

## REVISITING HADITH INTERPRETATION THROUGH GEOGRAPHY: EXTENDING MICHAEL A. COOK'S EXTERNAL CRITERIA THEORY

**Zella Famelia**

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang, Indonesia  
[zella\\_1901056009@student.walisongo.ac.id](mailto:zella_1901056009@student.walisongo.ac.id)

**Abdul Sattar**

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang, Indonesia  
[abdul\\_sattar@walisongo.ac.id](mailto:abdul_sattar@walisongo.ac.id)

### ***Abstract***

*A hadith cannot always be understood solely through its textual, it often requires a specific approach to uncover its proper contextual interpretation. The geographical approach is one such contextual method that helps reveal the true meaning of a hadith. This study adopts the theory of external criteria, as one of the essential aspects to examine in hadith research is the location where the hadith was conveyed. The purpose of this research is to explore the necessity of the geographical approach as an external criterion in understanding hadiths and to present examples of its application in several hadiths. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with a library research design and a hadith studies approach. The finding reveals that, first, the geographical approach as an external criterion is crucial for comprehending the Prophet's hadiths. Second, examples include: 1) hadiths on the dynamic direction of the Qibla according to a Muslim's location; 2) hadiths on toilet etiquette related to facing or turning away from the Qibla depending on the setting; 3) hadiths on garments such as white robes that adapt to local culture and climate.*

**Keywords:** *Geographical Approach, External Criteria Theory, Hadith Application*

### **Abstrak**

*Suatu hadis kadang kala tidak bisa dipahami secara tekstual saja, sehingga membutuhkan pendekatan tertentu agar menemukan makna kontekstual yang tepat. Pendekatan geografis adalah salah satu pendekatan kontekstual yang bisa membantu menggali makna sebenarnya suatu hadis. Peneliti mengadopsi teori external criteria karena salah satu kriteria yang harus diperiksa dalam penelitian hadis adalah lokasi hadis tersebut diturunkan. Tujuan penelitian ini untuk mengetahui butuhnya pendekatan geografis sebagai kriteria eksternal dalam memahami suatu hadis dan contoh aplikasinya pada beberapa hadis. Penelitian ini berjenis kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode studi pustaka dan pendekatan ilmu hadis. Hasil penelitian menemukan, pertama, pendekatan geografis sebagai kriteria eksternal sangat dibutuhkan dalam memahami hadis Nabi. Kedua, contoh aplikasi hadis: 1) hadis tentang arah kiblat bersifat dinamis mengikuti posisi Muslim berada; 2) hadis tentang etika buang air selama tidak menghadap atau membelakangi kiblat dan tertutup atau terbukanya tempat buang air; 3) hadis tentang pakaian gamis dan berwarna putih menyesuaikan budaya dan iklim suatu daerah.*

**Kata kunci:** *Pendekatan Geografis, Teori External Criteria, Aplikasi Hadis*

### **Introduction**

Prophetic traditions (hadith) did not emerge in a vacuum of time and space but within specific social and geographical contexts that shaped their meaning.<sup>1</sup> The geographical environment served as one of the external factors influencing the manner in which the Prophet conveyed his teachings. Consequently, certain hadiths require contextual interpretation so that their messages and wisdom can be understood appropriately.<sup>2</sup> Had the Prophet spoken to his companions without taking into account the spatial realities familiar to them, they would have

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1 Syamsuddin Arif, *Orientalis Dan Diabolisme Pemikiran* (Jakarta: Gema Insani, 2008).

2 M. Syuhudi Ismail, *Metodologi Penelitian Hadis Nabi*, 2nd ed. (Jakarta: PT. Bulan Bintang, 2007).

faced considerable difficulty in comprehending the intended meaning of his words.

The application of a geographical approach can be observed in several of the Prophet's teachings to his companions, such as determining the times of prayer and fasting during Ramadan based on natural phenomena involving the moon and the sun.<sup>3</sup> In the modern context, these temporal indicators have been replaced by the *hisab* (astronomical calculation) method, which provides greater scientific precision while still adhering to the geographical principles taught by the Prophet. Therefore, understanding hadiths through a geographical lens entails tracing the interrelation between the text and its surrounding environmental conditions, both natural and social.<sup>4</sup> This can be illustrated in the following hadith.

عن أبي هريرة رضي الله عنه أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم قال: لو لا أن اشدق على أمتي أو على الناس لأمرتهم بالسواك مع كل صلاة. رواه البخاري

*"From Abu Hurairah (RA), the Prophet ﷺ said: 'If it were not too burdensome for my followers, I would certainly have commanded them to use the siwak before every prayer.'" (Narrated by Bukhari)*

According to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, understanding a hadith should focus on its purpose (*maqasid*) rather than being confined to its literal wording or medium.<sup>5</sup> Textually, the above hadith appears to instruct Muslims to clean their teeth specifically with a *siwak* (tooth-stick). However, from a contextual perspective, the *siwak* serves merely as a means, while the primary objective of the hadith is to maintain oral cleanliness. The Prophet used the *siwak* because it was well-suited to the geographical conditions of the Arabian Peninsula, where the *arak* tree was abundant and the

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3 Philip K. Hitti, *History of The Arabs: From The Earliest Times to The Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1937).

4 Yusuf Al-Qardawi, *Kaifa Nata'amal Ma'a Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyah: Ma'alim Wa Dawabit* (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1991).

5 Michael A. Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam," *Arabica* 44, no. 4 (1997): 437–530.

climate was dry.<sup>6</sup> Thus, *siwak* should not be seen as the only permissible tool for oral hygiene, but rather as a symbol of personal cleanliness. In this sense, contextualizing the hadith in the modern era allows Muslims to substitute the *siwak* with a toothbrush and toothpaste, as long as the underlying purpose of maintaining cleanliness is fulfilled.<sup>7</sup>

Based on this explanation, the present study proceeds from the assumption that understanding hadith cannot rely solely on textual interpretation, but must also take into account the external context, the socio-environmental circumstances surrounding its revelation and application. To uncover such contextual meanings, it is essential to integrate a multidisciplinary approach, drawing insights from both the natural sciences and the social sciences.<sup>8</sup> One particularly relevant branch of the social sciences in this regard is geography, which examines the relationship between human beings and their living environment.

A considerable body of academic literature has examined Michael A. Cook's theory of external criteria, which explores the external dimensions of hadith transmission through the analysis of isnad chains, as well as the critical inquiries posed by Orientalist scholars concerning *who*, *when*, and *where* a hadith originated. This study adopts Cook's external criteria as an analytical framework that focuses on factors beyond the textual domain of the hadith. Cook emphasizes the importance of social, political, and geographical contexts in determining both the validity and historical meaning of prophetic traditions.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*, 2nd ed. (London: Oneworld Academic, 2018).

7 Maizuddin, *Metodologi Pemahaman Hadis* (Padang: Hayfa Press, 2008).

8 Harald Motzki, "The Muṣannaf of 'Abd Al-Razzāq Al-San'ānī as a Source of Authentic Aḥādīth of the First Century A. H.," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50, no. 1 (1991): 1–21.

9 Harald Motzki, "The Musannaf of 'Abd Al-Razzaq Al-San'ani as a Source of Authentic Ahadith," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50, no. 1 (1991): 1–21.

In this context, it is necessary to clarify that Cook's external criteria theory primarily operates as a historical-analytical tool rather than a prescriptive hermeneutic model. This study does not claim that Cook explicitly linked his external framework with geographical interpretation; rather, it adapts his principle of examining non-textual variables, such as place and circumstance, as part of an expanded contextual analysis. Hence, the geographical approach proposed here should be understood as an extension of Cook's epistemological concern with external evidence, serving to illuminate how spatial settings influence the transmission and comprehension of hadith.

The researcher finds this theory particularly relevant because it does not confine itself to internal factors such as the *isnad*, but rather expands the analysis to the external circumstances surrounding the narration's dating and transmission. By adapting this theoretical lens, the present study aims to uncover the contextual meaning of selected hadiths as accurately as possible by taking into account the geographical situations and conditions in which they were spoken. Furthermore, this research seeks to demonstrate how a geographical approach can serve as a vital component of external criteria in hadith studies through the analysis of several prophetic traditions.

## Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design using the library research method, which involves collecting data from various scholarly sources and examining relevant theories related to the focus of the study.<sup>10</sup> In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument who actively interprets data based on the contextual meanings emerging from the texts.<sup>11</sup> The scientific approach adopted in this study is the hadith studies

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10 Miza Nina Adlini et al., "Metode Penelitian Kualitatif Studi Pustaka," *Edumaspul Jurnal Pendidikan* 6, no. 1 (2022): 974–128, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.33487/edumaspul.v6i1.3394>.

11 John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2016).

approach, emphasizing the external dimensions of hadith, particularly the geographical context surrounding the Prophet's sayings. The analysis is conducted through a critical examination of Michael A. Cook's theory of external criteria, complemented by an interpretive analysis of selected hadith examples relevant to geographical aspects. This approach is deemed appropriate for uncovering the contextual meaning of prophetic traditions by taking into account the geographical, cultural, and social settings of Arab society during the Prophet's lifetime.

The data in this study consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary data include classical hadith compilations and contemporary hadith literature discussing the historical and geographical contexts of prophetic traditions. Meanwhile, the secondary data are drawn from books, journal articles, and other relevant scholarly research produced by both Muslim scholars and Orientalists. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which involves three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.<sup>12</sup> During the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and organized relevant literature systematically into a coherent narrative. The data display stage presented the findings of the literature review to illustrate the relationship between Michael A. Cook's external criteria theory and the geographical approach in understanding hadith. The final stage involved drawing conclusions, synthesizing and interpreting the analyzed data to derive meaningful insights.

It is important to note that the application of the Miles and Huberman model in this research is not intended to replace the classical methods of hadith criticism (*riwāyah* and *dirāyah*), but to complement them through a systematic qualitative procedure that organizes contextual data coherently. The model assists the researcher in operationalizing Cook's external criteria and the geographical perspective by structuring how textual evidence and spatial contexts are compared, interpreted, and validated. This

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12 Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Pendidikan (Pendekatan Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, dan R&D)* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2015).

integration maintains methodological rigor while remaining faithful to the epistemic foundation of hadith studies.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, source triangulation was conducted by comparing various perspectives from both classical and modern literature. This approach aligns with the principle of objectivity in qualitative research.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, validity was reinforced through the inclusion of interdisciplinary perspectives, including sociology, anthropology, and geography, to interpret the contextual background of hadith. Consequently, the findings of this study are expected to provide a methodological contribution to the expansion of contextual approaches in hadith studies, particularly by integrating the geographical perspective as one of the external criteria.

## Results and Discussion

### The Geographical Approach in Hadith Studies

Geography is not a discipline directly used in the formulation of Islamic law, but it plays an important role in understanding the Prophet's hadiths contextually, particularly those related to the narrator's location, centers of hadith transmission, and the socio-geographical conditions of a region. For example, the study *The Influence of Geography on the Spread and Transmission of Hadith Collections* shows that hadith tradition centers such as Madinah, Makkah, Kufa, and Baghdad were not only spiritual hubs but also geographically strategic for trade activities and the movement of scholars.<sup>14</sup>

Geography comes from the Greek words *geo* (earth) and *graphy* (description). It is the science of describing the Earth, a term first used by Eratosthenes. The study of geography is grounded in the exploration of humans and the Earth as the place where humans

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13 Robert C. Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2007).

14 Jabir Sani Maihula, "The Influence of Geography on the Spread and Transmission of Hadith," *Global Journal of Research in Education & Literature* 05, no. 02 (2025): 33–41.

live. Carl Ritter viewed geography as the study of the relationship between natural phenomena and human life, while Richard Hartshorne defined it as the study of differences in characteristics between one region and another.<sup>15</sup> Dadang Supardan added that geography examines everything related to the Earth, including its natural phenomena, processes, and life.<sup>16</sup> David A. King, in his article *The Culmination of Islamic Sacred Geography*, explains how sacred geography and mathematical geography were used in Islamic history to determine the qibla precisely according to geographical coordinates.<sup>17</sup>

While the classical definitions of geography provide a foundational understanding, their relevance in this study lies in framing geography as an analytical lens that connects human experience to spatial realities. In the context of hadith studies, these definitions remind scholars that the Prophet's sayings were uttered within specific geographical conditions that shaped both their form and meaning. Therefore, introducing geographical theory here is not merely definitional, but serves to underscore that spatial relationships, climate, landscape, and settlement are integral to understanding how the Prophet's teachings were practiced and transmitted in their original milieu.

At first glance, geography may seem to have no direct connection with the science of hadith. However, hadiths are records of the Prophet's actions, sayings, and approvals that emerged within specific spatial and temporal contexts. This means that geographical context plays a role in grounding the meaning of hadiths so that they align with the social and environmental

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15 Fatihunnada and Afaf Nazrat Uyun, "Kontekstualisasi Hadis Doa Pengalihan Hujan Pendekatan Geografis Jakarta Menurut Ali Mustafa Yaqub," *Ilmu Ushuluddin* 7, no. 1 (2020): 37–56, <https://doi.org/10.15408/iu.v>.

16 Benny Afwadzi, "Membangun Integrasi Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial Dan Hadis Nabi," *Jurnal Living Hadis* 1, no. 1 (2016).

17 David A King and Edward S Kennedy, "The Culmination of Islamic Sacred Geography: I: The World about the Kaaba (Folk Astronomy), and II: The World about Mecca (Mathematical Geography)," *Geography and Religious Knowledge in the Medieval World*, 2021, 179–88, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110686159-008>.



conditions in which they were spoken. The article *From Ideology to Hadith Narration: The Effect of Human Geography on the Asbab al-Riwayah* demonstrates that hadith narrators who lived in certain regions or experienced migration had particular reasons for their narration (*asbab al-riwayah*) that were influenced by their geographical circumstances.<sup>18</sup> If the geographical aspect is overlooked, understanding of hadiths risks becoming contextually biased.

Hasan Asy'ari Ulama'i asserts that the geographical approach can serve as an analytical lens through which the meaning of hadith texts can be understood more accurately, taking into account the situational, locational, and environmental settings in which the Prophet lived.<sup>19</sup> Hadiths related to the geographical conditions of Arabia were naturally easier to comprehend for the Prophet's contemporaries who shared the same environment. However, when these hadiths are interpreted by communities living in different geographical contexts, the potential for misinterpretation and misunderstanding inevitably increases.<sup>20</sup>

One of the scholars who paid significant attention to the geographical dimension in interpreting religious texts is Syauqi Abu Khalil. He systematically connected various narratives and events in the Qur'an and Hadith with specific geographic locations, then visualized them through map illustrations to help readers comprehend the spatial position of places mentioned in the texts. This approach allows readers to perceive these locations as real, tangible sites on Earth, rather than abstract names detached from reality. Consequently, his method provides an

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18 Recep Emin Gul, "From Ideology to Hadith Narration : The Effect of Human Geography on the Asbāb Al- Riwayah ( Reason for Narration ) □ İdeolojiden Hadis Rivayetini : Beşerî Coğrafyanın Sebebi -i Rivayete Etkisi," *Journal of Religious Inquiries* 4, no. 2 (2021).

19 A. Hasan Asy'ari Ulama'i, "Pendekatan Geografis dalam Memahami Hadits Nabi SAW" (IAIN Walisongo Semarang, 2014), <https://eprints.walisongo.ac.id/id/eprint/3950/>.

20 Andi Rahman, *Pendekatan-Pendekatan Dalam Memahami Hadis*, ed. Ulin Nuha (Jakarta Selatan: Program Studi Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir Fakultas Ushuluddin Institut PTIQ Jakarta, 2023).

understanding that is closer to historical reality than mere verbal explanations. Among his most monumental works are *Atlas al-Qur'an*, *Atlas Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, and *Atlas al-Hadith al-Nabawi*.<sup>21</sup> This mapping approach resembles the work of David A. King<sup>22</sup> and other studies on sacred geography found in international literature. The study by Maria Massi Dakake also emphasizes that the geographical location of sacred sites holds symbolic meaning in hadiths and religious texts.<sup>23</sup>

Hasan Asy'ari Ulama'i categorizes the Prophet's traditions related to geographical phenomena into two major models. (1) The first model consists of hadiths that do not necessarily require a geographical approach to be understood, but only need clarification of the locations mentioned within them. This model is further divided into three subcategories: a) hadiths that explicitly mention well-known and identifiable places; b) hadiths that refer to a place whose location is explained directly within the hadith text itself; and c) hadiths that mention a place whose geographical context is clarified by later scholars, either in hadith commentaries (*sharh al-hadith*) or in Syaui Abu Khalil's *Atlas al-Hadith al-Nabawi*. (2) The second model includes hadiths that require a geographical approach for proper understanding. This model is divided into two subgroups: a) hadiths that absolutely require geographical contextualization to be fully understood; and b) hadiths that do not absolutely require, yet benefit significantly from, a geographical approach in interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

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21 Syaui Abu Khalil, *Atlas Hadits: Uraian Lengkap Seputar Nama, Tempat, Dan Kaum Yang Disabdakan Rasulullah SAW* (Jakarta: Almahira, 2007).

22 David A. King, "The Culmination of Islamic Sacred Geography: I: The World about the Kaaba (Folk Astronomy), and II: The World about Mecca (Mathematical Geography)," *Geography and Religious Knowledge in the Medieval World*, 2021, 179–88, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110686159-008>.

23 Maria Massi Dakake, "Sacred Land in the Qur'an and Hadith and Its Symbolic and Eschatological Significance," *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 10, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.61335/1551-3432.1162>.

24 Ulama'i, "Pendekatan Geografis dalam Memahami Hadits Nabi SAW."

From the discussion above, it can be inferred that the geographical approach in hadith studies represents a form of contextual interpretation that takes into account the conditions of a region, such as climate, location, and environmental factors, that shaped the circumstances in which a hadith was uttered. The study by Veli İlci and colleagues reinforces that geographical conditions and the orientation of places of worship play a role in the context of hadiths.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, this approach not only deepens textual understanding but also facilitates a more holistic and cross-cultural comprehension of the Prophet's sayings.

### **Michael Allan Cook's External Criteria Theory**

The *External Criteria Theory* is an alternative approach in hadith studies introduced by Michael A. Cook. This approach seeks to assess the validity of hadiths by considering external factors beyond the chain of transmission (*isnad*), including the social, political, geographical, and historical contexts in which a hadith emerged.<sup>26</sup> Michael A. Cook is one of the most prominent Orientalist scholars who contributed significantly to the development of critical methodologies in hadith studies. The term *Orientalist* refers to Western scholars whose primary focus is the study of Eastern societies, particularly those related to Islamic religion, Arab culture, Arabic language, and their historical environments, often analyzed through distinct Western academic perspectives and methodologies.<sup>27</sup>

Many theories have been proposed by Orientalist scholars in their critical examination of hadith, and their ideas have often been celebrated in Western academic discourse. Among the most

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25 Veli İlçİ et al., "Investigation on the Accuracy of Existing Qibla Directions of the Mosques from Different Periods : A Case Study in Çorum City , Turkey," *Technical Gazette* 25, no. 6 (2018): 1642–49, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17559/TV-20170226111205>.

26 Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam."

27 Vrisko Putra Vachruddin, "Analisis Faktor Koneksitas Kritik Hadis Antara Ignaz Goldziher Dan Joseph Schacht," *Multidisciplinary Indonesian Center Journal(MICJO)* 1, no. 1 (2024): 138–55.

influential figures are Ignaz Goldziher with his seminal work *Muhammedanische Studien* (1889–1890), Joseph Schacht with his theories of *projecting back* (or *backward projection*) and *argumentum e silentio*, G. H. A. Juynboll with the *common link* theory, Harald Motzki with his *isnad-cum-matn analysis*, and Nabia Abbott with the concepts of *explosive isnad* and *isnad family*. In a similar vein, Michael A. Cook also contributed to the field through his development of the *External Criteria* theory, which emphasizes the importance of contextual and environmental factors in assessing the authenticity and meaning of prophetic traditions.

Clinton Bennett, citing the views of Farid Esack in his book *Muslims and Modernity: Current Debates*, categorizes the interactions of non-Muslim scholars with the Qur'an and Hadith into three broad groups: 1) The Friend or Lover, outsider researchers who approach the Qur'an with fairness and objectivity, and who even make valuable contributions to Islamic scholarship; 2) The Voyeur, scholars who critically examine and sometimes challenge the Qur'an, yet still acknowledge its truth insofar as it can be substantiated through convincing argumentation; and 3) The Polemicist, those who adopt a wholly negative stance and reject the Qur'an's claim as divine revelation.<sup>28</sup> According to Esack, Michael A. Cook belongs to the second group, the *Voyeurs*, which places him among the moderate scholars, neither uncritically hostile nor blindly accepting, but open to evidence-based reasoning and scientific inquiry.

Michael Allan Cook was born on December 24, 1940, in England. He began his orientalist studies by pursuing Middle Eastern and Islamic History at King's College, Cambridge, from 1959 to 1963. He then continued his postgraduate studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, from 1963 to 1966. Since 1986, Cook has been teaching in the graduate program and earned the title of Professor in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Michael A. Cook is

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28 Didi Junaedi, "Living Qur'an: Sebuah Pendekatan Baru Dalam Kajian AL-Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 4, no. 2 (2015): 169–90.

known as an orientalist deeply concerned with the authenticity of Islamic sources, particularly the Qur'an and Hadith. Together with Patricia Crone, he authored a controversial work titled *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (1977), which sparked debate for its attempt to reconstruct early Islamic history based on non-Muslim sources.<sup>29</sup> Although the book received heavy criticism, Cook's views later developed into a more moderate and methodological approach, especially in his effort to understand Hadith through *external evidences*.<sup>30</sup>

In the field of Hadith studies, Michael A. Cook became well-known for his critique of Juynboll's common link theory. According to Cook, a transmitter identified as a *common link* cannot be regarded as the central fabricator of a hadith, since every narrator in a chain (*isnad*) has an equal potential to falsify a narration.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the *common link* cannot serve as a reliable basis for dating a hadith. Cook's perspective effectively challenged and undermined the foundation of the *common link* theory.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond criticizing its weaknesses, Cook proposed an alternative framework known as the External Criteria theory, aimed at evaluating the authenticity of hadiths. He argued that not only internal factors (the *isnad*) should be examined, but also external aspects such as social, political, historical, geographical, and cultural contexts surrounding the emergence of a hadith. This consideration, according to Cook, allows researchers to gain a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of hadith, and to

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29 Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of The Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

30 Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Routledge: Psychology Press, 2000).

31 Muhammad Ghifari and Ulfah Zakiyah, "Genealogi Sanad Dalam Perspektif Orientalis: Studi Kritik Atas Pemikiran Michael Cook," *Refleksi* 20, no. 2 (2021): 169–92, <https://doi.org/10.15408/ref.v20i2.19755>.

32 Imam Sahal Ramdhani, "Teori The Spread of Isnad (Telaah Atas Pemikiran Michael Allan Cook)," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 16, no. 2 (2015): 223–42, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2015.1602-05>.

distinguish between narrations with strong historical grounding and those influenced by external factors.<sup>33</sup>

According to Michael A. Cook, a method that relies solely on internal criteria (the *isnad*) tends to be reductive, as it fails to take into account the socio-historical dimensions in which a hadith circulated.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, he introduced the External Criteria theory. The *external criteria* consist of historical documents or records that can reveal when and from where a hadith originated. Cook considered dating hadiths using the *common link* method to be futile. Through *external criteria*, researchers are able to uncover historical clues about the transmission of a hadith, something that is often overlooked by hadith scholars who rigidly focus on *isnad* chains while neglecting the external contexts surrounding the narrations.<sup>35</sup>

The External Criteria theory, as a method of hadith evaluation, examines several aspects outside the hadith text to assess its validity and authenticity. This theory evaluates external, verifiable criteria, such as time, location, narrator, and historical contextual consistency. The temporal criterion investigates whether a hadith was narrated during the same period as the event it describes. The spatial criterion examines whether the location mentioned in the hadith aligns with verifiable historical and geographical contexts. The narrator criterion explores the reputation, integrity, and reliability of the transmitters. Finally, the historical-contextual criterion assesses the consistency of a hadith with established historical facts.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Muhammad Ghifari, "Teori External Criteria Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Studi Hadis; Telaah Atas Pemikiran Michael Cook," *Tabdis: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Al-Hadis* 14, no. 2 (2023): 161–79.

34 Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in The Medieval and Modern World* (England: Oneworld Publication, 2009).

35 Muhammad Ghifari, *Asal Usul Sanad Dalam Wacana Orientalis Studi Kritis Atas Pemikiran Michael Cook*, ed. Ulafah Zakiyah (Jakarta Selatan: Pustaka Harakatuna, 2020).

36 Harald Motzki, *Hadith: Origins and Developments (The Transformations of the Classical Islamic World)*, ed. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2016).

Through the external criteria approach, Cook argues that understanding hadith becomes more holistic, as it involves external factors that can be verified through historical records or archaeological evidence. He also emphasizes that G. H. A. Juynboll's common link theory oversimplifies the process of hadith transmission, since the potential for fabrication does not lie solely with a single central transmitter (the *common link*), but may occur at any level of the isnad.<sup>37</sup> This approach has since been widely adopted in contemporary Western hadith studies as a critical alternative to traditional isnad-based methods. Nevertheless, many Muslim scholars contend that the theory cannot be fully applied without considering the Islamic epistemological principles that underlie hadith verification.<sup>38</sup>

### **Hadith Studies through a Geographical Approach Adopting the External Criteria Theory**

Hadith studies through a geographical approach that adopts Michael A. Cook's *external criteria* theory serve as a bridge between classical hadith criticism and contextual interpretation based on spatial-temporal realities. Numerous academic works explain that Cook's *external criteria* theory shares a similar objective with the *common link* theory, namely, to evaluate the authenticity of hadith. However, according to Cook, the *external criteria* theory is more precise and comprehensive in assessing hadith validity. This approach stems from a certain skepticism toward prophetic traditions. Although such skepticism may appear negative, Muslim hadith scholars have responded to Cook's idea constructively, viewing it as an intellectual contribution that enriches the understanding of hadith, allowing for a more accurate grasp of its contextual meanings. Orientalist scholars introduced this new perspective in studying and evaluating hadith to ensure that the

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37 G.H.A Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization)* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

38 Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: It's Origin, Development and Special Features*, 2nd ed. (UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

analysis does not rely solely on the *isnad* (internal chain of transmission), but also considers *external factors*, such as social, political, cultural, and particularly geographical circumstances, in which the hadith emerged.

This study therefore does not claim that Cook's theory was explicitly designed for geographical application. Rather, it reinterprets his notion of externality as a methodological gateway that accommodates spatial, social, and historical variables surrounding hadith transmission. The geographical approach introduced here functions as one possible operationalization of Cook's external criteria, specifically, the spatial aspect, which broadens the scope of hadith contextualization beyond the internal textual structure. Such adaptation illustrates the flexibility of Cook's framework in supporting cross-disciplinary approaches without distorting its original analytical intent.

Location serves as an essential external criterion that must be examined in the application of the *external criteria* theory. Researchers should verify whether the locations mentioned in a hadith are consistent with existing historical and geographical evidence. This examination aims to obtain a more valid and contextually grounded understanding of a hadith. For instance, if a hadith describes an event set in Mecca, it must be verified whether the depiction of Mecca in the narration aligns with what is known from historical and geographical studies of Mecca at that time. Such verification helps identify prophetic traditions that may contain geographical inconsistencies with historical contexts.<sup>39</sup> If these inconsistencies are found, literal interpretations of the hadith could become misleading.

The geographical approach as an external criterion becomes increasingly crucial when geographically embedded hadiths are transferred into contexts beyond the Arabian Peninsula, where the geographical landscape differs significantly. If a hadith is rigidly interpreted according to Arabian geographical conditions without

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39 Ghifari, "Teori External Criteria Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Studi Hadis; Telaah Atas Pemikiran Michael Cook."



contextual adaptation, its application in other regions may become overly literal, leading to monotony, misinterpretation, or even contradictions with the Prophet's original intent. For example, as discussed in Jabir S. M.'s study on the influence of geography on the transmission of hadith, the dissemination and circulation of hadith are dynamic processes that are deeply shaped by geographical factors. Differences in geographical settings also give rise to variations in tradition and modes of understanding hadith across regions.<sup>40</sup> Illustrative examples of hadiths that require an external geographical approach include those concerning the direction of the *qibla* during prayer, the orientation toward the *qibla* when relieving oneself, and traditions regarding wearing garments such as the *thawb* (robe) and the preference for white clothing.

**The first hadith** concerns the direction of the *qibla* in prayer. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once stated that the direction of the *qibla* lies between the East and the West.

عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: ما بين المشرق و المغرب  
قبلة. رواه ترمذي

*“The Prophet ﷺ said: ‘The direction between East and West is the Qiblah.’”* (Narrated by Tirmidzi)

The hadith above explains that the direction of the *qibla* for prayer lies between the North and the South. This hadith was delivered by the Prophet while he was in the house of Umm al-Mu'minin Hafsa (may Allah be pleased with her) in Madinah. Therefore, it applies specifically to the Prophet and his Companions who were residing in Madinah, a city geographically located to the north of the Ka'ba. In other words, the *qibla* referred to by the Prophet in this hadith is toward the South. This hadith cannot be generalized to all Muslims across the world. In fact, those who pray inside the Sacred Mosque (Masjid al-Haram)

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<sup>40</sup> Maihula, “The Influence of Geography on the Spread and Transmission of Hadith.”

may face any side of the Ka'ba, whether west, east, north, or south. Hence, the direction of the qibla is not static but dynamic, depending on the geographical position of the person performing the prayer.<sup>41</sup> To prevent misunderstanding, it must be clarified that the Prophet's statement about the qibla direction "between East and West" was contextually addressed to the people of Madinah, who were situated north of the Ka'ba. Thus, the phrase does not represent a fixed global orientation but a relative spatial expression based on local geography. By highlighting this relativity, the geographical approach does not alter the theological essence of the hadith but reinforces its contextual adaptability across regions. This precision aligns with the purpose of the external criteria theory, which encourages researchers to consider temporal and spatial referents in interpreting transmitted reports.

If this hadith is rigidly understood in a purely textual manner, it may lead to controversy and misinterpretation—for instance, regarding the direction of the qibla in Indonesia. Geographically, Indonesia lies to the east of Mecca, and its southern direction points toward the South Pole, not the Ka'ba. Therefore, if Indonesian Muslims were to face south during prayer, their prayer would be invalid since they would not be facing the Ka'ba. The contextual meaning of this hadith for Indonesian Muslims, therefore, is that the direction of prayer should be toward the West, as Indonesia is located to the east of the Ka'ba.<sup>42</sup>

A recent study on scaled mapping in Turkey demonstrated that the qibla direction can be calculated with geodetic accuracy on modern maps, revealing challenges in visualizing geographic orientation. This study helps Muslims determine the qibla direction easily without requiring field measurements and allows for convenient access through the internet.<sup>43</sup> The findings of this

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41 Rahman, *Pendekatan-Pendekatan Dalam Memahami Hadis*.

42 Afwadzi, "Membangun Integrasi Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial Dan Hadis Nabi."

43 Faruk Yildirim et al., "The Qibla Direction Problem in Large-Scale Maps and Its Representation with Geodetic Accuracy : The Case of Türkiye," *International Journal of Engineering and Geosciences* 10, no. 1 (2025): 151–63, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/ijeg>.

research further affirm that the hadith on the qibla direction remains relevant to geographical considerations.

**The second hadith** concerns facing the qibla while relieving oneself. The Prophet (peace be upon him) instructed his followers to face either the West or the East when defecating or urinating so as not to face or turn their back toward the qibla.

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم : إذا أتى أحدكم الغائط فلا يستقبل القبلة، و لا يولها ظهره شرقاً، أو غرباً  
رواه بخاري .

*“The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: ‘When any of you wants to relieve himself, he should neither face the qibla nor turn his back toward it; rather, he should face toward the East or the West.’”* (Narrated by al-Bukhari)

The above hadith, when understood geographically, indicates a prohibition against relieving oneself while facing or turning one’s back toward the direction of the Kaaba. This means that if a person’s position neither faces nor turns away from the Kaaba, it is permissible to relieve oneself in that direction. Contextually, the hadith should not be rigidly interpreted to mean that one must face only the East or the West when relieving oneself. The Prophet conveyed this hadith while he was in Madinah, which lies to the north of Mecca; therefore, at that time, he instructed people to face East or West when relieving themselves. In the geographical context of Indonesia, which is located to the east of the Kaaba, Muslims in Indonesia should not relieve themselves facing East or West.<sup>44</sup>

According to Imam Shafi’i, the application of this hadith is actually contextual, because generally, Arabs relieved themselves in the open desert, outside their homes. If someone relieved themselves facing toward or away from the Qiblah, it would automatically mean they were also facing toward or away from a person who was praying, with their private parts exposed. This

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44 Rahman, *Pendekatan-Pendekatan Dalam Memahami Hadis*.

contradicts the ethics of a Muslim in respecting another Muslim who is praying. It is a different matter if one relieves themselves in a closed space, inside the house. In such conditions, it is permissible to face toward or away from the Qiblah while doing so.<sup>45</sup>

**The third hadith** concerns wearing a *gamis* (long robe) and the color white.

البسوا البياض فإنها أطهر و أطيب و كفنوا فيها موتاكم  
رواه ترمذي

*“The clothing most beloved by the Prophet ﷺ is the gamis.”* (Narrated by Tirmidzi)

كان أحب الثياب الى رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم القميص .  
رواه ترمذي

*“Wear white clothing, for it is purer and better, and shroud your deceased among you in white cloth.”* (Narrated by Tirmidzi)

According to al-Qardhawi, matters of clothing, both in terms of cut and style, follow local customs and adapt to the climate, standard of living, social status, personal preference, and other backgrounds, as long as they do not contradict Islamic law, such as exposing the ‘awrah, revealing the body’s contours, or being intended for arrogance and pride. From a geographical perspective, Philip K. Hitti describes the city of Mecca as extremely hot, almost unbearable. Mecca was also a spice trade route from South Arabia to North Arabia, connecting merchants from Ma’rib to Gaza.

The geographical context above illustrates the meaning behind the Prophet’s love for wearing the *gamis*, as it reflects the clothing culture in Mecca. The *gamis* also facilitated daily activities for the people, most of whom were merchants. If this hadith were understood literally in Indonesia, it could hinder daily activities due to the diversity of professions, ranging from fishermen and

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45 Afwadzi, “Membangun Integrasi Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial Dan Hadis Nabi.”

farmers to police officers and others. Therefore, the contextualization of the hadith regarding the Prophet's preferred clothing emphasizes the type of clothing as a cultural symbol while accommodating the variety of professions in each region.

The geographical context of the hadith regarding the command to wear white clothing is related to the extremely hot climate of Mecca. White clothing has the best ability to reflect sunlight among all colors, thereby minimizing the feeling of heat. The contextualization of this hadith would certainly differ in colder regions, such as Europe, where white clothing would be less practical, and darker clothing would be a more suitable choice.<sup>46</sup>

In responding to the hadiths regarding the Prophet's fondness for the *gamis* and white clothing, it can be seen that the Prophet was, in many ways, an ordinary human being. He also lived in a specific geographical environment, which is why the prevailing culture of the society at that time was reflected in his attire. Therefore, the Prophet's way of dressing is not a *sunnah* in the sense of something that must be emulated as a part of religious obedience.<sup>47</sup> Pushpa Anbu Svd's research on the relationship between geography and Islamic thought emphasizes that geographical conditions and climate shape local religious practices. The study reveals that without considering geographical factors, understanding the social, economic, psychological, and religious dynamics of Muslims would be limited.<sup>48</sup> This implies that geography can indeed influence the interpretation of a hadith's meaning.

From several applications of the geographical approach as an external criterion, illustrated by the examples of the hadiths above,

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46 Muhammad Irsad, "Hadis-Hadis Populer Komunitas Jamaah Tabligh ( Reinterpretasi Menggunakan Pendekatan Historis- Kontekstual )," *Al-Afkar: Journal for Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2024): 904–15, <https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v7i1.918>. Popular.

47 Rahman, *Pendekatan-Pendekatan Dalam Memahami Hadis*.

48 Pushpa Anbu Svd, "Relationship Between Geography and Islamic Thought," *INTERAÇÕES - Cultura e Comunidade* 5, no. 8 (2010): 45–62.

it is evident that understanding hadiths cannot rely solely on a textual approach. One must also consider the background of the hadith to grasp its contextual meaning. Without a proper geographical approach, the understanding of hadiths with geographical content can be flawed and even contradictory. This could provide opportunities for skeptical Orientalists to further propagate claims that the Prophet's hadiths are unreliable or fabricated.

### **Conclusion**

Through the comprehensive discussion above, this study concludes two essential points. First, a geographical approach is crucial in understanding the Prophet's hadiths in order to accurately uncover their contextual meanings. Cook's geographical perspective serves as one of the external criteria that must be considered when examining a hadith. Second, the application of the geographical approach as an external criterion in several examples of the Prophet's hadiths demonstrates that: 1) The hadith about the direction of the qibla is dynamic, adapting to the geographical position of Muslims at a given time, rather than being textually fixed toward the West or East; 2) The hadith about etiquette in relieving oneself should be understood contextually, that as long as one neither faces nor turns one's back directly to the qibla, it is acceptable, depending also on whether the place of relieving oneself is open or enclosed, so as not to appear disrespectful toward those praying; 3) The hadith about wearing white or long garments (*gamis*) reflects local cultural and climatic contexts.

Thus, the geographical approach has proven to provide a significant contribution in interpreting the Prophet's hadiths contextually, making them relevant and compatible with the social and cultural conditions of different regions. Future research is recommended to explore hadiths related to contemporary geographical issues, such as climate change, migration, and qibla orientation across regions, in order to further highlight the

relevance of the geographical approach in understanding the Prophet's teachings in the modern era.

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