

## Musalsal Hadith: Ritualisation and Shifting Scholarly Culture of Oral Hadith Transmission in 21st-Century Malabar

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### Abstract

Hadith transmission, as a form of ritual, incorporated many practices traditionally associated with canonical acts such as daily prayers and Quranic recitation. Engaging in hadith transmission was often accompanied by recommendations for personal adornment, reflecting the sanctity of the practice. Among the significant developments in the ritualisation of oral hadith transmission is the tradition of Musalsal Hadith, which remains historically influential and continues to persist in modern times. This study examines the evolution of Musalsal Hadith, particularly its dissemination from Meccan scholars to the Malabar region in the 21st century. Special emphasis is placed on the scholarly engagements between Sheikh Yasin Al Fadani, a prominent Meccan scholar, and Malabar scholars, highlighting their role in the cultural and geographical shifts of Musalsal Hadith. The study also explores how Audition Notices and Ijaza Certificates serve as key indicators of these transformations. By analyzing these aspects, this paper articulates the ritualisation of Musalsal Hadith in terms of temporal, regional, and event-specific contexts, with a focus on its impact in 21st-century Malabar.

**Keywords:** *Musalsal Hadith, Hadith Transmission, Ritualisation, Malabar, 21st Century Islamic Scholarship*

### Introduction

One of the more historically influential developments related to the ritualization of Hadith transmission was the emergence of the genre of Hadith known as Musalsalāt beginning in the early fourth/tenth century. The practice of Musalsal Hadith transmission carries significant historical and spiritual importance. These are Hadith that have been passed down through generations with a specific attribution, a ‘serial enactment’ as Garrett Davidson says, such as smiling or holding a certain object, during the narration by every transmitter in the chain of transmission. In Muslim Intellectual Tradition, this genre reflects the growing emphasis on pre-

erving the authenticity and continuity of Islamic teachings. Transmission of Musalsal Hadith is part of a tradition of writings dedicated to the exaltation of the prophet. Hence, it is the way of integrating their intellectual work — the teaching of ḥadīth — to the movement of prophetic veneration, besides also to promote the concept that prophetic traditions were in themselves a great form of devotion to Muḥammad, the best way of delivering his lessons, make known his exemplary life and to convey to their contemporaries the message that the prophet’s followers would, be able to connected with these living links of chain of transmitting Musalsal Hadith. In contemporary times, the preservation and continuity of Musalsal Hadith are also maintained by Sunni Traditionalists of Malabar especially through their scholarly networks stretching to Mecca.

### **Modern Malabari Ḥadīth scholars and the Meccan strand of Musalsal network**

Muslim scholars in Malabar began making academic relations with Mecca even in pre-modern times. The connection between Makhdoods and scholars from Malabar with scholars from Mecca and Egypt extended as far back as the sixteenth century. The practice of making cosmopolitan scholarly relations is inherently familiar to Malabari Muslim scholars. Subsequently, scholarly relations between Malabari and Meccan scholars persisted throughout the centuries until the modern period. Sheikh Abubakr Aḥmed (b. 1939) and Sheikh Ismail Musliyār Nellikkuth (d. 2011) are two important modern scholarly figures in the Ḥadīth field from Malabar who kept academic relations with the Meccan scholars. Even though other modern Muslim scholars from Malabar also have an academic connection with the Meccan ulema, we interpret the isnād networks of these two scholars among them because they are the only scholars who made scholarly contributions to Ḥadīth science. Ismail Musliyār known as Sheikh al-Ḥadīth and Sheikh Abubakr Aḥmed are two main contributors to the Ḥadīth science from Malabar in 21st Century.

Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad and Ismail Musliyar primarily met with Hadith scholars in Mecca during their pilgrimage periods. Historically, such occasions of pilgrimage often facilitated scholarly exchanges and the acquisition of knowledge. In 1986, Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad had the opportunity to meet Sheikh Yaseen al-Fadani during his pilgrimage. It was during the month of Shawwal to Dhul Hijjah, he and other Malabari Scholars along with him went to Mecca for Pilgrimage and to find time for scholarly gatherings and other religious activities. During this period, Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad received numerous Ijazah for Musalsal Hadith from Sheikh Yaseen al-Fadani. The relationship established with Sheikh Yaseen al-

Fadani during this time later led to an invitation for him as a guest at the annual event of Jamia Markaz in 1989, which provided numerous Malabar scholars with the opportunity to receive ijazahs for Musalsal Hadith.

Sheikh Abubakr also received Ijazah for almost all major Ḥadīth collections with chain of transmission to the authors from other Hadith scholars in Mecca such as Sheikh Umer b. Hamdān al-Mahrīsi, Sheikh ‘Alawī al-Mālīkī and Sheikh ‘Abd Allah b. Muḥammed al-Ghāzi. He received the ijāzah al-riwāyah for many of these kitabs also from Sheikh Muḥammed ‘Alawī al-Mālīkī. Most probably he might have received these different Ijazah from these Meccan scholars in the form of ijāzah al-‘amma (General Permission) since he spent a short time period with these scholars which is not enough for hearing or reading of these massive Ḥadīth texts. Sheikh Yasīn is the major Muḥaddīth among them who gave Sheikh Abubakr ijāzah for Muwatta of Imām Mālīk b. Anas, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim of Imām Muslim al-Qushayrī, Kitāb al-Sunan of Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, al-Jāmi‘a al-Kabīr of Muḥammed b. Īsā al-Turmīdī, Kitāb al-Sunan of al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Nasāī, Kitāb al-Sunan of Abū ‘Abd allah Ibn Mājah al-Qazwīnī and Musands of Imām al-Shafī‘ī, Imām Abū Hanīfa and Aḥmed b. Ḥanbal. Sheikh Yasin is one of the most prominent figures in the study and transmission of Musalsal Hadith in the modern era, whose contributions to Hadith studies were widely recognized. His work, *Al-’Ujala fi al-Ahadith al-Musalsala*, is a compilation of these Hadith, demonstrating their significance in connecting the Ummah with the Prophet. Sheikh al-Fadani’s efforts underscore the enduring relevance of Isnad (chains of narration) in preserving the spiritual and scholarly legacy of Islam.

Ismail Musliyār narrated his isnād of the *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ* back to the author of its *Khaṭīb al-Tabrīzī* which he received as an *ijaza al-riwāya* (permission of transmission) from Meccan Ḥadīth scholar Sheikh Yasīn al-Fadhānī. Sheikh al-Fadhānī’s chain of transmission for *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ* reaching back to the author includes twenty-two transmitters in two different strands. Even though we don’t have a recorded document or detailed information about Ismail Musliyār’s other isnāds and ijāzahs as he doesn’t have a special account on his *musalsalāt* and *ijāzahs* as Sheikh Abubakr does, he might have received other *ijāzahs* and *musalsalāt* from Sheikh Yasīn and Sheikh ‘Alawī al-Mālīkī during his time in Jeddah. Because scholars usually give and receive many of their *ijāzahs* when they meet each other in the form of the *ijāzah al-‘amma* (general *ijāzah*) which is a practice of giving all the *ijāzahs* a teacher could transmit.

## **Musalsal Rituals: The Discursive Construction of Scholarly Sunni**

## Tradition in Modern Malabar

“After I joined Jamia Markaz for my graduate studies in Islamic sharia in June 2022, the first lecture in Jamia was led by Sheikh Abubakr Aḥmed. It was the lecture of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhāri and the session was called iftitāh al-Bukhāri. The most exciting part of the session was that the very first Ḥadīth, Sheikh taught us was Ḥadīth al-rahma al-Musalsal bi al-awwaliyya, ‘the Ḥadīth always transmitted first’: “Allah the most merciful is merciful towards those who are kind and mercy, be merciful to those who are on the earth, thus the one in the heavens will be merciful with you,” narrating its full-length isnād from him back to the prophet.” In his booklet called *faidān al-Musalsalāt wa al-ijazāt al-mutadāwala*, Sheikh Abubakr Aḥmed reports the complete isnād of this musalsal as he received it as the first Ḥadīth al-musalsal from his three different Sheikhs in Mecca Sheikh Sayyid ‘Alawi al-Mālikī, Sheikh Sayyid Ismail Zaini al-Makki, and Sheikh Yasī al-Fadhāni. At Sheikh Abubakr Ahmed’s scholarly gatherings, the recitation and conferral of ijazas for Musalsal hadīth emerged as a frequent ritual.

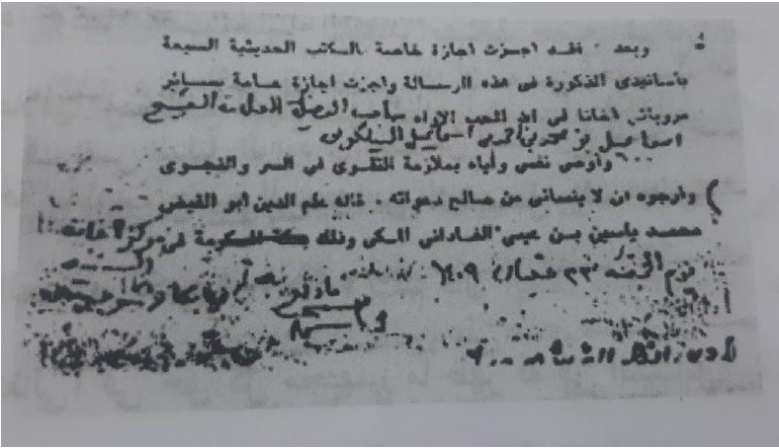
There are other Musalsalāt in which the action starts from the Prophet. For example, the Ḥadīth reported by Aḥmed b. Ḥanbal and al-Nasāi; the Prophet said to Muā’d : “Oh... Muā’d,I bear witness to Allah. I love you, therefore I want you to say after every prayer: Allah assist me to always remember You, to thank you and to worship you rightly.” This Ḥadīth is also known as al-musalsal bi-qawl, innī uhibbuk, ‘Ḥadīth transmitted always by saying; I love you. Sheikh Abubakr received this musalsal from Yasīn al-Fadhāni he is reporting from his two different teachers by saying: “I love you, therefore...” isnād of this musalsal includes twenty-nine persons starting from the Prophet to the Sheikh Yasīn al-Fadhāni. And another musalsal Sheikh Abubakr received from his teachers is al-musalsal bi-munāwalati al-Subha, ‘transmitted by handing over the subha’ (prayer beads). It starts from Imām Ḥasan al-Basri having a Subha in his hand and replying to his disciple ‘Umar al-Makki regarding the legacy of it. The handing over of the Subha started only at a later point of this musalsal when Abū Uthmān Saīd al-Maqri handed over his Subha to his disciple Abū ‘Uthmān Saīd al-Jazāi’rī. Sheikh Abubakr Aḥmed kept handing over Subhas to his graduating disciples in Jamia Markaz for many years following the musalsal he received from Sheikh Yasīn al-Fadhāni. Al-musalsal bi al-musāfaht al-unsiiyya, ‘transmitted by hands clasping’ is prominent musalsal Sheikh Abubakr received from Sheikh Yasīn after getting clasped his hands as his Sheikh Muḥammed ‘Ali al-Mālik did to him by providing a full-length isnād of the same action reaching back to Anas b. Mālik al-Ansāri the Ṣaḥābi who clasped the hands of Abū Hurmuz and

reported; “ I clasped my these hands with the hands of the messenger of God, and I didn’t touch any silk or cotton softer than his hands”. There are almost thirty reporters in this isnād between Sheikh Abubakr and the Prophet. Based on this ijāzah for musalsal Sheikh Abubakr clasps hands of each graduating disciple in the end time of al-Bukhārī majlis in Jamia Markaz each year. There are thirty more musalsalāt that Sheikh Abubakr possesses such as musalsal bi al-ta’-mīm bi al-‘amāma (knitting the turban), musalsal bi qirā’at Surah (reciting different Surahs of the Quran) al musalsal bi taqbīl al-yadain (kissing the hands of Sheikh) al-musalsal bi al-ayyam (special activities in different special days like Eid day and ‘Āshura’ day) so and so forth. Most of the isnāds of these musalsalāt are reaching back to the Prophet and some reach to the Ṣaḥābīs while very few of them reach to the tabi’īs.

Possessing musalsalāt is an equally or more prestigious thing for a Ḥadīth scholar than having an ijāzah al-riwāyah for transmitting Ḥadīth texts, since an authentic musalsal with an isnād reaching back to the Prophet transmitted in some special occasions’ contexts, makes anyone receiving that ijāzah feel closely connected to the Prophet and great figures in that isnād. While all Hadiths have been comprehensively compiled, the practice of Musalsal Hadith transmission, supported by scholars like Sheikh Abubakr Ahmed and Sheikh Yasin al-Fadani, highlights the ongoing importance of maintaining a direct and personal link to the Prophetic tradition. The continuation of these practices serves not only as a scholarly duty but also as a spiritual connection to the foundational teachings of Islam.

### **Audition Notices and Ijazah Certificates in Malabar; Historical Indicators of Shifting Culture in Oral Hadith Transmission**

‘Notices of audition are quite common within hadith manuscripts and are a rich and largely unutilized source for the social history of oral hadith transmission. Unfortunately, because they remain understudied, there exists considerable confusion in the secondary literature regarding the nature and function of audition notices. Similarly, the ijazah Certificate is a product of a struggle between the ideal oral transmission and the desire to maintain that ideal in the context of a scholarly culture that had produced a body of literature far too large for this ideal to be realistically maintained.’ In Malabar, it is still possible to find numerous certification notices and Hijaz certificates. However, these documents have undergone significant evolution compared to those from earlier periods. Below is an example of an ijazah certificate that Sheikh Ismail Musliyar received from Sheikh Yasin Fadani, reflecting this modern adaptation.



Similar Ijazah certificates have been granted to Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad and other scholars from Kerala. Both Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad and Ismail Musliyar had previously received Ijazah certificates from Indian scholars at Baqiyat-us-Salihah, where they studied. However, unlike the handwritten documents received from Fadani, these certificates were printed on paper. Unlike the printed or handwritten Audition notices of earlier times, today, announcements regarding the sessions of Sunni scholars in Malabar, particularly those concerning the transmission of Musalsal hadith, are widely disseminated through social media platforms. Notably, sessions conducted by Sheikh Abubakr, whether at Jami'a Markaz or Chaliyam Mosque in Kozhikode, hold significant importance. These sessions are especially prominent on days related to Musalsal Hadith such as the Day of Arafah, the 10th of Muharram, and during festive occasions like Eid. In addition to these formal announcements, unofficial sessions are also held at Sheikh Abubakr's residence.

Although there has been a noticeable revival of interest in Hadith studies in modern-day Malabar, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant gaps in scholarly contributions and focused efforts within this field. According to Malabar Hadith scholar Mukhtar Hadrat one of the main reasons for the relative lack of Hadith literature production by south Indian Shafi'i scholars in the medieval centuries might be due to the legalistic orientation of Shafi'i scholars in that period. Shafi'i 'ulema's literary contributions to subjects like Hadith and tafsir in the medieval centuries are very rare worldwide whereas they produced legal accounts abundantly and conducted research in fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence) related subjects. Apart from that, the influence of Ibn hajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) the author of "Tuḥfat

al-Minhāj” a groundbreaking Shafi’i fiqh text, who was the chief teacher of Shafi’i law in sixteenth-century Mecca, also inspired Shafi’i scholars around the globe including Makhdoom the junior to concentrate more on legal subjects in that period. Another significant reason for this gap is the absence of prominent ideological movements in the region. In North India, movements like Deobandi, Ahl-i Hadith, Bareilvi, Ahmadiyya, and Aligarh played a crucial role in shaping the Muslim community during the colonial period, each with distinct perspectives on Hadith. However, similar developments did not take root in Malabar and South India. While North Indian scholars engaged in intellectual debates primarily through written works, in Kerala, such exchanges were largely conducted through sermons, with only a few pamphlets and minor texts produced. Moreover, advanced centers of Islamic learning in Malabar were established much later, only after the mid-20th century. In a nutshell, the study of Musalsal Hadith in Malabar faces limitations due to these factors, which also hinder the comprehensive historical documentation of this tradition. Despite this, handwritten manuscripts and other material cultures that detail the Musalsal Hadith, and broader Islamic intellectual heritage in Malabar, have not yet gained significant attention in the research community.

## **Conclusion**

This research underscores the profound impact of Musalsal Hadith transmission on the scholarly landscape of 21st-century Malabar. The ritualization of Musalsal Hadith, characterized by its specific transmission practices and ceremonial significance, reflects a deep-seated connection to the Prophet Muhammad. The interactions between Malabari and Meccan scholars, notably through figures like Sheikh Abubakr Ahmed and Sheikh Yasin al-Fadani, highlight the enduring relevance and adaptability of these traditions in preserving Islamic teachings. The role of Audition Notices and Ijazah Certificates as markers of evolving scholarly practices offers insights into how traditional methods are being recontextualized in the modern era. While there has been a revival of interest in Hadith studies, the field still faces challenges, including gaps in historical documentation and regional influences. Despite these challenges, the dedication to Musalsal Hadith in Malabar illustrates a robust commitment to maintaining and enriching the region’s Islamic scholarly heritage.

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