



Harald Motzki's Isnad Cum Matan Method in the Study of Hadith Authenticity: An Analysis of the Concept and Its Relevance

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Abstract

Developments in contemporary hadith studies have given rise to various new approaches to examining the authenticity of hadith, one of which is the isnad cum matan method developed by Harald Motzki. This method offers an integrated analysis of the sanad and matan in an effort to reconstruct the history of hadith transmission more comprehensively. This study aims to analyze the basic concepts of Harald Motzki's isnad cum matan method and to examine its relevance in the study of hadith authenticity. The research employs a qualitative method using a literature review approach. Data were obtained from the works of Harald Motzki, literature on classical and contemporary hadith studies, and various scholarly articles discussing the isnad cum matan method. Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach by examining the methodological framework, application, and contribution of this method to modern hadith criticism. The results indicate that the isnad cum matan method integrates the analysis of isnad and matan, thereby providing a more systematic historical reconstruction of the hadith transmission process compared to approaches that focus solely on isnad or matan separately. This method also enriches the study of hadith authenticity by offering a historical-critical perspective without neglecting the fundamental principles of hadith science. However, its application requires adequate narrative data and in-depth comparative analysis; therefore, not all hadiths.

Keywords: Harald Motzki, Isnad Cum Matan, Authenticity of Hadith, Criticism of Hadith

Abstrak

Perkembangan studi hadis kontemporer melahirkan berbagai pendekatan baru dalam mengkaji autentisitas hadis, salah satunya adalah metode isnad cum matan yang dikembangkan oleh Harald Motzki. Metode ini menawarkan analisis terpadu antara sanad dan matan sebagai upaya merekonstruksi sejarah transmisi hadis secara lebih komprehensif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis konsep dasar metode isnad cum matan Harald Motzki serta mengkaji relevansinya dalam studi autentisitas hadis. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kepustakaan. Data diperoleh dari karya-karya Harald Motzki, literatur tentang ilmu hadis klasik dan kontemporer, serta berbagai artikel ilmiah yang membahas metode isnad cum matan. Analisis data dilakukan melalui pendekatan deskriptif-analitis dengan mengkaji konstruksi metodologis, penerapan, serta kontribusi metode tersebut terhadap kritik hadis modern. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa metode isnad cum matan mengintegrasikan analisis sanad dan matan sehingga mampu memberikan rekonstruksi historis mengenai proses transmisi hadis yang lebih sistematis dibandingkan pendekatan yang hanya berfokus pada sanad atau matan secara terpisah. Metode ini juga memperkaya kajian autentisitas hadis dengan menghadirkan perspektif historis-kritis tanpa mengabaikan prinsip-prinsip dasar ilmu hadis. Meskipun demikian, penerapannya memerlukan data riwayat yang memadai serta analisis komparatif yang mendalam sehingga tidak semua hadis dapat dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan ini. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa metode isnad cum matan Harald Motzki memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap pengembangan metodologi

studi hadis kontemporer dan memiliki relevansi sebagai pendekatan alternatif dalam mengkaji autentisitas hadis secara akademis.

Kata Kunci: Harald Motzki, Isnad Cum Matan, Autentisitas Hadis, Kritik Hadis.

Introduction

Starting with Ignaz Goldziher, in the 19th century, he was the first to critically examine the hadith from a historical perspective and assert that the hadith was not a reliable source for the early period of Islam, but rather held value only as dogma and a source of conflict (Setiadi, 2019). This view later became one of the foundations for the development of the historical-critical approach to hadith among Western scholars. This approach encouraged subsequent researchers to question the processes of transmission, formation, and development of hadith within the historical context of early Islam.

Subsequent research by Joseph Schacht in his 1950 dissertation examined hadiths concerning law and development, specifically focusing on *isnad* (chain of transmission); very few, if any, can be traced back to the Prophet. Nevertheless, through in-depth study, critical analysis, and careful scrutiny, one can present hadiths. Prophetic hadiths were properly compiled only in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AH. This is why the authenticity of Prophetic hadiths was subsequently assessed based on whether they included an *isnād* (chain of transmission) (Riady, 2021).

AG.H. Juynboll then brought this theory to life on a significant scale by critiquing the dating of hadiths through three questions: where, when did a hadith first appear, and who was responsible for disseminating it. Juynboll introduced what he called *isnād* analysis. This method of *isnād* analysis is considered more capable of providing answers concerning the source and origins of a hadith (Bargot, 2024).

Juynboll's method of dating hadith by analyzing the *sanad* (chain of transmission) is a fairly robust research tool. Both Schacht and Juynboll argue that the common link is a hadith forger. Schacht's research premises and methods, as well as Juynboll's method of dating hadiths by analyzing *isnad* alone, have drawn considerable criticism. The most significant challenges to his conclusions can be found in the works of Harald Motzki.

Motzki tends to view the common links found in the chains of transmission of hadith not as fabricators of hadith, as Schacht and Juynboll do, but as the first systematic compilers of hadith (Amin, 2009). A number of methods for dating hadith have been developed over the past two decades, namely *isnad* analysis with single chains of transmission, developed by Juynboll, and the method of hadith *matn* analysis which involves tracing and comparing variations in the text of a specific hadith and examining the correlation between the *matn* and the chain of transmission (*isnad*) an approach developed by Van Ess, Harald Motzki, and Schoeler (Amin, 2009).

Several previous studies have discussed Harald Motzki and the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis method. Ihsan Jamaluddin Junus dkk Previous studies have discussed analyzing the debate between Juynboll and Motzki dialectically, unpacking the foundational principles of each position, and then subjecting the *isnad-cum-matn* method to the same rigorous critical scrutiny (Junus et al., 2025). Muhammad Ilham Baihaqqi dan Nur Kholis (2024), The methodology employed by Harald Motzki in investigating the authenticity of Hadith and describing his refutation of Orientalist skepticism toward Hadith. Rahmad Ridwan Analyzing the application of the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis method to the *Ṣaḥīfa* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq. Ridwan (2026) This work serves as the foundation for Motzki’s argument in empirically reconstructing the authenticity of Hadith and challenging Joseph Schacht’s generalized skepticism.

Nevertheless, previous studies have primarily focused on the methodology itself and have not yet examined its relevance to contemporary Hadith studies. Therefore, this study can serve as a reference for Hadith research in the contemporary era. Although several previous studies have examined Harald Motzki’s thought and the *isnād-cum-matn* method, existing research tends to focus on specific aspects, such as Motzki’s response to Orientalist skepticism, his critique of Juynboll’s *common link* theory, or the application of the method to particular hadith sources.

However, there remains a need for a more comprehensive analysis of the fundamental concept, analytical mechanism, and relevance of the *isnād-cum-matn* method in the study of hadith authenticity. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the *isnād-cum-matn* method not merely as a technique for analyzing isnād and matn, but also as a historical-critical approach to reconstructing the development and authenticity of hadith.

Method

This article employs a qualitative method with a library research approach. The research data are obtained from relevant written sources, particularly the works of Harald Motzki as primary sources, as well as books, journal articles, undergraduate theses, master’s theses, and previous studies discussing Motzki’s thought and the authenticity of hadith as secondary sources. Data are collected through documentation and literature review, and are subsequently analyzed using content analysis to identify the concepts, principles, and methodological steps employed by Motzki in examining the authenticity of hadith. This approach is consistent with previous studies that have examined Motzki’s methodology through library research and positioned *isnād-cum-matn analysis* as a principal method for investigating the history and authenticity of hadith.

The analysis focuses on two main aspects, namely the concept of Harald Motzki’s methodology and its relevance to contemporary hadith studies. Regarding the first aspect, the study examines the application of *isnād-cum-matn analysis* by

collecting various chains of transmission, constructing transmission networks (*isnād bundles*), identifying *common links* and *partial common links*, and comparing variations in the *matn* to determine the relationship between chains of transmission and the development of hadith texts. Subsequently, the relevance of this methodology is analyzed by examining the extent to which it can provide a historical-critical perspective in the study of hadith authenticity while complementing classical hadith criticism methods. Thus, this study not only describes Motzki's methodological thought but also provides a critical analysis of the contributions and limitations of his approach to the development of contemporary hadith research methodology.

Results and Discussion

The Concept Of The *Isnād-cum-Matn* Theory

The *isnād-cum-matn* method was developed by Harald Motzki, a Western historian and Orientalist scholar. His full name is Harald Motzki; he was born in Germany in 1948. He studied at various institutions, including a Humanistic Academic High School, where he studied Latin, French, and Ancient Greek, and then continued his studies in Comparative Religions, Semitic Languages, Biblical Studies, Islamic Studies, and European History in Bonn (Germany), Paris, and Cologne (Germany) from 1968 to 1978. In 1974, he earned an M.A. with a major in Comparative Religions from the University of Bonn, and then received his Ph.D. in 1978 from the same university, specializing in Islamic Studies. He is a professor of Hadith at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands (Sumbulah, 2010).

In addition, Motzki is also known among scholars of Oriental studies and as a scholar who has extensively studied the hadith, the sirah, and the history of the origins of Islamic law. Furthermore, Motzki is recognized by scholars of Orientalism as a prominent figure who extensively studied hadith, sirah, and the history of the origins of Islamic law. One of his important works, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*, is regarded as a significant contribution to the study of the history of modern Islamic law. In this work, Motzki attempts to reconstruct the origins of the formation of Islamic law through the *isnād-cum-matn* method, which integrates the analysis of the chain of transmission (*isnād*) and the text (*matn*) of hadith (Anam & Hanafi, 2026).

From 1979 to 1983, he worked as a research fellow at the Institute of Historical Anthropology and, at the same time, served as a lecturer in Islamic Studies and Arabic at the University of Bremen; from 1983 to 1989, he was an assistant professor at the Institute of History and Culture of the Middle East at the University of Hamburg, Germany. In 1989, he earned his doctoral degree with a dissertation titled "*Die Anfänge der Islamischen Jurisprudenz*" (Rasyidaturrabi'ah, 2016).

Among Harald Motzki's works are: "Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey," "Methods of Dating Early Legal Traditions: An Introduction" (2012) in "Islamic Law and Society", "Motzki's Reliable Transmitter: A Short Answer to P. Gledhill" (2012)

in “Islamic Law and Society”, and “The Traditions About the Murder of Ibn Abi Huqayq” (2012). “The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Mecca Fiqh before the Classical Schools”, “The Formation of the Classical Islamic World”.

The analysis of the Isnad and Matan theory originated with Jan Hendrik Kramers’s views in his 1953 article and was revisited by Josep Vaness in 1975 in his work titled “Zwischen Hadith und Theologie”. However, these two works received little attention from Western hadith scholars until Motzki eventually expanded upon them in a number of books and articles that were analyzed using this approach. Through his isnad cum matan analysis, Motzki successfully and thoroughly refuted the premises, methods, and conclusions of skeptics such as Ignaz Goldziher, Joseph Schacht, Norman Calder, Michael Cook, G.H.A. Juynboll, and others (Wijayanti & Sukmawati, 2024).

Harald Motzki is one of the Orientalists who corrected the views of earlier Orientalists, which he considered too harsh and severe. Specifically, he criticized the skeptical assumptions of Schacht and Juynboll by arguing that the authenticity of the hadiths has been established since the 1st century AH. According to Motzki, the Qur’an and hadith have been studied since the second century of the Hijri calendar and it is evident that the jurists of the Hijaz had been using hadith as early as the first century of the Hijri calendar. Based on his analysis of the isnad and matn of the hadiths in the book “Mushannaf” by ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Shan’ani, Motzki concluded that it is highly unlikely that the diversity in the transmission data resulted from deliberate forgery (Sumbulah, 2010).

Thus, Motzki agrees with Coulson’s proposal that Orientalists reverse Schacht’s thesis from the *via negativa* to the *via positiva*. If Schacht asserts that all hadiths must be considered inauthentic until proven otherwise, then this must be reversed to: “All hadiths must be considered authentic, unless their inauthenticity is proven” (Sumbulah, 2010).

While Schacht and Juynboll regard Common Link as a forger or fabricator of hadith, Motzki considers Common Link to be the first systematic compiler of hadith, who recorded and transmitted them (Amin, 2009). Joseph Schacht argued that isnād was evidence of the arbitrary actions and negligence of scholars during that period. He supported his assumption by proposing three theories: the theory of backward projection (projecting back), the Common Link theory, and the *argumentum e silentio* (Jannah, 2020). When asked why a common link cites only one chain of transmission, he explained several points: first, they only transmit the versions of the hadith that they have received; second, they consider the versions they transmit to be the most reliable; third, it is possible that the common links added informants who were actually part of the chain (Ridlo, 2024).

Therefore, according to Motzki, the “single-strand” approach means: first, it does not necessarily imply that there is only one chain of transmission; second, a single chain means that when transmitting a hadith from his collection, the common

link mentions only one chain of transmission namely, the version that is best known and considered the most authoritative; Third, there may be other versions that were not collected or that have been lost because Common Link did not receive or transmit them, or because those versions were unknown during the Common Link era (Amin, 2009).

Motzki's theory has received mixed reactions, ranging from rejection to support. Among those who reject Motzki's theory is Irene Schneider. She argues that Motzki fails to acknowledge that the "common link" has fabricated hadiths through one or more chains of transmission. Among the figures who support Motzki's theory is Gregor Schoeler, who states that the "common link" should not necessarily be understood as a fabricator of hadiths (Sumbulah, 2010).

In addition, Motzki also corrected Juynboll's interpretation, which tended to suggest that the "single strand"—Prophet → a Companion → a Tabi'in → a lesser Tabi'in or someone from the generation following the Tabi'in, and so on—was the only chain of transmission through which hadiths were disseminated. Contrary to what Motzki argues, a "single chain" means that the common link in the process of hadith transmission refers to only one chain of transmission. Meanwhile, other chains of transmission have been lost because they were not documented or transmitted by any of these early collectors. Therefore, Motzki states that in some cases, the compilers or students of these early collectors attempted to trace the chains of transmission for certain hadiths further back (Masrur, 2007).

In an effort to improve Juynboll's method of isnad analysis, Motzki proposed a method known as the isnad cum matn method (Muhsin, 2017). This method aims to trace the history of hadith transmission by comparing the variants found in various different compilations (Haitomi & Syachrofi, 2020). Of course, this method relies not only on the isnad but also on the matn of the hadith; it is based on the fundamental assumption that the various variants of a hadith, at least in part, reflect the actual chains of transmission. The theory used in determining the existence of hadith is the isnad cum matn analysis theory which combines sanad and matan research. The aim is to determine the origin of these traditions before they became mass-produced. The character of the research relies on the existence of sanad variants which have implications for the credibility of the transmission (Fadhil & Imtyas, 2023).

According to Motzki, the steps to be taken in analyzing a source based on isnad and matn are as follows (Motzki, 2005):

- A. Compile as many variants of the hadith as possible, along with their isnads
- B. Compile all isnad chains to identify common links across different generations of narrators. Through these two steps, a hypothesis regarding the history of hadith transmission may be formulated. However, this is not sufficient and must be followed by the next step.

- C. Compare the texts from the various variants to identify similarities and differences, both in structure and word order. This step also makes it possible to formulate a history of the transmission of the hadith in question. Then, analyze the various variants of the matn. The analysis of the matn can refine the findings obtained by comparing the results of the isnad analysis with those of the matn analysis (Mufid, 2017).
- D. Comparing the results of the isnad and matn analyses
- E. By comparing the results of the analysis of the isnad and the matn, it is possible to draw conclusions about when the hadith began to be transmitted, who the earliest narrators were, how the texts may have undergone certain changes along specific chains of transmission, and who was responsible for those changes.

If there is a discrepancy between the results of the analysis of the isnad and the matn that is, if the isnad of a hadith indicates a connection between various variants, but the respective matn (text) of the hadith does not reflect the same connection then it can be concluded that both the isnad and the matn of the hadith are flawed, whether due to the negligence of the narrators or to intentional alterations (Masrur, 2007).

Upon closer examination, the first two steps of Motzki's isnad-cum-matan analysis method do not appear to differ significantly from Juynboll's isnad analysis method. The difference lies in the final two steps, which focus on the matn of the hadith, particularly its structure and word order (Masrur, 2007).

One scholar criticized earlier Orientalist theories specifically the skepticism of Joseph Schacht and Juynboll, who criticized hadith solely on the basis of isnad (common links). In contrast, Harald Motzki, after deeming that theory incomplete, proposed the "Isnad Cum Matan" theory. The steps taken by Harald Motzki were to collect as many hadiths as possible that shared the same theme and to compile all isnad chains to identify common links across different generations, Comparing texts from various variants to identify similarities and differences, comparing the isnad and matn; after this comparison, it will become clear when the text began to be disseminated, how the text underwent changes, and who was responsible for those changes.

The Relevance Of Harald Motzki's Isnad Cum Matan Method To Contemporary Scholarship

The isnad cum matan method developed by Harald Motzki is highly relevant to contemporary hadith studies because it offers a more comprehensive approach to assessing the authenticity of hadiths. While classical methods of hadith criticism tend to separate the analysis of the sanad and the matn, Motzki integrates the two so that the process of hadith transmission can be reconstructed more comprehensively. This approach allows researchers to understand not only the

validity of the chains of transmission but also the evolution of hadith wording over time.

In the modern academic context, this method has emerged as one response to the debate between Orientalist perspectives and the approach of classical hadith scholars, who emphasize the importance of sanad criticism. Through a comparative analysis of various isnad chains and variations in the matn, Motzki demonstrates that a number of hadiths can be traced back to the early period of Islam based on verifiable historical evidence. One key component of this method is the existence of various textual variants of the hadith. These variations allow each element of the hadith to be compared with one another, thereby revealing the characteristics of each narrator's transmission.

Based on these characteristics of transmission, researchers can identify the narrators responsible for a particular version (Mutammimah & Hosni, 2023). Analysis begins with a brief biography of the individuals to whom the traditions are attributed per group. To obtain an overview of which people have handed down the tradition according to the asānīd and to identify common transmitters per group, the asānīd have been drawn in a figure. The earliest common transmitter, the so-called common link, is by way of hypothesis assumed to be the distributor of the tradition in question. Subsequently, the mutūn of the traditions within a given group are first compared with each other and then with the groups discussed earlier (Voort, 2021).

Thus, the isnad cum matan method offers a more balanced methodological alternative because it neither accepts nor rejects a hadith based solely on assumptions, but rather on an analysis of the available transmission data. Although the theory put forward by Harald Motzki is not entirely new, the method he proposes is more systematic and focuses on presenting arguments regarding the authenticity of hadith by combining an analysis of both the sanad and the matn, thereby refuting the premises, methods, and conclusions of Orientalists who question their authenticity (Sumbulah dkk, 2022).

Another aspect of its relevance is evident in the growing field of hadith research at universities, which is increasingly adopting a multidisciplinary approach. The isnad cum matan method can be integrated with historical studies, philology, textual analysis, and digital research to produce more in-depth studies. Technological advances have also made it possible to map chains of transmission and compare various text variants more systematically through digital hadith databases, making the application of this method more effective than before.

In addition, the isnad cum matan method promotes the development of a culture of evidence-based research. Researchers do not merely rely on assessments of the narrators' credibility, but also examine the relationships between isnads, textual variations, and the historical context in which the hadith emerged. This approach is in line with the demands of contemporary scientific research, which

emphasizes methodological transparency, comparative analysis, and academically sound arguments.

Nevertheless, applying this method still requires caution. Not all hadiths have a sufficient number of chains of transmission to be analyzed using the *isnad cum matan* approach. Therefore, this method is best understood as a complement to classical hadith criticism, rather than as a replacement for it. The integration of the tradition of hadith criticism that has developed within Islamic scholarship with the historical-critical approach proposed by Motzki can, in fact, enrich contemporary hadith studies.

Thus, the relevance of the *isnad cum matan* method lies in its ability to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the authenticity of hadith, to strengthen the dialogue between Islamic scholarly tradition and modern academic research, and to open up opportunities for the development of a methodology for hadith studies that is more systematic, objective, and adaptable to advances in science.

The results of the study indicate that the *isnad cum matan* method is highly relevant to the development of modern hadith criticism methodology. This approach not only enriches the historical analysis of the hadith transmission process but also serves as a bridge between the classical scholarly tradition of hadith and contemporary academic approaches. Thus, this method can serve as an effective alternative for testing the authenticity of hadith in a more objective, systematic, and comprehensive manner.

Nevertheless, the application of the *isnad cum matan* method has several limitations. Its success depends heavily on the availability of complete transmission data, the ability to conduct comparative analyses of various *isnad* and *matan* chains, and meticulousness in reconstructing the history of hadith transmission. Therefore, this method should be viewed as a complement to rather than a replacement for the hadith criticism methodologies developed by classical scholars.

Conclusion

The *isnād-cum-matn* method by Harald Motzki's is one of the important approaches in the study of hadith authenticity. This method examines not only the *isnād* (chain of transmission) but also analyzes the *matn* (content of the hadith) simultaneously in order to trace the development and possible origins of a hadith. By comparing various chains of transmission and textual variants, this method seeks to provide a more critical understanding of the history of hadith transmission. Therefore, the *isnād-cum-matn* approach is relevant to hadith studies because it offers a methodological alternative to approaches that focus solely on the chain of transmission, while also providing an opportunity to reassess the authenticity of hadith based on historical and textual evidence.

Harald Motzki's *isnad cum matan* method makes a significant contribution to the development of contemporary hadith studies. The integration of *isnad* and

matan analysis that it offers opens up opportunities for more in-depth, critical, and historically grounded hadith research. Further research is recommended to apply this method to specific hadiths in primary hadith collections so that its effectiveness and relevance can be tested more empirically in the context of modern hadith studies.

This study contributes to the field of hadith studies by providing a systematic analysis of Harald Motzki's isnād-cum-matn method and its relevance to the study of hadith authenticity. It examines the relationship between the analysis of chains of transmission and the textual content of hadith, while also highlighting the strengths and limitations of Motzki's historical-critical approach. Furthermore, this study seeks to demonstrate how the *isnād-cum-matn* method can provide a more comprehensive perspective for assessing the historical development and authenticity of hadith.

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