Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama‘at

Marloes Janson – Lecturer in anthropology at SOAS, University of London
December 16 2013, 15.30-17.00
Staffseminar organized with African Studies Centre
Venue: Room 3A.06, Pieter de la Court Building

In this Staff Seminar, Marloes Janson talks about her monograph ‘Islam, Youth, and Modernity in the Gambia: The Tablighi Jama‘at’

Abstract
Based on extensive ethnographic field research, this monograph deals with the sweeping emergence of the Tablighi Jama‘at – a transnational Islamic missionary movement that has its origins in the reformist tradition that emerged in India in the mid-nineteenth century – in the Gambia in the past decade. It explores how a movement that originated in South Asia could appeal to the local Muslim population – youth and women in particular – in a West African setting, to the extent that ‘converts’ were willing to abandon their youthful pursuits and transgress generational and gender boundaries for a life devoted to God. Tracing the biographical narratives of five Gambian Tablighis, the book provides an understanding of the ambiguities and contradictions young people are confronted with in their (re)negotiation of Muslim identity, and the strategies they deploy in manoeuvring between being young and being Muslim. Together these narratives form a picture of how Gambian youth go about their lives within the framework of neo-liberal reforms and renegotiated parameters informed by the Tablighi model of how to be a ‘true’ Muslim, interpreted as a believer who is able to reconcile his or her faith with a modern lifestyle. At a time when a school diploma and even university degree is no longer considered sufficient to secure upward social and economic movement with the promise of a successful life, young Gambians have found in the Jama‘at ways to make Islam compatible with emerging configurations of progress, morality, personhood, and intergenerational and gender relationships.

Bio
Marloes Janson holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Leiden University. She is a lecturer in anthropology at SOAS, University of London, and was previously a researcher at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) in Berlin. She is the book reviews editor of the Journal of Religion in Africa. Janson has conducted extensive ethnographic field research in the Gambia, Senegal, and Nigeria.