

Social and Literary Structure of Isnad: A Historical Perspective

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“İsnadın İçtimâî ve Edebî Yapısı: Tarihi Bir Yaklaşım”

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Özet: Bu makale hadis rivayetinin, sosyal yapı ile ilişkisini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada, sözel ve sosyal süreçlerin birbirini etkiledikleri, dolayısıyla birinin diğerine indirgenemeyeceği fikri savunulmaktadır. Değişen sözel yapının *isnâdın* sosyal yapısına belirgin bir etkisinin olduğuna işaret edildiği gibi, isnâdın sosyal yapısının sözel yapıya etkisinin bulunduğu da gösterilmeye çalışılmaktadır. Tahlilde, dilbilim, edebî analiz, rivâyetbilim ve sosyal network analizi gibi nispeten yeni yöntemler, İslâm medeniyetinin ayırt edici özelliklerinden olan hadis rivâyet ağı sisteminin daha iyi anlaşılmasını sağlamak için kullanılmıştır. Ayrıca, hadis rivâyet ağının dinamik ve değişken yapısı hadisin sosyal ve sözel boyutlarının bir-biri ile etkileşiminin incelenmesi suretiyle gösterilmeye çalışılmıştır.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Rivâyet, isnad, hadis, yaş yapısı, rivâyet tarzı, sünnet, toplumsal ağ analizi.

Introduction

Social network of hadith scholars is longer than a millennium. Through this network, hadith came down to us. It is traditionally known as the *isnad* system. It involves countless number of scholars in the wide spread geography of Islam. The intellectual preoccupation of these scholars is known as the Science(s) of Hadith. ‘Science (*al-‘ilm*)’ here simply refers to a systemized body of knowledge. The Science of Hadith, as an academic study, is primarily a literary discipline dealing with the narratives about Prophet Muhammad (s.a.v.), yet, it has far reaching ramifications in Islamic culture and society. If the Qur’an is divine knowledge, then, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.v.) is its concrete and living embodiment. When she was asked about his conduct, Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.v.), replied: He was the walking Qur’an. Islam has two foundational scriptures or narratives, organically tied to each other, along with a multistream of interpretive traditions or metanarratives emerging around them.

A system of narration is constituted by narrators and listeners, texts of narrative, metanarrative(s), and the social network in which both the listeners and the tellers are embedded. The process of narration ties all these elements together. Within the context of hadith narration, these elements correspond to the master of hadith, the student of hadith, text of hadith, the metanarratives of hadith, and the isnad system, respectively. Below, I will discuss all these components and the way they are linked to each other within the context of hadith transmission network or Isnad system. I will show how both narrative and its holders are embedded in a stratified structure which helped determine whose narrative will gain more authority. The decision on the relative authority of a narrative is made by scholars who critically examine their texts and chains.

The question this chapter aims to answer is what is the logic behind this system of stratification? I shall return to this issue in greater detail shortly in the discussion of Methodology of Hadith. Yet to begin with, Ibn Khaldun’s account of hadith can help us as an outline of this logic. Ibn Khaldun designated a chapter in his *al-Muqaddima* (The Introduction) to the sciences in his time, among which the Science of Hadith occupied a distinguished place.

The sciences concerned with Prophetic traditions (hadith) are numerous and varied. One of them concerns abrogating and abrogated traditions... Two traditions may be mutually exclusive, and it may be difficult to reconcile them with the help of interpretation. If, in such a case, it is known that one is earlier than the other, it is definite that the latter (tradition) abrogates (the earlier one). This is one of the most important and difficult sciences of tradition.

Another of the sciences of tradition is the knowledge of the norms that leading hadith scholars have invented in order to know the chains of transmitters, the (individual) transmitters, their names, how the transmission took place, their conditions, their classes, and their different technical terminologies. This is because general consensus makes it obligatory to act in accordance with information established on the authority of the Messenger of God. This requires probability for the assumption that the information is true. Thus, the independent student must verify all the means by which it is possible to make such an assumption.

Having introduced the subject matter and its significance, Ibn Khaldun illustrates the process through which the relative reliability of a hadith is determined by the critics.

He may do this by scrutinizing the chains of transmitters of traditions. For that Purpose, one may use such knowledge of probity, accuracy, thoroughness, and lack of carelessness or negligence, as the most reliable Muslims describe a transmitter possessing.

Then, there are the differences in rank that exist among transmitters.

Further, there is the way the transmission took place. The transmitter may have heard the shaykh (dictate the tradition), or he may have read (it from a book) in his presence,

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or he may have heard (it) read in the presence of the shaykh and the shaykh may have written (it) down for him, or he may have obtained the approval of the shaykh for written material (*munawala*), or he may have obtained his permission to teach certain traditions (*ijazah*).

The process of critical scrutiny of narratives eventually leads to a hierarchical system of narrative and narrators. A set of concepts are produced and employed for the purpose of indicating their place in the refined stratification.

<Then there is difference> with regard to the (degree) of soundness or acceptability of the transmitted material. The highest grade of transmitted material is called 'sound' by (the hadith scholars). Next comes 'good.' The lowest grade is 'weak.' (The classification of traditions) includes also: 'skipping the first transmitter on Muhammad (s.a.v.)'s authority' (mursal), 'omitting one link' (munqati), 'omitting two links' (mu'dal), 'affected by some infirmity' (mu'allal), 'singular' (shadhhdh), 'unusual' (gharib), and 'singular and suspect' (munkar). In some cases, there is a difference of opinion as to whether (traditions so described) should be rejected. In other cases, there is general agreement that (they should be rejected). The same is the case with (traditions with) sound chains. In some cases, there is general agreement as to their acceptability and soundness, whereas, in other cases, there are differences of opinion. Hadith scholars differ greatly in their explanation of these terms.

Then, there follows the discussion of terms applying to the texts of the traditions. A text may be 'unusual' (gharib), 'difficult' (ambiguous, muskhill), '(affected by some) misspelling (or misreading),' or (containing) homonyms' (muftariq), or '(containing) homographs' (mukhtalif).

On all these points, hadith scholars have laid down a canon explaining the (various) grades and terms, and adequate to protect the transmission from possible defects¹.

Ibn Khaldun's account briefly demonstrates the rationally constructed and extremely self-reflexive system of traditional scholars of hadith². Below, I will briefly survey the evolving history and the rather dynamic and fluid system of hadith transmission network.

I. A Structure from Reflexive Speech

"All those who listen to me shall pass on my words to others and those to others again; and may the last ones understand my words better than those who listen to me directly." With these words, Prophet Muhammad (s.a.v.) concluded his Farewell Sermon which he gave atop his camel in the middle of the Arabian Desert near Mecca during his Farewell Pilgrimage (CE 631). Following the Prophet's oft-repeated instruction, as they had usually done since the beginning of Muhammad's Prophethood, his Companions carefully recorded in their memories the exact words they heard and the exact deeds they saw in order to convey them to their families, friends, tribes and especially the next generations. One wonders if they ever imagined to what extent their speech, reported over and over by subsequent narrators from east to west, contributed to the timeless social-literary monument which the hadith transmission network became.

Hadith, the reflexive speech³ by which we know retrospectively what the Prophet said and what he did not say, constituted the impetus for a network of narrators. In an attempt to control fictive narrative, narrators of hadith from subsequent generations insured that they learned the authorities through which the narrative reached down to them. This stemma or chain of authorities came to be called *isnad*, literally 'support' or 'backing.' In a few centuries after the Prophet's demise, chains of narrators grew longer.

From this process emerged the structure of hadith with its two elements: the chain of narrators (*isnad*) and the narrative text (*matn*), together constituting a new style of narrative. For interpretation, the chain needs to be contextualized in timespace as part of a larger network of narrators; and the text in the metanarrative as part of larger network of narratives. Thus a reader has to pay attention to time and space in the chain and in the text. The following example from Bukhari's hadith compilation will illustrate this better. Dates of death, according to the Hijrah calendar⁴, and names of the places

¹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Tr. Franz Rosenthal), Princeton 1958 [1967], II, 447-451.

² Commenting on the state of the Science of Hadith in his time, Ibn Khaldun writes: "At this time, traditions are no longer published, nor are the (publications of) traditions by former scholars corrected. Common (experience) attests the fact that these numerous religious leaders, close to each other in time, were too capable and too firmly possessed of independent judgment to have neglected or omitted any tradition, so that it is impossible that some later scholar might discover one. (Therefore), at this time, one is concerned with correcting the principle written works, with fixing the accuracy of their transmission, and with establishing continuous chains of transmitters leading back to the authors, chains that are sound throughout. With very few exceptions, no attention has been paid to more than five works" (Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, II, 456).

³ The present approach is particularly interested in the constructive role of reported speech, the most important subsection of reflexive speech, which is defined as language use that represents its own structure and use, including everyday metalinguistic activities of reporting, characterizing and commenting on speech (Lucy, John A. (ed.), *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*. Cambridge 1993, pp. 1-2). Conversely, object language refers to objects, but not to speech. Daily language incorporates both forms which serve different (meta)semantic, and (meta)pragmatic purposes (Bakhtin, M. M., *The Dialogic Imagination* (ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist), Austin 1981, pp. 261-263; White, Harrison, *Chains of Opportunity: System Models of Mobility in Organizations*, Cambridge 1970.

⁴ Hijrah dates are denoted usually by AH, which begins with the flight of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in CE 620. The dates reported in this study are according to CE unless otherwise indicated.

where the narrators lived have been added so as to better visualize dissemination of narrative across generations in time and space.

[Bukhari (194-256, Bukhara) wrote], Al-Humaidi Abd Allah ibn az-Zubair [d. 143, Mecca] related to us saying: Sufyân [107-198, Mecca] related to us, saying: Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Ansârî [d. 143, Medina] related to us, saying: Muhammad ibn Ibrahim at-Tamimi [d. 120, Medina] told me that he heard 'Alqamah ibn Waqqâs al-Laithi [d. 80, Medina] say: I heard 'Umar ibn al-Khattab [d. 24, Medina] say on the pulpit: I heard the Apostle of God [d. 10, Medina], peace be upon him, say: "*Behold, the actions are but [judged] according to the intentions; and, behold, unto every man is due but what he intended. Thence, whoso migrateth for the sake of this world or to wed a woman, his migration is [accounted] for that unto which he migrated*"⁵.

Reflexive speech connected generations of narrators to each other, thus playing the most crucial role in the construction and perpetuation of the network. Object language usually establishes ties between the present actors, but reflexive language has the power of engaging actors in a widespread network, thereby demonstrating explicitly the relationship between literary and social structures. Without the reflexive power of language, it would have been impossible to interconnect multitudes of narrators in a social network.

The protocol of narration or reporting speech came under close scrutiny among hadith narrators because of its consequences on the authenticity of narration. There are a multiple number of phrases used to indicate the transmission of narrative from one scholar to another. Each one of these phrases reflects a type or an aspect of the connection between the teller and the listener.⁶ For instance, 'I heard from x,' is not the same as simply saying 'from x.' The former specifies the coexistence in time and space as well as direct hearing, while the latter keeps all these ambiguous. Similarly, 'x told me,' is not the same as 'x said.' In the former, it specifies that it was a direct and personal contact, whereas in the latter, this is not clear.

Attempts to codify and rank protocols of reported speech did not gain unanimous support from the narrators. Yet, the *isnad* and the hadith are classified according to the phrases used to indicate reported speech⁷. For

⁵ Asad, Muhammad, *Sahih al-Bukhari: Early Years of Islam*, Gibraltar 1981, pp. 3-4. This hadith was narrated through several chains, slightly differing in the phraseology of the text, with an increasing spread in "depth" and "breath". It reflects the "disjointed" form of hadith genre, which gives the impression that a speech event is separated from larger context. This larger text is intentionally broken, leaving the question of what happened before and after unaddressed. If we want to reconstruct the sequential order of the events, we will need to piece this hadith with others. These features will be further elaborated later in the discussion.

⁶ al-Salih, Subhi, *Hadis Ilimleri ve Istilahlari* (tr. Yasar Kandemir), Ankara 1988, pp. 70-84.

⁷ Kocuyigit, *Hadis Usûlü*, Ankara: İlmî Yayınlar ts., pp. 117-131. For instance "mu'an'an" hadith denotes that in the *isnad* narrators reported the hadith from each other using the adverb ('an) which literally means "from." An example would be like saying "from x that he said..." Here the way the speech was heard is not specified. This ambiguity might cause ambivalence of the

instance, the famous Bukhari, author of the most respected hadith compilation, considered all phrases used in reporting speech to mean that both the teller and the listener were in the presence of each other and the narration was direct because, he argued, this is the only acceptable way of secure transmission. His standards, however, were hard to attain by the majority who used less strict criteria.

The authorities in the chain of narrative are linked to each other through reported speech until it reaches to the Companion who narrates a brief story about the Prophet or a saying by him. Therefore hadith employs both reported speech and narrative in the chain of authorities and in the actual text of narrative. The language use in the chain and the text of hadith displays different patterns and thus should be treated differently.

The structure of hadith makes explicit the ways in which literary and social structures bear upon each other by systematically recording what goes unnoticed in our daily life. In hadith, the structure in which the narrators and the narrative are embedded, which is only hinted at in varying degrees in other narrative social structures, is made explicit in writing. Both the text and the chain of previous narrators are narrated. The cultural subtext that comes with the narrative, without which it is impossible to interpret the narrative structure, is called metanarrative.⁸

From the time of the demise of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.v.) in 632, a social structure and a critical approach developed around hadith narration, which transformed this artifact from a conventional narrative into a 'science' with formal rules and terminology. The political, religious, and legal importance of hadith in social life, as the second scripture of Islam after the Qur'an, reinforced this process. The size of the network grew as Islam spread to other nations. Later, however, despite the continuous expansion of Islamic territories, the size of the network shrank.

The protocols of reporting speech and the producers of narration are common to all social networks. We are all implicitly aware of them because we strategically employ them in our day to day life. Yet, they are not exposed as much. Nor, as sociologists and linguists, do we emphasize their power in shaping our knowledge and relations.

listener to the hadith reported. Another type is "mu'en'en" in which case the hadith is reported as "*haddethana fulan enne fulan qal*" (such person told me that verily such person said). The word "enne" (verily) makes the connection stronger.

⁸ White, Hayden, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore 1973; Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction*. New York 1984; Somers, Margaret R., "What's Political or Cultural about Political Culture and the Public Sphere? Toward an Historical Sociology of Concept Formation." *Social Theory* 13 (2), 1995, pp. 113-144.

II. Content, Form and Network Spread of Narrative

How does the content and form of narrative bear upon the spread of its network? Current studies on hadith are silent on the relationship between literary structure of hadith and the configuration of its transmission network. This is because they are characterized by the traditional referential approach to narrative which concentrates solely on how narrative reflects what is assumed to be *the reality*. Nevertheless, in dealing with this the work of Hayden White on the content of the literary form of narrative, and Ong's work on oral and literary usage of language are illuminating.⁹

As Ong and Eco¹⁰ argue, some narrative structures are more likely than others to spread and consequently will be associated with larger networks of narrators. Ahadith with shorter sentences (additive style), mnemonic structures (formulaic) and stories as their content were more likely to spread compared to longer texts with plain prose and those dealing with legal injunctions. Ong's study about orality and literacy argues that narrative is the most convenient way for an oral culture to store and organize knowledge.¹¹ There are, however, constraints on the length and structure because of the limitations of human narrative in an oral culture. In line with Ong, although from a different point of view, Eco argues that 'disjointed' narrative is more appealing and all the cult narratives share the disjointed structure¹².

A hadith has the form of a brief narrative, a 'sound byte,' or a snapshot from the life of the Prophet, unencumbered with causal or chronological context. What did hadith narrators intend to do by creating this form? Hayden White argues that not only the text but also the form of a narrative has content. From this perspective, it is possible to ask what meaning does the form of hadith narrative carry? First of all, this form of narrative fostered the identity of hadith scholars in distinction from those who practiced other forms of narrative. The disjointed, plotless, and unsequential form differentiated hadith narrators from other communities¹³ which dealt with hadith:

storytellers (*qussas*), historians and biographers who presented their material in a coherent chronological order, a logic that was achieved by extensive use of fiction, according to hadith narrators.¹⁴ Narrative thus constructed, however, proved to be more appealing to the general public, which constituted a niche for the fictive mode of narrative about the Prophet in contradistinction to the empirical mode of jurists and hadith narrators. The dislike of certain hadith scholars for the story-tellers and even for historians and the apologetic reaction of others in defense of history is a well-known facet of Islamic intellectual history.

Chronological sequence was not a major concern for hadith narrators. Aristotle defined the plot (the *mythos*) as the 'arrangement of incidents' to be imitated by the narrative through mimesis.¹⁵ Ricoeur argues that mimesis is not straightforward: the mimetic process is a symbolic or allegoric representation in language of the universal human experience of temporality in actual or fictive events.¹⁶ Conversely, Barthes argues that 'narrative's function is not to represent, it is to constitute a spectacle.'¹⁷ For Barthes the coherence, unity, and naturalness of the text out of sequence are 'myths' to be denied by the critic whose task is to ceaselessly break and interrupt the narrative text, and disregard its seemingly natural divisions.¹⁸ Linear time was not, to early hadith narrators, an integral part of events anyway because the concept came into Arab culture late during the Caliphate of Umar, the architect of the Hijrah calendar.

More importantly, there seems to be a crucial pragmatic concern, as well, illustrated in the form of hadith. Disjointed narrative proved to be a mnemonic structure, more memorable, easier to recall and disseminate, and more compatible with the functioning of the oral mind. Thus, the more

⁹ Hayden, White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, 1987, pp. 1-57; Ong, Walter J., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London 1982, pp. 78-116.

¹⁰ Eco, Umberto, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 127-128.

¹¹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 31-77.

¹² Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, p. 127-128. Three examples of hadiths with large network spread, more than ten narrators in each generation. The prime example used by hadith scholars is "Whoever lies about me should get ready for his seat in Hellfire." Another example, "Water is from water." The last example, "The Muslim is the one from whose hand and tongue others are safe." Phraseology may change and the hadith may be embedded in a brief story contextualizing the text, based on the transmission chain.

¹³ Identity came from style. Although the identity "hadith narrator" (muhaddith) runs constant, the community of hadith narrators was further differentiated by other identities, depending

on position in the network: Companion vs. Successor; hafiz vs. shaikh; reliable vs. unreliable, etc. Furthermore, multiple identities arising out of membership in more than one network is not unusual: jurist and muhaddith, muhaddith and reciter (*qari*); or muhaddith and sufi.

¹⁴ Suyûti, *Tahdhir al-Khawass min Akadhib al-Qussas* (ed. Muhammad al-Sabbagh), Beirut nd.

¹⁵ Chatman, Seymour, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Itaca 1978, p. 43.

¹⁶ White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore 1987, pp. 169-184.

¹⁷ "Society is a spectacle he [Barthes] can help explain, by revealing to us some of the mechanisms by which it obscures its artificiality" (Sturrock, John, *Structuralism and Science*, Oxford 1979, p. 61).

¹⁸ Barthes, Ronald, *The Semiotic Challenge* (tr. Richard Howard), New York 1988, pp. 95-150. "We shall therefore star the text, separating in the manner of a minor earthquake, the blocks of signification of which reading grasps only the smooth surface, imperceptibly soldered by the movement of sentences, the flowing discourse of narration, the "naturalness of ordinary language" (Barthes, Ronald, *S/Z*. (tr. Richard Miller), New York 1974, 15). See also White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form*, pp. 35-36; Sturrock, *Structuralism and Science*, 1979, pp. 52-80).

broken a text, *a la* Barthes, the easier its dissemination¹⁹. I conjecture, in this connection, that hadith owes its large spread primarily to its disjointed form. If hadith had the form of an integrated single long text, only a selected few who had the dedication and means could have had access to it²⁰. The most-spread hadith, usually referred to as ‘mutawatir.’ If this is true, then, one can conjecture, those narrators with mnemonic narratives in their repertoire will become more prominent.

III. Rise of the Isnad System

The question of what gave rise to the hadith transmission network still remains to be fully addressed from a social and cultural perspective. It is not my primary purpose here, nor is it entirely possible with the current level of knowledge, to formulate a completely persuasive explanation of this question. Thousands of manuscripts, scattered all over the world, that might shed light on the issue have yet to be published. However, I can cite some converging interests which might be considered as probable reasons that contributed to the emergence of the hadith transmission network: (1) the Prophet’s constant injunctions to his Companions on transmitting his words to others, (2) the efforts of converts to learn the teaching of the Prophet, (3) the efforts of state and jurists to preserve the integrity of one of the sources of law, (4) the social status which the society bestowed on the scholars dealing with the narratives of the Prophet, (5) the sectarian conflicts that strove to support their views on the narratives of the Prophet and to destroy the narratives of the other side.

The historical roots of the hadith transmission network can be traced back to the pre-Islamic culture of Arabia. The ‘bookless’ culture of pre-Islamic Arabia required illiterate Arabs to make use of their memory extensively in their cultural and daily affairs. Memorizing poems and genealogies of tribes, families and famous figures was an integral part of this culture, especially for the cultivated few. With the advent of Islam, memorization found a new area of application; the Arabs began memorizing the Qur’an and the words of the Prophet (s.a.v.). Later, after the demise of the Prophet, when knowing the ties among hadith narrators became important, they began memorizing the connections between narrators, which was a body of knowledge formally very similar to that of tribal or familial genealogies.

According to various historical accounts, there is no clear beginning in the creation of the hadith transmission network and the sciences of hadith which

¹⁹ In fact, even in our secondary oral culture, all daily narrative is broken; we have to break it to be able to carry on our daily activities.

²⁰ Such an example is provided by Reynolds and Wilson in *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford 1968) Stemmatics produce transmission networks similar to *isnad*, but with a rather limited spread.

evolved, during the first two centuries of Islamic history. The hadith transmission network was rooted in the attempts of the Muslims to preserve the integrity of the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.v.), which they soon realized depended on a reliable transmission network. Forgery, motivated by sectarian and political interests or simply by mythical and fictional impulse, was against the interests of the Companions of the Prophet, the new converts, and the state. The Companions of the Prophet were entrusted by the Prophet to protect his legacy from forgery. It was also in the interest of the new converts to learn the authentic teachings of the Prophet. Furthermore, it was in the interest of the state to protect one of the principal bases from which Islamic law was derived. These efforts eventually led to the transformation of narrative from an art into a ‘science’ which resulted in the establishment of the ‘Science(s) of Hadith’, with its numerous branches, alongside the emergence of the transmission network of hadith that had survived for fourteen centuries until today.

Writing accompanied memorization from the beginning of hadith transmission, continually increasing in significance. Memorization of the Qur’an and hadith is considered in Islam a type of worship. In the first layer, only a few mastered writing and were allowed to write hadith. Others relied on their memory. Memory was valued higher than writing in this oral culture²¹; even the Prophet himself was unlettered. The number of hadith memorized by narrators is, by definition, correlated with the level of their knowledge.

One after another, great inventions by the collectivity of scholars emerged in scattered places. They contributed to the evolution of a narrative social structure. Muslims innovated a special unit of exchange, ‘hadith;’ a special type of social relation, ‘*riwaya*,’ meaning exchange of hadith; a special identity, ‘*muhaddith*,’ meaning expert in hadith; a special network, *isnad*, meaning tracing the knowledge to its source or simply ‘support’; as well as special criteria to distinguish various types of transmission chains. To insure the proper operation of the network, they had also innovated formal rules regulating the whole process, *Usul al-Hadith*, the Methodology of Hadith. These rules determined the inclusion in and exclusion from the hadith transmission network, and thus the scholarly activity of the narrators, the moral standards of their behavior, their relationships (as teacher-student) with

²¹ See Hart (1994, deriving from Ong, and Jameson) for the usage and role of narrative prior to the arrival of written culture among Greeks “as members of an essentially oral culture that used “stories of human action to store, organize, and communicate much of what they (knew)” (Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 140), with a way to understand the past and set moral boundaries for future behavior. Narrative in Greece has long been “a socially symbolic act,” reaching beyond description and into the realm of signification of experience” (Jameson, Fredric, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, 1981).

each other, and the authenticity of hadith in circulation. Multiple identities, such as *hafiz*, ‘well-known’, ‘obscure’, ‘trustworthy’ and ‘liar’, showing ranks and structural positions of narrators emerged and conflicted with each other in attempts to control the process of narrative dissemination.

Despite all these efforts for control, forgery continued, leaving devout followers of the Prophet, with an obligation to painstakingly search for his authentic narratives. Scholars of hadith, *al-muhaddithūn*, more than others in the Muslim community devoted their lives to this task and developed a vocation out of it. “On the whole, the traditionists, especially the pious ones who refused to serve the government as judges, paid greater attention to the *isnad*’s than did the rank and file of the legal profession and the rank and file of the historian”.

IV. Expanding Network and Shifting Centers

Hadith transmission network must be perceived against a larger historical background. External forces on hadith transmission network reveal themselves when we look at the shifting centers of hadith through time: (1) Mecca (610-620): the genesis of Islam, (2) Madina (620-661): the first Islamic state under the Prophet and his successors, (3) Syria (661-749): the Umayyad Empire, and (4) Iraq (749-1258): the Abbasid Empire. These cultural centers, with hadith as the integral part, were at the same time political centers of the time, which demonstrates the linkage between political and cultural history of Islam.

The number of hadith narrators who populated a city gives us a quantitative measure to determine the center of hadith narration (Ibn Hibban) (See Figure 2.3: Shifting centers of network through time). In Mecca the total number of Muslims did not exceed a few hundred. They gathered around the charisma of the Prophet and bore the pressures of rebelling against the dominant religion, culture and structure.²² In Medina, however, the total number of Muslims, who came from a variety of social, cultural and religious backgrounds, reached to thousands²³.

Disciples of the Prophet came to be known as the Companions. The most commonly accepted criterion of being considered a Companion was to have a direct tie to the Prophet in his lifetime. Those who lived at the same time with the Prophet without a direct tie to him are called *al-Muhadramun*. In the time

of the companions, Madina remained as the center of hadith, although new centers began to emerge with its 152 narrators, 23 of them being the most prominent. They occupied themselves primarily with teaching hadith to the young generations, who are called Successors (layer 2-4). Among themselves, however, they had very little narrative exchange.

In the time of Successors -those who had a direct tie to at least one Companion- Syria, in particular Damascus, the capital of the Umayyad Empire, emerged as the center of hadith with its 172 hadith narrators. The number of narrators who lived in Mecca was 70, a number that dropped even further later during the time of Successors of Successors- those who had a direct tie to at least one Successor (layer 5-7). In the time of the Successors of Successors, Iraq emerged as the center: Basra with its 107 narrators and Kufa with 98 narrators.

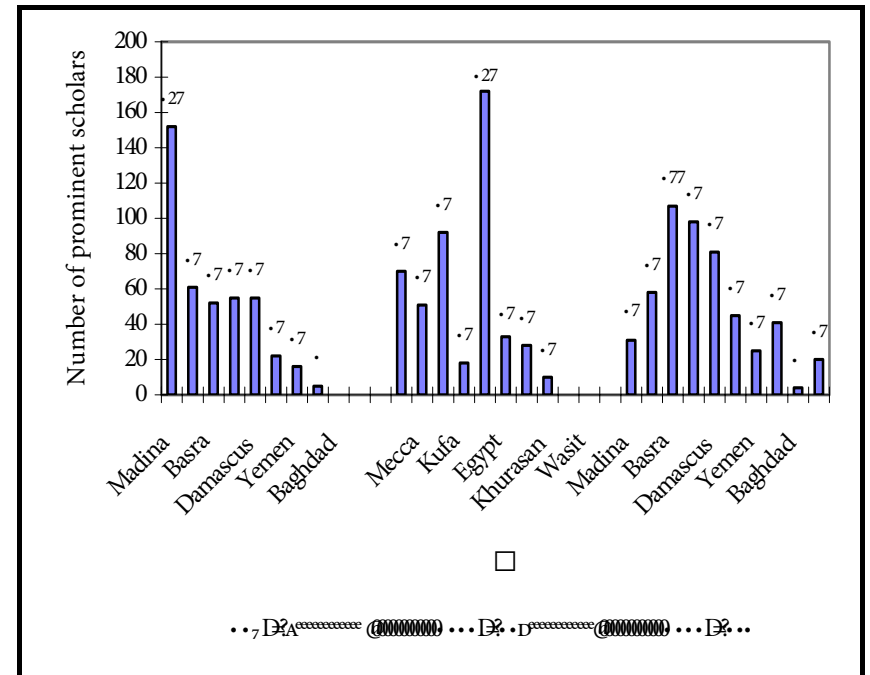


Figure 1: Shifting centers of hadith transmission network through time

The life spans of generations overlap and are indeterminate. Death of the last narrator from a layer marks its end. The era of Companions (layer 1) ended at AH 110/CE 728, Successors (layer 2-4) at AH 180/CE 796, Successors of Successors (layers 5-7) at AH 220/CE 835, the Successors of Successors of Successors (layer 8-10) at AH 260/CE 873, and the Successors of Successor of

²² Dabashi, Hamid, *Authority in Islam: from the Rise of the Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads*, New Brunswick 1989.

²³ The number of Companions included in the classical works vary. Qurtubi (AH 463/107) included 3500; Ibn al-Athir (AH 630/CE 1233) 8000, and Ibn Hajar (AH 852/1448) 12279 biographies in their biographical dictionaries exclusively dedicated to the Companions. The total number of Companions is reported by conflicting sources to be from 40 to 120 thousand.

Successor of Successors at AH 300/CE 912. Companions lived between BH 10-AH 110 (120 years); Successors lived between AH 12-180 (168 years); their Successors lived between AH 110-220 (110 years); their Successors lived between 180-260 (80 years); and their Successors lived between AH 220-300 (80 years).²⁴

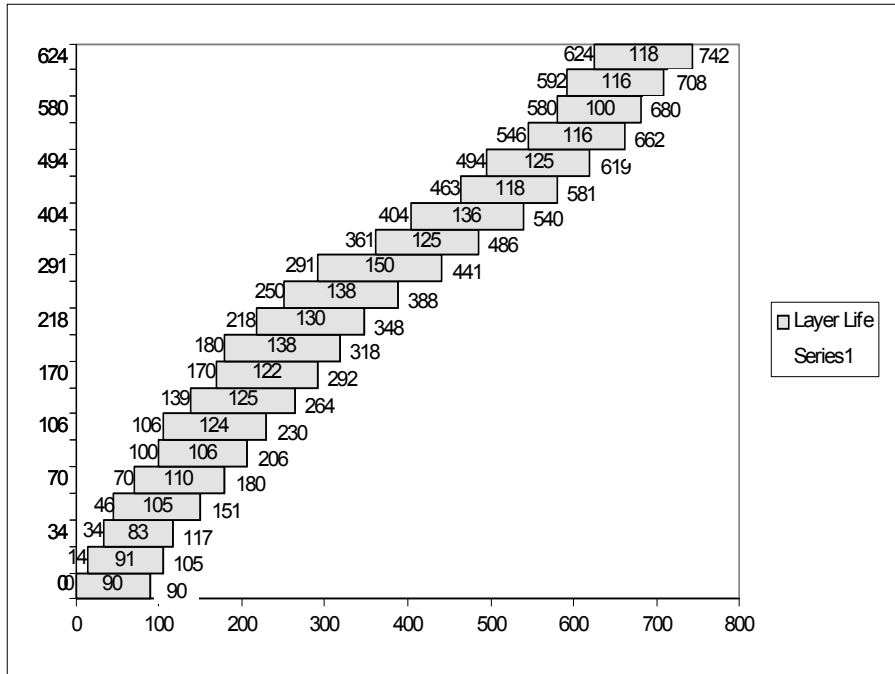


Figure 2: Longevity of Layers*, **

*The first number indicates the beginning, the second the duration, and the latter the end of a layer.

**The dates are according to Hijra calendar, beginning with 622 CE.

V. Rise of Narrative Genres and Cannons

The Prophet was concerned that his Companions might confuse the Qur'an with hadith. Hence he prohibited those who were incompetent in writing from writing down hadith while he strongly encouraged everyone to write down the Qur'an. It was quite possible that Arabs who were new to writing might not be able to distinguish in their notes what was meant to be the Qur'an as opposed to hadith. Yet, the literate and well-educated Companions got special permission and encouragement to record hadith in writing. However, the general attitude towards recording hadith had been ambivalent among the

Companions because of their concerns that the future generations might place equal importance on hadith and Qur'an. Yet, after the Qur'an's authority was completely established, this risk waned during the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and consequently attempts to collect hadith and write them down increased.

Hadith compilation as a literary genre presents a great diversity: *sahih* type (collections of authentic hadith), *sunan* type (topically organized), *musnad* type (organized by the name of the Companion), *juz* type (small collection), and the like. Each type serves a different need.

Spreading institutionalization of hadith education²⁵ also contributed to the canonization of certain collections as being the most reliable insuring a perception of reliability to the students of hadith²⁶. These collections, usually referred to as 'the Six [Most Reliable] Books', included books authored by Bukhari (d. AH 256), Muslim (d. AH 261), Tirmizi (d. AH 273), Nasai (d. AH 303), Ibn Maja (d. AH 273), Abu Dawud (d. AH 275). All of these late authorities were non-Arabs which illustrates how hadith spread across lands and layers within a polycentric structure.²⁷

Hadith compilation reached its peak with the emergence of the Six Reliable Books, which gained the highest authority among thousands of other collections. These compilations were later synthesized into single works, commented upon and abridged for public use. They are still highly regarded by Muslims with numerous scholarly works produced on them at each generation. They have served as the second scripture of Islam, along with the Qur'an, in Islamic law, theology and mysticism. The divergent interpretive

²⁵ Okic, Tayyib, *Bazi Hadis Meseleleri Uzerine Tedkikler*, Ankara 1959, pp. 101-102, 105-114; Sultan Nuruddin Mahmud (d. AH 569) opened the first "Dar al-Hadith" (College of Hadith) in Damascus and appointed the celebrated Ibn al-'Asakir as its dean. It was followed by al-Kamiliyya College in Cairo at AH 622, Ashrafiyya College at AH 626, Urwiyya College at AH 620 both in Damascus. These early institutions provided models for later Hadith Colleges which spread quickly around the Islamic world (Okic, *Bazi Hadis Meseleleri*, pp. 105-107).

²⁶ The impact of distrust with writing and the gradual transition from oral to written narrative around the same time can be observed elsewhere in the world as well. Kaufer and Carley write, "... the English courts admitted written documents as admissible evidence only when used to corroborate oral oaths and testimonies. It was only since the 12th century that medieval England gradually -over a 200-year period- began to build the infrastructure required to entrust their societal transactions to written records. A similar ebb and flow of trust and suspicion is evident in the passing of electronic communications". See also Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 135-138.

²⁷ Bulliet, Richard, *Conversion to Islam in Medieval Period*, Cambridge 1979, p. 8. This view is in line with Ibn Khaldun's argument that the contribution of non-Arab scholars to the development of Islamic sciences had been greater than that of Arab scholars (Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, III 3, pp. 311-315).

²⁴ Cakan, Ismail Lutfi, *Hadis Usulü*, İstanbul 1993: 70-80.

voices and communities around hadith narrative reflect multistream and polycentric structure of the network of traditional intellectuals.

The group is differentiated from the general community of scholars with the name *muhaddith*, which serves as a social identity. It has been gained through rituals of obtaining a diploma, *ijazah*, from master. One can get also acquire more than one diplome from various mentors. Yet, within the group the internal competition leads to social stratification which eventually determines whose narrative will gain acceptance and survive. The stratification of narrative that we discussed above must be analyzed in conjunction with the stratification of its holders, the narrators of hadith. Here are the strata of hadith scholars:

1. *Talib*: student, apprentice;
2. *Musnid*: the one who can report a hadith with its chain of authorities;
3. *Muhaddith*: Scholar of hadith²⁸;
4. *Hafiz*: Distinguished scholar of hadith;
5. *Imam*: the Leading scholar of hadith;
6. *Hujjah*: Scholar whose word is accepted as evidence;

²⁸ Sakhawi wrote: "As for the hadith scholar (al-muhaddith), he is the one who [1] knows the masters of hadith in his homeland as well as other lands; [2] has a precise knowledge of their date and place of birth and death, their ranking in the Sciences, and the various types of narratives they have in their possession; [3] differentiates those with longer chains of transmission from those with shorter ones; [4] is able to spot the hadith masters (al-huffâz) in the layers and the chains; [5] records them in writing; [6] recognizes the handwritings of the masters even if the same person's handwriting varies; [7] examines critically the narratives of the masters and extracts what he considers good from their narratives as well as his own, keeping aware of such qualities of chains as *badal*, *muwâfaqât*, *musâwât*, and the like (types of sound grades); [8] keeps a record of the names of his auditors even if their number is one thousand; [9] is an expert in the names of narrators, particularly those apt to be confused for one another, and obtains this discernment from the leaders in the discipline; [10] knows with precision the unusual words or names one comes across within the texts of hadith, or at least most of them, to avoid misspelling; [11] knows enough Arabic grammar to protect himself from language mistakes in most cases; [12] masters the terminology of experts in such way as is sufficient for teaching and explanation, and [13] keeps the proper terminology with respect to this and other disciplines... The muhaddith is the one who knows the chains, their defects, the names of the narrators, the short and long chains, and, in addition, has memorized an abundant amount of the hadith texts (as distinct from the chains), and heard (directly from a teacher) the Six Books, the Musnad of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the Sunan of al-Bayhaqi, the Mu`jam of al-Tabarani, and at least a thousand more monographs on hadith. After he has heard what we have mentioned, and written on all the layers of the narrators, and travelled far and wide to see the masters, and lectured about hadith defects, dates of birth and death, and chains of transmission - at that time he attains to the beginning level of hadith narrators" (al-Sakhawi, Shams al-Din Muhammad (H. 831-906), *al-Jawahir wa al-Durar fi Tarjamah Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Hajar (al-'Asqalani)*, Cairo 1406/1986).

7. *Shaykh al-Islam*²⁹: the leader of all Muslims in knowledge³⁰.

The lines that distinguish these strata are fuzzy. There has been engaging debate among the scholars for centuries about the definition of each title. Since different critics have different ideas about the merits of a scholar, scholars might be classified differently. The opinions of critics on the merits of scholars are reflected in their works, usually in the format of a biographical dictionary.

The rules for the critique of scholars constitute the subject matter of a distinct branch of the Sciences of Hadith, *Jarh wa Ta'dil*, in English 'Wounding and Honoring'. The vast literature on the subject is beyond our scope here. These rules concerning hadith criticism shed light on the logic behind the ranking of scholars based on their scholarly achievement and character.

VI. Age Structure of Learning: a Fortuitous Aspect

In the hadith transmission network, patron and client narrators came from generationally unequal positions thereby creating a historical example of clientelism. The exchange, as Makdisi demonstrated concerning the institution of the diploma, obtained from a teacher but not from a school, is interpersonal and between unequals. The concept of diploma from a school as a corporate body is foreign to traditional Islam. 'Islamic education,' writes Makdisi, 'like Islamic law, is basically individualistic, personalist'³¹.

There is a fortuitous aspect to this individualistic process of learning and stratification, which manifests itself in two ways: choice of the most prominent and the oldest teachers at a young age and longevity after maturity. Thus the

²⁹ Sakhawi defined it as follows: "Shaykh al-Islam," as inferred from its use as a term among the authorities, is a title attributed to that follower of the book of Allah Most High and the example of His messenger, who possesses the knowledge of the principles of the Science (of Religion), has plunged deep into the different views of the scholars, has become able to extract the legal evidences from the texts, and has understood the rational and the transmitted proofs at a satisfactory level" (Sakhawi *al-Jawahir wa al-Durar*). Sakhawi traces the evolution of the concept and lists the very few scholars who had been given this title.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion on the titles of hadith scholars, see Sa'd Fahmi Ahmad Bilal, *al-Siraj al-Munir fir Alqab al-Muhaddithin*, Riyad 1417/1996. See also, Shams al-Din Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi (831-902 H), *al-Jawahir wa al-Durar fi Tarjamah Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Hajar (al-'Asqalani)*" (ed. Hamid Abd al-Majid and Taha al-Zayni), Cairo 1986.

³¹ "Islamic law recognizes the physical person alone as endowed with legal personality" (Makdisi, George, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, Edinbrugh 1981, pp. 224, 271) while it does not recognize corporate actors as legal persons. Among prerequisites for a narrator, Ibn Hajar wrote, was "taking knowledge from the mouths of the individuals but not from pages" (quoted in Dhahabi 1991: 68). "When he [teacher] granted the license to the candidate he did so in his own name, acting as an individual, not as part of a group of master-juristconsults acting as a faculty, for there was no faculty" (Makdisi 1981: 274), even though they might be carrying on their activities in a university or college, known as madrasa.

fortuitous aspect characterizes the beginning and the final stages of a prominent scholar's career, in the former while a student and in the latter while a mentor.

Hadith education must begin at a young age for the chain of authorities to be shorter than one's colleagues because one's chances later in life as a teacher will depend on how short his chain of authorities is. Bulliet observes that "the sample indicates that typical students had begun their education by the time they reached the age range 4.8-10.2".³² Yet, a pupil cannot plan his education because he is too young and inexperienced to do that. If he became prominent later in his life because he had prominent teachers in his network when he was very young, his parents, or other accidents, must have guided him to the right teachers as a child without his own control and planning. Even if they had made the decisions about their own education at a young age, they can hardly be expected to know all the consequences involved in choosing a particular mentor. Rational planning in education by a student can begin only after a certain age.

The fortuitous aspect becomes even clearer when we look at the longevity of scholars. A hafiz died on average at the age of 79.82. This observation derives from reports, primarily by Dhahabi, about a population that consists of 1177 scholars over 22 generations³³. The sources used in this study report birth dates for 751 figures, death dates for 752 figures, and longevity for 1173 figures. It is evident that sources are less careful about reporting birth and death dates than longevity. As Table 2.2 shows, these figures about average longevity vary for each layer.

Layer No	Longevity of the layer in Years	Date of the Earliest Death	Date of the Latest Death	Date of the Earliest Birth	Date of the Latest Birth	Minimum Longevity in a Layer	Maximum Longevity in a Layer	Average Longevity in a Layer	SUM OF Longevity For All Sch. Rep.	Count of Rep. Longevity in a Layer	Count of Rep. Birth Dates in a Layer	Count of Reported Death Dates in a Layer
1	63	11	11	-52	-52	63	63	63	63	1	1	1
2	140	13	90	-50	-3	38	100	73	1245	17	17	23
3	177	32	105	-72	22	65	131	101	1513	15	15	42
4	103	90	117	14	52	40	101	73	1174	16	17	29
5	118	100	151	33	89	36	103	76	2200	29	29	58
6	110	144	180	70	107	54	86	73	2278	31	31	78
7	111	174	206	95	129	60	98	79	4197	53	51	81

8	124	191	230	106	150	54	100	82	5818	71	71	106	
9	125	213	264	139	174	50	100	81	6942	86	86	129	
10	122	239	292	170	204	49	102	81	5279	65	65	105	
11	138	264	318	180	240	55	123	84	6081	72	72	116	
12	130	305	348	218	271	45	99	82	4082	50	52	77	
13	138	304	388	250	306	46	100	83	3738	45	45	79	
14	150	360	441	291	363	47	94	76	3422	45	45	74	
15	125	427	486	361	409	56	95	80	1840	23	23	31	
16	136	468	540	404	467	42	89	70	2743	39	39	46	
17	118	542	581	463	506	56	101	76	1218	16	16	18	
18	125	575	619	494	548	36	87	70	1680	24	24	25	
19	116	611	662	546	584	47	93	70	1812	26	26	26	
20	100	630	680	580	605	37	83	63	695	11	11	12	
21	116	667	708	592	631	45	92	73	728	10	10	10	
22	118	672	742	624	661	26	88	66	396	6	6	7	
SUM	2703						1047	2128	1676.23	59144	751	752	1173
Average	122.9						49.86	101.33	79.82	2816.38	35.76	35.81	55.86

Table: Age Structure of Learning

A scholar of hadith has to outlive his peers -over which he has no control- for his chain of authorities to be comparatively shorter to attract students. If the narrative string of a scholar is longer than the string of other existing teachers, students will not seek him after. Furthermore, teaching hadith to students in the existence of someone with shorter chains would not be considered ethical in the hadith culture because it does not serve best to the interest of students and might be seen as gulling the naive students. Bulliets observation also confirms that scholars had to wait a few decades after they completed their education before they can commence teaching hadith.

If the typical teacher died between 75 and 93 at the end of a teaching career of 22 years, then 53-71 should be the age range for the commencement of a career in *hadith* transmission. Taking into account the high standard deviation associated with the estimate of 22 years, a plausible conclusion is that while it was not out of the question for a person to begin transmitting *hadith* when he was as young as forty, it was more likely that he would be over fifty if not over sixty years of old.³⁴

VII. Changing Modes of Narration and Networking

The tension and diachronic switching between various modes of narration affects narrative social structure. The switching from eyewitness to reported narrative is a crucial change in narrative social structure. Eyewitness narrative empowers those who have and can provide it. In the narrative chain, distance

³² Bulliet, Richard, *Conversion to Islam*, p. 109.

³³ This figure is close to the figure Bulliet computed earlier based on a smaller sample from Nishapur. "In the 47 ascertainable cases, the average age at death was 84.3 years with a standard deviation of 8.9" (Bulliet, Richard, *Conversion to Islam*, p. 111).

³⁴ Bulliet, Richard, *Conversion to Islam*, 112.

from the eyewitness narrative means decrease in the social value of narrative and thus in the prestige of its holders. Most of the activity in hadith transmission network (measured by the degree of connectedness between layers) takes place between non-adjacent layers, which means less activity between adjacent layers, and even lesser activity within the same layer, because of the attempts of narrators to get as close as possible to the stratum of eyewitness narrators by reducing network distance³⁵.

The impact of changing literary structures on social structure is also observable in the switching from eyewitness narrative to reported narrative which is demonstrated in the lexica: the lexicon of the Companions in reporting narrative is different from the lexicon of later layers. The lexica and structures used by eyewitness narrators and by those of later generations who merely reported speech illustrates how switching language, from participative to reportive mode paralleled the shifting network domains from the Companions to the Successors.³⁶ Structures such as ‘in the presence of the Prophet I did...,’ ‘while we were sitting...,’ ‘I saw,’ ‘I asked,’ ‘I heard’ were replaced, as the Companions disappeared, by structures such as “‘A’ told us that,” “from ‘A’,” “I heard ‘A’ telling”. The first set of words is participatory and emphatic: they indicate participation in the event either by actually partaking in it or as an onlooker. (Note how narrators report the speech from different layers in the above hadith). The second set of structures does not indicate participation but indicates reporting speech. Thus, none of the structures used by later narrators to denote some eight modes of transmission³⁷ applies to the Companions.³⁸

One of the explicit impacts of switching from oral to written mode was the decrease in the number of narrators who memorized a substantial amount of

³⁵ For instance, from layer 4 there are 21 ties to layer 4, 130 ties to layer 3, 115 ties to layer 2, while from layer 5 there are 59 ties to layer 5, 277 ties to layer 4, and 109 ties to layer 3. These numbers indicate the ties to other prominent narrators alone.

³⁶ Scholes, Robert and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, 256-265. Interestingly though, even when the written mode gained upper hand, the lexica of narrators remained one of oral culture owing to the fact that in the transmission of manuscript dictation or reading was usually involved. Although there was a text involved in the transmission, narrators still said, when they reported the transmission, “I was told by ‘A’,” which led Sezgin, a philologist of Arabic, to assume, quite naturally, that the transmission had always been oral until he discovered that the protocol of oral hadith transmission and reporting speech maintained its sway even in the transmission of manuscripts.

³⁷ Dhahabi provides an extended list of these utterances (*alfaz al-ada’*) corresponding to the various modes of transmission between layers following the Companions, apparently without noticing the striking distinction between utterances used by eyewitness narrators and layer generations (Dhahabi 1991: 53-55).

³⁸ Siddiqi, Muhammad Zubayr, *Hadith Literature, Its Origins, Development and Specific Features*, Cambridge 1993, p. 86.

narrative. In the beginning pure oral tradition, hence memorizing, was valued more than written tradition. This led an increasing number of narrators to memorize narratives. However, later, certain contextual changes such as institutionalization of education, which contributed to the spread of literacy, and canonization of certain texts, considerably helped the written narration triumph over the oral narration. In the beginning literacy had been an aid to orality; later orality became an aid to literacy.

The question this system served to answer was whose narrative will gain power to survive in the competition for authority. But how? The remainder of this study will attempt to provide an answer to this question. Prior to looking further deeply in the structural features of hadith transmission network in the subsequent chapters, the next chapter will explore the contesting theoretical approaches in sociology and humanities on the relationship between social narrative and structure.

“Social and Literary Structure of Isnad: A Historical Perspective”

Abstract: This paper explores *how the literary structure of hadith transmission is related to its social structure*. It is argued that literary and social processes compliment each other and thus cannot be reduced to one another. It is demonstrated that changing literary structures have an impact on the social structure of *Isnad*. Likewise, changing social structure of *Isnad* has an impact on its literary structure. Most recent methods from linguistics, literary analysis, narratology and social network analysis are combined to further our understanding of the monumental hadith transmission network which is a distinct facet of Islamic civilization. The fluid, dynamic and changing structure of hadith transmission network is explored by following the patterns of relations between its social and literary dimensions.

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