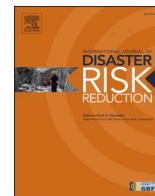


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# Covid-19, social stigma and changing religious practice in Tablighi Jamaat communities in Lombok, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence of Covid-19 has presented serious challenges to people's lives, and as a result many are in the process of reconstructing aspects of what used to be considered 'normal' life. In Indonesia, religious practice in 2020 experienced a kind of disempowerment and disruption in the areas of ritual and proselytization in Muslim communities. Religious people have been challenged to find ways to reconstruct their ritual and worship practices in safe ways that avoid spreading the virus. This article discusses the changes to religious practice and the ability to adapt to new forms of proselytization in Tablighi Jamaat environments where many followers have been infected with Covid-19. In particular, the article aims to explore how Tablighi Jamaat members interpret and define the Covid-19 pandemic, and what discourses have developed in their environments. Research for this article was conducted in Lombok, Indonesia from February till September 2020 and is based on observations and snowball-sampling interviews conducted online and offline with over 50 individuals. When the Indonesian government locked down mosques and large meetings, the Tablighi Jamaat took a position that Covid-19 was not a serious danger—indeed they saw it as an anti-Islamic conspiracy, instead—and they continued to gather and preach as before. This led to a disease cluster from a Tablighi event in Gowa, South Sulawesi, causing a stigma in broader society toward the Tablighi practice of Islam.

## 1. Introduction: Tablighi Jamaat opens a tap for the spread of Covid-19

Since the emergence of Covid-19 in Wuhan at the end of 2019, the Indonesian government's policy has been similar to that of other governments around the world in that it issued social restrictions in the public sphere, including in religious spaces, financial assistance and a strong commitment to fighting the spread of the virus. Despite these efforts, the infection rate in Indonesia per March 2, 2022, remains at a high rate with 5,589,176 cases and 148,660 deaths.

This article discusses the phenomena of the spread of Covid-19 and the effects on socio-religious life in the Tablighi Jamaat community in Indonesia, and in particular, Lombok. In 2020, religious practices involving ritual and prayer in crowded communal spaces facilitated the spread of the virus. The case of Shincheonji Church of Jesus in South Korea is one example of how religious gatherings facilitated massive spread: according to the Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention, from 12,484 initial cases in the country, a minimum of 5213 could be attributed to spreading from this church [1]. A similar case is that of the international Islamic movement known as the Tablighi Jamaat. In Asian countries including Malaysia, India, Pakistan and Indonesia, the Tablighi Jamaat gained world attention due to their large-scale communal gatherings involving thousands of people in ritual and preaching practices. Subsequently, the group created a massive transnational cluster which spread Covid-19 [2,3].

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This article documents the role of the Tablighi Jamaat community in spreading Covid-19 through its unique methods of proselytization and the group's unwillingness to believe the seriousness of the virus. That role as a vector of Covid-19 led to a social stigma around the Tablighi Jamaat that, alongside changes to government policy to mitigate the pandemic, led to a serious change in the religious methods of the group—from preaching to society at large through in-person gatherings to targeting family members, using social media, and public compliance with government mandates. In spite of this public compliance, the Tablighi Jamaat leadership still teaches that Covid-19 is not a serious health risk but rather a global conspiracy created to weaken the Muslim community. This case study shows the limitations of religious communities' ability to adapt themselves in light of the Covid-19 pandemic; certain religious groups whose practices would be curtailed by pandemic mitigation policies tend to reject the public health reality altogether, and this can lead to social stigmatization.

The first case of Covid-19 in the Tablighi Jamaat community was exposed by the media during one of the group's international meetings held from 27 February till March 1, 2020 in Malaysia after reports disclosed the deaths of two Tablighi Jamaat members due to Covid-19 infection [4]. The Malaysian government searched for those in attendance and carried out testing. The meeting attracted 16,000 Tablighi Jamaat members, and 1500 of those were non-Malaysian foreigners. Of the 16,000, the government tested 10,553 people and found that 1030 were infected with Covid-19. They were able to determine that 624 of these cases originated from the Tablighi Jamaat meeting [4,5].

In India, the Tablighi Jamaat Nizamuddin Center in New Delhi was forced into lockdown by the government after discovering 6 Tablighi Jamaat members had died after attending a massive Tablighi Jamaat meeting there. The government evacuated the remaining Tablighi Jamaat members at the Nizamuddin mosque and searched for other members in 6 districts in India. The case that forms the focus of this article is estimated to have occurred at a meeting prior to the Nizamuddin one, held between March 13 and 15, 2020, and attended by 8000 Tablighi Jamaat members from various countries. From the 4400 Covid-19 cases in Indonesia at that time, one third appeared to have emerged from this meeting [2]. Similarly, in Pakistan the government closed a Tablighi Jamaat center and conducted mass testing after a meeting in Punjab of 100,000 international members. Around 539 of those were infected with Covid-19 [6,7].

The spread of Covid-19 in Indonesia, which is the focus in this article, shows that a Tablighi Jamaat meeting in Gowa, Makassar, in South Sulawesi, was a significant doorway for introducing and spreading Covid-19 in Indonesia. Approximately 8694 members attended this meeting, and 411 of those were foreigners [8]. The government disbanded the meeting before it had finished and conducted rapid testing on many of the attendees. The attendees asked to return home early and therefore did not undergo testing. After returning home to their respective provinces, including in Lombok, the government located them and conducted testing. By looking at the complexity of the Tablighi Jamaat case in terms of the spread of Covid-19, this article moves the focus beyond how the virus spread to that of the emerging dynamics in communities with infected Tablighi Jamaat members. Covid-19 has serious consequences for religious practice because it challenges people to negotiate and reconstruct their religious lives to adapt to the new situation. For example, the Tablighi Jamaat can no longer travel around from place to place preaching and instead are expected to adhere to the new Covid-19 protocols. Therefore, the article also examines such changes to religious practice in Tablighi Jamaat circles and how Tablighi Jamaat members overcome stigma against them that has developed in communities.

The Tablighi Jamaat have become a popular research topic among local and national researchers in Indonesia and beyond. M. Imdadun Rahmat [9]; for example, has researched transnational networks including those of Tablighi Jamaat, Hizbut Tahriri and Wahabi groups, all of which sprang up rather quickly in Indonesia. Saipul Hamdi [10] has discussed cultural change and mazhab or 'demazhabisasi Islam', the divine economy and their efforts in reconciling conflict among the Tablighi Jamaat. Jan Ali [11]; Farish A. Noor [12]; Bulbul Siddiqi [13]; Horstmann [14]; Muhammad Khalid Masud et al. [15] and Peter Dale Scott [16] view the Tablighi Jamaat as an Islamic revivalist movement as part of the wider 18th century revivalist movement. Despite being connected to the former revivalist movement, they see a difference in the contemporary Tablighi Jamaat in their method and approach which has a strong focus on spiritual and personal development rather than scripture alone.

A significant effect from the transmission of Covid-19 is the increasingly strong role of stigma and the subsequent attempt to marginalise those infected from wider social interactions. Therefore, this article examines strategies and responses from Tablighi Jamaat followers in relation to stigma and social isolation. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, literature about the Tablighi Jamaat mostly spoke to the group's proselytization methods and socio-religious networks. This article updates that literature, by documenting major disruptions to the group's proselytization and networks due to the pandemic, and also speaks to the broader question of religion during Covid-19 and the way that religious movements have adapted to 'new normal' conditions for their ritual practices and proselytization.

Although several recent authors have mentioned the Tablighi Jamaat in the context of Covid-19, it has not yet been the focus of another study. That makes the current study rather urgent, because of the major impact that Covid-19 has had on the Tablighi Jamaat community and the important role that Tablighi Jamaat has played in shaping policies on religion and the pandemic. The Tablighi Jamaat community has faced a major crisis because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which threatened the sustainability of their proselytization model.

Uncertainty around the unmitigated spread of the Covid-19 virus has caused fear, stigma, and discrimination. Atul Kakar and Samiran Nundy [17] found that there were instances of violence toward public health officials seen as responsible for the spread of Covid-19 in society, as well as against religious communities—including the Tablighi Jamaat—in India that were victimized because they were seen as responsible for 30% of the country's cases. Anant Kumar and K. Rajasekharan Nayar [18,19] argued that during the pandemic many people blamed others to calm their own fears. More specifically, religious groups and communities became targets and were painted as spreaders of the pandemic, including the Tablighi Jamaat. Stigma is created by ostracizing migrants and particular communities seen as threats or accused of spreading disease [20–23]. The government and social solidarity are important to prevent stigmatization, discrimination, and violence against religious communities during the pandemic [24].

Aniruddha Jena, Ram Awatar Yadav and Raviteja Rambarki (2021) discussed the role of the media in presenting facts in a biased

way, comparing coverage of Tablighi Jamaat gatherings (called *ijtima*) and the Hindu pilgrimage around the Kumbh Mela festival. These two religious rites were documented to cause new clusters of Covid-19 spread in India, but the media was harsher on the Tablighi Jamaat, while the Kumbh Mela rituals were not covered much despite the fact that they demonstrated to contribute to the second wave of Covid-19 in the country.

## 2. Method

Data for this article derives from ethnographic research conducted from February till December 2020 in Lombok, Nusa Tenggara Barat, Indonesia. Prior to this, the author had researched Tablighi Jamaat communities in other parts of Indonesia (Kalimantan and Jakarta), Malaysia, Thailand, and the United States of America since December 2018. This research drew on these networks and long-term relationships with Tablighi Jamaat members as part of the ethnographic method in the field.

New challenges facing field researchers have emerged due to Covid-19, which prevents social scientists from entering the field to collect data through field observation, interviews, and participation in activities such as Focus Group Discussions. Physical distancing and wearing a face mask prevent smooth communication between researcher and informants. Covid-19 has also induced fear in informants who are wary of meeting directly with a researcher. In order to overcome these new issues in data collection, this research combined methods to include online data collection by personal communication and group conversations through Zoom and WhatsApp. Where fieldwork was undertaken, health protocols were employed to ensure safety for both the researcher and those who agreed to be interviewed.

The informants involved in this research actively chose to be included because they wanted their voices represented, given the stigmatization they faced in their communities. Informants include leaders, the head of the local Tablighi Jamaat community, hospital staff in the Covid unit at several hospitals, administrative staff in villages, and ordinary people. Fifty people were interviewed in informal settings using unstructured interviews, some of whose voices are presented here. In addition to this, the article includes general perceptions from individuals outside the Tablighi Jamaat community. During fieldwork, the author joined the Tablighi Jamaat meetings in their Markaz (headquarters) and listened to their sermons and discussions about Covid-19, as well as visiting them in their homes. Finally, this study surveyed relevant literature to complement data available through interviews, and also to place this local Indonesian case into a broader, global context and demonstrate the alignment of the Indonesian experience with the experience of Tablighis elsewhere in Asia.

## 3. Findings and discussions

### 3.1. *Fighting with Covid-19: an overview of Tablighi Jamaat and cases from Malaysia, India, Pakistan and Indonesia*

Covid-19 has hit the strongest centers of the Tablighi Jamaat community hard since 2019, including the countries of Malaysia, India, Pakistan and Indonesia [25–27]. There are no indications that the number of cases is decreasing despite the employment of lockdown and social distancing measures in place.

In order to identify Covid-19 carriers, governments since 2020 have tracked people's travel histories and with whom they travelled or were in contact. This way, the governments can locate new clusters if a new case emerges. In Indonesia, the cluster associated with the Tablighi Jamaat originated in Goa, Makassar, Sulawesi, and therefore carries the name Goa Makassar Cluster (Rahmawati 2020). Similar situations occurred in India, Pakistan and Malaysia, whereby areas where cases emerged become associated with a cluster, for example, the Nizamuddin Cluster in India, Sri Petaling Cluster in Malaysia and Raiwaind Cluster in Pakistan [6,28]. The aforementioned clusters involved the Tablighi Jamaat and have drawn worldwide attention because of the potential for massive transmission not only amongst members, but also amongst their families and the wider community. Tablighi Jamaat international meetings that are held regularly in different locations around the world have become a serious problem in the spread of Covid-19 in communities internationally.

Tablighi Jamaat international meetings, known as *ijtima*, were held in several countries at the start of the pandemic, and subsequently generated a new set of problems within their own Tablighi Jamaat community. These large-scale gatherings were (and still are) not only hotspots for Covid-19 transmission, but once attendees return home, the scope of transmission widens to their families and communities. Prior to Covid-19, Tablighi Jamaat international meetings were issue-free, and were events of which the group was proud because they could mobilise massive numbers of Muslims [12,15,16,29,30]. Government investigations into the Tablighi Jamaat clusters show that Tablighi Jamaat were a major source of Covid-19 transmission early in the pandemic. The first case was an international meeting in Masjid Jamek Seri in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. This *ijtima* was held from 27 February till March 1, 2020 and attended by almost 16,000 Tablighi Jamaat members: 14,000 from Malaysia, 700 from Indonesia, 200 from the Philippines, 95 from Singapore, 200 Rohingya, 150 from Myanmar and tens of others from Brunei, Vietnam and Cambodia [31,32].

In the early stages in Malaysia, 12 cases were detected from the Masjid Jamek Seri cluster, and eventually it went up to 950 infections. The government tracked attendees and collected 14,111 samples. 1290 were positive [33]. This means that 62% of Covid-19 cases in Malaysia could be attributed to the Tablighi Jamaat gathering at the Masjid Jamek Seri. From the 700 Indonesian attendees, 12 were infected, while in Brunei, 38 of the country's 40 infected were from the Masjid Jemak Seri. The Malaysia case did not stop the Tablighi Jamaat movement from holding their international meetings, giving the impression that they did not care for or understand what Covid-19 is or how it infects people.

The number of Covid-19 cases continued to increase in Tablighi Jamaat circles. After the Malaysia incident, international attention shifted to India after the government implemented lockdown in New Delhi on 22 March, and closed the Tablighi Jamaat center in Nizamuddin. The Indian government was slightly late in its implementation of lockdown, a week after the Tablighi Jamaat *ijtima*

meeting of more than 10,000 international members, had finished [2]. In Tablighi Jamaat religious practice, after the completion of *ijtima*, attendees are sent to Muslim communities and mosques, so there was potential for mass spreading in the days after the meeting. However, at the time the government closed down the Nizamuddin Tablighi Jamaat Center, there were 2500 members living there who were on *khuruj* (a spiritual practice where they stay in the mosque) [2]. One Indonesian Tablighi Jamaat member died from Covid-19 after attending the meeting in Nizamuddin. With this information, the government tracked every attendee and quarantined them, including foreigners still in India. In the Tamil Nadu area, of 1500 attendees, 570 were confirmed positive with Covid-19; in Maharashtra, 352 were positive from a total of 1400 attendees; in Uttar Pradesh there were 1300 attendees and 282 positive cases; in Haryana, 147 positive from 1170 attendees and in Telangana, from 1,000 attendees 640 were infected with Covid-19 [34].

The *ijtima* meeting in Raiwind Punjab Lahore, Pakistan held from 10 to March 12, 2020 was also a major source for the spread of Covid-19 in the country. Approximately 100,000 members attended this meeting from several countries. The meeting was initially scheduled for 6 days, but the government intervened and shortened it to 3 days. The Pakistani government had already announced publicly not to hold large-scale events, including religious ones. However, Tablighi Jamaat senior members ignored this request. The Minister for Science and Technology, Fawad Chaudhry, expressed his disappointment in the group and scolded religious leaders as stubborn [6]. The government immediately ordered the lockdown of the Tablighi Jamaat center in Raiwind and quarantined 20,000 members. From swab tests, an estimated 600 were infected with Covid-19 [6].

Tablighi Jamaat in Indonesia also held an international *ijtima* meeting at Pesantren Darul Ulum, Gowa, South Sulawesi. According to the head of the committee, Muhtari Burhanuddin, the event was held from 19 to March 22, 2020 and 10,000 members attended from several areas across the country, with 474 international attendees from 12 countries [35]. Although the Indonesian government had requested the committee to cancel the event, the group said they were unable to do so because attendees had already purchased their tickets in advance long before the Covid-19 pandemic had emerged. Hard negotiations took place between the government and the Tablighi Jamaat committee, and eventually the meeting was disbanded by force. The regional government isolated attendees and conducted swab testing. The government provided private cars to escort members home in accordance with safety protocols.

Concern about transmission from the new cluster from Gowa proved well-placed after one attendee from Balikpapan in East Kalimantan died. Local governments took immediate action by testing all attendees and quarantining them. As many as 750 Tablighi Jamaat in attendance came from Nusa Tenggara Barat and 100 of these were infected with Covid-19. In South Kalimantan 137 attendees were positive with Covid-19. Almost every area in Indonesia had a case of infection that originated in Gowa [36,37]. The Gowa cluster is one of the largest sources of Covid-19 transmission in Indonesia.

### 3.1.1. Tablighi Jamaat preaching practices: spreading Covid-19

As seen above, the Tablighi Jamaat are a religious group highly susceptible to spreading Covid-19. Patterns and techniques in preaching practices emphasize proximity, closeness, and brotherhood; thus, touch is an integral aspect of practice that is a fertile ground for spreading Covid-19. The World Health Organisation issued instructions to the global community, particularly religious leaders, to avoid and prevent the spread of the virus through physical and social distancing (see Ref. [38]). In order to implement these measures, citizens were asked to stay at home in lockdown, avoiding crowded places like places of worship, sports arenas and shopping malls. Within the Muslim world, many countries implemented strict measures that curtailed traditional Islamic practices. For example, Saber Yezli and Anas Khan have explained that the Saudi government's policy on Covid-19 was to stop all activities that involve gathering of people, including the closing of two large mosques, Al-Haram and Nabawi Mosques [39]. Social distancing measures and the closure of mosques was not easily accepted by many Muslims around the world, including the Tablighi Jamaat. Adhering to Covid-19 protocols in religious practice is a huge challenge for Tablighi Jamaat members.

Tablighi Jamaat preaching practices that are prone to spreading Covid-19 include visiting fellow Tablighi Jamaat families and community members when on *khuruj* (a Tablighi Jamaat practice of travel to another region to preach and invite people to be 'real Muslims'). One routine program called *jaulah* is a practice where Tablighi Jamaat members visit community members and invite them to perform the daily prayers together at the local mosque and listen to a Tablighi Jamaat preacher give a sermon known as *bayan*. *Jaulah* is carried out after the afternoon prayer, usually with 4–5 Tablighi Jamaat members in each group (Ali 2010, [10,12,13,29]). Each person in the group has his own role and tasks, because not everybody is permitted to speak when conducting preaching activities. One person has the role of *mutakallim* or key speaker; another as *dalil* or guide who leads to the houses, and the others join as *makmur* and *mustami*, which mean to accompany and listen [10,40].

Of the community members whose homes they visit, some may have previously joined prayer and sermons, and others are new to Tablighi Jamaat preaching practices. The *dalil* plays an important role here because he knows who is a potential candidate and possible recruit for the Tablighi Jamaat movement [40]. They visit homes, knocking on doors and introduce themselves and their reasons for visiting. In accordance with Islamic ethics, in order to strengthen the sense of brotherhood, Tablighi Jamaat greet each other with hugs and a kiss on each cheek. In the Covid-19 era, this *jaulah* practice is dangerous and has the potential to spread the virus not only amongst Tablighi Jamaat members but also to the wider community [37].

Other risky preaching practices that could facilitate the spread of Covid-19 include sitting together in a crossed-legged position with each knee touching the knee of the person sitting on either side of each member. Sitting in this way, in a circle, while listening to the sermon is a part of the Tablighi Jamaat identity. Prior to the sermon, members will be instructed to sit in a tight-knit circle with knees touching, the reason being that if there is a gap between knees, then Satan could enter the circle. The practice of sitting in close proximity has potential to spread Covid-19 [37].

Other forms of social interaction, such as eating together from one large plate (*nampan*) using the right hand only to take the food, also contribute to the direct transmission of the virus. Tablighi Jamaat members also sleep in a group together in the mosque as part of the *iktikaf* ritual. Eating and sleeping together in this way is seen as a part of the Prophet's tradition. Again, the aim to create a feeling of

brotherhood and solidarity amongst Tablighi Jamaat members, yet in the Covid-19 era, these practices pose a massive health risk. The communal use of mosque bathrooms where soap is not provided also poses a risk for the transmission of Covid-19.

Tablighi Jamaat preaching patterns rooted in brotherhood pose a risk to the spread of Covid-19. Furthermore, as shown above, the Tablighi Jamaat Covid-19 clusters in Malaysia, India, Pakistan and Indonesia highlight that Tablighi Jamaat practices do facilitate transmission of the virus. In spite of this, the Tablighi Jamaat view of the Covid-19 phenomenon is not as a major threat. and what measures they are taking to reconstruct and negotiate their religious practice so that they are able to implement strategies to prevent the spread of the virus.

### 3.1.2. *Tablighi Jamaat under Covid-19 on Lombok*

After the emergence of a new cluster of Covid-19 from the international Tablighi Jamaat *ijtima* in Gowa, people on Lombok (an island in West Nusa Tenggara province, Indonesia) were concerned and started to panic about the Tablighi Jamaat. People worried that members of the Tablighi Jamaat would bring Covid-19 into their communities and become new agents to disseminate the pandemic in environments where they settled. Members of the Tablighi Jamaat on Lombok do not live in the same area, but rather they are diffused through villages across Lombok. Since they live in different places, the process of spreading Covid-19 had the potential to go rapidly. This condition gave birth to a serious stigmatization and the strict social isolation of Tablighi Jamaat. Even family members of Tablighi Jamaat followers closed their doors when these relatives came to visit. This fear and concern were strengthened by news from both the mass media and the government highlighting new clusters from Gowa.

The *ijtima* in Gowa generated many controversies and much resistance to the Tablighi Jamaat. In March 2020, Covid-19 was just beginning to spread through Indonesia and the government had neither discourse nor instructions about the prohibition of large-scale religious activities. However, people were angry and upset with the members of the Tablighi Jamaat because they were viewed as stubborn for refusing to follow governmental instructions, all in the name of religion. After the *ijtima* event was dissolved, the government took decisive action by tracing and testing all Tablighi Jamaat members who attended the event from every party of Indonesia, including Lombok. Yet not all members who attended the event went to quarantine; only those who returned reactive tests were quarantined for 14–20 days. This was the first massive cluster of Covid-19 on Lombok, which then brought stigmatization, social isolation, and discrimination towards the Tablighi Jamaat.

The case on Lombok shows that Tablighi Jamaat members refused to believe that the Covid-19 virus was dangerous. According to Mugni (42 years old), one of the members of Tablighi Jamaat said that the Covid-19 panic was just a trick, because those who were suspected as being positive for the virus were mostly healthy. "Covid-19 is actually just a normal illness; what is strange is that we are classified as positive even though we are not sick and no one is dying. We just have runny noses and high temperatures because of the conditions of the place which are dirty, and then I am called 'reactive'." In his opinion, Covid-19 was presented as a fact but it felt as if it did not actually exist—it was just created as an issue in society without a real basis. This view of a Tablighi Jamaat member was in conflict with the medical findings that clearly identified many positive tests from Tablighi Jamaat followers who attended the gathering in Gowa. Another reason why Tablighi Jamaat members did not believe in Covid-19 was because of the unclear information circulating on social media and the weak policies from the government on leaving open public places like markets and malls, while mosques and religious sites were closed.

Field data showed that Tablighi Jamaat members were not following health protocols in their communities. Because of their beliefs that Covid-19 was a global conspiracy that did not actually pose a threat to health, they ignored health protocols in their proselytization activities. They occasionally wore masks, for example when they were traveling outside their home communities, but this was only to protect their social image to appear as if they were following government rules, while in actuality they were in opposition and felt that masks could not be used when performing daily prayers. Thus, Tablighi Jamaat members did not use masks when they gathered together with others for congregational prayers, listening to *bayan* sermons, eating together with friends, and meeting with other groups that came to visit their centers. Even non-members had to remove their masks when praying in Tablighi Jamaat centers. When the author attended the main mosque in Mataram city, he was the only one wearing a mask and became an object of jokes because he was seen as more afraid of the coronavirus than of God.

Tablighi Jamaat members stealthily and softly resisted governmental policies. For example, when the government ordered mosques locked down and Muslims to perform Friday midday prayers (the traditional congregational prayer) in their homes, the Tablighi Jamaat continued to stealthily perform congregational prayers with others in their community. Gozali Ma'rif (47 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat activist, stated that he and his friends kept performing congregational prayers at the mosque. They looked for mosques far from the city so that police officers and public health officials would not discover them. After lockdown was lifted in some cities, the Tablighi Jamaat restarted its preaching activities all over Indonesia in spite of remaining social restrictions. The group strengthened its preaching activities and campaigned on the idea that Covid-19 was not a dangerous virus. In each *bayan* sermon attended by the author, Tablighi Jamaat members discussed how Covid-19 was not real and was rather a made-up global conspiracy to overthrow Islam.

Lombok was one of the regions that reopened flight access from the outside after two months of lockdown. The Tablighi Jamaat took advantage of this situation to receive members from other regions to come and perform proselytization and preaching activities on the island. The decision of Tablighi Jamaat members to open their center to visits (in their idiom, to become a site for *khuruj* for outside members) had great potential to create new local clusters of Covid-19. Members came to Lombok from almost every province in Indonesia during the pandemic. The author met a group from Jakarta of seven members, including a member named Abu Zar, and they circulated for 40 days to proselytize on Lombok. Abu Zar when performing *khuruj* to East Lombok explained in an interview, "Our faith in God cannot lose to the coronavirus." He also explained, "We came to Lombok to revive the proselytization that almost died after Tablighi Jamaat members were slandered as carriers of the virus. We are all healthy; we are not carrying any virus. We are very grateful



that we can be received here to proselytize even though the conditions are very limited.” Besides meeting Abu Zar’s group, the author also met groups from West Java, East Java, and Sumatra conducting preaching activities on Lombok.

Tablighi Jamaat members from outside the region who came to Lombok did not follow health protocols when in their center. They did not wear masks; they gathered and mixed with local congregants; they ate together; they sat without any social distancing for *bayan* sermons; and they walked around together (conducting *jaulah*) to local homes. They were entirely unafraid when with other Tablighi Jamaat members about carrying the virus or any spread among the group because of the nature of their meetings with each other. This was despite the fact that no one could guarantee that the visiting members were negative for Covid-19, and these groups also rejected the vaccine. They only depended on their mutual belief that Covid-19 would not come among them because they were practicing religious rituals. Mugni (42 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member, stated “Covid is not dangerous, it is just normal like any other flu. If we trust in our religion, whether it is dangerous or not is up to God.”

Not only did Tablighi Jamaat members from other regions come to Lombok, but members from Lombok also undertook khuruj to other regions amid the Covid-19 pandemic. When the author received data from the Tablighi Jamaat center in Jakarta, Tablighi Jamaat groups from Lombok were proselytizing in Jakarta and West Java. This group was brave enough to travel around West Java despite Large Scale Social Restrictions (in Indonesian called *pembatasan sosial berskala besar* or PSBB—a strong level of government restrictions) because of growing Covid-19 numbers. Ramadhan (56 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member from Central Lombok who joined the preaching group, explained “At this moment we are being tested by God, and we want to show that Covid cannot take down the Tablighi Jamaat. We are not afraid of coronavirus because it is a creation of God. We were given this virus because we rarely pray in the mosques, and God sees that.”

### 3.1.3. Tablighi Jamaat discourse on Covid-19: fear Allah, not corona

Tablighi Jamaat communities have developed a distinctive discourse as they face Covid-19. Michel Foucault [41] and Sara Mills [42] view discourse as something that is not born from an empty condition, but it is rather something that is born in response to other discourses in the form of contestation or opposition.

Discourse that has emerged in Tablighi Jamaat in relation to the pandemic is connected to other discourses embedded in Tablighi Jamaat contexts. The Tablighi Jamaat are a group known for their teachings on surrendering to God with a strong focus on the afterlife [11,15,43,44]. Because of this, Tablighi Jamaat members do not focus on worldly matters and do not discuss economic matters in their preaching. Tablighi Jamaat members demonstrate a commitment to their mission whereby they sell land, farm animals, and even family jewelry for the cause. Tablighi Jamaat wives and children are left at home while the men travel for the mission, and often they have no source of income, some barely manage with very little [40]. When Covid-19 emerged, Tablighi Jamaat members expressed no fear of becoming infected and, rather, were of the opinion that they were safe and protected from it [2,6,37].

Tablighi Jamaat’s concept of surrender to God is what propelled them to not take the health protocols seriously. When the wider Muslim community expressed fear of Covid-19, the Tablighi Jamaat challenged its existence. The view put forward by several Tablighi Jamaat members was that of “Allah is stronger than a virus”. This view contrasted with that of mainstream Muslims who began to challenge Tablighi Jamaat members, especially when they went ahead with their international gathering involving thousands of people. Tablighi Jamaat definitions and interpretations of the pandemic differ from normative Islamic understandings [37]. For example, in Indonesia, the Tablighi Jamaat hold contrasting views from major Islamic organisations that follow the Sunnah, or the traditions of the Prophet.

Mainstream Muslims and Islamic organisations have so far followed Hadith and government rules and regulations in relation to the pandemic. Indonesia’s largest Islamic organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, holds a different perspective of the pandemic in contrast to the Tablighi Jamaat. Said Aqil Siradj, the head of the organisation, stated that in Islam it is necessary to protect one’s health as well as that of others, and that we must use knowledge, not emotion, to work through the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, Indonesia’s Council of Ulama (known as Majelis Ulama Indonesia), also issued a fatwa stating that it is working with government protocols to protect citizens and prevent the spread of the virus. Muhammadiyah, the second-largest Islamic organisation in Indonesia, for instance shows its strong commitment to follow Muhammad’s guidance and help people as well as government to face the huge impact of Covid-19 [45]. In one of the Prophet Muhammad’s Hadith (traditional sayings), it is said that in relation to a pandemic people must stay in their locale and outsiders are not to enter. The Tablighi Jamaat interpret this Hadith differently from mainstream Muslims and do not follow it or government regulations on Covid-19 including the wearing of masks when in mosques.

They understand that a pandemic is when a life-threatening illness has the potential to quickly kill en masse in a community. Therefore, they do not perceive Covid-19 as a pandemic.

One can see the kinds of discourses and responses that have developed in Tablighi Jamaat circles by the comments and issues they discuss in the public sphere. A Tablighi Jamaat leader in India, Maulana Saad, spoke on the YouTube Markaz channel on March 19, 2020, stating that, “coronavirus is an *azaab* (God’s punishment)”, and asked his followers to run to the mosques. He went on, saying that the mosque is the best place to die, and that punishment is harsh for those who leave the mosque. Furthermore, he declared that the Tablighi Jamaat do not need to follow doctors’ advice or government requests to leave mosques. He reinforced this by claiming that the notion of infection spreading in mosques is a falsehood (*baatil khayal*) [46]. This statement emerged one day before the Indian government locked-down the Nizamuddin Tablighi Jamaat Center. Maulana Saad disagreed with the announcement that all places of worship were to be shutdown in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19. To the contrary, he was of the belief that the virus would not enter mosques because they are holy places of worship and that it is a hallucination that activities at the mosque could spread Covid-19 [46]. After the closure of the Nizamuddin Center and the evacuation of Tablighi Jamaat members, Maulana Saad changed his opinion. He issued a fatwa requesting Tablighi Jamaat members follow government protocols and delay all gatherings for the time being. He was subsequently accused of murder by the government for not following government orders from the outset, yet he did not present

himself in court [6].

Such discourses suggest that Covid-19 does not exist. As a result, many Tablighi Jamaat members do not believe in the virus and instead view the pandemic as a way to weaken Islam. Kusmiadi (32 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member from Lombok, believes that it is a global conspiracy to attack Islam by ordering Muslims to leave mosques. He, too, is of the belief that Corona virus is an illusion created by those against Islam and that the virus does not exist. He claims that there have been no Tablighi Jamaat deaths in Lombok due to Covid-19 despite the large numbers of Tablighi Jamaat in quarantine. In quarantine, he claims that Tablighi Jamaat members only consumed vitamins, refused medical assistance and after the 14 days were in good health.

Basharudin (65 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member from East Lombok admitted that he felt confused by Covid-19. When he was swab tested at a local clinic it gave a positive result, yet when he was tested at the hospital, he was negative. He said that he only ever had a cough, which is usual for a man his age, and those around him assumed it was Covid-19. Like Kusmiadi, Basharudin also believes that Covid-19 is a weapon to divide humanity and destroy the Muslim community by keeping them out of mosques. Basharudin goes on to question the existence of Covid-19 and suggests that mass organisations are instrumental in manipulating the Muslim community with Covid-19. He expressed confusion about why dirty markets have remained open, yet all mosques have been closed. He notes that Friday prayers banned, and yet mosques are clean places. Miftah (42 years old), another Tablighi Jamaat figure in Lombok, said that there is an awkwardness about Covid-19 because only people with previous health conditions die from it. He claimed that from 100 positive cases in West Nusa Tenggara province, there were no deaths due to the virus.

A number of Tablighi Jamaat members believe that they are protected from all viruses, including the coronavirus. This view went viral on social media when a Tablighi Jamaat figure gave a sermon in Makassar. He said, “a new virus has come along and the whole world has stepped aside, when in fact it is easy to deal with this Corona, just send the Tablighi Jamaat community to Corona and for sure Corona will be scared, not the other way around where the Muslim community is scared of Corona; the Muslim community is only scared of God. This has become a part of our preaching mission, Corona is not in charge, yet the government has spent so much money trying to fix this problem but instead is only creating more problems. If we place the Corona problem in the hands of the Tablighi Jamaat, the problem will be resolved” [47]. This snippet from the speech in Makassar went viral on social media. Following this, Tablighi Jamaat members appropriated the discourse and continue to maintain the belief that Covid-19 is nothing compared to the greatness of God.

Lasmi (53 years old) is a mother in a Tablighi Jamaat family who attended the meeting in Makassar. She was deeply affected by the closure of the meeting because she had assumed debt in order to attend. She explained, “Why do we have to be scared of Corona? If we die, we die. I have had 9 operations and been in 2 comas, but I did not die. God decides when it is time for us to die, humans do not decide this” [48]. These discourses about Covid-19 from the Tablighi Jamaat show that they do not believe in viruses. They believe that this virus is a conspiracy to weaken the Muslim community into leaving their faith. In summary, the Tablighi Jamaat community chooses to fear God, not Covid-19, and views the mosque as the best place for isolation and death.

Didi (aged 62) is the leader of the Tablighi Jamaat community in Mataram, Lombok. He perceives Covid-19 as ‘just an ordinary virus’ similar to other viruses, and therefore he believes there is no need to prevent people from worshipping in mosques. Like other Tablighi Jamaat members, he believes that it is not Covid-19 that kills people, but God. Didi’s understanding of Covid-19, together with wider Tablighi Jamaat discourses, has shaped the experiences of the Tablighi community in Lombok.

Khairul (62 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member from East Lombok, does not agree with labeling Covid-19 with the term *attha’un*, the term for a pandemic that took place in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. “Attha’un was much more dangerous and difficult to cure, so that people had to isolate themselves and could not go out. On the other hand, Covid-19 is everywhere, and many people recover from this illness. This is what makes me doubt, and then there is information about many people who do not have Covid-19 but the hospital asks their agreement to be infected with coronavirus so the hospital can get paid to treat them and get a subsidy from the government.” Khairul went on to say “Covid-19 is a virus that was made intentionally to scare the Islamic community so that they would distance themselves from their religion. The policies of the government often disadvantage the Islamic community, including locking down the mosques, but leaving traditional markets open. The people who go to the markets rarely wear masks and are hard to control, so the potential to spread Covid-19 is greater. These policies are not fair; mosques are much cleaner, so why are people forbidden to be there?”

Ruhman (29 years old) from East Lombok also doubts the truth of Covid-19. He said, “My personal view of Covid-19, if you break it down, is 60% not to believe it and 40% to believe. What I mean is the 60% majority is not to believe rather than to believe, because from the handling of cases, information that is circulating on electronic media and social media is just not clear. So, we members of Tablighi Jamaat see this Covid as just normal, we all gather as one because this is not an institution or organisation that has a leader or head. We keep on praying Friday prayers in the mosque, never absent even though the mosques have been locked down. Praise the Lord, hopefully God will accept this devotion. My reasoning is clear: I do not want to be beaten by people selling in the market. I am not afraid to sell, would I really be afraid to go to the mosque? I’m also a merchant.” Mugni (42 years old) sees Covid-19 as just a global issue. “The government asks us to close our mosques, even though Muslims are saved by the mosques. It is not appropriate at all to tell us to leave the mosques.”

#### 3.1.4. Stigmatization and social rejection

The presence of Covid-19 has had a broad impact on human life including in economic, social, education, institutional, governmental and religious sectors. Life has slowed down and undergone significant changes as a result [49–51]. In Indonesia, the government decision to close down schools has had a great impact on the quality of education output. Not all school children use technology and are therefore unable to join in online classes. The effects upon the religious sector have also been significant because the community feels as though they cannot express themselves in their worship practice. Mosques have been closed, communal prayers

have been banned, and religious meetings are not allowed to be held for the risk they pose in spreading Covid-19.

The Tablighi Jamaat are one group that has felt the effects of Covid-19 both at an organisational level and in the lives of its members. Tablighi Jamaat centers throughout the world had their activities frozen by governments after the death of Tablighi Jamaat members during a retreat. Deaths have occurred in Malaysia, India, Pakistan and Indonesia and governments have taken this seriously in order to prevent the infectious spread of the virus. On the other hand, large meetings continued to be held, with the notion of proving that the Tablighi Jamaat are immune to Covid-19. It is these views and behavior that have led to the wider community stigmatizing the group and challenging their presence in local communities. Government and society have indirectly created a negative stigma against the Tablighi Jamaat, and as a result communities fear their presence in society.

The coronavirus case that has befallen the Tablighi Jamaat community in Indonesia began with the international *ijtima* meeting held in various countries [32,37]. The Indonesian government recorded 1129 cases of members from Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jordan, and Morocco who were unable to return home. Only a small number successfully returned home because they transgressed immigration laws and Covid-19 protocols. Others were put in jail and quarantine [52]. Those Tablighi Jamaat who managed to return home have been accused of spreading the virus. Covid-19 exploded in Indonesia via the international meeting in Makassar on 20 to March 23, 2020. More than 10,000 members from Indonesia attended, including some foreigners. The negative stigma attached to the Tablighi Jamaat only strengthened from this point onwards.

There were at least 1600 Tablighi Jamaat from Lombok who attended the meeting in Makassar in March 2020. This meeting birthed a polemic and controversy in society because the Indonesian government had just announced that citizens were not to go outside of their homes unless for important reasons, and to avoid gatherings [53]. The government at that time had just completed the evacuation of 250 students from Wuhan, which itself was in lockdown [54]. Because the Tablighi Jamaat ignored government orders and went ahead with the meeting, the government felt forced to shut it down despite opposition from Tablighi Jamaat members.

The forced closure of the meeting created tension because a number of Tablighi Jamaat members wanted the meeting to continue because it had been planned long before Covid-19. A number of Tablighi Jamaat protested against the forced closure. One woman who together with her husband was trading at the meeting, expressed great opposition to the closure due to the financial loss. The woman argued that sex workers should be tested and not Tablighi Jamaat members [48]. According to Miftah, a young figure in the Tablighi Jamaat movement from Lombok, who was also present at the meeting in Makassar, there was already a sign that something was off in the meeting, and so the Tablighi Jamaat ulama decided to turn up early. He explained that they had already held an internal discussion before the event was formally closed. The government forced Tablighi Jamaat members to return home to their respective areas and go into quarantine for those who were infected. Because many Tablighi Jamaat who attended this event tested positive for Covid-19, the government raised the status of this meeting to that of a new Covid-19 cluster.

From that time onward, Tablighi Jamaat became targets for swab testing in their home areas, including in Lombok. The government continued to track them down because a number of them were not tested at the meeting and thus avoided quarantine. Social drama and stories circulated communities about the Tablighi Jamaat who refused testing, and subsequently led to their stigmatization as carriers of coronavirus [55]. In response to the attitude of the Tablighi Jamaat members, Zulkieflimansyah, the governor of West Nusa Tenggara province encouraged Tablighi Jamaat members to remain patient in facing the process of testing and recovering from Covid-19. For the community, he suggested being wiser in seeing this event because there was no intention from the Tablighi Jamaat to carry and spread the virus. "I understand their attitude and belief because I have been a part of Tablighi Jamaat for a long time," he said. "Tablighi Jamaat is a sincere and patient group" [56].

The community in Lombok views them as uncooperative in terms of testing and quarantine, especially because many Tablighi Jamaat members publicly opposed health officials. HM (65 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member from West Lombok, threatened and kicked a health official who wanted to take him for further testing at the hospital. He was of the belief that he was not infected with the virus and did not need testing or quarantine. He said, "I did not want to go to the hospital, because I was, and am, fine." The health official who went to his house to collect him was dressed in Covid-19 protective wear and was ready to accompany him to the hospital by car [55].

Another case involving a Tablighi Jamaat member was captured by CCTV. It showed the Tablighi Jamaat man trying to escape from the quarantine room at the hospital by forcing open a window [57]. Hospital staff and police acted immediately in the hunt for this Tablighi Jamaat infected escapee. This particular Tablighi Jamaat member was initially tested at a local clinic with a negative result. But because he had attended the meeting in Makassar and had a light cough, health officials forced him out of his home and took him to the hospital. Because of this case, a number of Tablighi Jamaat members started to hide at family members' houses in order to avoid being tested. Of those Tablighi Jamaat who were tested in West Nusa Tenggara, 100 tested positive for Corona.

The majority of Tablighi Jamaat members infected with Covid-19 have experienced some kind of social stigma in their communities as infectious carriers and as a group that goes against the government. They also experienced isolation and marginalization in communities. Generally, wider society was, and still is, reluctant to communicate and interact with the Tablighi Jamaat, even those who are not infected. Usman (63 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member, talked of the adversity he faced in the aftermath of being accused of carrying Corona. When he met with members of the wider community, they would run away and avoid him because they were scared they would catch the virus. Everywhere he went, he felt that people rejected him, including his close family and friends. He is now unable to obtain work because of the stigma attached to his identity and is constantly asked if he is infected with Corona.

Latif (55 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member infected with Covid-19, has had to accept his new life situation, which is now full of stigma and labeling as a coronavirus carrier. His family is also experiencing social stigma and isolation as a result of this. The family business (they owned a small restaurant selling fried rice) has suffered greatly. Whereas prior to Covid-19, people would line up to purchase his food, now customers are afraid of becoming infected, despite Latif now being clear of the virus. Habib (45 years old), another Tablighi Jamaat member who was present at the meeting in Makassar, is also experiencing rejection and isolation. Despite



testing negative, the stigma attributed to him from the wider society has stuck. His daughter was supposed to get married, but due to Covid-19 and the stigma attached to his family, including his daughter, the daughter's fiancé's family has withdrawn due to concerns in the village about Covid-19. As a result, Habib's family had to travel to the fiancé's village and discuss alternatives.

Khairul (62 years old) was deeply traumatized when he was quarantined, because before this he had never heard of the term "coronavirus" until his case arose. "However, I did everything with acceptance. I was negative, but accused of being positive, but I was perfectly healthy when I returned from Gowa, Makassar. However, because [the cluster] was exposed in the media and there arose a stigma, I was forbidden to return to my village. After quarantining twenty days, I returned home and society was still afraid to meet with me. However, I still went to my fields because that is my job—what could I eat if I do not go to the field? I was said because everyone distanced themselves from me and accused me. Society did not permit me to pray in the mosque, so I just prayed at home with my family."

Mugni (42 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member, felt the strength of the social stigma. All of his neighbors gave him a message not to come out because it would endanger the neighborhood. "I was also forbidden to pray the supernumerary prayers during the month of Ramadan, even though I myself was proven to be negative. I was disappointed with this stigma, thinking that with time society would change. In my daily life I rarely wore a mask because it was uncomfortable, and when it comes to hand-washing the Tablighi Jamaat community was used to this from before, each time we wanted to pray and did our ablutions of course we were accustomed to washing our hands. Murtini (59 years old), the wife of a Tablighi Jamaat member and businesswoman in the distribution business who had customers from the Tablighi Jamaat community, also experienced stigmatization from society. Her goods were rejected because she had a business relationship with the Tablighi Jamaat, even though her customers had not joined the gathering in Gowa.

Bukhori (42 years old), a member of Tablighi Jamaat from Narmada, West Lombok, said that he experienced stigma and discrimination, but he surrendered all of this to God. "I was slandered as being infected with Covid-19, and this news was circulated on WhatsApp, even though I was negative. I could not freely leave my house because I was accused, and I had to isolate myself at home. I immediately forgave the people who slandered me." Budiman (47 years old), a Tablighi Jamaat member from North Lombok, was forced to quarantine for the second time by the government. The regent of North Lombok sent civil servants to escort him back into quarantine. Budiman rejected this, and he was prepared to fight with the health officials. Budiman was not taken into quarantine, in the end, to avoid a conflict with local society.

Such stigmatization also impacted Tablighi Jamaat preaching practices. Prior to the pandemic, the Tablighi Jamaat had an image in society as a pious group strong in proselytization practice. Every month they conduct what is called *khuruj* where they travel to preach. This involves leaving their families for 3 days, 40 days, 4 months or 1 year. After the emergence of Covid-19, the Tablighi Jamaat are no longer able to carry out preaching activities. Tablighi Jamaat mosques are still in lockdown, and they are also unable to preach in other mosques in society. Members of society continue to express fear about contracting the virus if the Tablighi Jamaat enter their mosques.

Social stigma towards Tablighi Jamaat members does not only impact social relations in communities, but it also affects the level of support they receive for preaching activities from society and government. The wider community expresses a fear of them, and there have been cases where Tablighi Jamaat members have been asked to leave mosques for fear of spreading coronavirus. This fear has had a negative impact on attracting new members to the movement. Field data shows that amongst Tablighi Jamaat members themselves, there has been no significant impact because they continue to quietly operate their mosques for Friday prayers and do not practice social distancing and mask wearing, despite government regulations. They also continue to receive guests from other parts of Indonesia. Throughout 2020, Tablighi Jamaat members both online and in the field said repeatedly that coronavirus does not exist and that it is only a conspiracy to weaken Islam. In sum, data show that Tablighi Jamaat communities in Lombok and Indonesia have strengthened their brotherhood as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic despite the stigma they receive from wider society.

### 3.1.5. Reconstructing new preaching patterns and approaches

The emergence of Covid-19 has brought with it several lessons for the Tablighi Jamaat. Despite the fact that a large number of Tablighi Jamaat members do not believe in the existence of Covid-19, data reveal that many Tablighi Jamaat have been infected—and not only in Indonesia but in other countries with a strong Tablighi Jamaat presence. The cases in Malaysia, India, and Pakistan amongst others, shocked the world because of the ways in which the Tablighi Jamaat preaching practices contributed to the spread of Covid-19. The Tablighi Jamaat did not effectively deal with government and social pressure by adhering to health protocols including physical distancing, staying at home, wearing a mask and washing hands with soap, in the fight against Covid-19. The government also enforced a lockdown of all mosques including Tablighi Jamaat mosques, and community mosques were especially strict in banning Tablighi Jamaat from entering for daily prayers and preaching activities.

The stopping of preaching activities across the world due to the threat they posed to spreading the virus subsequently stopped all Tablighi Jamaat preaching programs. Like other Muslims, the Tablighi Jamaat were forced to stay at home. They reconstructed their preaching by conducting what they call *makami* preaching, which is a kind of preaching practised at home with family members. Yet, a number of Tablighi Jamaat quietly continued to hold meetings in their mosques without attracting attention from the government or wider community. They invited religious figures to give religious through social media such as audio recordings and short videos. By looking at the phenomenon of religious change in Tablighi Jamaat preaching practices, we can see that there has been a kind of reconstruction that has taken place in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The group has had to adapt in flexible ways to the situation at hand, and because the pandemic is not yet over, the Tablighi Jamaat will not be able to resume its regular form of preaching. This leaves the group in an ongoing form of negotiation. The reconstruction of religious practice occurs in several contexts as society faces the rules and challenges of the 'new normal' era. One can see that views and meanings attributed to the pandemic are varied, and those that are less informed than scientific ones, such as those arising from notions about all Tablighi Jamaat members and their families as Corona carriers, have indeed become important sources of

information for Tablighi Jamaat members to grapple with as they negotiate with the pandemic.

The same can be said for traditional Tablighi Jamaat practices that have been challenged by physical distancing, wearing masks and avoiding physical contact. For example, sitting together while listening to sermons is now not allowed due to the implementation of the World Health Organisation's 1.8 m distance rule. Similarly, with the five daily prayers, Muslims are expected to follow social distancing rules while praying. The Tablighi Jamaat practice of reinforcing kinship and brotherhood by eating together from the same plate using hands and not utensils, is also prohibited for the risk it poses to spreading Covid-19. Rice boxes are now being used as substitutes or Tablighi Jamaat members bring their own plate of food to meetings. The Tablighi Jamaat practice of *iktikaf* (staying overnight together in mosques) has also experienced change due to the social distancing rule.

The Tablighi Jamaat in response to these changes have developed ways to negotiate their preaching practices through the use of social media by engaging platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Zoom as methods to socialise their programs. Pre-Covid-19, Tablighi Jamaat communities in Indonesia did not use social media to this extent. One can see that the group has adapted to change by engaging new media platforms to disseminate their teachings online.

#### 4. Conclusion

Covid-19 has significantly impacted the ways in which the Tablighi Jamaat community on Lombok, and in Indonesia more broadly, conduct their religious activities. The group's preaching activities in particular have faced serious challenges because they are officially no longer able to travel from mosque to mosque as they formerly did. They have been hit with national and regional government policies that limit crowds, including gathering for religious purposes. For the Tablighi Jamaat, communal preaching patterns have become a source of frustration in the Covid era. With the 'new normal' conditions, the group is under pressure to find new ways of preaching and carrying out other compulsory duties in accordance with government policies for Covid-19.

This article has shown how in Indonesia, the Tablighi Jamaat have put forward a perspective and interpretation of the Covid-19 pandemic that differs from government and mainstream Islamic organisations. The majority of Tablighi Jamaat believe that Covid-19 is not a serious threat to human health and is, instead, just another ordinary virus that should not be feared. Their understanding of a pandemic is where death occurs on a mass level in a community, like what happened during the time of the Prophet. This kind of interpretation has generated counter-responses from mainstream Islamic organisations including Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah and Salafi groups, together with government bodies, that oppose the kind of discourses that the Tablighi Jamaat promote.

As a result of their views on and practices regarding Covid-19, the group has undergone stigmatization in the wider community. The stigma and marginalization the Tablighi Jamaat experienced in the aftermath of the Gowa meeting on Sulawesi has not prevented the group from carrying out their activities. While some Tablighi Jamaat members follow government rules regarding quarantine, others do not, and they continue to preach in their own communities and mosques. In the current post-lockdown environment, the Tablighi have resumed travel around Indonesia for preaching activities. During prayers and sermons in mosques, Tablighi Jamaat members continue to ignore government protocols regarding face masks and social distancing. These examples demonstrate the strength of the Tablighi Jamaat's brotherhood bond and unwavering belief in the power of prayer and faith as protector during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The case of the Tablighi Jamaat in Indonesia is a particularly good example of the conflict between religious practices and Covid-19 control policies, however it is far from unique. In other Muslim contexts, as well as in other religious communities around the world, when specific religious practices are incompatible with Covid-19 mitigation, religious groups tend to reject public health guidance and sometimes deny the truth of the pandemic. This situation can give rise to social stigma, further complicating the participation of these religious groups in society.

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[58,59].

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