

**Qur'ān Recitation:
A Tradition of Oral Performance
and Transmission**

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Oral performance by means of recitation of the Qur'ān is at the center of Islamic corporate and individual piety. The Qur'ān is recited during the daily *ṣalāt* prayer services; nightly during the Ramadan fasting month; in special recitation sessions frequently convened in mosques, schools, and other places; and on many special occasions, such as the openings of businesses, schools, legislative sessions, at weddings, circumcisions, funerals, and other times. Individual Muslims also recite the Qur'ān, for religious merit, for reflection on its meaning, and for spiritual refreshment. The Qur'ān is recited in competitions in some regions of the Muslim world and champions earn fame and, potentially, wealth, because professional reciters of high standing can command substantial fees for their performances and their followers eagerly buy tape cassettes.

The academic study of Qur'ān recitation has been a very minor aspect of Arabic and Islamic studies in the West. Only a few treatises have been produced over the years,¹ and they have been devoted only to selected aspects of the art and based on data drawn from limited sample. Happily, there has recently been published a book-length study (Nelson 1985) which

¹Representative published works include: Bergsträsser 1932-33 (includes musical notation realized by K. Huber); Cantineau and Barbès 1942-47 (includes extensive musical notation); and ben Cheneb 1953. A relevant Ph.D. dissertation is Pacholczyk 1970. Of course, there is a vast bibliography of Qur'ān recitation in Arabic and other languages by Muslim scholars.

promises to be the standard work of the foreseeable future.²

Probably a major reason for the relative neglect of scholarship on recitation by Western scholars has been a biblical bias in scripture studies that places major emphasis on the meaning of the text as a written text. Although Jews have recited their Torah in a ritualized manner, and Eastern Christians also have maintained to this day a rich tradition of the melodious chanting of portions of the Bible in their services, Western Christians, in modern times especially, have not chanted the scriptures, except for those in traditional religious orders who include biblical passages in the observance of the daily offices.

To observe that Christian, and also Jewish as well as secular students of the Qur'ān have been influenced by a Western exegetical bias in their study of Islamic scripture is not to imply that Muslims, on the other hand, do not cultivate Qur'ānic scholarship focused on the *meaning* of the text as text. Rather, Muslims have a balanced consideration both for the Qur'ān's exegesis—which is necessary for legal as well as theological, ethical, and personal religious reasons—as well as its proper ritual recitation.³ Typical Western disregard for the latter is simply a product of blindness both to Muslim practices and the Qur'ān's special nature, which emphasizes orality. In other words, the Qur'ān resembles the Bible only superficially, and its uses within the Muslim community are quite different from the place of the Bible within either Judaism or Christianity, even though the two scriptures share centrally important convictions concerning ethical monotheism and the meaning of history.

The Oral Origin of the Qur'ān

Muḥammad experienced his first revelatory encounter while observing a spiritual retreat in a cave in Mt. Ḥirā', outside his native Mecca. The Prophet was about forty years old and for some time had taken to solitary meditation during the hot season. There are various hagiographical details, but at the core is the constant datum that Muḥammad was convinced that a voice spoke to him, commanding him to "Recite: in

² This work is based on extensive field research in Egypt, and combines the methodologies of Arabic language studies and ethnomusicology, which are essential for this topic. The layperson will gain much from reading certain sections of this book, but full comprehension requires a knowledge of Arabic. Dr. Nelson exhibits a sensitive regard for the religious context of Qur'ān recitation and does not limit her focus to technical matters. This balanced regard for the whole phenomenon of recitation makes her book an important contribution to the study of ritual performance.

³ For a comparative survey of exegesis and recitation, see Denny 1980a. An excellent study of orality, which appeared after this article had gone to press, is Graham 1987.

the name of your Lord, who created, created humankind from a blood clot; recite: and your Lord is the most noble, who taught by [the use of] the pen, taught humankind what he does not know” (96:1-5). Although the canonical position of this Sura of the Bloodclot is 96, Muslims have usually regarded its first five verses as the first revelation to Muḥammad. The opening word is *iqra'*, which in this context probably means “recite,” or “speak out,” but the root can also mean “read.” In any case, Muḥammad’s probable inability to read did not deter him from becoming the bearer of the new revelation, which did not require literacy, but was mastered by strenuous memorization and practice in oral performance. It is fitting, then, that the scripture called the *qur’ān* (“recitation”) should have been revealed with the opening command, “recite.”

There are very few details within the Qur’ānic text concerning how to recite, but the few there are have been sufficient to launch a full-fledged science of *tajwīd*, “the art of reciting the Qur’ān.”⁴ Sura 72:4 contains one of the principle specifications in the phrase, “*wa rattil il-qur’āna tartīlan*,” whose full sense is most likely “and repeat the recitation in an unhurried, distinct manner.”⁵ *Tartīl* has remained one of the fundamental elements of Qur’ān recitation, where it denotes a specific style, characterized by slow, rhythmic, non-melodic recitation, emphasizing clear and distinct enunciation according to the phonetic rules of *tajwīd*. *Tartīl* is often said to enable the reciter, and the hearers of recitation, to concentrate on the *meaning* of the text for spiritual edification.

Another Qur’ān root which has provided guidance for recitation is *t-l-w*, which occurs rather frequently in a variety of verbal forms, most of which mean to recite or read the Qur’ān or the scriptures of the Jews and Christians.⁶ *Talā /yatlū* does not in itself specify a style of recitation, at least in its Qur’ānic meaning; but the form *tilāwa*, which occurs only once in the Qur’ān, has become the most frequently used Muslim term for the recitation of the Qur’ān out loud in public. This root can mean “follow,”

⁴ The Arabic word *tajwīd* is a verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) of the active verb *jawwada*, which literally means to “do well,” but takes on the richer connotation of “to embellish,” in the case of recitation, by means of the voice. *Tajwīd* does not occur in the Qur’ān, but came later to mean the art of recitation in the sense of the phonetic rules and other related aspects. The term is used to mean more than one thing, as will be explained below.

⁵ A thorough discussion of *r-tt-l*, with copious examples, is provided in Lane 1867, I:3, 1028-29. The form *r-tt-l* also occurs in Sura 25:32, where its subject is God: *wa rattalnāhu tartīlan*, “and We have arranged it [i.e. the Qur’ān] in right order.” This interpretation is based on the context, where people had asked Muḥammad why God had not revealed the Message all at once. The commentators agree that the above-quoted phrase refers to an orderly sequential revelation.

⁶ E.g. 2:44; 2:113; 2:151; 3:113.

in the sense of conforming to the message of the Qur'ān.⁷ The word *qirā'a* also means recitation, but it does not occur in the Qur'ān, and it also may mean the matter of recitation in the sense of the text, and/or its variant readings (*qirā'āt*).⁸

Qur'ān Recitation in the Ḥadīth

Although the Qur'ān itself contains little directly pertaining to how it should be recited, the ḥadīth contain more. If the Ḥadīth are sometimes problematical with respect to ascertaining the precise historical truth about early events connected with Muḥammad and the Muslim community, there is less reason to be skeptical about recitation matter. Whether or not Ḥadīth passages about recitation actually can with confidence be traced all the way back to Muḥammad, the student of the subject at least knows that he is dealing with ancient sources concerning recitation, which most likely reflect basic facts about the practice as it existed in various regions of the early Muslim empire.

The context in which Qur'ān recitation first gained prominence was the Islamic ritual prayer-service known as the *ṣalāt*. The Qur'ān, as it emerged over the years of Muḥammad's prophetic activity, served as the prayer book for the Islamic movement. Recitation was learned directly from Muḥammad and those close companions who arose to take roles of leadership in the art (see Juynboll 1974), like Abū Mūsā al-'Ash'arī, whose reciting voice was likened by Muḥammad to a "flute" of David. Muḥammad is said to have recited very clearly and precisely, "letter by letter" (*ḥarfān ḥarfān*), while drawing out the voice over the long vowels.⁹

There is much in the Ḥadīth concerning the excellent qualities of the Qur'ān and the merits of recitation,¹⁰ but there is much less information of a specific nature covering actual performance rules and what recitation sounded like in the early Umma (Community). Many ḥadīths tell of the value of reciting such and such a verse or sura, as well as the merit

⁷ See, for example, al-Ṭabarī 1968, I:518-21, concerning Sura 2:121.

⁸ Interestingly, the *talā* root does not provide the active participle that indicates a reciter; that is expressed by *qārī'*, which form of *q-r-'* is absent from the Qur'ān. The word *qur'ān*, however, occurs 70 times in the text. Other forms of the root occur only 18 times.

⁹ The first report is from *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, in the edition with al-Nawawī's commentary (1964). The second report is recorded in Ibn Sa'd's *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*.

¹⁰ The non-specialist reader will find many ḥadīths in English in Robson 1965: II, 446-70.

of reciting large numbers of verses in a specific time frame. This latter is not without significance for the present subject, because a rapid style of recitation was developed—known as *ḥadr*—and it is performed by highly qualified reciters who want to cover a certain portion of the text rapidly, for religious merit as well as for retaining the text in memory. Concerning memorization, Muḥammad is reported to have said:

It is wrong for one to say that he has forgotten such and such a verse, for he has been made to forget. Study the Qur'ān, for it is more apt to escape from men's minds than animals'.¹¹

It is especially difficult for Muslims who do not speak Arabic as a native language to memorize the Qur'ān, and I have heard the above ḥadīth, or similar ones, recited in such countries as Indonesia, where institutes for memorization (*taḥfīz*) of the Qur'ān exist alongside recitation schools.

The Ḥadīth declare that a good voice is a prime requisite for reciting the Qur'ān: “God has not listened to anything as He does a prophet with a good voice chanting (*yataghannā*) the Qur'ān aloud.”¹² It is also reported that Muḥammad said that, “He does not belong to us who does not chant (*yataghannā*) the Qur'ān.”¹³ The meaning of *yataghannā* is interpreted by some as “being content” (*yastaghni*) with the Qur'ān, but by others, such as the Shāfi'ī ḥadīth expert al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), as “making the recitation sad, rendering it delicately. . . and embellishing the recitation with your voices,” by means of beautiful sounds (*taḥsīn al-ṣawt*).¹⁴

The question of loud versus soft recitation has been addressed in a memorable report:

He who recites the Qur'ān loudly is like him who gives *ṣadaqa* [“charity”] openly, and he who recites the Qur'ān quietly is like him who gives *ṣadaqa* secretly.¹⁵

Likewise there is a ḥadīth which tells about Muḥammad's manner of pausing in the recitation,¹⁶ an aspect that developed into the important subject of “pauses and starts” (*waqf wa ibtidā'*), which of course governs the precise meaning of each verse and the relationships between verses.

¹¹ See Robson 1965:462 (from the collection of al-Bukhārī).

¹² See Robson 1965 (al-Bukhārī).

¹³ See Robson 1965 (al-Bukhārī).

¹⁴ See al-Nawawī 1964, VI:78-79; my trans. of Nawawī's commentary.

¹⁵ See Robson 1965:464 (from the collection of al-Tirmidhī).

¹⁶ See Robson 1965:464 (al-Tirmidhī).

One very revealing ḥadīth concerning recitation style is the following:

Recite the Qur'ān with the modulations and tones of the Arabs, but avoid the modulations of those who recite love poetry and the modulations of the people of the two Books. After my death people will come who will trill when they recite the Qur'ān as is done in singing and wailing, but it will go no farther than their throats, and they and those who are charmed by their performance will be led into error.¹⁷

It appears that Muḥammad approved the old Arabian work songs and found them conformable with the spirit of the revelation; or at least, they did not suggest art song or alien religious traditions. It may be that this ḥadīth reflects a later period, when Muslims were in close contact with other than Arab influences. We are told by one source that the Qur'ān came to be recited by non-Muslims, who used popular melodies and even dance motions, with jingling ankle bracelets.¹⁸ The recitation by means of secular melodies, known as *qirā'a b'il-alḥān*, came to be outlawed by the 'Ulamā' during early 'Abbasid times (M. Talbi 1958).

Readings of the Qur'ān

There is also ḥadīth material concerning variant readings of the Qur'ān. For example, one tells of a dispute between two Muslims who recited a passage somewhat differently. Muḥammad was called as a referee and declared that both versions were correct, and that

a message was sent to me. . . to recite the Qur'ān in one mode, but when I replied that I wished matters to be made easy for my people, a second message instructed me to recite it in two modes. Again I replied that I wished matters to be made easy for my people, and a third message instructed me to recite it in seven modes. . .¹⁹

Possibly the seven modes relate to Arabic dialectal variations. The later development of seven canonical readings (*al-qirā'āt al-sab'*) is not directly related to this ḥadīth, probably, but reflects variants arising from recitation practice by different readers in different locations of the Muslim empire,

¹⁷ See Robson 1965:465 (from al-Baihaqī).

¹⁸ See AbūBakr Muḥammad in al-Ṭalibī [M. Ṭalibī] 1959:78.

¹⁹ See Robson 1965:467.

all using orthographically defective versions of a common text.²⁰

The science of variant readings (*‘ilm al-qirā’āt*) is complex and technically demanding. Most reciters know little about it, even though they may learn more than one reading by heart. The master of readings is known as a *muqri’*. Such a specialist is rather rare in the Islamic world, except in traditional centers of Qur’ānic recitation training, such as Cairo and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. In Indonesia, for example, the largest Muslim country, there are very few qualified *muqri’*s, but thousands of excellent *qāri’*s, or reciters in the sense of performance.

Several years ago, while I was doing fieldwork on recitation in Egypt, one of my informants—a venerable *muqri’*—was teaching me about the different readings of the Qur’ān. He showed me his certificate (*ijāza*) of mastery of the “Seven Readings” and emphasized that each *muqri’* had to have these by heart, so as to be able to correct mistakes, either in oral performance or in print, that might be detected anywhere. Each generation has had a certain number of such experts in readings and recitation, and it is thought to be an absolute essential for the well-being of the Muslim community. I asked this *muqri’* how he first learned the variant readings, and he said that he learned them from his own teacher. Did they use a written text? The answer was that they consulted both a written text and memory of the readings as received from a still earlier *muqri’*. The text has been transmitted orally from *muqri’* to *muqri’*, according to my informant, since the time of the Prophet. And *muqri’*s are able to furnish documents containing the chain of transmitters of the text all the way back from their teachers to the time of the seven accepted early reciter-transmitters and beyond them to the Prophet. I asked whether mistakes were ever made. The answer was yes. I asked, then, how a mistake was corrected, or a lapse of memory repaired. My informant then smiled slyly at me and patted his breast. Inside his garment he kept a folded chart of all the variant readings, which he confessed to consulting occasionally when his memory failed him. I asked whether this keeping of a written record was common, and he said that it was. But he also quickly added that the principle of oral transmission was still intact, because the student always had to prove his memorization of the variants to his master.

This story is not recounted here to disprove orality in the transmission of the Qur’ān. Rather, it specifies the kind and extent of oral transmission, which has never, in the case of the Qur’ān, been thought to have taken place entirely divorced from a written text. The original Qur’ān was certainly oral, and the specification of the precise “text”

²⁰ A clear summary of the development of the readings is al-Said 1975. This book was originally published in Arabic under the title *al-Jam‘ al-ṣawtī al-awwal li’l-Qur’ān al-karīm aw al-muṣḥaf al-murattal*. The total number of readings is ten, according to some authorities, and fourteen, according to others. But the basic seven are accepted by all.

was, from the beginning, possible only from oral sources, partly because of the defective Arabic script that greatly limited even the ʿUthmanic recension which was achieved over a generation after the death of Muḥammad and in an environment of relatively greater literacy.

Recitation, Literacy, and Orality

Consensus of scholarly opinion has in recent years concluded that the Qurʾān and Arabic poetry were both composed in the *ʿarabīya* language that required mastery of *ʿrāb*, the desinential inflection characteristic of Bedouin speech, but difficult for speakers not reared in an Arabic environment (see Rabin 1960; Zwettler 1978:160 and *passim*). Even such persons, especially in urban settings, who could perfectly understand the *ʿarabīya* of the pre-Islamic poets and of the Qurʾān could probably not thereby *speak* it in any spontaneous way as a vernacular. The ability of poets and Bedouin to speak with inflection was a mark of superiority and power.

Although the poetry of Muḥammad’s time, and before, in Arabia was composed orally, and although the poetic language was apparently the same as the language of the Qurʾān, the two genres of literature are actually quite different. Zwettler argues (1978:161) that the reason people called Muḥammad a poet was not because of the “poetic” qualities of the Qurʾān—strictly speaking, there are few—but because of the inflected language that, in its fluent productivity from the Prophet’s mouth, greatly affected hearers who were in any case highly susceptible to the power of the spoken word.

Whether or not one accepts the Muslim claim that the Qurʾān was revealed to Muḥammad by supernatural means, and not consciously composed by him, both believer and outside investigator will agree that the Qurʾānic text exhibits many distinctively oral and oral-formulaic traits, such as redundancy, frequent repetition of standard patterns and refrains in a variety of content contexts, oaths, rhyme, assonance, parables, exhortations, and other elements.²¹ But since Muḥammad’s time, the content of the Qurʾān has been learned by reading the text at least as much as by hearing it recited, indeed much more so. It is true that recitation of the Qurʾān has long been a specialization of blind persons, but they too had to learn the text from a person who had access to the written text. And modern literate blind reciters use braille in memorizing the text.

The fact that even the social and cultural environment of Muḥammad was heavily influenced by literacy, especially in urban settings, and that

²¹ For a succinct, perceptive summary of the oral-formulaic and literary elements in the Qurʾān, see Welch 1960: espec. 419-22.

Islamic civilization, like Western civilization, has been highly literate, does not imply that orality is lacking to a substantial degree. Orality and literacy have coexisted throughout Islamic history, but the orality of Muslims is not quite the same as the orality of primary oral societies never influenced by writing and texts.²² Muslim orality is, to a remarkable degree, liturgical, residing in the conviction that authentic life is made possible only in relation to sacred words. Muslim orality is also a discipline of memory: not a creative process, but a conserving and transmitting process. Even today, visitors to such a center of learning as the Azhar University Mosque in Cairo can see students pacing back and forth reading their text books in an attempt to memorize the contents before taking examinations centered in such mastery.²³ Traditional books and treatises have often been written in rhymed prose in order to make this task easier. With classical theological and legal texts, as with the fundamental sources Qur'ān and ḥadīth, the memorization process ensures that the Muslim community will be able to survive as a people of God by “writing” his commands, as it were, in the lives of the people.

In a real sense the *ḥāfiẓ al-Qur'ān*—the “memorizer” of the scripture—is a sort of person as book, but with more than mere visual letters. The person as book possesses and controls both the live oral-aural dimension of the recitation as revealed out loud, as well as the visual dimension of the Arabic script and, in most cases, the skill to reproduce that script in calligraphic form. My suggestion that the *ḥāfiẓ* somehow embodies the Qur'ān comes close to suggesting that the complete Muslim is both a receptacle and purveyor of divine power and guidance in the community. In writing this, I am reminded of Milton's words,

He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things—not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and the practice of all that which is praiseworthy (Hughes 1957:694).

Much the same thing could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of one who bears the Qur'ān, and al-Nawawī, introduced earlier, wrote an absorbing treatise, *Al-Tibyān fī ādāb ḥamalāt al-Qur'ān* (“An Exposition Concerning the Proper Procedures for those who Bear the Qur'ān”), which details not the technical matters of *tajwīd*, but the general spiritual and moral requisites as well as

²² Orality and speech act studies are increasingly important research fields. A good introduction is available in Ong 1967 and 1982. See also Graham 1987.

²³ For a field-based survey of Islamic education, particularly in Morocco, see Eickelman 1978. There is much in this perceptive essay that is relevant to the study of the place of the Qur'ān in the lives of Muslims.

the specific etiquette of living on intimate terms with the Qur'ān.²⁴

Muḥammad is believed to have been illiterate and thus unable to have composed the Qur'ān, in the sense of writing it. God is believed to be the sole “author” of the revelation, and to suggest in any manner that there was human involvement in its production is blasphemy. Without venturing far into this controversial field, it is interesting to observe that the pre-Islamic poets composed orally²⁵ and that Muḥammad, or someone, could, theoretically, have produced the Qur'ān orally, too. Mere literacy would not have been essential in the original framing of the words, although the arrangement of the Qur'ān as we have received it in the °Uthmanic recension required literacy to accomplish. To what extent Muḥammad had prepared the way for this arrangement before his death is unknown, although there are reports that he was engaged in it with his amanuensis, Zayd ibn Thābit.²⁶

But in addition to the insistence that Muḥammad's illiterate condition prevented him from composing the Qur'ān is the strong conviction among Muslims that the Qur'ān possesses an inimitable quality that is beyond any human agency to have produced.²⁷ Poets took up the challenge of imitating the Qur'ān in times after Muḥammad, but the results were mixed, depending on the point of view.

Musical Aspects

Neither Arabic literacy nor knowledge of the meaning of Arabic is absolutely required for Qur'ān recitation. On the other hand, there are many reciters who know Arabic well, but whose performance is marred by a limited range of melodic knowledge and a poor sense of the art of recitation. Even reciters who have mastered the rules of *tajwīd*, as phonetics, although their performance may be ritually correct, cannot, without some grounding in the melodic modes of recitation, rise to full mastery. Such reciters will be limited largely to the *tartīl* style, a plain, rhythmic recitation open to most who attempt it.

²⁴ I am presently engaged in translating this work. For a summary and discussion of its applications in specific Qur'ān recitation contexts in contemporary Cairo, see Denny 1980b.

²⁵ See Zwettler 1978:41-96 and *passim*, for insights about oral composition.

²⁶ On the collection of the Qur'ān after Muḥammad's death, see Welch 1960: espec. 405-9. For an unorthodox but suggestive thesis, see Burton 1977.

²⁷ This inimitability is known in Arabic as *i'jāz al-Qur'ān*. See von Grunebaum 1960.

A terse definition of *tajwīd* is “rendering the recitation beautifully,” and that requires some skill in matching rhythm and melody to the recitation, by means of at least a rudimentary training in the standard forms of Oriental music, known in Arabic as *maqām* (-*āt*), for mode(s), and *naghma* (*naghāmāt*), for melodies. When I interviewed reciters and asked them where they had learned the musical sources and ideas for their chanting, I received various answers. Most often the reciters said they had learned the melodies by ear, imitating their teachers or popular reciters heard on the media. Other reciters said they had been formally trained in music. Still others said that they got their *naghāmāt*, “melodies,” directly from God.

Qur’ān recitation, even of a melodic kind, is not strictly considered to be music, at least in the sense of art song, as was observed earlier. Nor are popular or composed melodies supposed ever to be employed in performance. But there are, of course, many musical aspects to Qur’ān chanting, and formal training in music has done much to raise the practice to a high level of sophistication and effectiveness (see Nelson 1985:ch. 5). But this dimension, however important for understanding the whole subject of recitation as performance, is not central to the oral transmission of the Qur’ān, strictly considered, even though beautiful rendering of it is a major ingredient in the Muslims’ enjoyment of their scripture and their sense of bearing it properly in the service of God.

An Overview of Some Basic Styles and Techniques of Qur’ān Recitation

Texts on recitation rules date back to at least to the fourth century of the Hijra, when a *qaṣīda* attributed to Ibn Khāqān (d.325/937-38) was composed (Boneschi 1938:51-92). This late date does not, of course, indicate that treatises on recitation performance had not existed earlier, and Ibn Khāqān himself claims to have simply transmitted the method of recitation originally taught by the seven early master readers of the Qur’ān, mentioned above. Ibn Khāqān’s ode favors slow, *tartīl* recitation over the more rapid, *ḥadr* style that had become prominent.

A major feature of the ode is the treatment of the ways in which the letters, words, and phrases of the Qur’ān are produced orally, as well as closely related matters of pauses and starts (a sort of oral “punctuation” in the absence of a punctuated text), shadings, lengthenings, assimilations and nasalizations of letters, and other things. From Ibn Khāqān’s time down to the present, such technical *tajwīd* matters would comprise the main outline of the elements of recitation. Usually, such performance-oriented manuals have not contained more than rudimentary coverage of the variant readings

of the ʿUthmanic text, although treatises on the readings, which are usually long and very detailed, more often than not cover the rules of *tajwīd*, and often also the *ādāb* or “etiquette” of *tilāwa*. The readings do not pertain directly to the manner of recitation so much as to its matter.

Tajwīd manuals are impossible to understand without the guidance of a living master of the art, both because of their characteristic terseness of expression and because of the living tradition which they preserve only in outline. To be sure, *tajwīd* manuals usually contain in their opening chapters detailed treatment of the locations of the anatomy (*makhārij al-ḥurūf*) from whence issue the correct sounds of the Arabic alphabet. But it is no easier to produce the sounds from such descriptions than it is to learn Arabic pronunciation from typical opening sections of Arabic textbooks designed for modern students in the West. One must have a native Arabic speaker, or at least sound recordings made by an expert.

In my field research in Egypt and Indonesia, I have collected many published works on *tajwīd* and related topics. Interestingly enough, I found more examples of the genre in Indonesia than in Egypt, both in the used-book market and current titles. My searches were energetic but not scientifically comprehensive, so I make no conclusive claims for my findings. It is possible that more recitation manuals are found in Indonesia because it is simply a much larger country, both in territorial expanse and in population. Egypt is very much a one-city country, because Cairo dominates in all matters, especially pertaining to Islamic scholarship and piety. Indonesia also has a dominant urban center in Jakarta, but there are also other great cities with their own strong local traditions. Surabaya, for example, has an old Arab population with its traditions of Qurʾānic scholarship, as well as intensely pious East Javanese and Madurese populations with a tradition of honored teachers of recitation.

In Egypt, *tajwīd* is taught along with the native language. The subject is properly considered to be for children, in the first instance, although there is much literature that is also aimed at mature readers. In Indonesia, on the other hand, all who enter upon the study of recitation come first as “children,” regardless of their chronological age. Recitation teachers, many of whom have studied either in Mecca or Cairo, or who have learned their art from such masters in Indonesia, develop their own favorite techniques for teaching recitation along with elementary Arabic.

It is surprising, at first, for a scholar used to the colloquial Arabic of Egypt or other Middle Eastern countries, to hear the classical Arabic spoken by Islamic teachers and their students throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The full *īrāb* and the archaic constructions seem to come from another age and ethos. This orally inspired skill enables Indonesian Muslims of the more observant variety (*santris*) to celebrate their sense of the unity of the *Umma* through their mastery of or at least basic pro-

ficiency in spoken Arabic. But the spoken Arabic is much closer to the Arabic of the Qur'ān than to any living colloquial. (When I addressed groups of students, sometimes quite young boys and girls, for example in Qur'ānic boarding schools [*pondok pesantrens*], I felt slightly embarrassed by my own Cairene colloquial, compared to the formal, correct speech of my hosts and their charges. I sounded like a Brooklynite in Oxford.) It is ironic that the spoken Arabic of Indonesians is actually closer to written Arabic. That is, orality is engaged in maintaining a tradition of formal language, because of the example and prestige of the Qur'ān.

One *tajwīd* manual that I have found both in Egypt and Indonesia will serve here as a typical example of the genre. It is published in Arabic in both countries. In Indonesia, most *tajwīd* manuals are in Indonesian, with either Arabic script or Roman transliteration for quotations from the Qur'ān, Ḥadīth, and other classical sources. My example of a *tajwīd* manual is widely known in Indonesia even among people who cannot read it in the original Arabic, because it is frequently cited in the Indonesian language manuals and seems to exert a fair influence on recitation teachers in Indonesia. It is *Hidāyat al-mustafīd fī ahkām al-tajwīd* ("Guide to the Acquiring of Knowledge in the Rules of *tajwīd*"),²⁸ by Muḥammad al-Maḥmūd al-Najjār, known as Abū Rīmāh, who was a native of Ḥamā, in western Syria. According to the author's own postscript, he wrote the work, which in a printed Egyptian edition runs to 40 pages, over a two-week period in 1316 A.H. (1898 C.E.).

Abū Rīmāh declares in his introduction that he wrote the manual in order to provide children with an approach that they could understand, declaring that there was in his day no convenient, intelligible introduction to be had. Toward this end, the treatise is composed in the form of questions and answers, like a catechism. I have been assured by recitation teachers in both Egypt and Indonesia that this "oral" approach works well with children and, indeed, with all beginners. An earlier teaching classic, the *Matn al-Jazarīya*, by the Syrian Shams al-Dīn Abū 'l-Khayr b. al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429), a poem of 107 verses in *rajaz* meter, is also frequently assigned to beginners, but it is exceedingly terse and therefore requires a

²⁸ My copies were published in Cairo, Egypt and Surabaya, Indonesia, the former by Ṣāḥib al-Maktaba al-Malūkīya wa Maṭba'atuhā, no date. One Indonesian edition was published by Maktabat Sa'd b. Nāṣir Najhān, Surabaya, East Java, 1969; another elsewhere in Indonesia, but with no place or date given. The companies that issue such manuals are often minuscule, amounting to family firms that serve very local markets. For Indonesia, see Denny 1988.

commentary.²⁹ There are still other brief rhymed *tajwīd* manuals intended for beginners, such as the *Tuḥfat al-Atfāl* (“The Gift of Children”) of Sulaymān al-Jamzūrī (b. ca. 1160’s/1750), of Ṭanṭā, Egypt. But this extremely short work of only about 60 verses is so laconic that even in one Egyptian edition there is a lengthy exposition and commentary.³⁰

The following table of contents from Abū Rīmāh’s *Hidāyat al-Mustafīd fī Aḥkām al-Tajwīd* is an epitome of the genre of brief manuals (my commentary and explication in parentheses).

- [1] Preface. (Summarizing what is to follow, and proclaiming the benefits of *tajwīd*)
- [2] Introduction. (Definition of *tajwīd*)
- [3] Section concerning the rules of *isti‘ādha* (“Seeking of refuge” by reciting “I seek refuge in God from the accursed Satan.” This formula must be uttered before reciting the Qur’ān. It is a kind of apotropaic utterance that protects the recitation from evil.) and the *basmala*. (The phrase “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate” prefaces any recitation of the Qur’ān and is used in many other contexts of both spoken and written language by pious Muslims, whether the language of discourse is Arabic or not.)
- [4] Section concerning the rules of vowelless *nūn* and nunnation (*tanwīn*). (This treats the “n” sound at the end of indefinite nouns, as well as assimilations of the *n* consonant with other letters that begin following words, such as *mīm* and *wāw*.)
- [5] Section concerning the rules of vowelless *mīm*. (The “m” sound at the end of a phrase, with no following syllable. Sometimes it is sounded in a nasal tone. At others it is assimilated with a following *mīm*, as in *wa lakum mā kasabtum* in which *wā lakum* is assimilated with *mā* as *wa lakummā*.)
- [6] Section concerning the rules of doubled *mīm* and *nūn*
- [7] Section concerning the rules of the “sun” and “moon” letters. (The former do not affect the *lām* of the definite article “al-” as in *al-Qur’ān*, whereas the latter assimilate the *lām* to the first letter of the defined word, as in *al-dīn* [written in Arabic as *al-dīn*].)
- [8] Section concerning the rules of *lām* occurring in a verb. (The moon letter rule of the definite article does not apply, e.g., the *lām* of

²⁹ One edition in my possession is titled *Matn al-Jazarīya fī ma‘rifat tajwīd āyāt al-Qur’āniya*, with commentary by Sh. Zakarīyā al-Anṣārī (Cairo: alMaṭba‘a al-Sa‘īdiyya, n.d.), 40 pp.

³⁰ This work is found widely. One edition that I located in Indonesia contains Arabic text with Javanese translation under the title *Nayl al-anfāl fī tarjamati tuḥfati ‘l-atfāl* (“The Attainment of Rich Booty in the Translation of the ‘Gift of Children’ [i.e. *Tuḥfat al-atfāl*],” Semarang: Maktabat wa Maṭba‘at Ṭā’ hā’ Fūtrā, 1381/1962). On the cover of this pamphlet-length edition is a schematic diagram of the human mouth, with the places of articulation of the Arabic letter sounds (*makhārij al-ḥurūf*) marked, a frequent feature of recitation manuals in Indonesia. The Egyptian edition with commentary is *Fathu ‘l-aqfāl bi sharḥi matni Tuḥfati ‘l-Atfāl* (“The Opening of Lock by Means of a Commentary on the Meaning of ‘Tuḥfat al-Atfāl’,” Cairo: Maktabat wa Maṭba‘at Muḥammad ‘Alī Ṣubayḥ wa Awlādihī, 1378/1959, 40 pp.).

- ja^calnā* is pronounced, and not assimilated as *ja^cannā*.)
- [9] Section concerning the rules of assimilation (*idghām*). (Various consonants assimilate with others when juxtaposed, like *tā'* and *ṭā'*, *mīm* and *nūn*, and *lām* and *rā'*.)
- [10] Section concerning the rules of lengthening (*madd*, *mudūd*) [of vowels] and their divisions. (This is the longest chapter.)
- [11] Section concerning the rules of [the letter] *rā'*. (Velarized or soft.)
- [12] Section concerning the explanation of the “concussive” letters (*hurūf qalqala*). (These letters—*bā'*, *jīm*, *qāf*, *ṭā'*, and *dāl*—are sometimes sounded in a strong manner, accented by a following neutral vowel, known in English phonetics as “schwa.” An example is the word *ḥaqq*, which, when the final consonant is silent, is sounded *ḥaqqā* rather than the written *ḥaqq*.)
- [13] Section concerning the explanation of the numbers of the articulation places of the letters (*makhārij al-ḥurūf*). (This means the locations in the anatomy of the mouth and throat which are used in producing the various sounds of the Arabic alphabet.)
- [14] Section concerning the explanation of the manner of articulating the letters (*ṣifāt al-ḥurūf*).
- [15] Section concerning the explanation of the placements of pauses. (About *waqf wa ibtidā'* (“pause and start”), mentioned earlier in this essay, which governs the meaning of recitation by oral “punctuation” of the text.)
- [16] Section concerning the explanation of forbidden matters which reciters introduce into recitation of the Qur'ān. (Includes such things as performing the recitation with popular melodies, with singing, or with exaggeration in the lengthening of vowels, and other matters considered unseemly, erroneous, or forbidden.)
- [17] Section concerning the explanation of *takbīr* [uttering *Allāhu akbar!* “God is most great”] and its occasion, its wording, its beginning, and its ending.
- [18] Closing section concerning the explanation of the positions (or precedents) of the pious forbears (*salaf*) after completing the recitation of the Qur'ān and the prayer mentioned by the Prophet, may God bless and preserve him.

Types of Qur'ān Recitation

Most recitation manuals describe three or four types of recitation. The first, known as *taḥqīq*, is a slow, precisely enunciated form of recitation, in which absolute clarity in the oral rendering of the text is paramount. *Taḥqīq* is not the kind of recitation that is offered up for public listening; rather, it is intended for full aural analysis of the text as it should be articulated. *Taḥqīq* is the basis for the best melodic chanting, because it provides a complete performance map, as it were. But *taḥqīq* is not a normal style of recitation, and is rarely heard outside teaching or practice contexts. *Tajwīd*, or more precisely, *mujawwad* recitation, with melodies, is based on *taḥqīq*.

The second style of recitation is *al-ḥadr*, a rapid form of recitation

that proceeds more quickly than the untrained ear can follow. *Ḥadr* recitation must follow the rules of *tajwīd*, but it cannot, obviously, observe all the fine points. Nevertheless, it is considered adequate, especially for individual, private, even *sotto voce* recitation. I have an acquaintance in Indonesia who can recite the entire Qur’ān on the train trip from Surabaya (Java) to Yogyakarta by means of *al-ḥadr*. The time required is around seven hours, as the train makes many stops. He has demonstrated his technique to me, and I have recorded it. Whenever he has made a mistake, he has immediately returned to the place and corrected it before continuing on in as perfect a manner as possible. (Such correction is required in all recitation.) I have recorded the *ḥadr* type of recitation also from an informant in Cairo, and I must say that on review of the tape at a rheostatically controlled slower speed I have been pressed to detect any flaws. Of course, the listener’s experience is not the same when listening to rapid recitation as it is when listening to *taḥqīq*—which is laborious—or *tartīl*, which we shall describe next, and which, in any event, has been a standard since the time of Muḥammad.

Tartīl is the type of recitation which was set forth in the Qur’ān as the manner in which the text should be recited. *Tartīl* is plain, unadorned, non-“musical” recitation. As has often been said, all *taḥqīq* is *tartīl*, but not all *tartīl* is *taḥqīq*. A prominent exponent of *tartīl* was the late Egyptian *qāri’*, Shaykh al-Ḥuṣārī, whose recordings via this style have influenced hosts of learners, because of his clear, precise, and warmly resonant recitation, which never became quite melodic, yet at the same time was anything but dull. Shaykh al-Ḥuṣārī’s style of Qur’ān chanting remains, in my mind, the highest standard of *tartīl* available in recorded form.³¹ Another prominent recitation master, who kindly provided much information and permitted me to observe his training sessions in a number of Cairo locales, limited the style among his students to *tartīl*.³² His reasons were both pedagogical and religious: *tartīl* is attainable and should be attempted by as many minimally equipped Muslims as possible. *Tartīl* is the style recommended by great recitation experts of the past, for example

³¹ Shaykh Maḥmūd Khalīl al-Ḥuṣārī published a useful book on the Qur’ān in which he focused on its recitation more in general religious than in technical terms: *Ma‘a ‘l-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (Cairo, n.p., 1380/1960; with endorsements by several leading religious scholars, including a former Shaykh of the Azhar University, Maḥmūd Shaltūt.)

³² Shaykh ‘Āmīr b. al-Sayyid b. ‘Uthmān, who was born in 1318/1900, kindly gave me two books that he had written on recitation, both of which were privately published by the author for free distribution. The first is *Kitāb fathi ‘l-qadr sharḥu tanqīhi ‘l-tahrīr* (“The Book of the Victory of the Almighty: A Commentary on the Examination of the Redaction,” Cairo 1382/1962, 252 pp.). The book is a technical treatise on the “Ten Readings,” covering fine points, sura by sura. The other book is an introduction to recitation, *Kayfa yutlā ‘l-Qur’ān* (“How the Qur’ān is Recited,” Cairo: 2nd printing, 1393/1974, 93 pp.).

the Shāfi'ī jurist and ḥadīth expert al-Nawawī, mentioned earlier. *Tartīl* is the clearest and least adorned recitation, yet at the same time it provides opportunity for the experience of the Qur'ān's sublime beauty while meditating on its message. Remember that *taḥqīq* is *tartīl*, too, but that all *tartīl* need not be so slowly or rigorously performed as in the precision-oriented subclass of the style. Again, it should not be imagined that non-*taḥqīq tartīl* is in any degree short of observing the rules of *tajwīd*. I see the issue as one of deliberate emphasis on the *manner* of the recitation in *taḥqīq*, and on the *matter* of recitation in the more spontaneous but still perfect recitation of normal *tartīl*. Once one has mastered *tartīl*, he or she can then recite the Qur'ān in a fluent manner, not consciously thinking about the techniques involved any more than Zen archers or, at a more accessible human level, bicyclists have to think about what they are doing while they are performing.

There is a fourth category of recitation, known as *tadwīr*. It is not a separate style, really, because it pertains to speed, falling between *taḥqīq* and *ḥadr*. *Tadwīr* is the preferred course and should be performed in *tartīl* style.

The rules of *tajwīd* apply to all Qur'ān recitation. *Tajwīd*, strictly speaking, is not a particular style, although some reciters use the term in two senses. The first sense is the generic sense just mentioned, namely, the rules of recitation. The second meaning of *tajwīd* is quasi-musical chanting, or cantillation of the Qur'ān which sometimes reaches extremes of florid, emotionally exciting musicality, displaying the virtuosity of performers as much as the inherent beauties of the Qur'ān. This style of recitation is properly known as *mujawwad*, and as such is perfectly acceptable. Over the centuries, there has been much written on “musical” recitation, both pro and con,³³ and we cannot rehearse the positions here except to observe that the melodic, i.e., *mujawwad*, recitation has generally been considered very desirable so long as it does not stray into mere entertainment, use popular or otherwise inappropriate tunes (such as Christian or Jewish melodies), or in any way deviate from the rules of technical *tajwīd*. Of course, the motives of both reciters and listeners must also be pure and the contexts of recitation acceptable. The Egyptian *muqri'* whose preference is

³³ Nelson has thoroughly reviewed this subject (1985:ch.3) and has provided detailed analysis of what she calls “ideal” recitation, both in *mujawwad* and non-*mujawwad* styles in substantial sections of other chapters. Ideal recitation depends on melodic dimensions of recitation, Nelson demonstrates. For insight into traditional Muslim thinking on music and religion, see Macdonald 1901, 1902. The author of this work was Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), one of the greatest Muslim thinkers. His brother Abū 'l-Futūḥ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 520/1126) was a Sufi master and heartily embraced both music and dance in the devotional life, unlike his more cautious brother, who was very circumspect in his highly qualified approval of music. One of Aḥmad's writings on the subject has been translated by Robson under the title *Tracts on Listening to Music* (1938).

for *tartīl* told me more than once that *tajwīd* in the sense of *mujawwad*, melodic recitation, usually tends too much towards musical performance and thus endangers the spiritual dimension of *tilāwat al-Qur’ān*. Remember that the root *tilāwa* is the characteristic Qur’ānic term for recitation, and that it means more than mere performance. The commentaries include among their interpretations of Sura 2:121, “Those to whom we have given the Scripture recite it with the right recitation” (*alladhīna ātaynāhumu ’l-kitāba yatlūnahu ḥaqqā tilāwatihi*), the view that *yatlūnahu ḥaqqā tilāwatihi* (“[they] recite it with the right recitation”) means obeying or conforming to the Qur’ān as much as reading or reciting it correctly.³⁴

Qur’ān and Community

Although most Muslim countries have modern educational systems, the old-style Qur’ān school (*kuttāb*; *pondok pesantren* in Indonesia) still has an important place in certain locales. Sometimes the *kuttāb* is still the main school, as in small villages. Mostly, recitation instruction is conducted after public school, whether in a mosque, religious school, or other place. In all cases, instruction possesses both an oral and a written dimension. With young children, the oral aspect is more prominent and rote repetition is the main method, reinforced by training in the alphabet and writing. A certain amount of memorization is usually required, but more common is correct recitation using an open copy of the Qur’ān. A minority of Qur’ān schools feature memorization of the entire text, as for example in Indonesia.

The motives for learning the recitation of the Qur’ān are mainly religious, but what is considered properly “religious” in Islam embraces cultural, social, aesthetic, and other dimensions as well. For example, in Indonesia, there are intense competitions (*musābaqa*) in the recitation of the Qur’ān, which begin at the local level of the neighborhood mosque or religious school, and then escalate to the town, city, provincial, and finally national levels. Every two years, a *Musābaqa Tilāwat al-Qur’ān* is held at the national level in Indonesia. This major event has been held fifteen times now. It draws enormous attention from the media and provides opportunities for outstanding reciters to become famous. The competition is called by the government a “national discipline,” in that it focuses the efforts and talents of very many people, young and old, on an activity that is believed to reinforce both religious and civic values in Indonesia.

I have attended *musābaqas* in Indonesia, both at the local and the national levels, and can attest to the enormous social, civic, cultural, and

³⁴ See note 7 for a reference in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*

spiritual power that they generate.³⁵ Young reciters, especially, find themselves highly motivated to perfect their recitation, and in the process all the religious and moral values and habits that ideally accompany any Qur'ān-related activities. Although prizes are awarded to winning contestants, the greatest rewards are intangible. The sheer beauty of the performances appears to be reward enough, both for participants and for their grateful (and in the cases of parents, relatives, teachers, and friends of contestants, *proud*) audiences.

Qur'ān recitation everywhere has the traits of cultural performance as well as universal Islamic religious activity. It is primarily because of the Qur'ān that Islam has retained a high level of orality in its piety and in its way of understanding the nature of things in a cosmos where God, when He decrees a thing, “says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is” (Sura 2:117). Only when the Qur'ān is recited does it bestow the blessings peculiar to its origin, form, and function. The sound of Qur'ānic recitation is as much a part of its meaning as the written text, but the former is more fundamental than the latter, because it embraces both. That is why Islam can never cease to preserve and transmit the Qur'ān as living recitation. Just as God creates by speech acts, so also did the Qur'ān originally create as it continues to sustain the Muslim community as guidance and blessing conveyed by the human voice.³⁶

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³⁵ See Denny 1985:33-37, for a description of the national-level *Musābaqa Tilāwatil Qur'an* held in Pontianak, West Kalimantan (Borneo) in May of 1985. The Indonesian approach to education in reading and reciting the Qur'ān in Arabic, and the institutions that sustain and promote these activities, are described in Shalihah 1983.

³⁶ Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following agencies and institutions for support of my field research on Qur'ān recitation: to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a fellowship for research in Cairo, Egypt in 1976-77; to the University of Virginia for a Summer Grant in support of that work in 1977; to the Center for Arabic Studies of the American University in Cairo for official sponsorship and generous academic hospitality; and to the American Research Center in Egypt for the use of its library and status as Honorary Fellow during my stay in Cairo. I also thank the University of Colorado's Council on Research and Creative Work for a Grant-in-Aid in support of travel to Indonesia for a preliminary field survey in 1980, and for a faculty fellowship and Grant-in-Aid for nine months' field research in East Java in 1984-85. The author is also most grateful to have been the recipient of a Fulbright Islamic Civilization Research Grant, awarded by the United States Information Service and administered by the Council on International Exchange of Scholars, for 1984-85 in Indonesia. Finally, he acknowledges the sponsorship of his research by the Islamic State University of Sunan Ampel, Surabaya, East Java, and the official permissions granted by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia), in Jakarta.

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