of the core Tablighi format of missionary tours or walks, around which the movement is built, is derived from going out or taking a walk – *gasht* (Urdu) or *khuruj* (Arabic). To popularise the format in Kyrgyzstan, local followers make special reference to its philosophical meaning as practicing isolation from worldly matters while being on a pious preaching tour. This connection is expressed by translating the idea of walking or ‘getting away from worldly matters’ – *dünüödön üzülüü* (Kyrg.). In addition, other new metaphors using the word ‘world’ (Kyrg. *dünüö*) have been created to intensify the same meaning. Detachment from worldly matters refers not only to physical isolation but also to the spiritual side of life, increasing one’s spiritual reflections and immersing oneself deeply in a spiritual experience in order to achieve self-reformation. There are other metaphors used by Tablighis to refer to their preference for turning away from worldly matters, namely ‘get away from worldly duties’ (Kyrg. *dünüönün ishinen üzül*) or ‘avoid worldly talks’ (Kyrg. *dünüönün sözün süllöbö*). This advice is directed at preachers who are on missionary tours, or to female Tablighi activists involved in *ta’lim* sessions, to achieve a deep spiritual experience. In this context, worldly life (*düünöö*) refers to a situation where people are very much attached to material values and lead a ‘Westernized’ lifestyle, whereas, conversely, Tablighi missionaries on *khuruj* are supposed to be physically detached from worldly life and have to develop skills to move into spiritual isolation as well.

While on a missionary tour, all rules push *dawatchys* to distance themselves from worldly matters; for example, my respondents reported that a cell phone cannot be used. When doing the local missionary walk *gasht*, it is suggested to walk on the left side of the street and not to look at women. Also, when knocking at the doors of houses, preachers should not look through holes in walls and gates, in order to avoid jealousy and greed by comparing the wealth of people living in the house. In addition, *dawat* members should sit in the mosque and not leave it for unnecessary reasons.

A Tablighi activist, who went on a three-day *dawat* tour for the first time, reflected on his experience:

“One’s thoughts and reflections really turn towards the spiritual side, and one starts to look at one’s life differently. Now I see how much people’s lives are attached to material values which make them blind to the spiritual side in their everyday competition for material wealth.”

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Tablighis strive to avoid these worldly effects, not only during the preaching tour, to fully immerse themselves into spiritual learning, but also in their everyday life. One of the female informants, 35-year-old Bermet (name is changed), who had participated in the family *masturat dawat* tour six times for three days, told the author in an interview how such avoidance helped her to keep her spirit clean in her everyday life. She was working as an electricity engineer at the airport, where she shared an

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<sup>19</sup> Author interview, Bishkek, September 2012.

office with other female colleagues who talked a lot about fashion, furniture, cosmetics and money. In order not to be involved in the conversation she would repeat the *kalima* and do inner *zikr* silently. She knew that such worldly things would lead people to bad actions (jealousy, corruption and consumerism) and completely fill one's thoughts, with no room remaining for moral and spiritual values. The personal stories of Tablighis heard by the author during interviews were deeply reflexive and structured, with clear boundaries along two lines: between the spiritual and the material, the pious and the ignorant, the moral and the immoral, etc. Such reflexive experiences became a primary condition for the Tablighis to reconsider critically their previous lifestyle and to change it according to TJ principles, in what Metcalf termed 'Sunnaisation' (1996a).

In Bermet's case, 'Sunnaisation' is seen as a reflexive reconsideration of her own life and a reconstruction thereof in a new way. She removed modern furniture from her flat – sofas, a table and chairs – and instead added Islamic decorations, putting up a picture of Mecca and verses from the Quran on the wall. Apart from observing her obligatory religious rituals – five daily prayers, fasting, etc. – she would find time to attend the weekly lectures delivered by former mufti Chubak aji, weekly *ta'lims* and *bayans* organised for women by Tablighis in Bishkek, listen to recorded *bayans* at home from CDs and read from the main book of the TJ, the collection of pious traditions (hadith), '*Faza'il-e A'mal*' (The Virtues of Good Deeds)<sup>20</sup> to her 5-year-old son and 12-year-old daughter.

At the same time, modernity is not completely ignored by Tablighis, as some modern achievements, which they might consider 'minor' or 'harmless', are used on certain conditions according to TJ philosophy. Bermet selectively watches some TV shows, but these are limited to news and popular scientific programmes. She understands the importance of modern education and sends her daughter to an expensive private school, a *dawha*, where scientific subjects are taught very well, while the basics of Islam are also covered. She wishes for her daughter to gain both types of knowledge, religious and secular, in order not to turn her into an 'educated Satan' (Kyrg. *bilimdüü shaitan*), a metaphor used by many Tablighis to refer to Muslims who are educated but do not practice Islam. Bermet always tries to balance both sides of her daughter's life, who wears the *hijab*, prays, reads from the *Faza'il-e A'mal* with her mother and attends an Arabic language course.

The concept of the world (*dünüiö*) in Tablighi practices is broad but does not reject worldly life completely; instead, it teaches one to lead a worldly life appropriately. According to *dawatchys*, only by distancing themselves from a worldly life can they see how it is constructed and how it must be reconstructed. Our field data show that distancing oneself from a worldly life amounts to a worldly occupation in itself, as it makes a person learn very practical worldly elements that help them to survive while on a tour. It also involves teaching and even training *dawatchys* through *khuruj* how and what to talk about, how to spend money, how to treat their husband or wife, parents and family members etc., in this life.

Another term used to interpret the meaning of the *khuruj* for Kyrgyz Muslims is *meenet*, meaning hard-working. According to TJ activists, life is given so that one may build faith (*yiman*), which requires hard work (*meenet*, Urdu: *mehnat*) to overcome one's *nafs* and external difficulties with society. One should have strong faith in order to achieve this goal. The hard work involved in *meenet* is understood

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<sup>20</sup> *Faza'il-I A'mal*. The book covers the virtues of prayer (*salat*), remembrance of God (*zikr*), charity, pilgrimage (*hajj*), ritual salutation to the Prophet and the Quran. See, for more information, Reetz (2008, 2009). In Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz and Russian translations are used in reading sessions (*ta'lim*).

by activists as another description of their missionary work, which they view as a global task. The Tablighis would say in their religious *bayan* talk in Kyrgyzstan that “hard working is going on in every part of the world now” (Kyrg. *meenet but dunuiodo jurup jatat*), thereby referring to Tablighi activities as a form of hard work. With reference to Kyrgyzstan, *meenet*, as understood by the Tablighis, relates as much to their hard labour against Western influence as it does against Soviet atheistic influence and to their efforts against difficulties created by local nationalists against Tablighi attempts to ‘purify Islam.’

The Tablighis do not always encourage a translation of their key terms into the Kyrgyz language. In some cases, it is important for Tablighis to keep Urdu or Arabic terms or names. During the missionary *dawat* tour, group members take different positions and fulfil different functions that change every day according to the council’s decision (*mashvara*), except for the leader (*amir*). *Mashvara* council sessions are conducted every day in the morning after the first prayer. Even when a Kyrgyz equivalent is available, *dawatchys* prefer to use Arabic or Urdu words to denote functions performed during the preaching tour. However, often, Urdu/Arabic/Turkic terms for the format are also used to identify the person performing the task: *elon* for an announcer, *ta’lim* for the person who leads the reading of Faza’il-e A’mal, *dalil* for the person usually recruited from the local cohort, who guides the group during the *gasht*, *mutakalim* for a speaker and *kymat* for those who cook and clean for the preachers. Using Arabic and Urdu words among *dawatchys* reflects not only how Urdu became the lingua franca of the movement, but it also shows how this linguistic style is important for enacting their religious identity by belonging to the transnational TJ network and manifesting their connections to the global Muslim community (*ummah*). Despite the suggestion of the highest Tablighi *mashvara* in Kyrgyzstan to introduce and use Kyrgyz terms supported by the *Dawat* department, *dawatchys* in Kyrgyzstan extensively use the Tablighis’ terminology in Arabic and Urdu to express their connections with the global network.

In some cases, Tablighis invent local metaphors, taken from the local language, which convey the meaning of Tablighi concepts and activities. In these cases, it is not the translation but similarly sounding metaphors in the native language which are used. For instance, *ijtima* refers to Tablighi gatherings which discuss Tablighi ‘work’. When the term is used without translation, local Tablighis refer to the Kyrgyz metaphor *ishtin maijy*, where *ish* in Kyrgyz means job and *mai* means buttermilk, thus forming the metaphorical meaning of ‘outcomes of the job’. Such linguistic adaptations fit well with the style of the Tablighi language discussed above.

The linguistic strategies adapted by the Tablighis in Kyrgyzstan creatively reproduce the metaphorical language of the TJ in a mixed idiom of local and foreign terms. For this purpose they combine their native language with Arabic and Urdu. This approach is an important tool for the introduction of Tablighi faith concepts and practices in the local environment. To some extent, I can say that the rich narrative practices of the TJ in Kyrgyzstan change and shape the current ‘faith language’ in Kyrgyz, which has a very distinctive linguistic and performative style.

### **“A woman is like a madrasa in the house”: learning a new role for Tablighi women in Kyrgyzstan**

Female Tablighis play a significant role in the localisation of transnational TJ practices and the networking of its activists. *Tablighi* women wear a *hidjab* and a long dress in dark colours. Some of them cover their face fully, strictly following the *purdah* principle of gender segregation in order to achieve certainty in faith (*yaqin*).

Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan, as with other Central Asian Muslim women, were traditionally involved in home-based religious rituals with cultural connotations through healing and worshipping at shrines, graves (*mazar*) and other holy sites, as well as performing lifecycle rituals. They remained far from preaching Islam. Fathi (1997), who studied religious practices among Central Asian Muslim women, and Tett (1994), who highlighted the importance of home-based ritualistic female practices in preserving Islam in Soviet Central Asia, noted the deep mixture of cultural traditional and Islamic elements in those practices. Nowadays, however, through the involvement in the global TJ network, Muslim women in Kyrgyzstan are learning to perform new roles, namely preaching and teaching Islam at home. The scrupulous reading of Tablighi textbooks makes Tablighi women more oriented towards Islamic orthodoxy in the sense of rules, and it creates discourse about the meaning of what constitutes a 'good Muslim' in the Tablighi way. This in turn distances Tablighi women from shrine worship, healing and lifecycle rituals. Tablighi women are acquiring and presenting those new roles in different ways: by attending weekly *ta'lim* sessions, joining a husband or male relative on a *masturat dawat* preaching tour or *zeyarat* welcome tour, teaching the basics of Islam at home and reading Faza'il-e A'mal every day to children.

The weekly *ta'lim* reading session is an open event that lasts only for an hour and focuses on reading *Faza'il-e A'mal*. It is led by experienced female Tablighis who open and close the *ta'lim* with a prayer (*du'a*). Between six and 32 women participate in the *ta'lim* which the author attended in different neighbourhoods in Bishkek, Karakol and Bashy. In all the houses or flats where the *ta'lim* was conducted, the author saw a *du'a* written in Arabic on a piece of paper and put on the entrance door, along with some Islamic objects arranged in the room: pictures of Mecca, rosaries, Faza'il-e A'mal textbooks on the shelf, CDs of *bayan* recordings, etc. In the town settings, the *ta'lim* reading sessions were usually conducted in the guest rooms of the flats, which had been refurnished according to the Muslim lifestyle, by removing Western-style furniture such as sofas, chairs, tables and sometimes even TV sets – all of which were associated with a Western lifestyle by the *dawatchys*. One could see mattresses laid on the floor and carpets strewn over the room, where the women would sit to listen to female Tablighi elders lead the sessions while sitting in the middle, together with an appointed reader of the Faza'il-e A'mal, to whom other attendees would listen whilst repeating ritualistic phrases. The chapters of the Faza'il-e A'mal for every *ta'lim* session were assigned by the Tablighi Jama'at in the mosque and would usually cover one extract from each of the chapters. After reading, the participants would pray, by performing *du'a*, and then go home.

Once every month, the *ta'lim* session for women would also include a *bayan* talk, given by an experienced male Tablighi activist from the local mosque. For this purpose, the room in the house would be usually divided into two parts. The corner where the *bayan* was delivered would be closed with a curtain. The *bayan* would discuss the importance of the role of female Tablighi *masturat* members in building faith (*yimandy kuruu*) within the community. This is how one preacher began his *bayan* in one of the *ta'lim* sessions:

“It was because of the strong adherence of *masturat* to the faith that it [faith] increased during the time of the Prophet. His main supporters were our Kadicha ene, Fatima ene and Aisha ene. Many *masturats* suffered in their struggle for faith, but they never gave up their faith. Women are like a madrasa in the house – they inspire their husbands to go on *dawat*

preaching tours and they teach Islam to their children and to other fellow Muslim women. They found complete happiness in the faith..."<sup>21</sup>

The talk lasted 30 minutes and was concluded by calling on *masturat* women to keep their faith strong and to carry the message to other fellow Muslims, such as family members, relatives and friends. After the *ta'lim* session was finished, the women were asked to repeat in pairs what they had learned. Then the invitation ritual (*tashkil*) followed, in which the participants were asked to sign up for the next joint preaching tour with their male family members, making one list of those ready to go (*nak*) and another one listing those intending to go (*niyat*). The women wrote down on the lists their contact details and asked the 6-year-old daughter of the host family to hand the list to the speaker of the night's talk, who then delivered it to the Tablighi elders at the mosque.

The *ta'lim* sessions follow a certain protocol. The hosting duty rotates from house to house every month, according to the decision of the Tablighi elders operating from a particular mosque in the town, village or neighbourhood. In the mosque, serving as a local headquarters for the TJ, local elders make a list of families who want to host a *ta'lim* session. The family must fulfil the following hosting requirements. The hosting couples have to be practicing, pious Muslims who observe all obligatory religious rituals. It is even better if the husband is part of the Tablighi network. The house should be clean, with a big room available in which to conduct teaching sessions. Tablighis believe that a house or flat that hosts a *ta'lim* should receive the metaphorical spiritual light (*noor*) as a sign of blessing, to the extent that it will also cover 20 neighbouring houses on all four sides. One of the female respondents eager to host a *ta'lim* session invited her brother-in-law to live in her house for a month so that she could meet one of the hosting requirements, according to which a man should be present in the family while the *ta'lim* session is hosted. Her husband had died several years previously and she had three daughters but no son.

According to Tablighi rules (Metcalf, 2000: 54), women should be accompanied by their husband or a male relative when attending a *ta'lim* session. In Kyrgyzstan, women most usually attend the *ta'lim* sessions alone or with a female friend. Another demand which was expressed by the speaker during the learning session in the Uchkun micro district, in Bishkek on 20 May 2012, was that women should go directly home after the *ta'lim* session, in order to bring back the spiritual benefit to their homes immediately after the *ta'lim*, thus keeping in their heart all inspiration they received from the session. On the way back home they should not be involved in worldly conversations, nor visit their friends or get involved in other worldly activities that might distract a person from their faith. They are not even allowed to discuss the content of the *ta'lim* session. If a woman has questions on the subject, she should send them to the imam of the mosque through her husband, and the husband will then bring back answers from the imam and give them to his wife. Women have no right to ask or to answer questions directly. Another key requirement for women attending the *ta'lim* session is that they should come with the sincere intention of learning about Islam. Women are recommended to leave everything associated with their worldly life at home, including feelings and thoughts about worldly duties. In one of the *ta'lim* sessions, which the author attended in Uchkun, one of Bishkek's micro districts, the speaker of the *bayan* talk advised that it was not good for them to bring small children to the *ta'lim* session, because they may interrupt the women and put them off learning, because their attention would be divided between the two factors. In order to meet this requirement, male Tablighis

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<sup>21</sup> Bishkek.Uchkun microdistrict. May 20<sup>th</sup> 2013.

have to look after the children when women attend *ta'lim* sessions, as this is a way of encouraging their wives to seek religious knowledge.

Besides providing religious interpretations of their distinctive moral values and practices, the Tablighis also respond to local needs. In Kyrgyzstan, many families have been separated because of migration. In the context of the separation of spouses, parents and children, the Tablighi idea of a 'cooperative family' (Metcalf, 1996b) for many such families can be seen as an alternative whereby spouses and children, despite the strains involved in doing so, still live harmoniously. They achieve this by maintaining the common goal of leading a pious life through the involvement of Tablighi practices of reclaiming religion, where the man is a spiritual leader, the woman is his supporter and the children are followers of the parents. On welcoming visits to other travelling Tablighi groups, obligatory religious *bayan* talks can be attended together by all family members, where children act as mediators between men and women, who are not allowed to talk to each other face to face. Men and women are dependent on each other when deciding on Tabligh activities: Tablighi women can also make decisions for men to go on preaching tours in the female *ta'lim* sessions during the call for participation in the next *dawat*, by signing up to confirm the participation or the intention of their husbands or male relatives to join the next missionary tour. As mentioned above, the women leave their husbands' contact details for them to be invited for the next *dawat* tour. In addition, it is argued that a man's *dawat* participation doesn't count too much if his wife is not involved in TJ practices. TJ networking is based predominantly on such cooperative families, in which some traditional gender roles are 'reconfigured,' using Metcalf's term, thereby challenging certain aspects of hierarchical family structures by assigning selective gender duties to the opposite side.

Some personal stories which were recounted by the respondents to this author demonstrate the reflexive and critical views of female Tablighi practitioners regarding traditional cultural customs of Kyrgyz people, which affect relationships not only between spouses but also all family members. The case of Bermet, a key respondent, who found a new meaning in life by joining the TJ, illustrates how she distanced herself from certain cultural customs that affected her position as a daughter-in-law in traditional Kyrgyz society:

"As a daughter-in-law (*kelin*) I experienced all of the unjust attitudes towards daughters-in-law according to traditional Kyrgyz custom. I was a servant to all my in-laws – cleaning, cooking for the whole family. I had to treat my parents-in-law as if they were God, bowing to them every day in the morning; I had no rights in my husband's family. Islam gives me equal rights. Islam teaches that 'a wife is a special gift (*amanat*) that requires a strong responsibility from the receiver to God by man. He has great responsibility for her'. A woman is not the servant of people, but she is a servant of God as well as men. I have to only bow to God".<sup>22</sup>

In this example Bermet reflects on those cultural customs that hierarchise the relationship between daughters-in-law and their husbands' family members. As in the Indian case described by Metcalf (1996b), Bermet 'finds less hierarchical familial structure and means for resisting social hierarchies' in Islam through Tablighi practices.

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<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Tablighi women. Bishkek, May 2012.

During the *ta'lim* sessions, where the author was an observer, the *ta'lim* leader made a comment about the greeting style of local woman, who came to listen to the *bayan* talk and greeted the others by bowing to show respect in a traditional way:

“One should only bow to God; I commit *shirk* [associating God with other people] when I bow down to them. We are just human beings, so we have to greet each other by saying *Salaam Aleikum*.”

In both examples, traditional cultural customs are seen as unjust rules causing inequality, whereas Islamic and Tablighi practices provide more egalitarian alternatives.

Tablighis see themselves as not rejecting but ‘restoring’ the traditional position of Muslim women by recommending that they keep their privacy, remain in the house, rear children according to Islam and treat their husbands as the leader in everyday life as well as in the religious sphere. They aim primarily at inspiring, supporting and encouraging women to gain Islamic knowledge and perform Tablighi duties. *Masturat* TJ followers are allowed to perform public duties during the *ta'lim* session and *dawat* activities, if they strictly follow the principles of gender segregation embodied in *pardah* by covering themselves and being accompanied by a *mahram*, a male relative. Nonetheless, Tablighi women in Kyrgyzstan apply these rules selectively, as they combine their professional work in diverse secular settings with Tablighi duties, by attending the *ta'lim* sessions without a *mahram*. For the same reason, the majority opt for wearing the *hijab* headscarf instead of the full body cover *nikab*.

#### **“‘Tablighi Jama’at’ is an incorrect name”: stressing universal revivalist goals**

All over Central Asia the relationship between the state and the TJ is complex and ambiguous, ranging from manipulation to degrees of freedom and from attempts to control and prohibit the TJ to cooperation. Except for Kyrgyzstan, the TJ is formally banned in all Central Asian Republics and Russia. Only in Kyrgyzstan is there no formal prohibition, but this does not mean that the state trusts the Tablighis or grants them full freedom. The TJ in Kyrgyzstan is partly and indirectly institutionalised through the state organisation in charge of administering religious activities in the country, namely the Spiritual Administration of Muslims (*Muftiyat*), a body inherited from the Soviet era when it represented so-called ‘official’ Islam. This administration has a department in charge of regulating missionary activities for Islam in the country, the *Dawat* department. While the department is supposed to control Tablighi activities, the Tablighis have established a working relationship with the department.

According to Jumabaev, head of the State Commission on Religious Affairs under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic:

“The TJ is now sitting on the shoulders of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims, because the main function of the *Muftiyat* is [de facto] fulfilled by the TJ. The official task of the *Muftiyat* is to lead religious propagation in the country, explaining to society the main principles of Islam and the ways how to practice it; but they are very passive, which is why religious propagation is conducted by Tablighis, according to the Tablighi Jama’at’s principles.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Author’s interview with Jumabaev. Bishkek, September 2012.

The full name of the *Dawat* department in the *Muftiyat* is the “Dawat and Propagation Department” (*Dawat jana ugut nasyiat bolumu*). It is led by Eratov, who graduated from the madrasa in Raiwind (Pakistan), which is associated with the national TJ centre there. He is also the administrator of a madrasa in the Archa beshik settlement, in Bishkek, where students are actively involved in Tablighi preaching. Eratov always stresses the very universalistic functions of his department, stating that *Dawat* is not specific to the TJ and started from Prophet Muhammad. The aim of the department is not to expand the TJ but to contribute to recovering religious practices where the state and many different groups participate. The same statements were made by Tablighi activists in an interview with the author, although the *dawatchys* expressed more universalistic goals shared with other groups in reviving Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

I can observe that to some extent the *Dawat* department has become a mediator between the state and the TJ in Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, the Head of the Department (HoD) reports on TJ activities to the State Commission for Religious Affairs under the President of KR<sup>24</sup>. The department collects statistical data on Tablighi preaching tours within and outside of the country, by conducting meetings with Tablighi activists in the region and preparing reports on those meetings. It issues regulative papers and rules, and it also responds to local complaints concerning some Tablighis’ ‘alien’ practices. In addition, they draft rules for preaching tours etc., in order to adapt and make TJ practices acceptable to Muslims in Kyrgyzstan. In doing so, the HoD plays a key role in the regulation of TJ practices and assists the state in controlling TJ activities. On the other hand, Eratov, as the Head of the *Dawat* Department and as a Tablighi practitioner, is actively involved in fulfilling the TJ mission, translating its main book *Faza’il-e A’mal* into Kyrgyz, establishing the first Tablighi madrasa in Bishkek and participating in Tablighi activities. He actively contributed to adapting Tablighi practices to the local context, issuing rules in the name of the *Muftiyat*, concerning the Tablighi clothing style that suggested shortening Tablighi clothes, and adding Kyrgyz ornaments to make them un-‘alien’ for Kyrgyz people. He also helped to draft rules for Tablighi preaching tours, making it mandatory to have official written authority from the local mosque, the police and the family to go on a *dawat* tour. It was a response to the hostile attitudes of people to *dawatchys*, although the *dawatchys* did not always accept new requirements for conducting *dawat*: “*Dawat* is not selective about participants [*dawat adamdy tandabait*],” said one of the *dawatchys* in an interview. “If a person, who was involved in criminal activities before, expresses his will to join *dawat* preaching, I must allow him to do so. His intention to change his lifestyle is very positive, and why would I create an obstacle for him in his motivation to strengthen his faith?” The Tablighis operate a control commission, called *kavaib jama’at*, which is used to discuss the conditions of every person who plans to do *dawat* preaching with regard to the conditions of his family and his finances. The commission also individually assesses his intentions to study Islam and to strengthen his faith.

Eratov stressed in an interview with the author that the Tablighi *Jama’at* is not the correct term to use when referring to actors who are involved in TJ preaching. He maintained that ordinary people invented this term, but the founder of the TJ, Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, rejected it, saying “I would call its objective ‘recovering faith or strengthening faith’” (*Yimandy jandandyruu, kyimyldatuu*).” According to Reetz (2006, 161), Ilyas preferred to call it a ‘faith movement’ (*tahrik-i iman*). However, Eratov was eager to present the more universalistic features of TJ, and he avoided talking openly about

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<sup>24</sup>The State Commission for Religious Affairs under the President of KR (Russ.: *Gosudarstvennaya Komissia po delam religij pri Prezidente Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki*).

its particularist features. In contrast, Jumabaev pointed out that “The Dawat department of the *Muftiyat* makes a *da’wa* call for Islam in a very specific Tablighi way, by involving Muslims in preaching tours.” For Jumabaev, it is not preferable to have one dominant group in the context of the re-Islamisation process:

“Such official institutions as the Spiritual Board of Muslims, and the Board of Ulama (*Ulamalar Keneshi*) should be free of any group influence. But now the Spiritual Administration of Muslims is under the strong influence of the TJ. Tablighi leaders say that they are not interested in politics – officially at least – but now that they are entering such structures as the *Muftiyat*, the Board of Ulama, they are gaining high positions for their members [and therefore] contradicting their declared non-political orientation”<sup>25</sup>.

Jumabaev, at the end of the interview, stressed that his commission does not work with unregistered religious organisations: “The TJ is not officially registered, that’s why the commission doesn’t collect information about them. Without registration our state can’t prohibit it.” He did not indicate in this interview what strategies other Central Asian countries apply to the TJ. He only mentioned the Agreement of the member countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (Russ.: *Organisatsia Dogovora o Collectivnoi Bezopasnosti*), signed in 2010 by The Security Committees of all member countries, including Kyrgyzstan, where the TJ was included in a list of terrorist organisations.

After Kazakhstan banned the TJ on 29 February 2013, some deputies and local activists raised the question about its presence in Kyrgyzstan, suggesting it should also be prohibited in this country. Tablighi Jama’at activists reacted publicly to this notion by using the media, among other sources, to express their views<sup>26</sup>. Some of them wrote that instead of prohibiting this apolitical movement, it would be beneficial for society to involve Tablighis in solving problems such as ethnic conflicts or political protests that are frequent in Kyrgyzstan. According to dawatchys, as the main idea of the Tablighis is to call on Muslims to distance themselves from politics and to unite by rejecting discrimination based on ethnic belonging, this could be utilised in a positive way by the government.

The presence of Tablighi activists in official structures reflects new discourses on the meaning and role of inherited structures such as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims and The State Commission for Religious Affairs, both of which were established in Soviet times to control Islam and to propagate a so-called ‘traditional Islam’, in order to make Muslims more homogenous. The previous forms and functions of those structures have been challenged by the entrance of activists from global movements into these structures, through which they contribute to a shift from ‘traditional’ to ‘orthodox’ Islam.

## 4. Conclusion

The Tablighi Jama’at in Kyrgyzstan has developed as part of a transnational network resulting from the involvement of Kyrgyzstani Tablighis in global religious movements, a move which is seen by scholars as the contribution of religion to globalisation. Roy, in his book ‘Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah’ (2004), points out that in a modern globalised world, ‘religions live beyond the cultures.’ The ‘Mobility’ paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006) suggests looking at global movements

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<sup>25</sup> Author’s Interview with Jumabaev. Bishkek, September 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Neskol’ko veruiushih musul’man trebuiut ot dvuh chinovnikov “po-mujski” uiti s doljnosti za priravnivanie chlenov soobshestva Tablig k terroristam. On [news.namba.kg/read.php?id=1480301](http://news.namba.kg/read.php?id=1480301), 30.11.2013.

together with 'mobile actors' who cross geographical, socio-cultural, national and ethnic boundaries, bringing with them new objects, sources, ideas and practices and creating networks based on existing social and new symbolic ties. Stressing the connections between mobility, actors and networking structures in an understanding of religious global movements, the 'mobility' paradigm addresses not only what global practices, ideas and structures emerge in different multilocalities, but also how local cultures are influenced by global mobilities. Reetz (2010b, 294), in his paper "Alternate Globalities?' On the Cultures and Formats of Transnational Muslim Networks from South Asia,' argues that religious globalisation has different forms, one of which emerged through the mobility of Muslim preachers, particularly the Tablighi Jama'at, who create 'alternative globalities' in contrast to Western globalisation. The impact of this alternative globalisation on local societies, Reetz (2013, 1) continues, is 'multifaceted and shaped by social, cultural experiences of local society and driven by its needs, rather than by a transnational agenda.'

This paper understood the localisation of the Tablighi Jama'at in Kyrgyzstan as a movement where mobile Tablighi actors 'communicatively construct' (Mielke and Hornidge, 2014, 18 ) a space which stretches existing sociocultural, religious and linguistic boundaries. The presented field data did not confirm the separation of religion from culture, allowing religions to live 'beyond ... culture,' as Roy put it (2004, 269), but pointed to the localisation of the TJ as a global movement which requires reconsideration of both, religion and culture, in a new way. Tablighi activists in Kyrgyzstan are 'not passive receivers of alternative globalization' but active agents who creatively transform TJ principles and practices in response to religious and socio-cultural and political-economic challenges in society: "Far from being objects or victims of globalization, they form 'alternate globalities' in their own right who self-consciously shape their own modernity"(Reetz 2013, 14). Tablighi actors in Kyrgyzstan introduced the movement's global faith principles, concepts and structures to the local context creatively adapting and reinterpreting them through local socio-historical, cultural and linguistic sources.

The localisation of the Tablighi Jama'at also draws attention to the TJ's 'purist' ideas, where new images and practices pursued by its followers challenge local cultures and societies, thus stirring debates among different groups in which religious actors, the state and common people are involved. These debates show how, under the influence of a transnational religious movement, local cultures are reconsidered in accordance with universalistic Islamic values. Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, rethinking both local cultural traditions and Islamic practices under the influence of Tablighis, have at their disposal many ways to shift from 'traditional' to 'orthodox' Islam. In this context, some groups, for instance female Muslims, learn new roles relating to preaching and teaching Islam.

As the collected field data demonstrate, the TJ as an emergent global movement does not produce a shift from traditional schools of Islam, such as Hanafi Islam, towards 'fundamentalist' Islam or Salafism. Instead, the Tablighi Jama'at contributes to the personalisation and individualisation of Islamic practices amongst Muslims, which in turn leads to a diversification of Islamic practices, not only in society (Akiner, 2003) but also within the family (Borbieva, 2009).

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## Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to Northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **“Conflict”** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group **“Migration”** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the **“Development”**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network aims to mediate between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at

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