

# Gathering at Night: Yaḥyā Efendī's Letter of Invitation

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## Context

Limited information is available on how the Ottomans exchanged letters within the same city. In this regard, the following letter serves as an example of how Ottoman elites arranged their meetings.

The letter in question is included in the manuscript registered under the number 2866 in the Şehid Ali Paşa Collection of the Süleymaniye Library. This collection mostly contains fatwas from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, with occasional examples of letters. The significance of these letters lies in the fact that they are autographs, providing direct insight into the correspondence between the *‘ulemā* of the period. Yaḥyā’s letter, in particular, is unique in this regard, as no other known example of it exists.

The letter in question concerns a certain qadi of Aleppo named Yahya, who invited the Grand Mufti, along with Es‘ad Efendī, Kātīb-zāde Efendī, and ‘Azīz Efendī, to his residence. To assess the letter within its historical context, it is first necessary to identify these individuals.

I argue that this letter may have been written by Zekeriyā-zāde Yaḥyā Efendī (b. 1644) immediately after his appointment to Aleppo as judge but before he physically left Istanbul. The following considerations support this argument: first, the manuscript predominantly contains fatwas and letters from individuals active in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>1</sup> Second, Zekeriyā-zāde Yaḥyā Efendī was born in Istanbul and spent his career working in various madrasas in Istanbul until 1596, when he was appointed qadi of Aleppo in April 1596.<sup>2</sup> Given this context, it seems reasonable to focus on individuals named Yaḥyā who served as qadis of Aleppo during the period in which the manuscript was compiled, rather than the numerous other figures with the same name in Ottoman history.

In this case, two individuals emerge: Bostān-zāde Yaḥyā Efendī (b. 1639) and Zekeriyā-zāde Yaḥyā Efendī (b. 1644). Both were descendants of prominent scholarly

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, there is no colophon record in the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Şeyhi Mehmed Efendī, *Vekāyi’u’l-Fuzalâ I-IV*, 441 and Uşşâkîzâde İbrâhîm Hasîb Efendî, *Zeyl-i Şakâ’ik*, 326.

families from Istanbul and belonged to the same social circle. However, by the time Bostān-zāde Yaḥyā Efendi served as qadi of Aleppo (c. 1601),<sup>3</sup> Kātib-zāde [Zeynī] Efendī—one of the figures mentioned in the letter—had already been appointed qadi of Medina and had previously served as qadi of Mecca.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Bostān-zāde Yaḥyā Efendi and Kātib-zāde Efendī were in the same city in 1601. Moreover, no other Kātib-zāde in this period appears to have had any connection to Bostān-zāde Yaḥyā Efendī.

Regarding the other individuals mentioned in the letter, I suggest that Es‘ad and ‘Azīz *efendis* may have been the brothers Es‘ad Efendī (d. 1625) and ‘Azīz Efendī (d. 1618), who were known as *Hocā-zādes* (the sons of Sa‘ade’d-dīn Efendī (d. 1599), a renowned scholar of the period).

Let us accept that the letter was written in 1596; Es‘ad Efendī briefly served as a muderris, qadi, and *kāḍī-‘asker* between Istanbul and Edirne in this year. ‘Azīz Efendī, on the other hand, was a muderris in the madrasas of Istanbul at that time.<sup>5</sup>

Kātib-zāde [Zeynī] Efendī was serving as a muderris at the Vefa Mosque in Istanbul during this period. His career trajectory closely paralleled that of Zekeriyā-zāde Yaḥyā Efendī, as both followed similar paths as muderris. Before Yahya was appointed qadi of Aleppo in April 1596, he had served as a muderris at the Valide Atik, where his immediate predecessor was Kātib-zāde Efendī.<sup>6</sup> This career overlap provides strong grounds to suggest that the two were acquainted.

If these identifications are correct, then the unnamed grand mufti mentioned in the letter must have been Bostān-zāde Mehmed Efendī (b. 1598), who held this position at the time.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Şeyhi Mehmed Efendi, *Vekâyi’u’l-Fuzalâ I-IV*, 286-287.

<sup>4</sup> Nev‘î-zāde Atayî. *Hadâ’îku’l-Hakâ’ik Fî Tekmîleti’ş-Şakâ’ik*, 1226-1227.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 1582-1583.

<sup>6</sup> Nev‘î-zāde Atayî. *Hadâ’îku’l-Hakâ’ik Fî Tekmîleti’ş-Şakâ’ik*, 1226-1227.

<sup>7</sup> Mehmet İpşirli, "Bostanzāde Mehmed Efendi", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/bostanzade-mehmed-efendi> (accessed: 31.01.2025).

Finally, there is no available data on the recipient of the letter. However, given the other individuals mentioned in the letter, the recipient was likely a member of the Ottoman elite.

As for the significance of this brief letter, first, it highlights the social relationships among the individuals mentioned, demonstrating that they were at least close enough to gather at Yaḥyā Efendī's residence. Second, it provides insight into how the Ottoman elite in Istanbul communicated within the city, employing such short letters as informal 'invitations' to arrange meetings.

## Transcription

Benüm sulṭānum

bu gice şeyḥü'l-islām ḥazretleri ve Es'ad Efendī ve 'Azīz Efendī ve Kātib-zāde Efendī  
muḥliṣ-ḥāneyi teşrīf ideceklerdür cā'iz ise teşrīf buyrıla ve'd-du'ā  
mine'l-muḥliṣ el-fakīr Yaḥyā  
el-kādī bi-medīneti Haleb<sup>8</sup>

## Translation

My sire,

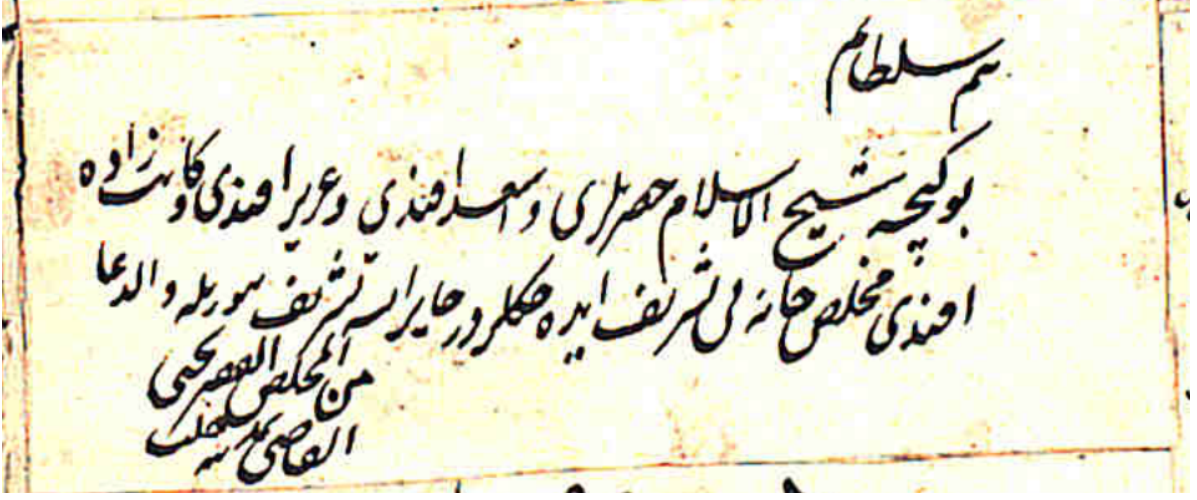
the exalted Grand Mufti, Es'ad Efendī, 'Azīz Efendī, and Kātib-zāde Efendī will honor  
by visiting [my] humble abode. If it is possible, you should honor by attending us. And  
my prayers [are for you].

Your humble servant Yaḥyā  
the judge of the city of Aleppo

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<sup>8</sup> *Mecmua*, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Şehid Ali Paşa Koleksiyonu, 2866, 215. As the manuscript in question lacks pagination, I here provide the number assigned to the page containing the letter. This pagination does not distinguish between the recto and verso sides of the folio.

## Facsimile



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