Ghuluww (Exaggeration) in al-Kāfī: A Data-Analytic Approach

Kaveh Aryanpoo,[1] Mohammad Reza Mousavi, [1] Mostafa Movahedifar[2]

[1] King's College London, London, UK

[2] Al-Mahdi Institute, Birmingham, UK

Abstract

The focus of the present study is the concept of *ghuluww* (to transgress a boundary) tendency and the *ḥadīth* content ascribed to this tendency. We designate *ḥadīth* transmitters that were labelled as the subscribers of the idea of *ghuluww*, called *ghulāt* (sing. *ghālī*; transgressive Shīʿīs), who lived in the early Islamic era, especially during the Imamates of the fifth and sixth Shīʿī Imāms, Muḥammad b. Alī al-Bāqir (d. 114/733) and Jafar b. Muḥammad al-Sādiq (d. 148/765). We examine such associations considering the 5th/11th-century bio-bibliographical dictionaries.

There is confusion in academic scholarship as to what constitutes *ghuluww* and what the main ideological tenets of *ghulāt* are. We apply a data-analytic approach as well as statistical techniques to verify some of the hypotheses assumed in academic scholarship and provide a means to rigorously address some of the confusion and disagreement in the ongoing research concerning *ghuluww*.

Based on the integration of a Twelver Shīʿī (Imāmī) *ḥadīth* collection of the 4th/10th Century, *al-Kāfī fī ilm al-dīn* compiled by Muḥammad b. Yaqūb al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941), on the one hand, and the alleged *ghālī* labels mentioned in the Imāmī bio-bibliographical literature from the 5th/11th century, on the other, we analyse the correlations between the contents of *ḥadīths* provided by al-Kulaynī and the allegations of *ghuluww* in the transmission chains (*isnāds*) of these *ḥadīths*. We analyse if there is a particular genre of *ḥadīths*, considered as *ghālī* in academic scholarship, in which the presence/influence of the *ghuluww* tendency is meaningfully more than the others. Also, we analyse whether there exists a particular genre of *ḥadīths*, considered *ghālī* in academic scholarship, where there is a statistically significant community-transmission among the *ghālī* transmitters. Our results show that, as far as the *isnāds* and text (*matns*) of *ḥadīths* found in *al-Kāfī* are concerned, there is neither statistically significant presence of *ghālī* transmitters nor community-transmission of what is considered as the *ghālī* genre.

Introduction

Ghuluww (to transgress a boundary) is an Islamic term, used in Qurʿan to mean transgressing a given boundary or mark and going beyond a limit.[1] It has been used in the

---

[1] In academic studies, the term "*ghuluww*" has been translated into English in various ways. Wadād al-Qāḏī considers extremism to be an erroneous translation and suggests

early heresiography and historiography, possibly dating back to the first/seventh century. [2] The focus of the present study is, however, a group of people active during the 2nd/8th century, who were designated by the later Imāmī bio-bibliographical dictionaries of the 5th/11th century as *ghulāt (sg. ghālī)*. Many of these have been among the disciples of Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Bāqir (d. 114/733) and his son Jaʿfar b. Muhammad al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), the fifth and the sixth Shīʿī Imāms; this tendency has not only been mentioned in some of the earliest Shīʿī heresiographies,[3] but their figures were also discussed in the later bio-bibliographical literature of the 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries (also under various other related designations, such as *Mufawwiḍa* or *Tayyāra*). There is a confusion, both in the early texts and in the academic scholarship, as to what constitutes *ghuluww* and what are the main ideological tenets of *ghulāt*. Our work proposes and applies a data-analytic approach to verify some of the hypotheses inspired by the academic scholarship on *ghuluww* and provides a means to rigorously address some of the confusion and disagreement in the ongoing research.

Several studies in academic scholarship have delved into the history and concept of *ghuluww* during the first fourth centuries of Islam.[4] An analysis of these academic

---

exaggeration as the most correct translation for this term. See al-Qāḍī, "The development of the term *Ghulāt* in Muslim literature with special reference to the Kaysāniyya", in Etan Kohlberg (ed.), *Shi'ism* (2003): 169-194. . Sean W. Anthony suggests "to trangsress a boundary" as the English translation of *ghuluww,* which is consistent with not only its Quranic application but also the relativistic use of the term through history. See Anthony, Sean W., "Ghulāt (extremist Shīʿīs)", in: Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE, Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Devin J. Stewart (eds.), Consulted online on 30 August 2023 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27473>

[2] See, e.g., the designation of Sabaʼiya among the followers of Mukhtar al-Thaqafi by Abu Mikhnaf, related by Tabari; cf. Wadad al-Qadi's analysis of the first century Ghulat .

[3] See Nowbakhti and Qummi; Hodgson , al-Qadi and Bayhom-Doua analysed and dated these mentions of Ghuluww; see Section 3 for a brief review of their work.

[4] For some instances of academic studies on the development and history of *ghuluww*, see M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *The spirituality of Shi'i Islam. Beliefs and practices*, London 2011; Mushegh Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam: The Ghulat Muslims and Their Beliefs* (Bloomsbury, 2016); *idem.*, An early Shīʿi cosmology. *Kitb al-ashbāḥ wa-l-aẓilla* and its milieu, *SI* 110 (2015): 1–80; *idem.*, Shiite underground literature between Iraq and Syria. *The Book of shadows* and the history of the early *ghulāt*, in Y. Tzvi Langermann and Robert G. Morrison (eds.), *Texts in transit in the pre-modern eastern Mediterranean* (Philadelphia 2016): 128-61; Anthony, The legend of ʿAbdallāh ibn Sabaʾ and the date of *Umm al-Kitāb*, *JRAS* 21 (2011): 1–30; *Idem.*, Kaysāniya, *EIr*; *Idem.*, *The caliph and the heretic. Ibn Sabaʾ and the origins of Shiʿism* (Leiden, 2012); *idem.*, The Meccan prison of ʿAbdallāh b. al-Zubayr and the imprisonment of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya, in M. A. Pomerantz and A. Shahin (eds.), *The heritage of Arabo-Islamic learning. Studies presented to Wadad Kadi* (Leiden 2015), pp. 3–27; Tamima Bayhom-Daou, The second-century Šīʿite *ghulāt*. Were they really gnostic? *JAIS* 5 (2003–4): 13–61; *idem.*, The imam's knowledge and the Quran according to al-Faḍl b. Shādhān al-Nīsābūrī (d. 260 A.H./874 A.D.), *BSOAS* 64 (2001): 188–207; Patricia Crone, *The nativist prophets of early Islamic Iran. Rural revolt and local Zoroastrianism*, Cambridge 2012; Patricia Crone, The

investigations reveals that the concept of *ghuluww* in the early Islamic era not only is marked by inconsistency but were not always used in a negative and pejorative context. *Ghuluww* has been categorised in diverse beliefs such as the concealment (*al-ghayba*) of the Imām instead of his death,[5] The belief in the return of Imām (*al-rajʿa*),[6] "the continuation of divine revelation (*waḥy*) and inspiration (*ilhām*) after the prophet Muḥammad's death", the Qurʾān's corruption and suppression (*taḥrīf*); the Imāms' "possession of a preternatural knowledge of the unseen (*ʿilm al-ghayb*)", the primacy of the esoteric interpretation of the Qurʾān (*taʾwīl*); the transmigration of souls (*tanāsukh*); the inherence of the divine in humans (*ḥulūl*); and the delegation (*tafwīḍ*) of divine powers to the Imāms. It is believed that

The classical categorization of beliefs known as "ghuluww" displayed variations among different treatments within the field of heresiology. Notably, Imāmī Shīʿa heresiographers and theologians frequently enumerated the following concepts:

- The belief in the return of Imāms and/or the righteous deceased at the culmination of time (al-rajʿa, rajʿat al-amwāt).
- The notion of the occultation of the future eschatological savior (al-ghayba).
- The continuation of divine revelation (waḥy) and inspiration (ilhām) subsequent to the demise of the Prophet Muḥammad and/or the belief in the true Qurʾān's corruption and suppression (taḥrīf).
- The possession of preternatural knowledge of the unseen by the Imāms and/or their followers (ʿilm al-ghayb).
- The primacy of an esoteric interpretation of the Qurʾān (taʾwīl).
- The transmigration of souls (tanāsukh).
- The concept of the inherent presence of the divine within humans (ḥulūl).
- The delegation (tafwīḍ) of divine powers to the Imāms.

Halm rooted early Shi'i Ghuluww in gnosticism. He held that early Shi'i Ghuluw borrowed their antinomianist theological tenets from gnosticism and hence held Imams as deities who revealed higher knowledge and light. This implied that early Ghulat had distinct views on imams, on the body and the soul (e.g., in transmigration of souls and rejecting the day of resurrection) and on legal matters (e.g., on denying the necessity of rituals such as fasts and prayers). This view of Halm has some support in the later Firaq literature . Al-Qadi argues that the concepts of ghuluww underwent a number of transformations; while the first

---

signiicance of wooden weapons in the revolt of al-Mukhtr and the Abbasid revolution, in Ian Richard Net- ton (ed.), *Studies in honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth* (Leiden 2000), 1:174–85; Amikam Elad, *The rebellion of Muammad al-Nafs al- Zakiyya in 145/762*, Leiden 2016; Yaron Friedman, *The Nuayr-Alaws*, Leiden 2010;

[5] Al-Qāḍī, "The development of the term Ghulāt", pp. 169-194.
[6] See Ibid.

century ghulat merely believed in the concealment and return of their leaders, these tendencies were acquired by the mainstream community. Hence, the term ghuluww had to undergo a transformation and was used to refer to more extreme ideas that deified the imams.

Hodgson argued that the ideological views of early Ghulat may be exaggerated in the firaq literature, in order to distinguish them from the theological tenets that later received wide acceptance from the mainstream community. Bayhom took Hodgson's argument a step further and showed that the gnostic theological ideas were ascribed to Ghulat at a later stage and there is no historical basis to assume that the early Ghulat had such a different theological basis than the mainstream community. She argues that gnostic esotiricism was superimposed at a later stage on the messianic ghuluww (often connected to militant movements such as that of Muhammad b. Abdullah, also known as al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah and Muhammad b. Miqlas, also known as Abu al-Khattab) to project more distance between the gnosticism and the mainstream community. In her theory, much of the deification and ascription of prophet-hood to imams and ghālī leaders to ghālī sects were the products of later formalisation of ghuluww. Our analysis of *al-Kāfī*'s *ḥadīths* corroborates Bayhom's findings; we do not find any of theological ideas ascribed to *ghulāt* having a significantly different distribution among the known ghālī transmitters compared to others.

Our research hypothesis considers the distinction between *ghuluww* and moderate genres postulated by some of the academic scholarship. Such a distinction assumes that certain genres, mostly concerned with the supernatural power and knowledge of Imams, were clear markers of the ghālī tendency and were commonly transmitted among them. We translate this research hypothesis into the following research questions:

1. Is there a sequence of *ḥadīths* in which the presence/influence of the individual *ghālī* transmitters is meaningfully more than the average of the entire *al-Kāfī*?

    The concept of "sequence" in this, and the following research questions, refers to a fixed number of neighbouring *ḥadīths*; we use the concept of sequence, in order not to rely on *al-Kāfī's* variable-sized chapters, whose varying length may be a threat to the validity of our results. We analyse the possible consequences of this decision in the design of our experiments later on.

    We measure the influence of the ghālī transmitters by measuring the number of ḥadīths in whose transmission chains there is at least one ghālī transmitter.

2. Is there a sequence of *ḥadīths*, in which the community-transmission of *ḥadīth* among the ghulāt is meaningfully more than the average of the entire *al-Kāfī*?

    We measure the influence of the ghālī transmitters by examining chains of transmissions in which a ghālī transmitter relates from another ghālī transmitter

versus those chains in which non-ghālī transmitters relate from ghālī transmitters and vice versa. .

The answers to these questions are analysed against the common findings of academic scholarship for correlation. Namely, we check whether those sequences designated by our data-analytic results match the genres typically associated with *ghuluww*.

Below we summarise a general theory that has support in the data analysis performed in the remainder of the paper.

In the remainder of this paper, we review the body of the literature on *ghuluww* and position our research within this body in Section 3. We specify our methodology and detail the design of our experiments in Section 4. We present the results of our analysis and discuss them in Section 6 by first reviewing the data and then manually studying through the body of *ḥadīths* resulting from our analysis. At the end of the same section, we also discuss the threats to validity and the measures we took to mitigate them as well as the direction of future studies that may be used to address them further.

Landscape of Ghuluww

Supported by our data analysis results, the landscape of *ghuluww* seems very diverse and closely intertwined with the mainstream community: the early Shīī community in the 2nd and early 3rd century was a mix of different tendencies without clear theological borders between ghālī and moderate; many ghālī transmitters were living with and participating in the mainstream community relating much of the mainstream texts. It is, hence, difficult to find any genre of *ḥadīths* that can be clearly labelled as ghuluww or has a characteristic of ghālī community transmission.[7]

The clear distinction between and many of the labels of *ghālī* and moderate attached to transmitters are artefacts of the later (late 3rd - 5th) socio-political necessities. The leaders of the later community felt the need to distance themselves from and extradite the outspoken part of the community that posed the threat of attacks by the Sunni political power. [8] This isolated part of the community developed a separate body of literature around

---

[7] Probably, this is also exacerbated by the filter applied by al-Kulayni; he did not trust those exclusively ghuluww content that we see back in the heritage of Nuṣairī authors.

[8] This can also explain the inconsistency in the criteria for ghuluww and the labelling of ghālī observed in our raw bio-bibliographical data by the different figures living in different socio-political milieu; particularly, those living in areas, such as Qum, with a strong threat from Sunni rulers, such as those in Ray, applied more strict criteria and accused more ḥadīth transmitters of ghuluww.

some earlier archetype figures.[9] The texts are then prominently featured by the mainstream as the representatives of the *ghālī* content in the 4th and 5th century heresiography and bio-bibliography literature and their alleged "authors" and transmitters are labelled as ghālī.

Methodology

Our research methodology comprises the following three steps:

- Digitising information about ghuluww transmitter in the major Shi'i bio-bibliographical dictionaries:

- Digitising isnad and matn information :

Distinct label used in heresiography and ḥadīth literature (incl. biobibliography) from 3rd/10th Century onwards

Much debated and unclear tenets: Purported theological tenets: supernatural power and position of imams, ghayba (occultation), refusing ritual Purported socio-political tenets political activism, open criticism of the political regimes, open advocacy of the claim of imams to political power

Used widely as a label to marginalise the heretic and opposing ideas (in a relativistic manner)

Methodology

Pilot Study

As a pilot study and to define and refine our research questions, we made a few manual case studies into the *ḥadīths* of *al-Kāfī* transmitted by the leading figures associated with the moderate tendency and contrast them with the *ḥadīths* of the ghālī tendency. The purpose of the pilot study was to find whether there is any pronounced difference between the content (matn) and the transmission chains (isnād) of these two categories of *ḥadīths*. Our initial findings indicated that the distinction is not significant and this motivated our research questions to establish or refute this observation in a larger scale across al-Kāfī. The data and a summary of our pilot study can be found in our public lab package .

---

[9] See the (manual) analysis of Kitab al-Haft and the work of the "aẓilla Group" by M. Asatryan ; we briefly review this work in the remainder of the paper.

Data cleaning

Isnads are first curated using a simple method, to mainly remove mursal isnads. First, for each transmitter a list of "generation" numbers are constructed. Generation of al-Kulayni himself is set to zeros, and for each isnad, generation number of each transmitter is set to the generation number of his pupil plus one. Then, for each transmitter u, a single generation number, gen(u) is estimated as the majority vote among their list of generation numbers. Then, only the edges (u,v) for which abs(gen(u)-gen(v)) <= 2 are retained for further processing.

Results and Discussion

Bigger Pictures

Research Question 1

To begin answering RQ1 we considered each sequence in al-Kāfī and calculated the percentage of hadiths where ghālī transmitters were influential in its transmission. We experimented with sequences of size 20 and 120. Figure 4 shows the percentages corresponding to sequences sliding over the al-Kāfī. Sequences of size 20 and 120 are depicted in orange and blue, respectively.
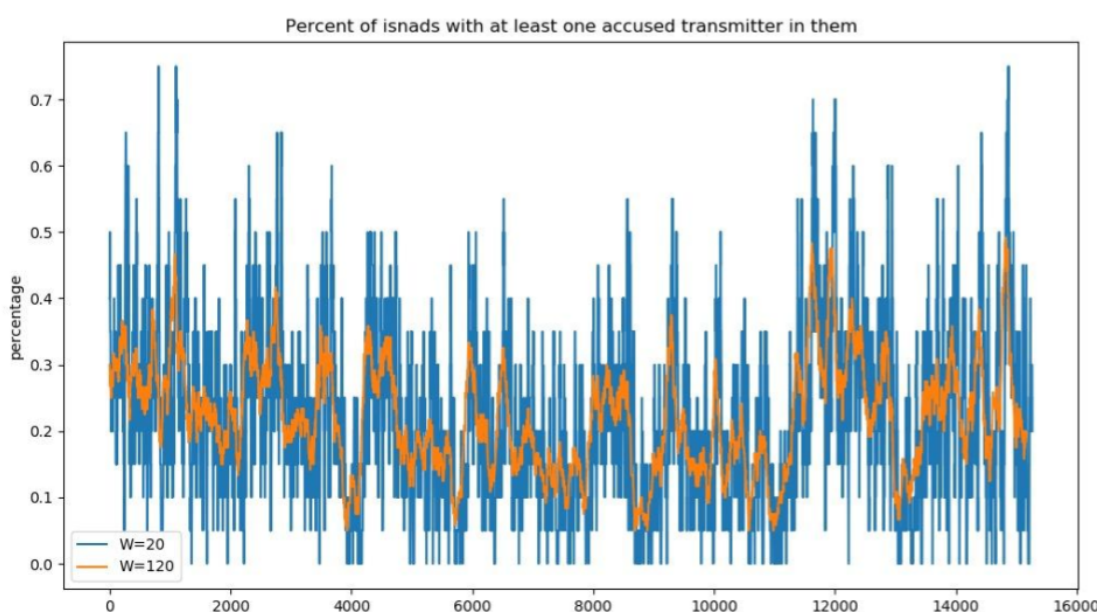
Average presence of ghālī transmitters across al-Kāfi for sequences of size 20 (blue) and 120 (orange).

As each hadith is present in a number of sequences, and each sequence corresponds to a percentage, each ḥadīth corresponds to a set of percentages. These percentages enable us to compare the influence of *ghālī* transmitters quantitatively. We use statistical tests of significance to ensure any observed difference is substantial or due to mere chance.

Out of the sequences in Figure 4 we took hadiths h that their corresponding $HS(h)$ (statistically) significantly differ from the average of al-Kāfī and have a strong effect size. Then, we sorted them by the effect size, and picked the top 1000, 2000, and 3000, hadiths respectively. We then looked at the chapters that these hadiths come from, and sorted these chapters by frequency normalised by the number of ahadith in each chapter. The three pictures in Figure 5, give us a consistent view: in Figure 5.(a) and (b) the top 10 chapters are identical (with slightly different orders) and they share 9 chapters with the top 10 chapters of (c).
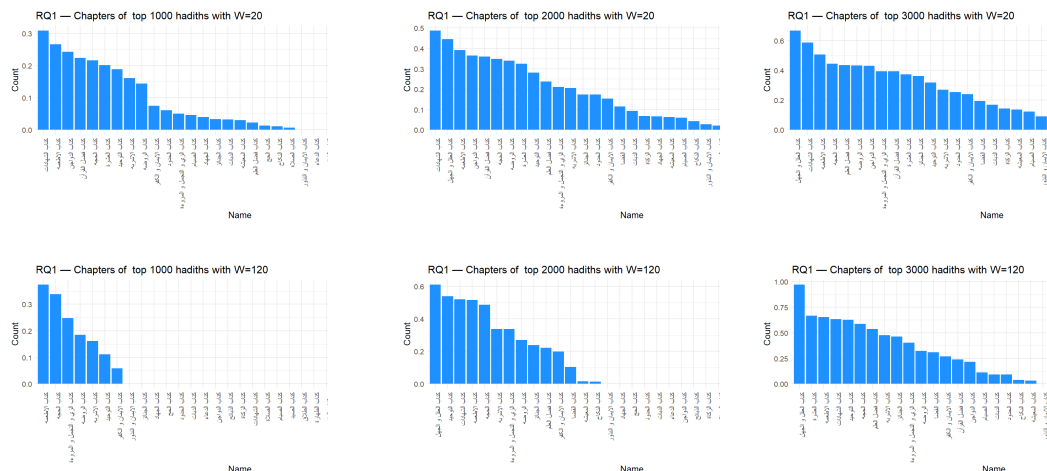
Chapters with top 1000 hadiths with ghali influence in the chain of transmission

Chapters with top 2000 hadiths with ghali influence in the chain of transmission

Chapters with top 3000 hadiths with ghali influence in the chain of transmission
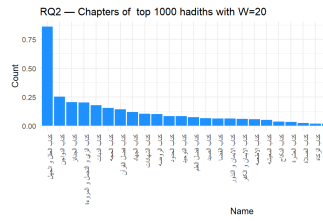
*RQ1 Results: Chapters of al-Kāfī with more pronounced presence of ghali influentiality compared to the average of al-Kafi. Chapters of top 1000 (left), top 2000 (middle), and top 3000 (right) hadiths with **sequence size 20 (top) and 120 (bottom)**.*

Research Question 2

RQ2 looks at spots in al-Kāfī where ghālī to/from ghālī transmission is clearly observable. To this end we calculated a new percentage for each sequence: the percentage of ghail-to-ghali links in the isnads (of ahadith) in the sequence. The rest is similar to above: hadiths whose corresponding list of percentages significantly and strongly differs from the average of al-Kafi are extracted and their encompassing chapters are studied.
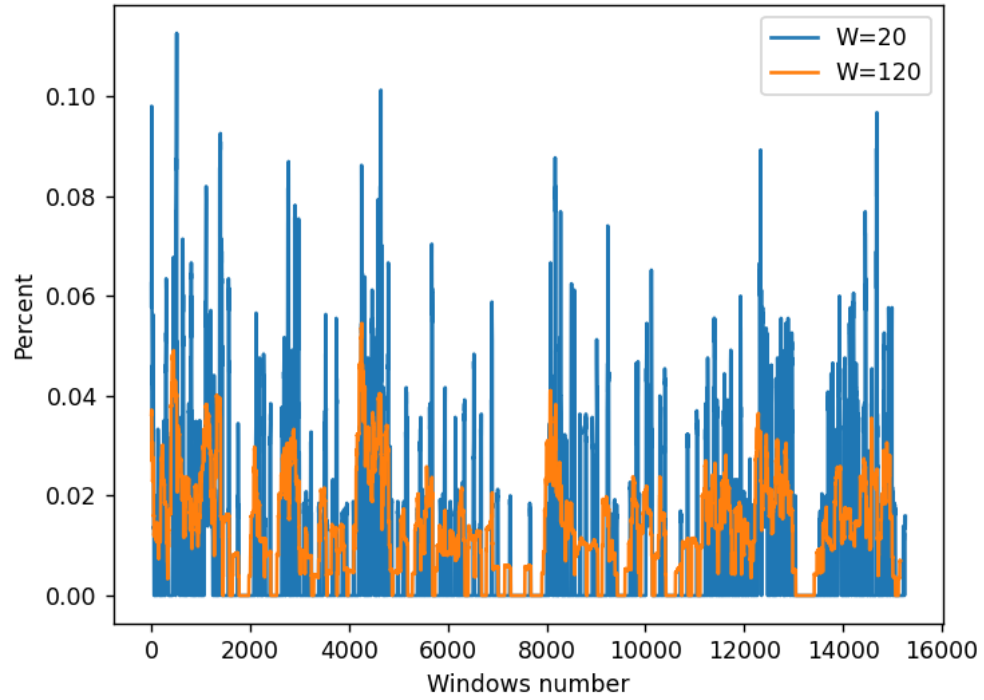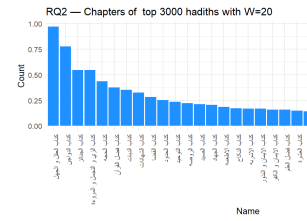
Average presence of ghālī-ghali links across al-Kāfi for sequences of size 20 (blue) and 120 (orange).
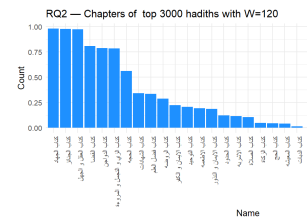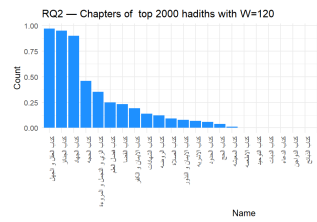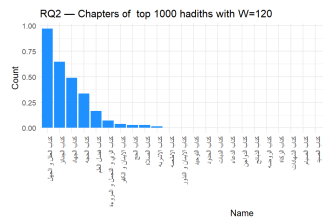

Chapters of the top 1000 hadiths in ghali to ghali transmission
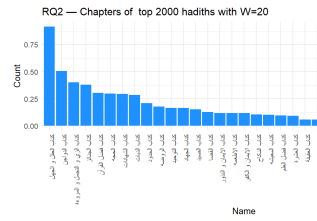
Chapters of the top 2000 hadiths in ghali to ghali transmission

Chapters of the top 3000 hadiths in ghali to ghali transmission

*RQ2 Results: Chapters of al-Kāfī with more pronounced presence of ghālī to ghālī transmission compared to the average of al-Kafi. Chapters of top 1000 (left), top 2000 (middle), and top 3000 (right) hadiths with **sequence size 20 (top) and 120 (bottom)**.*

Zooming In: 3 "Exaggerating" Chapters

Deeper understanding of the content and isnad;

Kitāb ad-Dawājin:

Kitāb Faḍl al-Qurān;

Kitāb al-Ḥujjah

Choice motivated by: Rank in the presence of extremist isnad Diversity of content and isnad (considered a few more and compared, to find a diverse set) Research question: Are there key distinct extremist figures/communities present in different chapters / sections?

Kitāb ad-Dawājin

One of the highest extremist ranks: Topmost in three ranks In top-five for all others

Subject matter: domesticated animals, their well-beings

Pivotal extremist figures: Sahl bin Ziād al-Ādamī ar-Rāzī: 17 hadiths, 16 al-Ḥusain bin Yazīd an-Nawfalī: 5 hadiths, 6 Muḥammad bin Sinān az-Zāhirī: 1 hadith

Sahl bin Ziād al-Ādamī ar-Rāzī:

"Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Isā announced him an extremist and a liar and sent him on exile to ar-Ray and so he resided there. …" an-Najjāshī (d. 450 AH), Fihrist Asmā Musannifī ash-Shi'a

Many of the *ḥadīths* in this chapter are from his well-known book an-Nawādir

al-Kulainī was among the transmitters of his book in the community

Bāb Nawādir fī ad-Dawab (the section on animals miscellania) On the well-being of domesticated animals (e.g., not beating them, particularly on their faces)

Bāb al-Ḥamām (the section on dove) On the domestication of doves

Kitāb al-Ḥujjah

6th-9th in the extremist ranks

Considered key in Mudarressi's definition of extremism

On the position of Imams

Pivotal extremist figures: Sahl bin Ziād al-Ādamī ar-Rāzī: 59 hadith, 8 Muḥammad bin Isā bin Ubaid al-Yaqtinī: 37 hadiths, 5 Muḥammad bin az-Zahirī: 4 hadith, <1 Muḥammad b. Alī Abū Sumayna: 3 hadith Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Diylamī: 3 hadith

Bāb Thabāt al-Imāmah fī al-Aʿqāb (60 No heirs to imamah among brothers (or other relatives) Small section, only 5 ḥadīths, noise in statistics

Bāb anna al-Arḍ Lā-Takhlu min Ḥujjatillāh (46 The earth will not sustain without Imām Probably a major part copied from Imāmah by Muḥammad b. Isā.

Threats to Validity

Threat: Influence of specific bio-bibliography authors: Mitigations: a) Extending the data-set to other sources of bio-bibliography, particularly Ibn al-Ghazāʾirī and Sunni sources (ongoing; data extracted)

RQ3: Ibn-Ghazaʿiri

b) Using machine learning to identify cohesive communities

Threat: Reliance on the ordering and classification of subjects in al-Kāfī Mitigation: Using text similarity tools to extract keywords and *sequences* of variable size: Finding sub-manifolds of texts that are correlated with extremism

Threat: Small sample sizes in short sections / books Mitigation: Gathering similar content from other collections of ḥadīths

Threat: Sensitivity to the selection of ḥadīths in al-Kāfī Mitigation: Extending to other collections of ḥadīths (possibly even non-Imāmī and non-Shīʿī)