

The Holy Qur'an: The Historical Bridge Between Oral and Written Traditions

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Abstract

The Holy Qur'an is the divine text of over one fifth of the world's population and is the guiding book of the Muslim faith. Though a written manuscript similar in textual length to the New Testament, its origins are deeply rooted in an oral tradition and is, up to the present day, rote-memorised and recited in its original Arabic form in its entirety by countless followers, as well as being undisputedly, the most recited text on the planet.

Yet outside Muslim communities living in the west and the Islamic world, little is known about this book. In an era where there is much scepticism in the west about cultures and traditions within the Islamic world, an understanding of the historical importance of the Qur'anic scripture is needed.

This paper focuses on the importance of The Holy Qur'an as a work of literature in a global context, its significance from a historical perspective, its diversity of content and its relevance as a key transitory mechanism in transforming human civilisation from an oral to a written tradition.

Short Description

An examination of The Holy Qur'an and its historical role in transforming human civilisation from an oral to a written tradition.

Keywords

Qur'an

Islam

Oral

Written

Arabic

Introduction

The Qur'an is believed by its followers to be a divinely revealed scripture. This revelation is thought to have taken place between the Archangel Gabriel, God's emissary for revelation, and the Prophet Muhammad, over a period of twenty three years between 610 and 632. The Qur'an can be analysed from many different aspects - as a work of literature, as an oral tradition, as a published work, as a source for global change (Randeree, 2009a), by comparative analysis with other Abrahamic religious texts, with regards to its breadth of subject matter, from the perspective of its linguistic and lexical importance, with a focus on sciences emanating from its subject matter, as a preserved scripture, as a poetic manuscript and as a source for societal change (Randeree, 2008a). The Qur'an has been regarded by Muslims throughout its history, as being the primary source of theology and law and today forms the constitution of many Muslim nations, including Arabian Gulf countries as well as Iran, Pakistan and others (Randeree and Malik, 2006a: Randeree and Malik, 2006b: Randeree and Malik, 2008: Randeree, 2008b: Randeree, 2008c). This paper aims to understand many of these issues, with a focal point for understanding the universal importance of the Qur'an as an unchanging book, an oral recitation and a literary masterpiece.

Literary Aspects of the Qur'an

"Read, in the Name of your Lord". As the first words of the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad, a forty year old, illiterate desert Arab over fourteen hundred years ago, the beginning of revelation marked his ascension to becoming a messenger and to prophethood. Muhammad, who was known to have been in retreat and meditation in a cave outside Makkah, on the western Arabian Peninsula, had received the first few words of a book that would have a tremendous impact on the world in general and the world of Arabic literature in particular (Tzoris, 2001).

Armstrong (1993) states,

"It is as though Muhammad had created an entirely new literary form ... without this experience of the Koran (Qur'an), it is extremely unlikely that Islam would have taken root."

The essential theme of the Qur'an is the unity of God, or Allah, with three underlying themes, namely, law (Shari'ah, or the Islamic code), the prophets (prior to, and including Muhammad, to a limited extent) and the final judgement (the Day of Resurrection, resulting in either Paradise or Hellfire for each individual).

The Qur'an is comprised of one hundred and fourteen chapters, or Suras. It begins with Sura 1, Al Fatihah or the Opening, which is a prayer and supplication used repeatedly in the five daily prayers (Salah). Following this, the book begins with the longest chapter (Sura 2 Al Baqara - Chapter 2 The Cow) with subsequent chapters gradually decreasing in length, as an approximation. Each Sura comprises of verses, or Ayas, the total number of which is between 6204 and 6306 depending on the method of summation (Rippon, 2005). As such, the Qur'an is a concise text, and, historically Islamic scholars such as Rummani, have argued that its concision is one of the key components to the inimitability of the Qur'an. Each Sura is believed to have been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad either in the city of his birth, Makkah, or in the city of his migration, Madinah. As such, each Sura is stated as being Makki (revealed in Makkah) or Madani (revealed in Madinah). Each Sura, with the exception of Sura 9, commences with the introductory phrase, '*Bismillah Al-Rahman Al-Raheem*', or, '*In The Name of Allah, Most Beneficent, Most Merciful*.' Furthermore, twenty nine of the Suras open with one or a series of disconnected letters, the significance of which has been a source of much discussion throughout Islamic history (Rippon, 2005). Early manuscripts of the eighth and ninth centuries contained words composed solely of Arabic consonants only, as early Arabic society was able to decipher words and their pronunciation without the need for vowels. Later, as Islam spread, particularly to non-Arab traditions, vowel notation was added to facilitate second language Arabic learners as well as Arabs with lower literacy abilities to pronounce and understand the words.

The unique literary form of the Qur'an was the cause of major change in the Arab world within a few decades. The Qur'an thus became the sole source of the new civilisation's political, philosophical and spiritual outlook by the time the Prophet Muhammad had passed away twenty three years after the first revelation (Tzoris, 2001: Randeree, 2007: Randeree, 2008d).

The literary form of the Qur'an is the basis of the doctrine of I'jaz al-Qur'an (the inimitability of the Qur'an) which is at the heart of the Qur'an's claim to being of divine origin. The Qur'an states,

"If you are in doubt of what We have revealed to Our messenger, then produce one chapter like it. Call upon all your helpers, besides Allah, if you are truthful" (Qur'an 2:23); and *"Let them produce a recital like it, if they speak the truth"* (Qur'an 52:34).

According to Qur'anic Exegetes (such as Ibn Kathir, Al-Qurtubi and others) these verses issue a challenge to produce a chapter that imitates the Qur'an's uniqueness as a literary work. The tools needed to meet this challenge are the finite grammatical rules and the twenty eight letters of the Arabic alphabet; these are independent and objective measures available to all. The fact that it has not been matched since it emerged does not surprise scholars of the Arabic language (Tzoris, 2001). This is further emphasised by Kadi and Mir (2003), who state that,

“Although Arabic, as a language and a literary tradition, was quite well developed by the time of Muhammad’s prophetic activity, it was only after the emergence of Islam, with its founding scripture in Arabic, that the language reached its utmost capacity of expression, and the literature its highest point of complexity and sophistication. Indeed, it probably is no exaggeration to say that the Qur’an was one of the most conspicuous forces in the making of classical and post-classical Arabic literature.”

Consequently,

“As a literary monument the Koran thus stands by itself, a production unique to the Arabic literature, having neither forerunners nor successors in its own idiom. Muslims of all ages are united in proclaiming the inimitability not only of its contents but also of its style..... and in forcing the High Arabic idiom into the expression of new ranges of thought the Koran develops a bold and strikingly effective rhetorical prose in which all the resources of syntactical modulation are exploited with great freedom and originality.” (Gibb, 1963).

This may seem strange that the Qur'an has developed its own genre by using current literary elements. However, it should be noted that the Qur'anic discourse uses these common elements of language in a way that has never been used before (Ash-Shati', 1968: Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2000: Abdul-Raof, 2004).

Arabic literature essentially falls into two categories. These are Poetry, known in Arabic as 'Al-Bihar', or rhythmical patterns, and; Prose, which can either be rhymed prose (Saj') or speech (Mursal). The Qur'an does not fit any category of Arabic linguistic or literary expression, having unique features of literary form, linguistic genre, eloquence and frequency of rhetoric.

The definition of Arabic Poetry is that it has an end rhyme and syllabic rhythmical pattern. Arabic Prose can be described as non-metrical speech, meaning it does not have a consistent rhythmical pattern like poetry. In Arabic Prose, Saj' is rhymed prose and Mursal is straight prose, or what some may call 'normal speech' (Stewart, 1990). Thus, *“... the Koran is neither*

prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both” (Arberry, 1998). The Qur’an is thus an independent genre in its own right (Abdul-Raof, 2003a), comprising of two inseparable elements; rhetorical and cohesive elements (Abdul-Raof, 2001a). Rhetoric can be defined as the use of language to please or persuade, “*the conveying of meaning in the best of verbal forms*” (Boullata, 1988). Cohesiveness is the feature that binds sentences to each other grammatically and lexically. It also refers to how words are linked together into sentences and how sentences are in turn linked together to form larger units in texts (Abdul-Raof, 2003b). These rhetorical and cohesive components of the Qur’anic text cannot be divorced from each other (Abdul-Raof, 2001a). The Qur’an utilises numerous rhetorical features including, but not limited to, rhythm, figures of speech, similes, metaphors, rhetorical questions, the use of irony and the repetition of words (Esack, 1993; Abdul-Raof, 2003c).

Its cohesiveness includes various methods such as parallelistic structures, phrasal ties, substitution, reference and lexical cohesion (Abdul-Raof, 2003d). These features provide the bedrock and hang together to create the Qur’an’s unique genre. In contrast, non-Qur’anic Arabic texts mostly employ cohesive elements but the Qur’an uses both cohesive and rhetorical elements in every verse (Abdul-Raof, 2001b). Furthermore, in contrast to the non-Qur’anic structure, this arrangement provides a pleasing, sweet acoustic effect, called euphony, which itself is a rhetorical feature (Abdul-Raof, 2000).

(Tzoris, 2008)

The frequency of rhetorical features in the Qur’an is unparalleled, surpassing any other Arabic text, classical or modern. These include Analogy (Qur’an 88:15–16 and 93:9-10); Alliteration (Qur’an 33:71 and 77:20); Antiphrasis (Qur’an 44:49); Antithesis (Qur’an 35:7 and 9:82); Asyndeton (Qur’an 13:2); Assonance (Qur’an 88:25-26 and 88:14-15); Cadence (present in the whole Qur’an); Chiasmus (Qur’an 3:27); Epizeuxis (Qur’an 94:5-6); Equivoque (Qur’an 24:43); Homonymy (Qur’an 2:14-15 and 3:54); Hyperbole (Qur’an 7:40, 33:10 and 39:71-72); Isocolon (Qur’an 65:7-10); Metaphor (Qur’an 19:4 and 21:18); Metonymy (Qur’an 54:13 and 6:127); Parenthesis (Qur’an 7:42 and 4:73); Polypeton (Qur’an 80:25-26); Rhetorical Questions (Qur’an 55:60 and 37:91-92); Stress (Qur’an 29:62 and 3:92); and Synecdoche (Qur’an 90:12-13), (Tzoris, 2004).

According to one analysis, just over 50% of the whole Qur’an ends with the same letter. This particular use of rhyme, in a text the size of the Qur’an, has not been replicated in any Arabic text (Abbas and Fretwell, 2000). However the Qur’an does not conform to a constant or

consistent rhyme, which reflects the work of Al-Rummani (1956), who states that the Qur'an's use of language is semantically orientated and does not conform to a particular style.

Furthermore, the Qur'an is awash with stylistic variation. Stylistic variation is the use of different features of language in a multitude of ways and is a branch of linguistics which studies the features of the varieties of language within a given situation, context and meaning. Stylistics also tries to develop principles to explain the particular choices made by the author (Abdul-Raof, 2004). Hajjaji-Jarrah (2000) discusses how the Qur'an achieves its uniqueness due to stylistic differences, stating,

"...Qur'anic 'Arabiyya (Arabic) brings forth a dazzling assembly of word meaning and sound defying the conventions of both the Arabian saj' and the literary rules of classical Arabic literature."

There are a myriad of ways the Qur'an uses language which is unknown in any Arabic discourse, some of these include; semantically orientated assonance and rhyme (Al-'Askari, 1981); 'Iltifaat' or grammatical shifts (Robinson, 1996: Abdel Haleem, 1999); interrelation between sound, structure and meaning (Qutb, 1966a: Qutb, 1966b: Sells, 1991: Sells, 2000a: Sells, 2000b); unique linguistic genre (Tzoris, 2008) and; word order.

Gibb (1980) states,

"...the Meccans (residents of Makkah) still demanded of him a miracle, and with remarkable boldness and self confidence Muhammad appealed as a supreme confirmation of his mission to the Koran itself. Like all Arabs they were connoisseurs of language and rhetoric. Well, then if the Koran were his own composition other men could rival it. Let them produce ten verses like it. If they could not (and it is obvious that they could not), then let them accept the Koran as an outstanding evidential miracle."

Thus, the Qur'an is a unique form of Arabic speech and the form of its language cannot be described as prose or poetry. It achieves this unique literary form by; intermingling metrical and non-metrical speech; transcending the defining features of Saj'; using literary and linguistic devices that render it stylistically distinct. Hussein (unknown) states,

"Arabic composition should be divided into three categories, prose, verse and Qur'an, saj' forming a part of prose but the Qur'an being a category of its own" (Tzoris, 2001).

The Qur'an thus has an unbinding relationship to the study of Arabic,

“That a competent knowledge of the Koran is indispensable as an introduction to the study of Arabic literature will be admitted by all who have advanced beyond the rudiments of the language. From the purity of its style and elegance of its diction it has come to be considered as the standard of Arabic...” (Penrice, 2004).

Oral Traditions of the Qur'an

Muslim tradition has historically dictated that the written form of the Qur'an has been preserved in its entirety, and that this process has to the most part been aided by a parallel oral tradition of memorisation and recitation of the text (Rippon, 2005). Indeed, the meaning of the word Qur'an is recitation. Guillaume suggests the reason for the Qur'an's aesthetic oral qualities:

“It has a rhythm of peculiar beauty and a cadence that charms the ear. Many Christian Arabs speak of its style with warm admiration, and most Arabists acknowledge its excellence. When it is read aloud or recited it has an almost hypnotic effect...”

The oral tradition surrounding the preservation of the Qur'an began with the Prophet Muhammad instructing his companions to learn and transmit the verses of the Qur'an as it was revealed (Saheeh Al-Bukhari Vol. 6, Hadith No. 546). The oral tradition is further aided by the Islamic doctrine. This doctrine is based on the well known five pillars of Islam, namely, testimony of faith (Shahadah), the five daily prayers (Salah), alms tax (Zakat), fasting the month of Ramadan (Saum) and the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). The recitation of the Qur'an is stipulated as an essential element of prayer (the second pillar). Thus, its oral recitation regularly as an act of worship, during these meditative prayers and its consequent continuous repetition, became an integral part of the need for its memorisation and oral recitation and preservation over the centuries. The entire Qur'an was memorised verbatim by many of the companions of Muhammad such as Zaid ibn Thabit, Ubayy ibn Ka'b, Muadh ibn Jabal, and Abu Zaid (Saheeh Al-Bukhari Vol. 6, Hadith No. 525) and the tradition of memorisation even by non-Arab followers of Islam continues today.

The memorisation of the Qur'an is a scientific discipline in its own right. Memorisation itself (*'Tahfeeth'*) is accompanied by the lexical preservation of the words (*'Lisaan Al-Arab'*) and the rules of pronunciation of each letter and each word (*'Tajweed'*). The Qur'an is perhaps the only book, religious or secular, that has been memorised completely by millions of people. Some estimates put the figure at 20 Million people, most of whom are non-Arab, who have memorised the Qur'an in its entirety in its original Arabic form, which equates to approximately 2% of the one billion followers of the religion (Graham, 1993).

Furthermore, the sequence or order of the Qur'an was arranged by Muhammad himself and was also well-known to his associates (Jeffery, 1937: von Denffer, 1983). Muhammad was also believed to recite, from memory, the entire Qur'an to the Angel Gabriel, in the presence of many of his companions, up to the current point of its revelation, annually, in the month of fasting called Ramadan (Saheeh Al-Bukhari Vol. 6, Hadith No. 519), and twice in the year he passed away (Saheeh Al-Bukhari Vol. 6, Hadith Nos. 518 and 520). Thus, verse and chapter order was preserved and, as his companions later moved to various outposts of the emerging Islamic civilisation, they carried their recitations with them and taught others. In this way, the Qur'an, unchanged and unaltered since its origin, became widely retained in the memories of large numbers of people spread across vast distances (Ibn Hisham, unknown). Cragg (1973) states:

"...this phenomenon of Qur'anic recital means that the text has traversed the centuries in an unbroken living sequence of devotion. It cannot, therefore, be handled as an antiquarian thing, nor as a historical document out of a distant past. The fact of 'hifdh' (Qur'anic memorisation) has made the Qur'an a present possession through all the lapse of Muslim time and given it a human currency in every generation, never allowing its relegation to a bare authority for reference alone."

The memorisation of the Qur'an therefore evolved into a continuous tradition over the centuries, with institutions, exclusively established to train people to memorise the book, becoming widespread across the Muslim world (As-Said, 1975). It ordinarily takes a student a minimum of three years to complete the memorisation of the Qur'an, with non-Arab students commencing with a period of a few months for learning the Arabic script. Most often, non-Arabs rote-memorise the Qur'an, without learning the meaning of Arabic words. The rhythmic melody of the Qur'an's recitation is thus used to guide them to ease the difficulty of memorising such a voluminous text in a foreign language. On completion of memorisation, the pupil's recitation is error-checked and graduates with a certificate (Ijaza) allowing them to recite and teach the Qur'an. Thus, Welch (1960) states:

"For Muslims the Qur'an is much more than scripture or sacred literature in the usual Western sense. Its primary significance for the vast majority through the centuries has been in its oral form, the form in which it first appeared, as the "recitation" chanted by Muhammad to his followers over a period of about twenty years... The revelations were memorised by some of Muhammad's followers during his lifetime, and the oral tradition that was thus established has had a continuous history ever since, in some ways independent of, and superior to, the written

Qur'an... Through the centuries the oral tradition of the entire Qur'an has been maintained by the professional reciters. Until recently, the significance of the recited Qur'an has seldom been fully appreciated in the West."

The Qur'an as a Published Book

The Qur'an was written down on leather, parchment, the shoulder bones of animals (scapulae) and date palm stalks (Al-Muhasabi, 1973) by selected literate companions of Muhammad, most notably, Zaid ibn Thabit (Suyuti, 1973), Ubayy ibn Ka'b, Ibn Mas'ud, Mu'awiyah ibn Abi-Sufyan, Khalid ibn Waleed and Zubayr ibn Awwam (Dodge, 1970: Azami, 1974: Al-'Asqalani, 1978). Azami, whose book "Kuttab al-Nabi" (literally meaning "Scribes of the Prophet"), expounds on close to fifty scribes who recorded the holy text.

Qur'anic codification into a single manuscript was done in 633, a year after the death of Muhammad, and during the Caliphate of Abu Bakr, the first Caliph of Islam. The driving force for this codification was the killing of many early Muslims who had memorised the Qur'an at the Battle of Yamamah in the same year. Zaid ibn Thabit was thus appointed chief scribe and headed the committee for the undertaking (Saheeh Al-Bukhari Vol. 6, Hadith Nos. 201 and 509; Vol. 9, Hadith No. 301). The resulting compiled single manuscript (called a Mus'haf), which consisted of authentic written texts penned in the presence of Muhammad, and verified by a minimum of two witnesses of respected character, who heard Muhammad recite the passage in question (Al-'Asqalani, ???), was kept with Abu Bakr. Upon his death in 634, the Mus'haf was given to Umar who was Caliph from 634 to 644, after which Umar's daughter Hafsah (also Muhammad's widow) became the custodian of it (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Vol. 6, Hadith No. 201) for a short time before passing it to the third Caliph, Uthman (644 - 656) who ordered that five further copies be scribed. This task was completed in 646 at which point he sent the copies to major Islamic provinces and returned the original Mus'haf to Hafsah. Thus, the authenticity of the Qur'an was preserved, as Burton (1988) states,

"...the text which has come down to us in the form in which it was organised and approved by the Prophet.... What we have today in our hands is the mus'haf of Muhammad."

Schwally (1909 - 38) acknowledges,

"As far as the various pieces of revelation are concerned, we may be confident that their text has been generally transmitted exactly as it was found in the Prophet's legacy."

These copies, written in a now outdated Arabic calligraphic script, called ‘Rasm’ or ‘Rasm al Uthman’ (The Uthmanic Rasm), well known for omitting vowel markings, became known as the manuscript of Uthman. Consequently, his Mus’haf could be read in a variety of different ways, which gave rise to several traditions of minor variations in oral recitation. The addition of diacritical marks, or vowel points, indicating pronunciation to the non-Arab or the uneducated Arab, began circa 700 and was completed approximately two centuries later. It continues to be used most widely today, in the so-called ‘Hafs’ tradition of recitation. The Museum of the City of Tashkent in Uzbekistan, Central Asia (Makhdum, 1971: Al-Nur, 1993) still holds the only surviving copy of the Qur’anic Mus’haf sent out by Uthman, which, “... *is the definitive version, known as the Mus’haf of Uthman*” (Mendelsohn, 1940: Jeffery and Mendelsohn, 1942: UNESCO, 2008). A copy of the Mus’haf sent to Syria was copied before the original was destroyed by fire in 1892, the fire razing the famous Jaami’ Masjid of Damascus, where the manuscript was kept. This copy survives to the present day, currently housed at the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul (Al-Nur, 1993). Other manuscripts from the early Islamic period reside at the London Museum, the Library of Congress in Washington and the Chester Beatty Museum in Dublin. These have been verified as true copies against the Tashkent, Turkey and Egypt manuscripts, confirming no changes in the script (Philips, 1997: Randeree, 2009b).

Thus, Muir (1894) states, “*There is probably no other book in the world which has remained twelve centuries with so pure a text.*” Other manuscripts have been claimed as being original copies distributed by Uthman though some scholars have rejected them as not authentic (Islamic Awareness, 2008). John Gilchrist (1989), in his book entitled “*Jam’ Al-Qur’an*” (meaning “Codification of the Qur’an”), hypothesises, “*The oldest manuscripts of the Qur’an still in existence date from not earlier than about one hundred years after Muhammad's death.*” Though this contradicts the believed authenticity of the Tashkent manuscript, he bases this finding on the fact that the earliest two manuscripts (Tashkent and Samarqand) are written in the Kufic script, which he claims did not come into use until the eighth century. He adds, “*(It) can generally be dated from the late eight century depending on the extent of development in the character of the script in each case.*” To counter this claim, scholars have cited that the Kufic script was already in common usage in the late seventh century, such as in the calligraphic inscriptions of the Qur’an in the Dome of the Rock, which are in Kufic script and are known to date from circa 692. Thus, Kufic script was in use in the seventh century, with the authenticity of the Mus’haf Uthman remaining intact.

The Qur'an as a printed and distributed work continues until the present day, with the most prominent contemporary publisher being based in the second holiest city for Muslims, and the resting place of Muhammad, Madinah, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Glorious Qur'an, in Madinah, was established in 1984 with the primary objective for printing and distribution of the Qur'an in Arabic as well as in translated forms worldwide. Furthermore, the complex collects and maintains historical manuscripts of the Qur'an.

This facility prints around 10 million copies of the Qur'an per year, with 142 Million copies having been printed and distributed in the first fifteen years of operation. The complex is well known for its gift of one Qur'anic manuscript to each pilgrim to the annual Hajj, upon completion of their religious rites. The complex is also visited by some two million people annually to learn about the publication process of the holy book. Though the primary activity is in publishing the Qur'an, the number of different publications is greater than ninety, including complete Qur'anic manuscripts (called 'Mus'haf'), part publications of the Qur'an composed of selected chapters, translations of the Qur'an, audio recordings of oral recitations of the Qur'an, books of prophetic sayings, biographies of notable individuals in Islamic history and others. The complex publishes the Qur'an in three forms of Arabic script and has its own calligrapher for all original manuscripts. In translation, the complex publishes the Qur'an in twenty nine languages, including English, Greek, Persian, Urdu and Albanian, with a further nine languages in progress, such as Mandarin and Russian.

Since the Qur'an in its Arabic form has remained unchanged through the centuries, the complex is mandated to ensure the quality of the Qur'an in its published form. To facilitate this, the complex must ensure each published manuscript is free from error in its printed form. This rigorous quality control process has three stages. The first, text control, deals with Tajweed (rules of recitation), the completeness of the methods of recitation, calligraphy and punctuation. The second, quality control, is responsible for error checking through printing, assembling, sewing and bookbinding processes. The third and final stage is called final control. The complex is globally unique in this activity, since it employs six hundred of its total 1700 staff to this activity, which is dedicated to checking each manuscript once it has been bound (King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an, 2008).

Conclusions

The Qur'an has been preserved in both oral and written form in a way no other book has, and with each form providing a check and balance for the authenticity of the other.

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