

Ancient Chains and Modern Silence

The Stagnation of Oral Transmission in the Muslim Tradition

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I. Introduction: Cornelis Hulsman

This paper expands upon earlier work published in Arab-West Report by Dutch Arabists Eildert Mulder and Thomas Milo on the contested earliest sources of Islam.¹ Mulder and Milo illustrate that critical scholarship has cast doubt on the historicity of the *hadith* and biographies and because other sources are scant, little is known for certain about the paradigm of the original Muslim community in the first century AH. These doubts appear to be at odds with the wish of Islamists, and in particular Salafī Muslims, to return to the paradigm of the original Muslim community. Andrew McDonnell, despite his weaknesses of not able to read Arabic sources, has dealt with this sensitive question in a very delicate way, full of respect for Muslim believers who believe the oral transmission in the first centuries to be reliable.

Criticism of the oral tradition is not simply a criticism of the mysterious 7th-8th century period from which so little contemporary evidence of early Islam in texts, archeological remains, or other sources has survived to our days. Oral tradition was, because other sources were missing, an essential component of the study of the Qur'an and even of the methodologies of *hadith*. To invalidate oral tradition is believed by many Muslims to attack a fundamental element of centuries of tradition, which has mostly been forgotten in the modern period. These criticisms have forced Muslim conservatives to defend their tradition and have alienated Muslims from the diversity and complexity of their tradition, as exemplified by the fact that most Arabic copies of Ibn Hisham's 9th

¹ Sandra Heijden and Salmá Ihab 'Isá. "The Contested Sources of Islam: Eildert Mulder in Egypt," *Arab West Report* 52 (2009) and Milo, Thomas and Mulder, Eildert. "The Contested Sources of Islam: A Preface." *Arab West Report* 52 (2009).

century biography of the Prophet are printed without his introduction in which he describes he has edited earlier sources, in an attempt to silence possible doubts.

I am grateful for the support given to Andrew's work by Prof. Ibrahim Houdaybi and Prof. Mahmoud Khayyal. The responsibility for the final result, however, are his and mine for where it comes to editing his text. Andrew's work should by no means be seen as a final work and is only intended to provide a basis for further study by other students and scholars.

I. Why the early history of Islam is important today

Andrew McDonnell's paper touches a few vital points that are essential to understand various socio-political aspects of Islam, not only in Muslim countries, but also among Muslim communities living in many non-Islamic countries. It helps to improve mutual understanding and respect between Muslims and adherents of other religions. As well it provides Muslims themselves a tool for a better understanding of their religion with its multiple aspects and hence protect them from indulging in narrow one-track visions about Islam that may eventually lead some to adopt strict fundamentalist attitudes and reject people with other convictions, including those adhering to other religions, and attain some anti- social behaviors.

Andrew's paper should form a basis for more extensive work. The efforts of Arab West Report, Cornelis Hulsman and Andrew McDonnell is much appreciated.

It is amazing how Andrew was able to construct such a nucleus despite his insufficient knowledge of the Arabic language. Many key references, though, are in Arabic and not all are translated to other languages. These need to be studied in depth in

their own language (like the works of Imam Shafa'i , Al Ghazaly , Ibn Rushd, Ibn Taymeya, and the more recently the works of Taha Husein, Khalil Abdel Kareem, Sayyed El-Qimny, Gamal El Banna, Ahmad Subhy Mansour and others). It is therefore recommended that an Arabic speaking scholar or student should work on expanding this theme. It is to be noted that many Muslim critiques aim their criticism at the works of Western Orientalists on the basis that they do not know enough Arabic and/ or they have not read enough Arabic texts, making it easy for their followers to reject their work altogether without even reading them, therefore loosing much of their value.

Andrew places much weight in his paper on Western (external) critiques in the 19th and 20th century, presenting them as leaders of criticizing the validity of hadith and biographies, while in fact it appears that internal criticism started very early in Islamic historical texts. This point needs to be further studied and covered in the future.

Finally, Andrew included the increasing importance of hadith and biographies in establishing civilian laws and traditions in some Muslim countries and/or communities. For example, the spread of hijab, female genital mutilation, flogging (whipping) and stoning for acts of adultery and converting to another religion. Also, of course, discussions about the Egyptian constitution “Islam is the religion of the state” and “the fundamentals of the Shari’a are the main source of for legislation.” I believe that the discussion on many of these subjects would be less polemic and much milder if Muslims themselves knew that many of the claims made concerning the “right” interpretation of Islam are based on weak suspicious hadith and/or biographies.

-Dr. Mahmoud Khayyal

II. Ancient Chains and Modern Silence: The Stagnation of Oral Transmission in the Muslim Tradition

It is said that when the Prophet Muhammad first received revelation from God, the arch-angel Gabriel appeared before him with a single command: “recite”. From that moment on the revelation, which is now known as the Qur’an, would progressively be revealed to Muhammad by God and passed on to the community of believers in the form of a spoken text. The words which Muhammad spoke to his listeners were believed by believers to be the exact words of God in Arabic. His followers kept those words alive as guidance to the nascent community in disparate forms until the third caliph, ‘Uthman (d. 35 AH), canonized and standardized the Qur’an into a written document. The Qur’an was not the only such oral tradition to become a standard written work. The sayings and deeds of Muhammad, the *hadith*, were verbally passed on in the community until years later when they gained both legal prominence and an unwieldy size, and scholars attempted to collate the most valid ones.

These textual traditions pose a problem to the modern scholarly community because of the gap between their origins (1-80 AH) and their written standardizations (90-300 AH). F.E. Peters explains the problem succinctly: “there is nothing of which we can say for certain that it incontestably dates back to the time of the Prophet.”² Such criticism has destabilized the legitimacy of oral tradition which has long formed a critical component of Islamic knowledge.

Contrary to first glances, while the 8th and 9th century (90-300 AH) saw the consolidation of these earlier sources (Qur’an, *hadith*, biographies) into text, the tradition

² F.E. Peters, “The Quest of the Historical Muhammad,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 291.

of oral transmission did not disappear or diminish in importance despite external as well as internal critiques that questioned the internal logic of the religious tradition.

For most of the individuals living in the Muslim community the Qur'an represents a unique document; a manifestation of God expressed in language. It has been the centerpiece of the religion since its inception. The Qur'an, however, is not the only surviving remnant of the Medinan community which still maintains relevance in the lives of believers. The life of Muhammad, as an exemplar of faith and piety and seen as implementing the will of God, fills a critical supplementary role in legal tradition and literature. Muhammad's legacy survived in two forms; the first were specific recollections of his sayings and doings (*hadith*), and the second were biographies (*sira*), which aimed at recording an historical narrative. While overlapping in numerous regards, the two must be considered distinct because of the tradition which surrounds them. Both were kept alive as stories within the community until they were later canonized, but their written recording reveals important distinctions. The *hadith* were not full narratives, but rather short vignettes. They were gathered in such form by experts who created a methodology of *hadith* verification. The reason for such a methodology was obvious: the validity of these sayings, since they were increasingly used in law, was paramount. While the biographers appear to be interested in preserving truth, their works were not intended to guide the community. Instead the biographies served to create a cohesive narrative. Thus there appear three oral trends from the 7th century (1-80 AH) onwards which were solidified in writing: Qur'an, *hadith*, and biography.

The Qur'an is perhaps one of the most unique and troublesome books to understand. Despite appearing to be simply a collection of randomly ordered divine

injunctions the Qur'an itself is immensely multifaceted. Hans Kung, in his book "Islam", identifies five critical defining elements of the Qur'an. According to Kung, the Qur'an is a book, one book, an Arabic book, a living book, and a holy book.³ As a book, the Qur'an makes religious guidance simple for Muslims: herein lies the unquestionable, unchangeable revelation of God. Kung defines it as a single book in contrast to the Hebrew Bible, which is a collection of numerous works. The Qur'an, meanwhile, is believed to have one author and was written/revealed/spoken in one time period. The practical validity of this point, though, has been challenged by scholars⁴. Arabic is a critical defining characteristic because not only was it revealed in Arabic, "more than anything else it promoted the dissemination of the Arabic language and script; to the present day it has a normative function in syntax and morphology."⁵ Despite its timeless quality as literature and language it is also living. This is one of the most crucial and overlooked pieces of the definition. The word *qur'an* comes from the root *qara'a* which means 'read aloud, recite'. As Kung elaborates, "by hearing, memorizing and reciting, Muslims both confess God's revelation and make it their own."⁶ The Qur'an is continuously kept alive and active in the lives of believers through recitation. In that sense it is unlike most books, whose words would have similar meaning if read aloud or silently. Lastly, it is also distinct in its holiness, both because of its content, and because it is believed to be a physical manifestation of God's Word.

³ Hans Kung. *Islam: Past, Present, & Future*. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007): 63-65.

⁴ A number of scholars, though, believe the Qur'an had multiple authors based on textual criticism. Dr. Mahmoud Khayyal notes that these counterpoints are left out of Kung initial overview perhaps out of a sense of political correctness.

⁵ Ibid, 63

⁶ Ibid, 64.

Before the Qur'an had the form it does today it was kept in the minds of believers. When the initial revelations were first recited there were groups of "the noblest and proudest members of the community" who devoted themselves to its exact memorization.⁷ Some, so as not to forget, even wrote down bits of it on various media. It should be remembered that those converts "were convinced from the outset... that what they were hearing and noting 'on scraps of leather and bone and in their hearts' were not the teachings of a man but the *ipsissima verba Dei*⁸ and so they would likely have been scrupulously careful in preserving the actual wording."⁹ However, as the community grew, debates arose over the correct recitation. Abu Bakr had created the initial single collection of Quranic verses, but had kept it in his personal possession, so disparate communities had no access to a central text. In response to these debates¹⁰, the third caliph, 'Uthman, in partnership with Muhammad's secretary Zayd ibn Thabit, brought together all the fragments that had been written in addition to the oral transmissions. This formed the first canonical Qur'an (sometime between the 1st and 2nd centuries AH).

This first Qur'an was sent out to all the disparate communities, who were instructed to destroy any alternative copies they may have had. However, not all alternatives were destroyed, which meant that varying readings floated around unofficially for years to come.¹¹ Regardless of other such texts the canonical version of

⁷ Ibn Khaldun. *An Arab Philosophy of History*, trans. Charles Issawi. (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1992), 32.

⁸ "The very words of God", meaning the exact words that came unfiltered from God.

⁹ Peters, 294.

¹⁰ Kung claims "what at first sight looks like a purely religious action... undoubtedly also had political significance. For in this way the caliph stripped of power those Qur'an readers... who were recognized as religious and indirectly as political authorities." Kung, 177.

¹¹ Ernst mentions the earliest text as appearing on the Dome of the Rock in 692, and at least one variant text from Yemen mentioned in the *Atlantic Monthly*, though that text does not have significant differences. Carl Ernst. *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 100.

‘Uthman still saw some variation, as it could not stand alone. Arabic, without the written short vowels constructed later¹², relied heavily on vocalization and context. Without such marks in place words could take on multiple meanings, which were entirely dependent on the context in which they were used. These differences could be heard in spoken language but were not a part of the script until many centuries later. The Qur’an itself is considered one of the most beautiful and perfect examples of Arabic language¹³, and consequently it is complex. Writing on the *Fatiha* (the opening), Muhammad Haleem notes: “the passage comes in a style that suits its important functions... the choice of words and structures allows for a remarkable multiplicity of meanings difficult to capture in English.”¹⁴ This wide plurality of meaning gave rise to the famous seven different readings and reciters, who eventually all gave way to one: Asim of Kufa in the tradition of Haf.¹⁵

While the Qur’an thus remained an oral tradition through these reciters, the physical Qur’an began to gain significance. At the beginning of the 8th century (2nd century AH) there was a movement towards the “veneration of the physical Qur’an,” as believers recognized it to be an actual manifestation of God’s Word.¹⁶ However, there was resistance in the community as to whether the written form reflected the original divine revelation. There was a “bifurcation between oral and written lines of transmission, concomitant with the variant readings.”¹⁷ Theoretically, this tension arose

¹² When Arabic was taught to non-native speakers.

¹³ In fact, Haleem claims “it was also the starting point around which... the various branches of Arabic studies were initiated and developed.” Muhammad Haleem. *Understanding the Qur’an: Themes and Style*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999): 7.

¹⁴ Ibid, 23.

¹⁵ Kung, 70.

¹⁶ Travis Zadeh. “Touching and Ingesting: Early Debates over the Material Qur’an,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129 (2009): 462.

¹⁷ Ibid.

from the notion of the *umm al-kitab/kitab maknun* (original/hidden scripture) that was kept in heaven and mentioned several times in the Qur'an itself (56:78, 43:4). This scripture is supposedly written on a holy tablet, *al-lawh al mahfuz*, which very much contrasts with the oral nature of Muhammad's revelation. Believers worried that the spoken revelation might deviate from the *umm al-kitab*. However, there were also worries about writing it down, as writing had impure connotations in the regional traditions.¹⁸ There is thus much wariness about the Qur'an as written. "Yet despite any early aversion toward writing scripture, the oral transmission of the Qur'an never came to displace the textual form."¹⁹ While the oral transmission of the text was no replacement, the written text could not stand by itself without leaving wide space for various alternative readings. Consequently, the standard practice of Islamic education, until the past 200 years, has been based around oral recitation handed down on a one-to-one basis from teacher to student.

Before examining the continuation of oral tradition, it is important to briefly examine the other important sources that came from the original community. Second only to the Qur'an in importance, *hadith* also arose from that time. They were recorded as vignettes illustrating some moral/legal/social issue and the Prophet response. As the Islamic legal system developed these became increasingly important to fill in gaps in the system that the Qur'an does not specifically mention.²⁰ Judges, who had initially relied on personal reasoning and regional precedents, increasingly looked to the Prophet and the original community for guidance. In fact, the Sunna (which includes the *hadith*) once

¹⁸ See Zadeh, "Touching and Ingesting", as well as David Tracy, "Writing" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Ibid, 463.

²⁰ See Wael Hallaq. *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*. (New York: Cambridge, 2005).

included the stories of Muhammad's Companions, which had some legal standing. As time went on, though, the stories of the Prophet were all that retained real authority.

The problems with the *hadith* were their sheer number and the ease with which they could be falsified. In contrast to the Qur'an, where only a few minor variant readings occur the *hadith* were fabricated frequently. There was more regulation of the Qur'an, even at the time of its recitation, as believers instantly understood its significance. The same cannot be said of *hadith*. In response to this issue, the methodology of *hadith* developed to combat the flaws of oral transmission and attempt to illustrate the veracity of as many *hadith* as possible. Ibn Sa'd (d. 230 AH), was the first to write on the science of the biography of transmitters, while al-Bukhari, writing a little later, wrote the first extensive *hadith* collection. Bukhari's collection numbers 2762 (out of 7600) unrepeatable *hadith* and is still considered by most believers the most authentic.²¹

Bukhari and his successors (Muslim, Dawud, Maja, at-Tirmidhi, Nasa'i) verified *hadith* through a specific process unique to Islam. Each *hadith* which was discovered, whether written or oral, had to be proven to have been passed down on a one-to-one basis through honest men up until the time of Muhammad. Two things were examined in this process: *matn* (content) and *isnad* (the chain of transmission). Within *isnad* there was the *'ilm al-rijal* (science of men) which had been pioneered by Ibn Sa'd. *Matn* was examined by comparison to the Qur'an and other verified *hadith*; if there was a clear contradiction between ideas, the *hadith* was suspect. *Isnad* was verified through character analysis and examination of the chain itself. Sa'd's work was the first to compile a character assessment of the major figures, in the Prophet's time and afterward, who claimed to know *hadith*. If any one of the transmitters were known to be untrustworthy or not of

²¹ Kung, 265.

sound mind then the chain could be declared weak. The chain itself had to be verified first by proving that it was feasible—could the people must have reasonably been able to meet and known each other. Secondly, the strength of the *hadith* depended on the number of disparate chains which passed on the same *hadith*. In other words, if it could be shown that several chains all link back to one person, then it is a weak chain. Two separate chains were better, and three was enough to claim an authentic *hadith*. Such authentic *hadith* were *mutawatir*, a concept which breaks down as: if something is told by many different people then it's probably true. *Hadith* were never as unquestionably authentic as the Qur'an. There are varying levels of strength of *hadith*; while a *hadith* can be strong it can never be 100% accurate in every way. In this way, *hadith* were translated from oral to written format, and in that form they remained without much contestation.

Meanwhile, the actual full biography of the Prophet raises other problems. The *hadith* were a legal source primarily; they are organized by theme and do not give a full picture of the Prophet's life. Given Muhammad's late appearance on the religious scene it seems like his biography should be easier than most prophets' to uncover, yet there is little in the full view of history. The earliest known recording of Muhammad's life, in biographical format, was Ibn Ishaq's biography composed in the 2nd century AH, more than a hundred years after Muhammad's death. How Ibn Ishaq chose his sources is unknown and there was no methodology for verification of sources as there was later for *hadith*²². No such methodology can be applied even now since Ibn Ishaq's work is lost, and all that remains is the redaction by Ibn Hisham. Ibn Hisham's work, however, raises an entirely new issue for the historical understanding of Muhammad. Ibn Hisham writes in the introduction to his redacting:

²² Remember, Sa'd died in 845 and Bukhari in 870, so Ishaq was writing before them.

For the sake of brevity [I am] confining myself to the prophet's biography and omitting some of the things which Ibn Ishaq has recorded in this book in which there is no mention of the apostle and about which the Qur'an says nothing... [as well as] things which it is disgraceful to discuss; matters which would distress certain people; and such reports as al-Bakka'i told me he could not accept as trustworthy. But God willing I shall give a full account of everything else so far as it is known and a trustworthy tradition is available.²³

This introduction illustrates several issues with Ibn Hisham's (and Ibn Ishaq's) work. The first is the apparent flaws with the original (Ibn Ishaq's) text: things which have no previous mention and things that are apparently untrustworthy. The second issue is the willingness of Ibn Hisham to leave out sections because they are disgraceful or would distress people. He seems to see no reason not to alter his text to suit the social or political climate in which he was writing. Hisham feels responsible for condensing all known knowledge and passing along a reputable source. He recognizes that he is simply doing the best he can with what he has, but that opens his account up to serious historical criticism. F.E. Peters sums up the situation rhetorically: "does any serious scholar now doubt that the materials in the... *Sira* [the life of Muhammad]... were shaped by the needs of the early Islamic community?"²⁴ The answer may be no, but redaction criticism of Ibn Hisham is not as significant as that of the Qur'an or *hadith*. Those sources were, and are, used in legal matters and thus formed (and form) the entire basis of law in the community. Ibn Hisham's work is a useful reference, but it is not unassailable or well vetted.

It is also worth noting that Ibn Hisham's work did not arise as a completely new form in the Islamic tradition (as did *hadith*). According to Hibri, "historical accounts,"

²³ Alfred Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 68.

²⁴ Peters, 298.

like Ibn Hisham's work, "belonged to an earlier climate of parabolic narration, which as mentioned earlier continued the tradition of biblical storytelling with a different focus."²⁵ Thus, Ibn Hisham's work should properly be relegated to the genre of literature, as a zealous narration similar to a biblical story. The *sira*, for example, introduces miracles of the Prophet in an attempt to authenticate his calling and "a simple desire to entertain."²⁶ Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham's works formed a valuable part of the Islamic tradition, but mostly as literature and speculative history. However, since Ibn Hisham's biography remains the oldest source on Muhammad's life it plays a critical role as a *primary source* in the eyes of many later Muslim scholars and communities.

The canonical Qur'an and *hadith*, though kept in written form, could only be properly understood through proper teaching. The authoritative meaning, especially of the Qur'an, was handed down personally from teacher to student throughout the successive centuries. The Islamic system of education focused on the memorization of the Qur'an under the personal tutelage of someone who had already mastered it. Learning the Qur'an was also a way to teach students the Arabic language, and thus any religious school focused heavily on grammar. In fact, over time, "learning the appropriate vowelizations for a word was more important at [the early stage] than learning the word's meaning."²⁷ While this seems to prioritize a shallow reading of the text, it was a necessary stage in order to preserve a unified meaning of the text.

The educational system focused heavily on texts, which students were required to master, usually by memorizing, in order to move on to further levels. The teaching

²⁵ Tayeb Hibri. *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: the Rashidun Caliphs*. (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2010), 9.

²⁶ Peters, 304.

²⁷ Indira Gesink. *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam*. (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 29.

system was known as the *halqa* (circle) system, so named because students would sit in circles around a given teacher, who in a large *madrasa* (school) would each have a particular pillar or alcove where they stood. Teachers would work on a one-to-one basis with each student ensuring they could memorize and recite a text. Teaching was in fact known often as *qira'a*²⁸ (reading or reciting) because teachers would essentially recite a text over and over until a student could recite it back properly. When a student had mastered a text, “the professor would write him a certificate called an *ijaza* that listed the text’s transmission from author to explicator and permitted the student to read that text to his own students.”²⁹ This letter was essential because it validated the authenticity of a particular reading above others. After all, “authorial intention could not be recaptured unless there was an unbroken chain of oral readings stretching back to the originator of the text.”³⁰ Thus, even though texts were prominent, they could not stand on their own without the authority of oral transmission.

The *ijaza* was especially important for the recitation of the Qur’an. Those who could recite the Qur’an in full are known as *hafiz* [have it all in their memory] and carried a unique status. Taha Husayn, for example, recounts in his autobiography his elevated prestige when he was first able to recite the Qur’an in full as a young child.³¹ The recitation of the Qur’an is more than simply reading verses out loud; it is an art in and of itself. It is critical to remember that this focus on recitation meant that the paradigm of oral transmission did not disappear after ‘Uthman’s canonical Qur’an. In fact, it continued as an important check to the authenticity of the Qur’an. In short, the

²⁸ Note this is the same root as *qur’an*

²⁹ Ibid, 18.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Taha Hussein, *The Days*, trans. E.H. Paxton et al. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1997).

standardization and unification of the Qur'an depended on a solid system of oral transmission; *ijaza* gave credibility to only certain people to teach the Qur'an, keeping the *ulama* (scholars) as the guardians of its knowledge.

The *hadith* did not function in quite the same way, as oral transmission was seen as a hindrance rather than a help to the transmission of *hadith*. The methodology of *hadith* verification developed precisely because oral retellings of *hadith* were disparate and untrustworthy. Islamic scholars recognized this problem and attempted to negotiate a way around it so they could still use stories of Muhammad without divisive internal strife. For this reason, the earliest source of *hadith*, al-Bukhari³² (d. 256 AH), is also regarded as the most authentic, as later sources would only have seen longer chains and more false *hadith*. Muslim scholars of *hadith* attempted to walk the line between harsh requirements for valid *hadith* (such as number of separate chains) and maintaining a useful body of legal knowledge. There were practical concerns keeping these scholars from abandoning too many *hadith* or invalidating *hadith* altogether: they needed supplements to the Qur'an, which did not address every facet of daily life. Regardless, the methodology of *hadith* verification was still an impressive historical achievement for the community, one which illustrates their self-critique of historical records.

One of the most well known Islamic philosophers, Ibn Khaldun, writing in the 14th century (around 750 AH), exemplified this internal critique of history. According to him “all records, by their very nature, are liable to error,” for various reasons ranging from partisanship, to over-confidence, to mistaken belief in truth.³³ Ibn Khaldun's criticism of over-confidence in sources specifically refers to *hadith* as an example. He

³² Notably al-Bukhari, originally from the region currently known as Uzbekistan, was not a native Arabic speaker.

³³ Khaldun, 27.

claims in a footnote that the process of *ta'dil wa tajrih* (roughly, amendment and defamation) was applied extensively to *hadith* in order to eliminate spurious sources.³⁴ Ibn Khaldun does not go further into criticism of *hadith* collections, but he does clearly recognize many basic problems that modern scholars would later highlight. For example, he writes: “it has often happened that historians have accepted and transmitted stories about events which are intrinsically impossible³⁵,” as Mas’udi did in claiming Alexander the Great was blocked from the port of Alexandria by sea monsters.³⁶ Ibn Khaldun’s philosophy, rising from the methodologies of *hadith* verification, illustrates that Muslim scholars remained critical of history and historical contexts for centuries.

Criticism of the veracity of *hadith* changed drastically with the advent of modern Western scholarship³⁷. However, as Ibn Khaldun, al-Bukhari, Sa’d and others make clear, internal criticism of source material was in no way foreign to the Muslim community³⁸. The Qur’an was a special exception of course; to criticize the validity of the Qur’an would be akin to challenging the very basis of Islam. Right up until the arrival of Western colonists and the impact of Western style scholarship the paradigm of knowledge transmission, partially orally and partially textually, existed relatively intact. The internal logic of the Muslim community went unchallenged by some, but was wholly disregarded by others.

Western approaches to the subject of *hadith* and historical accounts (Ibn Hisham) take two divergent paths. The first, exemplified by Maxime Rodinson and Montgomery

³⁴ Ibid, n. 1 p. 27.

³⁵ Modern scholars, (i.e. Peters, Ernst), make a similar claim about some hadith which refer to events after Muhammad’s death.

³⁶ Ibid, 28.

³⁷ It should be noted though, that the author’s position as a native English speaker from the West predisposes him to focus on Western sources.

³⁸ See also Abu al-Ala al-Misri (350-400 AH)

Watt, trusted to some degree in the stories of the Prophet and were therefore not as deeply critical of the sources. This path illustrated that “Westerners wanted to believe that historical events and stories... occurred in exactly the ways described in the texts.”³⁹ The second path, as exemplified by Joseph Schacht and Ignaz Goldziher, argued that *hadith* could not hold up in the face of modern criticism and therefore were most likely “forgeries fabricated to settle political scores or to underpin a legal or doctrinal ruling.”⁴⁰ This was not the most unheard-of claim even within the Muslim community. It is in fact reiterated by an anonymous 10-century scholar quoted by Carl Ernst: “pious men are never so willing to lie as in matters of *hadith*’,” as “it is always extremely tempting to have a proof text to back up one’s position in a legal argument.”⁴¹ Schacht and Goldziher, though, took this as a sign that all *hadith* were doubtful, leading to “an almost universal Western skepticism on the reliability of *all* reports advertising themselves... as going back to Muhammad’s time.”⁴² It is to be noted that few contemporary Muslim scholars have strongly criticized the validity of *hadith* ⁴³

Not all Western scholars adopted this mode of thought. Some, like N. Abbott, F. Sezgin, and M.M. Azami claimed that “to assume that a tradition is invented if its authenticity has not been proved by present day historical criteria to be beyond doubt seems... to be an exaggerated critical demand.”⁴⁴ There may be no way to demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that any given *hadith* accurately describes the life of the Prophet. Some more middle ground scholars, like F. Rahman, H. Motzki, or Noel

³⁹ Hibri, 18.

⁴⁰ Peters, 302.

⁴¹ Ernst, 81.

⁴² Peters, 302.

⁴³ See Gamal El Banna: “Genayet Kabeelat Haddathana” Dar el Fikr el Islami . Cairo 2008, and Ahmed Sobhi Mansour Inkar al Sunnah fe Mokaddemat Sa7ee7 Muslim. http://www.ahl-alquran.com/arabic/book_main.php?page_id=18.

⁴⁴ Kung, 267.

Coulson, argue that there may be a core of authenticity in some of the substance of the *hadith*. We should thus adopt a “reasonable principle of historical enquiry... [that] an alleged ruling of the Prophet should be tentatively accepted as such unless some reason can be adduced as to why it should be regarded as fictitious.”⁴⁵ All of this, however, is theoretical debate over the nature of *hadith*, and much of the mentioned criticism focuses entirely on the form of *hadith*. Such critiques do not offer an alternative version of the 7th century. A major problem with much of this debate—a problem for even early Muslim scholars too—has been the simple lack of reliable information on that era.

Some Western scholars are attempting to address this problem from a different angle. A group of Islamicists who called themselves “revisionist scholars” attempt to make a distinction between “direct and indirect sources,” of which only the former is reliable.⁴⁶ These scholars, such as G. Rudiger-Puin, V. Popp, K. Ohlig, and C. Luxenberg, try to rely solely on archeology, archeo-linguistics, and numismatics (coins) to directly reconstruct the context of 7th century Arabia. Their projects have met with varying degrees of success and have come under a good deal of criticism, as their conclusions often contradict longstanding tradition. For example, “there are no coins found with the names of the first four ‘rightly guided’ caliphs [which] implies, according to Popp, that they might not have existed at all.”⁴⁷ Regardless of their conclusions, the Muslim scholarly community has rejected these scholars and their methods on the whole, as have many of the above-mentioned scholars. The problem, however, facing the Muslim scholarship community goes beyond just a few contemporary scholars; Western

⁴⁵ Noel Coulson. *A History of Islamic Law*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964), 42.

⁴⁶ Sandra Heijden and Salmá Ihab ‘Isá. “The Contested Sources of Islam: Eildert Mulder in Egypt,” *Arab West Report* 52 (2009).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

scholarship has had tremendous impacts—believed by some to be destructive—on Muslim tradition for centuries now.

A helpful lens through which to understand this impact is the colonization of Egypt, in particular the changes to Egypt's famous center for scholarship: al-Azhar. Established in the 10th century under the Fatimids, al-Azhar had been a bastion of Islamic learning for centuries and held a prominent place in Egyptian society. However, with the growth of modern styles of education under Muhammad Ali and later Khedive Ismail in the 19th century, the institution fell from its place of glory. The changes implemented at al-Azhar, though, demonstrate the way in which the internal logic of the Muslim scholarly community was ignored and replaced by Western, Christian models.

Under the supervision of Ali Mubarak the Lancaster school system was imported from France. The Lancaster system⁴⁸ stressed the importance of moral learning, particularly from religious texts. In Europe, for example, children learned the Bible, not for the purposes of rote memorization, but to inculcate in them a sense of virtue and vice. In importing this system to Egypt it was theorized that “the Koran might be made, like the Bible, a means of imparting moral truth combined with instructive history.”⁴⁹ This use for the Qur'an had almost no bearing on the centuries of Islamic pedagogy, which placed oral recitation and memorization as paramount to proper understanding of the Arabic text. The notion that the Qur'an was a one-to-one replacement to the Bible was a gross oversight of the place of the Qur'an in education.

The Qur'an's place in regards to linguistic study was also mutated in the modern era of education. Shaykh Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, a teacher at al-Azhar in the 19th century who

⁴⁸ See Timothy Mitchell. *Colonising Egypt*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁴⁹ H. Cunynghame, “The Present State of Education in Egypt,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 19 (1887), 232.

was influential in reforms⁵⁰, advocated an adoption of the French style of language acquisition, wherein children learned basic material first, rather than the complex Qur'an.⁵¹ While al-Tahtawi's ideas did not fully last, the idea nonetheless undercut the place of the Qur'an in children's education. Children were said to be unable to grasp the advanced concepts of the Qur'an, and thus it gradually became a tool rather than the center of education. By the twentieth century the "Qur'an itself seems to have been disconnected almost completely from the idea of 'religious' instruction, constituting instead a source of linguistic exercises."⁵² The Qur'an was now simply one part of many in a modern education, even at a religious institution like al-Azhar, where modern subjects were required of students who became "self-taught ulema who no longer knew the Qur'an by heart."⁵³

Rote memorization did not disappear from the curriculum, even up to the current day. Despite an obvious aversion in contemporary Western learning to memorization in favor of critical thinking, even countries like Egypt, which has close ties to Western nations and cultures, maintain memorization. A study of contemporary Egyptian education revealed that "the textbooks reflect an adherence to traditional methods (memorization, oral recitation), source material (Qur'an, *hadith*, biographies of prominent Muslims, and shar'ia), and objectives (recitation of the Qur'an, ritual

⁵⁰ For further explanation of such reforms see: Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*; Gesink, *Islamic Reform*; Meir Hatina. "Historical Legacy and the Challenge of Modernity in the Middle East: The Case of al-Azhar in Egypt," *The Muslim World* 93 (2003); 53.

⁵¹ Gesink, 29.

⁵² Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 69.

⁵³ Malika Zeghal. "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952-94)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): p. 379.

performances, and correct Islamic dress and behavior) in teaching Islamic religion.”⁵⁴

This is not, however, a victory for Islamic traditionalism. The form has been maintained but without the substance. The reason for the existence of the oral tradition was in fact rendered nearly useless by King Fu’ad’s 1923 standard edition of the Qur’an. This Qur’an was commissioned, according to Hans Kung, because ‘Uthman’s had “no diacritical marks, so that numerous words and verses were ambiguous and open to misinterpretation.”⁵⁵ That ambiguity had been critical to the function of the religious experts who had devoted centuries to the careful preservation of meaning. Now, though, there was no room for alternate readings, except from a literary stance.

As education moved from the small *kuttab* village schools and the al-Azhar institutes into the Western style classrooms, students were no longer a part of scholarly chains. Recitation of the Qur’an, and *ijaza* letters, lost their place of significance, as teaching was no longer the purview of the ulama. Lancaster’s philosophy that the holy books could simply be taught to inculcate whatever virtues would stick allowed teachers to simply present children with the Qur’an to read for themselves. Even if teachers in the decades later and now disagree with that philosophy, they are no longer qualified to fill in any gaps for students as the ulama could. Meanwhile, “government efforts throughout modern Egyptian history to make religion an adjunct of state ideology [gave] rise to public distrust and apathy towards national religious institutions, including the apparatus for teaching Islamic education in the schools.”⁵⁶ Consequently, Egyptian youth nowadays often turn towards other sources in their daily life, like family or local mosques, to

⁵⁴ James Toronto and Muhammad Eissa. “Egypt: Promoting Tolerance, Defending Against Islamism,” in *Islam and Textbooks in the Middle East: Comparing Curricula*, ed. Eleanor Doumato and Gregory Starrett. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 27.

⁵⁵ Kung, 69.

⁵⁶ Toronto and Eissa, 47.

instruct them in religion. This deficit of legitimized authority has placed most of the authority to interpret texts in the hands of social outreach movements like the Muslim Brotherhood.

Oral authority in the religious tradition never truly disappeared. Even to this day, as Egypt's system illustrates, Muslims look to oral interactions to pass on the meaning of texts. The de-legitimization of oral transmission, however, in the modern era did have the unintended consequence of stripping authority from scholars and placing it in the hands of the loudest voices on the street⁵⁷. Consequently, much of the tradition of knowledge has evaporated. The process is reminiscent of Ibn Khaldun's description of the period of growth two generations after Muhammad:

It therefore became necessary to codify the sacred law in order to protect it from misinterpretation. Knowledge of the law then became a skill, to be acquired by learning; in other words it took its place among the crafts and professions... The nobles and heads of tribes, on the other hand, devoted themselves entirely to politics and administration, leaving learning to such others as were desirous of following it. Learning therefore became a profession, disdained by nobles and only followed by the humble...⁵⁸

This process has been repeated again in the modern age, as the Qur'an has been further codified, and the oral tradition has given way to strict adherence to text⁵⁹. Religious learning is increasingly looked down upon by the leaders, and is left only to those who truly desire it. However, unlike the period Ibn Khaldun describes, this age has seen the deregulation of authoritative traditions of religion, opening the door for individual interpretations, which has negatively impacted the way in which Islamic

⁵⁷ At the same time, scholars such as Sayid al-Qimni have attempted to curb the influence of these voices by offering informed critiques of the traditional sources.

⁵⁸ Khaldun, 33.

⁵⁹ As exemplified by the rise of Salafism, which attempts to rely solely on text. See Roel Meijer, introduction to *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, edited by Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

tradition discusses the Qur'an, *hadith* and biographies. As Kung remarks: "the great majority of Muslims have little knowledge of this state of [*hadith*] research."⁶⁰ Kung is specifically referring to the critiques from Western scholars, which are either unnoticed or disregarded by the general populace.

As the methodology of *hadith* (al-Bukhari, Sa'd) and the critiques of Ibn Khaldun make clear, internal criticism of the validity of sources surrounding Muhammad have long been a part of scholarly tradition. If modern methodologies can help better shift through these sources then these processes should not necessarily be anathema to the Muslim community. Tradition and modernity are not always antagonistic or discrete⁶¹. Of course, criticism of the Qur'an has, and will remain, out of the discussion for Muslim believers. However, even modern Qur'anic criticism does little more than suggest insignificant alternate readings or the possibility of outside influence, neither of which necessarily invalidate the Qur'an. As Peters points out, the Qur'an had to be understandable to its audiences, which meant to some degree it had to fit with the style of writing at the time.⁶² Even that suggestion may perhaps be too much for most Muslims, or even Muslim scholars, but it is a discussion that cannot be fully avoided.

External criticism has put many Muslims on the defensive; it often appears that Western scholars are criticizing not just texts, but the very foundation of the religion itself. Criticism of the oral tradition is not simply a criticism of the mysterious 7th-8th century period. Oral tradition was an essential component of the study of the Qur'an and even of the methodologies of *hadith*. To invalidate oral tradition is to attack a

⁶⁰ Kung, 267.

⁶¹ See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion : Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

⁶² Peters, 296.

fundamental element of centuries of tradition, which has only been forgotten in the modern period. Even modernist Muslim scholars cannot divorce themselves from the tradition.⁶³ Thus, these criticisms, in forcing conservatives to defend their tradition, have further alienated Muslims from the diversity and complexity of their tradition, as exemplified by the fact that most Arabic copies of Ibn Hisham's work are printed without the intro, in an attempt to silence possible doubts⁶⁴.

Muslim scholars, though, are not without a leg to stand on in this contemporary debate. Hans Kung wisely asks the question: "why then should we exclude the historical possibility that, in an 'oral culture', authentic words and actions of the Prophet were handed down only orally for one or two centuries?"⁶⁵ Oral tradition has formed a critical piece of Muslim scholarship and realistic approaches to the oral transmission have allowed scholars to vet *hadith* and critique weak oral chains. The oral paradigm was never the sole arbiter of the Muslim tradition, even during the Prophet's lifetime scribes wrote the Qur'an on various scraps. It should be remembered that there was not strictly a shift in model from oral to written tradition in the 9th Century. In fact the two coexisted until the disruption of the modern period. Keeping this in mind, Muslim scholars should not be embarrassed by the oral component of their tradition, and should reinvigorate the tradition of historical authentication.

⁶³ See Asad.

⁶⁴ Dr. Khayyal

⁶⁵ Kung, 267.

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IV. Further Research

Hopefully this essay has laid the groundwork for further research to be done on the topic of oral/written sources and the impact of the 7th century gap on contemporary Muslims. I have provided some background, both on the tradition itself and the scholarly debates on the history. As well I have provided some context for modern tensions. My research is bounded principally by books and the larger scholarly debates. I am as well bound to English-language sources, or English translations. This means in particular that I was unable to sufficiently address the internal critiques which arose throughout Islamic scholarly history; an area which could be addressed in further research. Further scholarship can be done by looking to Arabic sources, and looking to non-textual sources. What does the debate on 7th century sources mean for modern Muslim scholars or even for average Muslims? Further inquiries into this could greatly benefit cross-cultural dialogues on the subject of modern movements which seek to return to the paradigm of the original community (Islamists).

Below I have listed English language sources that I believe would be helpful in further research but I did not have the time or resources to examine myself.

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