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THE SOUND AND MEANING OF GOD'S WORD: AFFIRMATION IN AN OLD CAIRO QUR'AN LESSON

Abstract

For centuries Muslims have asked whether the Qur'an should be recited and memorized first and foremost, or whether one must prioritize understanding the meaning of its complex language. What is the best way to encounter God's Word? To explore this question, a women's Qur'an lesson in a slum of Old Cairo illustrates modern Muslim anxieties over the place of discursive meaning in encounters with the Qur'an. This article elaborates the concept of affirmation as an analytic to grasp how the women relate to the truth of revelation. Affirmation is a performative and discursive hermeneutic practice that deploys Qur'anic citation, situates Qur'anic concepts in daily life, and sutures the efficacy of Qur'an education with correct language and with right action. Their lessons are indicative of reformist trends in Qur'an education that open onto questions of meaning and understanding in relation to human interactions with divine speech.

Keywords: hermeneutics; Islamic education; Islamic reform; Qur'an; religious language

Samiya and her neighbors attended Qur'an lessons at their local community center in Batn al-Baqara, an informal neighborhood in the historical district of Old Cairo. They gathered on the plastic woven floor mat of the prayer room three times each week. It was September 2011 when I first joined them, a time when activists were spearheading new activities in the community center following the country's 25 January uprising that ousted Husni Mubarak. The women rehearsed the shortest chapters of the final section of the Qur'an (*juz' 'amma*), also known as the Seal of the Qur'an (*khatm al-qur'an*). When Samiya and others explained to me "there is Qur'an after the late afternoon prayer" (*fī qur'an ba'd al-'aṣr*), they referred to the variety of activities that took place in their lesson: the recitation (*tilāwa*) and memorization (*ḥifẓ*) of short chapters; training in proper pronunciation and elocution (*tajwīd*); and instruction in authoritative interpretations (*tafsīr*).¹ For three years, Samiya and her neighbors gathered in this way to rehearse the Word of God (*kalām allāh*). They called it, simply, Qur'an.

The women's Qur'an lessons in a slum of Old Cairo illustrate modern Muslim anxieties over how Muslims should encounter the Word of God.² The lessons combined components of Qur'an education that did not typically align in Qur'an education for laypeople, but that are increasingly prominent in Egypt's late Islamic Revival.³ In their lessons, the women blended a classical pedagogical style that emphasizes memorization and

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performance with a reformist orientation that emphasizes a particular relation to discursive meaning (a style of encountering the Qur'an historically reserved for scholars).⁴ This blended pedagogy is the result of a postcolonial dissatisfaction among many Muslim reformers with classical methods that they see as rote memorization, lacking a meaningful engagement with the Qur'an. The women's lessons demonstrate what anthropologists Rudolph Ware and Robert Launay describe as a "hybrid epistemology" of contemporary reformers who endeavor to merge classical and modern education. In their discussion of the epistemological stakes of reforming classical Qur'an education, they comment: "it remains to be seen whether such a hybrid form of Islamic education will be capable of resolving the apparent contradictions between its very different sources."⁵ The women's Qur'an education represents not the contradiction or resolution of these blended pedagogies, but rather the emergence of a specific approach to the meaning of God's Word, one that encourages but is not limited to a cognitive understanding of the content of the Qur'an.

The women's Qur'an lesson in Old Cairo offers a response to an enduring question: what is the best way to encounter God's Word? For centuries Muslims have asked whether the Qur'an should be recited and memorized first and foremost, or whether one must prioritize understanding the meaning of its complex language. This article's primary contribution is to problematize notions of "meaning" and "understanding" in Muslim encounters with divine speech, especially as these encounters are staged in reformist attempts that self-consciously seek out both the sacred form of Qur'anic language and its content. In order to apprehend how my interlocutors encountered the Qur'an, I develop the analytic of affirmation. Affirmation is a performative and discursive processes through which they recognize the truth of God's Word. Although they see understanding the meaning of key words as a hallmark of their study, they situate hermeneutic agency not within the individual, but within the text itself. The goal of the lessons is to affirm the truth of God's Word. Through ethnographic scenes from their lessons we observe three types of affirmation: citing direct quotes from the Qur'an, which indicates one's understanding through preservation and reverence of the Qur'an's language; situating Qur'anic concepts in daily life, which underscores the reality of the Qur'an through one's experiences; and actualizing Qur'anic study through right action. As I will show in the final scene, the efficacy of the lessons revolves around whether and how the women perform the obligatory prayer (*ṣalāt*).

The women's Qur'an lessons took place against the backdrop of contemporary Muslim debates over the modernization of Qur'an education and the epistemological stakes entailed.⁶ I dwell on the hermeneutical practices of nonliterate and semiliterate women to demonstrate the long reach of textualism in reformist Qur'an education.⁷ Scholarship on the oral and auditory experiences of the Qur'an's performance offers crucial insights into affective and sensorial modes of training the body—a honing of the human senses—to embody particular virtues. Scholarly engagements with performative dimensions of Qur'an practices expand our approach to "understanding" beyond an exclusively cognitive process through an appreciation of embodied knowledge.⁸ At the same time, scholarship on reformist scripturalism deploys the metaphor of "transparency" to depict how the mastery of the Arabic language is essential to some Muslim reformers' efforts to decipher the Qur'an.⁹ This metaphor captures the significant role of immediate and accessible meaning, implying that classical modes of embodiment leave the semantic

and cognitive meaning of the Qur'an opaque.¹⁰ Yet the relation of immediacy to the Qur'an is typically reserved for scholars or at least initiates (those with a certain facility with classical Arabic). An analytic of affirmation helps us subtly describe the hermeneutic of contemporary reformist Qur'an lessons by keeping taut the tension between opacity and transparency and the classical and reformist pedagogies at work.

Before turning to a thick description of the women's Qur'an lessons, I situate the Old Cairo lessons within broader trends of contemporary Qur'an education and within their specific socio-political milieu: an informal neighborhood of Cairo amid political and economic instability. A brief history of the women's Qur'an lessons at the community center illustrates how during the 1960s recitation practices began to focus on enunciating individual words and, in doing so, drew attention to deciphering words, laying the groundwork for the contemporary focus on the discursive meaning of key words. In the first scene, a lesson on *al-Kawthar* (Chapter 108, "Abundance"), the teacher employs a question-and-answer format to call upon the women to cite directly from the verses. Their responses both indexed their understanding and preserved the sacred form of the verse. The second scene, a lesson on *al-Ma'un* (Chapter 107, "Common Kindnesses"), illustrates a mode of discursive affirmation where the women situate the Qur'anic term within a conversation about ethical living. The final example turns to a moment of failure in the recitation of *al-Fatiha* (Chapter 1, "The Opening"), the most repeated chapter of the Qur'an in Muslim life. An episode of mispronunciation raises questions about the efficacy of language and the aims and failures of the women's lessons.

THE OLD CAIRO QUR'AN LESSON

The women's lesson in Old Cairo is indicative of Qur'an initiatives unfolding in Egypt and across the world, as scriptural interpretation is disseminated and takes on a new and unprecedented role among lay Muslims. Such lessons are a component of the broader turn to Islamic education (formal and informal) in contemporary revivalist trends. In Egypt, Qur'an study is typically divided into different classes for distinct modes of learning, from lessons for advanced students on exegetical works (*tafsir*) to those open to Muslims of all educational backgrounds focused on a teacher's sermon (*khutba*).¹¹ The most common lessons in Egyptian mosques of all sizes are Qur'an programs that emphasize recitation, memorization, and proper elocution (*tajwid*) for men and women with little to no background in Islamic education. *Tajwid* is the foundation of Qur'an lessons in Egypt, and a gateway to "higher" forms of study. In Cairo, prominent mosques such as Masjid al-Nur and Masjid al-Husary have daily programs of varying levels that include both group and private lessons.¹² The Old Cairo community center's al-Azhar-sponsored lessons are an example of how small prayer spaces not only blend Qur'an learning strategies, but also diffuse them throughout the country, even to the most marginal spaces.

I first visited the Batn al-Baqara community center in the summer of 2011 as part of my ethnographic research on Muslim reformers' turn to basic literacy as a program of Islamic revolutionary politics. In attending literacy classes there I discovered the longer-standing Qur'an lessons. Literacy classes became an essential site to observe not how the Qur'an ought to be read—a frequent topic of conversation in adult literacy classes in Egypt—but rather how it was *actually* encountered by nonliterate and semiliterate women. I

conducted fieldwork at the Batn al-Baqara community center for seventeen months between 2011 and 2013. In addition, I observed and participated in four other women's Qur'an lessons in different parts of the city that included students from various educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Among all the sites I worked in, I engaged most deeply with the students of Batn al-Baqara, where I participated in the life of the community center and neighborhood as it underwent significant changes in the months and years since the uprising.

When I explained to Samiya that I wanted to study their Qur'an lessons, she balked. "How can you write about Qur'an [lessons]? You would need a machine to know what is happening inside us." She understood my ethnographic object to be something that happens inside the body. For Samiya, this knowledge was only knowable to an omniscient God, or perhaps a fantastical machine. At the same time, by describing their Qur'an practices as internal, she skirted aspects of the lessons that left their impression on me—how the lessons created a community of textual practice and interpretation that called on multiple modes of discourse, reasoning, and reflection.¹³ Samiya and the others did not trust their own words to talk about the Qur'an; they relied on trusted authorities to explain its meaning. Yet, within their lessons they regularly discussed their lives in relation to it. Their ideas about the limits of everyday language to describe their Qur'an education tell us much about their language ideology, "the cultural representations of the nature of language, its uses, and its potentials."¹⁴ Throughout our conversations the women were conscious of the limits of human language for discussing anything related to the Qur'an. They frequently identified the insufficiency of any description they might offer of their lessons, and in so doing further emphasized the power of the Qur'an. They distinguished between their use of human and divine language through shifts in dialect that we will observe in the lessons. The women were reluctant to talk about their lessons because they saw themselves as unqualified to do so. In order to recognize their encounter with the Word of God, and what it tells us about 21st-century scriptural reformism, directly questioning them about their practices made little sense. It is for this reason that long-term participant observation was crucial for grasping how the women related to and deciphered the Qur'an.

In the lesson, the women memorized and learned to properly recite the Qur'an under the guidance of their teacher and neighbor, Maryam. Each lesson typically gathered between eight to twelve students who were neighbors and extended relatives. They learned and relearned the same short chapters, directing most of their attention to the final ten chapters.¹⁵ Maryam guided her students through a short chain of verses, strengthening each link with each repetition. The class was the initiative of the community center's director who, in 2009, invited a graduate of al-Azhar (the preeminent Sunni Islamic institution of learning) to train a select few residents from the neighborhood as Qur'an instructors. I had been attending the lesson for one month before it became clear to me that the women repeated the same short chapters over and over. Their discussion centered on the meaning of unfamiliar Qur'anic Arabic vocabulary, which differs significantly from their Egyptian dialect.

The al-Azhar initiative is indicative of the spread of a particular strand of reformism in contemporary Egypt. Although Islamic reformers are diverse in their references and aims, here I am interested in modern approaches to interpreting the Qur'an; "reform" glosses the dominant role of the Qur'an and highly textual modes of Qur'an education, even for

nonliterate Muslims. More specifically, drawing on Jonathan Brown's typology of modern Muslim schools of thought on scripture, the women's Qur'an lesson may be described as Modernist Salafi, the most influential of the four schools he delineates, defined by its formulation as a response to modernity that centers on the Qur'an as the primary resource for Islam, as well as the renewal of *tafsīr*. Modern Salafis see in the Qur'an practical solutions for contemporary problems. The women's Qur'an lesson in Old Cairo brings this approach into full relief.¹⁶ My interlocutors did not employ the terms "modernity" or "Salafism" in describing their lessons. They did not distinguish between different Islamic (or Islamist) movements in Egypt, and spoke with reverence for the institution of al-Azhar.

Originally from the cities of Fayoum and Beni Suef, the women's families settled in Cairo a generation ago. Some women were related to one another. They all lived in close proximity to each other and saw each other daily. While a few unmarried teenagers dropped in occasionally, and a couple of elderly women regularly attended, most of the regular students were in their twenties and had children ten and under. None of them worked outside the home, although some other women in the neighborhood maintained part-time employment with local schools and local NGOs. Most of the neighborhood men supported their families with salaries earned from typically insecure sources of income, such as the local kiln and casting industry or fast food delivery. The women in the Qur'an lesson left school at the age of twelve or thirteen. Although they insisted that their own children attend the local public school, their expectations of the school wavered. Generally, they urged their children to attend class, but on some days they allowed them to stay home because they saw their classes to have little value. They complained that even school teachers often do not attend school, and when they do, classes are too big for children to learn anyway.¹⁷

The neighborhood of Batn al-Baqara is notable for its proximity to historically significant sites, including some of the city's oldest mosques and churches. Among Cairo's neglected city slums (*'ashwā' iyā'*), Batn al-Baqara is often the focus of media attention, which led to many grassroots organizations spearheading social development projects in and around the community center. Charitable organizations and national development strategies have taken Cairo's slums as intense sites of infrastructural and moral rehabilitation. Following the 25 January uprising, the number of initiatives in Batn al-Baqara multiplied, adding several literacy classes and a new Montessori-style kindergarten to the already established carpet-making microenterprise project and Qur'an lessons. Young Egyptians mobilized by the revolution regularly visited the neighborhood for their various projects before departing for political meetings downtown or returning to their homes in affluent and middle-class neighborhoods before dark. They brought with them a sense of optimism for change. The women of Batn al-Baqara were pleased with the new programs, which they saw as more beneficial than the food bags they were used to receiving as charity. The presence of more outsiders in the neighborhood allowed them to discuss long-term problems, such as an insufficient sewage system and roofs that disintegrated during the damp winter months. A few members of the community plied young activists and volunteers, educating them on the "real needs" of the neighborhood in an attempt to solicit funds for infrastructural projects. The women had a cautious sense of possibility. "Tahrir," as they put it, referring to the central point of demonstrations, was for their unoccupied sons—not in school, and without

work—while they tended to their responsibilities of housework and childcare. Most urged their husbands to work rather than get caught up in politics.

DECIPHERING WORDS: EMERGING NOTIONS OF MEANING

Before teachers came from al-Azhar and introduced abridged scholarly texts to the neighborhood, the men and women of Batn al-Baqara used to gather around a cassette player to listen to and practice their recitation. The cassette tape they used was that of Shaykh Mahmud Khalil al-Husary, the first reciter to ever record the complete Qur'an in a style that came to be known as *murattal*, considered the model form of recitation that stresses the proper oral transmission of the text.¹⁸ Their cassette lessons drew attention to individual words, laying the groundwork for a focus on semantic meaning in the later lessons established by the al-Azhar initiative. In the recording, sound was marshalled to convey meaning, not through dramatic performance but through a combination of enunciation, pauses for breath, and rhythm that clarified and drew attention to significant individual words.

The first recording was a concerted response by Egyptian 'ulama' to the sense that the art of Qur'an recitation was neglected. The former president of the Jama'a al-Muhafiza 'ala al-Qur'an al-Karim (General Association for the Preservation of the Glorious Qur'an), Labib al-Sa'id, spearheaded a large-scale project to produce a recording that would become the authoritative resource for recitation, an "omnipresent 'teacher,'" as he put it.¹⁹ The ubiquity of Husary's state-sponsored 1960 recording has shaped Egyptian experiences of the Qur'an for nearly six decades. Husary's voice reverberates across Egypt's soundscape. But his influence extends well beyond the country or region. The Husary recording marks nothing short of the oral codification of the Qur'an; it made Qur'an recordings the most influential mode of transmission of God's Word in the 20th and 21st centuries.²⁰ The style that Husary employed in the performance had an unexpected, enduring outcome: it drew attention to the enunciation of individual words.

In preparation for the recording, al-Sa'id observed a public recitation by Husary and remarked on the audience's reception of it: "The audience was generally favorable and many remarked that the style of chanting used enabled them better to concentrate on the meaning of words."²¹ Not only did the new style of recitation draw attention to individual words, but the recording introduced new participants to the art of Qur'an recitation. Al-Sa'id cited among the justifications for the recording that such a tool would benefit women, allowing them to learn without arduous travel or having to study with male teachers, obstacles that had previously curtailed their pursuit of Qur'an education.²²

After practicing the Qur'an from the cassette for two years, in 2009 Maryam became one of only a few women in Batn al-Baqara to train with Shaykh 'Umar from al-Azhar. She suspected she had been selected because she was literate and could read the teaching manual. Al-Azhar-trained teachers such as Maryam would not normally have gained the authority to teach Islamic lessons. She had memorized the final section of the Qur'an, whereas typically formal licenses are issued only to those who have memorized the entirety of the Qur'an (known as *huffāz*). Al-Azhar is known globally as a center for Sunni higher learning; its role in the local community center illustrates the institution's emphasis on the Qur'an as the basis of basic education for a broader Egyptian public.²³ The lessons introduced new methods of transmission and pedagogy that would replace

the women's reliance on the Husary cassette. At the same time, it extended a preoccupation with the significance of words.

The women's focus on semantic meaning was enabled by new forms of *tafsīr* made accessible to wider audiences in abbreviated texts, and marks a new role for *tafsīr* in basic Qur'an education. The accessibility of Qur'an interpretations through teaching manuals that employ simple language has enabled lay Muslims to read the Qur'an in new ways.²⁴ Within Islamic educational contexts in Egypt, students and teachers describe their study of the interpretation of the Qur'an as "the explanation" (*sharḥ*) of the text rather than its meaning (*ma'nā*), implying that they elaborate an already established meaning from distilled *tafsīrs* rather than engage in an autonomous interpretive act.

Maryam's well-worn instructional manual, *Tafsīr al-'Ashr al-Akhir min al-Qur'an al-Karīm: Min Zubdat al-Tafsīr* (The Final Ten of the Holy Qur'an: Selections from the Essence of Interpretation), was the single text that guided her lessons. The author of the text, Muhammad Sulayman al-Ashqar (d. 2009), is an al-Azhar graduate who also trained in Saudi Arabia and was known for publications such as *al-Mawsu'at al-Fiqhiyya* (Encyclopedia of Islamic Jurisprudence), which was designed to distill all major schools of jurisprudence into an accessible reference for a wide audience. The Qur'an booklet included the short chapters of the final section of the Qur'an rendered with the basic vocal markings for proper recitation, and an expanded margin with explanations of key words. Teaching manuals of this sort carry on a history of techniques of recitation that consolidated in the 11th century and continue to circulate among learners of all levels.²⁵ Through Maryam's consultation with her guide, the lessons both fixed and made accessible the meaning of key words in a simple format to be taken up in the women's discussions.

The rise of *tafsīr* in teaching manuals, in addition to other transformations in the transmission of the Qur'an's meaning, has had paradoxical effects: on the one hand, these manuals distribute authoritative meanings to broad audiences previously not privy to the scholarly tradition; on the other, they give rise to lessons such as the one found in Old Cairo with only tenuous connections to trained Islamic scholars. This paradox complicates theories of Islamic knowledge in which the Qur'an is understood as "a text containing multiple levels of meaning, accessible to human beings in proportion to the depth of each person's capacity for understanding as developed over the course of his or her life."²⁶ As we will see, the lessons enlivened the meaning of key words addressed in Maryam's teaching manual in ways that sometimes called upon the women to revere the Word of God by cuing them to echo its form, while at other times asking them to situate Qur'anic concepts in their daily lives. In the following section, through a lesson on the chapter *al-Kawthar*, I depict the women's typical rehearsal and memorization of Qur'anic verses, and one technique in responding to their teacher's questions about the verses: through citation they preserved and revered the form of God's Word. The women strained to move their mouths to produce correct sounds, the meanings of which they held up to the light of a disappearing late afternoon sun.

"WHAT DID GOD GIVE?": PRESERVING THE FORM OF GOD'S WORD

The day's lesson focused on memorizing the chapter, and grasping the key word *kawthar*, which many English translators of the Qur'an render as "abundance." This was the first

but not the last time that I would observe the women practice this short chapter. Maryam recited each verse separately, instructing us to repeat after her. The women recited each verse three times. Maryam then added another verse, and the group repeated it three times. She strung together two verses and the group repeated the longer passage after her. As the women recited, they rehearsed the basics of *tajwīd*, the system that regulates the enunciation of the Qur'an, with the aim of reproducing the sound of the word as it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. When Maryam detected we had made an error, she had us all repeat the verse again together. Repetition affirmed the sound of the short chapter; it was a technique for stitching the verses into memory. When we faltered in our pronunciation, Maryam instructed us on where the sound should be produced in our mouths:

I seek protection with God from Satan, the outcast. In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. We have truly given abundance [*kawthar*] to you [O Prophet]—so pray to your Lord and make your sacrifice to Him alone—it is the one who hates you who has been cut off.

The women continued to string together verses. They began in synchronicity, and when a single voice strayed here and there, the small imprecisions caught in the ear like snags in a tapestry. In their practice of the basics of *tajwīd*, sound was critical to the effort to affirm God's Word. After repeating the verses with proper *tajwīd*, Maryam turned to the word *kawthar*. Consulting her manual, she explained that *kawthar* is a river in paradise.²⁷

She then quizzed them: "What did God give?" The question-and-answer format was typical of the lesson. Women shouted different answers over top of each other. She asked again, "What did God give?" Each time she posed the question, her voice gradually rose at the end of the sentence. She prompted the women's response by offering the first verse that held the answer to her question: *innā aṭaynāka al-kawthar* (We have truly given abundance to you). A few of the women picked up on her cue. Badariyya responded: *kawthar* (abundance). Maryam was satisfied. Her question was intended to elicit an answer from within the verse. *Kawthar* is a Qur'anic Arabic word that is not used in Egyptian dialect. In this lesson, no synonym was used to describe the idea of abundance. According to Maryam's explanation, *kawthar* describes a specific physical place, and it is also an image for the idea it represents—abundance. The discursive meaning of the key term is elaborated not through a definition, but through a specific instance of God's generosity. Through citation Badariyya's response preserved the form of God's Word.

On this particular day, Maryam's question, "What did God give?" called for a direct quotation from the Qur'an. Maryam relied on the *tafsīr* in her manual to render a Qur'anic Arabic term to her students, and yet the response called on them to cite not from the *tafsīr*, but from the verse itself. In this way the women were induced into the interpretive tradition, even when the teacher's style of questioning called on them to maintain the linguistic form of the verses. By preserving the word itself in the form it appears in the verse—*kawthar*—the women were solicited to regard Qur'anic Arabic as sacred and irreplaceable. The conceptual claim underpinning this understanding of the Arabic language, which significantly shapes modern Qur'an education, is part of a long-running theological dispute. In one of the formative debates of Islamic theology, the Ash'arites (whose ideas are now the basis of Sunni orthodoxy) supported the idea of Qur'anic Arabic as an immutable sacred language, while the Mu'tazilites (an 8th-century rationalist school whose positions have gained traction among both

Muslim reformers and secularists) maintained that Qur'anic Arabic was created, like all of God's creations.²⁸ According to the latter position, then, an orientation towards the text that privileges form obstructs free and critical thinking, and worse, obscures the very idea of God's Word.

In his discussion of religious language, Webb Keane describes citation as "more deferential to the text" than the practice of paraphrasing, which involves more interpretation on the part of the person responding. He explains that quotation "tends to sharpen the distinction between the quoter and the person quoted."²⁹ The women's citation from the Qur'an demarcates their own language from that of the Qur'an. Notably, Maryam did not ask "What is *kawthar*," which would anticipate an explanation of the word's semantic meaning. Nor did her question call on the women to offer the interpretation from her manual. Instead, Maryam called on the women to demonstrate their understanding by echoing the chapter directly. She framed her question to elicit one of God's words, not an extrapolation of the word's meaning, or a synonym. Her question was not an open-ended prompt to elaborate on instances of God's abundance. Rather, it called on the women to participate in an authorized dialectic that demonstrated their understanding. This style of question managed a possibly overwhelming consideration of God's abundance with a manageable single-word response, concretizing the meaning of *kawthar* in its use as a response. Rather than discern citation as always deferring to or reinforcing authority, by preserving the form of the word, Badariyya left open the vastness of her response's potential referents.

Citation was also a form of repetition, a major component of the women's lessons. Repetition was a part of the responsibility of maintaining previously memorized verses. Remembering is an obligation that calls attention to the impact an internalized verse should have on the individual: one must continue to carry the memorized verses. As Maryam reminded her students, forgetting is indicative of laxity with revelation. Relearning the simple chapters, then, was not a failure to progress through the Qur'an, but a shouldering of the women's responsibility. Maryam cited hadith that liken forgotten verses to an abandoned house. She explained to her students that the Prophet cautioned Muslims that verses can escape the memory like a camel freeing itself of its rope.

In this example, citation indexes one's understanding and *affirms* the form of God's Word. Granting such affirmation analytic status of its own shows us that repetition is not merely interpretive stasis. At times affirmation can entrench authority (Maryam's, and the meanings given in her manual), but the lesson shows that affirmation convenes a variety of blended pedagogical practices, underscoring the creative process of citing God's Word. In the women's reading of another short chapter, *al-Ma'un* (Common Kindnesses), we will see how Maryam's questions went beyond seeking answers that echo the Qur'an by making a key term the basis for discussions of ethical life.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF 'COMMON KINDNESSES'?": CONNECTING
QUR'ANIC CONCEPTS TO DAILY LIFE

The words of the short chapter, *Common Kindnesses*, flowed easily from the women as Maryam reintroduced the chapter to them verse by verse. She began: *bi-ism Allāh al-rahmān al-rahīm/ ara'ayta alladhī yukadhdhibu bi-l-dīn* (In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. Have you considered the person who denies the

Judgement?).” The women practiced these verses. Some stuttered. They repeated the lines until the group was in unison. Maryam introduced more: *fa-dhālika alladhī yadu’u al-yatīm/ wa-lā yahūdḍu ‘alā ṭa’ām al-miskīn* (It is he who pushes aside the orphan and does not urge others to feed the needy). They continued like before, as Maryam corrected their vowels. She strung together four verses to conclude the chapter. Many stumbled over the extra lines:

*fawaylun li-l-muṣallīn
al-ladhīna hum ‘an ṣalātihim sāhūn
al-ladhīna hum yurā’ūn
wa-yamna’ūna al-mā’ūn.*

[So woe to those who pray but are heedless of their prayer (*sāhūn*); those who are all show and forbid common kindnesses (*al mā’ūn*)]

Maryam explained that there is a valley in hell for those who are heedless (*sāhūn*) in prayer. Drawing from her guide, she described two different kinds of heedless people: those who are not regular or punctual in their daily prayers; and those who pray to be seen but are not present or are insincere in their prayer. She stressed the problem of not maintaining regular prayers. Rabab, a vivacious twenty year old whose infant daughter sat on her lap throughout each lesson, joked about her laziness and how she never performed her daily prayers. Another woman shared that she usually prayed all of her prayers at the same time in the evening, instead of at their appointed times throughout the day. Maryam related how she herself, busy with chores and children, often did this, too. Another woman, Malak, joined in: “Today, when I woke for *fajr* (the predawn prayer) I was happy with myself. But I knew it was Satan (*shayṭān*) making me pleased with myself. I know that’s wrong. Satan comes and spoils even the good things I do.”

Maryam continued: “And what are *mā’ūn*?” When no one responded, she explained: “*mā’ūn* are the little things we do for each other, so small we don’t notice them, but when we aren’t aware, we think they are big. We are so far away from God in our bad habits and neglect that we can’t even do the very smallest thing for our neighbor.” The women discussed the simple gestures they could do for each other to make life easier. They complained about people’s unwillingness to extend common kindnesses to each other. Aya, who lived in a first-floor apartment beside a small shop, complained that she had no space to hang her family’s wet laundry because her upstairs neighbor refused to let her use the family’s clothesline. The others agreed that this would be something easy to allow one’s neighbor to do. More joined in. One woman was agitated because her cousin was too quick to strike her child. When Maryam sensed the conversation straying, she reined it in: “So, what is *mā’ūn*?” She called on Umm Ahmad, who answered: “*mā’ūn* are the nice things we forget to do for each other.” Maryam was satisfied and carried on with the lesson by individually testing the women’s recitation.

The meaning of the words here was authorized by the favored interpretation of the manual and taken as axiomatic. The students drew on their experiences to elaborate the standardized explanations of *sāhūn* and *mā’ūn*. Their discussions were responses to the meanings established by religious authorities that they then located in their lives. Both the teacher and her students went beyond the citational practice we saw in their lesson on *kawthar*. Instead, in the lesson on *mā’ūn*, the women drew on key words as prompts to discuss how to conduct their daily lives. In this process, they described the

Qur'anic term *mā'ūn* in their own vernacular, employing the word *khidma* (a small favor) as they considered neighborly gestures. By way of concluding the conversation on small kindnesses, Maryam returned to the authorized meaning of *mā'ūn*. The women's discussion did more than veer away from the lesson; it made a Qur'anic concept real. The meaning was not felt through an apt performance, as is well documented in the important work on the affective performance and reception of the Qur'an's recitation. Instead, meaning was a deliberative process focused on Qur'anic vocabulary.

Unlike the previous scene where the interpretive question solicited direct quotations from the Qur'an, Maryam's question sought a vernacular explanation that spoke to the immediate economic and social stresses in the neighborhood, exacerbated by the political instability of the moment. The conversation illustrates a momentary dissolution of the sharp distinction between sacred and mundane language as a technique to render the meaning of the Qur'an relatable.

The women's frank conversation regarding *sāhūn* and the challenge of maintaining regular and sincere prayers underscores the women's education as a process. They articulated the gulf between the ideals of their Qur'an education and their perceptions of their own shortcomings. Their reflections on prayer raise the question of the impact of their Qur'an education on their actions. Indeed, proper understanding of the Qur'an is ideally embodied in the actions of the learner through what Ware describes as "actualized knowledge."³⁰ In the following, final section of the article, an episode of mispronunciation reveals divergent views regarding the stakes of an error in Qur'an recitation. The episode raises questions about the efficacy of religious language in inducing one to pray, and as a matter of the validity of prayer. The mistake opens a space to contemplate meaning beyond the semantic meaning of words, and to enquire into the ritual effects of the women's lessons. It is here that we discover the disjuncture between the ideals of the women's Qur'an education and what transpires in and outside of their afternoon lessons.

AN IMPROPER "TĀ": THE EFFICACY OF RITUAL LANGUAGE

At the end of each lesson, Maryam called on the women to individually recite the day's verses. She corrected and evaluated them, scribbling observations in her notebook. When a woman successfully completed the recitation without Maryam's prompting or correction, she was free to leave. One day Maryam returned to the most-repeated chapter of the Qur'an, *al-Fatiha* (the Opening). Seven verses in length, this chapter is central to prayer, as it is a part of each prayer cycle (*rak'a*).³¹ Samiya and I were regularly the last to leave. She tended to the women's space of the center for a small monthly fee, and was responsible for locking the padlock on the wooden door to the women's prayer area at the end of each lesson. As she recited, Maryam was clearly distracted. When Samiya finished, Maryam said she realized she made a mistake that day. She said she had mistakenly taught us to say the word *al-ṣirāṭ* (path, or way) with a plain or nonemphatic *tā'* rather than the emphatic or pharyngealized "ṭah," two distinct letters in the Arabic alphabet.³² She worried that the error would render the women's prayers void. The problem, as she saw it, was not that the incorrect letter altered the meaning of the word, rendering it nonsense, but that the mispronunciation corrupted the correct form of the ritual.

Maryam: "If they learn it incorrectly because of me, I receive a sin each time it is recited this way."

Samiya tried to reassure her: "Just tell them at the next lesson."

Maryam: "It will be too late; they will be praying for days incorrectly."

Samiya: "None of the women pray anyway. They won't recite the chapter before our next class."

I laughed and asked Samiya how she knew this. "I'm the one with the keys. I know when they come and go. And when we're in our homes, I see who moves to pray when it's time." She named the women who pray, all of whom were elderly attendees of the lesson.

But Maryam was worried about the implications of the error: that it would spread through the homes of Batn al-Baqara invalidating the women's prayers. She was certain of her responsibility as the teacher. After some thought, Maryam finally smiled at Samiya's identification of the women who pray and suggested we visit each of their homes to make the correction. We went to the front doors of their buildings. They were surprised to see us but recited the chapter when Maryam asked them to do so. She ensured that when they said *ṣirāt*, they vocalized the correct heavy "*ṭah*." They did not appear bothered by the difference between the two pronunciations. After visiting half a dozen buildings and listening to the women recite the verses again, Maryam's worries were assuaged.

What is at stake in an error of pronunciation? Maryam was so troubled by the mistake that she continued to dwell on it even after learning that her students did not maintain regular prayer. Her focus remained on pronunciation—form—rather than the general obligation to pray.³³ She later explained that this was because the women's proper pronunciation was her responsibility, whereas performing regular prayers was their own obligation. The episode calls into question the efficacy of the women's Qur'an education in two important ways: when Qur'an lessons do not lead to correct action—in this case, the performance of regular prayer—and when the form of the language is not precisely maintained. The error, then, reminds us that the Qur'an is not always rightly affirmed. Indeed, for one to affirm the truth of the Qur'an in habit, behavior, and comportment is a struggle. The women acknowledged their shortcomings frankly, and yet did not abandon the commitment that the Qur'an should work *in* the person, as Samiya reminded me. Rather than offering a third instance of affirmation, the episode allows us to perceive how Qur'an does not always play out as it should.

Maryam and her students maintain different orientations towards the significance of the form of sacred language and its impact on prayer. Maryam was troubled because she understood her role as a teacher to be to transmit intact the Divine Word so that the women's prayers would be valid. Emphasizing the classical model of Qur'an education that places form over content, Ware and Launay spell out the implications of an error in pronunciation: "a botched recitation is at the very least inefficacious and at worst impious."³⁴ *Ṣirāt* should be pronounced as it was pronounced when it was revealed, the way it has been properly repeated for over fourteen centuries—the necessary form for the performance of prayer. Maryam was troubled by her role in creating the error. She had been instructed by her own teacher that, just as she would be rewarded for each of her pupils' correct recitations and prayers, she would be punished for their errors.

The significance of form to apt prayer is dealt with in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) under the category of the performance of prayer. As we can observe from Maryam's anxiety, reaction, and remedy to the error, the difference between *tā'* and *ṭah* is grave not only

because of its distortion but also, and most importantly, because of the juridical positions regarding errors in recitation that could invalidate prayer. Three of the four legal schools (the Malikis, Shafi'is, and Hanbalis) state that the proper recitation of *al-Fatiha* is an integral component (*rukʿn*) of ritual prayer. To support this position, these legal schools cite the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*): "Whoever does not recite *al-Fatiha* in his prayer, his prayer is invalid." The Hanafis take a different position from the other legal schools. For them, such an error is a deficiency but does not invalidate the prayer. They base their position on a line from the Qur'an: "so recite as much of the Qur'an as is easy for you."³⁵ Although there is consensus that an error in pronunciation is grave, the jurists debate what type of error jeopardizes the validity of the prayer itself. Many fatwas have determined that a mispronunciation that alters a word's meaning (*ma' nā*) is such an error, while others explain that the validity of prayer depends on the sincerity or effort of the performance. Maryam took the former (majority) position on the effects of the pronunciation error. In doing so, she eschewed the opinion of the 19th-century Hanafi jurist, Ibn 'Abidin (d. 1836), for instance, who differentiated between errors that can be avoided and those that are unavoidable. For Ibn 'Abidin, an example of an inexcusable error would be the substitution of the Arabic letter *tā* for *ṣād*, such as uttering *al-tāliḥāt* instead of *al-ṣāliḥāt*. However, according to Ibn 'Abidin, pronouncing *tā*' instead of *ṭah*—the error that caused Maryam's distress—does not invalidate a prayer, because it is difficult for many to hear and to distinctively articulate these sounds; the error instead falls under the legal category of a "general hardship" (*'umūm al-balwa*). This position is especially popular among non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, but it is important to recall that the women were nonliterate and semiliterate Arabic speakers, gaining basic facility of the alphabet and learning to distinguish between letters that non-Arabic speakers often struggle with.

The mispronounced *tā*' crystallizes what anthropologists of Christianity call the "limits of meaning."³⁶ They explain how modern Christianity's emphasis on the production of meaning can also reveal when meaning cannot be found: by looking at a moment of failure "scholars can approach meaning not as a function or a product to be uncovered, but as a process and potential fraught with uncertainty and contestation."³⁷ We see the complex relation between form and content at work in a pedagogical approach that tries to fuse the two. Maryam's urgent attention to form (not shared by her students) underscores affirmation as an ideal that the women do not always achieve. The women's Qur'an lesson reminds us that scholarly approaches to understanding that foreground the sensorium may risk imposing classical models of Qur'an education, even when those models are subverted as they unfold in real life. A mispronounced *tā*', then, makes audible the dissonances between ideal and practice.

ISLAMIC REFORM IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE CERTAINTIES AND AMBIGUITIES OF AFFIRMATION

Qur'an works on the person in ways that are challenging for the women in the Batn al-Baqara lesson to describe. They routinely discussed God's Words, but to talk about their lessons was strange. As the women explained to me, talking about Qur'an means vocalizing what is already known. Here, I have tried (through writing) to repeat, cite, and echo the women of Batn al-Baqara in their encounter with God's Word. Yet in doing so, I risk misunderstanding. One possible reading of their lessons is to view

them as yet another exercise of rote memorization. One might observe that Samiya and the others neither questioned their teacher nor challenged her interpretations—they did not endeavor to create their own interpretation through a personal intervention into the exegetical field. However, such an expectation does not admit the significance of the form and agency of God’s Word itself. Neither is it sensitive to the contemplative discussions that related the Qur’an to the women’s lives.

For the women of Old Cairo, the truth of God’s Word must be recognized and affirmed through various modes of Qur’anic encounter: the performance of the recitation as well as the deliberative practices that center on meaning. The felicity of the women’s practice was measured in its mimetic reproduction of sound, a determined dialogic of question and answer, and the discussion of key terms authorized in the teaching manual’s gloss (*sharḥ*). Through their efforts, the women trouble the persistent divide between literate and nonliterate worlds. Their lesson, which blends performative and discursive Qur’anic practices, reveals to us how a scripturalist epistemology can be transmitted without the skill of autonomous reading, a skill widely regarded in Egypt and elsewhere as essential to modernity and properly encountering God’s Word.

The Old Cairo Qur’an lesson is a project to modernize and localize Qur’an instruction—to make the Word of God available to all. The women conceived of their recitation and discussion not as a redress of their illiteracy, but as practices that facilitate the correct reception of the recitation. From the Husary cassette tape, with its vocalization that renders each word distinguishable and audible, to the al-Azhar initiative, with its simplified explanation of words, reformist interventions make the Qur’an widely legible, even relatable. Maryam—keeper of the teacher’s guide, literate neighbor, responsible instructor—directed the women in the authoritative and settled meanings of words that they echoed through their discussions. These discussions were part of a process of understanding predicated on a distinct orientation to the Word of God. Together, the three Qur’an lessons bring to light conceptions of God’s Word as lived, adapted, rehearsed, forgotten, and neglected. In their late afternoon circles, the women engaged in practices of memorization, discussion, and community aimed to remember God. They connected the truth of the text to their lives, and in so doing affirmed God’s Word and their place in the world.

NOTES

Author’s note: I am grateful to the women of Batn al-Baqara who welcomed me and allowed me to think about questions of Qur’an and meaning with them. For their critical comments at various stages, I thank Emmanuelle Stefanidis, Basit Iqbal, Robert Launay, Junaid Quadri, and my supportive cohort of postdoctoral fellows at Northwestern University. The critical comments of the anonymous *IJMES* reviewers and the fine editorial work of Akram Khater and Jeffrey Culang brought clarity to my thinking.

¹All translations from Arabic into English are mine, except for translations of the meaning of the Qur’an. For the latter, I have drawn on M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Quran: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²For an introduction to the concept and debates surrounding the Word of God, see Matthias Radscheit, “Word of God,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 5:541–48. The Qur’anic text self-referentially employs the terms “God’s word” (*kalām Allāh*) (2:75); “our Lord’s word” (*qawl rabbīnā*) (Q 37:31); “his word” (*kalimatuhu*) (4:171); and “words from his Lord” (*min rabbīhi kalimatīn*) (2:37) (541).

³Egypt’s Islamic revival (*al-ṣaḥwa al-islāmiyya*) began in the 1970s with an increase of religious discussion and practice in the public sphere. It was marked by new religious publications, radio and television programs,

and forms of dress (especially among women), as well as an emphasis on religious education. Numerous factors contributed to this turn to piety, from the failure of Arab nationalism to the return of migrant workers from the Gulf. Egypt's Islamic revival was shaped by regional transformations and in turn came to impact regional as well as global revivalist trends in places such as Indonesia and the United States. On Egypt's Islamic revival, see, e.g., Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012); John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1998); and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Revival since 1988: A Critical Survey and Bibliography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997).

⁴Classical education in the Muslim world was first and foremost a pedagogy based on discipline, memorization, and the interiorization of texts. It was, and in many places continues to be, a training of the body. The aim was to embody the Qur'anic text. Modern schooling displaced the paramount role of memorization in education, in both secular and Islamic subjects. On Islamic education in Cairo during the Mamluk period, see Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). For a historical and ethnographic study of classical Qur'an education in the Senegambia, detailing the aims and methods of this form of education as a means to embody the Qur'an, see Rudolph Ware III's *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2014). On the breakdown of the classical system under colonial rule, see Nelly van Doorn-Harder, "Teaching and Preaching the Qur'an," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 5:205–31. In Egypt, during the last third of the 19th century British efforts to transform their colonial subjects through modern methods of education remade the epistemological bases of systems of knowledge and their corollary practices of learning; see Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1988); Paul Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity: Evangelicals, Reformers and Education in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011); and Heather Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵Rudolph Ware and Robert Launay, "How (Not) to Read the Qur'an? Logics of Islamic Education in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire," in *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, ed. Robert Launay (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2016), 358. Following Launay and Ware, I adopt the term "classical" rather than "traditional" forms of Qur'an education, because the latter term "implicitly adopts the 'modernist' epistemic perspective"; Ware and Launay, "How (Not) to Read the Qur'an?," 345. This terminology allows us to see disputes about Qur'an education as epistemological rather than as ideological. Although hermeneutics are certainly political, my purpose is to draw our attention to the major epistemological shifts in new textual practices that aim to make the Qur'an more widely accessible. Islamic reformist thinking is diverse; it is the subject of important works in the modern intellectual history of the Muslim world. See, e.g., Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad 'Abduh* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968); Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Francis Robinson, "Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 42 (2008): 259–81; and Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

⁶Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Robert Launay, ed., *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2016); Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007); Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998).

⁷On Muslim discussions of the Qur'an's meaning in prayer, see Niloofar Haeri, "The Private Performance of Salat Prayers: Repetition, Time, and Meaning," *Anthropological Quarterly* 86 (2013): 5–34; and Haeri, "The Sincere Subject: Mediation and Interiority among a Group of Muslim Women in Iran," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (2017): 139–61. See also James Baker, "The Presence of the Name: Reading Scripture in an Indonesian Village," in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. by Jonathan Boyarin (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993), 98–138.

⁸Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1985); Lauren E. Osborne, "From Text to Sound to Perception: Modes and Relationships of

Meaning in the Recited Qur'an" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014); Michael Frishkopf, "Mediated Qur'anic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt," in *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (London: Routledge, 2016), 75–114. The literature on Qur'an practices among non-Arabic speakers is particularly attentive to affective understandings of the Arabic Qur'an. Anna Gade's study of Indonesian Qur'an recitation competitions describes the embodied practices of recitation where the sense of piety that comes with correct and skillful execution cultivates an affective understanding that focuses on the self rather than the text; Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia* (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 42. See also Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010); and Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an*.

⁹Ware and Launay, "How (Not) to Read the Qur'an?"; Kevin Reinhart, "Fundamentalism and the Transparency of the Arabic Qur'an," in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Carl Ernst and Richard C. Martin (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 97–113.

¹⁰Ware and Launay employ the visual metaphor of opacity in describing classical Qur'an education: "The single most important epistemic difference distinguishing adherents of the classical approach from reformists is that the former are convinced of the opacity of signs and the latter of their transparency. For reformists, the Qur'an can be reduced to the meaning of its words. Whoever masters its language thus has access to the content of the book and can decipher its message"; Ware and Launay, "How (Not) to Read the Qur'an?," 354. The visual metaphor expands our attention to the senses so that audition is not the exclusive sensory mode. The language of transparency and opacity also invites us to consider the Qur'an's own language of veiling and unveiling, as well as its self-reference to verses that are clear in meaning (*muḥkamāt*) and others that are ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*).

¹¹Through the *Wizarat al-Awqaf* (Ministry of Endowments), the government body that oversees the regulation of religious affairs, the state regulates formal initiatives to train teachers, issue instructional licenses, and conduct religious lessons.

¹²Saba Mahmood's ethnographic account of Egypt's mosque movement (*Politics of Piety: The Islamist Revival and the Feminist Subject* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005]) locates mosque lessons as a locus of the country's late 20th-century Islamic Revival. Mahmood delineates the women's ritual and ethical practices aimed at cultivating piety. On the rising role of Muslim women leadership in education, see Pieterella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Hilary Kalmbach and Masooda Bano, eds., *Women, Leadership, and Mosques* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); and Ousseina Alidou, *Muslim Women in Postcolonial Kenya: Leadership, Representation, and Social Change* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

¹³Anne Blackburn, "The Text and the World," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 151–67.

¹⁴Joel Robbins, "Ritual Communication and Linguistic Ideology: A Reading and Partial Reformulation of Rappaport's Theory of Ritual," *Current Anthropology* 42 (2001): 592. On the politics of the divide between classical Arabic (*fushḥa*) (including Qur'anic and Modern Standard Arabic forms) and Egyptian Arabic, see Niloofar Haeri, *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁵These are: *al-Nas* (The People), six verses; *al-Falaq* (Daybreak), five verses; *al-Ikhlāṣ* (Purity [of Faith]), four verses; *al-Masad* (Palm Fiber), five verses; *al-Naṣr* (Help), three verses; *al-Kāfirun* (The Disbelievers), six verses; *al-Kawthar* (Abundance), three verses; *al-Ma'un* (Common Kindnesses), seven verses; *al-Quraysh* (Quraysh), four verses; *al-Fil* (The Elephant), five verses; *al-Humaza* (The Backbiter), eight verses.

¹⁶Jonathan Brown, "Scripture in the Modern Muslim World: The Quran and Hadith," in *Islam in the Modern World*, ed. Jeffrey T. Kenney and Ebrahim Moosa (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2014), 13–34. Brown's typology also includes Islamic modernists such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010), for whom the Qur'an is divine but subject to the conventions of human language; traditionalist Salafis such as Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), do not feel the need to respond to modernity and rely heavily on hadith; and late Sunni traditionalists, such as 'Ali Juma', refer to a "traditional Islam" and combine Sunni schools of law and Sufism.

¹⁷For ethnographic accounts of Egyptian schooling, see Linda Herrera and Carlos Alberto Torres, eds., *Cultures of Arab Schooling: Critical Ethnographies from Egypt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

¹⁸The second general recitation mode is *mujawwad*, which employs the dramatic use of melody and register to heighten the emotional experience of the listener. It is the form of recitation typically performed in public. Only the most advanced students study this style.

¹⁹Labib Sa'īd, *The Recited Koran: A History of the First Recorded Version*, trans. Bernard Weiss, M. A. Rauf, and Morroe Berger (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1978), 71.

²⁰The textual compilation of the corpus of the Qur'an is known as the 'Uthmanic text, named after 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (d. 656), the third caliph to rule the early Muslim community following the death of Muhammad. The standard sources on the 'Uthmanic compilation are Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, Otto Pretzl, and Wolfgang H. Behn, *The History of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), esp. "The Genesis of the Authorized Redaction of the Koran under the Caliph Uthman," 252–76; and Richard Bell and W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970). For the most up-to-date analysis of the canonization, see Viviane Comerro, *Les Traditions sur la Constitution du Muṣḥaf de 'Uthmān* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verl. in Komm, 2012). On the material Qur'an (*muṣḥaf*) on which the 1960 recording is based, see Gabriel Reynolds, ed., *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008), esp. the discussion in his introduction on the 1924 Royal Egyptian edition of the Qur'an.

²¹*Ibid.*, 81.

²²*Ibid.*, 111–12.

²³Al-Azhar plays a major role in religious, intellectual, and political life in Egypt and abroad. It is simultaneously a mediator of state-sanctioned Islam and a place of intellectual diversity that has transformed rapidly since the 19th century. For a general overview of the history and social transformation of this institution, see Bayard Dodge, *Al-Azhar: A Millennium of Muslim Learning* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 1961); and Muhammad 'Abd Allah 'Inan, *Tarikh al-Jami' al-Azhar* (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Khanji, 1958). On educational reform in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see Sa'īd Isma'īl 'Ali, *Al-Azhar 'ala Masrah al-Siyasa al-Misriyya: Dirasa fi Tatawwur al-'Alaqa bayna al-Tarbiya wa-l-Siyasa* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 1974). For socio-historical and sociological studies of 20th-century al-Azhar, see Chris Eccel, *Egypt, Islam and Social Change: Al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation* (Berlin: K. Schwarz Verlag, 1984); and Malika Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam: les oulémas d'Al-Azhar dans l'Égypte contemporaine* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1996). In addition to the mosque and university, over two million students attend school through the al-Azhar institutes (*ma'āhid azhariyya*). On the global influence of these primary schools and their modernizing effects on African Islamic education, see Cheikh Anta Babou, "The Al-Azhar School Network: A Murid Experiment in Islamic Modernism," in *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, ed. Robert Launay (Indianapolis, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2016), 173–94.

²⁴On the influence of mass print culture on the production of accessible Islamic publications, see Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print," *Modern Asian Studies* 27 (1993): 229–51; Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, "Publishing in Muslim Countries: Less Censorship, New Audiences and Rise of the 'Islamic' Book," *Logos* 8 (1997): 192–98; and Gregory Starrett, "The Margins of Print: Children's Religious Literature in Egypt," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2 (1996): 117–39.

²⁵Frederick M. Denny, "Qur'an Recitation Training in Indonesia: A Survey of Contexts and Handbooks" in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁶Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*, 152. This observation goes beyond the Qur'an and indeed is a part of Muslim approaches to knowledge and knowledge transmission as seen in classical education. See also Franz Rosenthal's discussion of how an individual's capacity structured education for children and students: *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, Brill, 1970).

²⁷The manual succinctly read: "Kawthar is a river in paradise created by God. It is a miracle for the prophet and his *umma*"; Muhammad Sulayman al-Ashqar, *Tafsir al-'Ashr al-Akhir min al-Qur'an al-Karim: Min Zubdat al-Tafsir* (Cairo: Al-Gazera International Press, n.d.), 61.

²⁸This point is significant because if the Qur'an were eternal it would be on the same plane as God. My depiction of the debate in broad strokes is intended as a heuristic to contrast differing language ideologies, each grounded in a philosophical/theological tradition. For a rich discussion of Mu'tazilite theories of language, see Sophia Vasalou, "'Their Intention Was Shown by Their Bodily Movements': The Başran Mu'tazilites on the Institution of Language," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47 (2009): 201–21.

²⁹Webb Keane, "Language and Religion," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti, (London: Blackwell, 2007), 439.

³⁰Ware, *The Walking Quran*, 4.

³¹*Al-Fatiha* is ritually significant, and is recited to open and bless important transactions and events. Michael Sells depicts the meaning of the chapter as “a microcosm of basic Qur’anic beliefs in the compassionate creator, the day of reckoning, and the need for guidance”; Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oreg.: White Cloud Press, 2001), 173.

³²In Egyptian Arabic, the error would be heard in the vowel preceding the consonant—in the quality of the *a*, rather than the emphasis on the *t*.

³³The first “pillar” (*rukn*) of Islam is bearing witness to the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad (the *shahāda*); the second “pillar” is the five regular prayers (*ṣalāt*).

³⁴Ware and Launay, “How (Not) to Read,” 346.

³⁵Qur’an 73:20.

³⁶Matthew Eric Engelke and Matt Tomlinson, eds., *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

³⁷*Ibid.*, 2.