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Re-Evaluating Early Memorization of the Qurʾān in Medieval Muslim Cultures

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Abstract: In medieval Islam, traditional primary educational practices laid special emphasis on learning the Qurʾān by heart. Ideally, a pupil was primed to memorize the entirety of the Holy Book—a feat known as *khatma* or *ḥadhqa*. The successful learner would earn the prestigious sobriquet of "*ḥāfiẓ*", for which he/she was to be proudly known for the rest of his/her life. Muslim youngsters continue up to present times to memorize the Qurʾān, in conceivably more or less the same way, in traditional Qurʾānic schools. In a sense, this practice developed into a symbol of Islamic conservatism and nationalism in the face of modern non-Islamic ideological forces. Against this backdrop, recent pedagogical trends tend to lay blame on rote learning as a markedly ineffective teaching method. The pedagogical issues of contemporary educational apparatus in the Muslim countries and the traditional Qurʾānic preschools in and beyond the Muslim world are usually ascribed to persistence of "abortive" medieval practices in such institutions. However, this hypothesis and the lingering presumptions related to it are based on defective modern applications of such medieval educational practices and inaccurate conceptions of how these practices are described by the sources. Generally, the intrinsic characteristics of traditional Islamic pedagogy have been explored, albeit partly, by only a limited number of Western surveys. This paper seeks to re-evaluate the efficiency of the pedagogies related to memorizing the Qurʾān in medieval Muslim primary schools. It opens the vista to explore the extent to which such pedagogies resonated with the educational and cultural milieus of the time. To that end, the paper applies literature and theoretical analysis of classical scholars. It also examines primary and secondary Islamic texts as well as the Qurʾān, *ḥadīth* and fragments of poetry. The main finding is that, contrary to modern misconceptions and generalizations, rote memorization was intertwined in the classical Islamic pedagogy with the ability to contemplate, reflect and understand. It was a multidimensional learning experience that was set to advance a plethora of cognitive, linguistic and intellectual abilities.

Keywords: medieval Islam; primary education; scripture; rote learning; reasoning and reflection; *kuttāb*

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1. Introduction

In pre-modern Muslim societies, primary educational practices laid special emphasis on learning the Qurʾān by heart in educational institutions called *katātīb* (sing. *kuttāb*). While such institutions also taught literacy and arithmetic, their chief emphasis was on learning the Qurʾān by rote—hence they were known as "Qurʾānic schools" among later Western observers (see Landau 1986, p. 568; Günther 2005, p. 642; Kadi 2006, p. 313; Ohlander 2006, p. 641; Wagner and Lotfi 1980; Boyle 2004). Typically, a pupil was primed to memorize the entirety of the Holy Book, which consists of 114 chapters (*sūra*s) comprising 6236 verses, divided into thirty similar-sized units (*ajzāʾ*)—a feat known as *khatma* or *ḥadhqa*. Successful learners earned the prestigious sobriquet of "*ḥāfiẓ*", for which they would be proudly known for the rest of their lives. In this context, success was assayed according to the perfection of memorization (*ḥifẓ*) and precise abidance by the phonetic rules of Qurʾānic recitation, which were passed down orally through generations. However, for various

reasons (not least a weak memory), many pupils could fall behind in this aspirational vocation, and would thus satisfy themselves, and their parents, with memorizing only a part of the Holy Book. Children of lower socio-economic status had less scope to undergo this education, due to the need to undertake economic activities to support their families. However, Muslims in general aspire to learn portions of the Qurʾān by heart for liturgical purposes, i.e., performing their own prayers, and this would include all illiterate people in traditional Muslim societies.

Generally perceived to be rooted in overarching Islamic "scripturalism", traditional learning of the Qurʾān by youngsters continues to persist, in conceivably more or less the same way, in many Muslim societies today. It also developed into a symbol of Islamic conservatism and nationalism in the face of modern non-Islamic ideological forces (see Boyle 2004, pp. 39–82; Tawil 2006; Abbas 2018). Against this backdrop, recent pedagogical trends tend to lay blame on rote learning as a markedly ineffective teaching method. For example, memorization resides in the bottom of the well-known, albeit debatable, Bloom's Taxonomy of educational learning objectives as well as the revised version of the taxonomy, which was put forward by a group of scholars in 2001 (Bloom 1956; Harrow 1972; cf. Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). This paper seeks to re-evaluate the efficiency of the educational practices related to memorizing the Qurʾān in medieval Muslim primary schools. It also opens the vista to explore the extent to which such pedagogies responded to the educational and societal needs of the time. The paper indicates that a healthy memorization of the Qurʾān was highly valued and practiced in medieval Islam, which, according to many specialists, covered the period between the third/ninth and the seventh/thirteenth centuries (see Saunders 2002; Bray 2006; von Grunebaum 2010; Lambton 2013). For reasons beyond the scope of the present article, this practice started to lose its rigorous traditions afterward and tended, since the late medieval period (1250–1500 CE), to lay utmost emphasis on memorization, as such.

While we should not look in the past for ready-made answers for questions asked by present-day school systems, investigating the history of such questions could definitely help us understand them better, and thus deal with them more effectively.[1] The pedagogical issues of the contemporary educational apparatuses in many Muslim countries are usually ascribed to persistence of "abortive" medieval practices in such systems. However, this hypothesis and the lingering presumptions related to it are based on defective modern applications of such medieval educational practices and inaccurate conceptions of how these practices are described by the sources. Speaking of premodern *kuttāb* learning, Landau, for example, states:

> Since independent thinking was frowned upon, as liable to lead to the weakening of belief and disobedience, learning by rote was customary. This method was, to a large extent, self-defeating, as it meant studying difficult subject-matter in a barely understood language. Literary Arabic was hardly known even by Arab children, not to speak of non-Arab Muslims. (Landau 1986, p. 568. See also Hassim 2010, pp. 162–63)

The negative outlook on traditional Muslim primary education is further enhanced by accounts in the autobiographies of modernist Muslim thinkers, such as the leading Egyptian intellectual Taha Hussein (1889–1973 CE), and Fatima al-Mernissi (1940–2015 CE), a prominent Moroccan feminist writer, who themselves underwent that type of traditional Muslim education. However, the most critical position in this regard is perhaps represented by Bassam Tibi, an advocate of liberalism and progressivism within Islam, who writes:

> Muslim children go to the Qur'an school, as did I myself in Damascus, and learn how to read and write using the text of the Qur'an. They are too young to grasp its complex meaning, but nonetheless are compelled to memorize the text even though they often do not understand its content. This rote learning of the Qur'an is transmitted to other realms of knowledge. (Tibi 2009, pp. 49–52—esp. at p. 49)

According to some, the large-scale adoption of such a traditional teaching method led to stagnation of Muslim intellectualism. Some went so far as to blame the perceived "discomfiture" of Arab Spring of 21st century on that traditional type of education (Huff 2017, p. 171); conversely, independent, critical, and entrepreneurial thinking are usually linked with positive socio-political values as democracy and freedom of speech.[2] This tendency, however, approached the issue at stake with the *a priori* assumption that rote learning is a pedagogical malpractice—an idea that has only been a mainstream consensus among modern Western curriculum designers since the 1960s, although some outliers had criticized it for centuries.[3]

Conversely, the majority of Western studies by historians, ethnographers and anthropologists since the start of the present millennium usually refer commendably to the oral/aural characteristics of the classical Islamic pedagogies—even if practiced in modern settings (Nelson 2001; Messick 1992). Generally, the relevant anthropological studies in the West show no reservation in expressing fondness for orality and memorization as integral features of learning the Qurʾān in traditional learning contexts (Ware 2014; Boyle 2006; Nelson 2001). Rosowsky (2008) went so far as to argue that pure memorization of the Muslim Holy Book by non-Arabic speaking pupils in the UK was a main reason for them to cultivate the faculty of liturgical literacy, which in turn imparted an array of constructive learning practices.[4] Some recent writings focused on a so-called 'Islamic soundscape' that is typically generated by stylized recitals, underlining the role of somatic movements and observances related to the spiritual 'voice' in summoning deific attendance and enabling worshipful auscultation (Sabki and Hardaker 2013; Harris 2014; Hirschkind 2006; Graham and Kermani 2006; Gade 2006; Eisenlohr 2018; de Vries 2008). This is in addition to recent empirical advances in understanding traditional and non-Western forms of pedagogy.

There has been a trend of Western appreciation of the lost art of learning by rote, lamenting its abandonment for the sake of new educational fads. However, such accounts are often romanticized. Nor do they pay adequate attention to the potential adverse effects of ritualized, didactical approaches (Sahin 2018, p. 4). The critical tendency, on the other hand, projects the issues of modern-day rote learning to medieval Muslim primary teaching and fails to appreciate the peculiar features of the latter, or to see it in the wider educational context of different times and places. Generally, the intrinsic characteristics of traditional Islamic pedagogy have been explored, albeit partly, by only a very limited number of Western surveys (Gent 2018).

In what follows, the paper attempts to redefine and re-evaluate the practice of learning the Qurʾān by heart, which was far more than just repeating, after the schoolmaster, a daily morsel of the holy text until it took root in students' memory. The paper also tries to identify the nuances related to such a practice in the light of broader cultural milieus. In particular, this paper responds to claims in modern scholarship (Western and Muslim) that early Qurʾānic memorization was a mere rote exercise that had no bearing whatsoever on understanding and reasoning. Applying theoretical analysis of classical scholars and critical reading of primary and secondary Islamic texts, the paper maintains that the memorization of the Qurʾān was intertwined in the classical Islamic pedagogy with the ability to contemplate, reflect and understand. As we shall see, certain pedagogies and recitation techniques were applied to ensure a minimum of comprehension. The article investigates the divergent perspectives which existed and interacted in medieval Islamic scholastic circles regarding the memorization of the Qurʾān in (early) childhood. This is complemented by examination of the internal scholarly discourse among Muslim theorists, jurists and polymaths who debated the appropriate age in which young Muslims should memorize the Qurʾān. They also debated where to place the memorization of the Qurʾān among other subjects to be taught in childhood and adolescence.

The article then makes use of relevant classical literature to shed light on the positions taken by Muslim scholars from various intellectual tendencies (from conservative traditionists and pedagogues to liberal thinkers and philosophers) regarding the position of understanding and reflection in post-*kuttāb* education in the medieval Islamic cultures.

The main finding here is that analytical analysis and reflection were integral features of post-*kuttāb* education, and that pupils in the *kuttāb* were being prepared through 'meaningful' rote learning to fit successfully in that dynamic higher education, where they could make utmost use of the (sacred) material which they had memorized in their early years. The article also looks into how relevant medieval Muslim writings were inspired by older reports on an earlier and a more effective learning of the Qurʾān, and how they used such retrospective perceptions to make the case in their time for a healthier memorization practice. In addition to classical literary accounts, the article examines fragments of medieval poetry and excerpts from the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* as well as their interpretations by classical and modern pedagogues and theorists.

2. Medieval Perspectives on Early Memorization of the Qurʾān

Medieval Muslim pedagogues and scholars from multidisciplinary backgrounds laid much emphasis on early education, likening the child's mind to a blank slate that is naturally primed to be impressed by concepts and information—a drift already grounded in Greek philosophy. In medieval civilizations, there was no more valuable material to be taught to youngsters than holy scriptures, including the Bible and the Qurʾān in Christendom and the Islamic world respectively (Günther 2006, p. 370). In the Muslim conscience, the Qurʾān is the final and undisputable word of God; it is also the ultimate source of knowledge and impetus for its pursuit. With that in mind, medieval Muslim theorists tended to accentuate the superlative merits of learning the holy text. However, studying the Book of God was not vouched for on spiritual grounds only; medieval Muslim scholars, such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), made an interesting case for studying the Qurʾān as a foundation and an incentive for gaining literary and scientific types of knowledge—as definable in today's learning cultures.[5]

In addition to practical stimuli of the time (*infra*), the medieval perspectives on learning the Qurʾān by rote was informed by the fact that its memorization through repetition was already rooted in Ḥadīth literature. One *ḥadīth*, of a high degree of authenticity, likens the bearer of the Qurʾān to the owner of tethered camels (*ka-mathal ṣāḥib al-ibil al-muʿaqqala*): 'If the owner tends their tether regularly, he would keep them in his possession, but if he sets them free, they would [naturally] break away. [Similarly], if the one who memorizes the Qurʾān (*ṣāḥib al-qurʾān*) recites it day and night, he would remember it, but if he does not, he would forget it'(Muslim, *Kitāb faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, *bāb al-amr bi-taʿahhud al-Qurʾān*, 226 [*ḥadīth* no. 1839]; al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān, bāb istidhkār al-Qurʾān wa-taʿāhudih*, 23 [*ḥadīth* no. 5031]; al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-ṣalāh, bāb al-muʿāhada ʿalā qirāʾat al-Qurʾān*, 487 [*ḥadīth* no. 4051]; al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *Kitāb faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, 13 [*ḥadīth* no. 2032]). Another *ḥadīth* states: 'He who reads the Qurʾān and memorizes it is to be assembled [on the Day of Judgement] with the noble and righteous people [. . .]' (al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-tafsīr, bāb sūrat ʿabasa*, 80 [*ḥadīth* no. 4937]). Medieval Muslim pedagogues, such as Ibn Saḥnūn (d. 256/870) and al-Qābisī (d. 403/1012), called upon parents to urge their children to learn the Qurʾān (Ibn Saḥnūn, pp. 75–83; al-Qābisī, pp. 74–90. See also al-Ghazālī, p. 77). To that end, they usually allude to prophetic reports on the merits of learning it at an early age, where immense heavenly retribution is promised for those engaged in this enterprise, including pupils, parents, teachers, and patrons. Another rationale for early memorization of the holy text had to do with stability. A well-known *ḥadīth* states: 'The Qurʾān mixes with the flesh and blood of him who learns it at a young age. However, it keeps on running away from the memory of him who learns it at an old age [. . .],[6] even though the latter would have double the reward if he did not quit' (Ibn Saḥnūn, p. 81, as translated by Ayyad 2021, p. 6. See also al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-tafsīr*, *bāb sūrat ʿabasa*, 80 [*ḥadīth* no. 4937]; al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-ṣalāh*, *bāb al-muʿāhada ʿalā qirāʾat al-Qurʾān* [*ḥadīths* nos. 4054–5]; Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-ṣalāh*, *bāb fī thawāb qirāʾat al-Qurʾān*, [*ḥadīth* no. 1454]).

Medieval Islam displayed a multitude of intellectual drifts and an obvious divergence of perspectives on how the Qurʾān and the Sunna should be approached and put to use in jurisprudence and life issues. However, there is an unequivocal unanimity between

the sources regarding the importance of the memorization of the Qurʾān at an early age. This notion was endorsed by the actual practices—as reported by key Muslim informants. According to a detailed account by the noted Maghrebi intellectual Ibn Khaldūn on primary school curricula throughout the medieval Islamic world, and aside from some qualitative disparities, the memorization of the Qurʾān was given utmost priority (Ibn Khaldūn, ii, pp. 353–55). Ancillary subjects included reading and writing, arithmetic, and some grammar and Arabic language. While this represented the overarching ethos of medieval Islamic pedagogy, it was not utterly safe from criticism, especially in that some parents tended to send their children to the *kuttāb* at an exceedingly early age.

Sometimes, this was impelled by pietistic motives; in other cases it was a prosaic way for parents to be rid of young children for a while. In either case, the practice was criticized. Nonetheless, while criticism of the latter case was recurrent and overt (see for example Ibn al-Ḥājj, ii, pp. 315–16), that of the former was rare and reticent. The renowned jurist and founder of the Mālikī school of law imam Mālik b. Anas is reported to have denounced the incident of a seven-year child memorizing the entirety of the Holy Book, which implied he must have begun this task at the age of five or so (al-Nafarāwī, i, p. 50. See also Ayyad 2021, p. 29). The justifications put forward by early Mālikīs for their master's judgement reflected concerns of different types: a faulty pronunciation of the holy text by young children; stress being exerted on them to achieve such a task; and depriving them from the entertainment essential for their psychological and kinesthetic formation. Abū Bakr al-Abharī (d. 375/985), a Mālikī scholar, opined that imam Mālik was most probably concerned that at such a *very* early age, the child would not naturally be able to have a handle on the Qurʾānic text—let alone the rules it comprises and the wisdom it preaches. Both al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 530/1136) and Ibn Raslān (d. 844/1440), a prominent Mālikī jurist and a notable Shāfiʿite respectively, associated Mālik's judgement with the Companions' negative outlook on memorizing the Qurʾān without understanding and careful consideration (*fiqh*/*tafaqquh*) (*infra*). Al-Ṭurṭūshī even counted this 'malpractice' as one of the detested innovations (*bidaʿ*) in his time, which also implied that it was not the norm. (al-Ṭurṭūshī, pp. 68–69; Ibn Rushd al-Jadd, xviii, p. 287; al-Nafarāwī, i, p. 50; al-Kattānī, ii, p. 202). Others, such as Saʿīd b. Jubayr (d. 95/714) and Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī (d. 96/715), did not recommend encouraging young children to memorize the Qurʾān, lest they should feel bored (al-Qasṭallānī, xi, p. 309).

The most resilient, and comprehensive, position in this regard was held by the eminent judge of Seville Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī (d. 543/1148), whose position in the official judicial body (see Aʿrāb 1987, pp. 9–49; Robson 1986) did not prevent him from expressing reservation against an established Qurʾān-centred educational tradition. Ibn al-ʿArabī's main contention was that children ought to learn literacy and arithmetic as well as Arabic language before they could move on to learn the holy text. He maintained that such preliminary educational preparation was a prerequisite for them to benefit from learning the Qurʾān and appreciate its semantics (Ibn al-ʿArabī, as cited by Ibn Khaldūn, ii, p. 355. See also Ayyad 2021, pp. 27–28). In his classical book *al-ʿAwāṣim min al-qawāsim* (p. 178), Ibn al-ʿArabī urged parents to imbue their children with faith (*īmān*) and teach them literacy and arithmetic. After that, they should encourage them to learn by heart some pre-Islamic epic poetry and teach them parsing and some declension. During the second decade of life, learners were assumed to become more self-reliant, whereupon they were advised to memorize a part of the Book of God. In his *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, Ibn al-ʿArabī detailed the teaching method he would recommend for pupils, as he saw being applied in some of the eastern Islamic lands which he visited:

> The people's method in education is remarkable, according to which the child is taken to the *maktab* [where literacy is learned] once he becomes sensible. After he passes the *maktab*, he would be taught penmanship, arithmetic and Arabic language. After he masters all that, or part of it, he would be consigned to the *muqriʾ* [Qurʾān instructor] who would teach him the Book of God. He [i.e., the child] would, on a daily basis, memorize a quarter, a half, or a whole of a *ḥizb* [which is half of a thirtieth, '*juzʾ*']. When he memorizes the whole of the Qurʾān,

> he would turn to whatever God has destined of education, or he would discard it *in toto*. [...] Others of them, who are the majority, would [even] delay the memorization of the Qurʾān and learn [instead] sciences such as *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, etc. (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, iv, p. 349)

Ibn Khaldūn, while commending Ibn al-ʿArabī's above approach, indicated why it was hard to adopt under the dominant religio-cultural traditions and practices of the time. According to such traditions and practices, learning the Qurʾān by heart was given ultimate priority for the blessings it would incur upon the child and his parents, as Ibn Khaldūn explained. Because it was not always guaranteed that the pupil would commit himself to this blessed task, childhood years were thought of as the most auspicious time to do it (see also Tritton, p. 85; Graham and Kermani 2006, p. 121; Ayyad 2021, pp. 27–30). As such, childhood was utilized to teach the pupils things which they would only be able to understand in the years to come; 'only children are capable of learning a text that they do not understand now and will understand later', opined Ibn Khaldūn (as quoted and translated by Bouzoubaa 1998, p. 3. See also *infra*). The memorization of the Qurʾān in childhood was made even more urgent by the fact that in medieval times the *kuttāb* learning was the only educational stage for many individuals. However, Ibn Khaldūn (ii, p. 355) insisted that Ibn al-ʿArabī's approach would certainly be advisable in case the pupil was primed to continue education and not to quit after the *kuttāb* stage.

That being said, the tendency of some parents and teachers to attach highest importance to memorization at the expense of a minimum requirement of understanding was strongly criticized by Ibn Khaldūn. He attributed the poor Arabic of the people of the Maghreb region to them being urged to memorize the Qurʾān, in childhood, without even being taught literacy. He blamed parents and teachers for considering the memorization of the Qurʾān, as such (regardless of the children's ability to read it) as adequate primary education. This 'erroneous' practice was formerly endorsed by his traditionist fellow-citizen, al-Qābisī.[7] If children did not know reading and writing, the learning of the Qurʾān by heart would not lead them to advancing properly in linguistic skills. This, as Ibn Khaldūn believed, was because the language of the Qurʾān is so superlative that it is not comparable to any of the people's discourses, and so memorizing it would not help learners advance in linguistic skills through, for instance, coming up with comparable linguistic styles or textual fabric (Ibn Khaldūn, ii, pp. 354, 167–68. See also Baer 2001, p. 86, n. 35).

3. The Position of Reasoning and Reflection in Post-*Kuttāb* Education

In medieval Islam, learning cultures were institutionalized in the interpretation of Islamic religion, with the *mujtahid* being qualified to derive original legal rulings. In 'secular' areas of knowledge, as the scholar advanced in age and learning competences, priority was expected to be shifted from rote learning to analytical thinking. Those who were particularly gifted would be expected to make original contributions. Rote learning was not superseded altogether but relegated to an effete, rather than central, position in the educational practice. This shift, however, was not made by all medieval Muslim learners, of whom quite a wide spectrum continued for the rest of their academic lives to lay utmost emphasis on memorization. They were criticized by Ibn Khaldūn for being 'superfluously engrossed in memorization', and thus would never be able to cultivate what he called *malaka ʿilmiyya*, 'intellectual aptitude'. For Ibn Khaldūn (ii, p. 166), this form of knowledge is more superior than just awareness and understanding; it is only attainable by proficient scholars through debate and argumentation and not a listen-and-comply approach. Speaking of such 'passive' learners, i.e., those continuing to prioritize memorization for the rest of their lives, Ibn Khaldūn observed:

> They would still be reluctant to speak or argue after spending most of their lives attending academic sessions. They care much about memorization and thus end up falling short of the skill to process knowledge. When one of them claims he studied a certain branch of knowledge, he is usually found incompetent in that field once he is put in a position to argue, debate or teach [...]. Otherwise, their

> memorization is better than that of others due to their high proficiency in it, and their belief that it is the purpose of intellectual aptitude (*malaka ʿilmiyya*), but it is surely not. (Ibn Khaldūn, ii, pp. 167–68)

An old axiom cited by al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868) acclaims logical reasoning (especially when practiced in a group) as being conducive to the 'pollination' of learners' minds, in contrast to the atrophying impact of memorization:

> Wise people, those of reasoning and analysis, disapprove perfect memorization as it is usually heavily relied on by learners and because it leads to depriving the mind of developing a *sensus communis*. It is even said: 'memorization leads to eradication of the mind (*ʿadhq al-dhihn*)', because he who normally counts on memorization cannot be but an impressionistic individual. [Methodical] reasoning, on the other hand, would guide one to the sphere of certitude and the prosperity of trustfulness [...]. (al-Jāḥiẓ, p. 29. See also El Bagir 1953, p. 175; Günther 2006, p. 372; 2016, p. 75)

This view was not just held by 'liberal' thinkers such as al-Jāḥiẓ, a prominent litterateur and Muʿtazilī advocate, and Ibn Khaldūn, a notable historian and theorist; it represented the dominant position in medieval Muslim educational thought. It was shared and championed by numerous theorists from different intellectual streams, including those of the tradition (*ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*). Al-Ghazālī (*Minhāj*, p. 95), for instance, commended argumentation (*mutāraḍa*) as a most effective basis for successful studying. He also advised students in the post-*kuttāb* stage to start with grammar. This is because, he explained, it is only through understanding and proper usage of words (*alfāẓ*) that scholars could reach their academic objectives. (al-Ghazālī, *Minhāj*, pp. 85–86). Al-Zarnūjī, a notable partisan of traditional Muslim pedagogy in the sixth/twelfth century, attached great importance to awareness and comprehension: 'a learner should not write down something which he does not understand, as this causes dullness, devitalizes percipience and wastes one's time'. Al-Zarnūjī added that if the learner takes the question of understanding lightly and does not exert the needed effort in this regard time and again, he/she would get used to negligence and end up not making out even the simplest discourses. He advised students to seek to decrease their assigned work (*sabq*) so as to give way to such healthy learning practices as cogitation and reflection. He also underpinned the efficiency of such techniques as collective studying (*mudhākara*), forensics (*munāẓara*), and literary debates (*muṭāraḍa*) (al-Zarnūjī, pp. 101–6).[8]

Although Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) was considered fortunate to have received private tutoring in childhood, as a theorist he was an ardent proponent of classroom teaching. According to him, the classroom environment provides the most conducive format for learning due to 'motives for competition,[9] pomposity (*mubāhā*), debate and simulation, which are all helpful in getting their [i.e., the pupils'] manners polished, their fervour stimulated, and their good customs practiced' (Ibn Sīna, pp. 85–86. See also Mirbabaev 2000, pp. 34–35; Gilʿadi 2005, p. 115; Günther 2006, p. 380; Tritton, p. 83). This approach is strikingly reminiscent of the so-called 'maieutic method', as developed by Socrates and Plato, and its role in evoking and activating pupils' 'already-known' knowledge and skills (see Günther 2016, pp. 88, 91). Generally, the ideas put forward by early Muslim educationalists, as Günther (2006, pp. 385–86) concludes, 'displays an awareness of principal issues, an open-minded approach, and a preference for analytical reasoning'.

It should be noted in this regard that the Qurʾān itself enjoins reflection and careful consideration (*infra*). The importance of argumentation and polemics in the Muslim intellectual life was further enhanced by the rise of schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalām*) in the second-third/eighth-ninth centuries, and by foreign intellectual influences in the course of the translation movement which took place between the second half of the second/eighth and the late fourth/tenth centuries. It is interesting that argumentation and polemics were supported personally be some of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs, who wanted to immunize the Muslim entourage and personnel against the emergence of non-Islamic

disputations in the state administrative apparatus. In about 166/782, the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158–69/775–85) commissioned his courtier Timothy I, the Patriarch of the Church of the East, to translate Aristotle's *Topics*, which discusses dialectics and the art of argumentation in general (Brentjes and Morrison 2011, p. 568).

In classical Arabic usage, *jadal* (also *jidāl* and *mujādala*), which has the general meaning of 'debate', could denote a good or a bad intellectual practice—depending on the context and methods. This is already reflected in the Qurʾānic use of the term and its derivatives (Qurʾān, 2. 197; 4. 109; 6. 25; 8. 6; 11. 32, 74; 16. 111, 125; 18. 56; 22. 8; 29. 46; 40. 4, 5; 43. 58).[10] Some tended to differentiate between *jadal* (to mean learned argumentation) and each of *jidāl* and *mujādala* (connoting quarrelling). The latter two practices are detested, primarily in polemics, seeing that they are usually done not to reach the truth but to either defeat the disputant or obfuscate the issue. The term and the practices related to it were particularly demoralized by certain tendencies, as well as the public, in days when the Muslim communities were overwhelmed by non-Islamic theological and philosophical drifts. The misapplications of *jadal* further enhanced an already persistent idea that independent thinking is difficult to reconcile with a believer's compliance to the divine truth (rational vs. spiritual knowledge). Against this backdrop, al-Zarnūjī praised the *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʾa* for being guided to the truth and immunized against heresies, as a reward for them having appealed to God to guide them through the tempests of spurious doctrines. The people of aberrance (*ahl al-ḍalāla*), on the other hand, were beguiled by their minds and opinions (*raʾy*), and so they were led astray (al-Zarnūjī, p. 107).

4. The Dichotomy of Memorized versus Scripted Knowledge in Islamic Pedagogy

For an adequate appraisal of the tradition of learning the Qurʾān by heart, it needs to be related to the overall Muslim intellectual culture. Both orality and aurality are archetypal Arab-Islamic features, which are deeply grounded in pre-Islamic practices and conditions of life.[11] Illiteracy was the norm among nomads as well as townspeople in pre-Islamic Arabia, yet they achieved the apex of Arabic literary skill with their oral poetry tradition. Nevertheless, literacy and written texts were sporadic and were not an intrinsic part of life. In the all-important city of Makka, for example, only a handful of the Qurayshites knew reading and writing, which they learned from Ḥīrite and Syrian schoolmasters (see Gilliot 2012, pp. xxii–xxix). After the rise of Islam, there were only a few amongst the Prophet's comrades who were familiar with reading and writing. These were usually entrusted with scribal responsibilities, particularly after the migration to Yathrib, and the institutionalization of the first Muslim state. In such a context, knowledge (including divine knowledge) used to be transferred orally through personal meeting (or audition) between the transmitter and the seeker for knowledge. As such, audition developed into an integral procedure in the Muslim learning practice.

By the late second/eighth century, writing had been widely disseminated thanks to three discrete factors: (i) the employment of Persian scribes in the Muslim administration; (ii) the emergence of the translation movement and authorship; (iii) and introduction of paper and papermaking to the Muslim empire (see Bloom 2011, p. 677). However, even after writing gained considerable importance in the third/ninth century as a workable means to conserve and convey knowledge,[12] audition retained its position as the most reliable vehicle to diffuse Qurʾān and Ḥadīth sciences, and as a literary medium. A hybrid culture emerged which combined the spoken word with written texts in a general milieu of teaching and learning. Scholars attended study circles and sessions (*ḥalqāt* and *majālis*) of notable informants and sought their permission to be allowed to write down the knowledge they received from them, which they would then use to pass such knowledge down to others. Audition came to be critically associated with manuscript culture. Known as *wijāda*, transcribing a written text was nevertheless viewed as the least trustworthy of the eight traditional methods of obtaining and transferring knowledge (collectively referred to as *ṭuruq taḥammul al-ʿilm*), as it involved no personal contact between master and student (see Goldziher 1971, ii, 188; Robinson 2003, p. 176; Schoeler 2006, pp. 29–30; Hassim 2010,

p. 163; Ayyad 2019, pp. 99–100, 122–23). In this connection, it is interesting to know that the 1924 'official' Egyptian edition of the Qurʾān was not assembled by checking extant manuscripts against one another, but on the testimony drawn from audition as well as the literature of readings (Paret 1986). It was usually books which were checked against memories, and not the other way round.

The oral/aural learning of the Qurʾān is deeply rooted in the Muslims' perception of their holy book as a recital in Arabic, which is the literal meaning of the term Qurʾān, rather than a written volume (see the Qurʾān, 12. 2; 20. 113. See also Jones 2003, pp. 587–93; Reichl 2011, p. 23). While the first verses of the Revelation specifically highlighted the role of the pen (and subsequently writing) as a divine gift to teach humans, 'acoustic' verbs are commonly used when referring to how the divine wisdom of the Revelation is to be conveyed and received. This is in recognition of its oral composition style and its initial audiences' oral culture. Therefore, recitation came to be 'the backbone of Muslim education' (Bloom 2011, p. 671; Sahin 2018, p. 4). Even after paper and papermaking were introduced to the Muslim world in the second/eighth century, orality and memorization still had their own central place in Islamic learning culture. Having been thought of as a built-in register, memory was normally (even if surprisingly) more trusted than scripts, which at that time were habitually prone to wear and tear. For example, memorized knowledge cannot be stolen. When a burglar broke into al-Ghazālī's house, the latter begged him to take whatever he would wish for but his books, yet the thief came up with the rejoinder: 'How can you claim to know these books when by taking them, I deprive you of their contents?' Having taken this unfortunate incident as a divine lesson, al-Ghazālī decided to memorize all of his writings, a task that reportedly took him three years (see Bloom 2011, p. 675; Makdisi 1981, p. 100).

In addition, memorized knowledge was usually deemed to be of special quality. It is reported of Muṣʿab b. al-Zubayr (d. 72/691) to have said 'the finest knowledge is what is taken from scholars' mouths, for they [normally] memorize the best of what they hear and say [i.e., promulgate] the best of what they memorize' (al-Ghazālī, *Minhāj*, p. 87; al-Zarnūjī, p. 123). With this ethos, the most highly admired scholars were those with well-stocked memories and sharp recall, whereas those with mediocre ability of knowledge preservation were downgraded (see Hassim 2010, pp. 162–63; Boyle 2006). In medieval Arab-Islamic culture, the tendency to trust memory over script was so popular in certain scholastic milieus that it passed down into an established idea, which was also intermittently expressed in proverbs and poems.[13] An old Arabic aphorism states: 'a letter in your heart [i.e., memory] is more useful than a thousand [letters] in your records (*ḥarf*^{un} *fī taʾmūrik khayr*^{un} *min alf*^{in} *fī dustūrik*)' (al-Jīṭālī, i, 103)—also, in modern Egyptian vernacular: '*al-ʿilm fi-l-rās mish fi-l-kurrās*'. Verses in this regard include:

عَلَيْكَ بِالْحِفْظِ دُونَ الجَمْعِ فِي كُتُبٍ فَإِنّ للكُتُبِ آفَاتٌ تُفَرّقُهَا

فَالْمَاءُ يُغْرِقُهَا وَالنّارُ تَحْرِقُهَا وَالفَأْرُ يَخْرِقُهَا وَاللِص يَسْرِقُهَا

You would rather learn by heart than compile information in books; the latter are prone to damage. Water may drown them, fire may burn them, rats may gnaw at them and thieves may steal them.

لَيْسَ بِعِلْمٍ مَا حَوَى الْقِمَطْرُ مَا الْعِلْمُ إِلَاّ مَا حَوَاهُ الصَدرُ

Knowledge is not what a bookcase may contain; it is what is kept in one's chest.

اسْتَوْدَعَ الْعِلْمَ قِرْطَاسًا فَضَيّعَهُ وَبِئْسَ مُسْتَوْدَعُ الْعِلْمِ الْقَرَاطِيسُ

He who entrusts knowledge to parchments would be wasting it. Verily parchments are an ill-advised reservoir for knowledge.

إِذَا لَمْ تَكُنْ حَافِظًا وَاعِيًا فَجَمْعُكَ لِلْكُتُبِ لَا يَنْفَعُ

أَأَحْضُرُ بِالْجَهْلِ فِي مَجْلِسِي وَعِلْمِيَ فِي الكُتْبِ مُسْتَوْدَعُ

> If you do not know knowledge by heart and understand it, then your collection of books is of no use. Why should I attend with ignorance in [academic] gatherings, while my knowledge is reserved in books? (al-Jīṭālī, i, pp. 103–4; al-Abrāshī 1976, p. 197; Makdisi 1981, pp. 101–2)

The last verse combines both memorization and understanding. In medieval Islamic culture, memorization was contrasted with writing (based on how knowledge is to be preserved), not reasoning (based on how it is to be processed) as in today's learning culture. In other words, memorization was thought of as a mental receptacle for knowledge, not a way of dealing with it. There was a stark distinction in the Muslim learning culture between *riwāyat al-ʿilm*, 'transmission of knowledge', which is the task of the fool, and *dirāyat al-ʿilm*, 'assessment of knowledge',[14] which is the task of perceptive scholars—according to one *ḥadīth* and a saying by the Companion ʿAbd Allāh b. Masʿūd (d. 32/653).[15] This also relates to classical distinction between the so-called *ʿulamāʾ al-shams* (readers) and *ʿulamāʾ al-qamar* (memorizers)—the latter tradition enabled many blind scholars to flourish in Islamic civilizations. He who memorized what he did not understand was commonly derided as a 'donkey' carrying valuable volumes (*ka-mathali-l-ḥimāri yaḥmilu asfārā*)—as stated by the Qurʾān (62. 5. See also al-Jīṭālī, i, p. 104; al-ʿĀmilī, p. 267; al-Ghazzī, p. 269). Encouraging adherents and disciples to understand properly the wisdom embedded in the knowledge they would disseminate, the Prophet pointed out that an attentive recipient of knowledge might be more aware of its purport than the informant would be (al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-fitan*, *bāb qawl al-nabī lā tarjiʿū baʿdī kuffārā*, 8 [*ḥadīth* no. 7078]). According to the early historian Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī (d. 276/889), the phases of learning are five: silence, listening, memorization, understanding and dissemination. ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) had put forward a more sensible progression: intention, listening, understanding, memorization, practice, and dissemination (al-Abrāshī 1976, pp. 196–97). As such, learning by rote should not conflict with reasoning and reflection in the classical Islamic paradigm, rather it should service them.[16] As Boyle (2004, p. 85) puts it: 'memorization was the first step in a lifelong enterprise of seeking understanding and thus knowledge. It did not seek to replace understanding with dogmatism, but to plant the seeds that would lead to understanding'.

Despite his aforementioned criticism of paying utmost attention to memorization, as an end in itself, al-Jāḥiẓ acknowledged that memorization and reasoning complement one another. Directly after his above cited criticism of 'perfecting' memorization, he stated that: 'If the learner neglects contemplation, meanings would not flow smoothly into his mind, and if he neglects memorization, meanings would not attach firmly to his heart [here to mean 'mind'] and their sojourn in his chest would be momentary [. . .]. There is no excellence [in learning] without these two skills' (al-Jāḥiẓ, pp. 29–30. See also Günther 2006, p. 372; 2016, p. 75). In this connection, al-Jāḥiẓ (like many other Muslim scholars from different tendencies) proceeded to advise students on successful memorization and the most suitable times and ambience for study and leisure (al-Jāḥiẓ, p. 30. See also al-Zarnūjī, pp. 100–1; Günther 2016, pp. 85–86). Al-Ghazālī even spoke of recommended food and drinks as well as dietary (and other living) habits that are useful for memorization, and those causing forgetfulness (al-Ghazālī, *Minhāj*, pp. 90–94. See also al-Zarnūjī, pp. 96–98, 126–27, 130–33; Ibn Jamāʿa, pp. 90–95; Makdisi 1981, p. 102).[17] The writings of al-Ghazālī in this regard inspired later scholars, such as al-Zarnūjī and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274).

5. Prompts for (Early) Memorization of the Qurʾān

Besides the spiritual merits of Qurʾān memorization and the divine rewards promised for those who achieve it, there were indeed material reasons that enhanced this learning practice in early Islam—not the least commanding of which was the relative scarcity of manuscripts of the Qurʾān due to the rarity of scribes and writing material and commen-

surate expense of illuminated manuscripts. Some believed that by their memorization of the Qurʾān they would help fulfill a divine will: 'We have, without doubt, sent down the Revelation; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)' (Qurʾān 15. 9). Also, in early and medieval Islam the memorization of the Qurʾān was regarded a prerequisite for post-*kuttāb* learning, as early Muslim scholars did not reportedly teach *ḥadīth* or *fiqh* unless the learner had already memorized the Holy Book (al-ʿĀmilī, p. 263; al-Ghazzī, p. 263; Graham 1993, pp. 105–6). The overwhelming majority of jurisconsults agree that the Qurʾān is the first thing a student should start with (see Ibn Jamāʿa, p. 112).

In practice, the memorization of the Qurʾān proved to be almost indispensable for learners of *fiqh* and theology; future *faqīh*s and theologians would definitely need to cite Qurʾānic verses to defend their positions and win legal polemics—especially in that a scripted copy may not be always available. In that case, having the Qurʾān memorized allowed scholars to recognize the prooftexts that were to be used in law or theology. In addition, they were required to be as quick and witty as possible in citing apt Qurʾānic verses in debates, which were germane to the issue at stake. The best way to do so was to retrieve it from memory, a mental record that is best charged with information at an early age. The same was true for learners of grammar and literature, as the Qurʾān became the normative resource for Arabic language studies. There were other metaphysical and material reasons for memorizing the Qurʾān. For example, it would be expensive and/or cumbersome for everyone to have or carry a hand-written manuscript of the Holy Book everywhere (which also required ritual purity etc.). In addition, books in general were expensive, and the prodigious and well-trained memories of Muslim scholars enabled them to memorize whole texts that they could subsequently analyse.

In the same vein, it was also standard in the late medieval period in Egypt and Syria, for example, for young students to memorize a short textbook in each of the standard fields, such as *Alfiyyat Ibn Mālik* in grammar, *Alfiyyat al-ʿIrāqī* in Ḥadīth criticism, *Minhāj al-ṭālibīn* on Shāfiʿī law, and then 'present' these texts in an oral exam to teachers and acquire a certificate for '*ʿarḍ*'. The idea was that, having memorized such materials, the student would go on to understand them in detail later (Stewart 2004). The tendency to take advantage of childhood years in learning by heart material that is to be scrutinized and used in later life stages was apparently common in medieval Islamic cultures. Speaking of the tendency of some parents to unduly encourage their children to learn nomadic pre-Islamic poetry by heart, al-Qābisī (p. 123) remarked that this was done so that the latter would commit their memorized poetic material to analysis and contemplation in later stages of their career. He, however, did not recommend laying much emphasis on that at the expense of learning the Qurʾān. While criticizing rote learning, the above Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī mentioned that he learned the Qurʾān while he was only nine years old (Aʿrāb 1987, pp. 186–87), and admitted that he later benefitted from things he learned by rote in childhood and adolescence:

> Having been a naïve youth by then, I used to gather of these piles of knowledge what can and cannot be stocked, while destiny caches them in my possession so that I would make use of them [one day] in responding to the atheists and paving the way to setting the principles of Islam (*uṣūl al-dīn*). (Aʿrāb 1987, pp. 190–91)

This approach is best described by al-Ghazālī who remarked:

> [The] creed ought to be taught to a boy in the earliest childhood, so that he may hold it absolutely in memory. Thereafter, the meaning of it will keep gradually unfolding itself to him, point by point, as he grows older. So, first, is the committing to memory; then understanding; then belief and certainty and acceptance. (al-Ghazālī as quoted and translated by Chamberlin 1975, p. 148. See also Wagner 1983, p. 185; Boyle 2004, pp. 84–85)

Against this background, the early memorization of the Qurʾān was highly advisable, for it would mean a less onerous task and a steadier record. Among the skills which are suggested by Ibn Sīnā to be gained by a young learner due to early memorization of

the Qurʾān are more competent use of expressive language, greater familiarity with life issues, and improved intellectual aptitude. Other things to be taught to youngsters by the Qurʾān, according to him, include morals, archetypal traditions, ethics, and good conduct. As already hinted, memorization of the Qurʾān was advised not only by conservative traditionists but also thinkers and philosophers. There was apparently a common consensus in medieval Islam that the teaching method to be applied for primary education should revolve around learning by rote not only for the Qurʾān, but also for the rudiments of basic types of knowledge, which together were indispensable for the making of future scholars at that time.

In this regard, the Brethren of Purity, or Ikhwān al-Ṣafā (*ca*. third-fourth/ninth-tenth centuries), stated that after *kuttāb* learning the pupil would no longer need the tools, which he had used to memorize material, including the Qurʾān. It was time in the higher educational stages for that memorized material to be analysed and put to proper use (*Rasāʾil ikhwān al-ṣafā*, iii, p. 60). In this sense, memorization was thought of as an essential loading process and memory was considered a reservoir of 'raw' material that would be utilized at different stages and in different ways throughout one's life. This is reminiscent of Michael Wood's discerning comment on Shakespeare and the making of his intellectual character and oratorical brilliance:

> Shakespeare was the product of a memorizing culture in which huge chunks of literature were learned off by heart. Today we no longer live in such a culture, but learning by rote offers many rewards, not least a sense of poetry, rhythm and refinement—a feel for heightened language. It forms habits of mind too: what they called the 'art of memory' was an invaluable tool when it came to composing speeches. (Wood 2003, p. 52)

6. The Position of 'Understanding' in Learning the Qurʾān by Heart

In medieval Islam, as in other cultures, childhood was looked upon as the most opportune stage of life to start education, but there were some debates on preferable ages for beginning education and for escalating its various stages. The primary school age in medieval Muslim communities varied across places and times, as well as socio-cultural parameters. According to one *ḥadīth* quoted by al-Ghazālī, but whose chain of transmitters is ranked faulty by later specialists, disciplining/cultivation (*taʾdīb*) should begin once the child attains the age of six years—Ibn Ḥibbān's narration of the same *ḥadīth* speaks of 'seven' years' (*wa-addibūhu li-sabʿ*) (al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, p. 681. See also Goldziher 1912, p. 200). Ibn al-Ḥājj al-ʿAbdarī advised parents in his time to emulate the early Muslim generations in sending their children to the *maktab* to learn the Qurʾān, at the age of seven—and not any earlier (Ibn al-Ḥājj, ii, pp. 315–16. See also Tritton, p. 82; Wagner and Lotfi 1980, p. 239). This, as he and others pointed out, was decided based on a well-known *ḥadīth* designating the age of seven as the one to train children on basic religious duties—most particularly *ṣalāh*. This in turn was based on the capability of an average child to understand and adopt responsibilities (Ibn al-Ḥājj, ii, pp. 315–16).

Ibn al-Ḥājj (ii, pp. 315–16) and others elaborated on the centrality of understanding in the education process and on how pointless it would be if children were sent to schools before their ability to understand was established. Commenting on *ḥadīth* no. 1485 in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (*Kitāb al-zakāh*, *bāb akhdh ṣadaqat al-tamr*, 57), al-Damāmīnī (d. *ca*. 827/1424) explained that when children are told not to do something, they should be told why, so that they would get used to *ʿilm al-sharīʿa* (which is based on obedience as much as on reason) (see al-Damāmīnī, iii, p. 483. See also al-Kattānī, ii, p. 201). It is telling, in this connection, to note that the *ḥadīth*s cited by those who call for early memorization of the Qurʾān usually use such terms as 'learn' (*taʿallam*) or 'read' (*qaraʾa*) rather than memorize (*ḥafiẓa*). A well-known *ḥadīth* reads: 'The best among you is he who learns (*taʿallam*) the Qurʾān and teaches it to others' (al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, *bāb khayrukum man taʿallam al-Qurʾān wa-ʿallamah*, 21 [*ḥadīth* no. 5027]). Learning the meaning of the Qurʾānic verses and the wisdom they preach was a priority for the first ever learners of the Holy

Book, i.e., the Companions. It is reported of ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar (d. 74/693–4) to have stated:

> We lived for a while [i.e., in the time of the Prophet] where one of us was taught faith before the Qurʾān; when a verse was revealed, we tended to learn what it allows and disallows as well as the resultant obligations. Nowadays, however, a 'man' would read out [presumably from memory] the entirety of the Holy Book, while distinguishing none of its commands, warnings, or obligations. He just throws its words as he would do with the *daqal*, 'dried dates of the lowest grade'. (al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-ṣalāh*, *bāb al-bayān innahu innamā qīl yaʾummuhum aqraʾuhum*, 739, [*ḥadīth* no. 5290]; al-Ḥākim, *Kitāb al-īmān* [*ḥadīth* no. 101]; al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, p. 325; al-Suyūṭī, p. 224)

A well-known *ḥadīth* commends any group of believers who 'gather in the mosque to recite the Book of God and study it collectively as well as carefully (*yatadārasūnahu baynahum*)'. Those are to be rewarded abundantly: 'Mercy would surely overwhelm them, tranquility would descend upon them, angels would escort them and God would mention them in heaven' (Muslim, *Kitāb al-dhikr wa-l-duʿāʾ*, *bāb faḍl al-ijtimāʿ ʿalā tilāwat al-Qurʾān*, 38 [*ḥadīth* no. 6853]; Abū Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-ṣalāh*, *bāb fī thawāb qirāʾat al-Qurʾān*, [*ḥadīth* no. 1455]). More importantly, the necessity to mull over the meanings and connotations of the holy text and its syntactic as well as semantic construction is accentuated by the Qurʾān itself in numerous positions. The Qurʾān is self-described as 'a Scripture that We have revealed unto you, full of blessing, that they may ponder its revelations, and that men of understanding may reflect' (Qurʾān, 38. 29). Listeners of the Holy Book are recurrently asked to receive its wisdom with attentive senses (Qurʾān, 3. 7; 7. 204; 22. 46; 41. 44; 69. 12. See also Sahin 2018, pp. 3–4). Devious and heedless individuals, on the other hand, are said to 'read the Qurʾān without it going past their larynges [i.e., not reaching their minds and hearts]' (al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, *bāb ithm man rāʾā bi-qirāʾat al-Qurʾān*, 36 [*ḥadīths* nos. 5057–8]; Muslim, *Kitāb al-zakāh*, *bāb dhikr al-khawārij wa-ṣifātihim*, 143 [*ḥadīth* no. 2451]; al-Bayhaqī, *Kitāb al-ṣalāh*, *bāb man istaḥabba al-ikthār min al-rukūʿ wa-l-sujūd*, *ḥadīths* nos. 4688–9. See also al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ*, pp. 324–25).

In *kuttāb*, the learning of the Qurʾān by heart ought to be complemented with a minimum level of comprehension that is to be enhanced and built on in the higher educational phases (*supra*). George Makdisi (1981, p. 103.) already referred to the fact that in the medieval Islamic *madrasas* (a post-*kuttāb* stage), memorization was 'not meant to be unreasoning rote learning'; rather, it had to be 'reinforced with intelligence and understanding' (see also Tan 2011, pp. 119–20; Leung 2008, p. 144). Any valid memorization of the Qurʾān entailed precise knowledge of pausing (*tawqīf*), which would in turn necessitate proper understanding of the text, especially in that the older *muṣḥafs*, 'Qurʾānic manuscripts', did not include the punctuation marks one can find in today's copies. Memorization is also quicker and more stable when based on understanding.

In their manuals on schoolmasters' rules of conduct, North African Mālikī pundits, such as Ibn Saḥnūn (p. 106) and al-Qābisī (pp. 112, 133), insisted that pupils should not be moved to the next *sūra* before their memorization of the preceding one is rounded off with a precise awareness of desinential inflection and orthography, unless a parental waiver of the latter requisite was granted (see also Ayyad 2021, p. 28). Precise awareness of orthography was stipulated to guarantee correct enunciation of the Scripture, while syntax and parsing have to do with a keen comprehension of its verses, especially in that parsing entailed breaking each Qurʾānic verse down into its component parts of speech with an explanation of the form, function, and syntactical relationship of each part. To substantiate the idea, Ibn Saḥnūn (p. 80) reported a *ḥadīth* stating that: 'He who reads the Qurʾān with [correct] syntax will gain the reward of a martyr'. The authenticity of this *ḥadīth* is doubted, but its existence in pedagogical Arabic literature is telling. The above techniques were also applied to ensure that the sacred knowledge is preserved in the right form so that it could be understood and analysed in due course (i.e., when the learner became qualified to do so). In all cases, the necessity to understand and analyse the Qurʾānic substance was

well-established in Muslim pedagogical thought, especially in that it was agreed that many of its verses could not be taken *prima facie* (al-Qābisī, p. 117).

Therefore, a 'sound' memorization of the Qurʾān involved understanding, and certain techniques were advised by specialists to ensure that. Of course, repetition was the most basic procedure (see al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, *bāb baʿth Abī Mūsā wa-muʿādh ilā al-Yaman*, 61 [*ḥadīth*s nos. 4341, 4344]). However, a healthy memorization practice is based on attentive recitation which, in turn, is based on understanding. Schoolteachers were repeatedly called upon by al-Qābisī et al. to apply a thoughtful recitation of the Qurʾān so as to give pupils the chance to understand and make out the grandeur of the holy text. Scholars in general recommend two particular types of recitation: *taḥqīq* and *tartīl*. While *taḥqīq* serves as an exercise for the tongue and refinement of phonation, *tartīl*, an approximate equivalent to 'hymnody', best supports contemplation, reflection and extrapolation (al-Suyūṭī, p. 225).

According to medieval Muslim specialists, the least perfection of *tartīl* entails emphatic pronunciation of words and articulation of letters/sounds so that no two consecutive ones are assimilated (i.e., not to make a sound seem more like another in the same or the next word). Also, a reciter should cut the text into sentences and employ a proper pause between successive ones, so as to give himself a chance to take breath and understand the meaning. The highest perfection, on the other hand, is to intonate the verses according to meaning; i.e., the reciter should seem to be threatening [someone] if the verse he reads includes minatory terms. Likewise, his voice should convey glory if the verse includes honorific expressions (al-Zarkashī, p. 302; al-Bayhaqī, ii, 76; al-Suyūṭī, p. 225). In all cases, scholars agree that the holy text should be recited in a way that is supportive of understanding and contemplation. As al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) explained, this would be only obtainable by having the heart/mind fully absorbed in the meaning of what is being recited and by pondering on the commands and interdictions it includes (al-Suyūṭī, p. 225). Also, loud and collective recitation, as in *kuttāb* learning, is better than murmuring, because it kindles the reader's presence of mind and assimilative capacity.

7. Conclusions

In medieval Islam, the importance of learning the Qurʾān by heart in childhood was almost unanimously agreed upon. Concomitant criticisms were limited and fortuitous—mainly honing in on the tendency of some families to send their children to the *kuttāb* at an 'exceedingly' early age. Only a few voices opined that the memorization of the Qurʾān should be delayed until pupils were of sufficient cognitive and emotional maturity to engage with the divine discourse of Scripture. However, such reservations came from a different place to modern criticisms of the long-established Muslim learning tradition—which still survives, albeit in variant forms. The majority of recent critiques tend to view it in a negative light in comparison with modern pedagogical trends and assumptions, which lay emphasis on such dynamic learning skills as critical, independent and entrepreneurial thinking. However, these critiques are informed by faulty modern applications of the classical Islamic pedagogical tradition of learning the Qurʾān by rote. While a *prima facie* look at Muslim sources may enhance the negative impression, a closer reading of such sources reveals a more nuanced and multifaceted picture. Inaccurate modern perceptions of the reality of traditional Islamic pedagogy skew recent criticisms and admirations alike.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this peculiar Islamic learning tradition, we should not see it in isolation from other historical cultural considerations. The memorization of the Qurʾān by primary-age pupils was meant to fit within a larger picture, and resonate with further educational and spiritual aspects. In terms of educational progress, early learning of the Qurʾān by heart should not be taken to inevitably represent renunciation of reasoning and reflection, as insinuated by today's dominant educational paradigm, any more than the rote learning of the alphabet or nursery rhymes. Rote learning was intended as a primer for the subsequent and sequential development of higher analytical learning skills in later educational stages. Early learning by rote was a way of conservation rather

than of studying, and childhood was seen as the most opportune stage of life to undertake memorization due to biological cognitive features (i.e., the increased capacity of children to learn and retain linguistic information). Memory was highly trusted in a culture whose relationship with orality and aurality harked back to pre-Islamic times. The knowledge that was gathered in childhood was set to be processed, analysed, and utilized in later learning stages. As such, learning by rote was meant to be in the service of reasoning and reflection, nor to substitute them, as some erroneously believed.

Such being the case, the early learning of the Qurʾān by rote ought to be administered in an effective way—a visibly absent procedure in most of today's Qurʾānic schools. In particular, it should involve initial processing (e.g., valuing and classifying) of the knowledge memorized, to make it easy to retrieve in the right time and context. In this connection, schoolmasters were urged to employ whatever method would help pupils understand the holy text, and the stipulation to teach the desinential inflection and parsing of each chapter and verse should be viewed in this context. Combined with the techniques mentioned above for a meditative recitation, these should have enabled initial understanding of the Qurʾānic substance. Unlike the case in most modern Qurʾānic schools, in medieval primary schools numerous techniques were applied to satisfy the more rudimentary requirements of understanding, which were to be expounded in subsequent educational stages. Such learning places, however basic, seemed well-equipped to provide the young learners with adequate mental preparation, especially in that the medieval *kuttāb*s often taught much more than most modern *kuttāb*s do, including math, poetry, and so on. Also, those who continued education after the *kuttāb* stage, particularly those who specialized in religious disciplines, were helped by a plethora of vigorous learning practices to apply contemplation to the knowledge they memorized in their childhood, including the Qurʾān.

Now, the mental life of individuals is inseparable from their social lives; indeed, the former is largely dictated by the latter. Until recent years, students had to memorize a surplus of things, some were essential for their language and literary formation, e.g., fragments of poetry and prose; others were vital for their socio-cultural awareness, e.g., anthems, national poems and songs; and yet others were important for educational progress, e.g., multiplication tables, the periodic table of chemical elements, as well as basic principles and equations in mathematics, physics and chemistry, etc. However, while memorization is essential for the learning process, it should not represent its terminal point. In the religion-based societies of the medieval Islamic world, the Holy Scripture, *per se*, taught youngsters the ethics and morals that would help them become fully integrated members of the community—which is one chief goal of education in any time and place.

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Notes

1 As Albert Reble rightly remarks: 'Today's issues in education are often rooted deeply in the historical grounds of the past' (see Reble 2004, pp. 14–15—as translated by Günther 2006, pp. 386–87).

2 On the necessity of a reconciliation between Islam and modern education (as well as science and reasoning), see (Pickthall 1927).

3 Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), for instance, strongly criticized rote learning, arguing that there is no knowledge with memorization: '*savoir par coeur n'est pas savoir*'. See (Appelbaum 2007, p. 50).

4 The same judgment is also maintained by Hoechner (2018) based on a recent field survey which he conducted in Northern Nigeria in 2018.

5 In this connection, see (Bloom 2011; Dallal 2004; Livingston 2018).

6 On the importance of receiving education at a young age, see also al-Jīṭālī, i, pp. 102–3.

[7] According to Ibn Saḥnūn (p. 100), however, the tutor should teach the students writing (*katb*) and make them compete in that.

[8] On such methodologies of learning, see (Makdisi 1981, pp. 99–149; cf. Tibi 2005, pp. 168–73) (esp. at p. 173); (Tibi 2009, p. 50). It is interesting, in this regard, to make mention of Abū Ḥanīfa's statement that he benefitted a lot from the jurisprudential debates in which he was involved with others while working as a mercer in Kūfa.

[9] On how competition could facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, see also al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, pp. 177–82.

[10] There is also a separate chapter (*sūra* no. 58) that is named 'al-Mujādala' (the Debate) or 'al-Mujādila' (the Female Disputant).

[11] For examples of prodigious memories, see (Bloom 2011, pp. 675–76; Makdisi 1981, pp. 100–1; al-Abrāshī 1976, pp. 207–8; al-Kattānī, ii, p. 202; al-Qasṭallānī, xi, p. 309).

[12] On the rising importance of books and the written word in medieval Muslim culture, see (al-Jīṭālī, i, pp. 104–5; Roxburgh 2006, pp. 114–17; Makdisi 1981, pp. 104–5).

[13] For an interesting comparison between the importance of the pen/book and that of the tongue/memory, see al-Jāḥiẓ, pp. 27–28.

[14] This same dichotomy is otherwise referred to as *ʿilm al-riwāya* vs. *ʿilm al-dirāya*.

[15] The same viewpoint was also held by the notable Mālikī jurisconsult Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 463/1071), as quoted by (Hassim 2010, p. 166).

[16] On memorization, see for example, (Goitein 1971, pp. 176, 182; Gilʿadi 1992, pp. 55–56).

[17] On perceived reasons for memorization and those for oblivion, see also (Maʿlūm 1993, pp. 213–19). Beside times, other scholars wrote about the best spatial settings for memorization. See (Ibn Jamāʿa, pp. 89–89; al-ʿĀmilī, p. 265; al-Ghazzī, pp. 266–67).

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