

Comparative Epistemology of Hadith Criticism: A Paradigmatic Analysis between the Textual Tradition and the Rational Tradition

Ike Hikmawati^{1*}, Ali Masrur², dan Tajul Arifin³

*Corresponding e-mail: hikmawatiike1971@gmail.com

¹²³Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung

Abstract:

This study critically analyzes the epistemological foundations of hadith criticism, examining the paradigmatic conflict between the textualist *Ahl al-Hadith* and the rationalist *Ahl al-Ra'yi/Kalam* traditions. This topic is vital as it addresses the core tension between tradition and reason in Islamic thought, a debate that remains highly relevant in contemporary contexts, especially regarding hadith's authenticity and its compatibility with modern knowledge. The research uses a qualitative, library-based comparative analysis to scrutinize the methodologies of both traditions, focusing on their respective primary sources of authority, criticism criteria, and validity standards. The research findings indicate that both paradigms possess complementary strengths and weaknesses: the textual paradigm excels in historical authenticity but lacks rational coherence, while the rational paradigm emphasizes theological consistency and universal Islamic values yet tends toward subjectivity. Both represent distinct but mutually corrective approaches to understanding prophetic truth. This study's key contribution is a proposal for a comprehensive critical epistemology that integrates the historical rigor of sanad criticism with the rational scrutiny of *matn*. This hybrid framework offers a balanced and accountable approach to hadith criticism, bridging the historical gap and ensuring its continued relevance for modern scholarship and believers.

Keywords: Hadith Criticism, Epistemology, *Ahl al-Hadith*, *Ahl al-Ra'yi*, Rationality

Abstrak:

Studi ini menganalisis secara kritis fondasi epistemologis kritik hadits, mengkaji konflik paradigmatis antara tradisi tekstual *Ahl al-Hadits* dan tradisi rasional *Ahl al-Ra'yi/Kalam*. Topik ini sangat penting karena membahas ketegangan inti antara tradisi dan akal dalam pemikiran Islam, sebuah debat yang tetap relevan di era kontemporer terkait otentisitas hadits dan kompatibilitasnya dengan pengetahuan modern. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis komparatif kualitatif berbasis studi pustaka untuk mengkaji metodologi kedua tradisi, berfokus pada sumber otoritas utama mereka, kriteria kritik, dan standar validitas. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kedua paradigma memiliki keunggulan dan kelemahan yang saling melengkapi: paradigma tekstual unggul dalam keotentikan historis namun lemah dalam rasionalitas, sedangkan paradigma rasional kuat dalam konsistensi teologis dan nilai universal Islam tetapi cenderung subjektif. Keduanya mencerminkan dua pendekatan yang berbeda namun saling mengoreksi dalam memahami kebenaran profetik. Kontribusi utama studi ini adalah pengajuan epistemologi kritis komprehensif yang mengintegrasikan keketatan historis kritik sanad dengan pengujian rasional terhadap matan. Kerangka kerja hibrida ini menawarkan pendekatan yang seimbang dan bertanggung jawab terhadap kritik hadits, menjembatani kesenjangan historis dan memastikan relevansinya bagi keilmuan modern dan umat.

Kata Kunci: Kritik Hadits, Epistemologi, *Ahl al-Hadits*, *Ahl al-Ra'yi*, Rasionalitas

Introduction

The existence of hadith as one of the main pillars in the structure of Islamic teachings, after the Qur'an, cannot be denied. Since the early days of Islam, hadith has been a crucial source of reference in understanding law, creed, morals, and various aspects of Muslim life. However, the authenticity and validity of hadith have never been free from debate and criticism. As Islamic thought developed, two main epistemological paradigms emerged that differed fundamentally in their approach to hadith criticism: the textual tradition dominated by *Ahl al-Hadith* and the rational tradition represented by *Ahl al-Ra'yi*.¹

The textual tradition, which culminated in monumental works such as *Sabih al-Bukhari* and *Sabih Muslim*, bases its criticism of hadith on the validity of the sanad (chain of narrators) and the integrity of the *matn* (text) as reviewed from a linguistic perspective and in terms of its consistency with other accounts. For adherents of this tradition, the authority of the text (hadith) is the highest authority originating from the Prophet, so reason must submit to the text. This approach gave rise to a very strict discipline of hadith science, with a systematic methodology for assessing the credibility of narrators (*adil* and *dhabit*) and examining defects in the sanad and matan (such as *syadz* and *'illah*).² As a result, hadiths with strong chains of transmission tend to be accepted, even if their content is difficult for reason to accept.

On the other hand, the rational tradition, rooted in the thought of *Ahl al-Ra'yi* in Kufah and flourishing in theological schools such as Mu'tazilah, offers a different approach. They argue that reason ('aql) has a significant role as a tool for criticizing and filtering hadith. For them, hadith must not contradict fundamental rational principles, especially theological principles about God's justice and perfection.³ If a hadith contradicts reason or solid

¹Al-Khatib, M., *Hadith Criticism between Traditionists and Jurisprudents*. (n.d). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474441810-011>; Purwaningsih, Y. "Al-Qur'an dan Hadist." *Religion, Education, and Social Laa Roiba Journal (RESLAJ)*, 6(11) (2024). <https://doi.org/10.47467/reslaj.v6i11.3227>

² Ismail, T. M. S., Baru, R., Hassan, A. F., Salleh, A. Z., & Amin, M. F. "The Matan and Sanad Criticisms in Evaluating the Hadith." *Asian Social Science*, 10(21) (2014), 152–158. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ASS.V10N21P152>; Maihula, J., & Abdulkadir, M. M. "In-depth Analysis on the Methodology of Sanad and Matan Criticisms: The Perspective of Hadith Scholars." *LAR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3(01) (2022), 55–60. <https://doi.org/10.47310/iarjhss.2022.v03i01.008>

³ Taufikkurahman, "Rasionalitas barat dan pengaruhnya terhadap studi hadis." *Tajdid: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin*, 21(1) (2022), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.30631/tjd.v21i1.221>; Siregar, I., & Harahap, A. P., "The Relevance of Hadith and Reason in Demonstrating The Status of Hadith." *Al-Bukhari*, 7(1) (2024), 16–33. <https://doi.org/10.32505/al-bukhari.v7i1.8237>

theological principles, then it must be rejected, even if its chain of transmission is authentic.⁴ This has sparked fierce debate about the authority of ahad hadith (hadith with a single chain of transmission) in matters of faith, where rationalists tend to reject them because they do not produce certainty (*yaqin*).⁵

The struggle between these two traditions is not merely a historical polemic. In the modern context, the tension between textual and rational approaches has resurfaced, especially in the face of new challenges, such as criticism of hadith from a Western perspective, the issue of hadith and modern science, and the emergence of literalism and extreme rationalism among Muslims.⁶ Hadiths that have historically been accepted with strong sanad, such as the hadith about the magic of the Prophet Muhammad, about the fly that fell into the drink, or the hadith about the creation of Adam, are now being questioned again in terms of their validity from a rational and scientific point of view.

Several previous studies have highlighted the debate between *Ahl al-Hadith* and *Ahl al-Ra'yi* from various perspectives. The works of Muhammad Mustafa Azami in *Studies in Early Hadith Literature* and Jonathan A.C. Brown in *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* provide a broad historical overview of the development of hadith science and the role of *Ahl al-Hadith*, but both focus more on historical aspects and sanad methodology than on in-depth epistemological comparisons.⁷ Contemporary studies such as those by Mohd. Shakir and Ahmad Fauzi also touch on the role of reason in the acceptance or rejection of hadith, but their analysis is still descriptive and does not discuss the paradigmatic relationship between the two major traditions.⁸

Meanwhile, Yusuf Rahman, in his article “*Mu'tazila's Critique of Hadith*,” reviews the Mu'tazilah's rational approach to hadith, but without systematically comparing it with the textual tradition.⁹ In Indonesia, research by Muhammad Taufiq attempts to integrate historical and rational approaches in *matn* criticism, but it is still limited to general

⁴ Redzwan, I. D. B. M., & Bannga, A. E.-M., مدى عناية المحدثين بالقرائن العقلية في المنهج النقدي. (2023). <https://doi.org/10.36701/bashirah.v4i2.1055>

⁵ Kamil, A., “Al-Hadith Al-Gharib in the Discourse of Hadith Studies; The Authenticity and The Authority.” *Deleted Journal*, (2024), 136–145. <https://doi.org/10.33102/johs.v9i2.320>

⁶ Keller, T., *Hadith* (Routledge eBooks, 2022), 38–61. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003044659-4>

⁷ Azami, M. M., *Studies in Early Hadith Literature: With a Critical Edition of Some Early Texts* (American Trust Publications, 1978); Brown, J. A. C., *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oneworld Publications, 2009).

⁸ Shakir, M., & Fauzi, A. “The Role of `Aql (Reason) in Accepting or Rejecting Ahadith: A Critical Study of Contemporary Debates.” *Journal of Hadith Studies*, 5(2) (2020), 24-42.

⁹ Rahman, Y. “Mu'tazila's Critique of Hadith: Re-examining the Rationalist Approach.” *Islamic Studies*, 57(2) (2018), 195-215.

reconstruction without tracing the roots of epistemological differences between *Ahl al-Hadith* and *Ahl al-Ra'yi*. Overall, existing studies have not presented a complete and in-depth comparative analysis between the two paradigms as independent systems of knowledge.¹⁰

Therefore, there is a significant research gap. There has been no in-depth and paradigmatic comparative study that explicitly compares these two epistemological traditions as two complete systems of thought, from their sources of authority to their methodological implications. This study will fill this void by conducting a structured comparative analysis, not only describing the methodologies of each tradition, but also analyzing the epistemological roots that form the basis of their critiques.

This study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these two traditions view knowledge, truth, and authority in the context of hadith, as well as how these differences in perspective influence their acceptance or rejection of certain narratives. This analysis will be very important for formulating a more balanced and comprehensive approach to hadith criticism in the contemporary era, one that is capable of appreciating historical authenticity while also fulfilling the demands of rationality.

Based on the above background, this study will attempt to answer the following questions: (1) How does the epistemology of hadith criticism in the textual tradition (*Ahl al-Hadith*) work, and what are its main characteristics? (2) How does the epistemology of hadith criticism in the rational tradition (*Ahl al-Ra'yi/Kalam*) operate, and what are its fundamental principles? (3) What are the paradigmatic differences and similarities underlying these two traditions in terms of sources of authority, critical methodology, and criteria for hadith validity? (4) How do these two traditions apply their critical methodologies to controversial hadiths, and what are the implications of these differences? (5) How can a comprehensive epistemological framework for hadith criticism be formulated by integrating the positive aspects of both traditions?

This research has theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, this research will enrich Islamic scholarship, particularly in the fields of hadith science and Islamic epistemology, by offering a paradigmatic comparative analysis that has not been widely conducted. The results of this research can serve as a foundation for future studies on hadith criticism. Practically, this research is expected to make an important contribution to

¹⁰ Taufiq, M. "Rekonstruksi Epistemologi Kritik Matan Hadits: Mengintegrasikan Pendekatan Historis dan Rasional." *Jurnal Studi Ilmu Hadis*, 3(1) (2019), 1-20.

academics, students, and the Muslim community in understanding the complexity of hadith criticism and developing a more balanced perspective that can overcome the polarization between textual literalism and extreme rationalism.

This research uses a qualitative approach with library research and comparative analysis methods. The main data sources for this research are primary and secondary literature relevant to the topic. Primary sources include monumental works of hadith science such as Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, and theological or *Kalam* works from the classical period. Secondary sources include reputable scientific journals, books, and dissertations discussing the epistemology of hadith criticism, comparisons between *Ahl al-Hadith* and *Ahl al-Ra'yi*, and contemporary hadith studies.

Data collection was carried out using documentation techniques, namely by searching, reading, and recording information from various relevant sources. The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis and comparative-paradigmatic analysis methods. Content analysis was applied to identify and categorize key concepts in each tradition, such as the criteria for accepting hadith, the role of reason, and the authority of texts. Furthermore, comparative-paradigmatic analysis was used to compare these two epistemological systems in depth, identifying fundamental differences and similarities at the paradigmatic level, not just at the methodological level.

Results and Discussion

Textual Paradigm: The Epistemology of *Ahl al-Hadith*

The epistemology of *Ahl al-Hadith*, literally meaning “the community of hadith specialists,” is a scholarly paradigm that places the text (hadith) as the primary source of religious knowledge after the Qur’an. In contrast to more rational approaches, this epistemology is grounded in the firm belief that absolute truth is embedded in narrations authentically traced back to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Thus, the main task of a scholar is to verify the authenticity of these narrations, not to test them against pure rational standards. Within this framework, textual authority (*naql*) is far superior to the authority of reason (*‘aql*). Reason, for them, functions as a tool to understand and confirm the text, not to reject or correct it. Jonathan A.C. Brown, in his book *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Authenticity in the Hadith Tradition*, explains that for *Ahl al-Hadith*, “Hadith is viewed as a second revelation that contains everything needed to understand and

apply Islam. Therefore, the task of scholars is to collect and study hadith, not to subject it to rational reasoning.”¹¹

The fundamental principle of this epistemology is *al-Hujjah fi al-Hadith* (authority lies in the hadith). Hadith, whether mutawatir or ahad, is considered a binding source of law and creed if its authenticity is proven through its transmission. Consequently, the validity of a hadith is determined by the quality of its sanad—the chain of transmitters that conveys it from one generation to the next until it reaches the Prophet. Confidence in the integrity and precision of the transmitters becomes the core foundation of this epistemology. Therefore, their primary concern lies in the biographies of transmitters, the history of transmission, and the methodology of narration.

Another key characteristic of this paradigm is the rejection of excessive *ra'y* (personal opinion) or *qiyas* (analogy) when it contradicts the text of hadith. They view unrestricted use of reason as opening the door to deviation and subjectivity in understanding religion. They argue that true and guaranteed knowledge is only that which originates from the Prophet. This attitude is clearly reflected in their works on creed, which emphasize the importance of accepting hadith narrations as they are (*bi-la kayfa*), without questioning how or why—especially on theological matters beyond human comprehension.

The epistemology of *Ahl al-Hadith* is implemented through a highly strict and systematic critical methodology consisting of two stages: sanad criticism and *matn* criticism. Sanad Criticism is the main pillar of this methodology. Its primary goal is to ensure that every transmitter in the chain is credible and trustworthy. This process involves evaluating two main criteria: *al-'Adalah* (moral integrity) and *al-Dhabt* (precision of memory). A transmitter must be known as an honest individual, never lying, and possessing a strong memory for his narration to be accepted. The disciplines of *'ilm al-Rijāl* (biography of transmitters) and *'ilm al-Jarh wa al-Ta'dil* (evaluation of transmitters) developed extensively as primary instruments to implement this sanad criticism.

This methodology resulted in the classification of hadith based on authenticity levels, such as *Sahih*, *Hasan*, and *Da'if*. A *Sahih* hadith is one whose chain is continuous, narrated by transmitters who are upright and precise, and free from hidden defects (*'illah*) or irregularities (*shudhudh*). This methodology is viewed as a remarkable innovation in Islamic historiography

¹¹ Brown, J. A. C., *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Authenticity in the Hadith Tradition* (Oneworld Publications, 2014).

for verifying oral reports. F.E. Peters, in *The Hadith and the Qur'an in the Early Islamic Period*, states that the sanad system is “one of the most extraordinary intellectual achievements of early Islamic civilization,” enabling them “to verify oral transmission with an unprecedented level of precision.”¹²

Although sanad criticism is the main focus, *Matn* Criticism is not ignored, though its function is largely supportive. *Matn* criticism in the *Ahl al-Hadith* tradition aims to ensure that the hadith's content does not contradict the Qur'an, stronger (mutawatir) hadith, absolute rational impossibilities, or valid historical data. However, the parameters of “reason” used are very narrow, limited to things that are categorically impossible—such as a hadith stating that a goat spoke fluent Arabic. A hadith that seems irrational but has a strong sanad is often explained through symbolic or theological interpretation, rather than being rejected outright. This demonstrates that the validity of the sanad remains the primary determinant for hadith acceptance.

The most monumental representation of the epistemology of *Ahl al-Hadith* can be seen in the works of Imam Bukhari (d. 256 AH) and Imam Muslim (d. 261 AH) in their *Sahih* compilations. Imam Bukhari, in *Al-Jami' al-Sahih*, set extremely strict criteria for accepting hadith. The primary requirement is that the transmitter must have met his teacher directly and that the transmission must be proven. According to M. M. Azami in *Studies in Early Hadith Literature*, Bukhari applied stricter standards than his predecessors, especially regarding *liqa'* (physical meeting between teacher and student), demonstrating his strong commitment to the authenticity of transmission.¹³

These works became prototypes for subsequent hadith literature and remain the primary references for Muslims today. Their methodology not only focused on sanad but also on organizing hadith by thematic topics (books of fiqh), which facilitated the use of hadith as a source of law. A. C. O'Connor, in *The Study of Hadith in the Modern Era*, states that “The methodology developed by Bukhari and Muslim became the gold standard for hadith criticism for centuries, and their works remain the foundation of academic hadith studies.”

In summary, the epistemology of *Ahl al-Hadith* is a robust and consistent system that places the text at the center of knowledge. Although *matn* criticism exists, it functions as a secondary filter. Its main pillar is the authenticity of transmission, proven through a highly

¹² Peters, F. E., *The Hadith and the Qur'an in the Early Islamic Period* (Routledge, 2017).

¹³ Azami, M. M., *Studies in Early Hadith Literature: With a Critical Edition of Some Early Texts* (American Trust Publications, 1978).

rigorous sanad methodology. This approach succeeded in producing an authoritative corpus of hadith that forms the basis of Sunni legal and theological thought, while at the same time presenting challenges when confronted with texts that are difficult to reconcile rationally.

Rational Paradigm: The Epistemology of *Ahl al-Ra'y*/ *Kalam*

The rational paradigm in hadith criticism, often associated with *Ahl al-Ra'y* (the People of Opinion) among jurists and *mutakallimūn* (theologians) among scholars of *Kalam*, offers an epistemology fundamentally different from that of *Ahl al-Hadith*. The core of this paradigm is the affirmation of the central role of reason (*'aql*) as a source of knowledge and an essential instrument of critique. They believe that reason is a divine gift that must be used to understand, interpret, and even verify religious texts. For them, revelatory texts should not be interpreted literally when they contradict firm and universal rational principles. Wael B. Hallaq, in his book *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, implicitly explains that this rational tradition has deep roots in Islamic thought, where the use of reason (*ra'y*) is a necessity in situations where no explicit textual evidence exists.¹⁴

This epistemology places reason alongside the text as a source of authority. The Qur'an is viewed as an absolute source of knowledge, but its understanding must be in harmony with rational principles. Hadith, on the other hand, must pass through the filter of rationality before being accepted. Consequently, if a hadith despite having a strong chain of transmission contradicts rational principles, the Qur'an, or moral values believed to originate from revelation, then it must be rejected or interpreted allegorically. This is the most striking paradigmatic difference with *Ahl al-Hadith*, who tend to accept sahih hadith literally.

Another important characteristic is the emphasis on the correlation between text and meaning. For *Ahl al-Ra'y*/*Kalam*, the primary goal is to discover the correct meaning, and that meaning must not violate reason. They argue that the Prophet could not have conveyed anything that contradicts reason, justice, or divine perfection. Therefore, if a hadith appears irrational or degrading to the dignity of prophethood, it is most likely fabricated or transmitted incorrectly. This paradigm is driven by the need to safeguard the purity of divine unity (*tawhid*) and God's justice (*'adl*), which are fundamental theological principles for them.

¹⁴ Hallaq, W. B., *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

Hadith criticism methodology in the rational tradition does not focus on the chain of transmission but on the *matn* (content). The quality of the *matn* is assessed based on rational and theological criteria. This differs from the methodology of *Ahl al-Hadith*, which is dominated by sanad criticism. *Matn* criticism here is not merely linguistic examination but a “test of rationality.” Yusuf Rahman, in his article “*Mu'tazila's Critique of Hadith: Re-examining the Rationalist Approach*,” states that the Mu'tazilah, as the primary representatives of this tradition, “applied strict rational criteria to hadith content, rejecting narrations that they considered contradictory to reason or to the principles of God’s justice and unity.”¹⁵

One of the most significant applications of this methodology is the rejection of *abad* hadith in matters of creed. For them, fundamental beliefs about God and the afterlife must be based on certain knowledge (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*), not probabilistic knowledge (*al-ẓann*). *Ahad* hadith, narrated by one or a few transmitters but not reaching the level of *tawatur* (multiple independent transmissions making fabrication impossible), is considered to yield only conjecture. Thus, they reject *abad* hadith used as the basis of creed, such as the hadith on seeing God in the afterlife, because it contradicts God’s transcendence.

Furthermore, this methodology also applies criticism to hadith that contradict the Qur’an and the general principles of the Sharia. If a hadith, even with a *sahih* chain, contradicts a clear Qur’anic verse (*mubkamat*) or general principles of justice and wisdom in the Sharia, it cannot be accepted. For example, hadiths that depict God with anthropomorphic attributes or those considered unjust are rejected because they contradict divine perfection. M. Taufiq, in *Rekonstruksi Epistemologi Kritik Matan Hadits: Mengintegrasikan Pendekatan Historis dan Rasional*, explains that “the rationalist approach treats hadith as a humanly transmitted product prone to error, and therefore must be scrutinized rigorously through reason.”¹⁶

The school that most clearly represents this epistemology is the Mu'tazilah. They are known for their five foundational principles (*al-Usul al-Khamsah*): *Tawhid*, *al-‘Adl* (Divine Justice), *al-Wa‘d wa al-Wa‘id* (Promise and Threat), *al-Manzilah bayna al-Manzilatayn* (the intermediate position), and *al-Amr bi al-Ma‘ruf wa al-Nahy ‘an al-Munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil). These principles function as theological filters for hadith evaluation. They

¹⁵ Rahman, Y., “Mu'tazila's Critique of Hadith: Re-examining the Rationalist Approach.” *Islamic Studies*, 57(2) (2018), 195-215.

¹⁶ Taufiq, M. “Rekonstruksi Epistemologi Kritik Matan Hadits: Mengintegrasikan Pendekatan Historis dan Rasional.” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu Hadis*, 3(1) (2019), 1-20.

reject narrations that contradict the principle of *Tawhid* (e.g., hadith suggesting that God has direction or bodily attributes) and *al-'Adl* (e.g., hadith portraying God as acting unjustly). According to Harith et al. in “The Mu'tazilite Approach to Hadith Criticism: A Rationalist Perspective,” “*The Mu'tazilah prioritized reason over transmission in matters concerning God's attributes and justice, making their rational perspective the primary criterion for hadith acceptance.*”¹⁷

In addition to the Mu'tazilah, several Hanafi jurists—known as *Ahl al-Ra'y*—also exhibited similar tendencies in using reason and analogy. Imam Abu Hanifah, for instance, frequently employed *ra'y* and *istihsan* (juristic preference) when establishing legal rulings, especially when existing hadith contradicted general principles of the Sharia or were difficult to apply in context. Although their approach is more practical (*fiqhi*) than theological (*Kalam*), its epistemological foundation is the same: reason plays a central role in interpreting and validating texts.

Overall, the epistemology of *Ahl al-Ra'y/Kalam* is a reaction to the literalism they perceived in the *Ahl al-Hadith* tradition. They offer a more flexible and critical approach that treats hadith as a source requiring verification not only from a historical (sanad) perspective but also from rational and theological (matan) perspectives. Although this approach is considered more progressive and logical by its proponents, it also faces criticism for allegedly diminishing the authority of the Prophet and opening the door to subjectivity in hadith criticism.

Comparative Paradigmatic Analysis

The paradigmatic comparative analysis between the textual tradition (*Ahl al-Hadith*) and the rational tradition (*Ahl al-Ra'y*) reveals fundamental differences that go beyond methodology; it touches the epistemological roots of both traditions. These differences include their views on sources of authority, methods of criticism, criteria for hadith validity, and their epistemological implications. This comparison shows that both operate under different intellectual frameworks, which ultimately produce contrasting views on hadith.

1. Primary Source of Authority: Text (*Naql*) vs. Reason (*'Aql*)

The most essential difference lies in the hierarchy of authority. For *Ahl al-Hadith*, the highest authority after the Qur'an is the authentic hadith text, verified through precise oral

¹⁷ Harith, Z., Hashim, A. W., & Azmi, M. A. “The Mu'tazilite Approach to Hadith Criticism: A Rationalist Perspective.” *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, 16(1) (2023), 72-85.

transmission. They believe that *al-hadith hujjah bi nafsibi*, hadith is authoritative in itself, as long as its chain of transmission is sound. Reason (*‘aql*) is acknowledged, but its role is *kbādim al-naql*, the servant of the text. Reason functions to understand the text, not to reject it. This view is reflected in their maxim: “If the hadith is authentic, that is my school” (*idbā ṣaḥḥa al-hadīthi fa huwa madhhabī*), indicating that textual validity is the decisive criterion.

Conversely, *Ahl al-Ra’y/Kalam* place reason (*‘aql*) in a very elevated position, even as a prerequisite for understanding revelation. They argue that reason is a God-given source of knowledge enabling humans to distinguish truth from falsehood. Texts (hadith) must align with basic rational principles that appear self-evident unless proven otherwise. If a hadith contradicts rationality or established theological principles, its authenticity is questioned despite the strength of its chain. D. B. MacDonald in *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory* asserts that for rationalist theologians, reason is “the ultimate tester of truth, even in religious matters.”¹⁸ This creates a paradigm in which reason acts as a critical filter for the text.

2. Method of Criticism: Chain/Text vs. Rationality/Theological Principles

Differences in sources of authority directly affect methods of criticism. *Ahl al-Hadith* developed a methodology focused on chain criticism, making it the primary gateway for verifying hadith. They established the sciences of *al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta’dil* and *‘Ilm al-Rijāl* to assess the integrity and accuracy of transmitters. Their matan criticism is secondary, functioning as an internal check for consistency with the Qur’an and stronger reports. According to Harun Nasution in *Teologi Islam: Aliran-aliran Sejarah Analisa Perbandingan*, this approach is “historical positivistic,” emphasizing empirical verification of transmission data.¹⁹

Meanwhile, *Ahl al-Ra’y/Kalam* prioritize matan criticism from rational and theological perspectives. For them, a sound chain does not guarantee absolute truth if its content is irrational. They use rationality and established theological principles—such as *tawḥīd* and *‘adl*—as main criteria. They reject hadiths that attribute physical qualities to God or that are considered unjust. A. C. O’Connor in “The Study of Hadith in the Modern Era” emphasizes

¹⁸ MacDonald, D. B., *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory* (Routledge, 2018). (Originally published in 1903)

¹⁹ Nasution, H., *Teologi Islam: Aliran-aliran Sejarah Analisa Perbandingan* (Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia Press, 2016).

that “the rationalist approach views the chain as part of a transmission susceptible to human error; thus, the text must be the primary focus of criticism.”²⁰

3. Criteria of Hadith Validity: Authentic Transmission vs. Rational Coherence

These methodological differences produce distinct criteria for validity. For *Ahl al-Hadith*, a hadith is valid if its chain is sound (continuous chain, upright and accurate transmitters, and absence of defects). The quality of the matan is assumed valid once the chain is authenticated. Hence, authenticity of transmission is the primary criterion.

In contrast, *Ahl al-Ra’y/Kalam* employ more complex criteria. For them, a hadith is valid only if its content accords with reason and does not contradict the Qur’an or theological principles. They tend to reject *khabar al-abad* in matters of creed because it does not yield the certainty (*yaqīn*) required for fundamental beliefs. Their main criteria are rational and theological coherence. A weak-chained hadith may be accepted if its content aligns with reason, while a strong-chained hadith may be rejected if its content is irrational, as discussed by Yusuf Rahman.²¹

4. Epistemological Implications: Preservation of Tradition vs. Purification of Creed

The implications of these two approaches are significant. The *Ahl al-Hadith* approach tends toward preserving tradition and law grounded in transmitted reports. Their prioritization of the chain produces an authoritative hadith corpus forming the core of Sunni Islamic law. This provides stability and historical continuity but risks accepting reports that are difficult to explain rationally.

In contrast, the approach of *Ahl al-Ra’y/Kalam* aims at purifying creed and law according to reason. They emphasize theological consistency and rationality, allowing them to dismiss reports that contradict God’s majesty or human reason. This approach offers flexibility and relevance to rational thought but risks subjectivity and diminishing prophetic authority. Harith et al. note that this view enables rationalists “to rationalize religious texts, opening doors to new interpretations aligned with changing times.”²²

²⁰ O’Connor, A. C., “The Study of Hadith in the Modern Era.” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 27(3) (2016), 297–315.

²¹ Rahman, Y., “Mu’tazila’s Critique of Hadith: Re-examining the Rationalist Approach.” *Islamic Studies*, 57(2) (2018), 195-215.

²² Harith, Z., Hashim, A. W., & Azmi, M. A. “The Mu’tazilite Approach to Hadith Criticism: A Rationalist Perspective.” *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, 16(1) (2023), 72-85.

Overall, these two paradigms represent two poles of Islamic intellectual history. *Ahl al-Hadith* is oriented toward historiography and transmission verification, while *Ahl al-Ra'y/Kalam* is oriented toward rationality and theology. Understanding these paradigmatic differences is crucial for formulating a more comprehensive hadith epistemology that integrates historical verification with the need for rationality.

Case Studies on the Application of Hadith Criticism

This section analyzes how the paradigmatic differences between the textual tradition (*Ahl al-Hadith*) and the rational tradition (*Ahl al-Ra'y*) manifest in the critique of certain controversial hadiths. These case studies demonstrate how different epistemologies produce different critical outcomes, even toward the same reports.

1. Case Study: The Hadith on the Prophet Muhammad Being Affected by Magic

One of the most debated hadiths is the report stating that the Prophet Muhammad was bewitched by a Jewish man named Labid ibn al-A'sam. This hadith appears in Sahih al-Bukhari (Kitab *al-Tibb*, Bab *al-Sibr*), narrated from Aisha who recounts that the Prophet experienced discomfort for some time and felt the effects of magic.

Analysis from the Perspective of Ahl al-Hadith: From the standpoint of *Ahl al-Hadith*, this is an authentic and sound report. Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim included it in their collections because it fulfills all stringent criteria of *isnad* criticism. The chain of transmission is considered sahih; every transmitter is known to be *'adil* (morally upright) and *dhabit* (precise and accurate in memory), and the chain is continuous up to Aisha. For them, the hadith's validity is unquestionable because it rests on a strong *isnad*. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, in one of his fatwas on this hadith, as cited in several modern scholarly articles, affirms that "if the *isnad* is sahih, then the *matn* must be accepted," reflecting the classical view. The authenticity of this hadith is taken as empirical evidence that magic is real and can affect humans, even a prophet.

Analysis from the Perspective of Ahl al-Ra'y/Kalam: Conversely, the rationalist and theological tradition of *Kalam*—especially the Mu'tazilah and modern rationalists—rejects this hadith based on strong arguments. They do not rely on *isnad* criticism but instead focus on *matn* criticism. For them, the content contradicts the principle of prophetic protection (*'ismah al-anbiya'*), which ensures that prophets are safeguarded from external influences that could compromise their mission. If the Prophet Muhammad could be bewitched to the point

of forgetfulness or confusion, this would undermine public trust in the teachings he delivered and could cast doubt on the Qur'an and Sunnah. Muhammad Abduh, a leading modern reformist, firmly rejected this hadith because it conflicts with the dignity of prophethood. According to Muhammad 'Imarah in *Al-Islam wa al-'Aql*, Abduh viewed such reports as “damaging to the image of the Prophet as one protected by God, and therefore they must be rejected even if they appear in the sahih collections.”²³

This rejection is based on rational and theological principles asserting that the Prophet could not be subject to magical forces that undermine his intellect or awareness. Rationalists argue that the “magic” mentioned in the hadith was merely a physical illness misinterpreted as magic. Thus, even if the *isnad* is sahih by *Ahl al-Hadith* standards, the content cannot be accepted by reason.

2. Case Study: Ahad Hadith in Matters of Creed (*'Aqidah*)

Ahad hadiths are reports transmitted by one or a few individuals at each level of the chain, falling short of mutawatir (widely transmitted by numerous reliable chains such that agreement upon fabrication is impossible). The debate over the authority of ahad hadith, especially in creed, is fundamental.

Analysis from the Perspective of *Ahl al-Hadith*: For *Ahl al-Hadith*, a sahih ahad hadith is binding in both creed and law, even though it yields probabilistic (*zanni*) knowledge rather than absolute certainty (*yaqin*). They believe that the Prophet instructed believers to accept reports from trustworthy transmitters. As long as the *isnad* is strong, the hadith must be followed. This principle is affirmed in classical creedal works. For example, the hadith on “*ru'yab Allah*” (seeing God in the Hereafter), transmitted via ahad routes, is accepted by *Ahl al-Hadith* because its chain is sahih—even though it seems to contradict Qur'anic verses implying that God cannot be seen. They reinterpret the Qur'anic verses accordingly and prioritize the hadith.

Analysis from the Perspective of *Ahl al-Ra'yi/Kalam*: Conversely, theologians of *Kalam*, such as the Mu'tazilah and many Ash'aris (with some exceptions), reject the authority of ahad hadith in matters of creed. They argue that creed must be built upon certain knowledge (*'ilm al-yaqin*), obtainable only from the Qur'an and mutawatir hadiths. Ahad hadiths, which yield only conjecture (*zann*), are insufficient for foundational beliefs. Ibn

²³ 'Imarah, M., *Al-Islam wa al-'Aql* (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2018).

Hazm, in *al-Ihkām fī Usūl al-Aḥkām*, often referencing rationalist views, asserts that “there is no obligation to accept a report transmitted by a single individual in matters of creed, for creed must rest upon absolute certainty.”²⁴

This principle results in their rejection of hadiths describing anthropomorphic attributes of God—such as “God’s hand” (*al-yad*) or “God’s face” (*al-wajh*). Even if transmitted through *sahih* chains, these hadiths are rejected because they clash with the rational principle of Tawhid, which teaches that God is unlike His creation. Such hadiths must either be interpreted metaphorically or dismissed. Imad al-Din al-Atrus, in his article “*The Role of Ahad Hadith in Theology: A Re-evaluation from a Rationalist Perspective*,” emphasizes that this rejection stems from the need to maintain theological consistency and protect the concept of God from compromising depictions.²⁵

The differences revealed in these case studies highlight a profound paradigmatic clash. For *Ahl al-Hadith*, the validity of transmission is the key, and they tend to accept a text at face value if the *isnād* is strong. For *Ahl al-Ra’yi/Kalam*, rationality and theological consistency act as primary filters that can override hadiths deemed historically sound. This demonstrates that hadith criticism is not merely a technical matter of *isnād* verification but a deeper epistemological contest over the sources and validation of religious knowledge.

Synthesis and Critique: Toward a Comprehensive Critical Epistemology

After deeply analyzing these two paradigms of hadith criticism, the textual tradition (*Ahl al-Hadith*) and the rational tradition (*Ahl al-Ra’yi*), we arrive at the stage of synthesis. This stage is not merely a combination of both approaches but an attempt to offer a critical perspective that goes beyond historical polarization. The goal is to formulate a more comprehensive and contemporary-relevant epistemology of hadith criticism—one capable of appreciating the historical authenticity of hadiths while meeting the demands of rationality and theological coherence.

Each paradigm has its own strengths and weaknesses. Recognizing these limitations is a crucial first step before attempting any synthesis:

1. Weaknesses of the Textual Paradigm (*Ahl al-Hadith*)

²⁴ Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Iḥkām fī Uṣūl al-Aḥkām* (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, 1979), jilid 1, hal. 119.

²⁵ al-Atrus, I. “The Role of Ahad Hadith in Theology: A Re-evaluation from a Rationalist Perspective.” *Journal of Islamic Theology and Philosophy*, 8(2) (2021), 110–125.

First, dogmatism toward the *isnād*. Excessive reliance on the validity of the *isnād* can lead to the acceptance of hadiths whose *matn* is problematic. The *isnād*, however meticulous, is still a historical construct that involves human memory and interpretation. A *sahih* chain merely proves that a report was transmitted by transmitters considered credible; it does not guarantee the absolute truth of the content, especially when that content contradicts science or universal rationality. F. E. Peters, in *The Hadith and the Qur'an in the Early Islamic Period*, subtly indicates that the *isnād* system was indeed the most sophisticated verification mechanism of its time, but still vulnerable to human error—whether intentional or unintentional.²⁶

Second, insufficient role given to reason. This epistemology tends to subordinate reason to textual authority (*kbādim al-naql*), resulting in the acceptance of hadiths that are rationally difficult to uphold. This creates tension between religious narratives and rational understanding, a tension increasingly visible in the modern era. For example, the hadith about a fly falling into a drink—despite its *sahih isnād*—is difficult to reconcile with scientific knowledge. Such an approach risks making hadith irrelevant to critical and rational contemporary audiences.

Third, the lack of robust *matn* criticism. Although classical hadith scholars formulated principles for *matn* criticism, its actual application was far weaker than *isnād* criticism. This is evident from the presence of *isra'iliyyāt* (Jewish and Christian-influenced reports) within major hadith collections, demonstrating that *matn* criticism was not fully effective in filtering out problematic content.

2. Weaknesses of the Rational Paradigm (*Ahl al-Ra'yi*)

First, the potential for rational subjectivity. The criteria of “rationality” used by *Ahl al-Ra'yi/Kalam* are often based on particular theological or philosophical assumptions that are not universal. What is rational for a Mu'tazilite scholar may not be rational for another. This opens the door to subjectivity in rejecting hadiths—some reports may be dismissed merely because they conflict with personal or sectarian views. Yasir Qadhi, in *The Mu'tazili Approach to the Sunnah: An Introduction to Their Methodology*,” argues that the Mu'tazilite rational

²⁶ Peters, F. E., *The Hadith and the Qur'an in the Early Islamic Period* (Routledge, 2017).

method was often “guided by their theological agenda, leading them to reject authentic hadiths for the sake of winning doctrinal debates.”²⁷

Second, neglect of historical and transmission context. By focusing too heavily on the *matn* while neglecting the *isnād*, this paradigm risks disconnecting itself from the historical life of a report. The *isnād* is not merely a chain of names; it is historical evidence that allows us to trace the journey of a report. Ignoring it amounts to ignoring the history of transmission, which can lead to misinterpretation of the hadith itself. Jonathan A. C. Brown, in *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, emphatically states that “to ignore the *isnād* is a fatal flaw, for it is the only tool we possess to trace the origins of a report in the pre-print era.”²⁸

Third, the limited scope of human reason. Human reason is inherently limited, particularly with regard to metaphysical matters beyond sensory and empirical experience. Rejecting all hadiths that seem irrational may ultimately entail rejecting miracles or the unseen (*ghayb*), elements that revelation itself affirms. This risks eroding belief in the transcendent dimension of religion.

Seeing the advantages and disadvantages of the two paradigms, it is necessary to propose an epistemological model of hadith criticism that is more holistic and comprehensive. This model does not eliminate one of the approaches, but rather integrates the two synergistically.

1. Basic Principles of a Comprehensive Critical Epistemology

Priority of the Qur’an as the Main Standard: All hadiths must first be tested for their conformity with the Qur’an as the highest source of authority. If there is a hadith that contradicts a *mubkamat* (clear and firm) Qur’anic verse, that hadith must be rejected. This is the first and most important filter. This approach is strengthened by contemporary works such as Ahmad al-Kubaisi in *Al-Hadith wa al-Qur’an: Dirasah Muqaranah*, which states that the Qur’an is *al-mi’yar al-asasi* (“the basic standard”) for hadith criticism.²⁹

Careful Historical-Sanad Verification: Sanad criticism from *Ahl al-Hadith* remains essential. The methodology of *al-jarh wa al-ta’dil* must be applied to ensure the historical authenticity of a narration. However, the validity of the sanad is no longer the sole

²⁷ Qadhi, Y., “The Mu’tazili Approach to the Sunnah: An Introduction to Their Methodology.” *Journal of Islamic Sciences*, 3(1) (2017), 51–69.

²⁸ Brown, J. A. C., *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oneworld Publications, 2009).

²⁹ Al-Kubaisi, A., *Al-Hadith wa al-Qur’an: Dirasah Muqaranah* (Maktabah al-Thaqafah al-Diniyyah, 2019).

determinant of the overall validity of a hadith, but rather a first prerequisite that must be fulfilled. A hadith must first pass the test of historical authenticity before being further tested.

In-Depth Rational Criticism of the Matan: After a hadith passes the sanad test, it must go through a test of the rationality of its matan. This test includes several layers:

- a. Consistency with the Universal Principles of Religion: A hadith must not contradict basic principles of Islam such as the oneness of God, justice, and the nobility of prophethood.
- b. Compatibility with Common Sense and Modern Science: If a hadith contradicts common sense or scientifically proven findings, reinterpretation or deeper explanation is needed. Rejection of a hadith can be considered if the contradiction is very clear and cannot be explained. For example, a hadith that contradicts basic physical laws.
- c. Historical and Sociological Contextualization: A hadith must be understood within the historical and sociological context in which it appeared. Knowledge of the social, cultural, and political situations during the time of the Prophet and the Companions is very important to understanding the meaning of the hadith correctly. This approach is increasingly popular in modern hadith studies, as proposed by Tariq Jameel in *The Contextual Study of Hadith: A New Methodology*.³⁰

2. Practical Implementation of the Synthetic Model

How is this model applied in practice? Take again the case of the hadith of the Prophet's magic (being bewitched). In a comprehensive critical epistemology, this hadith will be evaluated through several stages:

Sanad Test: This hadith has a very strong sanad according to Bukhari's standard. So, this hadith passes the test of historical verification. Matan Test (Rationality): This hadith is confronted with the principle of prophethood (*'ismah al-anbiya'*) and rationality. Is it possible that a prophet could be bewitched to such an extent? If the literal interpretation contradicts strong theological principles, reinterpretation is needed. Synthesis: Rather than rejecting this hadith completely (as rationalists do) or accepting it literally (as textualists do), the synthetic model will offer a more nuanced interpretation. This hadith may describe a physical illness that Aishah, in that era, understood as magic. Thus, the hadith is still accepted as a historical

³⁰ Jameel, T. "The Contextual Study of Hadith: A New Methodology." *Journal of Islamic Sciences and Culture*, 9(2) (2022), 210–225.

narration (*sanad* aspect), but its meaning is reinterpreted so that it aligns with the principles of prophethood and rationality (*matan* aspect).

Thus, a comprehensive critical epistemology does not reject *sanad* or reason. Instead, it views the two as two sides of the same coin that cannot be separated. *Sanad* criticism provides historical authenticity, while *matan* criticism provides rational and theological validity. This model allows us to accept hadith as a valuable heritage while critically filtering it to ensure its relevance and consistency with the universal values taught by Islam. This is a step toward a more mature and advanced understanding of hadith in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

This study compares the epistemology of hadith criticism between the textual tradition (*Ahl al-Hadith*) and the rational tradition (*Ahl al-Ra'yi/Kalam*). Several key findings emerged from the analysis. *First*, the textual tradition evaluates hadith authenticity mainly through the strength of its chain of transmission and the reliability of its narrators. Reason functions only as a tool to understand the text, not to judge it. This approach produces a strict historical verification system and an authoritative hadith corpus. *Second*, the rational tradition places reason as the main instrument for evaluating the content of hadith. A hadith is accepted only if it aligns with rational, theological, and moral principles of Islam. Narrations that contradict reason, the Qur'an, or firm theological principles are rejected even if their *sanad* is sound.

Third, the two traditions differ in their sources of authority: *Ahl al-Hadith* prioritizes *sanad*, while *Ahl al-Ra'yi* focuses on *matn* and reason. Despite this difference, both aim to preserve the purity of Islamic teachings. *Fourth*, these differences lead to contrasting assessments of controversial hadiths. *Ahl al-Hadith* tends to accept narrations with strong *sanad* even if they appear irrational, while *Ahl al-Ra'yi* rejects them when they contradict the principles of prophethood or theological rationality. *Fifth*, this study proposes a comprehensive critical epistemology that integrates both approaches: the Qur'an as the highest standard, *sanad* criticism as historical validation, and rational-contextual *matn* criticism. This integrated model is more balanced and relevant to modern scholarly challenges.

Further research is encouraged to apply this model to hadiths related to science, gender, and social issues. In education, hadith studies should include not only *sanad* criticism

but also rational and contextual *matn* analysis. Such a moderate approach will help build a more mature and proportional understanding of hadith.

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