

The Authority of *Hadîts* in Classical Sufi Literature: Negotiating Authenticity, Meaning, and Spiritual Legitimacy

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Abstract

*This article examines how the authority of hadith is constructed and negotiated in classical Sufi literature, focusing on the relationship among the text's authenticity, interpretive meaning, and spiritual legitimacy. The use of hadith in Sufi works is often criticized for relying on da'if or non-canonical narrations. This article argues that the authority of hadith in Sufi discourse cannot be understood only through the formal criteria of hadith criticism. Drawing on classical Sufi works such as al-Qushayri's *Al-Risālah al-Qusyayriyyah*, al-Sarraj's *al-Luma'*, and al-Ghazali's *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, this article employs a qualitative, library-based method grounded in literary studies, combining a historical approach with attention to hadith interpretation (tafsir al-hadith). The study shows that classical Sufi writers did not use hadith merely as a normative proposition, but also as a discursive instrument to form ethical discipline, articulate spiritual experience, and affirm the authority of Sufism within the broader framework of Islamic orthodoxy. Authenticity, in this context, is often negotiated through moral utility, symbolic depth, and pedagogical function rather than through*

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sanad evaluation alone. The article concludes that hadith in classical Sufi literature functions simultaneously as a source of religious normativity, a medium of spiritual interpretation, and a foundation for claims to prophetic inheritance.

Keywords: Hadith Authority, Classical Sufism, Authenticity, Spiritual Legitimacy, Hadith Interpretation.

Introduction

Hadith occupies a central position in the Islamic intellectual tradition because it functions not only as a normative source after the Qur'an, but also as a primary medium for articulating religious authority, forming moral discipline, and transmitting prophetic example across the various branches of Islamic scholars.¹ In classical Islamic history, the centrality of hadith is not limited to jurisprudence and kalam but extends into asceticism and Sufism, especially as the Sufi community sought to root its inner experience, spiritual discipline, and purification practices in the Sunnah of the Prophet and the framework of Sunni orthodoxy.² Classical Sufi literature therefore almost never stands outside the discourse of hadith; rather, Sufi authors made intense efforts to connect *maqāmāt*, *aḥwāl*, *adab*, *ṣūbūd*, *tawakkul*, and *ma'rifaḥ* with the words and example of the Prophet Muhammad.³ Taken together, these dimensions indicate that hadith functions in classical Sufi literature as the very ground on which spiritual authority is constructed, a claim this article develops below.

The closeness between Sufism and hadith is evident in representative works such as al-Sarraj's *al-Luma'*, al-Qushayri's *al-Risalah al-Qushayriyyah*, and al-Ghazali's *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, all of which consistently draw on hadith to sustain their normative

¹ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, 2nd ed. (London: Oneworld, 2017), 1–12.

² Alexander Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 62–88.

³ Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–25.

and pedagogical arguments.⁴ In these texts, hadith functions not only as a postulate for establishing particular virtues, but also as a discursive device connecting the Sufi *suluk* to the Prophet's model of life, so that spirituality appears not as an innovation detached from tradition but as a deepening of the prophetic heritage itself.⁵ Studies of Sufi manners and authority in the early Sufi community show that quoting hadith often served to organize the relationship between teacher and student, affirm ethical discipline, and frame inner experience in language acceptable to the wider Islamic scholarly community.⁶ The use of hadith in classical Sufi literature should therefore be read as an intellectual strategy for showing that the Sufi path is a morally and spiritually legitimate form of inheritance from the Prophet.

Nevertheless, the use of hadith in classical Sufi literature has long been an object of criticism, especially since some Sufi writers are considered to rely on *da'if* narrations or devotional expressions that circulate with the nuances of hadith without always submitting to the verification standards developed in the discipline of *muṣṭalah al-ḥadīths*.⁷ Such criticism is reinforced by the fact that hadith scholars have historically evaluated whether a narration can genuinely be attributed to the Prophet through *sanad*, *matn*, and a strict chain of transmission.⁸ However, measuring Sufi literature

⁴ Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma'* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 39–65; Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Khayr, 1993), 45–82; Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 3:3–28.

⁵ Christopher Melchert, *Before Sufism: Early Islamic Renunciant Piety* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 145–172.

⁶ Margaret Malamud, "Sufi Organizations and Structures of Authority in Medieval Nishapur," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 3 (1994): 427–442.

⁷ Brown, *Hadith*, 79–106.

⁸ Jonathan A. C. Brown, "Criticism of the Proto-Hadith Canon: al-Daraqutni's Adjustment of the Two Ṣaḥīḥs," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no. 1 (2004): 1–37; Khoirurrizqī, Ahmad Ainul Yaḥyā, Syahreza Badarul Ulum, Muhammad Fadhil Wathani, and Anjas Apriansyah. 2026. "A Multi-Tiered Matn Criticism Model on Gender-Related Hadiths: Ibn Ḥajar Al-'Asqalānī and Rashīd Riḍā in Comparison". *Dirasat Qur'aniyyah Wa Hadithiyyah* 1 (2): 127–46. <https://darulilmijournal.com/index.php/>

solely by the parameters of formal authenticity risks oversimplifying the role hadith plays in these texts, since Sufis often use hadith not only to establish law but to form ethical dispositions and translate spiritual experience into language recognized by normative Islamic tradition. The real issue, then, is not only whether cited hadiths meet established criteria of authenticity, but how authenticity is negotiated and exercised to build a spiritual authority still recognized by the wider field of Islamic scholars.

This is where the category of authority becomes important, because hadith in classical Sufi literature operates on at least three layers at once: as a source of religious normativity, as a medium of hadith interpretation, and as a foundation of legitimacy for Sufi claims to prophetic inheritance.⁹ In the first layer, hadith provides a normative basis allowing the teachings of *zuhud*, *wara'*, patience, and *tawakkul* to be presented as a continuation of the authoritative sunnah rather than as speculative ideas. In the second layer, hadith becomes an object of flexible interpretation, read ethically or symbolically so that its meaning develops from an informative function into a pedagogical means of guiding the inner journey of a *sālik*. In the third layer, hadith produces spiritual legitimacy, because linking a shaykh or teaching to the example of the Prophet allows Sufi authority to be understood as a continuation of prophetic legacy rather than as charismatic authority standing outside Sunni Islam. These three layers do not operate in isolation; their conjunction is the working definition of hadith authority used throughout this article.

Although the study of classical Sufism and the study of hadith are both extensive fields, the relationship between them is still often treated separately. Hadith scholars tends to focus on transmission and the criticism of authenticity, exemplified by Jonathan Brown's account of how the acceptance of a narration is shaped by broader

daqiyah/article/view/190.

⁹ Aisha Y. Musa, *Hadith as Scripture: Discussions on the Authority of Prophetic Traditions in Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1–20.

social and legal authority and Aisha Musa's account of debate over how prophetic practice is understood as living religious knowledge.¹⁰ Sufism scholars, meanwhile, emphasizes doctrine, mystical experience, and institutional history, as shown in Ahmet Karamustafa's account of formative asceticism and Alexander Knysh's account of how Sufis integrated inner experience into Islamic normativity.¹¹ Because these two literatures rarely meet, there is comparatively little research that specifically examines how classical Sufi writers constructed the authority of hadith through the intersection of formal validity, interpretive meaning, and ethical utility.

Numbers of scholars has approached this meeting point indirectly. Margaret Malamud shows that Sufi organizations in medieval Nishapur were built through language of scholars and piety requiring textual legitimacy, while Denis Gril's account of *adab* in Sufism shows that Sufi ethics were built through self-education explicitly referring to prophetic example.¹² Studies of sainthood in the Sufi and Shi'i traditions likewise show that concepts such as *walaya* were argued from hadith rather than asserted independently of it, and Indonesian scholars on K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari's reading of *walaya* shows that this hadith-based reasoning about sainthood continued to shape Sufi thought well beyond the classical period.¹³ These studies, however, tend to foreground *adab*, sainthood, or the social structure of Sufism in general, rather than making hadith

¹⁰ Brown, *Hadith*, 130–156; Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 48–68.

¹¹ Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, 92–118; Knysh, *Sufism*, 89–110.

¹² Malamud, "Sufi Organizations and Structures of Authority," 427–442; Denis Gril, "Adab et éthique dans le soufisme. Quelques constats et interrogations," in *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam: Sufi Adab*, ed. Francesco Chiabotti et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 45–62.

¹³ Rebecca Masterton, "A Comparative Exploration of the Spiritual Authority of the Awliyā' in the Shi'i and Sufi Traditions," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 32, no. 1 (2015): 26–50; Nur Hadi Ihsan, Moh. Isom Mudin, and Adib Fattah Suntoro, "K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari's View on Walāya (Sainthood) in Sufism," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 10, no. 2 (2021): 249–266.

itself the center of analysis regarding its authenticity, meaning, and spiritual legitimacy. That gap becomes still more apparent once one turns to how hadith is actually used within classical Sufi works themselves.

This article adopts a qualitative methodology with a library-based approach centered on close reading of *al-Luma'*, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, and *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* as primary sources, supported by secondary sources in both hadith studies and Sufi studies.¹⁴ It combines a historical approach, which situates these works within classical Islamic intellectual formation, with attention to hadith interpretation, which examines how hadith is not merely quoted but actively read for ethical and spiritual meaning.¹⁵ This continuing interpretive question is not only historical: recent hadith scholars reconstructs hadith interpretation through a *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* framework, rereads hadith on image-making to assess AI-generated images through Fazlur Rahman's double movement, and derives an Islamic environmental ethic from prophetic hadith, showing that the tension between textual authority and contextual meaning explored here remains a live methodological problem.¹⁶ The present article treats classical Sufi hadith interpretation as an early and doctrinally consequential instance of that same broader interpretive dynamic.

Based on this framework, the article aims to explain how hadith is used in classical Sufi literature to establish spiritual authority, how authenticity is negotiated in Sufi textual practice, and how the meaning

¹⁴ Al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma'*; al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*; al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 3:3–28.

¹⁵ Knysh, *Sufism*, 1–20; Melchert, *Before Sufism*, 1–18.

¹⁶ Mokh. Sya'roni et al., "Reconstructing Ḥadīth Interpretation through a Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah Framework: A Methodological Reassessment of Normative–Contextual Readings," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 107, no. 3 (2026): 1–20; Muhammad Yusuf Pratama, "Recontextualizing Hadith on Image Prohibition to Assess AI-Generated Images through Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement," *Journal of Visual Theology* 8, no. 1 (2026): 133–146; Mokh. Sya'roni et al., "Ecotheological Insights from Prophetic Hadiths: Reframing Islamic Environmental Ethics Based on SDGs," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 106, no. 5 (2025): 1–15.

of hadith contributes to the legitimacy of Sufism within the horizon of Islamic orthodoxy. Its central argument is that the authority of hadith in classical Sufi literature rests not solely on verification of *sanad*, but on the conjunction of religious normativity, symbolic depth, moral utility, and pedagogical function. The discussion proceeds in four sections: hadith as a foundational and normative source; hadith, adab, and the pedagogical formation of the Sufi self; the negotiation of authenticity between *muḥaddithsūn* standards and Sufi practice; and hadith interpretation in the construction of spiritual meaning. Together, these sections show that hadith functions in classical Sufism as a bridge between shari'a, inner experience, and the formation of spiritual authority.

Hadith as a Foundational and Normative Source in Classical Sufi Discourse

The foundational role of hadith in Sufism also shows that a rigid dichotomy between hadith scholars and Sufis oversimplifies the historical record. Network studies of so-called traditionist Sufis show that, from the earliest period, a number of figures were active both in transmitting hadith and in Sufi life, so that the space of encounter between the two traditions was closer than is often imagined.¹⁷ This matters because it shows that the use of hadith in Sufi texts was not a peripheral phenomenon but part of a broader intellectual configuration of Sunni Islam, in which a Sufi's intensive use of hadith marked participation in the tradition rather than deviation from it. Comparative work on spiritual authority across Sufi and Shi'i traditions reinforces this point by showing that claims to sanctity were argued through hadith rather than proposed as a rival source of authority standing apart from prophetic transmission.¹⁸

¹⁷ Jeremy Farrell, "Early 'Traditionist Sufis': A Network Analysis," in *Modern Hadith Studies: Continuing Debates and New Approaches*, ed. Belal Abu-Alabbas, Christopher Melchert, and Michael Dann (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 133–156.

¹⁸ Masterton, "A Comparative Exploration of the Spiritual Authority of the

The basic function of hadith in classical Sufi discourse can be seen in at least three forms. First, hadith serves as a normative source that provides religious justification for ascetic practice and spiritual ethics: practices such as *ṣubud*, *khalwah*, silence, hunger, *murāqabah*, patience, and *tawakkul* are typically linked to the words, actions, or habits of the Prophet rather than proposed as psychological speculation.¹⁹ This grounds Sufi discipline within Islamic orthopraxy rather than positioning it outside normative practice. Second, hadith serves a pedagogical function, since the narration of the Prophet is used not merely to prove a moral obligation but to shape how a *sālik* should feel, act, refrain, and interpret trial. Third, hadith serves as a source of prophetic identity, because Sufis need an intense relationship with the Prophet so that their spiritual path can be understood as moral inheritance rather than private mystical experience.

At the textual level, this foundational role can also be seen in how Sufi writers organize their arguments. A chapter on *tawakkul*, for example, commonly starts with verses and hadith before proceeding to an explanation by the shaykhs, an exemplary story, or an analysis of spiritual *maqam*.²⁰ This pattern is not an editorial coincidence but a structure of legitimacy: by placing hadith at the beginning of a discussion, the Sufi writer signals that what follows is an elaboration of prophetic legacy rather than a substitute for it. Studies of how Suhrawardī's manuals reference the Prophet show that hadith serves as a medium for interpreting Islam's primary texts and for organizing the daily life of disciples.²¹ Findings of this kind help explain that hadith in classical Sufi literature is not a passive element but an axis around which meaning, manners, and discipline are organized.

Awliyā', 26–50.

¹⁹ Al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma'*, 39–65; al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, 45–82.

²⁰ Al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma'*, 39–65.

²¹ Qamar-ul Huda, "Remembrance of the Prophet in Suhrawardī's 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 2 (2001): 129–150.

Read together, these are three functions indicate that hadith in classical Sufism operates simultaneously as postulate, pedagogical model, and living memory of an ideal to be imitated. Sufi authority is not built by setting the Prophet aside for the sake of inner experience, but by making the Prophet the normative horizon of that experience itself.²² This conclusion also clarifies why the boundary between hadith scholars and Sufism should not be drawn too sharply: even when a Sufi author's technical apparatus of transmission criticism is not the primary focus of a passage, the constant recourse to hadith indicates that prophetic authority remains the presupposed foundation of the argument. In other words, hadith is not simply quoted by Sufis; it becomes the framework through which the language of Sufism gains recognition within the wider horizon of Islamic scholars, a point developed further in the following section on adab and pedagogical formation.

Hadith, Adab, and the Pedagogical Formation of the Sufi Self

Hadith also provides the basis for the formation of Sufi manners. In the Sufi tradition, adab is not mere social etiquette but self-discipline regulating a person's relationship with God, the Prophet, teachers, others, and the self.²³ Because the Prophet is seen as the model of moral perfection, hadith becomes the primary source for determining how a *sālik* eats, speaks, keeps silence, worships, befriends others, and faces trials. From this it appears that the authority of hadith in Sufism does not stop at the doctrinal level but permeates the formation of habitus, so that Sufi texts treat hadith as a source of ethical formation that organizes movement, affection, and awareness in everyday conduct rather than only shaping abstract belief.

²² Knysh, *Sufism*, 111–135.

²³ Gril, "Adab et éthique dans le soufisme," 45–62.

The analysis of Sufi instructional manuals shows that this pedagogical use of hadith amounts to what can be called an adab theology: detailed instructions for spiritual exercise, meditation, and prayer are presented as a coherent theological connection among faith, law, and the etiquette of proper conduct, rather than as separate social rules.²⁴ When Sufis quote hadith in this context, they are not merely transmitting information but forming an ethical subject expected to imitate prophecy existentially rather than know the sunnah only intellectually. This pedagogical use of hadith also explains why adab manuals so often pair a hadith with a short commentary rather than leaving the narration to stand alone: the commentary translates prophetic example into concrete guidance for the disciple's daily conduct, reinforcing the sense that adab is learned through practice as much as through instruction.

Hadith also organizes the relationship between teacher and disciple. Studies of authority structures in medieval Sufi communities show that citing hadith in the context of instruction served to affirm ethical discipline and to frame the inner experience of disciples in language acceptable to the wider scholarly community, thereby binding pedagogical authority to prophetic authority rather than to the shaykh's personal charisma alone.²⁵ This suggests that the master-disciple relationship in classical Sufism was never purely personal, but was continuously mediated by shared reference to the Prophet's words and conduct, since a shaykh's own standing depended on being seen to transmit and embody prophetic example rather than to originate authority independently of it.

On this basis, it can be said that hadith in classical Sufi discourse links three things at once: religious normativity, the formation of spiritual meaning, and the legitimacy of the Sufi path. Before any question of formal authenticity arises, hadith is already

²⁴ Qamar-ul Huda, "The Light beyond the Shore in the Theology of Proper Sufi Moral Conduct (Adab)," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2004): 461–484.

²⁵ Malamud, "Sufi Organizations and Structures of Authority," 427–442.

the main tool by which Sufis affirm continuity with the Prophet, formulate an ethics of self-transformation, and ensure that spiritual authority continues to speak from within the established language of Islam. This pedagogical foundation is what allows the discussion to move to the next stage of the argument, namely how authenticity itself is negotiated in Sufi textual practice, since the adab and pedagogical functions described here presuppose that at least some hadith used for moral formation will not always meet the strictest standards of the *muhadditsun*.

Negotiating Authenticity: Between *Muḥadditsūn* Standards and Sufi Textual Practice

The question of authenticity is one of the most sensitive points in reading the use of hadith in classical Sufi literature, because it is here that two epistemological horizons that are not always identical meet: the horizon of formal criticism practiced by the *muhadditsun* and the horizon of moral-spiritual usefulness pursued by Sufi writers.²⁶ In the hadith tradition, authenticity is generally determined through evaluation of the *sanad*, the credibility of the narrator, the continuity of transmission, and consideration of hidden irregularities in *matn* and *isnad*.²⁷ This framework developed into a highly established discipline from the classical period onward and served to keep attribution of the Prophet's words from being mixed with weak, erroneous, or fabricated reports. It is precisely at this point of friction between formal criticism and moral-spiritual usefulness that the present section situates its argument, examining how classical Sufi authors negotiated authenticity rather than simply asserting or ignoring it.

²⁶ Brown, *Hadith*, 79–106. Idri and Rohaizan Baru, “The Criticism on Sufi's Hadith Narration Methods,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7, no. 5 (2017): 445–453.

²⁷ Muhammad 'Ajjāj al-Khaṭīb, *Uṣūl al-Ḥadīth: 'Ulūmuhu wa Muṣṭalaḥuhu* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1989), 301–307.

Classical Sufi literature shows that the function of hadith in these texts is not always oriented toward legal needs or the establishment of formal doctrine, but is often directed toward forming ethical sensitivity, ascetic appreciation, and guidance for a *sālik*'s inner journey.²⁸ In this context, Sufis do not necessarily reject the importance of accountable hadith, but they often operate on the assumption that the working power of a narration is also determined by its ability to lead the soul toward *taqwa*, *ikhlas*, *zuhd*, and *ma'rifah*. The resulting tension is therefore not solely between valid and invalid, but between two logics of authority: the logic of verifying transmission and the logic of spiritual effectiveness. Sufi texts thus become an important example of how the authority of hadith can be negotiated outside the strict arena of formal law without stepping entirely outside the normative Islamic horizon.

Such negotiation can be seen, first, in the tendency of Sufi writers to keep presenting hadith as a primary source of legitimacy without always giving detailed attention to the status of its *sanad*. Al-Sarraj, al-Qushayri, and al-Ghazali consistently open their discussions of the soul, manners, and *maqāmāt* with verses and hadith, a pattern suggesting that prophetic reference was seen as necessary to validate any stage of spiritual discussion.²⁹ Second, negotiation can be seen in how Sufis treat weak hadith and reports at the margins of the formal canon, since the use of *da'if* hadith in *fada'il al-a'māl*, *targhib wa tarhib*, and the reinforcement of ethical motivation was not altogether unfamiliar within contemporary comparative studies of Salafi and Sufi approaches to hadith criticism.³⁰ Because many Sufi themes concern the purification of the soul and the cultivation of sincere intention, some Sufi writers

²⁸ Knysh, *Sufism*, 89–110.

²⁹ Al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma'*, 39–65; al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah*, 45–82; al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 3:3–28.

³⁰ Nur Muhammad Anas Mohd Razak, Mohd Arif Nazri, and Latifah Abdul Majid, "Textual Criticism of Hadith in Contemporary Islamic Thought: A Comparative Analysis of Salafi and Sufi Approaches," *Al-Bayān: Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 23, no. 3 (2025): 578–601.

moved within areas of the hadith corpus that were historically more flexible in their use.

Al-Ghazali, for example, places great emphasis on ethics and *muraqabah*, so that hadith in *Ihya'* is often used to arouse moral awareness rather than to formulate strictly legal-formal arguments.³¹ Commentators on *Ihya'* have long noted debate over the quality of some hadith al-Ghazali uses, yet this debate itself suggests that the work should be understood as a meeting ground between the demands of hadith criticism and the broader ethical-spiritual project rather than as a simple failure of verification. The existence of weak reports in Sufi texts therefore needs to be read historically and functionally rather than through a purely normative binary of *ṣaḥīḥ* versus *da'if*. Authenticity in Sufi literature is negotiated through meaning as much as through transmission, since religious texts, including hadith, are often read ethically, symbolically, and pedagogically, so that a narration's weight lies not only in its technical status but also in the depth of meaning it opens for the process of self-transformation.

The negotiation of authenticity is also directly linked to the need for Sufis to establish spiritual legitimacy in the eyes of Sunni orthodoxy. Historical studies of classical Sufism argue that mystical experience and spiritual discipline did not stand outside the framework of Islam but represented a deepening of it, so that reference to hadith became crucial in anchoring claims to sainthood, companionship, etiquette, and spiritual lineage as a second source of Islamic teaching after the Qur'an.³² Consequently, even when certain narrations do not attain the highest grade in the assessment of hadith scholars, their continued presence in Sufi texts still serves the broader project of demonstrating that Sufism possesses both textual roots and a spiritual chain of transmission, a claim that prepares the ground for examining how such narrations are read for meaning in the section that follows.

³¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 3:3–28.

³² Knysh, *Sufism*, 111–135; Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 98–121.

Hadith Interpretation and the Construction of Meaning in Sufi Readings

If the previous section showed that the authority of hadith in classical Sufi literature is negotiated between the demands of formal authenticity and its ethical-spiritual function, this section explains how hadith itself is read, interpreted, and given meaning within Sufi discourse. The classical Sufi tradition does not treat religious texts, including hadith, as a collection of statements to be taken literally; rather, it treats them as a field of meaning that can be continuously elaborated in social, cultural, and pedagogical contexts.³³ Annabel Keeler's study of Sufi Qur'anic commentary shows that this interpretive sensibility moves from innate meaning toward ethical and interior meaning without eliminating the text's literal layer, and the same sensibility can be traced in how Sufi authors approach hadith.³⁴ This sensibility helps explain why Sufi hadith literature is often treated as a source of *ishara* and inner guidance rather than merely as an informative proposition.

Recent methodological work on hadith interpretation argues that normative and contextual readings, when pursued independently, tend to produce partial understandings, and proposes integrating *maqāsid al-syarī'ah* as a framework that evaluates textual meaning against the ethical objectives of the tradition.³⁵ Read against classical Sufi practice, this proposal describes in contemporary terms what al-Sarraj, al-Qushayri, and al-Ghazali already did without naming it so: they preserved the normative force of a hadith while reading it for the purpose it served in

³³ Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 69–97.

³⁴ Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybūdī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40–67.

³⁵ Elfreda, Apsari Arisanti, and Nasrulloh. 2026. "Integrating Takhrīj and Netnography: A Maqāshid Al-Hadith Framework for Evaluating Aesthetic Worship Content on Social Media". *Dirasat Qur'aniyyah Wa Hadithiyyah* 1 (2): 108-26. <https://darulilmijournal.com/index.php/daqiyah/article/view/160>; Mokh. Sya'roni et al., "Reconstructing Ḥadīth Interpretation through a Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah Framework," 1–20.

forming the disciple's soul, refusing to reduce interpretation to either bare literalism or a purely historical account of the text's origin. Seen this way, classical Sufi hadith interpretation anticipates a methodological problem that hadith scholars continues to debate under a different vocabulary.

This pattern of meaning-making also has an institutional dimension. Studies of hadith-based sainthood in Sufi and Shi'i traditions show that interpreting hadith and prophetic example was inseparable from organizing communal discipline, so that interpretation was not merely a private, contemplative exercise but part of how spiritual authority was transmitted across generations of disciples.³⁶ Analysis of a hadith on sainthood in An-Nawawī's Forty Hadith likewise shows that Sufi exegesis of a single narration could be extended into a full account of spiritual transformation and nearness to God, treating the hadith as a text to be unfolded rather than a statement to be merely repeated.³⁷ Seen this way, the interpretive and institutional functions of hadith reinforce one another: a hadith gains authority because it explains the stages of the spiritual journey and connects inner discipline with the prophetic example, while the interpretation itself becomes more authoritative when embedded within an established communal practice.

Fourth, and finally, this interpretive approach clarifies why classical Sufi literature can simultaneously honor the technical apparatus of hadith criticism and extend meaning beyond it. The interpretive model developed here does not deny that *sanad* criticism remains important for mapping the historical status of a narration, but it insists that the authority of hadith in Sufi texts

³⁶ Masterton, "A Comparative Exploration of the Spiritual Authority of the Awliyā'," 26–50; Ihsan, Mudin, and Suntoro, "K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari's View on Walāya," 249–266.

³⁷ Dauda Gambari Yusuph, "A Discourse on the Sufi's Concept of Sainthood (Al-Wilāyah) with Reference to Ḥadīth Thirty-Eight (38) of An-Nawawī's Forty Ḥadīth," *A Journal of Islamic Sciences and Muslim Development* (2020).

is complete only when this is joined with an analysis of how the narration is interpreted, lived, and translated into ethical and spiritual formation. Read together, al-Sarraj's *al-Luma'*, al-Qushayri's *al-Risālah al-Qusyayriyyah*, and al-Ghazali's *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* converge on a single analytical point: the meaning Sufi authors draw from hadith is not incidental to the text but produced through a disciplined interpretive practice that reads transmission together with ethical and spiritual application.

Conclusion

This article shows that the authority of hadith in classical Sufi literature cannot be understood solely from the perspective of formal authenticity, but must also be read in relation to the normative, pedagogical, and interpretive functions it performs within Sufi texts. Hadith in classical Sufi works is not merely a supporting quotation but a normative foundation connecting spiritual experience to a prophetic model. Through hadith, Sufi writers established the discipline of *adab*, explained *maqāmāt* and *ahwāl*, and affirmed that the Sufi path was a legitimate part of the Islamic heritage. The most important finding of this article is therefore that hadith in the classical Sufi tradition works simultaneously as a source of religious normativity, a medium for the formation of spiritual meaning, and a basis for the legitimacy of spiritual authority, and that these three functions cannot be reduced to one another without losing sight of how Sufi authors actually used hadith in practice.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this article seeks to bridge the study of hadith and the study of Sufism, which have often been pursued separately, with hadith scholars tending to focus on *sanad* and authenticity while Sufism scholars emphasizes doctrine, mystical experience, and the structure of spiritual authority. This article shows that the two fields meet intensely in the textual practice of classical Sufi literature, and its main contribution lies

in showing that the authority of hadith in Sufism is shaped not only by verification of transmission but also by moral usefulness, symbolic depth, and pedagogical function in the formation of religious subjects. With this framework, the article offers a more integrative reading of the relationship between prophetic texts, spiritual traditions, and the construction of authority in classical Islamic thought, one that treats hadith as a bridge between shari'a and inner experience rather than as a separate concern.

This study is limited in scope to three major works of classical Sunni Sufism and does not extend to philosophical Sufism, neo-Sufism, or the tariqa networks of the later and modern Islamic world, which means its conclusions should be read as characteristic of a particular period and corpus rather than as claims about Sufi literature in general. Future research could extend this framework to the reception of hadith in Sufi literature outside the classical Sunni corpus, and a comparative study of Middle Eastern Sufi literature alongside the Sufi tradition of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago would help clarify how hadith is used across different social, cultural, and pedagogical contexts. Further studies might also focus on particular hadith that recur prominently across Sufi discourse, so that it becomes clearer how a specific narration is reproduced, interpreted, and mobilized as a source of spiritual legitimacy across different periods and regions.[]

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