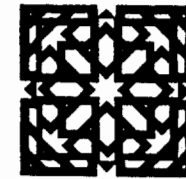


Indiana Series in Middle East Studies



Mark Tessler  
GENERAL EDITOR

Everyday Life  
*in the*  
Muslim  
Middle  
East

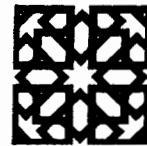


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## 23. The Sound of the Divine in Daily Life

*Kristina Nelson*

*Muslims declare that the Qur'an is proof of Muhammad's prophethood: only a divine source could explain the miraculous power and beauty of its language, for Muhammad was an illiterate merchant. Kristina Nelson writes here of the significance of the sound of the language of the recited Qur'an and of the many levels of meaning it has for listening Muslims, and explains the pervasiveness of that sound in daily life. —Eds.*

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the word of God revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad, and that it is the last of a series of revelations, including the Torah and the Gospels. The Qur'an has been compared to these holy books, but Muslims consider it to be more than a book of scripture in which is set down God's law and promise for humanity, and the history of creation. For the Qur'an must be heard, not merely read. As the word of God transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad, it is considered to be the actual sound of the Divine, the model of perfect beauty, and a testimony to the miracle of human and divine interaction. The revelation was not even written down, except in bits and pieces, until after the prophet's death, and then, the authoritative reference for the written text was the recited Qur'an as it had been memorized by the followers of the Prophet.

An indication of the primary importance of the sound is the fact that the official text distributed to each community was accompanied by a reciter. Since then, the primary source for learning the Qur'an has been its recitation. Learning the Qur'an is equated with reciting it from memory. Preschool children learn the verses of the Qur'an and the correct phrases with which to begin and end a recitation. But they memorize more than words: They are encouraged to master the sound of the Qur'an, even before they can comprehend its meaning. Throughout the Islamic world children are rewarded for memorizing the Qur'an with cash prizes, media exposure

and the respect of their communities. The child with a pleasing voice is encouraged to become a public reciter.

The actual learning process is rote memorization: the teacher recites and the student imitates. The teacher corrects until the student has it right. This tradition has great authority, for it is believed that the Prophet Muhammad was himself thus instructed by the Angel Gabriel over the twenty-year period during which the Qur'an was revealed, and that when the revelation was complete, the accuracy of the revelation was confirmed in a final review in which the Prophet was made to recite the Qur'an in full. Traditionally, the student may or may not refer to the written text, depending on the student's age and experience. But the basic premise of Quranic learning is that the written text is an aid to the oral tradition, and that to achieve full mastery, one must ultimately depend on what one hears.

To guard against the distortions and variants of oral tradition, Muslim scholars devised a code of rules which preserve the Qur'an in its oral manifestation. This code, called *tajwid*, regulates Quranic recitation in detail. Muslims believe that the sound thus preserved is that of the actual revelation; it is the language of God. Whereas the written text preserves the words, syntax, and order of materials, *tajwid* preserves the sound, from the pronunciation of each phoneme to the length and timbre or voice quality of each syllable. It is *tajwid* which differentiates Quranic Arabic from literary Arabic and gives the recitation its unique and characteristic sound. Even children have learned that, whether in the context of formal speech or informal conversation, the words of the Qur'an demand special rhythmic and pitch patterns which mark its divine origin.

The Qur'an is considered the miracle of Muhammad's prophethood. The proof of its divine source is in its inimitable euphony, eloquence, and wisdom, for Muhammad was neither poet nor sage, but an unlettered merchant. Most Westerners find the claim to the Qur'an's inimitable beauty baffling, for they have had access only to the written text, whether in translation or in the original Arabic. The ears hear more than the eyes see in the written text, and it is only in the sound that the full miracle is realized. Thus, while the meaning of each word may be translated from the Arabic, the Qur'an itself is untranslatable. In recognition of this, A. J. Arberry, an English scholar who tried to render something of the poetry, the imagery and rhythms, of the Qur'an into English, titled his work *The Koran Interpreted*. The point is made clear in comparing translations and the written Arabic text of a passage consisting of a simple list with the recitation of the same passage. What reads as a prosaic and boringly repetitive passage on who can marry whom (Qur'an 24/26) is, when recited, a lilting verse that draws one's attention to the subject with alternating rhymes, parallel syntax, and a catchy rhythm.

What does the Qur'an sound like? There are basically two sounds (and the following description should be considered a supplement to your lis-

tening), depending on whether the context is pedagogic and devotional or performative. *Murattal* is the style of recitation learned by all Muslims who want to recite correctly, that is, according to the rules of *tajwid*. Emphasis is on rendering the text correctly and clearly. The text is recited straight through, without repetition. Although differing from that of conversation, intonation is within the same range or even more restricted. The voice is pitched at conversation level or a bit higher. It is the characteristic rhythm of the text which dominates and most obviously marks this style. The sound of *murattal* has been variously described as "sing-song," soothing, restful, refreshing, and hypnotic. Except for radio broadcasting, *murattal* is usually heard only in the contexts of prayer, private devotions, and learning. *Murattal* is what most Muslims use when they recite.

What Muslims listen to, and what visitors to most Islamic communities are likely to hear, is the *mujawwad* style, which is used for public performance. In this style, clear and correct rendering of the text is taken for granted. The intent of the *mujawwad* reciter is to exploit the inherent beauty of the text with melody and artistry in order to "reach the hearts" of the listeners. This style is marked by repetition, elaborate melody, ornamentation, full voice, and, sometimes, an almost unbearable intensity. The audible release of tension on the part of listeners when the reciter comes to the end of a phrase is also characteristic of this style. Audience response may range from sighs and murmurs to weeping to ecstatic shouts.

Like all great art, recitation can be transforming, the participants touched and changed. But Quranic recitation is more than art. Indeed, Muslim scholars and reciters are careful to distinguish between recitation and "mere" music. The late Shaykh Mustafa Ismail, one of the more elaborately melodic reciters, told of a meeting with a prominent Egyptian musician who handed him a lute and asked him to sing. "I don't sing," said Shaykh Mustafa. Later the musician asked him, in effect, how he could make such sublime music when reciting and then say he does not sing. "I believe in God," said Shaykh Mustafa.

The public reciter is sensitive to what distinguishes him from the singer. He is not taught how to put text and melody together. He does not memorize melodies or set pieces. In performance, he has no back-up chorus or instrumental accompaniment. Although he may command as great a fee as the most popular singers, it is paid by a patron or group of sponsors, and his performance is free to the public. Whereas the singer may bend the text to his melodic inspiration, the reciter has no such license. He must not be carried away by melodic improvisation at the expense of the correctly rendered text. For it is not just any text, nor even just any religious text; it is the Qur'an.

The meaning of the Qur'an is not restricted to the words: the meaning transcends the words. In listening to the recited story of Joseph and his brothers, one hears not only a particular narrative but the sound of the Di-

vine, the moment of revelation. No wonder listeners have been known to weep, swoon, and even expire on hearing the recited Qur'an.

Indeed, the approved response to Quranic recitation is weeping; it is a sign that one is profoundly moved by the experience. An extensive tradition of stories attests to the affecting power of recitation, and anecdotes are continually being added to this tradition. I was told, for example, that every Christmas season the BBC used to broadcast the late Shaykh Muhammad Rif'at's recitation of the story of the birth of Jesus. An American heard five minutes of such a broadcast and "dropped everything to come to Egypt and devote himself to the study of Islam." It is said of the same reciter that, when it was time for his regular broadcast, "all of Cairo fell silent, listening, even the foreigners in restaurants." A well-respected patron of Quranic recitation told me that he used to drink heavily, and while drinking, would often listen to recitation. "My friends told me this was blasphemous [it is forbidden to drink alcohol in Islam], but gradually, I began to listen more and to drink less. Now I don't drink at all." You do not have to be Muslim to appreciate the recited Qur'an. Jews, Christians, and nonbelievers have all testified to the power of the sound. Comments of non-Muslims often acknowledge that the recitation is somehow more than music, and they include references to the character of the reciter, his piety, sincerity, or lack thereof.

Obviously not every recitation fulfills the ideal. There are reciters who misuse their skills to attract a following, whose inspiration is not the Qur'an, but financial reward and personal popularity, just as there are listeners who seek out performances for the thrill of a particular reciter's music genius. ("He is like a tightrope walker: when he goes high, you are breathless.") In some Islamic countries Quranic recitation is severely restricted melodically to preclude such transgressions, and even in Egypt there is continuing discussion over the appropriateness of the use of artistry in recitation. But none of this affects the essential orality of the Qur'an, nor its impact on the listener. Whatever the style of the recitation, the basic reality is that the Qur'an is recited.

Quranic recitation is a common, daily event, not restricted to special occasions, nor even to strictly religious contexts. You may hear a beggar, sitting with palm outstretched on a corner in a residential neighborhood, reciting in full voice. You may take a taxi to the accompaniment of recitation played on cassette tape. You may deliver your laundry, buy meat, and find that most shopkeepers along your route have their radios turned to Quranic recitation. Halfway up the block, a group of men, sitting formally on small stools which spill out of the store onto the sidewalk, are listening to a recording of recitation. They are there to honor the memory of a deceased colleague. A business is opened, and the event is marked with lights, flowers, and the sound of a reciter broadcast into the surrounding streets. At a summit conference in Tunisia, reciters representing the par-

ticipating countries perform in turn. Radio stations open and close their daily programming with recitation. Radio and television stations program recitation regularly during the course of the day. On the religious radio station in Egypt, you can listen to live performances of recitation in the context of commemorative and official events, or of religious liturgy. Or you may listen to a program that presents selections from a heritage of forty years of recordings of Quranic recitation.

Think of the characteristic sounds that define your day . . . the sound of the alarm clock, of dishes clattering, of disc jockeys and newscasters, the noise of traffic, of telephones and xerox machines and typewriters. Whereas you might be lucky enough to hear a piece of sublime beauty in a concert of religious music, or in the context of religious liturgy, or to hear even a Bach cantata in your local delicatessen, it would be a rare occasion, and it would not be the Qur'an. Imagine what it would be like to have, as an integral part of your day, a sound with all the implications and power and beauty and prestige of the recited Qur'an. There is no equivalent to that experience.