NEGOTIATING PIETY:

Locality, Identity, and Contestation within Tablighi Jamaat in Southeast Asia

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KEYWORD	ABSTRACT
Locality, Identity, Jamaah Tabligh, Southeast Asia	*This article explores the internal dynamics of the Tablighi Jamaat in Southeast Asia through an anthropological approach to religion. As a transnational da'wah movement originating from colonial India, the Tablighi Jamaat promotes a particular form of piety that interacts with, is negotiated, and at times contested within the local socio-cultural contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia. Drawing on the theories of locality (Appadurai), piety as a social construct (Asad & Mahmood), and symbolic capital (Bourdieu), the article highlights how language, travel experiences (safar), ethnicity, and gender serve as key arenas in the formation of hierarchy and authority within the movement. Through a critical reading of language adaptation, cultural resistance, and shifts in proselytizing practices by youth and converts, this study argues that piety within the Tablighi Jamaat is not a fixed entity, but rather the result of ongoing negotiations between global values and local realities. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of transnational Islam as a project shaped by locality, conflict, and social transformation.*

INTRODUCTION

The Tablighi Jamaat is a unique transnational Islamic movement within the contemporary landscape of da'wah activism (Sarwan et al., 2021). Founded in India in 1926 by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, the movement has expanded across the globe, including into Southeast Asia, bringing with it an apolitical, inward-focused vision of Islamic proselytization centered on personal transformation through lived religious experience (Nu'ad, 2016). Despite its aversion to political engagement and structural issues, the Tablighi Jamaat has played a significant role in shaping Islamic identity within Muslim communities—both urban and rural.

However, the expansion of the Tablighi Jamaat in Southeast Asia has not occurred in a vacuum (Arifin, 2017). It has emerged and operated within a sociocultural landscape long shaped by the legacies of colonialism, sharp ethnic differentiation, linguistic diversity, and distinct configurations of religious authority (Hamdi, 2021). In this region, Islam has never existed in isolation or neutrality; rather, it has always been intertwined with ethnic identity, class dynamics, and state politics. In Malaysia, for example, the category "Malay" is legally defined as synonymous with Islam (under Article 160 of the Constitution), which links Islamic identity with political and economic privilege. In Indonesia, Islam has experienced a long history of dialogue—and at times tension—with local adat traditions, nationalism, and religious pluralism from the Dutch colonial period through the New Order era and into the Reformasi period.

Within such a social space, the Tablighi Jamaat functions as a transnational movement that imports norms of piety originating in the Indian subcontinent, particularly from the conservative Deobandi milieu. Its practices–such as wearing *gamis*, speaking in Urdu, and using Arabic and Indo-Islamic terms such as *gasht*, *bayan*, *markaz*, and *shura*–often create symbolic distance from local communities. In some contexts, this has led to subtle resistance or even latent conflicts. For instance, field reports in Malaysia (Noor, 2003) describe how early *markaz* were dominated by Indian-Muslim descendants and only gradually became accessible to Malay followers, who were initially unfamiliar with the Tablighi Jamaat's ritualistic and disciplined model of piety.

A similar dynamic unfolded in Indonesia. The movement's spread occurred largely through informal networks among Muslim entrepreneurs and local religious leaders in major cities such as Jakarta, Medan, and Makassar. Yet, field studies (Aula et al., 2022; Drury, 2014; Guruh, 2014; Husda, 2020) suggest tensions between local *ustadz* and senior *mubaligh*, who were often perceived as "importing Indian culture" or asserting authority based on *safar* (da'wah travel seniority) rather than formal religious knowledge. Such tensions reflect what anthropologists refer to as *epistemic contestation*–the competition between local and transnational religious authorities in defining legitimate religious knowledge (Aqil, 2020).

This raises an important question: how is a da'wah movement born in colonial India–with its particular legacies of Islam, including hierarchical obedience, gendered piety, and ritual repetition–re-signified when operating within societies that possess different collective memories, social structures, and religious idioms? How is the notion of "returning to Islam" received, rejected, or adapted within local communities that may have long embraced Sufi traditions, syncretic Islam, or even modernist Islam critical of ritualistic legalism?

More importantly, how are power relations constructed between "center" and "periphery"? Here, the internal hierarchy of the Tablighi Jamaat becomes crucial. As shown in Hirofumi Okai and Norihito Takahashi's study on the Tablighi Jamaat in Japan (Okai & Takahashi, 2023), hierarchy is not only based on age or ethnic origin but also on the intensity of participation in *safar* (three days, forty days, or four months), which creates distinct statuses–such as the title *pranasati* for senior da'wah participants. In Southeast Asia, this structure often transcends ethnic and national boundaries but is not free from latent biases. For example, Urdu has become the de facto symbolic language of the movement, placing Malay or Javanese participants in a position of symbolic subordination–even if they have been active members for many years.

This is where the notion of *locality* becomes critical: the process by which global values, practices, and symbols are negotiated, adapted, or even contested in local contexts. Locality is not merely a geographic designation but a social arena in which adaptation, resistance, and the reproduction of values occur. In the case of the Tablighi Jamaat, locality is highly dynamic–it is manifested in the choice of language used for sermons, the food served in the *markaz*, the styles of dress worn by *jama'ah*, and the ways in which local members negotiate da'wah authority between younger and older generations.

By situating the movement in this context, this article argues that the Tablighi Jamaat is not merely a vehicle for disseminating Islam, but also a site for contesting the meanings of piety, identity, and authority. Piety is not a uniform or universal entity, but rather a product of ongoing social negotiation within the highly plural and dynamic Muslim lifeworlds of Southeast Asia.

Previous studies on the Tablighi Jamaat in Southeast Asia have primarily focused on its geographic spread, proselytization methods, and the social profiles of its adherents (Dickson, 2009; Gugler, 2010; Kepel & Masud, 2021; Masud, 2021). While important, these approaches often overlook the micro-level dynamics within the movement itself–namely, the struggle over meaning, the contestation of authority, and the negotiation of identity among members of diverse social, ethnic, generational, and linguistic backgrounds. In this context, what is called "piety" is neither

singular nor fixed; it is always subject to negotiation.

This article seeks to address that research gap. Drawing inspiration from Hirofumi Okai and Norihito Takahashi's (2023) study of the Tablighi Jamaat in Japan, it aims to explore the processes of negotiating locality and identity within the movement in Southeast Asia. An anthropological approach to religion is employed to reveal how piety is constructed, negotiated, and even contested in social spaces that are simultaneously transnational and local.

In doing so, this article not only portrays the Tablighi Jamaat as an agent of Islamic propagation but also as a social arena where struggles over meaning unfold—between universality and particularity, between the global and the local, between dominance and resistance. Within this framework, piety is understood not as a static and universal essence, but as the contingent outcome of complex social negotiations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study departs from the understanding that religious practices—including those performed by the Tablighi Jamaat—are never neutral or detached from the social spaces and relations in which they are embedded. Piety is not a universal or static construct, but one that is continuously negotiated, shaped, and contested within specific local contexts. To grasp the complexity of this phenomenon, this study employs three interrelated theoretical perspectives:

Locality as a Social Arena: Appadurai and the Production of Space

Arjun Appadurai (1996), in *Modernity at Large*, proposes that locality should not be seen as a passive, static, or isolated sphere, but rather as an actively produced social phenomenon within the flows of global movement. He challenges the binary of the "global" versus the "local," instead conceptualizing locality as a product of interactions between global circulations of ideas, people, and practices. Within the context of the Tablighi Jamaat, locality should not be narrowly defined by the existence of a *markaz* in Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, or Jakarta, but by the ways in which the normative values of the "center"—such as Urdu-Indian models of piety—are negotiated and interpreted by local actors. These actors carry distinct linguistic, cultural, and historical experiences that shape how dakwah is localized. Thus, locality becomes a social arena for the interaction, translation, and even resistance to normative religious authority, facilitating the rearticulation of global religiosity in familiar social terms.

Piety as a Formed Practice: Asad and Mahmood on Religious Subjectivity

Talal Asad (2003) frames religion as a historical discourse intricately tied to practices, power, and authoritative traditions. Building upon this foundation, Saba Mahmood (2011), in her influential work *Politics of Piety*, critiques liberal notions of autonomous individual choice in religious life. She argues that piety must be understood as an embodied process through which subjects are formed—not merely as expressions of free will, but through repetitive acts, disciplinary practices, and embodied engagements with moral traditions. In the context of the Tablighi Jamaat, piety is cultivated through the discipline of *safar* (preaching journeys), the ritualized reading of *Fadhail-e-A'mal*, adherence to *sunnah* clothing, and a life rhythm oriented toward obedience and modesty. However, these practices are not accepted uncritically or enacted uniformly. In many local settings, there are acts of negotiation—for instance, the preference for using local languages in *bayan* (preaching), or resistance from younger generations who question the mechanical ritualization of religious practices. This perspective allows us to understand piety not as monolithic or universal, but as a field of tension between traditional authority and individual agency.

Power Relations and Social Capital in Transnational Religious Movements: Bourdieu and Clifford

Pierre Bourdieu's (1989) theory of *field* and *capital* provides an analytical lens to examine how religious authority is constituted within the Tablighi Jamaat. The movement forms a specific social field in which actors compete for legitimacy as exemplars of piety. The symbolic capital at stake includes not only formal religious knowledge, but also experiential capital such as the number and duration of *safar*, mastery of the Urdu language, and proximity to central religious networks. These resources serve as markers of authority within the hierarchical structure of the movement. At the same time, James Clifford (1994), through his notion of *traveling cultures* and diasporic formations, reminds us that no transnational movement is free from tensions between center and periphery. In the Tablighi context, the hegemonic forms of Urdu-Indian piety exported from South Asia often clash with local cultural sensibilities in Southeast Asia. Such dissonance gives rise to adaptation, reinterpretation, and sometimes resistance among local *jamaah* members. These dynamics reveal how global religious movements must contend with localized articulations of faith, in which power, language, and social capital are continually renegotiated.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach (Moleong, 2017), grounded in the tradition of interpretive ethnography within the anthropology of religion. This approach is chosen not merely to examine the institutional structure of the Tablighi Jamaat, but more importantly, to explore the meanings, practices, and symbolic negotiations embedded in the everyday lives of its adherents. The research is both exploratory and interpretive, positioning the lived experiences of actors as the primary source for constructing knowledge.

The data analyzed in this article were obtained through two primary sources. First, an in-depth literature review was conducted on academic works relevant to the Tablighi Jamaat, both in its global expressions and its local articulations in Southeast Asia. Key references include *Islam on the Move* by Farish Noor (2012), *Travellers in Faith* by Masud (2021), and recent contributions by Okai and Takahashi (2023), which examine the internal dynamics of the Tablighi Jamaat in Japan. These works are not treated merely as background literature, but as forms of "ethnographic secondary data" that can be re-read through the theoretical lens proposed in this article.

Second, the study draws on secondary fieldwork data derived from previous ethnographic reports, documented interviews with Tablighi followers in Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as the author's personal observations of Tablighi activities in several *markaz* across Indonesia (Gaborieau, 2021). Additional data sources include internal Tablighi media—such as *ijtima* leaflets, sermon transcripts, and records of *safar* (preaching tours). This approach enables an investigation of the often informal and undocumented, yet deeply meaningful, everyday practices through which piety is constructed at the local level.

In analyzing these materials, the author employs the method of *thick description* (Fenn & Geertz, 1974) to uncover the symbolic meanings behind seemingly mundane actions—such as language choices during sermons, the kinds of food served at *markaz*, the formation of preaching groups based on age or ethnicity, and narratives of *dakwah* experiences. Each of these actions is interpreted not in isolation, but within the broader contexts of power relations, colonial history, and local socio-cultural dynamics.

A critical dimension of this methodology lies in the researcher's awareness of *positionality*. The author acknowledges that any analysis of a movement such as the Tablighi Jamaat cannot be detached from the researcher's own social and epistemological position. Therefore, the approach adopted in this study does not aim to judge the legitimacy of particular practices, but rather seeks to

understand how these practices are produced, transmitted, and negotiated by actors within frameworks of locality and transnationalism.

Through this methodological framework, the article aims not only to describe what the Tablighi Jamaat does in Southeast Asia, but also to illuminate how the meaning of "piety" is shaped through social relations, symbolic contestations, and identity negotiations within their missionary spaces.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Locality and Language: An Arena for Identity Negotiation

One of the most tangible arenas where locality and identity are negotiated within the Tablighi Jamaat in Southeast Asia is in the use of language. In this context, language is not merely a tool of communication—it functions as a symbol of cultural authority, a marker of hierarchy, and a medium for the construction and reinforcement of religious identity. Within a movement that advocates a spirit of "universal piety," language has instead become a site of tension between center and periphery, between transnationalism and local rootedness (Noor, 2012).

From the outset of its spread into Southeast Asia, the Tablighi Jamaat brought with it a distinctive missionary language rooted in its Indian origins: Urdu. Although incomprehensible to most local adherents, Urdu continues to be used in core forums—especially sermons (*bayan*), deliberations (*shura*), and foundational literature such as *Fadhail A'mal*. In Malaysia, for example, Farish Noor's report (Noor & Hedges, 2023) indicates that the use of Urdu once became a symbol of exclusivity in some *markaz*, particularly those established by Indian-Muslim communities. The language operated as a form of "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1991), distinguishing those who "understand the *manhaj*" from those who are seen merely as followers.

A similar situation is observed in Indonesia, particularly at the Kebon Jeruk Mosque in Jakarta—the country's oldest and largest Tablighi *markaz* (Sila, 2016). Until the early 2000s, sermons were often delivered in Urdu or by preachers from India or Pakistan. Translators would stand beside the speaker to deliver interpretations in Bahasa Indonesia, though the style and structure of the sermon still mirrored South Asian pedagogy: lengthy narratives, repetitive patterns, and highly normative in tone. This dynamic created a symbolic distance between local followers—especially younger generations or recent converts—and the central authority of the movement.

However, as the number of local adherents and second-generation participants grew, pressures for "language localization" intensified. In several regional *markaz* across Indonesia, sermons began to be delivered in Javanese, Sundanese, or Bugis. This not only facilitated comprehension but also strengthened emotional connections between followers and the *dakwah*, which felt more "authentic" and proximate. As shown in the study by Hirofumi Okai and Norihito Takahashi (2023) on the Tablighi Jamaat in Japan, the shift in language is not merely a matter of communication—it reflects an effort to align religious practice with broader social realities.

These shifts have often given rise to internal tensions. On one side, some *pranasati* (senior preachers who have traveled extensively) feel that the use of local languages undermines the "authenticity" of the *manhaj* of *dakwah*. On the other side, local followers, especially the youth, argue that the use of local language actually broadens the reach of the movement and deepens their religious experiences. This conflict reveals that language is not a neutral medium but rather a contested terrain for the struggle over meaning and authority.

Moreover, language serves as a marker of social identity. When Urdu is placed at the top of the symbolic hierarchy within the Tablighi Jamaat, those who do not master it are implicitly marginalized (Badriza et al., 2022). This creates a "minority within a minority"—a subset of adherents

who feel alienated within a movement that claims to be inclusive and universal (*ummah*-oriented). In this context, the use of local languages is not only an inclusion strategy but also a form of resistance against the symbolic hegemony carried by the movement's linguistic center.

In addition, language choice shapes the style and content of *dakwah*. Sermons in Bahasa Indonesia or Malay tend to be more communicative and dialogical, whereas Urdu-based sermons are often monologic, with emphasis on rituals and obligations. These differences give rise to varying styles of piety within the Tablighi Jamaat—ranging from highly textual and normative expressions to more contextual and adaptive forms aligned with local life.

Therefore, language within the Tablighi Jamaat in Southeast Asia is not merely a missionary tool—it is a mirror of power dynamics, identity formations, and local adaptations. This ongoing negotiation over language reveals that "piety," as a moral project, is never neutral; it is always shaped by social relations, historical memory, and the cultural aspirations of local communities.

Hierarchies of Authority and Symbolic Capital within the Jama'at

Beneath the surface of the Jama'at Tabligh's ostensibly egalitarian character—as a non-political, non-hierarchical Islamic revivalist movement lacking a formalized leadership structure—lies a sophisticated tapestry of social and cultural stratification. Although the movement eschews conventional organizational models, its internal order is sustained through symbolic practices tied to missionary experience (*safar*), linguistic proficiency, ethnic identity, and proximity to the movement's *manhaj* (methodological foundation). Viewed through the analytical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields (1991), the Jama'at may be understood as a dynamic arena where actors compete to accumulate and mobilize *symbolic capital*. This currency confers religious legitimacy and social authority within the movement.

First, Safar Experience as Primary Capital. One of the most salient indicators of status within the Jama'at is the extent of one's *safar* experience—the duration and frequency of one's participation in missionary journeys. Those who have undertaken the canonical circuits of three days, forty days, or four months are often perceived as having attained higher degrees of spiritual refinement. Consequently, they are more likely to be entrusted with delivering *bayan* (religious sermons) or engaging in *shura* (consultative decision-making) (Hairil et al., 2023). Such individuals are often revered as *pranasati*—those who embody an exemplary commitment to the path of *da'wah* (Ikbar et al., 2020).

However, this symbolic capital is not universally accessible. Individuals constrained by economic necessity, familial obligations, or institutional commitments often find themselves excluded from extended missionary travel and, by extension, from the inner circles of authority. Informal laborers, women, students, and recent converts are structurally disadvantaged. In Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, many members engaged in salaried employment cannot afford prolonged absences, thus precluding their ascension to leadership roles. As Bourdieu might suggest, such exclusions represent the covert reproduction of hierarchical power under the guise of neutral spiritual metrics (Ningtyas, 2015).

Second, Language, Ethnicity, and Symbolic Legitimacy. Linguistic proficiency—particularly in Urdu—is a potent form of symbolic capital within the Jama'at. Since core texts, discourses, and instructions are predominantly articulated in Urdu, those who comprehend or speak the language are seen as occupying a cultural and religious authenticity position. In the Malaysian context, Indian-Muslim members—many of whom are fluent in Urdu—often command leadership positions within local *markaz* (central mosques), despite being numerical minorities relative to Malay members. In Indonesia, adherents who read the *Fadhail A'mal* in its original Urdu or Arabic versions are frequently viewed as more "genuine" followers than those dependent on translated materials (Dayyan et al., 2019).

Ethnic identity further complicates these dynamics. Preachers from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh often enjoy an assumed spiritual authority due to their geographic and historical proximity to the movement's origins. This dynamic produces a form of reverse orientalism, wherein religious authenticity is projected onto foreign missionaries rather than localized figures. As a result, the capacities of indigenous leaders are frequently overlooked, and hybrid or contextualized expressions of Islamic piety risk marginalization (Arifin, 2017; Doni Saepol Aziz, Ms Udin, 2022; Okai & Takahashi, 2023).

Third, Gender and the Invisibility of Women. The gendered architecture of the Jama'at Tabligh is firmly patriarchal. While women are nominally included in the missionary vision of the movement, their actual participation is confined mainly to private domains, domestic religious instruction, or segregated gatherings (Santoso et al., 2022). Across Southeast Asia, women are rarely afforded opportunities to speak in public religious forums, engage in *shura*, or assume roles of symbolic leadership. This exclusion reveals that access to symbolic capital is not solely determined by spiritual merit, but is regulated by entrenched gender norms that limit women's public visibility and institutional influence.

Fieldwork accounts from Indonesia indicate that women are significantly involved in child education and community mobilization. However, their contributions are seldom recognized within the formal symbolic economy of the movement. Consequently, women emerge as invisible producers of religious continuity, central to the movement's sustenance, yet peripheral to its official narrative of authority.

Fourth, Intersections of Capital: Who Holds the Power to Speak?. The internal stratification of the Jama'at is not reducible to a single axis. However, it is formed at the intersection of multiple symbolic capitals—*social* experience, linguistic ability, ethnic origin, gender, and access to transnational networks. A local preacher who has completed the four-month *safari* may enjoy considerable status. However, if that individual is a woman, a convert, an ethnic minority, or lacks fluency in Urdu, their authority is often muted or contested. Likewise, local figures deeply committed to *da'wah* yet unfamiliar with the central texts in their original languages may be perceived as lacking legitimacy compared to foreign emissaries.

As the Jama'at expands geographically and socially, these asymmetries become more acute. Local adherents increasingly seek to contextualize the *manhaj* within indigenous cultural frameworks, generating tension with transnational actors who insist on preserving what they view as doctrinal purity. In this contested terrain, piety is not merely a private spiritual aspiration—it becomes a field of negotiation over interpretive authority, religious authenticity, and symbolic power.

Resistance, Adaptation, and Cultural Contestation from the Margins

Within the internal dynamics of the Jama'at Tabligh in Southeast Asia, the emergence of voices from the "margins" is a critical phenomenon that warrants serious attention. These margins are not limited to geographic peripheries far from the movement's central *markaz*, but also refer to the symbolic and social positions of groups that lack traditional authority within the Jama'at, such as local non-Urdu-speaking congregants, youth, converts, women, and ethnic minorities. For these groups, *da'wah* is not merely a process of value transmission from the center to the periphery but also a space for adaptation, negotiation, and even cultural resistance against forms of piety perceived as foreign, elitist, or disconnected from local realities.

First, Local Adaptation of Da'wah Practices. In many parts of Indonesia, the da'wah practices of the Jama'at Tabligh have undergone significant cultural transformations. Religious talks increasingly incorporate local languages such as Javanese, Sundanese, and Bugis. Meals served at *Markaz* are no longer restricted to Indian-Pakistani styles (such as *roti prata* and curry), but are

tailored to local preferences, including *nasi uduk*, *lontong*, or grilled fish. Even the clothing styles of participants have adapted: the long Arab-style *jilbab* has often been replaced by *baju koko*, *sarong*, or modest traditional attire. These transformations represent both cultural adaptation and strategic efforts to expand the base of followers.

Such adaptations can be interpreted as soft resistance, in which local actors do not overtly reject the symbolic structures introduced by the center, but gradually reformulate them to suit their socio-cultural contexts. This reflects an *organic localisation of Islam* grounded in lived experience rather than imposed institutional engineering.

Second, Movements among Youth and Converts. Young people and converts often feel alienated by the authority structures of the Jama'at Tabligh, which are dominated by senior figures with long *safar* histories and foreign language proficiency. In Indonesia, some youth groups have begun developing more dialogical and interactive approaches to *da'wah*—not just listening to *bayan*, but engaging in group discussions, Q&A sessions, and online forums. In major cities, specific Tablighi communities have created casual *halaqah*—informal gatherings where Islam is discussed in everyday language, with relevant topics (such as mental health, love in Islam, or social relations), and without pressure to undertake lengthy *safar*.

Inspiration for this model is evident in the "Japanese Jama'at" study by Okai and Takahashi (2023), where converts and second-generation Muslims formed an alternative space called *Nihongo Jama'at*. This group holds sermons and events in Japanese, serves local cuisine, and frees participants from the rigid requirements of *safar*. Although criticized by central authorities for being "too local" and "insufficiently Tablighi," the movement reflects the need to cultivate piety within everyday lived contexts and diverse social realities.

Similar phenomena are occurring across Southeast Asia, where younger generations do not reject the core values of the Jama'at Tabligh but seek to conduct *da'wah* in more flexible, communicative, and relevant ways. From an anthropological perspective, this represents a *reclaiming of religious agency*—the act of marginalized actors taking ownership of religious spaces that had previously excluded them.

Third, Symbolic Tensions and the Demand for Recognition. Resistance from the margins is not always articulated explicitly. In many cases, it takes symbolic forms—for example, opting out of *the safari* despite active participation in local activities, or refusing to wear the traditional Jama'at Tabligh attire in public forums. These actions are often misinterpreted by central authorities as signs of "weak commitment," when they are expressions of skepticism toward symbols of piety perceived as unreflective of local life.

Here, resistance should not be seen as defiance but as an effort to reconfigure the very meaning of piety—from something textual and ritualistic to something contextual and relational. Marginal actors do not seek to leave the Jama'at Tabligh, but wish to be recognized as legitimate participants in the community, in ways that reflect their own cultural and social realities.

Thus, an analysis of resistance and adaptation within the Jama'at Tabligh reveals a complex internal dynamic: the movement is not a monolithic entity moving unilaterally from center to periphery, but a social field filled with negotiations between global values and local realities. Piety, in this context, is not a singular form of obedience but a contested domain of meaning shaped by actors with diverse social backgrounds, ethnicities, languages, and lived experiences.

CONCLUTION

The Tablighi Jamaat in Southeast Asia cannot be understood merely as a da'wah movement disseminating Islamic values from the center to the periphery. Instead, it is a complex social field

where various actors—from local followers to transnational preachers, from the older to the younger generation, from men to women—interact and compete in shaping legitimate forms of piety.

Language constitutes one of the most powerful arenas in reflecting and shaping power relations within the Jamaat. When Urdu becomes the symbol of authority, followers who only speak local languages are symbolically positioned as subordinate. However, the emergence of local sermons delivered in native tongues illustrates a significant process of resistance and adaptation. Similarly, the hierarchical authority built upon the basis of safar experience, textual mastery, or closeness to the center creates exclusionary boundaries for those without access to such symbolic capital.

Amidst a structure that appears egalitarian, the acts of resistance and adaptation from peripheral groups—through changes in the language of da'wah, the creation of new halaqah formats, or the rejection of certain symbols—reveal that the Tablighi Jamaat is far from a homogeneous entity. Instead, it is a contested arena of meaning, where piety is not transmitted unilaterally but constantly negotiated within diverse social contexts.

By employing a localized anthropological approach and contemporary theories of power and piety, this article invites us to see transnational Islam not as a project of purification or homogenization, but as a field of symbolic conflict and cultural negotiation. In this context, the Tablighi Jamaat is not merely a vehicle of da'wah, but a dynamic and lived space full of complexity and possibility.

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