

Transnational Religious Networks in Central Asia: Structure, Travel, and Culture of Kyrgyz Tablighi Jama'at

Aksana Ismailbekova and Emil Nasritdinov

Abstract

This paper explores the transnational character of religious networks in Central Asia based on the example of *tablighi jama'at*, a movement for the revival of Islam that emerged in the early 20th century in India and after the break-up of the Soviet Union became very popular in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The paper looks at the transnational elements of Kyrgyz *tablighi jama'at*'s social organization, cross-border travel, and culture. Using ethnographic materials, the authors portray Kyrgyz *tablighi* travelers not as passive recipients of outside influence, but as committed transnational actors actively engaged in cross-border exchange of religious ideas and networking practices.

Keywords: transnational religious networks, physical mobility, transnational knowledge production, ethnography, *tablighi jama'at*, Kyrgyzstan

1. Introduction

In August 2011, Ismailbekova (one of the authors) was observing activities in a mosque in Kara-Suu, a town in the Southern Kyrgyzstan, where a group of Muslims was discussing an opening ceremony for the new mosque and an upcoming holy night of *Laylat al-Qadr*¹: One by one, people arrived at the mosque. The meeting was initiated by Murat-ake,² imam of the mosque, scholar, and teacher, who had studied for nine years in Lahore, Pakistan. Young men were bringing in new carpets, Pakistani clothes, and books for the new mosque from two big cars. Murat-ake had many followers and many of these young men were greeting each other. Murat-ake shared that he had returned to his birthplace to continue spreading the message of Islam and to help his community children to learn Arabic language. Relatively young (he was born in 1972), he had a long beard, which is not common at this age, and was wearing traditional Pakistani style dress with a turban on his head. Many practicing Muslims in Kara-Suu bazaar had their specific niche, said Murat-ake, selling Islamic books, CDs, DVDs, *jilbabs*, *hijabs*, and cosmetics. Murat-ake himself transported almost two tons of books from Pakistan after completing his studies two years ago, but he did not want to sell the books. Instead he planned to use them for educational purposes and send them to various mosques around Kara-Suu. He also said that in January 2012 many of his friends from Kyrgyzstan, including himself, were planning to go to Bangladesh for the gathering (*ijtimai*) of the *tablighi jama'at*, i.e., which is a movement for the revival of Islam, which originated in India in the early 20th century and by now has become

1 Because not all readers might be familiar with specific terms of *tablighi* activities, which come from Urdu and Arabic, we give additional information to central terms (in italic) in the glossary at the end of the paper.

2 Ake is a suffix added to the name to identify someone older.

global in its scale and geographic reach and transnational in the number of members regularly traveling across national borders.

This episode gives a brief glance at the member activities of the transnational religious community of *tablighi jama'at* in Central Asia and it invites a discussion of how the members are connected to *tablighi* centers in the Indian Subcontinent. This article explores the transnational nature of the Central Asian *tablighi* practice manifested in the regular travels of its members from Central to South Asia and to the territories of former Soviet Union. Our analysis sheds light on the complexity of *tablighi jama'at* patterns within their communities as well as in transnational religious networks. We focus on what makes *tablighi jama'at* a transnational religious community. First, we introduce the theoretical framework and provide background information on the history of Islam in Central Asia; then, we provide a short overview of recent patterns of international religious influences in Central Asia, explaining why *tablighi jama'at* can be considered transnational. The ethnographic central part of this article unpacks the transnational phenomenon of *tablighi* religious networks by looking at three main dimensions of networking practices: structure, travel, and culture.

2. Islam in Central Asia

Almost 70 years the Soviet rule controlled the religious affairs in the countries of the USSR, including Central Asian Republics. The main purpose was to create socialist citizens and isolate religion from the public sphere. During the Soviet era, the official Islamic institutions were destroyed, religious networks weakened, and the flows of religious knowledge transmission from neighboring regions totally cut (Kramer, 2007). Religious networks and rituals were replaced by ethnic traditions. In spite of all these efforts, religion as a whole remained important, and so did Islam, and many people continued to identify themselves as committed Muslims. However, religion was preserved more like a part of cultural heritage than everyday practice (Shahrani, 1984). Despite the socialist propaganda trying to diminish religiosity among people, religious sentiment and sources of religious knowledge did not completely disappear rather they could survive (Saroyan, 1997). Official attacks on Islam weakened its institutional infrastructure, but a number of underground movements survived, and citizens maintained a collective sense of Islamic identity and appreciation for Islamic core doctrines (Privratsky, 2001; Shahrani, 1991). The religion in Soviet times was domesticated, limited to the private life (Dragazde, 1993).

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to greater religious freedom. Many scholars call this process re-Islamization. Islam was valued as a source of nation building or feared as a potentially destabilizing force by the secular authorities (Rasanayagam, 2011). Thus “the changing intersections between religion and politics in Muslim Central Asia is the result of succeeding regimes meshed and clashed with Islam in their efforts to assert worldly power. The resulting attempts to co-opt, channel and control religious expression provide insights into the nature of secular power” (Hann/Pelkmans, 2009: 1536). Religious actors started to protest against autocratic and corrupt governments, reflecting the growing role played by religion in society (Rotar, 2004b).

3. Transnational Religious Networks in Central Asia: Above Unidirectionality

Today, international Islamic organizations, ideologies, and practices grounded in various Islamic traditions become increasingly visible and powerful and they influence the Muslim population across the globe. International Islam is not only about religion, it can also represent broader global debates about political and socioeconomic problems (Mandaville, 2009). Since the opening of its borders, Central Asia, once cut off from cultures and religious influences outside of the USSR, is opening its doors to various religious Islamic groups from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, India, and Iran (Balci, 2012), but also to a large number of new Evangelical Christian organizations (Borbieva, 2007, 2009; Pelkmans, 2006). The inflow of these international Islamic and Christian discourses, people, and ideas affects the ways in which people in Kyrgyzstan think about their own identities and how they question their religious authorities (Borbieva, 2009). Pelkmans (2006) argues that the idea of 'religious market' emerged, interests in traditional religions remained shaky, and new religious movements gained importance. Traditionally there were two dominant religions on the territory of Central Asia: Islam and Orthodox Christianity. In the meantime there is a variety of other religious orientations. Their current activities and missionary works in the region contribute to religious diversity and give rise to various kinds of debates (Borbieva, 2009; McBrien, 2006).

Today the primary channels for the cross-border transmission of new Islamic ideas include scholarly exchange and study abroad programs, labor migration, new media, pilgrimage, education programs, and new Islamic institutions such as Islamic religious schools (*madrasas*) and Islamic universities (Mandaville, 2009). Information comes in the form of books translated from Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, leaflets, videos, and websites (Borbieva, 2009; Reetz, 2007; Stephan, 2006). The ideas, actors, and institutions that cross Central Asian borders attract support in many localities, but cause suspicious attitudes from the government. Following are some examples of these new international Islamic influences.

On the mobility of ideas, discourses, and actors, McBrien (2006) examines the contemporary discourse on Islamic extremism in southern Kyrgyzstan. In her opinion, the existence of religious pluralism has promoted religious debate. "The expansion of multiple interpretations of Islam and the debate around the religious extremism has affected social life more significantly. As a result, the local people experience new religious multiplicities and utilize the rhetoric of religious extremism to deal with the changing environment" (McBrien, 2006: 48). Furthermore, Balci (2003) describes how since the beginning of the 1990s, Central Asia has been the area where the *Fethullah Gülen movement* has been actively focusing its strategy of development as a transnational network. This was done through missionary schools, media, and economic life. Its alleged main purpose was to spread Turkism and help Central Asians to rediscover Islam. Facing the deep rooted distrust of Islam by the local powers, the movement had to act under the better accepted cover of nationalism, and was obliged to disguise its identity (Balci, 2008).

In addition, Stephan (2006) portrays how with their independence, *tajiks* have had opportunities to visit Islamic countries for the purpose of study. She describes the experiences of the Islamic students who return from the Middle East to their birthplace, Tajikistan. At home, many of them face the government's ambivalent and suspicious attitudes. At the same time, "the students experience positive moments when people on the street and in the mosque ask them for the religious advice and thank them for broadening the religious scope" (Stephan, 2006: 156). Beyond that, Balci (2005) describes the role of Saudi Uzbeks

and *uyghurs* and of the *hajj* pilgrimage in the development of Islamism in Central Asia. His multisided fieldwork, both in Central Asia as well as in the cities of Mecca and Medina, allowed him to discover the existence of contacts between the Saudi *wahhabism* and Islamic movements in Central Asia. Reetz (1999b) also examined the Islamic activism in Central Asia and the Pakistan factor. He focuses on the three major movements functioning in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and China, namely *taliban*, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, and the *uyghur* opposition. Reetz argues that even though these three groups have common conditions, concepts, and roots, and their activities and operation have been facilitated or supported by the forces in Pakistan (many young members of the three movements are enrolled as students in Islamic religious schools in Pakistan for training in formal Islamic religious studies), nevertheless they still differ on many other issues. This paper propose to study the transnational nature of another major religious influence in such Central Asian countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the *tablighi jama'at*. In the next section we provide a brief overview of its history and transnational influence.

4. The *Tablighi Jama'at* and Its Activities Worldwide

Tablighi jama'at is a widely spread Islamic movement in the contemporary Muslim world. The term *jama'at* means group, therefore the group of *tablighi*. It originated in 1926 in the area of Mewat near Delhi, India, under the guidance of the Islamic scholar Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944). Within last century, *tablighi jama'at* became global in its scale and transnational in its nature. Now *tablighi jama'at* has estimated 12-15 million followers throughout the Muslim world and Western countries. The global headquarters are located in Delhi, in the area called Nizamuddin (Reetz, 2009a). Since the 1980s, its influence has grown significantly, and has extended beyond its original constituency of South Asian immigrants. In many countries in West Africa, North Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and parts of Europe, the local supporters become very famous and well respected (Reetz, 2009b). The success of the *tablighi jama'at* depends on the missionary work of its members and followers, and the way how they spread its message as well as their face to face contacts with the individual Muslims in their respected regions. Usually, *jama'at* members invite people to join their ranks by going door to door (Reetz, 2008). Their program includes inviting Muslims to join the communal learning and worshiping. Moreover, when *jama'at* members properly conduct Islamic work and missionary activities, they usually leave their families, jobs, and home towns for a temporary period of time (Reetz, 2009b).

Khalid Masud (2000) contributes to the study of the *tablighi* phenomenon as a transnational movement. The *tablighi* movement has no formal structure or organization; nevertheless, it is considered the largest Muslim missionary group in the world, with followers in more than eighty countries. With millions of participants, its annual conference has become the second largest Muslim congregation after the *hajj*. Annual *tablighi* congregations in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh attract large crowds of Muslims from around the world. In many Muslim countries, the *tablighi* movement attracts everyone from hawkers to medical students and businessmen to weekend gatherings held in mosques and Islamic centers. South Asians have played an important role in transforming it into a transnational movement, because they themselves travel on their spiritual journeys all across the world and host large numbers of *tablighi* participants from distant corners of the world (Khalid Masud, 2000).

There have not been many written accounts on the *tablighi* in Central Asia, even though the fact that the movement is one of the largest in Central Asia should warrant it more attention (Balci, 2012). In his own work, Balci (2012) focused on the rise of the *tablighi jama'at* in Kyrgyzstan as the sign of the revival of Islamic ties between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. Talking about the nature of the *tablighi jama'at* in Central Asia, Balci (2012: 74) argues that:

"[I]t does not differ from the one the organization has been disseminating around the world for decades. [...] Although, it never expresses political ideas or shows any opposition to the very secular regimes, the latter are still extremely suspicious of the potential political ambitions of the *tablighis*. Authorities are less concerned by their religious and political ideology than by their alien look and style, as they dress like Pakistani Muslims, who are perceived by local regimes, like the Taliban and Afghans in general, as radical and potentially dangerous opposition forces."

This can be seen as a misconception, because in reality the strictly apolitical nature of *tablighi jama'at* has had a strong pacifying effect on the overall religious situation in the region. Because of its growing influence in such countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the movement does more for the stability in the region than security forces in these countries: it "steals" potential participants from more radically and politically oriented Islamic influences; and its ideology, which disapproves of any kind of political engagement, creates powerful folk narratives reducing the popularity of Islamic political radicalism (Nasritdinov, 2010). The remainder of this paper will explore the transnational human "infrastructure" established and used by the *tablighi* in the Central Asian region. We would like to suggest that even such a small, and by many standards, remote country like Kyrgyzstan, can have a considerable impact on the formation of transnational religious networks if members of the religious community in this country are actively engaged in the cross-border traveling.

5. Debate and Methodology

Such key authors on transnationalism as Portes, Glick Schiller, and Levitt (2008: 276), in defining a transnational lifestyle, stress the importance of active exchange, regular contact, "new modes of transacting, and the multiplication of activities that require cross-border travel and contacts on a sustained basis." Regular travel across national borders is a necessary component of transnational practices: "If individuals engage in social relations and practices that cross borders as a regular feature of everyday life, then they exhibit a transnational way of being" (Levitt/Schiller, 2008: 287). However, the above descriptions of transnational religious influences in Central Asia mostly portray unidirectional flows of religious ideas, from outside into Central Asia. There is no movement of people and ideas in the opposite direction. Examples of *tajik* students studying in the Middle East described by Stephan (2006) are relatively rare and there is no regular movement of lay religious participants, while pilgrimages to Mecca described by Balci (2005) are only once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Thus, even the transnational character of these religious influences can be challenged.

This paper proposes that we can learn much more about the transnational religious networks in Central Asia by studying practices of *tablighi jama'at* members, as an example of transnational religious community that incorporates a much stronger (in comparison to some other influences mentioned above) cross-border exchange. We propose that it is transnational because it involves active, regular, and significant in size movement of its

participants across borders in various directions: to Central Asia, to the Indian subcontinent, and to the countries of former Soviet Union and East Asia. The movement of people is accompanied by the creation and development of transnational social networks and transnational religious narratives. Accordingly, studying this movement can help us differentiate between various new religious influences in Central Asia and provide very important theoretical insights for understanding the nature of transnational religious systems. That is why in this article we concentrate on studying the principles of organization, directions of traveling, and formation of transnational culture of the Central Asian *tablighi jama'at*. Using ethnographic evidence, we show how this movement has found a very fruitful soil in Kyrgyzstan, where it was adopted under a different name – *davat*.

Clarification must be given in advance to the use of two terms, *tablighi* and *davatchi*. Both of them carry the same meaning, but in the Indian subcontinent, in many places around the world, and elsewhere in literature the word *tablighi* is used to identify the participants of *tablighi jama'at*, while in Kyrgyzstan the word *davat* became popular to identify the same activity and the term *davatchi* is now used to identify a participant. For these reasons, in this paper the word *tablighi* is used to describe the practice in its international context and the word *davatchi* is used to describe participants from the Central Asian region, particularly Kyrgyzstan.

Few words must also be said about the methodology of this research. Ismailbekova (one of the authors) started studying *tablighi jama'at* as a part of her long-term research. In the summer of 2011 she conducted her field research among *tablighi* members in Southern Kyrgyzstan, where she interviewed 20 participants in the movement. She also used participant observation (Bernard, 2006) and focus group methods of data collection. Moreover, she travelled with one group to different sites of the southern region of Kyrgyzstan, and is currently planning a trip to Pakistan. Nasritdinov (the other author) has been involved with the movement as a participant and as a researcher since 2002. He frequently participated in three-day *tablighi* travels in Australia and Kyrgyzstan and in 2010 he spent 40 days on a *tablighi* travel to India, where he attended the annual gathering in Bhopal. His method of participant observation made it possible to get deeper insights into the practice, collect valuable stories and narratives, and position some major discourses. From his 40-day journey he brought back almost 300 pages of notes, where he recorded talks and stories he heard during the trip and his own experiences, feelings and analytical thoughts. These notes were later analyzed with a purpose of revealing broader themes uniting them (Nasritdinov, 2012). Some of that material made its way into the travel section of this paper. However, the main analysis was drawn from longitudinal observations of *tablighi* practice, particularly in Kyrgyzstan in the last five years.

6. The *Tablighi Jama'at* and Its Transnational Dimensions in Kyrgyzstan

6.1 Transnational Social Structure

Tablighi jama'at in Kyrgyzstan is organized both vertically and horizontally is connected to the transnational *tablighi* movement in the same ways. On the one hand, there are vertical connections leading to the center of *tablighi* in Nizamuddin, Delhi, expressed in the hierarchical mode of passing decisions down the vertical chain. On the other hand, there is a strong degree of flexibility and horizontal exchange on various levels of social interaction

within the *tablighi* communities and with the Muslims outside of it. The *tablighi* claim that there is no special organization and administration involved, however, a closer look at their functioning reveals that this is far from true. Their international administrations have become very strong and robust (Reetz, 2008).

Vertical Structure

Every year, gatherings of *tablighis* from all over the world take place in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These bring together groups up to three million people. World gatherings are attended by representatives of almost all countries in the world where *tablighi* is active. Kyrgyz *davatchis* also travel to these countries and attend such gatherings. During these gatherings all international *jama'ats* have consultations with the leaders and veterans of the *tablighi* from the Indian subcontinent, including the elders from Nizamudin, Delhi, which is considered as the global center of *tablighi*. Kyrgyz *jama'ats* report the successes and difficulties of their practice in Kyrgyzstan: the range of issues reported can include the number of 3-day, 40-day and 4-month *jama'ats*, which travelled inside Kyrgyzstan and abroad, the quality of everyday local efforts, the main patterns and trends in comparison to previous years, etc. They also receive instructions and recommendations from the veterans of the movement, which are then brought back to Kyrgyzstan. Accounts of traveling upon return are often made in the form of proper sermon, while more specific information is reported to the local national and city-level councils.

In Kyrgyzstan, all major country-wide decisions for *davatchis* from its different regions are made by the national councils. These decisions are passed down to the regional, city, and local levels. On the city and regional levels, these councils are held once a week and have more focus on organizational matters. In the evening of the same day the reports from the regional and city councils are made in the local councils at the level of individual mosques. The chain depicted here shows the very organized nature of *tablighi* and its vertical structure beginning in the global centers of *tablighi* movement on the Indian subcontinent and going all the way to the level of local mosques in remote parts of Kyrgyzstan. The verticality of this connection is also expressed in the slow shift from more conceptual matters discussed on the global scale towards more organizational matters at the local levels, which help to materialize the transnational ideas on the ground. This vertical organization allows for a well-coordinated and controlled activity of the *tablighi jama'at*, which reduces the risk of deviation from its mainstream apolitical approach and does not allow members of other, more politically oriented groups, to enter the movement and have influence on its members.

However, there is also a strong movement of people and ideas in the other direction, from local mosques in Kyrgyzstan to India. First of all, the number of *tablighi* from India coming to Kyrgyzstan is relatively insignificant: only two to three *jama'ats* come from the subcontinent every year, while the number of Kyrgyz *davatchis* traveling to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh can be 10 to 20 times higher. Kyrgyz travelers are not simply passive learners, listeners, and observers: during their trips they also give talks in the mosques and speak to local population during their rounds in the streets and inside the mosques. In their talks they share their Central Asian experiences and often contextualize *tablighi* narratives and discourses in their regional particularities. Usually, talks are made in Russian, Kyrgyz, or Kazakh and then translated into Urdu or Bengali. Sometimes, double translation is made: first into English, and then into Urdu or Bengali.

We can see that this vertical system exchanges information in both ways and that it is not rigid; it allows flexibility and freedom for local decision-making that helps to adjust

tablighi ideas to the peculiarities of each local context. This happens mostly due to the significant horizontal links structuring *tablighi* communities at various levels of their functionality.

Horizontal Linkages

The horizontality of the *tablighi* social organization is manifested in several ways. First of all it can be found in the democratic nature of decision making. At all levels (global, country, city, regional, local) decisions are made by one person, the leader of each council (*amir*), in consultation with everybody else in the group. There is a certain ethic of discussion, whereby one is encouraged to give his/her opinion but not to defend it or argue strongly for it. Councils bring together representatives from different localities depending on their levels: the global councils bring together people from different corners of the world, country councils bring together people from distant parts of the country, and so on. As a result, there is a regular and significant horizontal interaction within the levels, and also across the levels because of the vertical organization. Finally, there is a lot of horizontal interaction of *tablighis* with members of their local communities and the communities they visit during their regular travels. *Tablighis* are encouraged to be active members of their own mosques and to establish good and friendly relations with the visitors to the mosque and with other local residents. In their weekly or daily rounds in their own locality they visit local residents and invite them to the mosque. When they travel to other localities they continue the same practice of visitations and if they travel to other countries they also actively interact with the locals in using the help of interpreters or relying on common *tablighi* terminology.

The intensity and regularity of these horizontal interactions contribute to the strengthening and densification of *tablighi* networks. This structural analysis shows how *tablighi* ideas emerging in the Indian subcontinent are appropriated by transnational travelers and then brought and widely distributed within national borders, how they are passed down to the local levels and spread quickly via these horizontal channels of interaction. The role of transnational, and also regional and local travel, is therefore crucial for the success of the *tablighi* effort. This is described in the next section.

6.2 Transnational Travel

Regular spiritual travel is the main component of *tablighi* practice. It is recommended to travel for lengths of time of at least 3 days every month, 40 days a year, and 4 months at least once in a lifetime. During such travels, *tablighi* stay in different mosques, study and socialize within the *jama'at* and with local residents. Travel has several important meanings for *tablighis* (Nasritdinov, 2012): (1) they temporarily cut the links with daily worldly matters and spend more time in the religious environment; (2) they obtain new knowledge from daily study circles (*taalims*); (3) they get the chance to build new perspectives on worldly matters; (4) they can go through significant personal transformations (Nasritdinov, 2012). Travel also expands social networks, since it is an opportunity to spend more time alone, but at the same time a chance to meet a large number of new people. There are three ways of socializing during the *tablighi* journey: meeting people from the locality where people travel to, spending time with *tablighi* within the traveling group, and meeting *tablighi* from other regions during different kinds of gatherings. When these travels cross borders, such socializations and social networks become transnational.

Transnational travels for Kyrgyz *davatchis* can be of two kinds. The first are to the countries of the Indian subcontinent; these are open to people with less experience in *tablighi* practice and have more of a learning character. The second are to the countries of former Soviet Union and to Turkey, South Korea, and Mongolia; these trips are taken by more experienced *davatchis*. In order to go to the Indian subcontinent, *davatchis* in Kyrgyzstan have to pass through three councils: first in their own mosque, then regional, and finally Bishkek city council. Usually, it is expected that a *davatchi* would spend at least one 40-day trip in Kyrgyzstan, so that the person is familiar with the peculiarities of the longer journeys and prepared to various difficulties associated with it. The three main destinations are Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The next three sections will examine the history of international travel to the subcontinent for *davatchis* from Kyrgyzstan and connect it with their interpretations of its dynamics.

Pakistan: Motivation and Sacrifices

In the late 1990s when *tablighi* practice was just introduced in Central Asia, the majority of such journeys were made to Pakistan. It was the closest place and some *davatchis* traveled there by cars. This early period in the history of *davat* in Kyrgyzstan is often portrayed by those who were a part of the effort as a period of major sacrifices made by first *davatchis*. This was the time when people were not familiar with and were often hostile towards *davatchis*, including imams of some mosques. There were many stories of sacrifice describing how people had to sleep in the open on the snow because they were kicked out of the mosque or how *jama'at* had to eat grass because they ran out of food and money. There is a strong heroic motif in such stories: one *davatchi* saved a little boy who fell into a tunnel with water by jumping after him and risking his own life. Some stories are given with a sense of humor. One *davatchi* described how he was taken out from his house by other *davatchis* on the mattress while he was sleeping, to start the 40-day trip.

In this period of difficulties and sacrifices, learning from the Pakistani experience was important. In Pakistan the majority of population is Muslim, but there are many Islamic movements and more secular versions of Islam. For these reasons Pakistani motivational talk (*targib*) is not soft; it often builds on the stories of sacrifices of the Prophet (SAW) and his companions (*sahabahs*), their suffering at the hands of unbelievers, and difficulties they experienced in their journeys. Stories of sacrifices of women and children are often used, too. This kind of motivational talk was necessary for Kyrgyz *davatchis* in the early period of introducing *tablighi* practice in Kyrgyzstan, because at that time very few people knew about it and there was a lot misunderstanding and even resistance to it. Many Kyrgyz *davatchis* went to study in Pakistani Islamic religious schools for as long as nine years to complete the full Islamic scholar course and then spend one full year in the *tablighi* journey. Many of these scholars today are the leaders of *tablighi* practice in Kyrgyzstan. The knowledge that they have helps them to legitimize the *tablighi* practice in the region and ground its ideas in the broader framework of Islamic theology.

As years went by, *davat* became more and more popular, especially in the Northern regions of Kyrgyzstan and in the capital Bishkek. It became institutionalized in some ways; more and more people learned what *davat* is about and there were fewer and fewer mosques that would not accept *davatchis*. The early 2000s were the years of great motivation when *davat* reached its peak point in regards to its popularity and number of people involved. As the movement became massive, it started generating some resistance from the more secularly oriented population and it started attracting the attention of the governmental security

services. This period coincided with the 9/11 attacks in New York, and Pakistan stopped issuing visas to Central Asians. Kyrgyz *davatchis* turned their eyes towards India.

India: Wisdom and Hospitality

The uniqueness of Indian context for *tablighi jama'at* lies in the minority status of Muslim population and the history of conflict with the Hindu majority. In India, *tablighi* often have to live in a hostile environment and that significantly affects the choice of strategies and methods they use in their everyday activities. One could summarize them as keeping a low profile, using a lot of wisdom, and being very gentle in their talks. The other quality that Indian *tablighis* are famous for is their legendary hospitality. There are many stories that describe how local *tablighi* bring their last food to share with the visiting *jama'ats* and go into debt not to miss the opportunity to prepare food for visitors. During Nasritdinov's (one of the authors) 40-day journey to India, his *jama'at* hardly had a chance to prepare food; in all mosques the local residents prepared breakfasts, lunches, and dinners and brought desserts and drinks in between. During meal-taking locals always stand behind, serving famous Indian milk tea or water. They take notice of what some visitors like and bring more of that kind of food for them. One can see elderly Indian men in their 70s serving tea to the 20-year old travelers, something one can never see in Central Asia. Seeing this extremely gentle, humble, and hospitable conduct of behavior is a learning experience for the Kyrgyz *davatchis* who journey to India. When they come back home to Kyrgyzstan, they try to introduce similar attitudes in their own practices when *jama'ats* from other localities visit their mosques and they also tell stories about such hospitality to other *davatchis*. In this way the local qualities of Indian *tablighis* hospitality become transnational.

Spending time in a foreign country is a great transformational experience for Kyrgyz *davatchis*. Nasritdinov (2012) describes how longer *tablighi* travels affect traveler's personality: travelers have more time alone and away from worldly matters to rethink their values and priorities, establish a more distant and more abstract vision of their life, learn to live without such "products of civilization" as daily showers, TVs, or cell phones, and become physically fitter because of living in more extreme conditions, sleeping on the floor and walking long distances. These kinds of personal transformation are common for all longer *tablighi* trips, including those within the country. However, transnational experiences have more impact because travelers find themselves in a culture that is very different from their own and are exposed to larger amounts of new information. Particularly, there is a lot of interaction in the Nizamudin center in Delhi. This is the place where *jama'ats* from all over the world come when they first land in India. The *jama'ats* spend their first few days in a simple four-story building before they are sent to other places in India. The building is divided into two parts: one for local Indian *jama'ats* and one for international *jama'ats*. In the international half, one can see a great ethnic and national diversity: Malay, Turkish, and Arab *jama'ats* sleep on the same floor and eat together with Americans, Europeans, Australians, Russians, and Central Asians. Eating together contributes to the sense of unity and creates the opportunity for *tablighi* from different corners of the world feel the global and transformative nature of Islam and reality of such concept as the global Muslim community. The most frequently asked question when people sit across each other at the table cloth is: "Brother, where are you from?"

The program inside the center is quite intensive. Almost after every prayer, there is a talk by one of the visiting or Nizamuddin elders. These are usually given in Urdu and then translated into other languages. Microphones and ear-phones are installed in corners, where an interpreter would sit and listen and translate the talk for the foreign *jama'ats*. As a result,

one can see how groups of *tablighi* speaking the same language are gathering together around their interpreters in different places in the center. During the talks, *davatchis* listen to theoretical conceptualizations, inspirational stories, and specific instructions on how to combine religious life with everyday work. They are advised to listen carefully, take notes, and share all that they hear when they go back home.

One of the biggest *jama'ats* in the center is from the former Soviet Union. The people in this group are called "Russian" *jama'ats* because they can speak Russian, and include mostly *davatchis* from Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, and some smaller groups from other parts of the former Soviet Union. Frequently, this *jama'at* splits into two parts: one speaking Russian and one speaking Kyrgyz or Kazakh, which are very similar. Traditionally, Kyrgyz *jama'at* was the biggest "Russian" *jama'at* in India. But in the last few years the situation has changed. In the late 2000s, the ambassador from the Indian Embassy in Almaty, Kazakhstan, who was said to be particularly strict in issuing visas, was transferred to the Indian Embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. His place was taken by another ambassador and suddenly it became very easy for Kazakh and very difficult for Kyrgyz *davatchis* to obtain visas to India. Now the biggest group is *davatchis* from Kazakhstan. Kyrgyz *davatchis*, for whom it became difficult to come to India, turned their interest into yet another direction, this time to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh: Stability and Quality

Bangladesh is another major center for *tablighi jama'at* that hosts transnational visitors from all over the world. The country has a predominantly Muslim population with a large number of *tablighi* participants, and a government, that is tolerant of both local and foreign *tablighi*. The biggest gatherings in the world bringing together 2-3 million people and take place in Dhaka. The large size of local population involved in the *tablighi* practice has affected the ways *tablighi* is performed in Bangladesh: there is no need for extra emphasis on sacrifices to motivate less active Muslim population, like it is in Pakistan, or on extra care and softness, as it is in India. Instead, the focus is on continuity and stability of the effort since it has been established and the critical mass reached.

Kyrgyzstan has not reached such large involvement of *tablighi jama'at* like Bangladesh, but there are noticeable trends of stability of the movement. The period of high motivation and massive engagement has passed. At the same time, the group of *davatchis* with experience, including Indian experience, has grown and there is now more emphasis on regularity, stability, and quality of the effort. *Davat* has been more or less recognized by the government and institutionalized via the central council of Islamic scholars (*muftiyat*). The Kyrgyz narrative, which we were following in this section, continued making sense of these changes; it can be generalized in the following statement of one *tablighi*: "Allah has somewhat closed the doors to India and opened doors to Bangladesh, so that Kyrgyz *davatchis* could learn how to keep the effort steady and improve its quality."

Former Soviet Union and Other Countries: More Sacrifices

The descriptions of travels to the three countries of the Indian subcontinent show that their main purpose is to obtain different kinds of knowledge and *tablighi* experience. Once *davatchis* obtain the transnational experience and ground it in several long travels inside Kyrgyzstan, they can get permission to travel to some countries of the former Soviet Union, which include Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan, and to Mongolia, South Ko-

rea, and Turkey. This is the list of countries where Kyrgyz *davatchis* have a permission from the center in Nizamuddin, Delhi to go and where *tablighi* effort is mostly illegal and people can be very hostile; that is why only experienced *davatchis* can join such *jama'ats*. Because of the complexity of local situations, these trips are performed in a different way. In the Indian subcontinent *tabligh* is performed according to the Madinah rules (*tartip*), i.e. openly, similar to the ways Islam was practiced in Madinah in the times of the Prophet (SAW). The practice of *tablighi* in the countries where it is not welcomed is called Mekkah *tartip*, analogous with how Islam was practiced in Mekkah when it was hostile to Muslims. *Jama'ats* do not stay in the mosques and do not make open public talks. Instead, they stay in the houses of local *davatchis* and give talks and socialize mostly with local residents who are invited to these houses. They go to the mosque only for prayers. The links and contacts *davatchis* established when they traveled to the Indian subcontinent become very useful. Such trips are quite risky and often said to require significant sacrifices, as *jama'ats* had been arrested, beaten, and frequently deported.

During such trips transnational linkages of various strength and duration are established between traveling *jama'ats* and local hosting *jama'ats*. In the *tablighi* narratives, analogies are often made between Muslims who migrated from Mekkah to Madinah during *hijra* (*muhajirin*) and – local residents of Madinah (*ansari*) who supported the migrants from Mekkah and shared with them everything that they had. It is frequently mentioned that the success of Islam came only when migrants and locals joined their efforts. In a similar way, Kyrgyz *davatchis* are portrayed as migrants who left their homelands for spiritual purposes while communities in the countries they visit are perceived as locals, and the success of the *tablighi* effort lies in the strength of this transnational cooperation.

However, there is another kind of transnational connection which is built through the various kinds of international travel. These are the connections built inside the *jama'at* in India, which are formed on the basis of language: Russian *jama'ats* are often formed from the mix of representatives of the former Soviet Union, most of whom can speak Russian. Kyrgyz and Kazakh *jama'ats* are often joined because they can understand each other very well. People in one *jama'at* can travel together for as long as 40 days, after which they have to return to Nizamuddin, rest there for few days and then join new *jama'ats*. During those 40 days, people from different countries spend a lot of time together. The daily program of a *tablighi jama'at* is very intensive and it is mostly based on different kinds of group activity. *Davatchis* have some free time to spend on rest, the remembrance of God (*zikr*), and reading of Quran and prayer, but very often even this time is used for informal talks and sharing of stories and jokes between members of *jama'at*. Because of such intensive and interactive schedules, strong bonds and friendships are often established between *davatchis* from different countries. The shared transnational experiences also bond together *davatchis* from different mosques in the same country, which becomes important when they return home.

In this section we followed the transnational paths of Kyrgyz *davatchis*. In the next section we will look at the transnational culture of *tablighi* travelers including their clothing, language, and trajectories of *tablighi* narratives: ideas, stories, and allegories used by *tablighi* in their talks and conversations, which help them to reconstruct the world and the place of a human being in a new vision.

6.3 Transnational *Tablighi* Culture

In this last section of the ethnographic analysis of our article we want to focus on the transnational aspects of *tablighi* culture in Kyrgyzstan. The most vivid and interesting discussions of the culture of *davatchis* are related to their clothing, language, and narrative.

While Islamic dress for women in Kyrgyzstan does not cause much public discussion, the *davatchis'* clothing style for men is often the most controversial of the debates about the growing influence of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. Because of the Indian influence, it became popular among *davatchis* to wear Indian style *kurtas* and sometimes Arabic *jalabeas*. In the narration of *davatchis*, these are traditional Islamic clothing, which they call *sunnah* clothes. Such clothing is said to be modest and to properly cover man's private parts. In pre-Soviet Central Asia, the clothing style was similar, but during the Soviet period it had almost disappeared from the larger cities and was replaced by Western style pants and shirts for men and shorter skirts and blouses for women. For these reasons, *davatchis* are easily noticeable in the streets because of their "strange" outfit, which often triggers negative reaction of people and comments like: "Why do they put on these skirts like women?" or "These are Pakistani clothes, these are not Kyrgyz clothes." Scull-caps and long beards, which are also not so common, add to the controversy. *Davatchis* reply: "Is the business suit you are wearing, or are the mini-skirts modern girls are wearing, traditional Kyrgyz clothes?" Their position, founded on the fairly revolutionary value of the Islamic message they bring into the secular society, has already placed them somewhat in opposition to mainstream culture and this kind of transnational clothing becomes the visual manifestation of this position and of their connection with a global community of believers. What makes these clothes transnational is that many of these dresses are not simply imported by traders, but purchased by participants themselves in their journeys to the Indian subcontinent.

The growing demand for more Islamic clothing also generated a hybrid kind of fashion, where principles of Islamic attire are combined with traditional Kyrgyz materials such as felt and with traditional Kyrgyz ornaments. Such traditional Kyrgyz elements in a way legitimize this transnational style of clothing by making it more Kyrgyz. Considering the general trends towards building national identity and growing national politics, this approach makes such hybrid Islamic clothes less controversial. When Kyrgyz *davatchis* travel to other countries, they contribute to the diversity by showing these hybrid localized elements of Islamic fashion.

Similarly, strong Indian influence is felt in the jargon used by *davatchis* in Kyrgyzstan. Most of the terms related to *tablighi* activity come from Urdu and Arabic, as also shown by some of the terms used in this article. Being familiar with them and being able to use them easily makes a person "one of us" for *davatchis* because the fluency in such jargon comes only with experience in the community. However, recently the national council made a decision that Kyrgyz translations should be used instead of Urdu and Arabic words when referring to the activities of *davatchis*. This was done to make the complex terminology more understandable for beginners and for non-participants, in a conscious attempt to localize the transnational language.

The *tablighi* narrative is perhaps the most important element in the *tablighi* practice. The main way in which knowledge and stories are exchanged is oral. A *tablighi* makes sense of the world as he talks about it and most of *tablighi* activities are constructed around different kinds of talks: proper sermon (*bayan*), report (*karguzari*), announcement (*ilon*), motivational talk (*targib*), instructional talk (*muzakira*), encouragement to join (*tashkil*), instructions for traveling (*hidayat*), and so on. There are very few written references; two books are most commonly used: *Fazail-Amal* (Virtues of Deeds) and *Selected Hadiths*, both written by Maulana Muhammad Yusuf. Oral tradition, on the other hand, is extreme-

ly rich and, because of the grassroot nature of the movement and its transnational character, it continually expands and diversifies. Structurally it varies from very strict references to Quran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*) to extensive use of stories and all kinds of allegories and metaphors by *davatchis* to simplify and make complex blocks of Islamic teaching more accessible to common folks, the majority of whom do not have religious education. Narratives differ: some have a more complex line of argument and are difficult to grasp, essentialize, or retell; others are quite straightforward and easy to remember. It is the latter ones which become widely spread, shared, and transformed. There is no complete freedom of interpretation, however. The verses from the Quran (*ayahs*), *hadiths* of the Prophet (SAW), and stories of his companions are usually told with great respect towards their authenticity. The knowledge of these sources is reinforced through daily study circles in the local mosques, and during journeys through the readings of *Fazail-Amal* and *Collected Hadiths*.

However, there is another kind of narrative that has more flexibility and space for interpretation. This includes stories from everyday life, stories from experiences of traveling *tablighi*, personal ramifications on certain topics, and various kinds of allegories and metaphors. Because these stories are extensively shared, they are retold repeatedly and often become significantly transformed in the process. Usually, the essence is remembered, while details are forgotten. The story often keeps the main idea, but has new details and makes use of different examples from the local context to illustrate the main idea, and that makes the story more understandable for people from the same locality. Some of the terminology is lost on the way, while some new concepts enter the story. With every transmission there are modifications introduced into it, and one could trace how the story branches out as it is shared across the space. Once, Nasritdinov (one of the authors) heard the story of himself: the difficulties and life journeys he experienced before he started practicing Islam and how his Islamic practice and engagement with *tablighi* affected his life. He heard this story about a year after he shared it with his friends. He recognized himself in the story because it had a very specific story line, but the details and geographic context of the story were totally transformed. At another time he heard a story he had brought from India, and similarly, the essence remained, but details were transformed in significant ways. This is how *tablighi* narrative can be said almost to have a life of its own, which is embedded in the active interaction and regular oral exchange.

In fact, these stories, which could be called the elements of folk-Islam, are nothing new or specific only to the *tablighi* practice. They existed for centuries both in India and in Central Asia. They were not a part of the traditional teachings of the more conservative Islamic scholarship, but were extensively used by participants of various *sufi* orders and brotherhoods. The *sufis* put less stress on proper Islamic knowledge and more on meditation and travel, as manifested in a figure of a wondering *dervish*. Such *dervishes* could not carry libraries of books with them, but instead were making extensive use of stories and metaphors when explaining Islamic concepts. In Kyrgyzstan, storytelling has even more importance than in many other cultures around the world. The Kyrgyz have one of the most outstanding oral history traditions (Hewitt, 2012). The legendary Kyrgyz epic *Manas* (Kuchemkulyzy, 2005) is the longest epic in the world. Kyrgyz people always appreciated interesting stories and skillful storytellers (*akyns*) and themselves were very attentive listeners. Islamic concepts were weaved into these stories with other Kyrgyz traditions, worldviews, and histories.

What changed today, and what is of the main interest to this paper, is the intensified transnational character and exchange of these narratives. With such large number of Kyrgyz *davatchis* traveling to the Indian subcontinent and to countries of the former Soviet Union and beyond, and with few but regular foreign *jama'ats* coming to Kyrgyzstan, a large

transnational geographic space is spreading from South Korea, the Far East and Mongolia, to the Western borders of Russian Federation and the Southern tips of the Indian subcontinent that serves as a platform for the exchange, spreading, and new interpretations of these narratives. *Tablighi* narratives become transnational. On the one hand, the narratives incorporate a variety of cultural interpretations and ground these interpretations in diverse social, historical, and economic contexts. On the other hand, these stories often become descriptions of something distant and exotic, which makes them even more interesting for the people from many localities.

Therefore, what makes *tablighi* narrative unique is this translocal, transnational, and transformative character embedded in the intensity of interactions across its vertical and horizontal structural elements discussed earlier in this article. This is something that is not common for many other, more conservative, religious practices and narratives. This gives us a final piece of evidence to use in our argument for *tablighi jama'at* being a transnational religious network.

7. Conclusion

This paper described how multidirectional *tablighi* religious networks become transnational because they are not based on passive acceptance or rejection of ideas from outside, but on active engagement with these ideas in the places of their origin, made possible because of regular and significant traveling across national borders. We tried to portray the mechanism of how this is done through the example of the *davatchis*, or *tablighi jama'at* members in Kyrgyzstan. We did so by looking at the structures of religious activities of Kyrgyz *davatchis* and their travels abroad in order to understand the nature and influence of religious cross-border relationships and transnational networking. We analyzed how trans-local narratives from the South-East Asian homeland of *tablighi* are “translated” into local Kyrgyz narratives and then “exported” to the countries of the former Soviet Union and to Turkey, South Korea, and Mongolia. We followed these discourse trajectories in the ethnographies of *davatchis* who travel across borders and in the trans-local narratives, styles of life, clothes, mutual support, and religious actor networks. The study highlighted the specific forms of Muslim networking emerging from cross-border and cross-culture activities in the name of Islam. We emphasized both the fluidities and hierarchies of social relations among the *davatchis* and analyzed the interconnectedness of networks that cross nation-state boundaries. Findings from this study allow us to have better understanding of transnational religious networks. While we could reconstruct for the Kyrgyz *tablighi jama'at* the more than one directed transnational nature of the network, it remains open how other religious movements are exercised in Central Asia and how transnational they are.

Glossary of Terms

<i>davat</i>	local Central Asian term for the preaching of Islam.
<i>davatchi</i>	local Central Asian term for someone who is engaged in the <i>tablighi</i> practice.
<i>dervishs</i>	persons, who are known for their extreme poverty and austerity. In this

	respect, dervishes are most similar to mendicant friars.
<i>Fethullah Gülen movement</i>	is a transnational civic society movement inspired by the teachings of Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen. His teachings have attracted a large number of supporters in Turkey, Central Asia and increasingly in other parts of the World.
<i>hajj</i>	is the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.
<i>hijabs</i>	Islamic head cover for women, which covers the hair and neck and leaves the face open.
<i>hijra</i>	the migration of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his companions from Mecca to Medina.
<i>jama'at</i>	group; in this paper it has two meanings: 1) in reference to the <i>tablighi jama'at</i> as a movement, and 2) to the specific small groups of <i>tablighi</i> travelers.
<i>jilbabs</i>	traditional Arabic women dresses, which are long and loose; they cover the entire body leaving open only the head and hands.
<i>Laylat al-Qadr</i>	Night of Power; a special night in the wholly month of Ramadan, when different kinds of worship are particularly recommended.
<i>sunnah</i>	practice of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

<i>sufi</i>	a practitioner of the tradition of <i>Sufism</i> , a special Islamic sub sub-group, which puts stress on meditation practices.
<i>tablighi</i>	movement for the revival of Islam, which originated in India in the early 20th century.
<i>tajik</i>	is a general designation for a wide range of Persian-speaking people of Iranic origin.
<i>taliban</i>	is an Islamic fundamentalist militant movement. It gained diplomatic recognition from three states: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.
<i>uyghur</i>	a Turkic ethnic group living in Eastern and Central Asia.
<i>wahhabism</i>	is a conservative branch of <i>Sunni</i> Islam.

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Aksana Ismailbekova, PhD, Research Fellow, Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Kirchweg 33, 14129 Berlin, Germany, e-mail: aksana_ismailbekova@yahoo.co.uk

Emil Nasritdinov, PhD, Associate Professor, Anthropology, American University of Central Asia, 205 Abdymomunov St., 720040 Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, e-mail: emilzn@gmail.com