Al-Shafi‘i’s Concept of Prophetic Sunnah  
(al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah)  

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Abstrak  

There are many discussions in modern literature regarding the concept of the sunnah of the Prophet or the term sunnah itself. Analysis of the term sunnah based on early literature leads to different findings.  

Western scholars such as Schacht and Margoliouth held that there was no such original concept of the sunnah of the Prophet. To them, the concept was a later development. Schacht disagrees with al-Shafi‘i who defined sunnah as the model behaviour of the Prophet and the latter’s direct connotation of ‘sunnah’ as the ‘sunnah of the Prophet’. According to Schacht, sunnah is nothing more than precedent way of life. Goldziher has shown that this, originally a pagan term, was taken over and adapted by Islam, and Margoliouth has concluded that sunnah meant originally the ideal or normative usage of the community, and only later acquired the restricted meaning of precedents set by the Prophet.  

Schacht argues that the concept of the sunnah of the Prophet emerged first in Kufah in connection with the back-projection of doctrine applied as a means of securing greater authority for local practices. He believes that the Madinans used this concept only rarely.  

Muslim authors believe that the sunnah of the Prophet already existed in the early period of Islam. On the other hand, Western scholars argue that the concept of
Prophetic sunnah is absent in the Qur'an. Only 'the sunnah of God (sunnat Allah)' and 'the sunnah of the predecessors (sunnat al-awwalin)' are mentioned in the Qur'an. To this, Ansari and Ahmad Hasan argue that though the sunnah of the Prophet per se is not mentioned, the essence of the concept is clearly stated in the Qur'an for it testifies to the conduct of the Prophet as conduct par excellence:  

"Certainly you have in the Messenger of Allah a good example (qudwah hasanah)."

One of the earliest uses of this expression is attributed to 'Umar who was reported to have explained the functions of his officials as consisting the instruction of the people in their religion and in the sunnah of their Prophet. An epistle written by al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110H) to the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan (65-86H) also contains the expression sunnah of the Prophet.

The Authority of the Prophet's Sunnah

It is the characteristic of al-Shafi‘i to begin his writings by explaining what it means to follow the Prophet (ittiba‘ al-Rasul). He did so in order to establish a concrete foundation for discussion. His methodological approach, however, differs according to his different audience or opponent. For instance, when he discussed this matter with the ahl al-kalam (rationalists) or the so-called ahl al-Qur’an, he would provide evidence from the Qur’an, since the ahl al-Qur’an would not accept anything but the Qur’an and it would be irrelevant to adduce a piece of evidence from the hadith, for the fundamental arguments between the two are different. Therefore, in order to proceed with the discussion and to convince his audience, al-Shafi‘i pursued the basis of his arguments according to situational needs. This kind of argumentation appears in Jima‘ al-‘ilm, in which his opponents are the ahl al-kalam. Al-Shafi‘i cited three Qur’anic ayat to prove to his opponents that the obligation to follow the Prophet is derived from the Qur’an itself. These are,

i. “But no, by thy Lord, they can have no [real] faith until they make thee judge in all disputes between them, and find in their souls no resistance against your decisions, but accept them with the fullest conviction”.

ii. “He who obeys the Apostle, obeys Allah”.

iii. “Then, let those beware who withstand the Apostle’s order, let some trial befall them, or a grievous penalty be inflicted on them”.

From the above ayat, it is established that the commandment to follow the injunctions given by the Prophet is derived from the Qur’an itself. Yet, how does one obey and follow the Prophet after his death? On this point, al-Shafi‘i argues that the only way
is to accept the hadith from the Prophet. Therefore, the acceptance of the sunnah or the hadith from the Prophet is incumbent upon each and every Muslim.¹⁷

Throughout his life, al-Shafi‘i worked to reinforce the authority and superiority of the sunnah of the Prophet. During that period, rationalist (theological) movements especially the Mu‘tazilah were at their peak. The most obvious doctrine held by the Mu‘tazilah is the supremacy of reason.¹⁸ In this respect, al-Shafi‘i worked to formulate a hierarchical order of proofs in which revelation, i.e. the Qur’an and hadith are given priority over consensus opinion and reasoning. In his writings, al-Shafi‘i gave priority to the hadith or the sunnah of the Prophet and his most significant contribution to hadith is the acceptance of hadith as whole, and particularly isolated traditions (khabar al-wahid), for most of the hadiths are in the form of khabar al-wahid.

Through his books on usul like al-Risalah, Jima‘ al-‘ilm, Ikhtilaf al-Hadith and Ikhtilaf Malik wa al-Shafi‘i, there are at least two principles concerning the authority of the sunnah of the Prophet which can be deduced:

i. No consideration is given to any opinion which contradicts the sunnah of the Prophet.¹⁹

ii. No one is considered a proof (hujjah) beside the Prophet.²⁰

Having mentioned these, I shall examine in some details their application by al-Shafi‘i in his writings.

His insistence on the authoritativeness of the sunnah of the Prophet leads al-Shafi‘i to formulate a principle in order to arrive at a systematic argumentation and consistent results. As an illustration, in any given circumstances, there may be hadiths or sunnahs of the Prophet and athar from the Companions or Successors which apparently contradict each other. While one jurist may hold the sunnah of the Prophet, another may prefer the athar. The resulting opinion may differ, for each person has his own preference with regard to the evidence available. Al-Shafi‘i attempts to reconcile such inconsistency or disagreement.

According to al-Shafi‘i, when a hadith is narrated by trustworthy authority (‘adl and thiqah) and certified as coming from the Prophet, it must be accepted and cannot be rejected unless there is another hadith contradicting it.²¹ Hadiths from the Prophet are sui generis (self validating) and do not need athar to make them more sound or stronger.²² If athar of the Companions and Successors are present in a case where a sunnah of the Prophet already existed, whether they support or oppose to it, the sunnah of the Prophet must prevail.

When Athar Contradicts the Sunnah of the Prophet

As stated earlier, al-Shafi‘i emphasizes that the sunnah of the Prophet is self-validating (asl fi dhatih) and the presence of athar whether of the Companions or the Successors
will not add further strength to it. Questions arise as to what happens if athar seems to contradict the sunnah of the Prophet. In such a case, according to al-Shafi‘i, the existence of athar has no weight or significance. To a certain extent, this principle is in disagreement with Malik’s method in terms of the acceptability of established practice (al-amr ‘indana, al-amr al-mujtama‘)24 and his preference for the athar of Companions or Successors. As far as this is concerned, al-Shafi‘i devotes the whole of Ikhtilaf Malik wa al-Shafi‘i25 to disputing with al-Rabi‘ as a representative of the Maliki madhhab, criticising the latter for relating hadiths in some hadiths and abandoning or neglecting them in others.

Selected cases below will demonstrate how al-Shafi‘i sticks to his principles:

i. Touching the Penis

Does touching the penis invalidate wudu’? Al-Shafi‘i and the Malikites hold that someone who touches his penis has to perform wudu’. Their evidence is the hadith of Busrah bint Safwan, that she heard the Prophet saying to the effect:

“When one of you touches his penis, he should take wudu”.

Some others like the Hanafites27 hold a contrary view based on an unknown (majhul) hadith, as claimed by al-Shafi‘i and athar of the Companions,28 that such incident does not invalidate wudu’. So, in this case, al-Shafi‘i adheres to the hadith of Busrah instead of other athar for he holds that once a hadith is confirmed as definitely coming from the Prophet, no other saying will effect it.29

ii. Raf‘ al-Yadayn in Prayer

As far as raising hands (raf‘ al-yadayn) in prayer is concerned, al-Shafi‘i holds a view based on a hadith30 that a worshipper should raise his hands up to his shoulders three times in the first raka‘ah, and two times in other raka‘ahs. In the first raka‘ah, one should raise the hands when one starts the prayer (takbirat al-ihram), when one bends to do ruku‘ and when he rises from ruku’. For other raka‘ahs, the hands should only be raised twice i.e. when bending to ruku‘ and when rising from ruku’. So, according to al-Shafi‘i, during these parts of the prayer that only raising hands are recommended, whereas during others such as performing sujud or starting second raka‘ah.

Al-Rabi‘ expresses a contrary view that raising hands is recommended only at the beginning of the prayer, not at any other part. Here, as in many places in Ikhtilaf Malik wa al-Shafi‘i, al-Shafi‘i criticised his opponent for neglecting or abandoning hadiths narrated by Malik from the Prophet and from Ibn ‘Umar.

It was related that there was once a munazarah31 between Abu Hanifah and al-Awza‘i concerning this matter. Al-Awza‘i questioned the former as to why did he not raising his hands during the prayer, when bending down for ruku‘ and raising from it since ‘Abd Allah reported that the Prophet (s.a.w.) did so. However, Abu Hanifah
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contended that in his view there was no valid and sound hadith from the Prophet on this matter. Both parties in the munazarah cited their respective authorities. Abu Hanifah claimed that his authorities, - Hammad - ‘Alqamah - al-Aswad - Ibn Mas‘ud who narrated the hadith to the effect that the Prophet did not raise the hands except at the beginning of prayer, was better than al-Awza‘i’s.33

iii. Al-Mash ‘ala al-Khuffayn (Wiping the Boots)34

Al-Shafi‘i, based on hadiths of the Prophet and athar of Companions, holds the view that both muqim (non-traveller) and musafir (traveller) are allowed to wipe their boots (khuffayn), whereas al-Rabi‘ holds the opinion that this exception is only restricted to a musafir.35

Al-Shafi‘i argued on the authority of al-Mughirah b. Shu‘bah that in the battle of Tabuk, the Prophet went to the toilet, performed his wudu‘ and wiped his boots, and then he prayed.36 It is also reported that Anas b. Malik went took his Quba‘, urinated, did wudu‘ and wiped his boots and then performed his prayer.

iv. Performing Hajj on Behalf of Others37

A question arises whether performing hajj on behalf of others, such as father or mother is possible or not. Based on the hadith of Ibn ‘Abbas and Ibn Sirin, al-Shafi‘i declares that performing hajj on behalf of another is legitimate, because it is clearly mentioned in a hadith of Ibn ‘Abbas that the Prophet was approached by a woman asking about her father’s obligation to perform hajj but he was unable to make the journey because of old age. The reply given by the Prophet (s.a.w) was that she could perform it on his behalf.38

However, according to al-Shafi‘i ‘s opponent, this was not the practice (‘amal) in Madinah.39 He (the opponent) argues on the authority of Ibn ‘Umar that one cannot perform the hajj on behalf of another person. This statement is derived from analogical reasoning that fasting (siyam) and prayer cannot be done by others. On this basis, al-Shafi‘i ‘s opponent comes to the conclusion that this hukm is also applicable to hajj.40

To counter this, al-Shafi‘i argues that the opinion or athar of someone other than the Prophet (s.a.w) is of no weight or value and does not merit any consideration in judgements the moment it is explicitly opposing the sunnah of the Prophet.

He also advances his argument that the application of the Shari‘ah, such as in salat, siyam or others, cannot be compared to another. Therefore, according to al-Shafi‘i, it is obviously wrong for someone to make judgements prohibiting the performing of hajj on behalf of another, simply based on the grounds of analogical reasoning.41
Conclusion

Having discussed the above matters, it can be concluded that the term *sunnah* supposedly connotes the *sunnah* of the Prophet. And no other *athar* either those of Companions or Successors would overrule the authority of the *sunnah* of the Prophet particularly when it is confirmed as coming from the Prophet (s.a.w).

Notes


12. This is evident in his writings like al-Risalah, Ikhtilaf al-Hadith, Jima‘ al-‘ilm, Ikhtilaf Malik wa al-Shafī‘i and others.


15. Al-Nisa‘: 80.


22. Ibid, p. 262.


26. Ibid, p. 192. This hadith is reported by Malik - ‘Abd Allah b. Abu Bakr - ‘Urwarh - Marwan - Busrah bint Safwan. For details of the hadith of mass al-dhakar see Abu Dawud, (taharah), no. 69; Nasa‘i, (taharah) no. 117, (ghusl) 30; Muwatta’, (taharah) 58; Bukhari, (‘ilm) 53, (salah) 9, (hajj) 21; Tirmidhi, (taharah) 61.


30. Reported by Malik - Ibn Shihab - Salim - ‘Abd Allah. And the second eq *hadith* was related by Sufyan - Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri - Salim - ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar - ‘Umar. Al-Shafi‘i claims that the second *hadith* is related by many people (*bid‘at ‘ashar*), while the third *hadith* was reported by Malik - Nafi‘ - Ibn ‘Umar that he (Ibn ‘Umar) began his prayer by raising two hands up to the shoulders and rose the hands when he woke up from *ruku*.

31. There was a controversy on *raf‘ al-yadayn fi al-salat* between *ahl al-hadith* and *ahl al-‘ra‘y* in Andalusia in the time of Baqi b. Makhlad (d. 276/889A). According to *ahl al-hadith* and the Malikites in Andalusia, the *hadith* of Ibn ‘Umar (that the Prophet raised his hands in each *takbir* of the *ruku*) is considered to abrogate (*nasikh*) the *hadith* with Kufan isnads in which the Prophet did not raise his hands in the prayer except once. See Isabel Fierro, “The Introduction of Hadith in al-Andalus (2nd/8th-3rd/9th Centuries)”, Der Islam, 66 (1989), p. 83-5


