Abū l-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī and Ḥadīth

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In this article, I analyze the role of hadith (prophetic sayings) in the work of the eminent Rifāʿiyya Shaykh Abū l-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī (d. 1909). My case-study comprises two books authored by Ṣayyādī himself and one ascribed to Abū Shujāʿ al-Wāsiṭī (d. 1185), a disciple of the founder of the brotherhood, Aḥmad al-Rifāʿī. All three were published in the 1890s, at the peak of al-Ṣayyādī’s influence in Syria and Istanbul. I argue that these works are of specific interest because of their isnāds. A Ḥadīth consists of two parts, a text (matn, “the saying”) and a chain of transmitters (isnād) authorizing that text. The focus of most academic studies on Ḥadīth is on the first centuries of its transmission. Research on Ḥadīth often treats the matn as the Ḥadīth-part carrying the actual message, while the isnād is mostly not viewed as a carrier of a significant message; scholars turn to the isnāds only as a means to establish when a given Ḥadīth variant came into circulation, and to reconstruct its history of transmission. But as recent research has shown, isnāds can also be used to project a certain view of history, especially when the transmission lines integrate various authorities/transmitters into one framework, or when they ascribe opposing views to one and the same authorizing figure. This way, isnāds can be understood as serving a pivotal social function for a community, i.e. repairing or glossing over rifts that otherwise might have torn the community apart.1 In a similar vein, my analysis of the three aforementioned Ḥadīth books authored by Rifāʿī Sufis and published in the 1890s will show how those writings presented leading figures of legitimation within the Sufi Rifāʿiyya ṭarīqa around 1900 as nodes of Ḥadīth transmission. In the three books, these figures are presented as bringing together two separate fields of this transmission that had existed separately for centuries. In addition, I will point to Ḥadīth material with isnāds going back to the Shīʿī Imāms. I argue that this substantiates my previously-published argument that the Rifāʿiyya around 1900 constituted a sort of social linkage between Sunnīs and Shīʿīs in the Arab Middle East, and particularly in Iraq.

Research on Abū l-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī

Muḥammad b. Ḥasan Wādī al-Ṣayyādī, commonly known by his later eponym Abū l-Hudā, was born in 1850 into humble origins in the northern Syrian countryside. He forged a remarkable career in late Ottoman society and eventually became part of the entourage of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) in the late 1870s. Abū l-Hudā was a shaykh of the Rifāʿīyya and he became the ṭariqa’s most prominent and influential figure in his time. Among other things, he secured exemption from military service for members of the larger Rifāʿī family in Syria and Iraq who could produce a testified nasab.2 During the 1880s and into the 1890s, he commanded considerable influence in Istanbul, although later his influence waned.3 He died shortly after the Young Turk coup d’etat in 1909.

The ambiguous image of Ṣayyādī in historical scholarship is partly a reflection of the polarized stands his contemporaries took towards him. Often, he is described as a reactionary against the tanzimat-reforms and as an opponent of so-called Salafī thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th century.4 In addition, he is often mentioned as an important person in the context of Abdülhamid II’s pan-Islamic policy. I have previously argued that Abū l-Hudā owed important career moves to his contacts with Tanzimat-reformers, and pointed to those he had with personalities who would later on become known as representatives

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2 This process of military exemption of Rifāʾīs started in 1885 (see Muharrem Varol, II. Abdülhamid’in danışmanı Ebü’l-Huda Sayyad’ın hayatı, eserleri ve tesirleri [1850–1909] [unpublished master’s dissertation, Marmara Universitesi, Istanbul 2004], 35, based on Ottoman archival sources). This disagrees with the “official Rifāʾī narrative” that the exemption was granted in 1889, as maintained in Thomas Eich, Abū l-Hudā as-Ṣayyādī: Eine Studie zur Instrumentalisierung sufischer Netzwerke und genealogischer Kontroversen im späotosmanischen Reich (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2003), 115–16, based on a publication by Abū l-Hudā. I kindly thank Muharrem Varol for sharing his work with me, as well as Tobias Völker for translating selected parts of it from Turkish.

3 See also Varol, II. Abdülhamid’in, 54–56, based on analysis of several petitions of Abū l-Hudā from the Ottoman archives, showing the first indications of losing influence as occurring roughly in 1893.

4 For a problematization of the use of the Salafī-label for turn-of-the-century thinkers such as ‘Abduh see Henri Lauzière, “The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History”, International Journal of Middle East Studies 42 (2010), 369–89.