

QURANIC MATTERS: MEDIA AND MATERIALITY

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ABSTRACT

Natalia Kasprzak Suit: Quranic Matters: Media and Materiality (Under the direction of Margaret Wiener)

Mushaf (read with “s” and “h” separately) is what Muslims call the physical body of the Quran, its pages, binding, and print. In contrast to earlier works on the holy book of Muslims, in my dissertation I shift from studying the Quranic text exclusively as message to its corporeal existence as an object in the hands of its manufacturers and users in Egypt, treating its production and consumption as meaning-making processes.

I approach materiality of the Quran -- the corporeal and electronic medium of the text -- as a place for tracking transformations of religious authority, agency, knowledge and Muslim practice in the context of changing technologies of text production. By looking at different media forms (manuscript, print, and digital devices) that disseminate the text of the Quran, I follow tensions existing between a manufactured object, tradition, and practical religious experience among Muslims in Egypt.

I treat material carrier of the Quran as an object that mediates between institutionalized authority epitomized by the University of al-Azhar (the oldest religious institution in the Middle East) that controls Quranic production, markets of publishing houses that manufacture printed and electronic “Qurans,” and socially and economically diversified public consumers of the holy word in Egypt and beyond.

Egypt is not the only potentate on the Muslim religious publishing market; highlighting the materiality of the Quranic text allows me to track the connections and tensions that arise

between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, a new competitor in the production of Qurans. Through this project, I show how the Quran as an object participates in configuring social ties both locally and transnationally.

To my committee members, who helped me to fledge.

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NOTE ON LANGUAGE TRANSCRIPTION

I have chosen to abridge the traditionally used IJMES system of transliteration and simplify Arabic words for the convenience of reading as well as in order to avoid problems of transliteration related to the use of the Egyptian dialect and classical Arabic at the same time. There were two reasons behind my choice to cite original text in Arabic: a visual effect – as this is the subject my dissertation engages – and the ambiguity of some of the older text, which I wanted the interested readers to be able to examine for themselves. Also, I thought it more convenient to separate the Arabic language bibliography from the works and other sources used in English.

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PREFACE

There is a book on the table in front of me that is bound in dark green, plastic covers. Quite ordinary looking. It is about a quarter of the size of a regular book. It has five hundred and forty four pages but the paper is rather thin, slightly transparent, covered with black print. A charcoal color ribbon inches out from between the pages. This book can be easily purchased in many countries all over the world. I got mine from a friend in Egypt who had a few of them at home and gave me a spare copy. Before handing it to me, he kissed it and touched with it his forehead in a gesture of deference. On the cover, in the middle of a faded golden arabesque it reads in Arabic: “al-Quran al-Karim.” The book Ali gave me was the Quran, traditionally glossed in English as “the Muslim holy book”; about this book I wrote my dissertation.

More precisely, my interest has been in a physical object that carries the text of the Quran and circulates in millions of printed copies in the Muslim world and beyond; an object that people read, touch, carry, and appropriate in many other ways. This dissertation is, then, an account of intimate relations between a text as object and those who make it and use in a concrete place: Cairo, Egypt. Counter to a prevailing -- also in Egypt -- inclination to read *through* the book without paying attention to its material surface,¹ I explore how the book’s physical characteristics, its print design, paper, covers, embellishments, spelling, etc. matter to those who interact with it. This perspective includes the material body of the text as a vehicle of

¹ Peter Stallybrass, “Material Culture: Introduction,” *Shakespeare Studies* 28 (2000): 124.

meaning. Here, printing is a point of departure to thinking about the Quran, with writing and digitization as analytical counterpoints. Both of these media, when thought of in conjunction with printing, problematize the relationship of the Quranic text to the object that mediates it and redefine the notion of a “holy book.” But as this account is not simply a history of Quranic media but rather an exploration in thinking of what the materiality of a religious text may do to those who handle it, digitization and writing make only a partial appearance vis-à-vis printing which, after recitation, is still the dominant technology for disseminating the Quranic message.

Muslims print, sell, give, buy, and use Quranic books in large quantities. Undoubtedly, Quranic books that circulate in the Middle East and beyond participate in shaping the Islamic *umma* (Muslim community) and mediating the divine message in ways that call for academic attention by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. It was the ways in which my friends and random acquaintances approached their ordinary, quotidian copies of the Quran that initially provoked my interest and in some ways defined my further work in Cairo as “praxiography”² -- an ethnographic narrative of religious practice. The more I observed people and talked to them about what they did with their Quranic books, the more I realized that my interlocutors discussed issues and performed activities that pertained to theology and technology alike in a way that made it impossible for me to think about the Quran without simultaneously thinking about its material medium: how they are made, controlled, distributed, and handled by Egyptian Muslims.

As a site for thinking about the Quranic text as object, Cairo has been both representative and unique. Egypt was the first Arab country to begin mass producing Quran on printing

² Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 31-33.

presses.³ Presently, Egypt is one of the largest manufacturers of Quranic books in the Middle East⁴ and has one of the greatest numbers of religious publishing houses in the region. Apart from the historical and contemporary importance of Cairo as a center for the production of Quranic copies, it is also a place where relations between producers of Quranic books and religious authorities have a long and complicated history. Cairo is the location of the oldest Middle Eastern Islamic theological university, al-Azhar, whose scholars have been supervising the printing of the Quranic text in Egypt for the past century or so. Although at different points in time the fluctuating economic situation caused some houses to lower publishing costs by outsourcing Quranic printing abroad, all copies of the Quran sold on the Egyptian market, whether printed in Egypt or outside its borders, local or imported, must be authorized by al-Azhar.

Al-Azhar's supervision over printing Quranic books, although necessary to ensure their quality and correctness, is met with mixed feelings on the part of those who produce them. Some publishers perceive it as unavoidable while others find it a nuisance, as the same regulations that are to protect the integrity of the Quranic message impose restrictions and create obstacles for those interested in reproducing and distributing its text. Printing Quranic copies is not an easy business, creating contentions about how to do it in a way that would fulfill both economic objectives and religious obligations alike.

Once sold, Quranic books enter the realm of personal use and pietistic practice. The sheer numbers of circulating copies create an environment in which users reinterpret traditional

³ أبو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق و لمحة في تاريخ الطباعة في بلدان الشرق الاوسط (القاهرة: المطبعة الاميرية بالقاهرة، ١٩٥٣، [١٩٤٢]).

⁴ Private conversation with the Director of the Chamber of Printing in Egypt, Muṣṭafa Kamal 'Abduh, September 2012.

forms of handling the book and come up with new ones. Digitization speeds up this process even more when, instead of paper and ink, Muslim practitioners deal with plastic cases and digital bytes. The question that emerges then is: in what ways is the religious practice affected by a change in medium?

In this unique milieu, where the physical presence of the Quranic text has long been established, I came to see how the Quran in its tangible form participates in the daily life of Muslim practitioners, lingering in their hands and pockets, laying on their desks and in their cars. I spoke to and observed ordinary people as well as those who produce and distribute Quranic texts and the *'ulama'* of al-Azhar, who have a direct control over the publishing companies that print the Quranic text. In my efforts to map out the past relationships between the manufacturers of the Quran and the religious and governmental authorities and to trace the scattered pieces of history of printing in Egypt, I drew on secondary sources and archival documents from the National Library in Egypt. The Internet and newspapers helped me to cover contemporary discussions and decisions surrounding the Quranic text in Egypt and other Muslim countries.

One cannot understand questions and debates about the printing and use of Quranic copies without being familiar with Islamic tradition. Preoccupation with the ways in which a Quranic book should be handled is not unique to Muslims in Egypt. It is part of an Islamic tradition that, as Talal Asad points out, “consists of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice.”⁵ Asad calls a given dialogue with a foundational text a “discursive tradition” and defines it as a relationship to a body of knowledge

⁵ Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam.” *Occasional Papers Series* (Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986): 14.

with which Muslims engage and through which they actively shape their present. The texts on which religious reasoning is based, apart from the Quran itself, include compilations of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*) assembled by Muslim scholars in order to direct the comportment of all members of the *umma*. Collections of *ahadith* (plural of *hadith*), such as *Sahih al-Bukhari* by the Persian Muhammad Ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810-870); *Sahih Muslim*, also by the Persian Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj (817-874), or more recently the work on Islamic law *Fiqh al-Sunnah*, compiled by the Egyptian scholar Sayyid Sabiq (1915-2000), are continually consulted, interpreted and debated in the process of evaluation and validation of contemporary practices and ideas. Many of my friends referred to specific *ahadith* while commenting on particular uses of the Quranic book. Therefore, a considerable part of my research was devoted to familiarizing myself with classical sources in the sciences of the Quran that constitute a basis for many decisions surrounding the printing of Quranic books and inform many popular religious practices related to its use.

The beginning of this research goes back to 1995 and my first trip to Egypt, while its final stages took place in 2012 during the year between the fall of Hosni Mubarak's old regime and the return of the new military regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. A considerable part of my fieldwork happened in the context of riots and strikes, water and electricity shortages, and growing anger. In uncertain times people are cautious and fatigued. Familiar channels of bureaucratic command and ways of going about daily institutional life cannot be assured from one day to another. After a while a statement such as "we had to close because of the protests" becomes as prosaic as traffic congestion at Tahrir square. I have been sheltered from all these things although not unaffected. I felt for al-Azhar officials, library workers, and many other

administrative assistants who tried to facilitate my research as best as they could in circumstances that were far from usual. I visited some places and institutions many times only to find in the end that the materials I was looking for were not there or that the people I wanted to talk to were gone. In many ways my research has been a testimony to Egyptian efforts to go on with life in spite of and against the prevailing instability, conflict, and affliction. Perhaps, because so much about everyday existence in Cairo was unpredictable, I accepted chance as part and parcel of my fieldwork. Sometimes, an inadvertent conversation with a metro passenger or a heedless walk in the streets provided me with my most interesting discoveries, connections, and even artifacts, all of which later became an important part of my work. Thus collected with the help of many individuals and pieced together materials serve to give an account of a text whose material mediation has vast consequences for Muslim practitioners in Egypt and beyond.

INTRODUCTION: AN “INVISIBLE” OBJECT

In an act of iconoclasm, Terry Jones, pastor of a small nondenominational church in Florida, announced in 2010 that he would “burn the Quran” on the anniversary of 9/11. Soon the press was full of reports about why and where he was planning to do it. Yet the press had it all wrong. Neither Jones, nor anybody else for that matter, could “burn the Quran.” The reason has to do with religious dogma. In Muslim theology, the word “Quran” does not describe a physical book but rather the immaterial message of Allah sent to people through the Prophet Muhammad.

What enabled Jones’ iconoclastic move was the fact that the divine message has to be transmitted through material means, including vocal cords, airwaves, stone, parchment, paper, and digital bytes. Undeniably, there is a long and rich tradition of Quranic recitation that is central to Muslim religious practice, yet the emphasis on vocal mediation of the message does not mean that the tangible object that mediates the Quranic text is inconsequential. Muslims have not neglected the corporeal medium of the Quran, whether to beautify it through calligraphy, or to address it through acts of ritual purity, or to treat it with particular forms of deference. Given the persistent presence of the Quranic book in Muslim religious practice -- and the extreme treatment of its material body in other parts of the world -- it is increasingly hard for me to think of the Quran only in terms of abstract, ethereal message.

The Quran and a *mushaf*: objects as actors

Etymologically, the word *Quran* is derived from the root word *qara’a* and means

“reading” or “reciting.” More precisely, *Quran* means “the spoken message of Allah.” This emphasis on vocal mediation is grounded in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad himself, who encouraged his companions to memorize and recite the message. “Chant it, for whoever does not chant it is not one of us,” says the Prophet in a well-known *hadith* narrated by Ibn Kathir.⁶ There are many accounts like this in addition to verses in the Quran itself that remind Muslims about the importance of recitation.

As in the past, memorizing the Quran and reciting it aloud constitutes a large part of Muslim religious education in contemporary Egypt. Children learn to recite the Quran in public schools, although in order to memorize the whole message they often have to take additional private classes from licensed instructors. In recent decades the larger mosques and religious centers in Cairo have started offering courses in Quranic recitation. Radio and TV channels broadcast contests featuring Quranic reciters, which are especially popular during the fasting month of Ramadan. Apart from beautiful voices and musical virtuosity, participants in these competitions demonstrate their knowledge of the rules of *tajwid* -- a particular form of recitation characterized by vocal embellishments. Recitation as a performance elicits strong emotional responses and it is common to see the audience weep during performances of their favorite *qari'* (reciter), although a less elaborate form of recitation called *tartil* (slow and ordinary chanting) may also bring a performer and his listeners to tears. Once a friend was telling me the Quranic story of the Virgin Mary. “Give me your handkerchief,” he asked his son after a moment, wiping away the tears that swelled in his eyes. The recited Quran accompanies Egyptian Muslims at birth, marriage, and death. Recitation of the Quran marks holidays, especially the Prophet’s birthday (*mawlid*), the night of his journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (*mi'raj*) and -- most of all --

⁶ أبو الفداء إسماعيل بن عمر بن كثير، تفسير القرآن العظيم، مجلد ٧ (بيروت: دار الفكر، ١٩٦٦): ٤٨١.

Ramadan, the month during which the Quran was sent down to people for the first time. Muslims recite the Quran as part of their daily prayers and devotion. The aural landscape of Egyptian cities is imbued with Quranic recitation, chanted by professional reciters or played on electronic devices during the day and long into the busy urban night.

But the Quran mediated by voice has also a less evanescent medium in the form of a book -- consisting of pages, binding, and script -- that is called a “*mushaf*” (read with “s” and “h” pronounced separately) The word *mushaf* comes from the root “*ṣuhuf*” (bound pages) and is primarily understood to refer to the pages that carry the text of the Quran. It is not mentioned in the Quran itself but appears later in scholarly writings about the Quran. Grammatically, unlike the Quran, *mushaf* has a plural form “*masahif*,” indicating an essential difference between the ontological status of the two. One is divine; the other is not. In the Arabic language, the Quran is always preceded by the definite article “al” and often followed by a collocation, “al-Karim,” which means bounteous or generous, although many English translations prefer to use the words “glorious” or “noble.” Despite the fact that reporters covering the memorable Burn-the Quran-Day often used the word Quran in plural -- “the Qurans” (as it is customarily done with the Bible, where a proper noun denotes both the content and the object that carries it) -- in Arabic the word Quran does not have a plural form. There is only one Quran – al-Quran – *the* Quran -- mediated by a tangible book, a *mushaf*.

It is a *mushaf* that Terry Jones tried to burn, and it is the state of this book as an object that concerns me here. The precarious state of books as objects was already noticed a century ago by Walter Benjamin in his essay *Unpacking my Library*,⁷ where he spoke of books not as a

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969, [1931]): 59-67.

source of intellectual enrichment but collector's pleasures. However, my approach was directly informed by the writings of historians Roger Chartier, Donald F. McKenzie, and Patrick Hanan,⁸ who specifically concentrate on graphic technologies in a social context. Chartier and McKenzie in particular make it clear that the meaning a text evokes at a particular time cannot be separated from its form, place, and technology of manufacture. Both scholars criticized the tendency to see texts as a category of things whose material form is irrelevant to their use and signification. I share their conviction that treating texts as mere repositories of meaning neglects the corporeality that surreptitiously shapes our responses to them. To study, then, how tangible books mediate the Quran means to ask questions about the potential effects of their material form in the realm in which they circulate: in this case, the realm of Quranic makers, custodians, and users.

A broader theoretical claim informs my inquiry as well: material objects are not hapless bearers of human projections. This contention is informed by a long anthropological interest in material culture (museum collections, archaeology, social use of things). Yet although classified, described, and collected, objects were often treated by anthropologists too narrowly, as merely expressing human ideas and/or as tangible projections of particular social orders. Even seminal works that explicitly focused on the material conditioning of the social order and human self-transformation through production of things (Marx),⁹ or ways in which objects participated in shaping individual's psyche (Freud),¹⁰ emphasized the importance of things for *human* purposes

⁸ Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994). Patrick Hanan, Judith T. Zeitlin, and Lydia He Liu, *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2003). Donald F. McKenzie, *Making Meaning: "Printers of the Mind" and Other Essays* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital* (Provo, UT: Regal Publications, 1993 [1867]).

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1950 [1913]).

and needs, eventually shifting the focus from objects to people. Material world, although indispensable, appeared to be somewhat generic. It is true that now and then ability of individual things to directly interfere in human affairs was acknowledged; for instance in Durkheim's description of totemic emblems and the importance of their physical presence for the clan's existence¹¹ or Mauss's argument that particular objects, when exchanged as gifts, created social bonds.¹² In order to theorize culture one had to take its material component into account, but the focus on people in these accounts tended to leave the relationship between things and people somewhat asymmetrical. For example, in 1940, fifteen years after Marcel Mauss published *The Gift*, Evans-Pritchard wrote, "material culture may be regarded as part of social relations, for material objects are the chains along which social relations run. (...) People not only create their material culture and attach themselves to it, but also build up their relationships through it and see them in terms of it."¹³ Here too, material things were presented as extremely important, yet their efficacy was recognized primarily in terms of human agency, in spite of the authors' occasional hints at objects' unruliness. Similarly, Bourdieu's description of how material world enters human consciousness, for instance in his famous description of the Kabyle house, put emphasis on the symbolic meaning of objects, not their material qualities – that could have participate in the production of symbolic associations.¹⁴ A more recent interest in material culture emerged in the field of cultural studies and generated a number of accounts by scholars

¹¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912]).

¹² Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990 [1923]).

¹³ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1968 [1940]): 89.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Kabyle House or the World Inversed," in *Algeria 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 133-53.

who analyzed objects as tools for subverting social relations or as vehicles through which people constitute identities. But again, even Arjun Appadurai, known for his discussion of “the social life of things,” did not seriously treat objects as social players despite his analysis of how circulation of objects and the regimes of value that arise from this affect social relations. He insisted on -- what he termed -- “methodological fetishism,” a phrase identifying his position that would invoke following things in their forms, uses, and trajectories, to say at the end that:

*It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.*¹⁵

These works have undeniably put foundation for the contemporary interest in materiality but, perhaps with the exception of Marx, they did not push the question of how exactly objects participate in the world far enough.

A number of writings produced over the past fifteen years have picked up the challenge to draw attention to the things themselves. Several have paid particular attention to the material qualities of objects and their effects¹⁶ and others have emphasized the need to reevaluate our

¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [1986]): 5

¹⁶ Tim Ingold, “Materials against Materiality,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 14, no.1 (2007): 1-16. Lorraine Daston, *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (NY: Zone Books, 2004). Webb Keane, “Signs are Not the Garb of Meaning; On the Social Analysis of Material Things,” in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 182-205. Webb Keane, “Subjects and Objects,” in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Y. Tilley et al. (London: SAGE, 2006): 198-202. Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Webb Keane, “On the Materiality of Religion” *Material Culture* 4, no 2 (2008): 230-231. Daniel Miller, ed., “Why Some Things Matter,” in *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 1-21. Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008). Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

thinking about the place of things in everyday social life.¹⁷ Rather than analyzing objects as a means to social ends, they attempt to problematize our relationship to/with objects. Their concerns are captured by Bjornar Olsen's critical assessment of scholarship on material culture, who provocatively states that he is tired of the common narrative on how the social world constitutes the world of objects, and weary of the tendency to overemphasize human agency over things. Therefore, he suggests that anthropologists start paying more attention to the material component of our world and what it does to humans.¹⁸

Bruno Latour in particular has been telling us for quite a while now that objects do not merely “‘express’ power relations, ‘symbolize’ social hierarchies, ‘reinforce’ social inequalities, ‘transport’ social power, ‘objectify’ inequality, and ‘reify’ gender relations.”¹⁹ Social theorists may think of them as docile but their action is more varied and their effect is much more ambiguous than such a narrow list of competencies would suggest. On the contrary, they may be at the origin of social affairs by actively participating in formation of assemblies of people and things. It is tracing these assemblies which allows us to see the kinds of agencies that make up the surrounding world. In other words, objects are as social as they are material, and they relentlessly (albeit without acknowledgements) contribute to building what we commonly call

¹⁷ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1(2001): 1-22. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Patricia Spyer, ed., *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1998). Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005). Michael Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Bjornar Olsen, “Material Culture after Text: Re-Membering Things,” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 36, no. 2 (2003): 100.

¹⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 72.

“the social world” even as they are commonly excluded from it by those who write about it.

Exclusion of objects as actors hinges on the assumption that “the social” is constituted by human intentional actions for which objects form only a backdrop. If this is not the case -- as Latour and others argue -- it is reasonable to ask what objects can do and how.

From the early anthropological writings on material culture we know that objects coexist in relationships with people. Missing from these accounts is the idea that objects have ability to make people do things. In practice, human dealings with things are much more intricate and symmetrical than the social theories would have it. Although objects cannot act intentionally, they do have agency that impacts our choices and limits our decisions. Accepting objects as agentive elements of the social realm has far-reaching consequences for the way we occupy and act towards the world we live in. Removing transparency of objects changes the way we grasp facts and understand objectivity, it slows us down in an uncontrolled and unreflexive proliferation of things, and engenders new kind of politics that, embracing objects as actors, creates space for hesitation regarding what it means to say “good”.²⁰ It also has consequences for anthropology of religion as it recasts in a new light the way in which religious and scientific truth are usually contrasted, one being thought of as “constructed” and the other not.

My dissertation aims at highlighting the moments in which the *mushaf* acts independently of or in addition to what the Quranic message produces. Let me be clear, though: I do not propose here some sort of idolatry or anthropomorphism in thinking about objects; I do not treat them as somehow willful. I am not trying to turn Muslim doctrine on its head and suggest that a *mushaf* takes precedence over the Quran. I am simply proposing an inquiry into how objects help

²⁰ Isabelle Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005): 995.

to construct the world in which we live. By “constructed” I mean make solid and durable. So instead of bracketing practices involving a *mushaf*, I foreground them to map out the material-social reality this produces. In this undertaking, I am led by concerns, problems, discussions, projects, agreements, and disagreements generated by the material form of the book and ask who is allied in these developments and what other actors are enlisted along the road, for as Latour says, “If you mention an agency, you have to provide the account of its action.”²¹ Tracing the associations between humans and other objects (and other non-human entities, Latour would add) that emerge thanks to the fact that the Quran is mediated not only through a sound but also via paper, ink, script, orthography, diacritics, and so on allows me to see what builds the world without deciding ahead of time what kind of reality is actually being produced: political?, economic?, religious? or something else? This way I do not limit my inquiry in advance: I do not constrain myself to fields that are commonly associated with the study of religious texts and media. As a result I extend my study to myriad technologies involved in disseminating the Quranic text. This move adds one more critical voice to speak against the popular myth of religion as the ‘other’ of modern media practice.²² In fact, as coming chapters will show, mediating the Quran has as much to do with technology as it does with theology.

Framing my project this way emphasizes one more peculiar characteristic of the reality about which I am writing: in practice it is much harder to say who is the subject of an action and who is its object. The familiar subject/object divide becomes much more fuzzy and hard to maintain when competencies are not distributed *a priori* to only a handful of actors. While tracking the connections, transformations, translations, and enrollments of actors in relation to

²¹ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 53.

²² Jeremy Stolow, *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the Artscroll Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010): 124.

the Quranic text, I follow three main groups of human-nonhuman networks. The first one consists, among others, of printing presses, fonts, moveable types, calligraphic styles, and people who work in the Quranic printing business. The second involves permits, orthography, religious pronouncements, governmental institutions, and the scholars who have much to say on the subject of the Quran and its material media. The third group of actors includes mobile phones, museums, radiocarbon dating, and multiple users of the Quranic text. Of course, those who produce *masahif* also use them, and those who define their graphic form in a sense produce them, so this tripartite configuration of actors is only provisional, helping to highlight situations in which the *mushaf* matters. This configuration also allows me to map out patterns of authoritative claims, practical concerns, economic interests, and personal piety, all of which have the Quranic text at their center.

So far, I have spoken of a material medium of the Quranic message without specifying what I mean by that. I have used a neutral word “medium” as it does not indicate what kind of a job a “medium” does and whether what it does has any consequences for what it mediates. But as the following chapters will show, it would be more pertinent to say that what we are dealing with here is a Quranic mediator, as oppose to an intermediary. There is a vast difference between the job performed by intermediaries and mediators, says Latour. Unlike intermediaries that can be ignored, mediators “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry.”²³ An intermediary can be easily forgotten, transporting meaning or force without transformation; a mediator always exceeds its conditions and its output cannot be defined by its input. In this sense, at times a *mushaf* acts as a mediator. Moreover, it is a complex

²³ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 39.

mediator, as one cannot always say for sure whether it is the paper that mediates the message?

The spelling? The script? All at once, or separately, at different times?

The complexity of the process of mediation has already been pointed out by Marshall McLuhan who saw technology -- and printed books among them -- as multilayered environments in which multiple media, like Russian Matrioshkas, “nest” in each other. “The ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium,”²⁴ proposed McLuhan, seeing speech mediated by script used in printing and reproduced through books as an example of such a conglomeration of media, each of which had the ability to introduce change into human affairs through its process of mediation. While McLuhan analyzed the effects of this mediation on a level of an individual’s perception, Latour is more interested in tracking how mediation of objects “glues” humans and non-humans together. They both however emphasize that the costs of mediation lie in the unpredictability of its results. Moreover, for Latour it is never certain ahead of time what and how will act but this uncertainty should not be seen by scholars as an obstacle. It only confirms that the reality constituted partially by objects is defined by constant movements, displacements, transformations, translations, and enrollments.²⁵ Tracing them makes *things* only more interesting; in the case of the Quranic text these movements, displacements, and translations have been at play for over a thousand years.

***Mushaf* in early Muslim texts**

In spite of the traditional emphasis on recitation, a written Quranic text has a place in

²⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: The New American Library, 1964): 23.

²⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 64.

well-known narratives about the birth of Islam. Apart from the accounts about the time when the Quran was written down for the first time, a *mushaf* appears in the story of the third Caliph, ‘Uthman Ibn ‘Affan, who is said to have been assassinated while reading it. This dramatic event is described by a collector of *ahadith*, Ibn Abi Dawud al-Sijistani, who writes “the Caliph fell mortally wounded by a sword, with his blood dripping on the verse: “...God will suffice you for them; He is the All-hearing, the All-knowing” (Q 2:137).”²⁶ There are also narratives that disclose the presence of *masahif* at crucial moments in the history of the early *umma* (Muslim community). Travis Zadeh, an historian of religion who traces early Muslim writings that mention material copies of the Quran, notes that “in the Battle of the Camel (35 AH/656 AD) and again at Siffin (37/657), *masahif* appear prominently. In the course of these separate battles, the raising up of Quranic codices (*raf‘ al-masahif*) is used to signify a move for arbitration. In the case of Mu‘awiya (r. 41-60/661-680) at Siffin, several traditions detail how his forces lifted the *masahif* on the tips of their spears to demonstrate their desire for a resolution to the conflict through arbitration based on the book of God (kitab Allah).”²⁷ These accounts date from the second and third centuries *hijri* (the Muslim calendar, counted from year 622) and although Zadeh is not entirely sure of their provenance they indicate that at least in the times when they were written (two to three centuries after the events they describe) the material form of the Quran had started to attract the attention of Muslim authors/chroniclers.

Material copies of the Quranic text not only participate in historical accounts of events that affected the shape and development of the Muslim community but also -- starting in the

²⁶ أبو بكر بن أبي داود (السجستاني) كتاب المصاحف، محرر محب الدين عبد السبحان وائظ (بيروت: دار البشائر الإسلامية، ٢٠٠٢): ١٤١.

²⁷ Travis Zadeh, “Touching and Ingesting: Early Debates over the Material Quran,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 3 (July-September 2009): 444.

second AH/eighth century AD -- they become part of the broader discourse defining and codifying the practice of ritual purity (*tahara*). The *mushaf* as an object of particular concern appears in a number of legal writings starting with the works of the Medinan jurist Malik Ibn Anas (d. 179/796), who quotes a story of a letter the Prophet sent to Yemen's governor in which he urges people to teach the Quran to others but notes that the person who touches it must be in a state of purity. This story is used as the basis of a legal pronouncement that prohibits an impure Muslim from carrying a *mushaf*, including carrying it by a strap, in a cover, or on a cushion. Zadeh suggests that this example -- as well as other pronouncements that prohibited the use of the *mushaf* in particular circumstances -- coincides with the beginning of debates on the nature of the Quran that by the early third AH/ninth century AD produced a particular religious genre called "*fada'il al-Quran*," the "excellent qualities of the Quran."²⁸ The writings of well-known scholars 'Abd al-Razzaq and Ibn Abi Shayba and later of Abu 'Ubayd Ibn Sallam (d. 224/838), Ibn Durays (d. 294/906), al-Mustaghfiri (d. 432/1040), al-Razi (d. 454/1062), and al-Nawawi (d. 676/1277) all included -- among narratives pertaining to the Quran -- passages referring to the use of *masahif* in different contexts. Dispersed in these writings are legal pronouncements concerning embellishments of the written text, the sale of *masahif*, sprinkling a *mushaf* with perfume, the use of *masahif* in the mosque and during the prayer, and, most notably, how to handle *masahif* properly according to the rules of *tahara* (state of ritual purity). A number of authors also addressed whether it is permissible for a non-Muslim to touch a *mushaf* and -- by extension -- whether a Muslim may travel with a *mushaf* to a non-Muslim land, where the book might be touched by unbelievers.

Legal discourses surrounding the corporeality of the Quranic text were by no means

²⁸ Travis Zadeh, "*Touching and Ingesting*," 448.

homogeneous, says Zadeh. In fact, they included a variety of conflicting opinions concerning what one is permitted to do with a *mushaf*. For instance, a few scholars -- including al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 110/728) and Abu Razin (d. ca. 90/708) -- argued that touching a *mushaf* in a state of minor impurity is permissible.²⁹ Others debated whether the use of proxy objects (such as cloth or containers) would change the requirements of *tahara* and if a menstruating woman (who in the consensus of many scholars is automatically in a state of major impurity) might handle a *mushaf* hidden in a cover, coming to the conclusion that this was not permitted. On the other hand, according to Ibn ‘Abbas, laying a *mushaf* on a bed where someone made love, sweated, or had nocturnal emissions did not violate the rules of *tahara*.³⁰ The examples are many but the injunctions suggest two things: one, that a book that carries the text of the Quran is somehow special, and, two, that it needs to be handled with care. Obviously, as Zadeh observes, such deliberation about the proper handling of Quranic copies would not make sense unless they took place in a society where a *mushaf* was already a common object of use.³¹

“Uncreatedness” of the Quran

Questions about the proper handling of *masahif* during the first few centuries of the development of Islamic tradition drew on much more consequential debates about the ontological status of the Quran. As the Muslim doctrine of *tawhid* -- the absolute unicity³² of Allah -- was taking shape some scholars became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that

²⁹ Muslims generally agree that there are two degrees of impurity: a major state of impurity (*al-ḥadath al-akbar*) and a minor state of impurity (*al-ḥadath al-asghar*). In order to remove the major state of impurity one has to perform *ghusl* (full ablution).

³⁰ عبد الرزاق الصنعاني، المصنف، جز كتاب الحيض، محرر ايمن نصرالدين الازهري، مجلد ١ (بيروت: دار الكتب العلمية، ٢٠٠٠): ٢٦٣.

³¹ Travis Zadeh, “Touching and Ingesting,” 4.

³² The word unicity (versus unity) puts an emphasis on uniqueness of Allah and his oneness.

the Quran, as Allah's eternal speech, resembled the Christian concept of Logos. They were also disturbed that this suggested that Allah could speak, uttering sounds like a human, and thus that he shared some similarity with his creation. To avoid any likeness of this sort, a group of scholars known as the Mu'tazilites proclaimed the Quran to be the *created* word of Allah out of the need to communicate with His creation. This opinion was unacceptable to scholars who did not want to compromise the uniqueness and authority of the Quran by putting it on the same level as the creation itself. The debates, which lasted for over a century, had political as well as theological ramifications, with supporters of both camps being prosecuted at different times and in different places. The arguments ended by the third AH/ninth AD century with the defeat of the Mu'tazilites' doctrine and the victory of those who thought the Quran eternal and who treated Allah's speech as one of his uncreated attributes. The crystallization of the doctrine of *tawhid* and of the ontological status of the Quran helped also to clarify the relationship between the message of the Quran and its human-made medium. A major fifth/eleventh century Ash'arite scholar, Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (419-478/1028-1085), articulated this affinity in the following manner:

*The words of the Exalted God are written in copies of the Quran, preserved in the breast, but they do not inhere in the copy nor subsist in the heart. The writing by which it [the message] is expressed, either through the movements of the person who writes or through inscribed letters and imprinted lines, is altogether temporally contingent. What the lines signify is the eternal speech.*³³

Al-Juwayni's position on the nature of the relationship between the text of the Quran and the Quran itself was shared by other scholars and became a part of the *'aqida* (creed) that has

³³ Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni *A Guide to Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief* (Kitab al-Irshad 'ila Qawati'l- 'adilla fi usul al i'tiqad) trans. Paul E. Walker (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2000): 73.

defined Islam to the present. Al-Juwayni clearly distinguished the temporal text of the Quran, “that which is between two covers,” and the eternal Quran, by stating that the *writing*, which is impermanent, points to what is *written*, and everlasting.

Although in theory the script in a tangible book only indexes an immaterial message, However, in the course of daily activities it is much harder to determine where exactly the divine message ends and the material object begins. Attention to the *mushaf* as a temporal “safeguard” of the Quran has continued among practitioners even though the need to theorize about them ceased to be important to Muslim scholars once the doctrinal principles had been established (around the tenth century AD). After this writing about *mushaf* became a part of normative literature (*sunna* [Prophetic tradition] and *fikh* [jurisprudence]); questions about how to handle a *mushaf* became a matter of personal piety.

An “invisible” object

Perhaps because of the absence of discussions of *masahif* in later Islamic literature and attention to recitation in general, non-Muslim academic writings are rather silent about the presence of *masahif* in the fabric of Muslim social life. There are only a few contemporary anthropologists who addressed *mushaf* in its material form: Gregory Starrett in his article on the Quranic text as a religious commodity³⁴, Anouk Cohen in her dissertation on reading the Quran in Morocco³⁵, Leslie Moore in her article on the physical handling and copying of the text in

³⁴ Gregory Starrett, “The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series 97, 1 (March 1995): 51-68.

³⁵ Anouk Cohen, “Book manufacturing in Morocco: Uses of Writing and Reading in Urban Environments.” Dissertation written at Paris Ouest-Nanterre la Défense University, 2009.

Qur'anic schools in Cameroon³⁶, and Kenneth George in his article on politics of Islamic art in Indonesia³⁷. The book carrying the Quranic text has generated much larger interest in in only two fields -- art history and codicology.³⁸ Art historians have long paid attention to the *mushaf*, extensively documenting the history of Quranic manuscripts, discussing the technology of their production, addressing the relationship between the materials used and the visual characteristics of Quranic codices at different points in time, and occasionally discussing the social relations involved in inscribing and distributing manuscripts. Art historians, however, have ignored undecorated (from their perspective “ordinary” or “ephemeral”) *masahif* written by mediocre calligraphers and pious laymen that nevertheless circulated among Muslims and were used in religious practice. Understanding these *masahif* for those who made and used them did not belong to the purview of knowledge art historians produced. Neither were codicologists inclined to analyze the materiality of the book in relation to its effects on the *mushaf*'s producers and users. Mechanically printed *mushaf* have received even less attention among academicians, as they do not seem to have much to offer anyone except a few historians of print.

A tendency to overlook the material medium of the Quran has been perpetuated in academia by a position that emphasizes the oral/aural features of Islamic practice, to the point of ignoring the book altogether. For instance, in his work on writing and authority in Islamic scripture, Daniel Madigan says:

“Islam is [...] characterized by an almost entirely oral approach to its scripture. One

³⁶ Leslie Moore, “Learning by Heart in Quranic and Public Schools in Northern Cameroon,” *Social Analysis* 50, no. 3 (Winter 2006): 109-126.

³⁷ Kenneth M. George, “Ethics, Iconoclasm, and Quranic Art in Indonesia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 24 (2009).

³⁸ A study of codices.

finds no physical book at the center of Muslim worship; nothing at all reminiscent of the crowned Torah scroll or the embellished lectionary. On the contrary, the simple ritual and the recitation of the Quran that forms part of it are carried out from memory. Even the prodigious effort of memory required to have the entire sacred text by heart is not considered at all out of the ordinary for a Muslim. To have to consult a written copy to quote the Quran is thought a failure of piety."³⁹

Such generalizations are in part shaped by an unstated comparison with images of the Bible held in the hands of Christian worshippers or, as in this example, by a more explicit contrast with the use of the Torah in Jewish ritual. But if Madigan's description accurately portrayed the role that memorization plays in contemporary Muslim practice there would be no need for ten million *masahif* to be published every year in Saudi Arabia alone, not including a few millions of copies printed in the rest of the Muslim world.

Clearly, printing as a medium in dissemination of the Quranic message plays an increasingly important role in the religious landscape of the Muslim world. Thus, my explorations in the materiality of the *mushaf* start with the arrival of printing in Egypt. Chapter one of my dissertation opens up a section entitled "The Makers" and tells a story of the first attempts to print the Quranic text under the rule of Muhammad Ali Basha and the subsequent concerns and problems that arose as a result of this decision. Over the centuries, the Quranic message had developed very characteristic forms of graphic representation that were disrupted by the new technology. The relationship between the Quran and its written text is a focus of chapter two. It allows us to understand better why typographic printing took off in the Middle East only at the end of the nineteenth century and why it was a particularly problematic technology when it came to dissemination of the Quran. Chapter three covers the more recent

³⁹ Daniel A. Madigan, *The Quran's Self Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001): 3.

developments in the history of the Quranic printing and reveals conflicting ideas about the role of *mushaf* as a commodity and a medium of the Quran. This conflict of interests is especially prominent when the Egyptian religious publishing market and its output is compared with the way the Quranic text is printed and distributed in Saudi Arabia. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, production of *masahif* in Egypt has been officially supervised by the University of al-Azhar. Chapter four opens up a second section entitled “The Custodians” and tells the story of the complex relationship that exists between the makers of the Quranic copies and the religious authorities who ward the message. The reasons for which the interests of those who produce the *masahif* and those who have authority over the text do not always converge are discussed in chapter five. In this chapter Muslim theology and practicalities of spreading the message mix together showing how dissemination of the Quran is a matter of constant negotiation and decision-making. Muslim scholars have valid arguments for keeping the traditional Quranic orthography in place, yet at the same time they are willing to reinterpret tradition to make exceptions. Chapter six speaks to a question of what constitutes a *mushaf* and why the Quran in Braille is rather problematic for Muslim scholars. Section three of my dissertation entitled “The Users” takes us into the realm of those who deal with *masahif* as practitioners. It starts with chapter seven that addresses the effects of printing on handwritten *masahif* and the ways in which they turn into “manuscripts” in institutionalized settings. Finally, in chapter eight I present various ways of enacting the Quran in practices of using it as an object. I conclude with a discussion of *mushaf* as a mediator of the Quran.

PART I: THE MAKERS

CHAPTER 1: THE BEGINNINGS

Bodies and Artifacts

On 1 July 1798, after a sea journey that lasted a little over a month, Napoleon Bonaparte reached the rocky shores of Alexandria. On the board of his flagship *L'Orient*, which was loaded with soldiers, gunpowder, personal luxuries, and scientific instruments, he also carried a stolen object. Only a few months earlier, in anticipation of the voyage to the land of his youthful fantasies and shrewd political calculations, the French general sent one of his *savants* on an important mission to Rome. Gaspard Monge was an accomplished mathematician and administrator whom Napoleon had charged with the task of bringing valuable artifacts and books lifted from the Vatican during the just accomplished, successful military campaign in Italy. He also asked Monge to bring something else that Napoleon thought he would very much need in order to govern his new subjects in Egypt: a printing press with Arabic letters. So it happened that the first letter-pressed Quranic verses in Egypt were most probably printed on a press stolen from the Vatican. Napoleon was not interested in religious proselytizing. These Quranic verses were published in 1798 as exercises for the Frenchmen who wanted to learn Arabic and were sold at a cost of twelve *midi* for regular paper and twenty for glossy.⁴⁰ Four years later, when the last defeated French soldiers embarked on British ships to return home (by that time their own

⁴⁰ ابو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق و لمحة في تاريخ الطباعة في بلدان الشرق الاوسط (القاهرة: المطبعة الاميرية بالقاهرة، ١٩٥٣، [١٩٤٢]): ١٩.

vessels were at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea), many of their possessions, instruments, and inventions remained behind, including that printing press.

This is not the orthodox story of the beginnings of the *mushaf*, the tangible book with pages and binding that carries the text of the Quran. In Egypt, as in other Muslim communities, the narrative of how the spoken text of the Quran was inscribed on a physical object starts at the moment in which the skilled and trusted scribe Zayd Ibn Thabit was given the task of collecting parts of the message revealed gradually to the Prophet Muhammad over many lunar years. These parts of the message had been recorded on pieces of parchment, leaves, and other materials, but had not been collated into one object. Here the story hesitates: maybe only Zayd assisted Muhammad in writing down revealed portions of the Quran, or maybe others aided him. The Ramadan lesson, printed in one of the major Egyptian newspapers, Al-Ahram, during the fasting month of 2010, teaches that the first compilation took place after the Prophet's death under the guidance of Abu Bakr, who was concerned about the casualties of war and the diminishing numbers of those who could recite the text from memory. This particular lesson ends with a discussion of the editorial efforts exerted by the third Caliph, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, who was one of the Prophet Muhammad's companions and took over leadership of the Muslim *umma* (community) twelve years after the Prophet's death. Upon hearing rumors about different ways in which the Quranic text was being recited in far corners of the caliphate, he enlisted Zayd Ibn Thabit's help in finalizing the compilation process to gather the Quranic text in one authorized codex. Then he ordered the burning of any text - presumably, recorded by some of the followers - that did not follow the version Zayd produced and was not confirmed by other companions of the Prophet.

This is the canonical story of the beginnings of the *mushaf*. Picking up its history at this

point would lead me into the murky terrain of academic discussions of historical truth and veracity in which Western scholars have various stakes. Talking about origins of anything that pertains to religion inevitably leads to debates of facts versus beliefs, because for many nonbelievers and believers alike the need to impose a test of credibility on certain events and narratives is crucial. Participation in such disputes, although expected from someone interested in the Quran, would divert me, however, from the tangible, present-day ubiquity of printed Quranic texts. As Travis Zadeh points out, investigations into when the event took place or how it proceeded - for instance, whether the first *mushaf* was assembled during the Prophet's life time or after - are "mired in the very epistemological positivism necessary for such endeavors."⁴¹ They also direct our attention away from what the *mushaf* as an object does to those involved with it today, as practitioners, manufacturers, and scholars (Muslim and non-Muslim), and what concerns, aesthetic pleasures, and deliberations it produces in the course of its use. I have to admit that my interest in the early history of *masahif* goes only as far as its invocation in the present. This story of the *mushaf* does not aim at a full chronology of its past.

For these reasons, I link the history of the *mushaf* to a very different constellation of events that highlight in a practical manner the untidy relationship between text and thing. That constellation, it seems, has not left many traces in the collective memory of contemporary Egyptian Muslims, having been slowly buried under the weight of affairs of the past century. It has not been particularly significant for non-Muslim scholars interested in the Quran either, for very different reasons. Yet, if we trust Marshal McLuhan's insights about the consequences of the medium for the message it mediates, it may have had a great deal of consequence for Muslim

⁴¹ Travis Zadeh, "Touching and Ingesting, 444.

practitioners who rarely hold a handwritten *mushaf* in their hands any more. For over a hundred years now, it has been a very different kind of book – a mechanically reproduced one.

“History begins with bodies and artifacts,” says anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot.⁴² Taking this statement as my guide, I examine how these concrete entities - bodies and artifacts – instigated changes that made printed *masahif* ubiquitous elements in Egypt’s religious landscape. I also want to let archives and historical records reveal the decisions that created conditions of possibility for the following encounter to occur over a century later. This encounter took place some years ago, before the upheavals of 2011, when Egyptian peddlers were still hurling jokes at each other in the streets, rather than stones and homemade explosives. I was in an old mosque, one of those timeworn structures that tourists are allowed to visit “after hours,” polluting it with the modern ambivalence of the spectator. There was a tomb there behind ornate bars, covered in green fabric and artificial flowers, and ringed by a guarding circle of open, upright *masahif*. I was curiously walking around the tomb, trying to peek through the latticework to see what verses of the Quran the *masahif* were open to. In my circumambulation, I passed an older man in a long beige tunic and a grey shawl wrapped around his head, who seemed to be snoozing in the corner of the room with an open *mushaf* on his lap. During one of my circuits the man opened his eyes, looked at me and gestured me to come closer. I remember a flash of surprise when he placed his *mushaf* over my head, smiling encouragingly, and murmured a little blessing. I wonder: would it have been possible for this somewhat shabby looking man to bless visitors to the tomb with his own *mushaf* two centuries ago?

So where does *this* story begin? What is responsible for the change that allowed my

⁴² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995): 29.

shabby friend to snooze in the corner of the mosque with his own copy of the Quranic text on his lap? I start with an unlikely actor - the printing press - because, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot says, we should not “exclude in advance any of the actors who participate in the production of history.”⁴³ Although Trouillot does not include here things as historical agents, if we agree that objects can act then they cannot be omitted from accounts of the past. So here is the beginning of the story I offer.

Early printed *masahif* in Egypt

After the last French troops left Egypt in 1801, the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul, Selim III, tried to re-establish control over the country. He thought it would be a good idea to send the energetic and ambitious Albanian-born commander Muhammad ‘Ali Basha al-Mas’ud ibn Agha to re-occupy Cairo after Napoleon’s withdrawal. Muhammad ‘Ali turned out to be so successful in his mission that he soon managed to become a *wali* (governor) and in 1805 forced the Sultan to acknowledge him as a viceroy only nominally subordinate to Istanbul. ‘Ali sought to turn Egypt into a military stronghold, matching the powers of the European states. Memory of Muhammad ‘Ali as a well-organized but ruthless military leader has morphed over time into that of an enlightened ruler and founder of the modern Egyptian state; he is introduced as such to those who come to admire his headquarters in the Salah al-Din Citadel towering majestically over old Cairo. But, ‘Ali’s interest in military power can be seen not only in the improvements he made to the interior of the citadel which he also generously splashed with the blood of his Mamluk opponents in 1811. Sometimes particles of the forgotten find their ways into present consciousness in the form of contingent knowledge expressed by unexpected interlocutors. In the

⁴³ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25.

course of a chance conversation about the first printing press in Egypt with a taxi driver on my way to the library, I heard an unanticipated assertion that questioned ‘Ali’s popular image. The driver had a degree in history from Cairo University and drove the taxi as a second job. He was convinced that the radical modernization of the country carried out by Muhammad ‘Ali was not intended to improve his subjects’ situation but merely to create an efficient army for his own less altruistic purposes. He agreed, though, that ‘Ali’s robust military reforms required introducing new technology and organizing military schools, which, in turn, needed textbooks. These were to be speedily provided through the industrialized printing that had just made its way more decisively into other Middle Eastern regions, in particular Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria.

By 1815, Muhammad ‘Ali had sent a delegation headed by Niqula al-Masabki to Milan in Italy to learn the principles of printing.⁴⁴ A few years later, the same delegation was able to establish an official Egyptian governmental print house named *Matba‘at Bulaq*.⁴⁵ Historians disagree about whether its founders used Napoleon’s ex-printing press or not. But one thing is certain: the old walls of the governmental printing establishment no longer remain where they were built. Since 1822, when the printshop issued its first book (an Italian-Arabic dictionary), it has changed not only its location but also its name. It is now known as al-Amiriya and its original printing machines are long gone. What is left of the nineteenth century equipment is now part of an exhibition at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, an institution meant to replicate the fame of its renowned antecedent, burned almost two millennia ago. There the remnants of Bulaq’s

⁴⁴ Muhammad ‘Ali had to look for assistance in establishing his new printing press. Italy was close, militarily nonthreatening, and had a long history of printing in Arabic. ‘Ali might have also been familiar with the Muteffarrika Press in Istanbul that printed manuals, governmental publications, and dictionaries used for translation of foreign works pertaining to development and state organization. Perhaps, following the Turkish example, he chose to print first the Italian -Arabic dictionary as a tool for bringing into the country literature he needed to further his projects of modernization and administrative growth. J.R. Osborn, personal communication, May 2014.

⁴⁵ اسماعيل سراج الدين و خالد عزب، وعاء المعرفة: من الحجر إلى النشر الفوري (الاسكندرية: مكتبة الاسكندرية، ٢٠٠٧): ٨٣.

printing presses -- blocks of letters, lithographic stones, a few machines -- participate in a display that endorses a discourse of successful modernization as exemplified by the development of bookmaking in Egypt. While visitors may see these objects in the Library's display hall as a sign of advancement, I suggest thinking instead of what happened as they produced a *mushaf* very different from those guilds of copyists and decorators had manufactured in the past.

Publishing the Quranic text was not 'Ali's priority. The first publications of his official print house (it seems that there were also other print houses established soon after Bulaq and working for the schools of medicine and engineering) were directly related to 'Ali's project of developing a modern and efficient army. Translated mainly from the Italian, Bulaq textbooks provided practical knowledge for military professionals. The decision to print the text of the Quran came only a decade later and was most probably dictated by a need to teach a new cadre of soldiers to read. This decision was likely influenced by the Middle Eastern tradition of using the Quran as a primary text to teach literacy.

These two editions of the Quranic text produced in Egypt -- fragments of the Quran printed as lessons in Arabic for Napoleon's French soldiers and the verses printed at Bulaq for 'Ali's Egyptian soldiers -- do not, however, represent the first ever mechanically-reproduced copies of the Quranic text. There had been much earlier attempts in Europe to publish the text of the Quran. In 1537 in Venice, the father and the son Paganino and Alessandro Paganini printed out a complete copy of the Quran, perhaps for Christian missionaries or perhaps even for sale in the Muslim world. Sheila Blair, a well-known historian of Islamic calligraphy, concludes that this non-Muslim edition was neither a success among Christians nor among Muslims. (Although Sobhi al-Saleh, professor of Islamic Studies and Philology at the Lebanese University, suggested

that it was the Christian authorities that banned the Paganini's *mushaf* from the market.⁴⁶⁾

Looking at the copy from an aesthetic perspective, she judges the typeface ungainly. Across the board, the script exemplified "the difficulty typesetters had in reconciling the exigencies of setting type on a line with the piling up of letters in Arabic."⁴⁷ (Arabic letters overlap and run on a page in a cascading pattern, instead of laying flat on the line.) All in all, the Paganinis' venture failed to produce a satisfying copy of the Quranic text. Subsequent editions made in Hamburg (1694), Padua (1698), and Saint Petersburg (1787) gained no popularity among Muslims either. Nevertheless, efforts to produce acceptable copies continued until World War I, when European editions began to be replaced with *masahif* printed in the Islamic world.⁴⁸ Why copies made outside the Muslim world did not become popular will become clear below.

Ironically, these unsuccessful attempts by non-Muslim advocates of print are much better documented than the early efforts of those to whom the text belonged. I cannot claim that my record of events in Egypt is complete. There are gaps and contradictions, the result of conflicts, politics, and the limitations of human memory. Documents that would allow glimpses of that period are rare and scattered. The archival passion so well known to Europeans (and perhaps Chinese) has not feverishly consumed this part of the world yet and led people to produce equally large repositories of fragmented pasts. On the other hand, Egyptian political changes that shifted the country's position from that of a semi-independent Turkish province, to a colonial protectorate, to a nominally independent kingdom and then a military regime, did not always secure a long-lasting interest in the preservation of materials documenting the deeds of

⁴⁶ صبحي الصالح، مباحث في علوم القرآن. دار العلم للملايين (بيروت، ١٩٧٧ [١٩٥٨])، ٩٩.

⁴⁷ Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006): 29.

⁴⁸ Michael W. Albin, "Printing of the Quran," in *Encyclopedia of the Quran*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001): 265.

predecessors. What is left, at least in connection to the printing of *masahif*, can often be found in the margins of records of other, more pressing affairs. Some dates and descriptions of events come from secondary sources, additionally mixing up the layers of historical accuracy, personal endorsements, and interpretations. And so my story continues, propelled by choices in the end somewhat arbitrary, dictated by chance encounters and a network of people and objects of which I happened to become a part.

Printing at Bulaq

Al-Waqa'i'a al-Masriya (Egyptian Affairs) was a daily newspaper established by Muhammad 'Ali in 1828 to inform elites about the doings of his government. Today it has become a treasured source of historical information on nineteenth-century Egypt and a pearl of early journalism in the Middle East. It was Dr. Khaled 'Azzab, co-author of a book on the history of print in the Middle East⁴⁹ and Head of the Media Department and Deputy Director of the Calligraphy Center at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, who first mentioned to me a note printed in an early issue of *Al-Waqa'i'a al-Masriya*. He could not remember the date, but he thought that it confirmed Muhammad 'Ali's decision to print the Quranic text at Bulaq. Among many vague or forgotten traces of the transition of Quranic verses from handwritten to mechanically produced objects, a reference in *al-Waqa'i'a al-Masriya* appeared unequivocal and easily accessible. Or so I thought. Finding facts that line up in a neat fashion -- a process that appears so smooth and logical in finished texts -- comes to be that way only retrospectively. In practice, it is a messy undertaking full of failures and surprises. A copy of *Egyptian Affairs* was listed in the catalogue of the Egyptian National Library to which I was a frequent visitor. I did not imagine that it would

⁴⁹ اسماعيل سراج الدين و خالد عزب، وعاء المعرفة: من الحجر إلى النشر الفوري (الاسكندرية: مكتبة الاسكندرية، ٢٠٠٧).

take two months before I could find this short paragraph:

Mahmud Agha, the supervisor of the school gave a presentation to the Council of Army [that supervised Bulaq], in which he was asked about the amount of what is necessary for the students of the aforementioned school when it comes to the parts of the Glorious Quran and other supplies. He replied that they need four complete readings of the Quran and sixty sheets. The members of the Council said that this proposal should be signed by his excellency the supervisor of army, Bak Afandi, and directed to 'Omar Afandi, the supplies manager, to provide students with the previously mentioned items, as they are needed for their education.⁵⁰

This memo (somewhat equivocal in its content⁵¹) as well as another governmental document issued a year later (in which the actual printing of the Quranic text is mentioned explicitly), persuaded Egyptian historian Abu al-Futuh Radwan that by April of 1833 Bulaq had released a first local, mechanically reproduced text of the Quran in Egypt.⁵² Perhaps, it was not a complete *mushaf* but only its parts -- splitting the text of the Quran into even parts was and still is an established practice to make handling the text more convenient. This printed Quranic text was meant for pupils in the governmental school, and maybe also sold to the general public. At any case, the first domestic printing, as in Istanbul and a few other places, caused concerns among Muslim scholars. Egyptian religious authorities issued *fatawa* (plural of *fatwa*, a religious opinion or verdict on a particular matter) critical of the practice of printing rather than writing the Quranic text by hand. Abu al-Futuh Radwan notes

⁵⁰ محمود أغا ناظر القلمخانه قدم عرضاً لمجلس الجهادية مضمونه أنه سنل عن كمية ما يلزم لتلاميذ القلم المذكور من أجزاء القرآن الكريم ومن سائر اللوازم، فأجاب بأنه يلزم لهم أربع ختمات وستون لوحاً. فقال أهل المجلس: ينبغي أن يحرر علم من طرف حضرة بك أفندي ناظر الجهادية إلى عمر أفندي ناظر المهمات بأن يصرف الأشياء المذكورة للتلاميذ حيث كانت لازمة لهم. الوقائع المصرية، العدد رقم 338 الصادر في 4 شعبان 1247هـ/8 يناير 1832م.

⁵¹ The word *lawh* used in the original text has many meanings and does not necessarily mean *printed* sheets. It can also mean tablets. On the other hand, the word *khatma* means a complete *reading* of the Quran, and may refer to a handwritten *mushaf*.

⁵² اسماعيل سراج الدين، مطبعة بولاق (مكتبة الاسكندرية: الاسكندرية، ٢٠٠٥): ٢٧٨.

If al-Azhar scholars forbade printing religious books, they would make prohibition to print the Quran their priority. And indeed, printing of the Quran remained prohibited under fatawa of the scholars for a long time during the reign of Muhammad 'Ali. This [decision] was based on flimsy arguments, such as incompatibility of printing machines with the [requirements of] tahara, lack of permissibility to press the verses of Allah with the metal machinery, and a likelihood of error in the process of printing.⁵³

Evidently arguments against the use of new technology to disseminate texts that pertained to Islam were not “flimsy” in the eyes of the Turkish scholars who also forbade printing of the Quran, as well as *tafsir* (explanations of the Quranic text), *hadith* (narratives about the deeds and saying of the Prophet Muhammad), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *kalam* (a branch of Islamic theology), all of which usually contained considerable portions of the Quran. The prohibition was upheld until the first half of the nineteenth century⁵⁴ although printing other materials had been permitted since the early 1700s. Muslim authorities clearly viewed the printing press as *bid'a* (an innovation of an unreliable character) and they were -- justifiably as we will see later -- worried that the use of machines could distort the text. The issue of *tahara*, purity, was also significant: not only should a person copying the text be in a state of personal purity but also the place and objects used in the process of copying traditionally had been surrounded by constraints. So, for instance, the 1833 document that directly addressed the question of printed *masahif*, requested investigation of a very concrete problem,

In regard to the occasion of printing the noble mushaf, it is needed to recruit a head of

⁵³ إذا كان علماء الازهر قد حرّموا طبع كتب الدين فقد كان أولى بهم أن يحرموا طبع القرآن. وقد ظل طبع القرآن محرماً بمقتضى فتاوى العلاء الى تاريخ متأخر من عهد محمد على. كان ذلك بناء على حجج واهية كنفادة مواد الطبع للطهارة، كعدم جواز ضغط آيات الله بالآلات الحديدية، وكاحتمال وقوع خطأ في طبع القرآن. ابو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق، ١٩.

⁵⁴ Ibid ٢.

*the press and ask him whether some parts of the press are made out of canine skin or not, and send a report about it to Ḥabīb Afandī, by the end of Dhū al-Qa‘ada 1248 (30th of April, 1833).*⁵⁵

The authorities wanted to know the type of materials out of which the printing machine was built to exclude the possibility that the text might come into contact with items such as the skin of dogs, animals that, according to some *ahadith*, were impure. The wording in this document also suggests that this time it was printing of a complete *mushaf*, not parts, that needed to be supervised. The permission to print, which Muhammad acquired from religious authorities at al-Azhar, was not given without qualms. As chronicled by Andrew Archibald Paton, a British traveller to Egypt, it seems that arguments about the prudence of this action continued for a while, even though the Mufti of Cairo, sheikh al-Tamimi, put his seal on it at Muhammad ‘Ali’s request. In this way ‘Ali ensured that the *mushaf* was officially approved and would, in fact, sell.⁵⁶ The *mushaf* printed under the rule of Muhammad ‘Ali was, nevertheless, criticized for printing mistakes. According to Abu al-Futuh Radwan, the book was finally banned from circulation in 1853 on the order of Muhammad ‘Ali’s grandson, Viceroy ‘Abbas I, who ruled Egypt from 1849 to 1854.⁵⁷ In spite of this prohibition, the authorities were not able to curtail trade in printed *masahif*; copies continued to circulate. A year later, another decree was issued by the governorate of Alexandria. It stated

⁵⁵ انه بمناسبة طبع المصحف الشريف يلزم استقدام ناظر المطبعة وسؤاله عما إذا كانت بعض اجزاء المطبعة مصنوعة منجلد الكلب أم لا وترسل الإفادة عن ذلك الى حبيب افندي في آخر ذى القعدة سنة ١٢٤٨ (٣٠ ابريل سنة ١٨٣٣) دفاتر المعية بتركي، دفتر رقم ٥٥، وثيقة رقم ٥٣٧، ص ٩٤، محفوظات عابدين. واستشهد في: ابو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق، ٢٧٩.

⁵⁶ Andrew Archibald Paton, *A History of the Egyptian Revolution, from the Period of the Mamelukes to the Death of Mohammed Ali; from Arab and European Memoirs, Oral Tradition, and Local Research* (London : Trübner & Co., 1870): 245.

⁵⁷ ابو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق، ٢٨.

*The printed masahif that contained numerous mistakes and misspelling in multiple places have been forbidden to buy and sell. Therefore disposing of them in a religiously proper manner is legal. In regard to those who own such masahif or possess them, they should be punished in proportion to their offense [determined after investigation].*⁵⁸

And so, printed *masahif* were confiscated and collected at the Ministry of the Interior⁵⁹ but, as Abu al-Futuh Radwan records, there was a problem with “disposing of them in a religiously proper manner.” Perhaps nobody was sure what to do with them; for the next four years they lay stored in the ministry’s warehouse. The problem continued through the reign of ‘Abbas I’s successor, Viceroy Sa‘id Basha, who ruled Egypt and Sudan from 1854 to 1863. Upon inquiry from the Ministry of Interior in 1858 about what to do with the confiscated *masahif*, Sa‘id Basha decided to appropriate some of them for students in the military school. He consulted the ‘*ulama* (religious scholars) who recommended corrections to the existing copies before their dissemination. So fifty-two *masahif* were sent to the military school and revised there for the use of the pupils. Then a qualified governmental employee who memorized the Quran and copied the work of Ibn Khaldun, calligrapher sheikh ‘Abd al-Baqi al-Jari, was charged with the task of correcting the remaining 217 copies. The cost of these corrections was 4,890 piasters.

Confiscation of the *masahif* caused friction between their owners and the government. Radwan tells us a story about al-Hajj Amin and al-Hajj ‘Uthman who requested the return of 134 confiscated copies. Their representative, al-Hajj Hasan, argued at the Ministry that they should receive their *masahif* back without having to pay the 2800 piasters it would cost to correct them.

⁵⁸ إن المصاحف المطبوعة منع بيعها وشراها لكثرة غلطاتها ولحانتها وتحريف كتابتها في جملة مواضع فيصير اعدامها بالوجه المستحسن شرعا. وأما ما يجري في حق من يضبط معه مصاحف مثل ذلك فما أن ما وجد معه من ذلك جرى مجازاته فهكذا إذا وجد أحدا معهم مصاحف مثل ذلك يجرى مجازاتهم بحسب ما يتضح. أفادة نمرة ٣٤٧ من المعية الكتخداوية لمحافظة الاسكندرية في ١١ شعبان سنة ١٢٧٠ (٨ مايو سنة ١٨٥٤) وجح ١٣١ دفتر مجموع أمور إدارة وإجراءات مجلس الأحكام ص ٢٦٤ محفوظات عابدين. استشهد في ابو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق , ٢٨.

⁵⁹ ديوان الداخلية

He claimed that his clients could take care of the mistakes themselves, presumably by asking someone else to correct them. The Ministry directed the case back to the Muslim religious authorities who declared that the owners of the *masahif* had not asked for the corrections to be done so they did not need to pay for them. Whatever *masahif* remained Viceroy Sa'id Basha ordered corrected at his expense and for the pleasure of Allah, before giving them back to their owners. Unclaimed ones were to be distributed in the appropriate (that is, "unadulterated") places for recitation and reading.⁶⁰ The records Radwan investigated are silent from that time on about disagreements concerning the early printing of *masahif*; the duplication of Quranic copies at Bulaq continued. Yusef Sarkis (1856-1932), a Lebanese scholar who moved to Cairo in 1912 and set up his own Maktabat (bookstore) Sarkis in the famous book street al-Fagala, mentions in his bibliography of early printed Arabic books editions of the Quranic text released at Bulaq in the years 1864, 1866, 1881, and 1886. He also names seven other private print shops located in Cairo that printed *masahif* at that time.⁶¹ There is no description of what the process of printing looked like in private print shops but at Bulaq the earlier concerns religious authorities voiced resulted in the creation of a separate space for printing *masahif* only. Radwan says, "Out of concern for printing the Quran it was decided to apportion a part of the printing house for special printing. It was known as 'Print House of the Noble *Mushaf*,' and there was an independent person in charge of it."⁶²

⁶⁰ ابو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق، ٢٨١.

⁶¹ يوسف إليان سركيس، معجم المطبوعات العربية والمصرية. الجزء الثاني. مكتبة الثقافة الدينية. ١٩٢٨، ١٩٣٠، ١٤٩٩، ١٥٠٠.

⁶² وقد بلغ من العناية بطبع القرآن أن خصص جزء من مطبعة بولاق لطبعة خاصة عرف باسم "مطبعة المصحف الشريف" وكان لها رئيس مستقل. ابو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق، ٢٨٢.

The problem of the “look”: effects of printing

At this point, it is worth asking what printing of the *mushaf* in Bulaq did. Did the government intend to assert its Islamic and administrative authority through printing *masahif*, as was the case in Turkey? What was the response of the broader Egyptian public to this transition? Did Egyptian voices echo those of Turkish Muslims, who saw it as a sign of cultural colonization and a threat of modernization?⁶³ Pondering power and the production of history, Trouillot says that “archival sources are (...) instances of inclusion, the other face of which is, of course what is excluded.”⁶⁴ Not surprisingly, we do not know much about the reactions of lay people to printed Quran. Egyptian archives - themselves a product of a modern preoccupation with advancement and melioration - annotate the transition to print as an instance of modernization and a triumph over the backwardness of past inefficiency. What is certain, however, is that without this transition Quranic manuscripts would not have moved into the realm of “tradition,” to what *was before* rather than what *is still now*. The Bulaq printing press transformed handwritten *masahif* into the relics of a revered yet non-modern past. As a long term result of this transformation, handwritten Quranic copies kept now in the Cairo Museum of Bab al-Khalq or Dar al-Kutub serve as proofs of Egyptian competence in protecting Muslim heritage. Dar al-Kutub is known for its publications on handwritten *masahif*. In 2011, its employees participated in the Frankfurt Book Fair, the biggest book and media fair in the world, displaying as one of their achievements a monumental survey of *masahif* preserved at the National Library. The newly opened Museum of Bab al-Khalq shows -- in the fashion of the best Western museums -- a collection of *makhtutat*

⁶³ Brett Wilson, “Quran after Babel: Translating and printing the Quran in late Ottoman and modern Turkey” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 2009): 27.

⁶⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

(manuscripts), with gorgeously illuminated and calligraphed *masahif* as part of the attraction. At Bab al-Khalq, these *masahif* are not Quranic texts as much as they are *makhtutat* - handwritten books that testify to the greatness of the past (I will develop this further in chapter seven). Perhaps, their fate would have been different had Muhammad ‘Ali and his descendants stood by the ‘*ulama*’s objections to print the Quran.

The decisions made at Bulaq and other Egyptian presses to use machines to reproduce of the Quranic text, although met with concern, were not an isolated phenomenon in the Muslim world. The first Muslim-instigated efforts to print the Quranic text in Turkey, Syria, and Persia also took place in the early 1800s, and were closely followed by print editions made in India, mainly in Lucknow (1850), Bombay (1952), and Delhi (1863).⁶⁵ Indonesia’s first printed copy of the Quran appeared in 1848 and it sold well.⁶⁶ In Morocco, print was introduced in the mid-1800s and included religious books from the start, but the first Quranic text only appeared in 1879. The title of “first” is, of course, elusive and likely to be questioned. The “first” print is such only until a new original shows up, changing dates and reassigning antecedence. I leave the task of establishing priority to historians. What I find more important in this inventory of dates is that although for a long period of time printing did not constitute a popular technology for the dissemination of religious texts, *masahif* in particular, once it happened printing quickly spread through the Muslim world. What is also interesting is that print editions relied on two very different techniques.

In Euro-American societies, we are mainly familiar with letterpress printing in which a

⁶⁵ Michael W. Albin, “Printing of the Quran,” 266.

⁶⁶ Ian Proudfoot, “Lithography at the Crossroads of the East,” *Journal of the Printing Historical Society* 27 (1998): 127.

movable type is arranged into the bed of a press, before being inked and stamped onto paper. For a long time letterpress or typographic printing was a practical and inexpensive way to multiply texts written in Latin script. Once missionaries and traders introduced this technology to other parts of the world, however, it turned out to be less effective for Arabic script. In some places, especially Southeast Asia, experiments with lithographic printing produced better results.

Lithographic printing was based on the chemical properties of oil and water, substances that repel each other. The image was not carved out but applied to the surface of a flat stone with the help of oil or wax, using specially prepared paper. Ink adhered to the greasy image and was repelled from blank areas by a thin film of water and a mixture of gum arabic and nitric acid spread on the surface of the stone. This kind of printing yielded smaller editions but allowed greater flexibility. Little print shops using a lithographic method mushroomed all over northern India and were primarily Muslim owned and operated.⁶⁷ “By the 1870s editions of the Quran and other religious books were selling in tens of thousand,” says Francis Robinson.⁶⁸ Unlike Egyptian and Turkish typographic books, lithographed publications in India and Persia from the beginning included religious literature and the Quran, although the *fatawa* issued by Turkish and Egyptian religious authorities to set conditions for printing religious books must have been known in other parts of the Muslim world. Eventually, lithography also made its way to the Ottoman Empire but it seems that it was not as commonly used as typography, in spite of its advantages for printing in Arabic script.

⁶⁷ Ian Proudfoot, “Mass Producing Hourī’s Moles, or Aesthetics and Choice of Technology in Early Muslim Book Printing,” in *Islam: Essays on Scripture, Thought, and Society*, eds. P.G. Riddell and T. Street (Leiden: Brill, 1997): 164.

⁶⁸ Francis Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 1, Special Issue: How Social, Political and Cultural Information Is Collected, Defined, Used and Analyzed published by Cambridge University Press (February 1993): 233.

Some interesting questions could be asked here. For instance, why was print technology welcomed in Muslim countries so reluctantly? Why, once introduced in Southeast Asia, was lithography so successful? Why didn't the Levant embrace lithography as eagerly as India and Iran did? Why did the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Maghreb continue to struggle with typography? The historians of print have addressed some of these questions. I will focus on those potentially relevant for the production of *masahif*.

It is likely that the distrust of Muslim scholars towards industrialized printing was entangled with the mundane demands of making a living, since many of them were calligraphers and artisans. In the Ottoman Empire, *if* a person owned a book it would most probably have been a *mushaf*. The copies that we curiously consume as spectators in Western museums are adorned masterpieces of calligraphic artistry. But museums do not display *masahif* written by average scribes, "who produced the unsightly and mediocre copies of the Quran that fill the back shelves of archives and libraries."⁶⁹ With the introduction of print, at least in theory, a person who did not have a thorough knowledge of the Quran could produce a printed *mushaf*. Thus, this new form of reproduction undoubtedly concerned those who had to master the text by heart to qualify as copyists. Still, qualms about the future of one's profession do not fully explain the reluctance which printing, especially of the Quranic text, met throughout the Muslim world.

Although the concerns of religious authorities might stem from distrust of the novelty of this technology and lack of familiarity with its applications, I suspect that the controversies over printing the text of the Quran might depend not only on the problematic conditions of printing itself, or on the threats it posed to those who copied by hand, but also on the relation of printing

⁶⁹ Brett Wilson, "Quran after Babel: Translating and printing the Quran in late Ottoman and modern Turkey" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 2009): 42.

to the past. The introduction of the printing press created an interruption in the chain of authority produced by generations of copiers who learned from their masters. Before print, what authenticated the accuracy of the text, whether written or recited, was the *isnad*, a method of transmission in which the provenience of a text was traced through a person-to-person, student-to-teacher connection. Printing disrupted such connections. Francis Robinson explains this predicament succinctly, if somewhat dramatically: “printing attacked the very heart of Islamic systems for the transmission of knowledge; it attacked what was understood to make knowledge trustworthy, what gave it value, what gave it authority.”⁷⁰ *Isnad* as an authoritative method for the transmission of knowledge was fundamental to the formation of Islamic law, theology and science. It was, and still is, indispensable for certification of the professional qualifications of reciters of the Quran. A professor of teaching recitation at al-Azhar proudly showed me his *ijaza*, a license to teach Quranic recitation and a proof of his *isnad*. It was a plain document, rather like a governmental booklet, a few pages long, that consisted of a long sequence of antecedent reciters, traced all the way back to the Prophet Muhammad. I found it interesting that this *written* document confirmed the credentials of a person who testified to the credibility of the text through its transmission through a chain of personal training and *memory* (a method known as *talaqqi*, in which student has to recite the whole text of the Quran to his sheikh teacher who can trace through the *isnad* his own teachers back to the Prophet Muhammad).

Nevertheless, the introduction of printing interrupted the *isnad* of person-to person instruction in calligraphy and writing. “With print,” suggested Wilson in his work on Turkish translations of the Quranic text in print, “the author of a work could still justify credentials via

⁷⁰ Francis Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change, 234.

the *isnad*; hence the content of the text maintained a connection to Muslim trajectories of authenticity. However, the method of textual *reproduction* via print could no longer trace its origins back to the early Muslim community, but rather to the fifteenth century Germany and the non-Muslim print men who developed that technology.”⁷¹ Printing is a technology of multiplicity and assemblage. Each *mushaf* produced by a less or more accomplished copyist was nonetheless singular and unique, easily checked for accuracy and completeness, and easy to correct if any mistakes occurred in the process of writing. A printed *mushaf* could multiply the same shape of a letter or a space between words - or a misspelling - hundreds of times. A missed word in a handwritten *mushaf* -- a rare event -- was added in the margin of the text. Correcting hundreds of copies carrying the same mistake defeated the benefits of fast multiplication. In this circumstance, the question of the text’s correct spelling was becoming crucial. How could the accuracy of a written text previously secured by *isnad* be preserved now? With printing as primary technology of dissemination, the graphic representation of the Quranic message was at risk.

The way the mechanically reproduced text looked also unsettled readers. The strangeness of printed *mushaf* became a problem, especially in areas where letterpress printing was more common. In the typography so prevalent in Europe, each letter was set separately. This method was not easily transplanted to places using non-Latin alphabets, especially Arabic. We get a glimpse of this problem of “look” from materials on print in Malaysia, where Walter Henry Medhurst, a nineteenth-century European missionary printmaker who worked primarily with typographic print, discovered that lithography was much more suitable for printing Malay, which was then written in Arabic script. This method allowed the printer to produce a whole page at

⁷¹ Brett Wilson, “Quran after Babel, 43.

one time using print that resembled handwriting. Readers found this much more acceptable.

Medhurst noted,

*The Malays have few or no printed books; and when they are presented with one executed by letter press, they find it altogether so unlike their own, and so foreign in its appearance, that they are inclined to reject it on this ground alone.*⁷²

This rejection was not surprising. Even a person who did not grow up intimately familiar with a handwritten Quranic text, could -- by looking at early printed *masahif* -- understand the challenge of graphically representing the Quranic text in print: artificial looking spacing between letters and words; awkward positioning of letters on the baseline; rigidity and disproportionate sizes of particular signs, diacritics above and below the line placed at the same unadjusted heights; and familiar ligatures and letter conjunctions oddly altered. These predicaments must have been even more obvious for those who for years incorporated a particular image of the text into the practice of reading.

We have more detail about efforts undertaken to produce manuscript-like *masahif* in Indonesia, where lithography was the dominant technique of printing. Ian Proudfoot, a historian of Asian print, tells us that Muhammad Azhari, a native of Palembang in south Sumatra, undertook printing the Quranic text in 1848.⁷³ It was the first book ever published by an indigenous Southeast Asian. He printed his *mushaf* on a press that he purchased in Singapore on his return from Mecca. He also brought along to Palembang a trained lithographer to help in his venture. Azhari's *mushaf* imitated manuscript conventions very closely, including handmade

⁷² Walter Henry Medhurst in *The Missionary Herald* 25 (1829): 192-93. Cited in Ian Proudfoot, *Lithography at the Crossroads*, 121.

⁷³ Ian Proudfoot, *Lithography at the Crossroads*, 127.

verse markers. Proudfoot says, “The degree to which he succeeded is indicated in the following description of his second edition by a contemporary Dutch scholar who made a visit to Azhari’s press,

The script is quite clean and neat, in the so-called Lahore hand... . The text itself is written in frames, in the usual way. The pages are numbered continuously by numerals at the foot; at the head of each page is the name of the Suraj [book]. The thirty Juz’ [sections] are indicated in the margin. The end of each verse is marked by a small golden circle above the line of script. The verses are not numbered, that practice occurring, if I am not mistaken, only in Qurans printed in Europe. On the second side of each leaf, outside the frame on the lower left hand corner, is the catchword (rakibah).”⁷⁴

Indeed, this description sounds much like a handmade manuscript although page numbers were a new addition. Of course, the text of the colophon printed on the last two pages of the 1848 edition would not appear in a manuscript either. The reason for placing it in this copy, says Proudfoot, was to make known Azhari’s religious standing and where he printed his *mushaf* in order to give credibility to the text reproduced through this new technology. Perhaps such information aimed to reassure the reader that the printing was done by a Muslim and according to the rules of *tahara*.

To begin with, this holy Quran was printed by lithographic press, that is to say on a stone pressing the handwriting of the man of God Almighty, Haji Muhammad Azhari son of Kemas Haji Abdullah, resident of Palembang, follower of the Shafi ‘i school, of the Ash ‘arite conviction [etc. ...] The person who executed this print is Ibrahim bin Husain, formerly of Sahab Nagur and now resident in Singapore, a pupil of Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi of Malacca. The printing was finished on Monday the twenty-first day of the month of Ramadan according to the sighting of the new moon at Palembang, in the year of the Prophet’s Hijra - may God’s blessings and peace be upon him -- twelve hundred and

⁷⁴ H. von Dewall (1857) “[Berigten:] Eene Inlandsche Drukkerij te Palembang”, Tijdschrift voor de Indische Taal- Land- en Volkenkunde uitgegeven door het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen, deel 6 / n.s. deel 3 (1857): 194 (Proudfoot’s translation) cited by Ian Proudfoot, *Lithography at the Crossroads*, 129.

*sixty-four, 1264. This coincides with the twenty first day of the month of August in the Christian year eighteen hundred and forty-eight, 1848, and the sixteenth day of the month of Misra in the Coptic year fifteen hundred and sixty-four, 1564 [etc. ...]. The number of Qurans printed was one hundred and five. The time taken to produce them was fifty days, or two Qurans and three sections per day. The place where the printing was done was the city of Palembang, in the neighbourhood of the Third Upstream Village, on the left bank, going upstream from the settlement of Demang Jayalaksana Muhammad Najib, son of the deceased Demang Wiralaksana Abdul Khalik. May God the All-Holy and Almighty bestow forgiveness on those who have copied this, who have printed this, and who will read this, and upon their forebears and upon all Muslim men and women and their forebears.*⁷⁵

Unlike *masahif* printed in Cairo during the reign of Muhammad ‘Ali, printing these editions became profitable; by 1854 Azhari had printed “several hundred Qurans, for which he finds ready buyers at 25 guilders per item.”⁷⁶

The importance of likeness to a handwritten manuscript may be seen in changes made to successive editions in Cairo and other places where typography prevailed. By the end of the nineteenth century the fonts on a printed page resembled calligraphy much more than the early ones did. Also, the late nineteenth-century editions mentioned by Sarkis were lithographed.⁷⁷ In Southeast Asia this imitation of handwriting was perfected over time to such a degree that a well-executed lithographic print edition could be mistaken for a manuscript. In the western part of the Muslim world, some improved over many decades, typographed copies started looking similar to lithographed ones. A century later, booksellers who trade old books at al-Azhar book market have difficulty telling whether some of the *masahif* printed in the first half of the twentieth century were lithographed or letter-pressed. I often heard a hesitantly stated guess: It looks very

⁷⁵ Ian Proudfoot, *Lithography at the Crossroads*, 127.

⁷⁶ H. Von Dewall (1857): 196-197 in Jeroen Peeters, “Palembang Revisited: Further Notes on the Printing Establishment of Kemas Haji Muhammad Azhari, 1848,” *International Institute for Asian Studies Yearbook* (1995): 182.

⁷⁷ عابدة إبراهيم نصير، الكتب العربية التي نشرت في مصر في القرن التاسع عشر (القاهرة: قسم النشر بالجامعة الأمريكية بالقاهرة، ١٩٩٠): ٢٢.

much like handwriting - it must have been printed “on a stone,” as they call the lithographic method. For booksellers as well as common users, a *mushaf* is *helu* (pretty, nice) if it looks like a manuscript. But they compare printed *masahif* from the turn of the twentieth century to contemporary handwritten and then reprinted through an offset method copies, not to the manuscripts written before the introduction of print. Ultimately, a particular look makes some *masahif* more acceptable than others. A 1905 copy that I found sandwiched between other religious books was “nice,” I was told, because the text looked as if it were penned by a calligrapher. An older copy, although neat and readable at first sight, was “not as nice” because the type looked “mechanical” and the letters lacked “character.”

The interplay between handwriting and its imitation works only for scripts that are recognizable and readable, which means the scripts that developed after the eighth-century, in which diacritics distinguishing letters and full vowelization are present. Undertakings such as the 1905 facsimile of the early handwritten ‘Uthmanic *mushaf* in St. Petersburg are not common. This large text reprinted in fifty volumes, “of which 25 were sold and the remainder presented to London, Afghanistan, Iran and other countries,” was a copy of a handwritten *mushaf* said to be one of the famous *masahif* made by the third Caliph ‘Uthman about twenty years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.⁷⁸ What is odd about this particular undertaking is that hardly anybody can read it other than a person who has memorized the Quranic text or is a Quranic scholar. The *mushaf* of ‘Uthman was written before Arabic consonants took their final shape; short vowels were not in their final form either. Therefore, *masahif* that were lithographed or letter-pressed at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries imitated the then-contemporary style of writing, which was visually very different from early seventh or eighth-

⁷⁸ <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/nominations/en/uzbekistan/uzbekistan.htm>

century script. The early twentieth century style is close to what one can find in a printed *mushaf* these days.

The look of an inscribed Quranic text derives from two elements: calligraphy and diacritics, making it visually distinct. The format of the Quranic text is so characteristic that even from afar it is not difficult to distinguish it from other printed texts. My friend Khaled forced me to notice this visual distinctiveness of the Quranic text when walking one day he suddenly stopped and leaned over to inspect a piece of paper sticking out of a heap of trash on the side of the walkway. Halted halfway through our conversation, I observed his attempts to pull a printed page out of the mound of plastic bags, metal cans, containers, rotting food, and rubble. The paper turned out not to be what Khaled expected. He tossed it. “I thought it was a passage from the Quran,” he said with relief as he resumed zigzagging between people and honking cars. “It is easy to recognize it, you know,” he added. What I also learned from my walks with Khaled and his explanations was that print allowed the creation of calligraphic styles that do not have prototypes in handwritten *masahif*. While calligraphies associated with *masahif* can be used in non-Quranic publications – for example, in book titles on the front cover – the reverse does not happen. Modern fonts are not used in producing a *mushaf*. I confirmed Khaled’s casual remarks later in my conversations with scholars at al-Azhar.

In the story of *mushaf* that I offer here, concerns by the ‘ulama’ over the use of new technology in the dissemination of the Quranic text, the aesthetic preferences of common readers, and efforts by printmakers to satisfy both -- scholars and users -- all intersect at the point at which the Quranic message is rendered in a graphic format as a text. The message/content of the Quran takes precedence but the “look” of the inscribed message affects responses. The way Quran is inscribed matters. There is a connection between message and inscription that goes

beyond customary efforts to make sure that the content is preserved correctly. The peculiarities of this connection are the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: TOPOGRAPHY OF THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Each written language has a topography that is reflected not only in the abstract notion of the alphabet but above all in the practice of producing a text. Script, apart from being a system of signs, encompasses also the materials used to produce it, the practices that make the signs appear, and an overall understanding of the role of writing as a form of expression. In the Islamic world, writing developed far beyond the needs of rudimentary communication. For almost ten centuries, it endured as art intimately connected to a spiritual worldview on one side and existing technologies on the other. The Quran was its primary object of beautification. Introduction of print drastically changed the topography of Arabic script, and printing the Quran limited the role of graphic representation to the utilitarian function of communicating the text's meaning. With the introduction of print, the Quranic text was to be read but not necessarily admired with one's eyes. This chapter aims to map out some characteristics of the topography of Arabic writing in order to convey the scope of change that took place with the introduction of print in the visual culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Muslim practitioners.

Calligraphy and script

In front of the National Library,⁷⁹ in the middle of a green lawn, there is a small, one room glass pavilion full of hardbound, heavy books stacked on shelves and tables. *Ustaz*⁸⁰ 'Adel sits at the big desk at the back of the room always surrounded by other workers, helpers and tea

⁷⁹ دار الكتب

⁸⁰ An equivalent of "Mr.", a common form of address.

makers. I met him for the first time while looking for Robert Solé's '*Ulama' Bunabart fi Miṣr* (*Savants of Bonaparte in Egypt*). Someone suggested that this French book translated into Arabic might contain a clue about what happened to the Arabic printing press Napoleon brought to Egypt. I asked for the book in many places. The last one was the General Egyptian Book Organization⁸¹ that sometimes held copies of publications already gone from other places. It was their pavilion that stood in front of the National Library. The book was not in stock but *ustaz* 'Adel promised to find it. Drinking hot, dark, strong, sweet tea we chatted about his unfinished degree in calligraphy. For in addition to his occupation as a manager of the center, *ustaz* 'Adel was also a *khattat* - a maker of *khatt*.

The multivolume *Lisan al-'Arab* – an Arabic equivalent of an unabridged Webster's Dictionary - defines *khatt* as lines written with a pen. But in contemporary Egypt, penmanship indexes the rapidly changing social position of professional calligraphers and the shrinking opportunities to train in this field. "Becoming a *khattat* requires time and patience," reflected *ustaz* 'Adel, sipping his hot tea and signing documents scattered on the desk, "now people are too busy." His words revealed more than just regret over the modern affliction of time shortage. Over the last fifty years, new technologies have pushed this previously widespread and indispensable activity to the peripheries. Employment opportunities for calligraphers have shrunk, partly because of the increasing numbers of literates in Egypt who do not have to use the services of a penman to produce written documents and partly because increasingly inexpensive mobile phones eliminate the need to communicate in writing. A convergence of education and technology might also explain the disappearance of "writing offices." In my neighborhood I came across only one, located in the most timeworn and least fancy part of Ma'adi. The office

⁸¹ الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب

was a single alcove slightly below the ground floor level, completely open to the street, and screened from it by a big desk that filled the whole room leaving just a bit of space for the person sitting behind it. The sign read: “Muhammad ‘Ali, calligrapher, writing documents and making signs.” Ironically, when I tried to call the number listed on the sign to make an appointment, a pleasant female voice told me that the number was out of service. I would have liked to ask Muhammad ‘Ali which calligraphy school he had attended and whether he, like *ustaz* ‘Adel and some others, thought his craft was in peril.

Some time later I visited Dr. Mustafa Muhammad ‘Omari, a calligrapher recommended to me by Munir who came to Egypt to study penmanship. Munir was interested in developing a computer font that would imitate some of the calligraphic techniques, an idea that Dr. ‘Omari abhorred, Munir warned me. I had with me a piece of calligraphy written by *ustaz* ‘Adel from the Dar al-Kutub bookstore. It turned out that Dr. ‘Omari and *ustaz* ‘Adel had been good friends at the calligraphy school. To make sure we were talking about the same person, Dr. ‘Omari said, “He smokes a lot, doesn’t he?” I laughed and said, “He smokes, all right.” Dr. ‘Omari welcomed me with most solicitous greetings. He looked to be in his early fifties, his hair peppered with gray. He wore glasses, a small moustache, and a trimmed goatee. He offered me tea and snacks, slightly upset that I had already eaten. To discuss his work, we set at the desk where jugs full of bamboo and reed pens surrounded a computer screen.

At home, searching for Dr. ‘Omari’s name on the Internet, I found a YouTube excerpt from a TV program in which he was interviewed on the subject of Arabic calligraphy. The excerpt was titled “Arabic Calligraphy in Danger”⁸² and came from a public Russian TV and news station, RTarabic, that broadcasts for the Middle East. The presenter introduced the topic

⁸² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yb_E55YOE uploaded on YouTube on July 24 2009.

“The art of Arabic calligraphy is an important part of the heritage of the Arab and Muslim culture with its roots reaching deep into the history. But this craft faces serious crisis in our contemporary times because of the lack of demand for its mastery and learning among the Arabs of different age. Our journalist, Amal al-Hannawi reports from Cairo.”

Then the camera entered Dr. ‘Omari’s office room, focusing on the numerous diplomas hanging on the wall and hundreds of books stacked tightly on the shelves and the pens gathered on his desk. He was described as a *khattat* who penned the Quran four times. He worked, said the reporter during a close up on Omari’s hand drawing the sentence “Allah is the light,” at a time when the art of calligraphy was threatened. “Calligraphy goes through a crisis. There is no close relationship between people and the language that naturally sustains calligraphy,” continued ustaz Omari. “There are no people who would defend it through an artistic engagement with it.”

His words echoed conversations with *ustaz* ‘Adel, who spoke ruefully about decreasing interest in penmanship. A few days after my visit to *ustaz* ‘Adel’s pavilion, I came across an article published two years before in the online English edition of al-Ahram, a government owned daily. Its author bemoaned the state of calligraphy in Egypt and disapproved of the irresolute posture of the Ministry of Education that sponsored events to propagate the art of Arabic calligraphy and, at the same time, without warning, limited admission to the main calligraphy schools in the city.⁸³ Apart from worries about the future of the school and, ultimately, the art of calligraphy itself, the article offered personal stories about those who managed to enter the program before admission was restricted. Among them was a fifty-four

⁸³ Sarah Eissa, “Killing Calligraphy,” *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, 16 - 22 December 2010. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/1027/fe2.htm> (accessed March 1, 2013)

year old jeweler, Nasser al-Shami, who, by improving his skills in refined writing, hoped to design more marketable jewelry. Perhaps, like many others in the jewelry business, he sought to emulate the iconic Egyptian designer, ‘Azza Fahmi, praised at home and abroad for her exclusive, calligraphy-inspired silver and gold ornaments. Al-Shami spoke about benefits of learning calligraphy, criticizing the street banners commonplace in Cairo. In his opinion, they had lost their artistic quality, particularly those designed by computer programs, because they cannot produce writing with the same visual appeal as those that are handmade.

The link he made between calligraphy and banners in the streets of Cairo did not surprise me. White sheets of fabric with all sorts of ads were common in the city and hiring men with good handwriting to make them was popular, as well as cheaper than hiring a computer designer. The number of white sheets floating in the air increased significantly in January 2012, around the time of the first anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. Banners commemorating the martyrs who died in clashes with the police, and in prisons the previous year, sprouted all around the city. I learned about the banner making business from Sa‘ad ‘Ali, a high school teacher directly affected by the Ministry of Education’s inexplicable decision; his calligraphy school had been closed before he managed to complete his degree. “To be fair, though,” he said, “these schools could have been a waste of money because few people applied for admissions.” Strangely, al-Ahram’s article claimed the opposite; it was hard to get accepted to the al-Saedia Calligraphy School in Cairo, the story described. Many students had to reapply and only two hundred were admitted annually after a very difficult entry examination. Sa‘ad lived in the remote suburbs of Cairo. Perhaps his school had not placed high in the ranking of places to study good handwriting? Was there not enough need for banner making in Tuh? While talking about his passion for calligraphy, and defending its importance, Sa‘ad informed me that “wealthy or well-

sponsored political candidates employ professional calligraphers to create eye-catching banners for their campaigns because people's eyes are drawn to beautiful handwriting." Such conversations about calligraphy and my experience of street banners made me think about the movement and flair of Arabic letters which were so easily written on long stretches of spacious fabric floating between buildings. Human creativity combined with the materiality of sheets and the movement of air produced a unique form of expression. In banners, the mechanics of writing became entangled with the physical qualities of the objects that bear the letters. Was this synergy palpable enough to explain why Sa'ad, like al-Shami in the article and like many others, thought that freehand banner calligraphy followed tacit aesthetic rules too complex to be imitated by mechanical typesetting?

In the same class with the jewelry maker was another student, 'Ali Mahmud. 'Ali did not expect to benefit economically from what he was learning but treated the process of acquiring calligraphy skills as a form of self-discipline and an activity that gave him personal satisfaction. "I'm learning something that I like," he told the reporter. "I feel the beauty and energy inside me, and I am also learning to draw by co-existing with the letters."⁸⁴ Unless English distorted their meaning (the article was published in English), these last words suggested a bodily disposition beyond my experience, but they also reminded me of another occasion when I saw a calligrapher writing the "*basmala*"⁸⁵ on a classroom blackboard. It was at a calligraphy workshop. Muhammad took the time to finish painstakingly every letter and every diacritic mark. I watched his body and hands move in slow motion as if the letters flowed from within him, through his

⁸⁴ Sarah Eissa, "Killing Calligraphy."

⁸⁵ A phrase *bism illahi ar-raḥmani ar-raḥīm* (In the name of God, the Most Merciful and Compassionate) commonly known as *basmala*.

arm and hand down to the board. His body seemed to remember not only each letter but also the motion that produced it. He was so concentrated on the cadence of writing that he did not hear the growing fidgetiness of his American students. The volume of conversations slowly rose behind his back but he did not stop until he finished the whole sentence.

While watching Muhammad, I pondered the idea of Islamic authenticity offered by a calligraphic tradition rooted in bodily training and artisanship that is missing from new techniques of textual reproduction. Handwriting the Quranic text was a technique of the body⁸⁶ combined with spiritual training. Religious education intersected here with bodily exercises that included the hand-eye coordination and breathing rhythm that correspond with the movement of the pen. Writing the text of the Quran was not only a profession but also a pious act that brought the writer personal blessings. Calligraphers like quoting the Prophet's words -- "Whoever writes the *basmala* beautifully will enter the Paradise"⁸⁷ -- and point to Quranic verses that mention writing: "Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that he knew not" (96: 3-5) or "Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea-seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the Words of God not be spent. God is All-mighty, All-wise" (31: 27).⁸⁸ Technology certainly thwarted this form of piety, as interest shifted towards the benefits of the text's fast multiplication. Before introduction of print, even laymen who had an interest in calligraphy could write the Quranic text for their own benefit and donate what they wrote to the

⁸⁶ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W.D. Halls. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990 [1923]).

⁸⁷ Saif-Ur-Rahman Dar, *The Roots of Muslim Calligraphy in Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan*. (Pakistan: University of Peshawar, 1981): 7.

⁸⁸ Transl. Arthur J. Arberry

mosque.⁸⁹ I have not heard of such copies being donated to mosques these days. Although it is unlikely that over the centuries every Muslim calligrapher and copyist treated his or her⁹⁰ profession with equal piety and wonder (most of the time making a living by copying Quranic text required relative speed), nevertheless, up to the present calligraphy has continued to represent for its practitioners a creative act that requires special manual skills and a particular predilection of mind. Reminiscing about his days in calligraphy school, *ustaz* ‘Adel evoked the visceral habits acquired through comprehensive training. He said, “Writing is connected with the state of mind. If I am angry I don’t write things in the same way.” After a pause, stretching in a squeaky chair and exhaling smoke from the cigarette nonchalantly stuck between the tips of his fingers, he added: “There is a secret in each style of calligraphy. There is an atmosphere in each of them.”⁹¹ One should not write before he learns about the secret of each style and immerses himself in its atmosphere.”

Noticeably, each calligraphic style has its own peculiar characteristics that often have been considered suited to particular genres of text. For instance, *naskh* and *ruqa’a* are quite plain, and easy to read or write fast. Students learn these styles in elementary school. *Naskh* also is the style imitated by print fonts and the most common form to find in books. In the past it was used in correspondence because of its simplicity and clarity without any particular emphasis. *Thuluth* is very different. Its extremely elongated vertical lines and narrow, upright letters give it a monumental character. Stately in its features, it requires more space and is often chosen for

⁸⁹ Such individualized products of personal piety can be viewed in the collection of manuscripts stored at Sayeda Zaynab Mosque in Cairo.

⁹⁰ History of calligraphy in the Middle East includes names of women from notable families who became famous for their artistic skills in copying Quranic text.

⁹¹ فيه جو في كل الخط

headings and more spectacular inscriptions. For instance, the confession of faith (“There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is Allah’s Messenger”) on the flag of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is written in *thuluth*. Arabesque-like and curvilinear, *diwani* is famous for its intricacy, its intertwined letters, and its use at Ottoman courts for secret messages hard to decipher by those who did not know the style. It is the most agile and vivacious of the main styles. With the expansion of Islam, the Arabic alphabet was adapted to the Persian language and in the process yielded the *nasta‘liq* style. Persian poets liked its thick and thin, diagonally running, “hanging” or “swooping” lines that save space horizontally and give the writing a rhythmic look. In Arabic, *nasta‘liq* is used to embellish book titles or, more recently, to fashion elegant postcards and posters with Quranic inscriptions.

The main calligraphic styles are products of different exigencies and conventions. They were designed for particular purposes yet disposed to evolve under the fickleness of calligraphic fashions and through the artistic sensibilities of individual masters. Each style developed variations, and each calligrapher could add to it unique features deriving from his or her own technique, while still preserving rules of proportion and spacing. These rules were dictated not only by the artists’ inspirations but also by the tools and materials they used. The size and shape of letters could be measured by the number and relative positions of hypothetical dots made by the nib of a pen. For instance, *alef* (long a) that is the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, looks like a single, long, vertical line. In the picture below, in the *naskh* style the length of the *alef* that begins the first line on the right should be no longer or shorter than five measures of the pen’s nib.

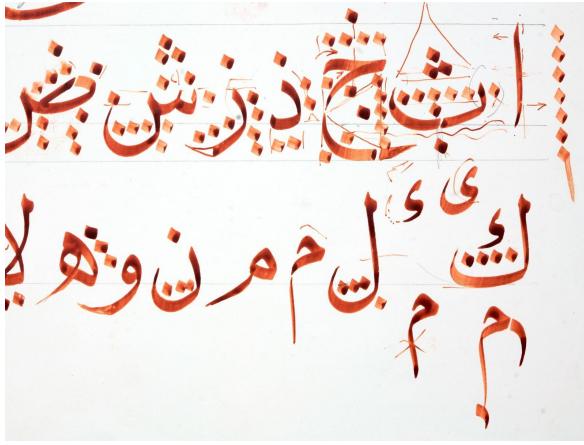


Fig. 1 Proportions of letters measured by the nib of the pen. (Photograph courtesy of Munir Sayegh.)

Another important element of each style was defined by the angle at which the lines were written. Whenever the letters followed more angular lines and were based on a square or rectangular grid, as in *kufi* style, the angle of parts of each letter was carefully calculated. In *kufi*, the complexity of measurements of the length and height of the letters, the angles at which they are drawn, and their thickness and thinness at different sections is remarkable. In another bookstore belonging to the General Egyptian Book Organization, located in an out of the way building behind al-Husseyin Mosque and called Bookstore al-Husseyin, I came across a textbook on *kufi* style and its variations prepared and drawn by Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Abd Allah (1917-1995), a professor of calligraphy in the College of Applied Arts who received his calligraphy diploma with honors at the age of eighteen. This amazing book contained over two hundred pages of calculations and patterns for letters written in *kufi* style and their Quranic variations. It also contained examples of ornamentation and particularly well composed pieces in other calligraphic styles. The descriptions of letters and examples were preceded by a short history of the most influential calligraphers in Egypt who were listed in a familiar fashion: a long sequence of teachers and their students who then became teachers as well. I have already spoken

about this form of authentication of knowledge. The introduction to the book by Awas al-Ansari, professor of calligraphy and teacher of Arabic language at Cairo University, suggested that despite being the oldest calligraphic style, *kufi* went through a period of renaissance in mid-twentieth century in Egypt through the teachings of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Abd Allah. Yet it was the only style which *ustaz* ‘Adel did not master and could not use to design cover titles for some of the books printed at *Dar al-Kutub*. He had left before the end of the fourth year during which students wrestled with *kufi*, which *ustaz* ‘Adel considered to be the least “atmospheric” on account of its angular features. But some calligraphers, such as Sa‘ad, thought it the most challenging style because of the precision of measurement and complicated calculation of angles that required using additional measuring tools. In addition to studying *kufi*, during the last year students practiced the rules of text ornamentation. Their final exam required procuring a small piece of calligraphy surrounded by a lacy frame of decorations. Elements of writing such as contour and flow of the line, proportions, elongations, tension and correct alignment were scrutinized by the examination committee.

Examples of *ustaz* ‘Adel’s writing lay collected in a small pile of papers on his large metal desk. Pushing away books and files, he pulled a set of bamboo pens from the drawer, carefully opened a little bottle of black ink, dipped the nib, and on a scrap of paper began to set down strokes of curvy, unwavering lines, running from right to left. With few exceptions, the line was unbroken like a ribbon of narrow black satin meandering on a white surface. He held his breath whenever his hand was in motion. *Ustaz* ‘Adel first wrote in different styles to accentuate the differences, stopping now and then and cautiously putting dots and strokes over and above the base line of writing. He was visibly proud of what he was doing. Distinctive, smooth lines crept from under his pen: tall and narrow, thick and stubby, or slanted with each word running

down at an angle like oblique traces of raindrops on the window glass. The movement of these lines depended on established characteristics of style, *ustaz* ‘Adel’s skills, and the width of the nib of the pen he held in his cigarette stained fingers. A few projects in *diwani* style on which he was working during my visits visually epitomized scholarship and aesthetics. They allowed the reader not only to enter a world of knowledge and erudition but tied the content of the book to an aesthetic experience of reading an artfully and studiously designed title. The level of one’s refinement was already tested at the moment that a potential reader looked at the book cover and could understand the words hidden in the arabesque of intertwined strokes pressed in gold on its crimson, indigo, dark green, or charcoal leather binding.

The connectedness of Arabic letters gives the writing its decorative quality and richness of form – a feature that had caused headaches to entrepreneurs of mechanical printing in Arabic. These dramatic effects are hard to achieve in the Latin handwriting, where letters forming words not only have two forms, upper- and lower case, but can also stand alone as individual graphemes,⁹² breaking up the optical flow of the line. In Arabic, with a few exceptions letters are not separated within a word, which means that they are always written in cursive. There is no block writing in Arabic, but to create desired aesthetic effects a calligrapher can alter spaces between the sentences, words, and a few letters that do not connect in some circumstances. Or, he can keep all the spaces the same, unlike the contemporary Latin script where spaces between sentences and words are larger than those between letters. As already mentioned, *alef*, a single, long, vertical stroke and the first letter of the alphabet that denotes a long vowel “a,” is the only letter that always stands alone. In the past, this exception intrigued Muslim linguists and scholars of Islam, who devoted monographs to this phenomenon and assigned to it spiritual significance.

⁹² A visual representation of the sound.

Also, the letters ز (zayn), ر (rayn), و (waw), د (dal), and ذ (dhal) connect only with the preceding glyph and leave a space between themselves and the consequent sign. But the rest of the twenty-eight letters of the alphabet always join preceding as well as following signs. Over the centuries, Muslim artisans have intentionally used the property of connectedness, creating artifacts that contributed to a religious-artistic tradition in which ornamental writing has been the main and sometimes the only form of decoration.





A calligrapher writing in Arabic is not constricted by the interruptions of punctuation used in Western languages that was introduced into Arabic writing systems only in the nineteenth century. In Arabic, there are other ways of directing a reader through the text: the end of one and the beginning of the next sentence are identified with the help of particular phrases. There are no capital letters in Arabic but, unlike Latin, an artist can additionally play with multiple shapes of the same letter. This is possible because, depending on its position within the word, each letter has three slightly different forms: an initial form that starts a word, a medial form within a word, and a final form at the end of a word. For example, the letter *sin* (equivalent to the English “s”) looks like this  in its initial form, but it looks like this  in medial, and like this  in the final form. Each letter also has an independent form when written alone (independent *sin* looks like this: ; this form is not used very often).



Fig 2. Letter ‘ayn in three positions. (Author’s photograph)

However, Arabic letters are very malleable so the same *sin* in the middle of the word can be written in different ways depending on the style, the calligraphers preferences, and the letters immediately preceding and following it. But, in whatever form, it is still the letter *sin*.

Apart from changing their forms, letters within words can be kerned,⁹³ stretched, shortened, or modified by a calligrapher. Some, like *sin*, are more prone to such adjustments than others. These modifications are done in order to achieve an overall effect of harmony and proportion, or, on the contrary, a dramatic look. *Kashida* (“long” from Persian) is one of the most common ways of altering the shape of a letter. In contrast to white space justification, which modifies spaces between words or individual letters, *kashida* involves stretching letters. Some letters are prone to stretch horizontally and some, like *alef* or *lam*, stretch vertically. And so the *basmla* I watched being written at a calligraphy workshop, visually composed of the four words

⁹³ Kerning means adjusting the spaces between the letters to achieve a visually pleasing result. In kerning letters can overlap their spaces so that the end of one letter is above or below the next letter.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ, becomes an inscription in which the tail of the letter *sin* is so elongated that it doubles the length of the whole phrase.



Fig. 3 *Basmala* with *kashida*. (Author's photograph and writing)

Another characteristic of Arabic letters appropriated by calligraphers is the similarity between some graphemes. For instance, the letters *ba*, *ta*, *tha*, *nun* and *ya* have the same initial and middle forms in the shape of a small vertical stroke, and are differentiated only by the number of dots placed below or over the stroke called *i'jam* (which mark the phonetic distinctions between consonants). There are other letters that have an identical base or “footing” and different numbers of dots. The shape of the letters predisposes them to certain transformations -- for instance an intertwining of *alef* ا and *lam* ل (“a” and “l”) into لا -- and calligraphers make use of this to develop characteristics of each style. *Thuluth* and *kufi* in particular like to play with combinations of these two letters.

Dots that accompany the “footing” of the letter and whose basic role is to distinguish between letters also serve a calligraphic purpose. In the picture above, initial letter *ba* starts the *basmala* (on the right side) and has a single dot below the short, vertical base of the letter. Precisely arranged dots can be used as an additional decorative element, like the single and double dots at the end of the *basmala*. The single dot over the *nun* belongs to الرحمن, second word from the end. But in the *basmala* above, that dot overlaps with the beginning of the last word

الرحيم, thus creating a bridge between الرحمن and الرحيم, and adding overall rhythm to the whole line.

In Arabic, as in other Semitic languages, short vowels can be, and usually are, omitted in writing and print. This “docility” of vowels is important for Muslim calligraphers and scholars. When written or printed, short vowels are represented by diacritical marks (*harakat*) above and below the consonants they follow. However, in certain cases their presence or absence has practical and theological ramifications that may lead to debates. To see why, it is necessary to take a small detour into Arabic linguistics.

Short sound “u” is represented by the comma-like mark called *damma* and placed above the letter (as in this example: سُ, where it is placed above the letter *sin*; together they represent the sound “su”). Short sound “i” is represented by a single oblique stroke called *kesra* below the letter (here *kesra* and *sin* س denote the sound “si”). *Fatha*, which looks like *kesra* but is placed above instead of below the letter َ, gives the short sound “a” (here, *sin* and *fatha* سَ represent sound “sa”). The grammatical structure of Arabic, which relies on a system of three (sometimes four) consonant word roots from which all other parts of speech (nouns, adjectives, adverbs) are derived, allows a writer to omit short vowels (*damma*, *kesra*, and *fatha*). All parts of speech, stemming from a root word (which is a verb in the third person of the past tense: he said, he slept, he came, etc.), follow regular patterns of consonants and long and short vowels, and native speakers easily recognize them in the context of a sentence. Therefore, printed Arabic texts skip the short vowels that are, nevertheless, vocalized in speech or reading aloud. For instance, the verbal noun *salam* سلام (well-being) derives from the root verb *salima* سَلِمَ which literally means “he was safe, intact,” according to a grammatical pattern: first consonant, short vowel “a” written over the first consonant, second consonant, long vowel “a,” third consonant. Three consonants in

this pattern are the same as consonants of the root verb: *sin* س, *lam* ل and *mim* م. Another root verb, *kallama* كَلَّمَ (he spoke), gives us a verbal noun *kalam* كَلَام (speaking) that follows the same pattern: first consonant, short vowel “a” over the first consonant, second consonant, long vowel “a,” third consonant. The root consonants here are *kaf* ك, *lam* ل, *mim* م. In theory, Arabic has endless possibilities for the formation of words that follow the established patterns of vowels and consonants, although in practice not all patterns are utilized for each of the root words. The existing words, however, because they follow recognizable patterns, may have their short vowels omitted in writing. *Salam* and *kalam* would skip the first *fatha* (short vowel “a”) and would be written without diacritics as *slam* سَلَام and *klam* كَلَام, although every reader knows from the context of the sentence and practical knowledge of the language that these words should be pronounced as *salam* and *kalam*. A detail discussion of Arabic diacritics may seem to be only of interest to linguists and calligraphers. But diacritics are extremely important in the production of graphic representations of the Quranic text. *Harakat* conveniently ignored in any contemporary printed text cannot be omitted or modified in a printed *mushaf*. For that reason, it is easy for an Arabic reader to spot text from the Quran. It is fully vowelized and therefore visually characteristic, unlike most other contemporary texts in print.⁹⁴ The uniqueness of the graphic representation of the Quranic text becomes accentuated, then, through comparison of printed *masahif* with other, non-vowelized texts.

Ability to modify artistically the shape of Arabic letters, to change their proportions or use diacritics, like the strokes that represent short vowels, to enhance ornamentation, was not only related to the characteristics of the graphemic system itself. It also depended on the

⁹⁴ Elementary textbooks are vocalized to help children to learn to read. Some religious classics (for instance *hadith*) can also be vocalized to avoid misreading.

materials on which inscriptions could be made. The introduction of paper from China in the eighth century⁹⁵ created more possibilities for change in calligraphic styles. Paper's smooth surface offered more freedom to experiment with the contours of letters and allowed greater litheness of lines. Early 'squarish' inscription in *kufi* were executed on rough surfaces, most commonly stone and parchment, sometimes wood, papyrus or textile, which may have initially contributed to characteristic features of this style.

Today the use of particular calligraphic styles in printing is commonly dictated by a combination of factors that include tradition, materials, the calligrapher's skills, and the cost of production. Countless shops and stands clustered around the al-Husseyin Mosque constitute a major *bazaar* in Cairo. Their clientele is diverse, as shopkeepers cater to Egyptians as well as tourists. Among thousands of products, many of which come from China, numerous objects display calligraphy: postcards, jewelry, framed ornamental textiles, clocks, and stickers. Radi, a master's student in the department of history at al-Azhar, had a stand across the al-Azhar street that divides the al-Husseyin area from the booksellers' quarter. Radi sold textbooks but made money on the side using the penmanship he learned at the university. We had known each other for a few years, during which Radi was struggling to finish his master's thesis on the slave trade in Zanzibar. In return for help in finding English language sources, he assisted me in procuring copies of *masahif*. One hot and sticky day, I was photographing *masahif* he had borrowed from another seller a few bookstands down the road. At the same time, I tried to watch Radi writing something in Arabic in his elegant handwriting. A boy of about ten had brought him a list of five

⁹⁵ The conquest of Central Asia opened the Muslim World to contact with China. Methods of papermaking were transferred through lands today known as Uzbekistan. The new technology was perfected and subsequently spread to Iraq, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, Sicily and Spain. Jonathan Bloom, *Paper Before Print: the History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 8-9.

or six names, which Radi was now carefully drawing on a piece of paper. I kept photographing books, drawing curious, furtive looks from passing customers. The same boy came back twenty minutes later.

“Abu al-Hasan, can you write these names too!” He held out the same list with a few more names. Radi, laughing, shooed him away.

“Go, don’t bother me again. I am busy.”

“Please, Abu al-Hasan, just this last time.”

“No! I told you. Go away!”

“But it will take you only a minute.” The boy was throwing meaningful looks in my direction. I joined him.

“Come on, Radi. Write them for my sake,” I said, jokingly using a popular pleading phrase. With a theatrical sigh, Radi wrote two more names on the wrinkled page. Giving the paper back to the grinning boy, he started saying,

“Next time when I say go, you go!” He finished the sentence yelling after the running boy who swiftly vanished into the crowd, skipping and waving the page with Radi’s handsome calligraphy. I saw him later, selling copper pendants with the names cut out according to templates skillfully penned by Radi.

A lot of what Radi learned about calligraphy came from books that had passed through his stand. He did not have extra income to purchase the latest books and periodicals on calligraphy published in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or the Emirates, but he carefully studied examples provided in older publications and on book covers. New materials came mostly from outside of Egypt and at high prices. It was *ustaz* ‘Adel, who lent me an example of a foreign

publication: a beautifully edited *Journal of Arabic Letters*,⁹⁶ published quarterly in the United Arab Emirates and printed on a thick, glossy paper. In recent decades, efforts to revitalize the art of Arabic calligraphy in that country (especially by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Development⁹⁷) have involved organizing workshops and competitions for calligraphers from all over the world. *Ustaz* ‘Adel had a few issues carefully wrapped in a plastic bag waiting for me on his desk. “There is a saying that the Quran was revealed in Mecca,” – said *ustaz* ‘Adel in his husky voice, handing me the journals – “written in Istanbul, and recited in Cairo. This means that the best calligraphers come from Turkey but here in Egypt we have always had the best reciters.” I nodded agreeably, having already heard of the fame of Egyptian reciters and their popularity in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. I had also heard of the fame of the Turkish calligraphers among Egyptian lovers of penmanship. In fact, beginning in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman empire became a major center for the development and production of artistically acclaimed calligraphy, competing with and often superseding older centers in other parts of the Islamic world. It would be wrong, though, to think of the history of Islamic calligraphy as an uninterrupted, linear process. Rather it is the product of overlaps among artistic endeavors, intersections among the mundane work of ordinary copyists and the creativity of individual artists, all dispersed over time and space, and influenced by the economic and political situation in the Middle East and individual interests of particular rulers.

According to *ustaz* ‘Adel and a few other professional calligraphers -- based on knowledge gathered at schools they had attended -- throughout the nineteenth century Egyptian pen artists were as accomplished as their Turkish colleagues. But the most famous artists often

⁹⁶ مجلة حروف عربية

⁹⁷ وزارة الثقافة والشباب وتنمية

could be claimed by different regions as they learned and worked in multiple locations, like the acclaimed penman ‘Abdallah Bak al-Zuhdi who was born in 1836, probably in Damascus, studied calligraphy in Turkey, and later practiced in the school of Khedive Isma‘il Basha in Egypt. His skills were so highly regarded that he designed inscriptions on *kiswat al-ka‘aba*, the fabric covering the shrine in Mecca that was periodically produced in Egypt. After 1927, Saudi Arabia took over the right to manufacture cloth for the shrine.

On several occasions, some of my Egyptian friends expressed a nuanced deprecation of their Saudi neighbors. A note of jealousy surfaced also in *ustaz* ‘Adel’s remark that the growing wealth of Saudi princes allowed them, especially in recent decades, to sponsor calligraphic events, competing with Turkish and other established centers of calligraphic production. What still makes Turkey special, however, is the promotion of calligraphy done by women. For instance, in 2010 Turkey hosted an International Female Calligraphers Exhibition. The prominence of female calligraphers in Turkey, such as Hilal Kazan or Soraya Syed, was echoed in *ustaz* ‘Adel’s mini-lecture on the day I borrowed *The Journal of Arabic Letters*: “There is a family of calligraphers in Turkey,” he noted, although he could not remember their name, “and the girl from that family is very famous for her calligraphy and ornamentations.” Without warning, he passed me a sheet of white paper and asked me to write the title of a text on calligraphy, obviously testing my writing skills. I laughed and grabbed a pen.

Writing the Quran

In my efforts to understand the principles of Arabic calligraphy, I had learned the *naskh* style although I have never studied it enough to become really skilled, a task that would require a year or two of regular practice. In the process, I realized that producing Arabic calligraphy is

not only an exercise in aesthetics but also a lesson in religious ethics. All five of my penmanship teachers had a religious education and, with one exception, had graduated from al-Azhar University. Moreover, they all insisted that no one could practice calligraphy properly without being immersed in “the study of Quranic writing” or literally “the study of Uthmanic writing,”⁹⁸ a specialization in the broader field of Quranic studies taught at al-Azhar. While learning about the proportions and shapes of letters or the placement of short vowels and other diacritics, I could not ignore Islamic precepts and the theology of the Quran. Over time, I started sensing an intricate connection between the text’s graphic representation, the act of writing, and understanding/knowing by heart the Quranic message. I also realized that this tenacious relationship between message, act, and representation has peculiar effects. One -- which I had already learned from Khaled -- is that no *masahif* are executed in any of the calligraphic styles invented after the introduction of print. The Mushaf Committee, a branch of the Islamic Research Academy at al-Azhar⁹⁹ that oversees production of all media that carry Quranic text, does not accept them.

However, the connection between memorizing and understanding the Quranic message, the act of writing it, and graphic representation is not mystical but rather historical and practical. To a certain degree, this connection has always been negotiable and negotiated, mainly through evolving practices of writing Quranic copies but also through other, more mundane aspects of life, such as the production of jewelry and coins, architecture, home decor, textiles, and more recently advertising, newspaper headlines, or banner making. A “secular calligraphy” that does not reference the Quran, or boldly alters its stabilized calligraphic styles, is another such

⁹⁸ الرسم العثماني

⁹⁹ لجنة المصحف تحت مجمع البحوث الإسلامية

negotiation that tests the limits of al-Azhar's authority and public sensitivity by developing new fonts for print and by experimenting with letters as aesthetic objects. However, in Egypt, such efforts have always been cautious and partial, so as not to disengage the final product completely from its "heritage." For since at least the twentieth century, calligraphy has been presented as an Arab and/or Muslim heritage, with greater emphasis on one or the other depending on the circumstances. No one wants to be completely separated from such a powerful network. Otherwise, instead of benefiting from the aura of participation in "centuries of tradition" an artist risks entering the dangerous grounds of blasphemy.

Attempts to unravel the relationship between Quranic message, its carrier, and calligraphy may create trouble. Those unaware of this tradition, such as Karl Lagerfeld and the Chanel fashion house, learned a hard lesson in 1994 when during a fashion show in Paris they featured an evening gown that displayed a fragment of Quranic text. It did not matter that the verse ran across Claudia Schiffer's bosom, as some newspapers noted. What aggravated Muslim authorities most was the complete removal of that verse from relationships, including the medium authorized to carry it. Thus I disagree with Kenneth George's statement that "What Lagerfeld would learn is that a custodial ethics for displaying Quranic script subtends an interest in Arabic orthography from an 'aesthetic point of view'."¹⁰⁰ Muslims often use Quranic verses for aesthetic purposes. Old and new quotes exist side by side on walls, ornamental textiles, dishes, or furniture, but what allows them to be "visually pleasing" is the ethics of their production and display immersed in the network of theological and calligraphic knowledge and

¹⁰⁰ Kenneth M. George, "Ethics, Iconoclasm, and Quranic Art in Indonesia," *Cultural Anthropology* 24 (2009).

practice. Sheila Blair argues that the point of calligraphy is to “impress the receiver visually”¹⁰¹ but also to reflect the audible beauty of the Quranic text. Verses on display have an aesthetic value in part because they are a part of the Quranic text. The historical association of particular calligraphic styles, executed by hand, with the Quranic message has become stabilized to the point that styles initially developed and refined for the purpose of writing the Quran are considered the most aesthetically pleasing. Print copies resemble hand-made manuscripts, as I was told, because of their beauty. “The old calligraphic styles are meant to preserve the beauty of the writing and bring pleasure to the eye,” said one of the workers in the print shop that I visited. In other words, the connection between styles of writing and text has become so close that what originally was meant to beautify a *mushaf* is now considered beautiful by virtue of being a part of the *mushaf*.

During my visit to Omari, in speaking about the prolongation of certain letters to space them harmoniously over the page, he said, “You can get examples from different places in the *mushaf*. And take pictures of them and you can use them as examples. And even better if you mention the number and name of the *sura* [a “chapter” in the Quranic text] because a scholar needs to gain knowledge and be sure of the legitimacy of what you are saying. And it is a matter of proper scholarship that you mention the sources from which you took your information.”

Dr. Omari’s reference to the Quran when speaking about calligraphic techniques was expected. It reflects an education in which aesthetic and religious knowledge are complementary rather than opposed to each other. I asked Dr. Omari why institutions such as the Islamic Research Academy did not promote calligraphy. He shook his head. “The governmental administrators are not likely to promote calligraphy,” he said. “They specialize in reviews of the

¹⁰¹ Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006) xxvi.

masahif, scholars like Dr. Ahmad ‘Isi al-Ma‘asarawi. They are preoccupied with memorizations and reading of the Quran, they are not interested in teaching how to write the Quran. They are interested in the Quran from the perspective of special legal affairs and listening, not things pleasing for the eye. I studied Arabic language and I have experience in writing the Quran so, naturally, I am interested in it. However, there should be more interest on the side of the scholars to specialize in everything that pertains to the Quran, and to research it, and to create archives of everything that relates to the Quran. There should be a special museum of the Quran.”

In Egypt, calligraphy, whether understood as art, communication, or an obsolete technology, is grounded in the Quran. It developed historically in relation to the production of material inscriptions of the message. To graphically represent the Quran in print means to wrestle with its long tradition of writing.

CHAPTER 3: FROM MUSHAF FU'AD to MUSHAF AL-MADINA

Printing in Egypt, especially printing of the Quranic text, was from the beginning marked by the efforts of many people to define its role and capacities in relation to writing. As we will see in this chapter, with the spread of new ways of text dissemination questions about the graphic mediation of the Quran continued and were soon followed by the growing concerns of the *'ulama'* about how to regulate the printing process, now taking place in multiple locations and in numerous private publishing houses. On the other hand, the early small family businesses that printed *masahif* continued to flourish and expand their production, building up a market in which Quranic texts circulated as a particular kind of commodity. In this milieu, the task of disseminating the Quran intersected with the profit making interests of individual publishers. Nonetheless, the equilibrium between religious duty and ordinary life could be sustained only as long as everybody agreed that although the Quran as the word of Allah could not be sold those who produced *masahif* still needed to make a living. Introduction of other ways of thinking about production and dissemination of the Qurānic text changed the *status quo*.

Printing *masahif* as family business

My first meeting with with Dr. Ahmad Hossam al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman, the Vice President of the Administrative Council for the Chamber of Printing Industries¹⁰² and the owner of the Publishing House "Dar al-Mushaf" did not take place at the appointed time. I was already

¹⁰² نائب رئيس مجلس ادارة غرفة صناعات الطباعة

running late, traffic was bad, and I could not catch a taxi anywhere. Suddenly, I spotted the familiar sign and waved. The taxi slowed down by the curb and I shouted the name of the district into the open window. The driver only shook his head and sped up, merging back into the traffic. I drew in a deep breath and pulled out my cell phone. “Wa ‘alaykum assalam. Good that you are calling,” I heard Dr. Ahmad’s voice, “Can we meet next week? I am very busy today.” I did not tell him how glad I was that he cancelled the meeting and that I was just about to do the same.

Meeting Dr. Ahmad was important and I did not want to arrive disheveled and worried about not being on time. After all, he was an eminent person in the Cairo publishing world. Although working in the medical profession, he still oversaw a few printing establishments, including one that printed *masahif*. Moreover, he came from a family with a long tradition of working in the printing business. His great-grandfather Muhammad Afandi Mustafa, a member of the ‘Abd al-Rahman family, established a printshop in the year 1851 -- al-Matba‘a al-Bahya al-Masriyya. It was still the reign of Viceroy ‘Abbas I, who had to deal with the misprinted *masahif* from Bulaq. Dr. Ahmad’s great-grandfather, in addition to other religious books, also ventured into printing *masahif* at al-Matba‘a al-Bahya. He was assisted in this undertaking by the Azhari sheikh al-Dardir. Within a decade, his printing business became quite successful -- he even exported his books to the Levant, thanks to the mercantile connections of his friend, sheikh Ahmad al-Babi al-Halabi. In 1866 he opened a second printing establishment under the same name, al-Matba‘a al-Bahiya. In this new printing house Muhammad Mustafa printed mainly the Quranic text. His press became known as “the first and oldest publishing house in Egypt and the Arab world that specialized in publishing of the *mushaf*.”¹⁰³ At least this is the opinion of al-Sa‘id Dawud, who, encouraged by descendants of entrepreneurs in the printing business, wrote a

¹⁰³ السعيد داود. النشر العائلي في مصر: دراسة تأصيلية. (دار التيسير، القاهرة، ٢٠٠٨): ٩٦.

monograph about the families, who started their establishments in the nineteenth century and continued through the twentieth. Dr. ‘Abd al-Rahman proudly handed me that book when I finally met him. “Here,” he said, passing it to me, “you will find most important information about my family.” Interestingly, Yusef Sarkis, a bibliophile operating a generation after Muhammad Afandi Mustafa, does not mention either al-Matba‘a al-Bahya or Muhammad Mustafa in his list of printing shops that produced *masahif* in the second half of the nineteenth century. In any case, Dr. Ahmad’s great-grandfather, like other entrepreneurs opening up print shops around al-Azhar Mosque, was, perhaps, encouraged by the slowly growing public interest in print and a new opportunity to make money. Perhaps he learned from those, who previously specialized in providing cheaply written manuscripts, and foresaw a profitable alternative in providing inexpensively printed texts. Maybe he heard about the popularity of printed *masahif* in Asia. After all, Indonesian entrepreneur Muhammad Azhari, of whom we heard earlier, did not hesitate to mention in his first edition of the Quranic text that the new method of reproduction allowed him to produce “two Qurans and three sections per day,” while generating a handwritten copy could take weeks. Perhaps, Dr. Ahmad’s great-grandfather was also encouraged by developments at Bulaq, where the first set of foreign-made moveable type Masabki brought from Milano had been replaced by another more suitable one made in Cairo. Evidently, the first set did not produce print of the required quality: letter imprints were clunky and inconsistent in thickness. The set also lacked *harakat*, marks for vowelization. But most of all, the letters did not follow “the eastern style”¹⁰⁴ of calligraphy; the print just did not “look Arabic.” The letters from

¹⁰⁴ القاعدة الشرقية

Europe were “stylistically strange for the Eastern taste.”¹⁰⁵

A professional calligrapher designed the second set, made in the two writing styles known as *farsi* and *naskh*, and it was “accepted with great praise.”¹⁰⁶ It was probably this type that the printing team at Bulaq used in printing the Quranic text, making the *mushaf* more palatable to the local eye. Muhammad Afandi Mustafa knew about these developments firsthand. He worked for some time at Bulaq before establishing his own printing business in 1851, and benefited from his knowledge of improvements in typeface. Dr. Ahmad’s grandfather, ‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad, worked at the family printshop while studying at the Royal School of Calligraphy.¹⁰⁷ After graduation, in addition to involvement in the family business he became a teacher at the Royal School and was known for inscribing the Quran by hand a few times. Given his education and experience, he most probably also advised on the text of printed editions. His brother, Mustafa Muhammad, opened his own print shop and published there other religious books in addition to *mushaf*.

During the lifetime of Muhammad Afandi Mustafa, founder of the printing house that contributed to the growing number of printed *masahif* available on the Egyptian market, a significant change took place. If anything initially was forbidden to be printed at first, it was the *mushaf*. By the end of his life, if anything were printed, it would have to include *mushaf*, especially if the price was affordable for less wealthy customers. On the other hand, a conviction that a *mushaf* was the most important of all Muslim books might have encouraged some private and governmental publishers to take more interest in this particular enterprise. Fifty years after

¹⁰⁵ ابو الفتوح رضوان، تاريخ مطبعة بولاق، ٩٠.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. ٨٩، ٩١.

¹⁰⁷ مدرسة الخطوط الملكية

the establishment of the printing house al-Matba‘a al-Bahya, *mushaf* in print had become common and normalized as an object of everyday use. The printed *mushaf* was accessible to those who could not afford a handmade one. Some *masahif* printed at the beginning of the twentieth century can still be found at the book souq in the back alleys around al-Azhar Mosque.

I was in search of such a copy in Darb al-Atrak, an old, narrow, and curvy street tucked behind the al-Azhar Mosque when I came to *ustaz* Mustafa. *Ustaz* Mustafa sells books in the entryway to the old *wikāla* (warehouse) on the side of the eighteenth-century Mosque Abu Dhahab. The warehouse is a stone building raised with beige blocks of rock, cool and dusty inside and hot and bright outside. The doorway stands perpendicular to the entry of al-Azhar and opens to a small courtyard, where the original Printing House and Bookstore Muhammad ‘Ali Subih was established in 1900. Perhaps it was 1890, as stories were not too concerned about dates. Matba‘at Muhammad ‘Ali Subih was another family business whose members prospered for a long time, printing and selling religious books. Yet after a hundred years of operation, the business was closed and sold to a stranger outside of the family. *Ustaz* Mustafa did not mind sharing what he knew about the place. He informed me that the original machines were bought in Germany, and that they had an engine, and that four people operated the press. But the family grew so big, with so many descendants, that running the business smoothly became impossible, and they collectively decided to sell it. “I wish I knew more,” he ended apologetically. *Ustaz* Mustafa was still unpacking and dusting off the books stored over the decades in the print house’s back rooms. He remarked begrudgingly and somewhat sadly that some people buy his books to resell them for a much higher price to collectors, usually from abroad. Others buy the books to reprint them. I stepped into his entryway bookstore because it had books with faded and tattered covers lying on tables in front of a big stone gate and along the breezy hallway leading to

the courtyard. Tables obstructed the end of the passage, barring the shoppers from entering the courtyard where cool, dark, and sand-smelling rooms were hidden along the stone walls. A forlorn printing machine stood in the corner of the open space, its greasy gears and handles deflecting the brightness of the afternoon light. *Ustaz* Mustafa let me browse the books his assistant was bringing out of the darkness of the rooms, every now and then vigorously blowing at a stack, raising clouds of dust in the air. I fished for *masahif* and planned to come back to photograph them another day.

A week later I returned to al-Azhar Square. The morning air was still brisk but I could feel the heat slowly rising in the open spaces between the buildings. I hoped Radi could help me but he was not in his nook yet. I called him and asked if he could meet me at *ustaz* Mustafa's shop. I needed Radi's expertise in calligraphy. When Radi came, *ustaz* Mustafa waved him into the room full of books. "You know, we normally don't let any Egyptians in there," he repeated what he had already told me, stressing the word "Egyptians." The room was placed somewhat above the level of the hallway and we squatted by the opening in the wall right over *ustaz* Mustafa's table. My *masahif* were stack up on the floor on a piece of cardboard, set aside from the pile of books rising up in the middle of the room. Ismail was still sorting the books and we would occasionally pass some of them to *ustaz* Mustafa. According to the Muslim lunar calendar, some of the books were printed in the thirteen hundreds of *hijrī* -- almost a century ago -- and we would pause to discuss the value of the volumes passing through the window.

Muhammad 'Ali Subih printed classic religious books in tandem with the 'ulama' of al-Azhar. He hoped to revive interest in such literature by publicizing them to students and the broader public. His cooperation with the religious authorities was very productive, to the point that Maktabat Subih gained a reputation as a prominent printing house specializing in Islamic

books not only for the Egyptian market but also for export to other Muslim countries. The Quranic text was listed by al-Sa‘id Dawud as first among the printed titles.¹⁰⁸ Muhammad ‘Ali Subih’s brother, sheikh Mahmud ‘Ali Subih, also printed *masahif* “under the approval of al-Azhar.”¹⁰⁹ He carried out his printing in a print shop called al-Maktaba al-Mahmudiyya al-Tigariyya, not far from Maktabat Subih. Muhammad and Mahmud’s sons continued working in the trade, the Quranic text being their top publication.

Squatting on the stone floor we were going *mushaf* by *mushaf*, stacking them in two piles on a piece of cardboard. Twenty volumes of different sizes and styles. All, except one, printed in the last century. Only a few printed by Muhammad ‘Ali Subih, but undated. They did not resemble the elaborate and colorfully decorated handwritten *masahif* on display in the museums. Small, thin, with soft covers, they looked like any other book. I was making notes and comparing fonts. Radi squatted before me, every now and then pointing to interesting particularities in the print. Some of these *masahif* were obviously lithographed, preserving the tighter, often overlapping, wavy lines. The lithographic print expressed the writer’s individuality: *waw* curved more here or there; *nun* now round and podgy, now a little flat; *kesra* adjusting its length to the width of its neighbors. These letters existed in a mutual dependency, making space for each other, stretching and dwindling to accommodate each other’s shape and curve. Each of the lithographed *masahif* looked slightly different from the others, with *harakat* wrapping around the letters rather than running above and below them in their own separate trajectories, a feature characteristic of many typographed Quranic texts. All of these *masahif* lay in piles not as museum objects but as used books that nobody knew what to do with. Not new, but not too old

¹⁰⁸ السعيد داود، النشر العائلي، ١٤٩.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. ١٥٠.

either, like the misprinted *masahif* of ‘Abbas I, they needed “disposal in a religiously proper manner.” But, as before, such disposal was not going to happen, not yet. The very moment I lifted them from the pile, their worn out covers and yellow pages were already changing them into something else, antiques, potential collectibles. My preoccupation with the dates and places printed on their binding -- but not with the message itself -- was adding to their transformation. After all, I was to pay *ustaz* Mustafa for letting me photograph them. My salvaging conflicted with the purpose for which these books were made. They were to be read, not photographed for money. Yet, such early printed Quranic texts can be found in the antiques stores; not old enough to make their way to the exhibit halls but old enough to draw attention of a book collector or a tourist, they bridge the gap between a museum object and a commodity. If collected, they do not speak to the artistic skills of their makers but to processes of modernization and technological change. Their value to a collector lies in their material form and singularity, that prevents them from being held in hands and used daily.

I lifted a copy that looked like a textbook: in soft, brown covers, with a black taped spine, and with the following words running across it:

ministry of education¹¹⁰
juz’ (part) twenty nine
juz’ tabarak
(followed by the calligrapher’s tiny signature under the elaborately designed title)
second edition
al-Matba‘a al-Amiriyya in Cairo
1329 hijri (1911)

In the corner of the cover someone had written in red and blue pencil: Ahmad Hilmi Nufal, and repeated the name in a little rectangle on the title page, and again on the last empty page of the *mushaf*, adding the words: “eighth in the month of October 1926 from al-Quran.” I paused for a

¹¹⁰ نظارة المعارف العمومية

moment. Was it the date by which Ahmad Hilmi Nufal was to memorize this particular part of the Quran? Or the day on which he received it from his teachers in one of al-Azhar's preparatory schools? He must have been a youth who had not yet learned that one should not write in a *mushaf*, although he did his best at ornamenting his words with two colors. If he was already a student at al-Azhar he probably was just starting his education: *juz* ' twenty-ninth would have been only the second out of thirty to memorize. The length of the Quranic chapters decreases towards the end of the book so it is not uncommon to start memorization from the end. Perhaps it was one of the *masahif* the Ministry of Education ordered for courses in Quran at al-Azhar. Al-Amiriyya was a governmental printing house and supplied limited orders of *masahif* free for students. How did it get mixed up with the books in storage at Subih? Was Ahmad Hilmi Nufal a member of the family? Or did he give away the copy that he had already memorized to a *rubabikya* man - a collector of unwanted objects, who then resold it to someone else? Did printers at Subih use it as a copy with which to compare their own Quranic "textbooks"?

This inconspicuous *mushaf* was printed by Bulaq, which by then had changed its name into al-Matba'a al-Amiriyya, the Royal Print House. It was printed fifteen years before Ahmad Hilmi Nufal signed his name on it in red and blue pencils. It was made with a letterpress, which by then had gained a grace and style of its own. I could not deny the letters' elegance and clarity. It was easy to read, with loosely arranged words and an extra line of space between the twelve lines of text. The diacritics unobtrusively floated below and above the consonants. The changing thickness of letters imitated the effects of a writing pen. There was an overall sense of order and rhythm without exuberance. It was obviously a *mushaf* meant to be read, easily and conveniently. But something else in the text must have vexed the calligraphers -- minuscule cracks between the letters, almost invisible to those who did not know about them but not hidden

from the eye of a *khattat* like Mustafa Muhammad Omari or *ustaz* ‘Adel. The cracks were irksome, unbecoming, and they interfered with the ideals of calligraphy, which focuses on the perfection of an unwavering line. This would have to be changed in the future.

On the back cover I could see a note in small print: corrections to this *mushaf* were made thanks to the knowledge of *ustaz* Husseyn Zaghlul, a teacher at the Muhammadiyya School. It had been necessary to solicit the assistance of a person with a solid knowledge of the Quranic text, whether to write out the text for printing on a lithographic stone or to make sure that none of the individual letters, diacritics, or other recitation signs were missing or changed in the final version, lithographed or typographed. Husseyn Zaghlul was probably not directly involved in the printing activities at al-Amiriyya but rather served as a corrector of this particular edition. Still, the involvement of many Quranic scholars of different caliber in editing editions of the Quranic text for private and governmental publishing houses likely produced varying results.

Perhaps ‘*ulama*’ at al-Azhar had grown tired of coming across copies with misprints. Maybe they concluded that the Quranic text needed a more thorough inspection than contemporary publishers could afford before releasing these materials to the public. Undoubtedly, they could not accept a *mushaf* in which words were spelled according to modern orthography instead of the rules established by the third Caliph ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan, and known as *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* (*rasm* is the written consonant base of the Arabic language without vowelization). Still, it seems that orthography differing from *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* was used in at least some *masahif*, according to a description produced by ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Qadi (1907-1982), sheikh of the Institute for Recitations at al-Azhar.¹¹¹ It is hard to say when decisive calls for

¹¹¹ شيخ معهد القراءات بالازهر الشريف

improvements of print copies were issued but complaints continued until the scholar and sheikh Radwan ibn Muhammad -- known as al-Makhallati -- wrote “a *mushaf* of sublime quality and great significance” that paid particular attention to the rules of ‘Uthmanic orthography. He also made a few improvements. First of all, he indicated the count of verses in each chapter. He also marked the *fawasil* -- the last word of each verse -- on which the scholars disagreed, and which affected the count of verses in each chapter. Finally, he applied six different ‘*alamat al-wuqf*, signs for obligatory, optional, and forbidden pauses while reading or reciting the Quran, and placed them above the line of *tashkil*. In an appendix to the Quranic text, he gave credit to the scholarly sources on which he drew in making these changes and offered a short account of the *mushaf* in the time of the Prophet and his followers. Finally, he summarized briefly existing research on *rasm* (orthography) and *dabd* (diacritics), cited several famous scholars in this field, defined the words *sura* and *aya*, and “he did all of that in simple words and an eloquent manner.”¹¹²

This *mushaf* was printed in 1890 by al-Matba‘a al-Bahiya, whose owner was sheikh Muhammad Abu Zayd.¹¹³ This edition became an instant favorite among scholars of Quranic reading and is known as Mushaf al-Makhallati. Purportedly, religious scholars relied on it more than on any other *mushaf* printed at that time, as it included all the improvements that earlier scholars and editors had made. Unfortunately, says sheikh ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Qadi, “it did not distinguish itself in a positive way among its beholders and disquieted the readers by the poor quality of the paper and badly done printing job, as it was lithographed.”¹¹⁴ It is difficult to say

¹¹² عبد الفتاح القاضي، تاريخ المصحف الشريف (مكتبة القاهرة: القاهرة، ٢٠١٠) : ٥١ .

¹¹³ Ibid . ٥٢ .

¹¹⁴ و كان هذا المصحف هو المتداول بين أهل العلم والقراء.. المعول عليه عندهم المقدم دون سائر المصاحف لما اشتمل عليه من المزايا السابقة، بيد

whether the complaints about the poor material condition of this particular *mushaf* reflected the general poverty of lithographic technique among Cairo's printers or the readers' heightened expectation of printed *masahif*. In any case, the authorities at al-Azhar were not satisfied with the state of the Quranic copies in Egypt and decided to form a committee to once and for all correct the problem.

Mushaf Fu'ad

Auspiciously, King Fu'ad I, a descendant of Muhammad 'Ali and the ninth ruler of Egypt and Sudan -- who came to the Egyptian throne in 1917, the same year that the Tsar of Russia was forced to abdicate -- must have had similar concerns. He is said to have been benevolent towards religious establishments and is known for his support of the al-Azhar scholars, expressed in part by his monetary donations to the school and his provisions for mosques in Egypt and outside of the country -- I read at Dar al-Kutub in a tribute to his achievements. King Fu'ad I in his benevolence expressed a desire to fund the printing of a well-prepared Quranic edition at his own expense. Preparations began in 1918 and the Sheikdom assembled a committee, including the most experienced '*ulama*', experts in Quranic science and literature. The committee was led in what sheikh 'Abd al-Fattah al-Qadi called this "serious and arduous assignment" by sheikh Muhammad Ali Khalaf al-Husseyini al-Haddad (1865-1939), Head of the Egyptian Reciters,¹¹⁵ who was joined by a professor of linguistics, Hefni Nasif, and two other members, Mustafa 'Anani and Ahmad al-Iskandari. This committee was given the task of adjusting the diacritics

أنه لم يبرز في صورة حسنة تروق الناظر، تنشيط القارئ، لرداءة ورقه، وسوء طبعه، إذ أنه طبع في مطبعة حجرية. عبد الفتاح القاضي، تاريخ المصحف، ٥٢.

¹¹⁵ شيخ المقرئ المصرية محمد علي خلف الحسيني

(*dabt*) and the spelling of the baseline consonants (*rasm*), according to the rules of *al-rasm al-Uthmani*. It took them five years to complete the task,

and they thoroughly revised the orthography of the Quran according to opinions of the experts among the ulama. In the heading preceding each sura, they indicated the number of its ayas and whether the sura was revealed in Makkah or Madina, and after which sura it was revealed. They also inserted into the text a verse number corresponding with each aya and set the signs of pause, and text dividers that split the text of the Quran into thirty parts and their subparts. Finally they marked al-sajadat, the signs of prostration. They divided the marks of pause into five signs: "necessary to pause and not to continue with the next word after" and gave it a letter mim, "preferred to pause but permitted to continue" and gave it a qilla-ligature (قلى), "permitted to pause but preferred to continue" and gave it a "silla" ligature (صلى), "permitted to pause or to continue" and gave it a letter jim, and finally, "necessary to continue" and gave it the ligature "la" (لا)¹¹⁶

Muhammad 'Ali Khalaf al-Husseyini al-Haddad calligraphed the text himself. The printing took place in 1923. The letters the printers used had been designed a few years earlier by a famous calligrapher, Muhammad Ja'afar Bak, and were cast by the Print House al-Amiriyya. "It was done in an elegant print compared to other contemporary *masahif* and was received with great acceptance by the broader Muslim community" -- this is how *Mushaf Fu'ad* is described today by an Egyptian seller in an Internet store *The Souq*, where this first edition has been available for purchase for 8,000 Egyptian pounds.¹¹⁷ The book that lauded king Fu'ad's benevolence also praised this *mushaf*, printed in different sizes and in considerable numbers, "so that it was

¹¹⁶ وضبطوه الضبط التام على ماذهب إليه المحققون من العلماء، وبينوا في ترجمة كل سورة عدد آيها، وأنها مكية أو مدينية، وإنها نزلت بعد سورة كذا... ووضعوا لكل آية رقمها الخاص بها. كما وضعوا علامات للوقوف. والأجزاء والأحزاب. رباع. والسجادات. ثم قسموا الوقف إلى خمسة أقسام الأول مايلزم الوقف عليه ولا يصح وصلة بما بعده ووضعوا له علامة هي الميم المفردة هكذا "م"، الثاني مايصح الوقف عليه والابتداء بما بعده كما يصح وصله بما بعده غير أن الوقف عليه أرجح من وصله بما بعده وقد وضعوا لهذا القسم هذه العلامة "قلى" وهي كلمة منحوتة. وأصلها الوقف أولى. العلامة "صلى" وهي كلمة منحوتة أيضاً، وأصلها: الوصل أولى: الرابع مايجوز فيه الوقف والوصل على السواء من غير ترجيح لأحدهما على الآخر ووضعوا لهذا القسم هذه العلامة "ج" الخامس ما لا يصح الوقف عليه والابتداء بما بعده، فإذا وقف عليه لانقطاع نفس، أو استراحة، أو نحو ذلك تعين عليه أن يرجع فيصليه بما بعده ووضعوا لهذا القسم هذه العلامة (لا) عبد الفتاح القاضي، تاريخ المصحف، ٥٣.

¹¹⁷ Search at <http://egypt.souq.com>, keyword: مصحف الملك فؤاد

accessible to the wider Muslim population in the world. The printing was precise and mastery in what was produced was a picture of the king's sincere interest in it." This *mushaf*, later known as Mushaf Fu'ad (sometimes confused with the handmade *mushaf* penned especially for the king) Mushaf Bulaq, Mushaf Amiri, Egyptian Mushaf, Mushaf Dar al-Kutub or Cairene Mushaf, soon became a popular edition not only in Egypt but in other Islamic countries. A note at the back read:

*This mushaf is based on the mushaf of al-al-Matba'a al-Amiriyya and was printed in the division of Messaha in Giza in 1924. It was written by his Eminence Professor Sheikh Muhammad 'Ali Khalaf al-Husseyini, the sheikh of recitation and the Head of the Egyptian Reciters at present. It was endorsed by the committee appointed for this task under the supervision of the Sheikhdome.*¹¹⁸

The note is followed by an "Introduction to This Mushaf," which asserts that it complies with the spelling the scholars of *rasm* confirm according to the *masahif* edited by the third Caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan. Yet, in spite of the efforts to use the correct spelling, a few words, in the opinion of the next generation of *rasm* scholars, were still incorrect. For instance, the letter *ta* normally written at the end of the word *kilmatu* (كلمة) as *ta marbuta* according to the rules of *rasm al-mushaf al-'Uthmani* should be changed to *ta maftuha* (كلمت). This is an example of spelling that was initially "corrected" according to the rules of modern orthography and later changed back to the version present in the early *masahif*.

Therefore, during the reign of King Faruk I, the son of king Fu'ad who ascended to the Egyptian and Sudanese throne in 1936, Mushaf Malik Fu'ad went through another series of editing revisions. A new committee was formed at al-Azhar to prepare the second edition, which

¹¹⁸ تم هذا المصحف الشريف عملاً و تصحيحاً و مراجعة بمعرفة على المصحف الأميري الذي جمع و رتب في المطبعة الأميرية ببولاق و طبع في مصلحة المساحة بالجيزة سنة 1243 هـ , المصحف الذي كتبه حضرة صاحب الفضيلة الاستاذ الجليل الشيخ محمد علي خلف الحسيني شيخ القراء و المقارئ بالديار المصرية الان . وأقرته اللجنة المعينه لذلك تحت إشراف مشيخة الازهر الجليله .

al-Amiriya was ready to print. Muhammad ‘Ali al-Diba‘a, the then Head of the Egyptian Reciters, presided, joined by ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Qadi (Supervisor of the Institute for Recitations), Muhammad ‘Ali al-Najar (professor in the College of Arabic Language), and ‘Abd al-Halim Basyuni (a supervisor from al-Azhar). The committee reviewed the *mushaf* according to the classic sources in recitation/reading, *rasm*, diacritics, *tafsir* (exegesis) and Quranic sciences, correcting the first edition. This is how one member, sheikh ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Qadi sums up the committee’s efforts: “We worked to the best of our knowledge to avoid these defects and to improve these flaws, and we ask God to make this work count among our good deeds, purely for His sake. He is the best patron and the best supporter.”¹¹⁹

The committee finished its work in 1951. This second and revised edition of Mushaf Fu’ad was printed in 1952, the year of the Egyptian Revolution in which King Faruq I was forced to abdicate in favor of his infant son Ahmad Fu’ad II. The abdication did not appease the revolutionaries and a year later the monarchy was abolished, and Egypt became a republic with Muhammad Najib as first president. The dynasty that sponsored Mushaf Fu’ad ended, but subsequent editions of Mushaf Fu’ad continue to appear.

Back to writing

In contrast to a handwritten copy, a printed *mushaf* follows a pattern of writing and page design sanctioned by a Mushaf Committee, and it is sold to the public in general, not to a particular person. Yet in spite of an aesthetic bias that mass produced objects are not authentic, printed *masahif* resist this attribution.

¹¹⁹ "عملنا جهد الطاقة على تلافية هذه المآخذ واصلاح هذه الهنات، ونسأله تعالاه أن يجعله عملا مبرورا خالصا لوجهه الكريم إنه نعم المولى ونعم النصير." عبد الفتاح القاضي، تاريخ المصحف ، ٥٦.

In his classic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin says that “[for] the decline of the aura, one thing within the realm of production is of overriding importance: the massive reproduction of the image.” While lamenting the disappearance of auratic properties in mass reproduced objects, Benjamin suggests that something new arises through massive reproduction of images. In the context of printed *masahif* what emerges is “a new authority, a new truth value, enhanced by the definitiveness of the technology.” It is a different kind of authority produced and reproduced by a particular calligraphy, vocalization, and spelling sanctioned by the scholars of al-Azhar. But paradoxically -- and contrary to what Walter Benjamin suggests -- a printed *mushaf* is not detached from the “original.” It may be emancipated from its dependence upon particular rituals of manufacture but a mechanically multiplied and non-individualized Quranic text becomes even more universal and closer to “original” than ever before. This happens because printing and the regulations introduced by the Mushaf Committee have made the *mushaf* graphically traditional. It is easy to spot the text of the Quran among other printed texts. The difference was not as obvious in the past. The tenth century scholar Ibn al-Nadim, an early author on the subject of calligraphy, lists about sixteen scripts used to transcribe the Quran. This number stands in sharp contrast to the limitations on calligraphic style and format of the text imposed on publishers. Thus a printed *mushaf* epitomizes a reified tradition, by its adherence to a particular script, calligraphic style, orthography, and recitation signs, all of which are further authorized through the book’s multiplication as print copies roll off the press.

The temptation to see the typographic *mushaf*, such as Mushaf Fu’ad, as less valuable than a handwritten one is clear. For collectors, scholars, and institutions that deal with manuscripts, the handwritten Quranic copies possess the power of authenticity – an authenticity

that printed codices lack. Printed *masahif* cannot be examined to verify anything else beyond their own historical “lateness” on a continuum of technological progress. They are not one-of-a-kind in terms of either their content or material form (although I am sure that partisans of Mushaf al-Shimarli would disagree). From an aesthetic perspective, as a result of the transition to print Egyptian Muslim practitioners started using a less individualized and artistically refined object.

But aesthetics aside, they obtained a text that was more fixed and seen as unalterable. A handmade *mushaf* may have been a product of artistic sensibilities, individual knowledge shaped by a line of transmission (*isnad*) and devotion. However, in line with Benjamin’s suggestion that mass production generates its own form of preeminence, King Fu’ad’s *mushaf* firmly fastened the text in the sphere of tradition by giving it a standardized form and by making an explicit connection with the *masahif* of ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan. The use of print to reproduce the Quranic text led cumulatively to a reassessment of earlier works on *rasm* and *qira’at*

(recitations/readings) and, as a result, a unification of the rules for writing *mushaf*.¹²⁰

Paradoxically, technological innovation solidified tradition. If treated as art objects, mass produced *masahif* lost their aura of an authenticity rooted in scholarship, calligraphy, and hand-production. But mass production enhanced the Quran’s authority with individual readers through multiplication of a particular version considered closer to the original and therefore more correct.

Moreover, the 1923 edition finally turned eighteenth-century calligraphy and page design into the standard “look” of the Quranic text. This *mushaf*, endorsed by al-Azhar and used by its students, became for a while the most popular edition in Egypt and was well known and appreciated elsewhere in the Muslim world. What was the source of its popularity? It was a

¹²⁰ The first one took place in the second Islamic century when the differences between the ‘Uthmanic and other, non-‘Uthmanic *rasms* (such as *rasm* of Ibn Mas’ud) were still reviewed by Muslim scholars but in the third Islamic century ‘*ulama*’ began to limit possible variants to those attributed to ‘Uthman only.

product of the cumulative effort of religious and political authorities to disseminate an edition of the Quranic text prepared by a committee of scholars and published by a governmental publishing house. It also appealed to Middle Eastern aesthetic sensibilities with its evocation of the rules of Arabic calligraphy. Al-Amiriyya printed thousands of copies and many other publishing houses copied and reprinted it later as offset technology allowed.

Yet the letters used to print Mushaf Fu'ad, now so praised for their beauty and so closely identified with this edition, were not uniformly accepted by all. A report kept in Dar al-Kutub written in 1948 by Muhammad Nadim, the Director of the National Library, reveals frictions and conflicting points of view on the relations between printing and calligraphy. In 1902, writes Muhammad Nadim, the Ministry of Finance requested improvements to the letters used in printing in general to make them more legible. A committee led by Ibrahim Najib Basha, a representative of the Ministry of Interior, joined by four other members, Amin Sami Basha, Ahmad Zaki Basha, and Sheikh Hamza Fatah Allah, and Shilu Basha, undertook the task of improving the letter casts. In the process, the committee decreased the existing set of casts from 900 to 464 glyphs. They also decided to establish new rules for printing in *naskh* and chose for this job Muhammad Ja'afar Bak, a calligrapher known for his elegant inscriptions on street signs and Egyptian banknotes.

The committee wanted to simplify the writing and move away from adherence to the strict rules of *naskh* style, especially when it came to certain ways of connecting or overlapping letters. They also wanted to standardize forms of single letters that until then came in a variety of shapes. Here they encountered a problem. Muhammad Ja'afar abhorred the idea of moving away from the rules of the calligraphed *naskh* and insisted on preserving the connecting and overlapping letters as they were. This decision was, he argued, necessary to preserve the

calligraphy of *naskh* as one of the fine arts. “I was informed by Sami Basha, a member of the committee,” writes Muhammad Nadim

...that the late Muhammad Ja‘afar Bak threatened the committee to withdraw from the project if it insisted on their plan. Under the pressure, the committee accepted his objection to simplify connections and overlappings between the letters, even though Ja‘afar increased their number. These letters, finished in 1906, have been until now used at Matba‘a al-Amiriyya and other governmental printing houses.¹²¹

The committee did not succeed in improving the diacritic system either. The markings indicating short vowels and some other signs facilitating pronunciation were left as before: in two separate rows below and above the main line of writing. This division of script into three lines continued until a few changes were made by Mustafa Nadim, an expert in calligraphy who joined the committee later (Muhammad Ja‘afar Bak died in 1916), who also happened to be the father of the report’s author. Mustafa Nadim managed to improve positioning of lower vowels but was not able to change the upper ones. The set of letters designed by Muhammad Ja‘afar Bak was promoted in official printing beyond the religious domain. For a while, it was used in governmental newspapers and books, even though now it is mainly remembered as the font of Mushaf Fu’ad. This was the state of affairs in 1985.

“Cultural colonialism”

In the city of Madina in Saudi Arabia there is a statue. It does not represent a human being but a gigantic open book - a *mushaf*. The statue marks a location of the “King Fahd

¹²¹ مذكرة بشأن تيسير القراءة العربية الصحيحة بحروف الطباعة الحالية وضبطها بحركات الشكل المعروفة اللازمة للنطق الصحيح مرفوعة إلى حضرة صاحب المعالي رئيس مجمع الملك فواد الاول للغة العربية من محمد نديم، مدير المطبعة بدار الكتب المصرية، ١٩٤٨.

Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran.¹²² Since its establishment in 1984, the company that employs 1,700 workers has been producing about ten million *masahif* a year.¹²³ The *mushaf* released by the King Fahd Complex is distributed for free and has one primary calligrapher, ‘Uthman Taha.

Taha was born in Syria in 1934, and was educated in Damascus where he studied religious law, Arabic language, and Islamic arts. He received a certificate in calligraphy and in 1970 he prepared a *mushaf* for the Syrian Ministry of Religious Endowments.¹²⁴ In 1988, he traveled to Saudi Arabia where the religious authorities appointed him the head calligrapher at the King Fahd Complex. “It took Taha three years to prepare a copy of the Quran for the royal printing house,” says the article about Taha in the local Saudi newspaper.¹²⁵ After another year of revisions, the text was ready for publishing and the press released the first edition of *Mushaf al-Madina al-Munawwara* based on Taha’s handwritten copy. Since then, ‘Uthman Taha has prepared a template for reproduction three more times, making more corrections and improving the book visually. More than two hundred million copies of the *mushaf* written in his hand have been distributed around the world.

Like many other accomplished calligraphers, Taha learned his art from other calligraphers, in his case calligraphers located in Syria and Turkey. As part of his training he also remembers copying other handwritten and printed *masahif* available at the time. Unfortunately,

¹²² مجمع الملك فهد لطباعة المصحف الشريف

¹²³ فلم وثائقي عن مجمع الملك فهد لطباعة المصحف الشريف، Uploaded on Apr 7, 2011
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VY4Eg8_smEs

¹²⁴ وزارة الأوقاف السورية

¹²⁵ أحمد غاوي، "عثمان طه: كتبت أربع نسخ للمصحف فنشر منها الملك فهد عشرات الملايين في العالم"، الرياض، ٢٣ نوفمبر ٢٠٠٦.
<http://www.alriyadh.com:8080/203788>

printed ones that were good -- he admits -- were scarce, except a couple of *masahif* from Turkey and the Mushaf Fu'ad from Egypt. Taha learned clarity and simplicity of style by imitating these books. Indeed, contemporary Egyptian readers praise Mushaf al-Madina al-Munawwara for its clear and easy to read calligraphy. But his *mushaf* does not simply continue the calligraphic tradition of Taha's teachers. It does more than that. Mushaf al-Madina has introduced to the Muslim readers of the Quran a style of calligraphy that has been influenced by the simplified mechanical typography of printed *masahif*, such as *mushaf* Fu'ad, that by Taha's time already dominated the book market. The Syrian calligrapher deployed printed *masahif* as models for his writing. Perhaps this is why calligraphers in Egypt say, "Mushaf al-Madina is easy to read but it lacks character."

Nevertheless, Mushaf al-Madina, known in Egypt also as the Saudi Mushaf, is now the most common edition of the Quranic text in the country. The presence of Mushaf al Madina in Egypt has had an impact on the Egyptian religious publishing market as well as on users of the Quranic text. What are the consequences of the introduction of the Saudi Mushaf in Egypt?

I will start with a short conversation that took place a month into my fieldwork in Egypt that illustrates some of the interesting entanglements between Mushaf al-Madina and other *masahif* produced in Egypt, especially Mushaf Fu'ad.

I spotted Muhammad, my old teacher of classical Arabic, in the common room of a language center. It was two years since I had seen him last. He wanted to know how my project was going. I told him about my visits to the publishing houses that print *masahif*, including recent one to the Publishing House al-Shimarli. Two other teachers were engrossed in a conversation, sitting on a couch next to us. After a moment, they went silent and began listening to our chat.

Suddenly one of them interrupted

- “What’s Mushaf al-Shimarli, Muhammad?”

- “It’s a *mushaf* used at al-Azhar in the past but they don’t use it anymore,” he replied. “I memorized the Quran from it and when I started reading from Mushaf al-Madina I was confused.”

- “Aaah,” said the teacher with evident curiosity on her face. “I have never heard of it. I use Mushaf al-Madina al-Munawwara. Now they distribute it for free to people who go on the pilgrimage. When I went to Mecca maybe ten years ago I found a *mushaf* that had mistakes so I gave it to the police there. I think it must have been left by a pilgrim from another country. Because, you know” -- she looked at me -- “people come with their *masahif* and then donate them to the mosque. That’s why the Saudi king decided to print one *mushaf* and give it to everyone to make sure that there are no bad copies.”

This little dialogue brings to light two interesting points: one, the easy availability of Mushaf al-Madina in the market of religious publications, and two, its dominance over other editions of the text. I will start with the first point and come back to the second one in the next chapter. The teacher who went on the pilgrimage grew up in the 1970s. She might have learned the Quran reading from Mushaf Fu’ad or from other editions available on the market at that time. Mushaf Fu’ad, printed by the governmental publishing house al-Amiriyya, although popular, was not the only one in circulation. Private publishing houses continued releasing their own editions along with the governmental al-Amiriyya. Among them, was a publishing house belonging to the family ‘Abd al-Rahman.

I have already talked about the founder of this publishing house, Muhammad Afandi Mustafa, who established his own printing business in the mid-nineteenth century. His sons,

‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad and Mustafa Muhammad, continued printing Quranic text. Copies from their company were readily available when Mushaf Fu’ad entered the market during the first half of the twentieth century. Muhammad Afandi Mustafa’s grandson, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahman, studied printing in England and received his engineering diploma there in 1933. He worked in his grandfather’s printing business and later in England, where -- when an opportunity came -- he designed a one-page *mushaf* with print so minuscule that it needed to be read with a magnifying glass. He must have been fond of miniatures for later he also printed a whole *mushaf* as a book in the size of a postage stamp. “It was considered a miracle in 1952,” lauded this print curiosity al-Sa‘id Dawud.¹²⁶ Al-Azhar authorities inspected these miniaturized *masahif* to check if they were correct.

After Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahman’s return to Egypt, he continued printing and distributing regular *masahif* through his father’s Cairo establishment, the “Bookstore and Print Shop ‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad.” In 1963, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahman published an edition of the Quranic text for a “foreign” market. He printed this edition in the Maghrebi calligraphy -- a style derived from *kufi* and used predominantly in North-West Africa -- in order to make the text easily readable for the Algerian, Moroccan, or Nigerian practitioners. According to Dawud, this initiative met with great success and was particularly well received in the West Africa. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahman’s commitment to printing *masahif* was reflected in the change he made to the name of his father’s shop in 1971: “Dar al-Mushaf: Company of Bookstore and Print Shop ‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad.” A year later, he embarked on a new project: a *mushaf* with an appendix in which he discussed the basic religious obligations: prayer (*sala*), alms (*zaka*),

¹²⁶ السعيد داود، النشر العائلي، ٩٧

fasting (*ṣiyam*), and pilgrimage (*hajj*) with a tabulation of the *ayat* that pertain to these obligations arranged in a topical index. Published under the name al-Mushaf al-Mu‘allim” (*mushaf* that instructs), this edition garnered “fame throughout the Arab and Muslim world.”¹²⁷

There were, therefore, many Egyptian publishing houses with a tradition of printing the Quranic text, not only ‘Abd al-Rahman, but also Subih, al-Halabi, and smaller businesses, among them al-Shimarli, publisher of the *mushaf* my friend Muhammad had used at al-Azhar. The story of this publishing house starts in 1944 with a man named Hajj Ahmad Husseyn al-Shimarli al-Kabir, grandfather of the company’s present director. Hajj Ahmad al-Shimarli employed a calligrapher named Hajj Muhammad Sa‘ad Ibrahim, more commonly known as Haddad, to write the copy of the text to be used for its publication. Haddad was famous for his calligraphy not only in Egypt but also in other Muslim countries, including Kuwait and Saudi Arabia where he had also prepared copies of the Quranic text for printing houses. It took Haddad five years to prepare a copy of the Quran for al-Shimarli, and since the 1950s this version has been printed as *Mushaf* al-Shimarli, a text well known among Egyptian calligraphers and admired for its beauty and elegance. Haddad’s distinctive calligraphy, coupled with decades of corrections and reviews, have made this *mushaf* highly reputable. As a result, the company has been extremely protective of its rights to publish it -- rights that al-Azhar guarantees and confirms every five years.

Unlike many other publishing houses, al-Shimarli employs its own specialists in calligraphy whose primary task is to attend to the *mushaf* and its correctness. Because of its exactitude and refinement, the copy of the Quranic text that al-Shimarli produced competed for decades with *Mushaf* Fu’ad as one of the most popular editions in Egypt and al-Azhar recommended it to its students. Moreover, each year al-Shimarli exported considerable numbers

٩٨. Ibid ¹²⁷

of this *mushaf* to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. But the introduction of Mushaf al-Madina in the 1980s was a game changer. Within a decade, Mushaf al-Shimarli, Mushaf Fu'ad, and other local and foreign editions were outnumbered on the market by the Saudi *mushaf* that is now the most commonly used *mushaf* in Egypt.

Several factors have made Mushaf al-Madina so ubiquitous. As one of the language teachers at Muhammad's school noted, it is commonly brought into the country by Egyptian pilgrims returning from Mecca, where it is distributed for free. Thousands of Egyptian workers who find temporary jobs in Saudi Arabia bring it home as well, often as a gift, because the quality of paper and print are better than the *masahif* made in Egypt, making it look more elegant. Different Saudi institutions, including the Saudi embassy, distribute Mushaf al-Madina for free to people who want it. But the most significant factor in the increase of its popularity in Egypt is the strange fact that it is also printed there. King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran does not claim the copyright over the Quranic text written by 'Uthman Taha.¹²⁸ Thus many small and sometimes semi-legal printing houses in Egypt copy or download the text and reprint it in cheap editions that flood the market. On the other hand, the long and thorough revisions made by a committee of religious scholars in Saudi Arabia have prompted al-Azhar's '*ulama*' to recommend Mushaf al-Madina to its students, which also encourages its local reproduction.

¹²⁸ A statement placed on the official website of King Fahd Complex: Copyright: Based on the approval of His Excellency the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Da'wah and Guidance, General Supervisor of the King Fahd Quran Printing Complex. The Quran Printing Complex is honored to present to the Muslim public a complete free digital copy of Mushaf al-Madina published by the Complex, in the following formats: Adobe Illustrator files, PDF files, High quality images, True Type Font. Mushaf al-Madina in these previous formats can be used for free in all personal, commercial & individual businesses, in works of governmental departments & agencies, in the publications of both private and national institutions, also suitable for Quran printing, digital publishing, & for media use, can be used also in websites, software, and other similar intermediates. We ask Allah that He renders this blessed project beneficial to all Muslims. <http://dm.Qurancomplex.gov.sa/copyright-2/>

The emergence of Mushaf al-Madina has corresponded with a decline in the production of other *masahif* in Egypt. The story of ‘Abd al-Rahman family illustrates the causes behind the decline. After the death of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahman (the printer fond of miniature versions of the Quran), his sons: Ahmad, Mahmud, and Muhammad Wafiq, continued to print *masahif* until 1988. After that, they decided to significantly to cut back significantly on production of the Quranic text. The eldest brother Ahmad explained some of the reasons that to this decision: “First,” he said, “techniques of printing developed in other countries allowed them to establish their own printing houses specializing in printing *masahif*. Second, the newly established Quran Printing Complex of Malik Fahd in Saudi Arabia produced high quality *masahif* and distributed them for free among Muslims in all Islamic countries. Third, the costs of production, taxes, and customs fees became too high to continue the printing of *masahif* only.” In its stead, the brothers began to print books for the Ministry of Schooling and Education in a new printing house they called al-Dar al-Taysir, printing religious books and *masahif* at Dar al-Mushaf as a supplement to their main business.

The decreased presence of other Quranic editions on the market is evident in two ways. First, one may peruse the *masahif* for sale in Egyptian bookstores and street stands. Whether at the little religious shops mushrooming around al-Azhar Mosque or the French owned Carrefour, a multinational retailer built on the outskirts of the city, Mushaf al-Madina al-Munawwara is by far the most common *mushaf* available. The measure of its popularity is also visible in the places of its disposal. It is common to donate an aged *mushaf* to one’s local mosque where such books fill spaces on the shelves if they are not kept in closets. I browsed these surplus collections occasionally, looking for editions other than the Saudi one. They were hard to find in the rows of colorful covers protecting the characteristic green and black text written in the hand of ‘Uthman

Taha.

For Egyptian producers of *masahif*, Mushaf al-Madina is a problematic book. On one hand, its ubiquity is good, because it is The Quran. As put in the words of an Azhari scholar, sheikh Tareq ‘Abd al-Hakim¹²⁹ it is “the most precious possession of all Muslims, their constitution, a secret of their strength, a source of their rejuvenation, a cause of their success, a unifier of their judgment, and an object of pride to which they adhere.” On the other, the Saudi Mushaf has caused an economic crisis for publishers who depended on printing the Quranic text. Al-Shimarli is perhaps the only publishing house that claims to continue its production in the same numbers since the appearance of Mushaf al-Madina but even they have had to look for new markets outside of Egypt to distribute what they print for instance, they have turned to Palestine as their new importer. Mushaf al-Shimarli’s firmly established position among Quranic readers and the company’s careful protection of its copyright has over time turned this particular *mushaf* into a sort of connoisseur's book. In Egypt at least, it is used primarily either by those who learned from it as youth or by those who specifically appreciate its unique and graceful calligraphy, very different from the one exercised by ‘Uthman Taha.

There is one major difference between the ways in which these two Quranic texts are written, a difference not easily visible to the untrained eye but obvious to those who know calligraphy. Mushaf al-Madina is a product of a practical sensibility: it is clear, simple, and easy to read. In order to facilitate its reading or recitation aloud it is designed according to the rule demanding that no verse of the text should continue on the following page. In order not to interrupt the reading by turning the page, the verses always end at the end of the page. This method of text adjustment, easy to achieve in digitized typography by automatically adjusting the

¹²⁹ محمد علي عنز. "توحيد جهة الطباعة ضرورة لسلامة المصحف من الأخطاء"، الأهرام، ٥ نوفمبر ٢٠١٠، ص. ١١.

width of the letter or word, is much harder to implement when a text is handwritten. Therefore, Taha's calligraphy, instead of following solely its inner harmony and composition, is forced into an external framework of page design. The writing in Mushaf al-Madina does not flow naturally, crossing the page as necessary, but rather is expanded and contracted on the page to ensure that it fits the space. Thus the differences in the density of the writing go against the rules of proportion and evenness so cherished by Egyptian calligraphic artisans.

On a practical level, differences between Mushaf al-Madina and Mushaf al-Shimarli create a problem for their readers. Those who memorized the Quran following the text of Mushaf al-Shimarli, like my teacher Muhammad, find it confusing to use Mushaf al-Madina and vice versa. It is because the mnemonic techniques of memorizing the Quran include remembering the position of the words on a page. A different location will confuse the reader who has memorized the text and who looks for passages in particular places within the rectangular space of the white sheet of paper that constitutes a printed page. Of course, it is not impossible to read from another *mushaf* but preference for a particular copy is usually shaped by an early experience of memorizing a text that has a particular "look" and distribution of words on each page. Younger generations of Muslims in Cairo have grown up with Mushaf al-Madina however, so when they purchase a new copy of the text they are likely to buy the same, familiar, easy to follow edition.

The inconvenience of adjusting to another edition is exemplified by a question posted on a Qatari *fatwa* website that provides, like other websites of this kind, a direct way of obtaining authoritatively sanctioned pronouncements on a variety of religious issues. The most common are questions pertaining to permissibility of a particular action. One of the requests submitted for the scholarly opinion had to do with Mushaf al-Shimarli. An anonymous person accustomed to Mushaf al-Shimarli was finding it increasingly difficult to find copies in the mosques in which

he or she taught recitation. To amend this situation this person came up with a plan to look for copies of Mushaf al-Shimarli in other mosques, remove them, and place them where he or she needed them to be. To compensate these mosques for their loss, this person offered to replace the removed copies of al-Shimarli with newly purchased copies of Mushaf al-Madina. The question was whether such an exchange was permissible. The replying *mufti* was not sympathetic, pointing out that it does not befit a teacher of the Quranic recitation to be limited to a single type of *mushaf*. The *mufti* was also concerned by the issue of donation. If someone intentionally had donated a particular *mushaf* to a particular mosque, he stated that it should not be removed from there.¹³⁰

The ubiquity of Mushaf al-Madina concerns some Egyptian publishers for yet another reason. They ask: should the Quranic text have a copyright? By claiming intellectual property rights to a particular edition of *mushaf*, a publisher could watch over his own economic interests and, in some cases, ensure survival of his business. But at the same time, it is the Quran that should be distributed widely and in the best condition possible. The King Fahd Complex in Saudi Arabia not only produces Quranic copies of good quality but also can afford to check each

¹³⁰ السؤال: أعلم الناس القرآن في عدة دور وبعض المساجد، وأنا حفظت القرآن من مصحف قديم وهو طبعة الشمري 12 سطر ولا يباع الآن ولا يوجد إلا في المساجد القديمة ومن قلة تداوله تكون أوراقه صفراء، ومن الصعب علي قراءة المصاحف الأخرى ويحدث لي تشتت، فهل يجوز أن أخذ بعض هذه المصاحف من المسجد وأضعها في المساجد والدور التي أحفظ فيها ولا يوجد لديهم مثل هذه الطبعة على أن أشتري مصاحف جديدة وأضعها بدلا من التي أخذتها؟ جزاكم الله خير الجزاء.

الإجابة: الحمد لله والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله وعلى آله وصحبه، أما بعد: فقيل الجواب عما سألت عنه، نريد أولا أن ننصحك بأن تتعلم القراءة في جميع المصاحف؛ لأنه لا يليق بمدرس للقرآن أن يعجز عن قراءة القرآن من أي مصحف، خصوصا المصاحف المتداولة في كافة أنحاء الأرض، وفيما يخص موضوع سؤالك، فالغالب على من يضعون المصاحف في المساجد أنهم إنما يوقفونها لتقرأ في المساجد، ولكنهم قد يقصدون بها أحيانا خصوص المصلين في المساجد التي يضعونها فيها. والواجب في الوقف أن يصرف فيما عينه الواقف بتصريح أو تضمن. وقد نص أهل العلم على أن شرط الواقف كنص الشارع ما لم يخالف الشرع. وعليه.. فإذا علم أن واضع المصاحف في المساجد إنما يريد قراءتها، ولا فرق عنده بين أن تقرأ في هذا المسجد أو ذاك، فلا مانع من أن تفعل بها ما أردت، وإن علم أن الواقف يخص بالمصحف جماعة المسجد التي هي فيه أو شك في ذلك فلا نرى إباحة نقلها عنه، ما دام الانتفاع بها فيه ممكنا. والله أعلم.

"حكم أخذ مصحف من مسجد ووضعه في مسجد آخر"، رقم الفتوى: 100457. مركز الفتوى islamweb.net، ١٠ أكتوبر ٢٠٠٧

<http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=100457>.

individual copy for correctness. After such inspection books are stamped as a proof of control, and only then made available to the public. Unfortunately, no publishing houses in Egypt can afford such quality control. At present, other publishers can legally reproduce Mushaf al-Madina. But what if the law changes? Who will be able to afford to pay royalties? Will retroactive payments be demanded for copies already sold? These and similar questions worry some who work in Cairo's printing houses.

Ustaz Ahmad, owner of a private Egyptian publishing company that also used to print *masahif*, has an office in an old condominium in downtown Cairo. From the street, dark wooden stairs lead to a three-room apartment full of books stacked along the tall walls up to the ceiling. The stairwell has the characteristic musty smell of an old building. I greet the doorkeeper who is sitting on a small chair by the building's entry. His dry, wrinkled face shows no emotion but he acknowledges my greeting with a slight nod of his head, which is wrapped in a beige shawl. He sometimes dozes on the cardboard boxes stretched on the floor behind the door. Later in the day he drinks tea, squatting in the sun before the entrance, but most of the time he stares from his chair at the ceaseless flow of cars and people in the street.

Ustaz Ahmad's office is on the first floor. The men who work there are always busy, sorting out the stacks and filling out forms, but they do not mind my visits. I pop in there quite often to ask about the latest news from the publishing quarters, always welcomed with a cup of tea. *Ustaz* Ahmad is one of those who worry about copyright issues. His company does not produce *masahif* anymore, although it used to print some before Mushaf al-Madina. "It is all a matter of politics," says *ustaz* Ahmad one day over a glass of refreshing lemon juice. "Like America, Saudi Arabia wants to be the leader. It dominates other countries through money. They give *masahif* away by the box load for free while in Egypt production is more expensive." The

honking of cars bursts through the open window. A small breeze lazily undulates the dusty sheer in the air. He shifts to the subject of illegal printing. Later, he remarks again, “The relationship between Saudi Arabia and other neighboring countries is that of control, including culture. Yes, it is cultural control. They want to have everything best, including the *mushaf*.”

As I found in many conversations, people outside on the streets of Cairo take Mushaf al-Madina for granted. Most people do not even know that this *mushaf* was not written in Egypt and that the original version comes from Saudi Arabia. Many Cairo shop owners do not know its history either. Egyptian publishers who reproduce the Saudi text often do not include their company’s name but simply reprint information about the King Fahd Center. Yet, like al-Shimarli and other publishing houses that print their own editions, these *masahif* of Saudi origin have to have a printing permit issued by Cairo’s al-Azhar University. The way production of Quranic texts from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere is institutionally guarded and the political implications of this relationship will be the subject of the next chapter.

PART II: THE CUSTODIANS

CHAPTER 4: BETWEEN AL-AZHAR AND MAJLIS AL-SHA‘AB

On Monday 28 of May 2012, the daily newspaper *al-Akhbar* published a short editorial by Raja’ al-Nimr entitled *Elections and Printing of the Noble Mushaf*.¹³¹ The first round of presidential elections had just ended with two candidates, Muhammad Morsi and Ahmad Shafiq, selected as finalists running for the presidential office. The press was brimming with opinions and speculations about the voting process and what one might expect when the final election was held. Madam Raja’ commented on rumors about voting fraud but did not end there. She went on to speak about another event that had been overshadowed by the frenzy of the first free presidential elections since the 2011 revolution. While the general public discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the two presidential candidates, a group of parliamentary members at Majlis al-Sha‘ab (the Egyptian lower house) gathered to resolve a very different set of issues. They debated how to avoid flaws in the printing of the Quranic text. The discussion focused on the requirements and penalties to be imposed on publishers whose print copies of the Quran contained “errors or distortions.”¹³² The discussion of a new law that would severely punish those who release *masahif* with errors met with strong opposition from the body representing the

¹³¹ رجاء النمر، "الانتخابات و طباعة المصحف الشريف"، الاخبار، ٢٨ مايو ٢٠١٢، ص. ٢٠.

¹³² أخطاء أو تحريف

Chamber of Printing Industries,¹³³ who -- according to the editorial -- threatened to stop printing *masahif* altogether if the law in its proposed form were to pass. Apart from the severity of the monetary penalties and the unacceptable length of time suggested for imprisoning those convicted, the Chamber contested the very definition of text “distortion.” They argued that some errors, such as wrinkled paper, missing page, or ink blobs, simply happened during the printing process and were a natural and unavoidable byproduct of the process of mechanical reproduction. They were by no means intentional or insidious “distortions” of the Quranic text .

In this chapter I turn to affairs that reveal a broader political context in which the Quranic text is manufactured. The production of *masahif* takes place under the supervision of religious authorities -- the Grand Imam of al-Azhar and his subordinates -- who have the power to define what, how, and where the *masahif* may be printed but have no direct means to enforce it. In order to regulate the production of *masahif* effectively they need to deploy other institutions that, through legislative measures, can provide practical ways of reinforcing the rules. This means that what would seem to be solely a matter of religious jurisprudence becomes a case of multilayered negotiations and agreements between religious authorities, governmental officials, and publishers’ representatives of the text makers. During these debates all parties define their stakes: al-Azhar officials the theological integrity of the text and their own authoritative position, politicians and lawyers their aptitude in creating passable and enforceable laws, and the Quranic publishers their ability to reconcile economic profits with religious requirements and spiritual edification. In the process, however, scholars and producers have to address issues that speak as much to the content of the text as to its material form. It is necessary for them to confront a question of very peculiar nature: What does it mean to “distort” the Quranic text? Here I offer a

¹³³ غرفة صناعات الطباعة والتغليف

narrative of efforts to overcome technological pitfalls in order to properly attend to the text; efforts that bring together politics, religion, and the materiality of the book, producing a reality that is at odds with the secular/religious divide of modern (that is Enlightenment-influenced) political practice.

A couple of weeks before *al-Akhbar* published the editorial on the legislative debates regarding the printing of *masahif*, *ustaz* Ahmad, the owner of a Cairo publishing house, spoke to me of his concerns. As someone familiar with the legal propositions being discussed in the parliament, he simply said, clicking his tongue in a characteristic sign of disapproval, “This bill is a bad idea.” I asked why. “It will create a climate of fear in which the publishers might not want to print the *mushaf* at all.” After a moment of thought he added rather harshly, “If one gets fewer years in prison for dealing drugs than for misprints, people will prefer to make a living by selling drugs rather than printing the *mushaf*. A fine of two or three thousand pounds is a reasonable amount to pay for a mistake but not tens or hundreds of thousands, as the proposal suggests.” He reiterated his opinion making sure I understood him correctly, “The proposed penalties in this case are disproportional to this sort of crime.” In principle, *ustaz* Ahmad was not against punishing the wrongdoers but he felt that by proposing such penalties the parliament disclosed a complete lack of understanding of the realities of the printing profession, its technological constraints and profit margins.

Madam Raja’ thought otherwise. “Is it reasonable to print a *mushaf* with a number of errors and then argue that they were not intentional or that they were misprints?” she asked in her editorial. “The Chamber of Printing Industries should first solve this problem, instead of threatening to stop publishing the *mushaf*. And anyway,” she concluded, switching her line of argument, “Egyptian do not need *masahif* printed by big publishing companies. Every household

has already at least ten copies. What is important is to read them and to memorize them. And if publishing companies fear for their export they should also discuss it with Majlis al-Sha‘ab, as it is a matter of commerce.” She ended her piece rather facetiously, “Not every industry threatens to stop the production when they don’t like the law that is to regulate it.”

Her editorial was subsequently picked up by Jabar al-Qarmuṭi, a host of a news program *Manshit* (Headlines) on ONTV, a private Egyptian television station that presents news and politics. Al-Qarmuṭi was also taken aback by the protests of the Chamber of Printing. “So a school book is inspected three times before it goes on the market and it’s not possible to do the same with a *mushaf*?!” exclaimed the host over the *al-Akhbar* newspaper spread out on his desk, opened to the page with the editorial by Madam Raja’. “Our Lord preserved the heavenly books, the Quran...” after a momentary pause he added, “... and the Enjil [Gospels] and Tawra [Torah], and now we distort them?! Do you want to print this book as you like?! No! It’s one of those laws that we have to respect. Not every law comes from Freedom and Justice Party [the Party of Muslim Brotherhood]. How can a Muslim or a Christian buy the book, bring it home and find that it has mistakes? It may lead to more distortions and soon you will find that the whole *sura* is wrong. And, anyway, there are houses full of *masahif* and people don’t read them. There are cars with a *mushaf* in front of you and behind you, and people don’t know anything of it.” He closed the newspaper with a flourish. “I think it is good that there is a law that regulates printing of *mushaf*. Something positive will come out of it.”

In his journalistic monologue, Jabar al-Qarmuti not only managed to give a back handed complement of the then-leading Muslim Brotherhood party that was receiving a flurry of popular criticism for its inability to deliver laws that would invigorate the spiraling economy, but he also got himself in trouble for his politically correct but theologically faulty inclusion of the Gospel

and Torah in the list of books preserved by Allah. “And where does this idea come from?” commented a viewer under the YouTube recording of the program. “Allah pledged to save the Quran only, not other books.”

Al-Qarmuti’s very pragmatic approach to printing the Quranic text was at odds with the equally pragmatic attitude of the Chamber of Printing Industries. From the Chamber’s perspective, there was a significant difference between a printing error that changed the meaning of the text and a flaw that merely made the text look less attractive. Similarly, there was an even bigger difference between a purposefully made corruption of the text (accusations of such efforts by “Israeli spies” have periodically circulated on the Internet) and an accidental flaw, created by the printing machine. All of these gradations of errors, the Chamber argued, should be taken into consideration when discussing penalties that could possibly bring a publishing house to financial ruin.

During the course of these arguments, the fact that “mistake or error” (*khata*’) has multiple meanings was never addressed. In an interview with an official from a sister organization, the Union of Book Distributors, the word *khata*’ came up so often that I asked for specific examples of the errors in question. The official looked around his small office, furnished with a desk, coffee table, a few armchairs, and a bookcase standing along the wall. He reached for one of the *masahif* on the shelf, opened it randomly, and after a few seconds of quick skimming he pointed to a letter *kaf* that was missing its top part. A few pages further, there was an ink smudge in the middle of the text -- also an error, he said, flipping through the pages. Suddenly, he came across a blank page; strangely, only the red numbers that should mark the end of the verses were suspended in the empty space of bare paper. “Look at that!” he exclaimed visibly surprised. “This is impossible! It’s sixteen pages like that! One sheet of printing contains

sixteen pages, so any mistake of this sort affects all sixteen pages!” He looked at the first page to see who printed the *mushaf*. A nervous smile covered his discomfort, “Don’t tell anybody at al-Azhar. The publisher is my friend and he might end up in prison.”

The issue of printing errors in the Quranic text that spurred the editorial and its discussion on television was addressed by the president of the Chamber of Printing Industries, Khaled ‘Abduh, at a council that took place on 22 May 2012 when members of the organization gathered to discuss their official response to the proposed law. Representatives of the publishing houses that print *masahif* attended the council as well as some officials from al-Azhar who were asked to deliver their opinions on this matter. Short news reports appeared in the media thereafter, informing the public that the representatives of the Chamber criticized the Grand Imam and Sheikh of al-Azhar, doctor Ahmad al-Tayyeb as well as the Ministry of Justice,¹³⁴ for stipulating a fine of 50,000 Egyptian pounds (LE) and fifteen years of imprisonment for the owner of any publishing house that prints the Quranic text without a license, a 200,000 LE fine for misprints in the text (one news agency quoted a range between 100,000 and 1,300,000 LE).¹³⁵ News agencies stated that the Chamber’s president, Khaled ‘Abduh intended to form a delegation that would include three members of the Chamber, three members of the Union of Book Distributors and three representatives of the houses that publish *masahif*. This delegation would subsequently meet with the Sheikh of al-Azhar and the President of the Parliamentary Council for Religious

¹³⁴ وزارة العدل

¹³⁵ سلوى عثمان، "الطباعة تفتح النار على شيخ الأزهر لتجريمه أخطاء المصحف"، البلد، ٢٢ مايو ٢٠١٢ <http://www.el-balad.com/170170/altbaah-tfth-alnar-aly-s.aspx#sthash.NJ5TJMw1.dpuf>
سليم على، "صناعة الطباعة" تشكل لجنة لزيارة "الطبيب" لبحث قرار تجريم أخطاء طباعة "المصحف"، اليوم السابع، ٢٦ مايو ٢٠١٢. <http://www.1youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=688624&SecID=24&IssueID=0#.U-Jza0hPZ8s>
وائل المزيكي، "غرفة الطباعة تناقش مقترح قانون لتجريم أخطاء طباعة المصحف"، اخبار اليوم، ٢١ مايو ٢٠١٢. <http://www.akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/34924/1/0.html#.UnvtCCSE4zm>

Affairs,¹³⁶ sheikh Sayed ‘Askar, to discuss the proposed law and the alleviation of the problems it would create for the publishing sector. The news reports emphasized that according to the Chamber’s representatives the printing of *mushaf* has always been given a priority but mechanical mistakes, such as pages in the wrong sequence, blank pages, or missing pages sometimes occur, although -- of course -- they are not desired. To help in finding a resolution Sheikh al-Tayyeb should offer a clear definition of what it means “to distort” the text of the Quran. If the proposed law were implemented, Ahmad Hossam (a member of the Chamber’s Board) warned, “the publishers who print *masahif* in Egypt will face a threat to stop production. This will open the door to other countries, such as China or countries of Southeast Asia, for printing the Quranic text and will result in the loss of prestige on the part of al-Azhar.”¹³⁷ Hossam’s reference to the *masahif* printed in Asia was not only a concern of commercial nature - - for financial reasons it is always better to export rather than import copies of the Quranic text -- but it also hinted at an ethnic and cultural hierarchy of Quranic production, with Chinese *masahif* having a reputation for being notoriously erroneous and, therefore, not as good as locally produced Middle Eastern ones.

A week later, Internet news websites and newspapers announced that yet another round of negotiations had taken place. This time it was the Union of Book Distributors that met with the members of the Parliamentary Council for Culture and Information¹³⁸ headed by Muhammad al-Sawi. The issue of penalties for misprints in *masahif* was not the only one discussed by the

¹³⁶ رئيس لجنة الشؤون الدينية بمجلس الشعب

¹³⁷ " في حالة تطبيق القانون فإن جميع مطابع المصحف في مصر ستكون مهددة بالتوقف وبذلك سنفتح الباب لدول أخرى لطباعة المصحف مثل الصين ودول شرق اسيا وهو ما يهدد بضياح هيبة الأزهر الشريف." سلوى عثمان، "الطباعة تفتح النار على شيخ الأزهر لتجريمه أخطاء المصحف"، البلد، ٢٢ مايو ٢٠١٢. <http://www.el-balad.com/170170/altbaah-tfth-alnar-aly-s.aspx#sthash.NJ5TJMwl.dpuf>

¹³⁸ لجنة الثقافة والإعلام

Union's delegation but it was contentious enough to remain unsolved and, eventually, any decisions were postponed to yet another council. At the meeting, the Union delegation expressed amongst other grievances its discontent with the slow speed with which al-Azhar issued licenses to print the Quran (often a year or more) and the lack of standardization in printing procedures. The author of one of the longer articles reporting on this meeting juxtaposed these complaints with the rather unyielding opinion of Muhasin Radi, a parliamentary member, representative of the Council for Culture and Information, and Secretary of the Freedom and Justice Party, who called for the imprisonment of any person involved with printing a *mushaf* with distortion, appealing to al-Azhar to exercise "its rightful authority in that matter." Muhammad Rashad, the Union's president, had his own agenda to defend. According to law number 25 of the year 1965 only publishers belonging to the Union had the right to print the Quranic text. In his opinion, al-Azhar should indicate the publishing houses that are capable of printing the *mushaf* although each printing house should employ a reviewer in addition to the review done by al-Azhar to make sure that the text is printed correctly. The report ended with the words of Muhammad Hossam, a member of the Union's delegation, stating, "We [Egyptians] are no lesser than the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where *masahif* are printed as well and where it is done according to standards and specifications, and penalties are enforced on those who violate them."¹³⁹ He meant, of course, the King Fahd Glorious Quran Printing Complex in Madina, a place that has clearly been producing, apart from millions of copies of the Quranic text, mixed feelings of pride and jealousy on the part of some of the publishers in Egypt.

The next meeting took place in June. Khaled 'Abduh representing the Chamber of

¹³⁹ لسنا أقل من المملكة العربية السعودية التي يتم طباعة المصحف فيها، وفقا لمواصفات ومعايير مع تطبيق العقوبات على المخالفين." اتحاد الناشرين
 ينتقد فرض الأهر لرسم جديدة على طباعة المصحف، " Egypt.com ٢٩ مايو
<http://news.egypt.com/arabic/permalink/2248214.html>. ٢٠١٢

Printing Industries and ‘Asim Shalabi representing the Union of Book Distributors met with ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Baqi, Secretary General of the Islamic Research Council.¹⁴⁰ Negotiations continued, with each side defending its position. The meeting reported in *al-Wadi*, *al-Ahram*, *al-Yum 7*, and a few other newspapers¹⁴¹ became an opportunity for ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Baqi’s to denounce most of the printing errors as, what he called, “professional errors,”¹⁴² blaming them on negligent workers. Therefore, in his opinion, a publishing house that applied for a license to produce the Quranic text should be responsible for the quality of its printing. If it published a *mushaf* with misprints, a house should be penalized even if it claimed that the mistakes were accidental and they did not represent a case of willful distortion. Publishing houses should monitor the standards of their printing, concluded ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Baqi, acknowledging that the ‘*ulama*’ and administrators at the Islamic Research Council had been working on a revision of Law Number 102 of the year 1985 to better address the problem of printing errors and to deflect public criticism of al-Azhar for slipping in its supervisory role. ‘Asim Shalabi, on the other hand, made more general comments about the development of Quranic printing over the last fifteen years. In spite of improvements, he admitted, misprints in *masahif* have occurred, including those printed in Beirut for Egyptian distributors. Even the Saudi Mushaf al-Madina printed in Egypt was not free from printing errors, claimed Shalabi. So there was an evident need, he said, to put new rules into place and to create regulations that would efficiently manage the printing of

¹⁴⁰ مجمع البحوث الإسلامية

¹⁴¹ عائشة زيدان، "صناعة الطباعة تناقش أخطاء طباعة المصحف"، مصرس، ١٣ يونيو ٢٠١٢. <http://www.masress.com/elwady/17849>. محمد فتحي، "الناشرون ينتقدون الأزهر لفرضه رسوما جديدة على طباعة المصحف"، الأهرام الرقمي، ٣٠ مايو ٢٠١٢. <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/Policy.aspx?Serial=916281> سليم علي، "تأجيل اجتماع أصحاب مطابع "المصحف" مع "الأزهر" للأحد المقبل"، اليوم السابع، ٧ يونيو ٢٠١٢. <http://www1.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=698595&SecID=24>

¹⁴² الأخطاء المهنية ناتجة من إهمال

These news reports gave an impression that, however united in their opposition to the proposed law, the Chamber of Printing Industries and the Union of Book Distributors had their own internal disagreements to overcome. Perhaps this is why Khaled ‘Abduh spoke at length about the growing ties between the two institutions and their willingness to cooperate in solving the printing problem. After all, there was a question of at what stage -- printing or distribution -- responsibility for the quality of the text should be assigned. He also responded to al-Baqi’s denunciation of negligent workers by emphasizing that the workers in this industry clearly desired to be rewarded by Allah for their efforts. Yet printing is a human activity, prone to problems and in need of correction. In any case, he reassured everyone that the Chamber had no desire to be profiteering from printing Allah’s words.

The meeting ended by declaring that its proceedings would be presented to the Sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, with whom the representatives of the Chamber and the Union would meet again. Meanwhile, ‘Abduh and Shalabi would draft a statement about the importance of recognizing the difference between accidental errors that happen in any printing process and willful distortion of the text. This statement was to be discussed with the Sheikh during the upcoming meeting.

A few days later, Khaled ‘Abduh, ‘Aṣim Shalabi and Ahmad al-Shimarli met with the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb. The Egyptian media reported that the men agreed to create a committee to once more review the proposed fees for license to print the Quranic text, define clearly what it means to “distort” the *mushaf*, and increase penalties for misprints to more

¹⁴³ زيدان، عائشة. "صناعة الطباعة تناقش أخطاء طباعة المصحف"، *مصرس*. ١٣ يونيو ٢٠١٢. <http://www.masress.com/elwady/17849>.

reasonable amounts.¹⁴⁴

Although the series of official meetings I describe above occurred within a single month, the parliamentary project to impose penalties for misprints of *masahif* in Egypt had already been under discussion for a year prior to these events.¹⁴⁵ A proposal to penalize those who misprint the Quranic text or print it without a license came out from the Islamic Research Council al-Azhar after a growing number of incidents in which *masahif* with misprints, missing pages, or pages out of order were discovered for sale. In 2008, *al-Yum 7* reported that 371 *masahif* containing errors had been confiscated from a bookstore located in the al-Husseyin area and belonging to a certain ‘Abd al-Tuwab.¹⁴⁶ Two years later, the news broadcasted another incident. A parliamentary member belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, Yasir Hamud, requested an inquiry from the Parliamentary Religious Council regarding *masahif* printed by the Publishing House al-Ghad from Mansura. In copies he had found page 419 was followed by pages 196-227 and then jumped to page 452. The *mushaf* seemed to be missing about thirty pages as well. The briefing was evidently not well attended by the governmental representatives, who were criticized by another Muslim Brotherhood MP, sheikh Sayed ‘Askar.¹⁴⁷ Interestingly, he blamed the Islamic Research Council for the publication of faulty *masahif* even though he was intimately

¹⁴⁴ محمد ربيع غزالة، "شيخ الأزهر: تذليل كل الصعوبات من أجل طباعة المصحف الشريف"، *الاهرام المسائي*.

<http://massai.ahram.org.eg/Inner.aspx?ContentID=57045>

فوقية ياسين، "الطيب: سنذلل كافة الصعوبات من أجل طباعة المصحف الشريف"، *البلد*، ١٠ يونيو ٢٠١٢.

<http://www.el-balad.com/187177/altybsnzll-kafh-alsaobat.aspx>

¹⁴⁵ "البرلمان المصري يدعم عقوبة الخطأ في طباعة المصحف"، *عرب نت* ٥، ٣ يناير ٢٠١١.

<http://www.arabnet5.com/news.asp?c=2&id=76430#.T8ahEL-Qx-I>

¹⁴⁶ يوسف محمد، "مكتبة بالحسين تعرض مصاحف بها أخطاء مطبعية"، *مصرس*، ١٩ أغسطس ٢٠٠٨.

<http://www.masress.com/youm7/36659>

¹⁴⁷ He became the President of Parliamentary Council for Religious Affairs two years later. He had also he worked at the Islamic Research Council at al-Azhar supervising, among others, the Department of mushaf. In 2005 he was briefly arrested for participation in the demonstrations against American "insults against the Noble *mushaf*."

familiar with the difficulties the Council faced in controlling the final product, having been its member a decade earlier. The head of the Council for Religious Affairs, at that time Ahmad ‘Amr Hashim, asked Grand Sheikh al-Tayyeb to withdraw the flawed *masahif* from the market and to cancel the license the Islamic Research Council had given to the Publishing House al-Ghad.¹⁴⁸ In 2012, *al-Maṣri al-Yum* ran a short piece on a Quranic reciter from Sharqiyya who found errors in a *mushaf* licensed by al-Azhar and printed in al-‘Abur City. The book did not contain a standardized picture of the printing permit that the Mushaf Committee insisted must be present in every legally produced copy of the Quranic text. Some of the verses in this *mushaf* were merged together, the titles of chapters were mixed up, and some chapters appeared twice.¹⁴⁹ The reciter who bought the *mushaf*, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Hakim al-Muhammad, said in an interview with the reporter, “I bought this *mushaf* because I was impressed with its cover and printing but when I started reading it I realized that there were changes in the meaning of the verses and that there were repetitions. Had I not memorized the Quran I would not have noticed these mistakes. [...] I took the *mushaf* and went immediately to its publisher who told me that the *mushaf* with which I had problems had been distributed in ten thousand copies, out of which three thousand went to the mosques and nobody has complained so far. So I took the *mushaf* and went with it to al-Azhar but nobody listened to me.”¹⁵⁰ The story ended without revealing what eventually happened to the erroneous copies of the Quranic text that Mr. Muhammad ‘Abd al-

¹⁴⁸ ياسر حمود يكشف أخطاء في طباعة المصحف الشريف، "نافذة مصر، ٣ مايو ٢٠١٠، http://www.egyptwindow.net/news_Details.aspx?News_ID=8056.

¹⁴⁹ لجنة المصحف الشريف

¹⁵⁰ "اشتريت المصحف بعد أن انبهرت بتجليده وطباعته، لكن بعد القراءة لاحظت تغييراً في معاني آيات السور وتشابهها في معظم الآيات، ولولا حفظي للقرآن ما كنت اكتشفت تلك الأخطاء. [...] فور اكتشاف الأخطاء ذهبت بالمصحف إلى دار النشر التي طبعتته فقال لي أصحابها: المصحف اللي مش عاجبك ده وزعنا منه 10 آلاف نسخة، منها 3 آلاف نسخة للمساجد ولم يشك أحد منه»، فذهبت به إلى مشيخة الأزهر بالدراسة ولم يهتم بي أحد».

<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/1167671>

Hakim al-Muhammad discovered.

Committee for the Review of the Noble *Mushaf*

The tepid reaction of the al-Azhar officials could have been exaggerated by the reporters of this story or it could have been factual -- after all, this was not the first time this sort of problem had been brought to the Council's attention; besides, how could one retrieve from their owners copies that have already been sold? Nevertheless, Muhammad 'Abd al-Hakim al-Muhammad was correct to turn to this institution with his complaint. Law Number 102 of the year 1985, evoked in the negotiations between the Majlis al-Sha'ab and the organizations representing printers and distributors of the Quran, stated that only the Islamic Research Council at al-Azhar was authorized to oversee the printing, dissemination, and trading of *masahif* and of any books containing *sunna*. The same body was in charge of granting the licenses and keeping records of companies and individuals who apply for permits to print and distribute the Quranic copies, and the general secretary of the Islamic Research Council is designated as the proper authority to issue the document itself. The law also stipulated that the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar is the person to establish the conditions and regulations for manufacturing *masahif*. Only *masahif* produced by the Ministry of Religious Endowments¹⁵¹ were exempted from the obligation to obtain a license.

Law Number 102 imposed monetary penalties and imprisonment on those who printed and distributed *masahif* or audio recordings of the Quranic text without a permit. Similarly, it listed the reprisals that those who violated the rules decreed by the Sheikh of al-Azhar and the

¹⁵¹ وزارة الاوقاف

Islamic Research Council would suffer. According to Article Two of the Law, printing and distribution without a license would result in a fine of 3,000 - 10,000 Egyptian pounds (LE) and five year in prison, while any deliberate distortions to the text would result in a sentence of hard labor and a fine of 10,000 - 20,000 LE. The law did not stipulate penalties for “accidental distortion” resulting from mechanical printing; nor did it define the meaning of “deliberate distortions.”¹⁵²

In theory, al-Azhar’s control over the distribution of the Quranic text in Egypt is unquestionable. Its branch, the Islamic Research Council is a parent institution to the *Mushaf* Committee (the full name of which is the “Committee for the Review of the Noble *Mushaf*.”)¹⁵³ The Committee includes a chair, two deputies, and over ten members. The Committee oversees all Quranic production and distribution in Egypt by assigning permits to print and sell. Several stages are required to obtain a license. A publishing house must first submit a copy of the Quranic text to be reproduced for inspection. Then ten test copies of printed text are requested. Once proofed and found correct, the Committee grants the house a permit to print. Several random copies of the Quranic text are selected from the run and forwarded for further inspection. Once the house passes this inspection the Committee issues a license to sell the Quranic book.

A calligraphy specialist employed by the publishing house of Shimarli described the procedure of getting a license as follows,

The first step to printing the noble mushaf in our company was to send the blueprint¹⁵⁴ for

¹⁵² "القانون رقم 102 لسنة 1985 بشأن تنظيم طبع المصحف الشريف والأحاديث النبوية،" <http://www.ug-law.com/downloads/law102-85.pdf>

¹⁵³ لجنة مراجعة المصحف الشريف

¹⁵⁴ البروفات

review and comments to the Head of the Reciters in Egyptian Homelands¹⁵⁵ who at that time was sheikh 'Ali Muhammad al-Diba'a [he became the Head in 1949, died in 1961]. After that we received the license to print from the Department of Publishing at the Ministry of Interior and thus started our blessed journey in printing the book of Allah the Exalted, with the vast support of His prosperity, a journey marked by our utmost efforts and care. With the spread of printing in Egypt, the Islamic Research Council at al-Azhar formed the Committee for the Review of the Noble Mushaf that reviewed the mushaf before it was printed and supervised its printing afterwards. From then on, we had to prepare blueprints of mushaf al-Shimarli to be shown to this Committee and to follow their decisions. The Mushaf Committee reviewed the blueprints very thoroughly and returned them with comments and corrections to be executed before printing, which we did. Then we made a proper copy by photographing the blueprints, and we submitted it for the Committee for another reading. After the Committee reviewed the corrected copy, they gave us a permit to print a limited number of masahif and requested ten copies out of this printing to review again in order to be sure of their quality after the final printing. We printed the limited number of masahif and sent ten copies back to the Committee. Having checked them, the Committee gave us a license to trade this mushaf. The license was valid for five years after which it had to be renewed again. Over the years, we have received very few notices about mistakes in our masahif. Once we had a person call and tell about a missing madda [an orthographic error]. We contacted al-Azhar and they confirmed that it should be there so we made the correction.

Procedures for obtaining a license to print and distribute the *mushaf* are the same for every individual and institution and, in theory, every printing house that distributes *masahif* includes a copy of a valid license in every *mushaf* they print. However, a temptation to make a profit without following these complicated procedures -- or, in some cases, lack of familiarity with the law -- brings about a situation in which unregistered printing houses copy *masahif* prepared by companies such as al-Shimarli, including the page that contains the license, and sell them without putting their name on the cover. If any mistakes were discovered, it is the Printing House al-Shimarli who might be made responsible for them. In a similar way, some print shops reproduce the Saudi *mushaf* without a license from al-Azhar. Their *masahif* are usually inexpensive but of poor quality (very thin paper, poorly glued pages, flimsy covers) and likely to

¹⁵⁵ شيخ القراء والمقارئ بالديار المصري

contain errors, such as the ones mentioned by Mr. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Hakim al-Muhammad, the intrepid reciter from Sharqiyya.

The main problem the *Mushaf* Committee faces is that there are too many unlicensed printing businesses and too few al-Azhar employees to police the book market in search of illegal or misprinted copies. Moreover, the *Mushaf* Committee is not capable of supervising the printing process after the license has been issued and cannot inspect every single Quranic copy that enters the market even from officially licensed publishers. Sheikh Ahmad al-Ma‘asarawi, current president of the *Mushaf* Committee, is not pleased with this situation because, he says, no substantial errors show up in the *masahif* brought for a review. The errors that press highlights (missing pages, merged verses, smudges, etc.) -- and for which al-Azhar has been criticized -- would not be found in the copies inspected by the Committee. They are, in al-Ma‘asarawi’s opinion, a result of slapdash negligence of the workers in the publishing houses and of their purely commercial attitudes. “A worker may leave the room for a moment or press the wrong button that will result in blank pages,” said al-Ma‘asarawi in an interview given in 2009,¹⁵⁶ implying that such copies are nevertheless sold on the market and that al-Azhar cannot be held responsible for this kind of errors. However, there is a solution to this problem, he suggested. Those who print *masahif* should employ their own reviewers to inspect the books after they have been printed and bound. He repeated this view three years later when I spoke to him about the issues surrounding printing of the Quran.

We met at the Islamic Research Council, which is located in one of the modern, 1960s socialist-style office buildings in one of Cairo’s newer neighborhoods. A mix of security in navy blue and shabby looking doormen lounged before the building. A Fulbright liaison had arranged

¹⁵⁶ "المعصرواي: أخطاء المصاحف سببها دور النشر،" مصرس، ٥ أبريل ٢٠٠٩ <http://www.masress.com/moheet/100000>

my visit ahead of time. When I showed up at the entry to the building one of the doormen asked, “al-Ma‘asarawi?”

“Naam (yes),” I replied

He threw away his cigarette. “Come with me.”

We got into an elevator. The space was bedecked with dainty white and orange curtains with frills. I found out later that regular customers took a less fancy elevator on the other side of the hallway. We got off on the fifth floor. The rest of the building was quite sterile. Long, straight corridors were lined with offices on both sides. Concrete floors echoed the steps of the “offise bouy” delivering tea and interdepartmental mail.

One of the department’s workers said that doctor al-Ma‘asarawi had not come yet so I was invited to wait with their secretary Ronda, an amiable girl who had graduated from Cairo University with a degree in classical Arabic. Her room was small with two desks, a few chairs, and some metal shelves full of boxes and videotapes loosely stuck on top of each other. Ronda did not know much about the review procedures but asked about the tapes behind her chair she said that TV programs were brought here for theological inspections as well. “It is necessary because you would not believe what kind of mistakes they may have,” she said with a merry twinkle in her eye. “For example, one of the animated films for children presented the direction of circumambulation around Kaaba in the wrong direction!” “But,” she added, “the division of audiotapes does not have a lot of work because of CDs.” We snacked on dried dates, chatted about work, and drank tea to keep us warm while waiting. Ronda’s office had a pretty view of Cairo but, like many other governmental buildings, had neither central heating nor insulation. She laughed, watching me pour more hot tea to warm up my hands, and said, “When I get too cold I go to my friends on the other side of the building. Their windows face the south. But in the

summer it is much cooler on this side and they come here. I like it that way.”

Sheikh al-Ma‘asarawi arrived two hours later. He was tall and redoubtable, with a white and red ‘*amama* (turban) on his head and a well-tailored robe of fine grey wool. He joked with Ronda, who offered him a cup of tea. A man walked into the office and kissed al-Ma‘asarawi’s hand, thanking him for something. There was a hustle and bustle around the sheikh that marked him as someone important. He finally set down, looked at me, and smiling said, “I have visited North Carolina.” Ahmad al-Ma‘asarawi is the embodiment of a modern Muslim scholar, traditionally educated (he memorized the Quran by the age of eleven) yet aware of the dramatically changing needs and precarious political situation of the institution for which he works. Representing the elite of Azhari textual experts, he specializes in the history of Quranic recitations with a particular emphasis on variant schools of reading and is well respected in the Muslim academic world for his *magnum opus*, *Mushaf of Fourteen Schools of Reading* in which he explains idiosyncrasies of each school by coding the Quranic text printed therein; a very innovative approach, as I was told by many sellers of *masahif*.

Since Ahmad al-Ma‘asarawi is the head of the *Mushaf* Committee, I was very interested in his opinion about the project entertained for a while in Azhari circles tied to the production of *masahif*: that Quranic printing be unified. It meant that there would be only one institution in the country responsible for printing of the Quran. I found out about this proposal for the first time in 2010 when I came across an article titled “Unification of Printing Necessary for Preservation of *Mushaf* from Errors.” The article was in the religious section of popular Egyptian newspaper al-Ahram and featured an interview with sheikh Tareq ‘Abd al-Hakim, a member of the *Mushaf* Committee who did not find the current system of supervision of printing sufficiently efficient. He said,

The proliferation of entities that print is one of the reasons that leads to creation of errors in mushaf. Everybody who wants to print obtains a permit, and this is a big mistake. So the number of institutions that print masahif grows causing problems and the quality of printing differs from one house to another. This happens because the same machine can produce one page correct and the other with a letter missing its part or omitted altogether. Errors can also happen during the process of binding. Most of all, the attitude of some of the printing houses to printing masahif as a commercial undertaking causes a lot of harm. These print the whole edition before obtaining the final permit for selling the mushaf. So instead of printing only ten copies requested for inspection they go ahead and print the whole amount and in the case of presence of mistakes they correct only a few copies, distributing the rest on the market. Therefore in Egypt there should only be one printing house that prints masahif.¹⁵⁷

It was not only sheikh Tareq ‘Abd al-Hakim who argued that Egypt should have a printing house resembling the King Fahd Complex in Saudi Arabia. Such a proposal came from the Grand Sheikh himself. Not all members of the *Mushaf* Committee, however, supported it. In fact some, including Ahmad Al-Ma‘asarawi, found the idea preposterous. “This was sheikh al-Tayyeb’s idea,” he said to me, “but it was a shortsighted vision that did not account for the situation of the Egyptian publishing market and the fact that there are about two hundred publishing houses that print *masahif*.” He shook his head. “If we shifted the responsibility for printing *masahif* onto al-Azhar alone, it does not have the potential to print millions of copies. Such an undertaking could have hurt Egyptian economy and the publishing houses, and it did not have support from the public, so it went into the dustbin of history.”

There were other reasons for which Sheikh al-Ma‘asarawi spoke about the project as unrealistic. In 2009 the Ministry of Finance agreed to spend two hundred million Egyptian pounds to create a printing house that would produce *masahif* in a manner similar to King Fahd Complex in Saudi Arabia but the Egyptian government took no steps to implement the project in

¹⁵⁷ محمد علي عنز، "توحيد جهة الطباعة ضرورة لسلامة المصحف من الأخطاء"، الأهرام، ٥ نوفمبر ٢٠١٠، ص. ١١.

spite of efforts to gain President Hosni Mubarak's patronage. The printing center was to be under the presidential supervision and bear the name "Publishing House Mubarak for Printing of the Noble *Mushaf*," as reported by sheikh Tareq 'Abd al-Hakim and a few other officials familiar with the campaign.

In January 2011, weeks before the collapse of President Mubarak and his government, the project was still on the table. In an interview for a Saudi newspaper al-Ray, sheikh al-Ma'asarawi mentioned that a proposal to build a centralized publishing house for printing *masahif* was under consideration at al-Azhar. The center will print millions of copies for distribution on both local and international markets. However, such an effort would require a considerable amount of startup money and a special operating budget that the sheikh of al-Azhar is still seeking to secure. The project would also needs large grounds to build three or four individual buildings equipped with advanced technology.¹⁵⁸ Three weeks after the interview, the unthinkable happened and after thirty years Mubarak and his government fell from power. Thus, the promises of the Ministry of Finance to finance the project were left unrealized.

It is unclear that the idea of building one, large printing complex would have come to fruition had Mubarak's regime continued. The deteriorating economic situation in the country cast doubts on either the government or al-Azhar's capacity to finance an undertaking that would require at least 30 million \$US. The change in Egypt's political configuration and increasing frictions between different factions at the University of al-Azhar led to a hounding of Azhari figures associated with the deposed president. Mubarak had appointed al-Tayyeb the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar in 2010 and in the opinion of sheikh al-Ma'asarawi this caused unfounded

¹⁵⁸ هبة خالد، "المعصر اوي: نشر الآيات القرآنية على الإنترنت أمر بالغ الخطورة ... وفرصة لتحريفه"، الراي، ٢٠ يناير ٢٠١١.
<http://www.alraimedia.com/alrai/Article.aspx?id=251094&date=20012011>

rumors. He said, “Ahmad al-Tayyeb tried to approach the ex-president Hosni Mubarak with the idea of Complex Mubarak -- like Complex King Fahd. But Mubarak’s reaction was cynical. He said he was not able to do that. But whoever wrote about it made a futile effort to ridicule al-Tayyeb and expose his connections to the old regime.”

In any event, Grand Sheikh al-Tayyeb certainly did not originate the idea that al-Azhar should centralize printing of the Quranic text. A note saying that “the Islamic Research Council is studying the ways and means of avoiding typographical mistakes in printing copies of the Holy Quran, after a number of copies that were being sold on the local market were found to contain such mistakes” appeared in English in 2003. IPR Strategic Business Information Database that tracks the major newspapers, magazines, government reports and websites in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa contained a short article that stated,

A senior official of the Academy [Islamic Research Council] said that the Azhar Printing Press prints 30,000 [masahif] annually, while the market needs around 450, 000 each year. But the Azhar lacks the material and financial wherewithal for expanding its printing activities, and therefore an appeal has been made to the well-to-do to contribute to a project for printing the Holy Quran, under the supervision of the Azhar. An official of the Academy said that such a project would require financing in the region of a billion Egyptian Pounds.¹⁵⁹

A desire to centralize printing of the Quranic text, or at least increase al-Azhar’s control may seem solely to be an imitation of the Saudi model. This was, at least, *ustaz* Ahmad’s interpretation of these events as well that of others in the printing business who disapproved of the initiative. “King Fahd’s Center is an institution financed by the royal family who can invest a lot of money in printing *masahif* of high quality,” argued *ustaz* Ahmad in defense of private

¹⁵⁹ IPR Strategic Business Information Database, May 12, 2003.

publishing companies. “They are later distributed for free, while al-Azhar is not able to carry out a similar undertaking. It’s not capable financially and does not have enough qualified workers to supervise such a big project. Centralized printing would hurt family businesses like Shimarli that have their own traditions of publishing the *mushaf*.” Certainly at least some officials at the Islamic Research Council have been aware of the fragile symbiosis between Egyptian *masahif* and the publishing companies that manufacture them. Obviously, those who participated in negotiations surrounding proposed laws delineating penalties for printing errors have had a chance to listen to an array of grievances and points of view. Yet these concerns could have been easily trumped by the concerns of Azhari officials about the quality of printing had sufficient funding been available to carry out the centralization project.

Printing “errors”

Printing “errors” are a very delicate and sensitive matter in the eyes of the Azhari scholars, as they directly relate to a number of issues. Apart from genuine concern for the integrity of the Quranic text, these mistakes undermine the authority of al-Azhar as a leading religious institution and can be effectively used by those who, ironically, see al-Azhar as a puppet of a secular Egyptian regime and a defender of the old political status quo. More importantly, printing errors in the Quranic text erode the credibility of religious education at al-Azhar, already been challenged on many levels by the more radical and independent Egyptian sheikhs who did not receive Azhari diplomas and who often have Salafi affiliations -- a theological orientation not welcomed at al-Azhar. Flawed Egyptian Quranic copies can thus lead to lost prestige, especially when compared to the Quranic copies coming out of the King Fahd Complex. Further, some fear that Coptic Christians might use such mistakes in debates about the

veracity of Islam and, if news presented in a sensational way spread outside of the country, in broader Christian anti-Muslim Internet campaigns. Printing errors can even trigger rumors about the “foreign efforts” and “hidden hands” that purposefully aim to discredit the Quran and, by extension, Islam. Such insinuations have appeared in the margins of a few news articles reporting on negotiations between al-Azhar, parliament, and publishers, and some Azhari scholars treat these issues very seriously. But most importantly, printing errors lead to questions about the accuracy of the graphic representation of the Quranic text, an issue that preoccupies the scholarly attention of those who specialize in the *rasm* and *dabt* of the Quran -- in other words, those who specialized in Quranic orthography. The next chapter will explain why the printed representation of the Quranic message matters so much for the Azhari scholars and practitioners versed in the Quranic sciences.

CHAPTER 5: *AL-RASM AL-UTHMANI*: A GRAPHIC BLUEPRINT

Rasm

The materiality of a book does not reside only in its parchment, paper, or binding but also includes the ink that covers the surface of a page. Ink can be applied with a variety of tools and technologies that will either limit or expand the possibilities of how well the text is inscribed. In other words, a particular technology will either create a satisfactory image of spoken words or represent them in a way considered inferior to their acoustic equivalent. In this chapter I discuss some of the debates surrounding graphic representations of the Quranic message that, although present in the past, became in many ways more relevant and pressing with the introduction of print. Reproduction of the text through a particular way of writing, or more precisely spelling, has its implications for religious practice. Discussions of Quranic orthography were rekindled by two factors: the difficulties of recreating the Quran's exact letters and diacritics in print and general pressures to update the orthography of the Arabic language. These deliberations over the Arabic language and its spelling were carried out in multiple sites, from the institutions that directly dealt with the production of *masahif* and the associations of linguists with ideas about the graphic form of the Arabic language, to the Muslim leaders responsible for delivering legal pronouncements on Quranic orthography. An interesting question has emerged from such discussions: what precisely is the written representation of a text supposed to *reflect*? The sound of the Quranic words? Their meaning? Perhaps there is something about the signs themselves that requires the graphic representation of the message to look in a certain way? In other words,

if a glyph in a word is not pronounced and its absence would not change the word's meaning why is it still there? The Muslim '*ulama*' who declared that the spelling of the Quranic message should not be changed under any circumstances had very sound arguments in favor of their position. In order to understand them we need to return to Arabic grammar and calligraphy.

The Quranic message in its handwritten form, reproduced in individual copies with the use of calligraphic pens, nicely accommodated some of the practical questions of representation that appeared almost as soon as the Quranic message was committed to more than memory. The reasons for putting the message into a form other than sound were quite pragmatic. In case of disagreements between reciters a material copy of the text could assist in adjudicating the argument. But visualizing the message in a material medium begged a question: what is the most correct way to write down words not inscribed by the messenger himself?

When twenty years after the Prophet Muhammad's death the third Caliph, 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan (d. 35/ 577-656), was asked to supervise a compilation of the first official codex containing the full text of the Quranic message in one book, his scribes recorded the text according to a writing system that represented only the consonant baseline of the words, known in Arabic as *rasm* (from *rasama*, to draw). Nevertheless, this script was easy to read for native speakers of Arabic who were familiar with the morphological patterns of the language and had already memorized the message. This *rasm* is referred to as *al-rasm al-'Uthmani* - the consonant base authorized by the third Caliph 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan.

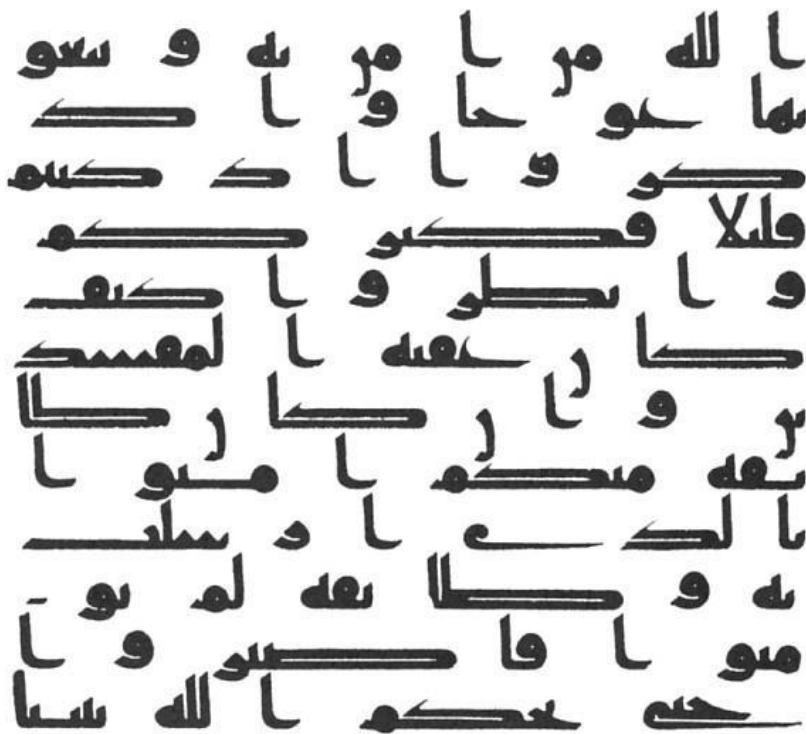


Fig 4. ‘Uthmanic *rasm*, without the short vowels and diacritics that differentiate between consonants of the same shape, such as ت and ث, signified within the text by the same glyph without any dots. (Public domain picture)

Yet the Muslim *umma* grew rapidly and soon the Quran was recited far away from the center of its revelation, and by those who did not speak Arabic at home. This necessitated modifications to the existing system of graphemes, which introduced more complicated orthographic inscription of the message. The first person credited by many Muslim historians with improving the written Quranic message was Abu al-Aswad al-Du‘Ali¹⁶⁰ (d. 69 AH/ 688 AD), a companion of the Prophet’s son-in-law, who added a system of dots to indicate three short vowels -- *u*, *a*, and *i* (*harakat*) -- and to signal the grammatical cases of the Arabic language (*i‘rab*) -- nominative, accusative, and genitive. Later, Abu al-Aswad al-Du‘Ali or one of his

¹⁶⁰ Although there are other scholars credited with this task as well, such as Nasr Ibn ‘Aṣim (d. 89 / 707), Yaḥya Ibn Ya‘mur (d. 129 / 746) and others.

successors added more dots to mark differences between consonants of similar shape (*i'jam*).

The dots distinguishing letters of the same shape and short vowels were of different sizes and colors, as opposed to black *rasm*, and were intended to enable the non-native speakers to read the Quran without errors.

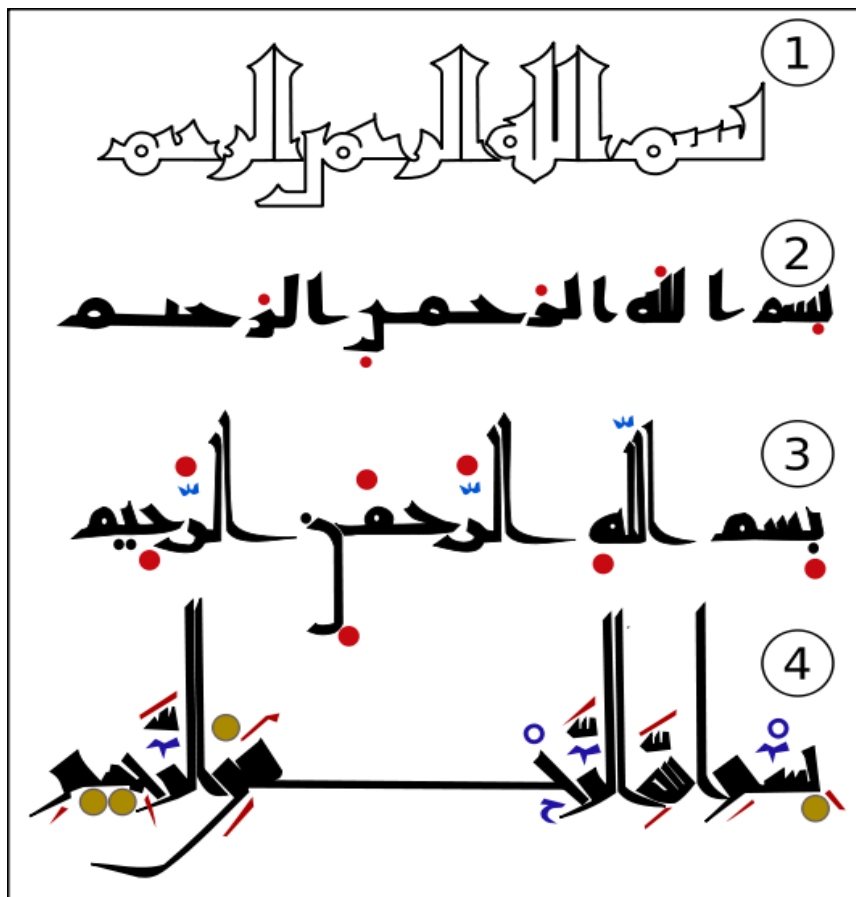


Fig. 5 Stages of adding diacritics

1. *Rasm* without any diacritics.
2. Red dots indicating some of the short vowels and case endings.
3. Red dots indicating short vowels and case endings, and black dots distinguishing between the consonants of a similar shape.
4. The system used today in which vowel and case dots were changed into marks of a different shape to make the distinction between *harakat* and *i'jam* more pronounced. (Public domain picture)

Some Muslim scholars opposed any additions to the original *rasm* but most agreed that they were permissible, if not necessary, as long as they facilitated correct recitation.¹⁶¹ Still, the initial dot system must have been seen as imprecise (perhaps in small codices limited space made

¹⁶¹ Abdel Haleem, "Quranic Orthography: The Written Representation of the Recited Text of the Quran," *Islamic Quarterly* 38, no.3 (1994): 172.

the dots accompanying *rasm* hard to tell apart?), so for the next couple of centuries Quranic scribes continued expanding and improving the system of diacritical signs. The science of their correct use (*‘ilm al-naqt*) that prompted Muslim scholars to study Arabic syntax, became a part of Quranic studies and its grammar. By the beginning of the third century *hijri* (ninth century) the system of Quranic diacritics facilitating reading was fairly established although small changes continued to be introduced till about the fifth century *hijri* (eleventh century).

These developments went hand in hand with the efforts to explicate the rules of writing the consonant baseline of the Quranic text. *‘Ilm al-rasm* (science of *rasm*) dealt, then, with the orthographic form of the text’s consonants and long vowels. At first, the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* was one of the important sources of Arabic orthography but with time spelling of certain words began to differ from the one used in Quranic copies. The question of whether Quranic *rasm* should be updated to contemporary rules of spelling came up already in the third century *hijri*. Malik ibn Anas (c. 93-179 AH/ 711-795 AD), founder of one of the major Islamic schools of religious law, when asked whether such changes in Quranic orthography should be executed replied “No, [it should be written] according to what was first.”¹⁶² Malik was not the only scholar who felt that the *rasm* of the Quranic text should be left unmodified. Among those who explicitly opposed any alterations to Quranic orthography were Abu ‘Amr al-Dani (371-444 / 981-1053) who wrote a famous treatise on the Quranic *rasm* entitled *A Persuasive Book of Knowledge of What Has Been Decreed in Relation to Masahif of People of the Region*;¹⁶³ Abu Dawud Suliman Ibn Najah (d. 496/ 1103), who wrote on the same subject in his *Revelation*;¹⁶⁴ Imam al-Shatibi (d. 590/ 1193)

¹⁶² جلال الدين السيوطي، الاتقان في علوم القرآن (المملكة العربية السعودية: مركز الدراسات القرآني، nd) : ٢١٩٩.

¹⁶³ كتاب المقنع في معرفة مرسوم مصاحف أهل الأمصار

¹⁶⁴ التنزيل

who discussed schools of reading in relation to orthography in *The Best of the Lowliest of Poems Regarding Loftiest of Goals Concerning the Science of Quranic Orthography*,¹⁶⁵ Abu al- ‘Abbas al-Marakashi (Ibn al-Bina’) (d. 721/ 1321), who prepared a *Manual for the Orthography of the Revelation*,¹⁶⁶ Muhammad ibn Bahadur Zarkashi (744-794/ 1344 -1392), who wrote multiple treatises on this subject; and al-Suyuti (849-911/ 1445-1505) who produced a classic work, *The Perfect Guide to the Sciences of the Quran*.¹⁶⁷ The position of these scholars on the question of *rasm* is well known among the Muslim academics and cited as authoritative in contemporary writings that discuss the ‘Uthmanic orthography, in particular Al-Suyuti who wrote extensively, compiling earlier works on rules and patterns characteristic of Quranic orthography. His work on Quranic grammar has served as a foundation for general grammar courses and its elements are still taught in Egyptian public schools. At al-Azhar, study of the Quranic *rasm* represents a narrow but complicated branch of Quranic knowledge and takes years of rigorous scholarship for those who want to specialize in it. Yet, it is essential for the contemporary ‘*ulama*’ who supervise the production of Quranic copies, as they have to ensure that no letter or diacritical sign is missing. Moreover, they have to make certain that no form of contemporary spelling fraudulently sneaks into the written or printed text.

It is hard to understand what is at stake in such rigorous control of the text without thorough knowledge of the Quranic grammar. A brief example below only partially reflects the complexity of this issue and indicates how the rules of *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* compare to

¹⁶⁵ عقيلة أرتاب القصائد في أسنى المفاصد

¹⁶⁶ عنوان الدليل في مرسوم خط التنزيل

¹⁶⁷ الاتقان في علوم القرآن

contemporary spelling. The Quran's orthographic patterns are grouped into six categories.¹⁶⁸

Quranic orthography	Contemporary orthography
the pattern of deletion: the letters <i>alef</i> , <i>ya</i> , <i>waw</i> , <i>lam</i> , and <i>nun</i> are omitted in writing some words although they are pronounced (example: <i>al-il</i> instead of <i>al-lil</i> ¹⁶⁹)	some of these letters are now written in contemporary modern standard Arabic
the pattern of addition: the letters <i>alef</i> , <i>waw</i> , and <i>ya</i> can be added even though they are not pronounced (example: <i>qalu</i> with an extra <i>alef</i> after <i>waw</i> ¹⁷⁰)	this <i>alef</i> is not written in vernaculars but retained in contemporary standard Arabic
the pattern of writing the <i>hamza</i> ء - a glottal stop that can be pronounced in different ways depending on the surrounding letters	its writing in the Quran differs from non-Quranic orthography ¹⁷¹
the pattern of changing: the letter <i>alef</i> changes into the letters <i>waw</i> or <i>ya</i> , <i>nun</i> into <i>alef</i> , and the final feminine <i>ha</i> (<i>ta' marbuta</i>) into an ordinary open <i>ta'</i> (example: <i>zaku'a</i> instead of <i>zakaa</i> ¹⁷²)	the Quranic text preserves this spelling but not contemporary orthography
the pattern of joining and separating where pronouns and prepositions are combined with other words (example: <i>yawmuhum</i> instead of <i>yawmu hum</i> or <i>fīma</i> instead of <i>fī ma</i> ¹⁷³)	this spelling is preserved in contemporary writing
existence of variant canonical readings ("schools" or methods of recitation)	

Although complex, these are not differences that would make contemporary reading of the Quran

¹⁶⁸ Abdel Haleem, "Quranic Orthography: The Written Representation of the Recited Text of the Quran," *Islamic Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1994): 173-79.

¹⁶⁹ الليل الليل

¹⁷⁰ قالوا

¹⁷¹ يسأل يسأل

¹⁷² زكاة زكاة

¹⁷³ يومهم يومهم؛ فيما في ما

impossible. Most of these discrepancies could be compared to the way in which “took - taketh” varies in the English language. Why, then, do scholars at al-Azhar (and other places as well) still adhere to the unrevised spelling? I will come back to this question shortly but for the moment I turn to the last category on the list of orthographic patterns: variant canonical readings.

The science of variant schools of recitation of the Quran (*‘ilm al-qira’at*) represents a separate branch of specialization in Quranic studies but it is also intimately connected to the knowledge of *rasm*. Therefore, in Egypt sheikh al-Ma‘asarawi is the Head of the *Mushaf* Committee and the Head of the Egyptian Reciters at the same time.¹⁷⁴ Such a position entails comprehension of both: how to recite the message according to *‘ilm al-qira’at* and how to inscribe it so that there are no discrepancies between the sound of a particular recitation and its visual representation.

It is common knowledge among Egyptian Muslims that reading the Quranic text out loud (*tilawa*) is better than reading it silently. It is even more beneficial if one is familiar with the rules of *tajwid*, a desired way of reciting the Quran that is attentive to particularities such as the modulation of the voice, length of syllables, accents, assimilation of consonants to the following ones, or places where one should pause and end the verse. Differences between variant readings include these particularities as well as simple pronunciation variants, different case endings or verbal forms, and synonyms or near synonyms. The question of how much difference the variants of reading actually produce when it comes to the text’s meaning has been a matter of debate between the Muslim scholars and some orientalists, and does not belong here; neither does the history of the variants’ development - also debated by Muslim and non-Muslim alike. But what I find relevant, and what is important for the printing houses that produce *masahif*, is

¹⁷⁴ شيخ عموم المقارئ المصرية

the fact that peculiarities of each school/variant of reading find their reflection in the *rasm* of the *mushaf*, its diacritics, and reading signs (‘*alamat al-wuqf*’).

Schools of reading

To illustrate the consequences of predicaments arising between schools of recitation and the printed Quranic text I return to the conversation with Muhammad and two other language instructors. The conversation concerned *masahif* in the Grand Mosque in Mecca, in particular the one that was found to have “errors” and was turned in to the religious police. The teacher who discovered it could not recall what kind of “errors” the book contained, and it may well be that what she had come across were simply mechanical misprints. However, it is also possible that, instead of mistakes, the *mushaf* contained one of the less common recitation variants (*qira’at*), specifically one that the teacher did not know, as this kind of knowledge is mastered mainly by Muslim religious scholars and those who graduate from al-Azhar. Occasionally, a person without Azhari education may know one or two other variants which he or she learned through self-study or courses at various religious centers, but most Egyptian Muslims are not familiar with differences between the *qira’at*, and know only one, their own reading.

It may happen, however, that one comes across a *mushaf* printed in another *qira’a* at mosques frequented by Muslims from other countries. The Grand Mosque in Mecca is, of course, just such a place. Over six millions pilgrims a year visit it and Muslims from all over the world gather there, many of whom bring their own *masahif*, sometimes leaving copies worn out by prayer behind (especially when they receive in return a brand new Mushaf al-Madina). An amalgamation of people and books in one building creates a space of juncture where objects can easily find themselves changing hands. Crowds of pilgrims pour in and out of this famous place

daily, some clenching a *mushaf* in their hands, others looking for a copy left behind or belonging to the Mosque. The religious custodians of the Holy City strive to satisfy the needs of the pilgrims in this matter. In 2012, the Director of the Administration of Affairs Pertaining to Masahif¹⁷⁵ at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, ‘Abd al-Rahman Ibn ‘Ali al-‘Aqla, announced that the King Fahd Complex had provided a million *masahif* of different sizes to be distributed around the mosque so they would be available to visitors.¹⁷⁶ He did not mention whether they included *masahif* with different *qira’at* but from what I heard on different occasions it is reasonable to assume that most, if not all, contained the reading predominant in Saudi Arabia. One Azhari sheikh summarized the state of affairs by saying, “If you want a different *qira’a*, get on-line and listen or buy a CD with an old sheikh who was famous for a certain school of reading.”

Auspiciously, for the Egyptian pilgrims and visitors from Lebanon or Syria, that particular choice is not a problem. In Egypt, as in Saudi Arabia and the Levant, the common school of recitation is attributed to the reciter ‘Asim according to the version narrated by Hafs, generally called “Hafs ‘an ‘Asim.” It is one of seven officially accepted schools of *qira’at* (an additional seven more are considered less authoritative), each one deriving its name from a famous reciter (*qari’*) and his transmitter (*rawi*) through a chain of other well-known reciters, beginning with the Prophet himself. For instance, the reading variant “Hafs ‘an ‘Asim” is traced back to the reciter ‘Asim Ibn Abi al-Najud (d. in 127 or 128 *hijri*), who learned from Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Solammi and Zirr Ibn Hubaysh. Abu ‘Abd ar-Rahman was reported to have learned from ‘Uthman, ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib, ‘Ubayy Ibn Ka‘ab and Zayd Ibn Thabit, who were all

¹⁷⁵ مدير إدارة شؤون المصاحف بالمسجد الحرام

¹⁷⁶ مليون مصحف بالمسجد الحرام، "دي ون جي" <http://www.d1g.com/forum/show/4855761>

companions of the Prophet. And Zirr Ibn Hubaysh was said to have learned from ‘Abdallah Ibn Mas‘ud, also one of the Prophet’s close associates.

So a pilgrim from Egypt who receives a *Mushaf* al-Madina is not troubled by its orthography. A sojourner from Morocco, however, will spot a few differences. For instance, in *surat* al-Shura 42:30 according to the school of Hafs she would read فِيمَ (*fabima* “then it is what”) and according to school of Warsh popular in Morocco she would read بِمَا (*bima* “it is what”). Variant readings also affect the text’s diacritics. Thus, in Al-Fath 48:17 Hafshas it: يَدْخُلُهُ (*yudkhillhu* “he makes him enter,” while Warsh contains the same rasm with altered *i’jam*: نَدْخُلُهُ (*nudkhillhu* “we make him enter”). The letters *qaf* and *fa* would also look differently, as their dots (*i’ajam*) would be shifted: in the Maghrebi script the letter *qaf* has only one dot above instead of two and looks like a regular *fa* while the *fa* has a dot beneath instead of above. Variants of reading also include different ways of prolonging syllables, connecting words, and making stops to take a breath. These rules are marked in the texts of the contemporary *masahif* and the reciters call them ‘*alamat al-wuqf*, “signs of punctuation,” better translated as “guide to when to stop, pause, or continue.” Those were added last to the Quranic text and differ depending not only on the school of recitation but also on the expertise of the scholars who decided it would be beneficial to readers to use them. With the introduction of print, the editorial notes in the form of a coda that explained orthographic modifications, additions to facilitate recitation, and any other decisions made about the *rasm* of the text became common. The coda signaled to readers the *mushaf*’s accuracy and fidelity to the “original” text. It also cited the scholarly treatises on which the opinion about the text’s accuracy was formed. In the epilogue to the famous *Mushaf* Fu‘ad printed in 1923, editors of which emphasized their efforts to follow strictly the rules of *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani*, we read,

*When it comes to the few letters that differed from mushaf to another, they followed the most common orthography according to the school of reading of the reciter who wrote the mushaf. They [also] complied with the rules formulated by the scholars of that rasm, based on what was said by sheikhs Abu 'Amru al-Dani and Abu Dawud Suliman Ibn Najah with the preference [for the opinion] of the latter in the case of disagreement.*¹⁷⁷

Needles to say, this edition, like most of *masahif* printed in Egypt, followed the *qira'at* "Hafs 'an 'Asim." What is also interesting is this coda's emphasis on adherence to the rules of *al-rasm al-'Uthmani* although at this point in time *al-rasm al-'Uthmani* already had come to mean not only the consonant base of the text but also all later additions: *i'arab* (suffixes indicating cases), *i'jam* (dots distinguishing between the letters), and *tashkil* (all other signs functioning as phonetic guides including *harakat*, short vowels).

Visualizing a *qira'a* in print may have effects on the actions practitioners undertake. As we learned earlier from the sheikh who gave a *fatwa* on the question of replacing the Mushaf al-Shimarli in the neighboring mosques, a professional reciter should not have difficulty reading from *any mushaf*. But a person unfamiliar with the orthography of other variants will likely find them strange if not altogether "wrong," as Dalia did. Her story testifies to the unsettled reality in which different variants coexist in the market. While some *qira'at* are printed in larger quantities than others, they all can circulate freely along contemporary channels of migration, such as international student exchange. Dalia's job was to teach the basics of the Quran to foreigners.

Performing this task, however, did not mean that Dalia had a good command of *qira'at* other

¹⁷⁷ أما الأحرف اليسيرة التي اختلفت فيها أهجية تلك المصاحف فأتبع فيها الهجاء الغالب مع مراعاة قراءة القارئ الذي يكتب المصحف لبيان قراءته ومراعاة القواعد التي استنبطها علماء هذا الرسم من الأهجية المختلفة على حسب ما رواه الشيخان أبو عمرو الداني و أبو داود سليمان بن نجاح مع ترجيح الثاني عند الاختلاف. و على الجملة كل حرف من حروف هذا المصحف موافق لنظيره في مصحف من المصاحف السابق ذكرها , و العمدة في بيان كل ذلك على ما حققه الأستاذ محمد بن محمد الأموي الشربيني المشهور بالخزاز في منظومته " مورد الظمان " و ما قرره شارحها المحقق الشيخ عبد الواحد بن عاشر الأنصاري الأندلسي . و أخذت طريقة ضبطه مما قرره علماء الضبط على حسب ما ورد في كتاب " الطراز على ضبط الخزاز للإمام التنيسي " مع إبدال علامات الأندلسيين و المغاربة بعلامات الخليل بن أحمد و أتباعه من المشارقة

than “Hafs ‘an ‘Asim.”

“I once found a *mushaf* with misprints,” she told me.

“Oh really?!” I said, letting my voice trail off and hoping for more details.

“It was on the old American University campus.” She spoke to me in English, “I once found one in the mosque. We had a mosque usually for the students. When I was a student...

“I remember.” I interrupted. “The mosque was on the top of the building, the administrative...”

She interrupted in return.

“Ayyywa, it was on the top of the building. I once found a *mushaf* there. I think it was printed somewhere in Africa, in Sudan?” She hesitated trying to recall an event that had happened more than ten years ago. “No, I don’t remember. But I remember that I took it from the shelf. Usually the stuff there is donated by students. And I think I gave it to security or something like that. “

I was curious.

“So you just started reading and you noticed that it had a mistake?”

“Not only that I started reading. I first noticed that the version was different. *Bussi* (see). You know when you read Wuthering Heights, you have the Longman Wuthering Heights, and you have... *ismaha eh* (whatchamacallit)... the Lady Bird Wuthering Heights. So you know the version that you have, *keda* (just like that). I noticed a version that I never knew, so I started looking at it. Because, usually, we Muslims, especially Muslims who are practicing, you know by looks, you know them. You know?”

I didn’t know. But I was intrigued by this comparison.

“So, what do you mean by versions when you talk about...?”

She got slightly impatient.

“*Ya ‘ani* (well). It’s not the content!”

“Right, right. I know that.”

- “The cover, *habibti* (darling).” She stressed the word “cover” as an obvious answer.

“The cover looked different. I never met this cover before.”

- “Oh, OK, so visually... it looked different from the ones you normally see around?”

She made a typical throaty “ah” to confirm.

“I started looking and I noticed. What’s this? And then I started looking at the print house and I never heard about this print house...”

At this point she digressed to the subject of printing houses in Egypt and penalties for misprints, but I kept thinking about what she said. I called her again a few days later.

- “Listen, Dalia.” I said. “Do you think you could have found a *mushaf* in a different *qira’a* and you just didn’t know it?”

She thought for a moment and then said, “Now that you said it, yeah... it could have been a different *qira’a*, you know.”

Dalia did not seem bothered by the fact the *mushaf* she brought to the security office could have been, in fact, errorless. As a devout Muslim, she felt a moral responsibility to make sure that the copy she came across and perceived as faulty would be removed from a place where other young Muslims could find it. But her lack of more specialized knowledge of the Quran prevented her from discovering her own mistake caused by the fact that the two largest producers of the *masahif* in the Muslim world -- Egypt and Saudi Arabia -- share the same *qira’a* and Muslims in Egypt are mainly familiar with copies of *Mushaf al-Madina* that dominates religious market there. But what happens if an institution, such as the King Fahd Complex that produces

millions of *masahif* a year, uses predominantly one school of reading in all of its editions and distributes them for free? At what point must an historically developed adherence to a particular *qira'a* in places such as Yemen or Morocco give way to sheer numbers of *masahif* produced elsewhere? After all, it is not possible for any local religious authority to forbid the import of *masahif* of this or that variant, as technically they all contain the same Quranic message. But precisely for this reason, some of the scholars who specialize in *'ilm of qira'at* in Egypt are concerned about the proliferation of the Saudi Mushaf al-Madina, printed in "Hafs 'an 'Asim," and its effects on the continuity of a tradition that supports a number of different schools of reading. Of course, religious authorities in Madina are aware that pilgrims from Libya or Tunisia may prefer "Qalun 'an Nafi'," that sojourners from Algeria and Morocco may be more interested in procuring "Warsh an Nafi'," or that travellers from West Africa and Sudan would rather have "Abu 'Amr Ibn al-'Ala' 'an Hafs al-Duri" and cater to them in their Quranic production to a certain degree but most print that comes out of the King Fahd Complex in practice promotes only one *qira'a*.

Let us return now to the question of why Muslim *'ulama'* at the Islamic Research Academy advocate adherence to the unaltered orthography of the Quranic text and why they have been so particular about the accuracy of printed *masahif*. In their opinion, only the 'Uthmanic *rasm* should constitute an orthographic template for the contemporary *masahif*. It is true that this standpoint conforms to the opinion of most, though not all, classical scholars. Yet to say that merely the weight of tradition affects the *'ulama's* opinions would be simplistic. What complicates matters is that the text's original orthography is mainly known through works and commentaries written by later scholars and there is no consensus about whether a few manuscripts known as true 'Uthmanic copies were, in fact, written in the Caliph's time.

Concerns about how to inscribe the words of the message in the most accurate way preoccupied Muslim *'ulama'* in Islam's first few centuries but somewhat abated later as other, more pressing problems needed attention from scholars and theologians. Yet the problem came back with new urgency with the growing use of print technology in the nineteenth century and with the language reforms contemplated by members of the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo¹⁷⁸ at the turn of the twentieth century.

Orthographic reforms

In the chapter discussing *Mushaf* Fu'ad, I spoke about attempts to modernize Arabic fonts at al-Amiriyya and the frictions that arose between the calligrapher designing the characters and other more pragmatically oriented officials involved in the project. This dispute had at its backdrop other debates surrounding the Arabic language in general. One of the most crucial issues at that time was (and still is) related to the footing of the Egyptian spoken dialect (*'amiyya*) vis-à-vis its literary register - modern standard Arabic (*fusha*). The former was commonly spoken in the country while the latter was taught at schools and used by the intelligentsia and the media. This meant that a large percentage of the population did not have a working knowledge of the literary language that, although initially bound to the Quran, also had evolved and changed, as did its use (for instance some inflections were dropped even from spoken *fusha*). Different ideas of how to ameliorate the language problems started emerging at the turn of the twentieth century.

Perhaps debates about reforms to the Arabic alphabet that already had surfaced in the

¹⁷⁸ مجمع اللغة العربية بالقاهرة

second half of the nineteenth century in the Ottoman Empire, and intensified significantly at the beginning of the twentieth, fueled similar discussions in Egypt. Of course, in Turkey the language matters looked quite different. The Arabic alphabet was used to write in Turkish language that belonged, unlike Arabic, to a non-Semitic linguistic group and contained sounds nonexistent in Arabic. In addition, Kemal Atatürk's aggressive politics of modernization was ready to appropriate any arguments -- such as the incompatibility of the Arabic alphabet with the use of the telegraph¹⁷⁹ -- that could promote a swift transition to the Latin alphabet which he saw as a tool of development. At any case, a motion to relinquish the Arabic alphabet and to replace it with Latin script was proposed by a prominent lawyer 'Abd al-'Aziz Fahmi (1870 - 1951), at the conference of the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo in 1941.¹⁸⁰ After a serious discussion of the motion, the Council rejected the proposal. Fahmi's plan was very radical, especially considering that only two decades earlier - in 1917 - the Sheikdom of al-Azhar had issued a decision that forbade under penalty of confiscation printing and distributing *masahif* that did not follow the 'Uthmanic *rasm*.¹⁸¹ Indeed, if the proposal to adopt the Latin alphabet in other areas of life had been accepted, such a shift would have put the Quranic text in the peculiar situation of being calligraphically obsolete writ. More moderate proposals, expressed around the time of the conference, opted for preservation of the Arabic alphabet but suggested that orthography be modified to reflect the dialect spoken in Egypt. Their authors were of the opinion that traditional spelling was becoming increasingly unrepresentative of people's speech, and so they urged its

¹⁷⁹ Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004): 188.

¹⁸⁰ عبد الحى الفرماوي، كتابة القرآن الكريم بالرسم الإملائي أو الحروف اللاتينية: اقتراحان مرفوضان. (القاهرة: دار التوزيع والنشر الإسلامية، ١٩٩١): ٣٣.

¹⁸¹ عبد الحى الفرماوي، رسم المصحف: بين المؤيدين والمعارضين (القاهرة: مكتبة الأزهر، ١٩٧٨): ٥٤.

reform. Updated orthography would make reading easier, they argued -- especially reading the Quran. Some promoters of language reform compared their efforts to modernize the Arabic language to a “religious revolution -- like the Protestant Reformation” that would free the Quranic text from the constraints of traditional orthography.¹⁸² In support of their cause, they emphasized that nothing in the Quran explicitly and irrevocably indicated that it had to be written according to any particular *rasm*. As long as the printed signs pointed a reader to the correct pronunciation, their format should not matter and could be changed as needed.

Neither path, although carefully discussed at al-Azhar, was ultimately accepted. If the need to modernize orthography was so pressing, what were the reasons behind the reluctance to revise the Quran’s spelling? First of all, ‘*ulama*’ who defended the ‘Uthmanic way of writing relied on the opinions of earlier scholars who had faced similar questions and had to resolve a similar quandary about whether or not the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* could be updated. In order to accept or reject changes, experts first had to define the nature of Quranic writing itself: was it merely a human-made tool to record the divine words (*istilāḥi* - a matter of convention) or a part of the revelation (*al-rasm al-tawqifi*) and, as such, unchangeable in any circumstances? With a few exceptions (the most famous of them being Abu Bakr al-Baqillani and Ibn Khaldun¹⁸³), most classical scholars were inclined to see *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* as revealed. This meant that the text’s written representation was part of Allah’s plan to preserve the message intact; therefore, it was something that people should not tinker with. But even among those who did not believe in the divinity of Quranic orthography, some scholars preferred to preserve the ‘Uthmanic spelling, because of its value as a historical artifact or because the consensus of the *umma* (Muslim

¹⁸² Ibid. ١٦.

¹⁸³ شعبان محمد اسماعيل، رسم المصحف وضبطه: بين التوقيف والاصطلاحات الحديثية (القاهرة: دار السلامة، ١٩٩٩): ٦٣.

community) always had counted a great deal in any decision making process. The Prophet's companions wrote the message under his guidance, many argued, and Muhammad's followers agreed with its form, so it would be unwise to change it. Besides, the scholars who seriously considered the issue, asked: with what *rasm* should we replace the previous spelling? Language evolves and once updated the Quran would require constant revisions, revisions that might open the door to other, undesired changes. A small group of scholars -- 'Az al-Din Ibn 'Abd al-Salam and Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi were among them -- took the middle ground, suggesting that an updated spelling was permissible in *masahif* written for the benefit of the public but the original orthography should be preserved in the texts used by the '*ulama*' and specialists as a "psychological heritage" that had been preserved by the previous generations.¹⁸⁴

Clearly any decision -- whether to keep or to change the 'Uthmanic *rasm* -- consequently entailed more adjustments and demanded even more answers in other areas of Quranic knowledge. Most prominently, if the spelling were modified what was to be done with the "mysterious letters" that opened some chapters of Quranic text? These combinations of single letters stand at the beginning of twenty-nine out of a hundred and fourteen *suwar* (pl. of *sura*) and have puzzled Muslim scholars for centuries. And so the twentieth *sura* starts with two letters *ta ha* (ط هـ) that by themselves constitute the chapter's first verse. The *sura* itself is titled after them and is called Surat Ta Ha. Surat al-Shu'ara' (chapter twenty-eight) begins with *ta, sa*, and *mim* (ت س م), and Surat Ghafir (chapter forty) has as its first verse *ha mim* (هـ م). These letters are recited along with the rest of the text. All Muslims consider them a part of the revelation, although there have been many different explanations as to what meaning they have or what their role might be. Some scholars suggest that they stand for abbreviations of the names of Allah or

.Ibid¹⁸⁴ ٦٣.

the Prophet, others that the letters signify abbreviated titles for the chapters or the ways to mark the separation of one chapter from another. Those who have participated in more esoteric trends in Islam saw the isolated letters as mystical signs with symbolic meaning based on the numerical values assigned to the letters. What everybody has agreed upon was the fact that nobody could confidently explain why they were there. As it is difficult to decide the relation between the mysterious letters and the message, scholars concluded that it was better to leave them where the first scribes had placed them. However, if these letters had a potential symbolic meaning, perhaps the same was true of other letters in words that did not follow the rules of conventional orthography. More precisely, what should be done with instances of words in the Quranic text that had alternative ways of being spelled and, depending on the *sura*, were written according to two different orthographic rules? Any changes to the *rasm*, then, were not simply a matter of discarding traditional spelling and embracing an easier, modern one. Updating Quranic orthography required a rejection of a considerable body of theological thought and speculation developed over the centuries in this particular field of study. No wonder, then, that the decision whether to adhere to or update orthodox spelling was from the beginning fraught with difficulties and uncertainty.

Twentieth century Egyptian scholars of *rasm* were familiar with all of these dilemmas and examined different opinions by classical '*ulama*', carefully evaluating the effects of each decision. Moreover, they added a new, uniquely modern argument to the discussion: a broader concern for the preservation of the Arab and Muslim heritage of which the Quran is the source and epitome. In this argument, Quranic orthography represented the linguistic heritage of the pre-Muslim Arabs and contributed to the development of Muslim sciences. As such it spoke not only to theological concerns but also was an object of historical preservation.

Yet the Language Academy's 1941 rejection of the proposals to modernize the Arabic language and decision by the 'ulama' regarding modernizing the script used for the Quran did not close the subject altogether. While I have not found documents from the nineteen fifties and sixties reporting any specific schemes or debates related to the Quranic spelling something must have prompted members of the Islamic Research Academy to return to this question when they convened for their Sixth Symposium in March of 1971. One point of discussion was a research paper submitted by Muhammad Muhammad Abu Shahabah, Dean of the College of Fundamentals of Islam¹⁸⁵ at the al-Azhar University (Asyut branch) entitled "The *Rasm* of 'Uthmanic *Masahif*." Abu Shahabah presented to the members of the Council a summary of his research on the history of the 'Uthmanic *rasm* and its rules in which he dutifully reviewed once more earlier scholars' opinions about the revealed nature of this *rasm*, the benefits of its preservation, and the outcome of research by some Orientalist scholars on the subject. After a fresh consideration of the issue, the Council delivered a memorandum:

In regard to schools of Quranic reading the [members] of the Symposium have decided that the variants are not [a matter of individual] discretion but of revelation, and they depend on the unbroken [chains] of narrations (al-ruwayatt al-mutawatira).

*The (members) of the Symposium encourage the reciters of the Glorious Quran not to limit themselves to the reading of Hafs only but to safeguard from the oblivion and extinction all the established schools of reading.*¹⁸⁶

*The (members) of the Symposium recommend that Muslims abide by [the rules of] al-rasm al-'Uthmani in the Noble Mushaf, protecting it from distortion.*¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ كلية أصول الدين

¹⁸⁶ يوصي المؤتمر بتشجيع مقرئي القرآن الكريم على ألا يقتصرُوا على قراءة حفص حفظاً لكل هذه القراءات الثابتة من النسيان والاندثار.

¹⁸⁷ شعبان محمد اسماعيل. رسم المصحف وضبطه: بين التوقيف والاصطلاحات الحديثة (القاهرة: دار السلامة، ١٩٩٩): ٨١، ٨٢.

On the whole, the *‘ulama’* at the Symposium affirmed the revealed character of the Quranic orthography. The memorandum they issued blocked again any attempts to do away with the ‘Uthmanic *rasm*. The decision carried extra weight, as the sheikhs gathered at the conference were to represent the consensus of the Muslim scholarly community, or at least its majority, in religious matters for the rest of the Muslim world.

In spite of the authoritative position of scholars at al-Azhar, other prominent Muslim assemblies must have felt the need to join in the debate. Seven years later the Organization of Senior Scholars of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia¹⁸⁸ held a similar conference on the same subject. This time the Committee for Scientific Research and Fatwa carried out the preliminary research.¹⁸⁹ After deliberating materials prepared by the Committee, the Organization confirmed the view that Caliph ‘Uthman had ordered a codification of the Quranic text and had ensured that it be written in a particular way, and generations of Muslim who followed had consented to this decision. A move to common orthography, in the Organization’s opinion, would entail constant amendments to the text as language developed. Over time, these changes would lead to growing discrepancies between *masahif* from different parts of the Muslim world, and to possible friction, which would “turn the book of Allāh into a toy in human hands.” Because of such apprehensions, the Senior Scholars found it preferable to preserve the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* and not to modify it according to the rules of contemporary orthography, thus protecting the Quranic text from any “distortion.” This decision, known as Decision No. 71, was consequently confirmed by

¹⁸⁸ هيئة كبار العلماء بالملكة العربية السعودية

¹⁸⁹ اللجنة الدائمة للبحوث العلمية والإفتاء

other scholars of religious jurisprudence in the Kingdom, published in a scholarly journal,¹⁹⁰ and announced in the newspapers.

Rasm and technology

The proclamations of the Muslim '*ulama*' in Egypt and Saudi Arabia had a direct impact on the production of *masahif* in these two countries, and -- by extension -- in the rest of the Muslim world. For publishers, to adhere to the 'Uthmanic *rasm* meant that - unlike all other books -- templates for *masahif* still had to be handmade by calligraphers schooled in Quranic orthography because of the technical difficulties in replicating the 'Uthmanic *rasm* via available technology. The texts of regular books were assembled using by then simplified typeset fonts and were then photocopied. This task did not require any specialized knowledge beyond that of the profession of printing. But, when it came to the Quranic text, the use of *tashkil* not applied in common print made production much more demanding.

The difficulties were not alleviated by the introduction of computerized printing. For a long time after the establishment of digital printing systems the publishing houses in Egypt, and in other countries as well, continued to photocopy written Quranic texts. There were two reasons for this seemingly strange practice. Until the end of the twentieth century, the complexity of Arabic script made it simply impossible to create computerized graphic design programs that could successfully imitate 'Uthmanic orthography, along with its diacritics and other signs added to the text to facilitate reading. I will come back to this problem in the coming chapters. Second, photocopying a written or already printed text allowed publishers to be sure that their *masahif* did not contain any typeset errors. Of course, the book still had to go through all the steps

¹⁹⁰ شعبان محمد اسماعيل. رسم المصحف وضبطه: بين التوقيف والاصطلاحات الحديثة (القاهرة: دار السلامة، ١٩٩٩): ٨٣ ٨٦ .

required by the Mushaf Committee to secure permits to print and distribute the *masahif*. But scanning a handwritten text meant that the publishing house could start their production with a template less likely to contain mistakes and that included all of the proper signs in the right places.

The last decision of the Azhari ‘*ulama*’ to preserve the old orthographic system must not have been an easy one. In spite of the views of classical writers there were (and are) scholars who supported changes in the spelling. But once constituted, the decision to adhere to the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* has created additional pressure on members of organizations supervising the production of *masahif* to make sure that the text’s accuracy is upheld in all circumstances. It is now common practice now to include in the *mushaf*’s appendix a paragraph stating that this particular *mushaf* follows the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* (although I have never come across a contemporary *mushaf* that would be printed otherwise). However, this note may not mean much to practitioners without an Azhari education; when I asked lay Muslims about *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* they often thought that it referred to an Ottoman style of calligraphy (in Arabic called *al-khatt al-‘Uthmani*) or referred me to a sheikh or a student from al-Azhar, as more likely to know more about this subject.

This limited familiarity with the rules of ‘Uthmanic *rasm* leads to various issues. Scholars must oversee not only *how* the Quranic message is written (or printed) but also *who* writes it. Obviously, a person without proper Quranic training is more likely to make a mistake. In this context, the critical reactions of the ‘*ulama*’ to the Quranic quote on Claudia Schiffer’s dress become even more understandable. To all previous arguments against such use and display of the Quranic text already mentioned in chapter two, one might add one more: a Quranic text applied for its aesthetic quality by a non-practitioner as a decorative motif may be in danger of following

the simplified orthography. A text displayed in these circumstances not only does not evoke either its proper sound nor its meaning for those who look at the dress (a dress is not a fabric to be read and understood -- at least not in the conventional sense of this word), but is also likely to have its graphic form altered and, as already remarked, although not all '*ulama*' would find contemporary spelling offensive, most would object to any changes to the graphic representation of the Quranic message.

Strangely, however, insistence on fidelity to the 'Uthmanic *rasm* and all other diacritics as a template for present-day *masahif* stands in a stark contrast with another decision Azhari scholars accepted around the same time their discussions of Quranic spelling took place. It was a decision to print the Quranic text in Braille.

CHAPTER 6: WHAT EYES CANNOT SEE BUT HANDS CAN TOUCH

The decision to render the Quranic message in Braille marks a tipping point in thinking about the Quran as a uniquely aural phenomenon. Before the Braille *mushaf*, a sight-impaired or blind person could know the Quran only through its acoustic mediators. For centuries, the acoustic mediator was a reciter. In the twentieth century, though, the live human voice was reproduced and multiplied by electronic audio devices. Blind Muslims could use all of these. But with the choice to make the Quranic message available in Braille, blind practitioners were given a chance to become familiar with the Quran through a different medium, in the form of perforated paper. In other words, they were offered a way to *read* the Quran. I do not suggest that from that point on the Quran ceased to be a message highly reliant on the mediation of sound. The chanted words of the Quran, produced by a reciter or disseminated by various electronic audio media, still constitute a ubiquitous element of Cairo's religious landscape. An image that I associate with this phenomenon is that of a man (sometimes a woman) riding a metro and listening to a cell-phone by his ear, his eyes closed. He is listening to Quranic recitation that is audible for other passengers as well. Over the last decades the practice of Quranic recitation has become even more popular thanks to the growth of religious programming, internet sites promoting recitation and internationally broadcast competitions. But the decision to put the message in hand on paper for blind and sight-impaired Muslims suggests that, apart from listening, *reading* the text has become an integral way to know it. According to some classical scholars, to recite and to read the Quran simultaneously was always an ideal, but

few could attain it in the past. Now, with growing levels of literacy in Egypt and the easy availability of *masahif* on the market, it has become the norm.

However, Braille is a tactile writing system that relies on combinations of raised dots grouped in rectangular blocks to represent sounds. These arrangements of tiny palpable bumps, although acting like letters, do not resemble the glyphs of the Arabic alphabet and none of the rules of Arabic calligraphy applies to them. All blocks or cells filled with indentations are of the same size, they are separate, and -- in contrast to the letters of the Arabic alphabet -- each sign has only one form instead of three. Most of all, they cannot be arranged into a main script line with smaller markings placed around it. In other words, Braille is not a *rasm*. For that reason, the decision to use Braille to disseminate the Quranic message appears to be in stark contrast with the polemics surrounding the issue of ‘Uthmanic writing. The existence of *mushaf* in Braille does not support the arguments against changing the graphic format of the Quranic text. If the orthography of a printed *mushaf* cannot be altered what arguments prompted the ‘*ulama*’ to allow the use of a completely different writing system in *masahif* for the blind? Is a *mushaf* in Braille a *mushaf* at all?

Dr. Yasin

I had passed by the al-Azhar gate next to al-Husseyin Mosque so many times on my way to other places, never crossing under its arches to the other side. In fact, I was not allowed to enter the campus without permission from the Azhari authorities. This time, though, I had a notification from the Dean. Coming nearer to the gate, I expected a routine set of questions from the security officers standing by the decorated iron bars. But the guard silently wrote down my name in a big book lying on the shaky table set by the wall that surrounded the university and the

mosque, and let me in without any further inquiry. The fringes of my head scarf were getting tangled in the bag strap on my shoulder so I kept shifting the veil, nervously holding onto the fabric with one hand and my bag with the other. This place made me uneasy, perhaps because I could almost palpably sense the unabashed interest of men's gazes cast at me from every corner. I certainly felt out of place on this essentially male campus.

I found the library of the College of Islamic Fundamentals in a big, new building opposite the Department of Arabic Language. It comprised two rooms. The first one had rows of stands with books along the walls with big, wooden tables crouching heavily in its center. A few students were sitting in a group, talking to each other and laughing merrily. The librarian, who was reading a newspaper at the desk in front of the room, listened to my request and then asked one of the young men to assist me. The somber looking student gave me a hesitant look, took a deep breath and quickly recited an evidently memorized lesson on why 'Uthmanic *rasm* was *tawqifi*. He ended his speech with the sudden assertion that Islam in its inception spread without violence and immediately left the room, as if worried that I might challenge what he said.

The librarian observed us from a distance. He smiled with encouragement. "Now, go to the other room," he said, "and ask for help there." I crossed the hallway into a place that looked very similar to the first one. There was only one sheikh sitting at the table, making some notes in a simple, lined binder. The librarian working in that room asked him to spare me some time. "Doctor" Tareq was a matter-of-fact person and without much talk led me to see his thesis supervisor, sheikh Muhammad. We walked up to the first floor but sheikh Muhammad was at a meeting. I returned to the basement. Meanwhile the second librarian accosted another person and cheerfully waved at me to come closer and meet the professor of *qira'at*, Dr. Yasin, who immediately burst out with remarks and advice. "You need to know about *mushaf* in Braille," he

said as his eyes wandered around the room, “We have to meet again. Not today. The library is closing soon. Tomorrow.” It was Dr. Yasin’s personal investment in this particular *mushaf* that opened up for me a whole new dimension of the material mediation of the Quranic text.

The next day, I came to the library of the Kulleyat Usul al-Din early morning. The librarian, *ustaz* Shirif, and his coworker were just having breakfast and, having made sure that I was not hungry, they let me browse the stacks. The newer part of the room looked neat and clean, and was evidently used by students on daily basis. The back part contained uncatalogued books stacked in piles and on the shelves, some of them quite old, judging by the way the metal font casts perforated the pages, a feature characteristic to books printed before the twentieth century. I enjoyed running my fingers over their yellowing pages, trying to decipher the titles that spoke to the concerns of people more than a century ago. A few students were sitting at the desk, working on an assignment and throwing furtive looks in my direction.

When Dr. Yasin came he was greeted with joyous *salams* by everyone in the room. He sat at the table in front of me. Sipping hot tea from a thick glass brought by *ustaz* Shirif, he began with an unanticipated statement, “I do not believe that *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* is *tawqifi*,” he said. His words took me by surprise. “I think that whatever helps you to read the Quran correctly is right. If it’s a contemporary spelling, so be it.” I did not expect to hear such an open contradiction of the prevailing opinion about the nature of the Quranic *rasm* from a member of the faculty. But Dr. Yasin was not a sheikh and he did not favor the “traditionalistic,” as he described it, position of many Azhari sheikhs on the issue of *rasm*. “The traditionalists are used to only one way of thinking,” he shook his head, sighing, “and it has affected decisions made about *mushaf* in Braille. The discussions about printing this *mushaf* started in the fifties or sixties,” he felt with his right hand for the glass on the table and sipped from it again as he

talked, “but not all sheikhs supported it. They thought that if such a *mushaf* were written according to *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* it would make Muslims read incorrectly the words that were spelled one way but read another.¹⁹¹ They also could not decide what to do with the *tashkil* and chose to print *rasm* in one line and the rest of the diacritics in the other. Reading from that *mushaf* was to be taught by memorization. It meant that students were to repeat the words after the teacher. But the opportunities to learn that way came to nothing as there were fewer and fewer Quranic schools. People began listening to audiotapes and mobile phones, and Braille lost its relevance. Anyway, the blind always prefer to learn from hearing. But at the same time people initiated discussions whether to adhere to the *rasm* of *mushaf* or to replace it with a spelling that reflected the pronunciation. There was a lot of talking surrounding this subject.”

He pulled out a cell phone from the pocket of his grey suit and called the department of audio recordings. “Let’s go and see a copy of the *mushaf* in Braille,” he said. We walked to another building but a female librarian sitting at the desk informed us that they had none. Dr. Yasin winced. Obviously trying to make up for the bad news, he said, “Why don’t you come and see my *masahif* then?” We left the department and caught a taxi to Naser City. Dr. Yasin’s wife greeted us at the door of their apartment and somewhat surprised collected his *masahif* from the bookshelves filling out the sitting room. Her white, Persian cat, Mishmish, eyed me and the stack of books arranged by her on the coffee table.

“They printed a *mushaf* Braille in Jordan.” Dr. Yasin continued, sitting himself comfortably on a red, velvety sofa by the pile of *masahif*. “Scholars there also disagreed on this subject. It had a problem too. It came in six volumes and was too large. This did not facilitate its

¹⁹¹ For instance الصلاة

reading but they kept it as a ‘specimen.’¹⁹² It was printed according to the modern spelling; it was not constrained by the limitations of the ‘Uthmanic *rasm*. Still, you needed a teacher to learn how to recite it.”

Dr. Yasin’s *masahif* were new, printed mostly in the last couple of decades. He felt for them on the table. A few were made abroad. I noticed that some of them had twelve and some fifteen or seventeen lines of text per page. These were standard numbers. Even in that matter readers had different preferences, said my host, holding one of them very close to his face to count the lines.

“It helps to recite always from the same *mushaf*. Here in Egypt, we uphold the tradition of good recitation. So they do in Indonesia. I have tapes by an Indonesian sheikh who beautifully recites with *al-muqamat* [particular voice intonations depending on the content of the sentence]. This is an Egyptian art, nonexistent in Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, there is a quality of scholarship on the Quran. You know of the museum at Sayeda Zaynab Mosque. They have a very old *mushaf* made in the times of the Prophet’s Companions. It is said to be the *mushaf* of ‘Uthman Ibn ‘Affan but I am not confident about it because one should not speak with certainty without a documented proof. The scholarly research needs to be authenticated.”

Attention to details and accuracy have caused Dr. Yasin to grumble about the common confusion of *rasm al-mushaf* with *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani*. “It is not correct to call the contemporary *rasm* of the Quranic book *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani*,” he explained, “because all of the diacritics used in contemporary *masahif* (*tashkil*, *i‘rab*, *i‘jam*, and other signs) were not written in the *masahif* produced at the time of the third Caliph ‘Uthman; they were added only later by the scholars with a purpose of improving the recitation. Also, those who inscribed the message

¹⁹² أثر

did it according to the rules of orthography prevalent at that time, which does not mean that these rules cannot be changed.” In the light of these arguments, Dr. Yasin’s endorsement for *mushaf* Braille was not surprising. “You have to see it,” he insisted, making arrangements to visit the library at Masjid al-Nur.

Mosque al-Nur in al-‘Abbasiyya cannot be missed even from afar. Its two slender minarets tower well over the roofs of the surrounding buildings and highway flyovers. They resemble sharp pencils reaching to the sky as if ready to draw the outlines of the white, domed mosque. It is a place of prayer and a bustling center of academic and political life in one. Here work the specialists in services for the handicapped and the mosque’s library holds a copy of *mushaf* in Braille.

I waited for Dr. Yasin on al-Azhar old campus outside of the department’s building, warming up in the pale November sun and transcribing some documents on my laptop. A security man came up to me and asked what I was doing there. I said I was waiting for Dr. Yasin and he left me, apologizing for the interruption. Not wanting to draw more attention, I went back to the department and sat on the floor in an empty hall in front of the main office. A sheikh came out of a classroom nearby and seeing me sitting on the floor ordered a worker to bring a chair, but the men inside the office invited me to come in. Some wore *abayas* and some western clothes, but all left their shoes at the edge of the ornamental carpet by the door to the office. A Saudi sheikh conspicuous in the group because of his white *thawb* (robe) was also waiting for Dr. Yasin. He once had been Dr. Yasin’s student but now was a professor at the university in Mecca. Another man, sitting next to me on the opposite side, began a casual conversation about Jesus. “How can you believe that Allah may have children?” he asked and unapologetically demanded a response. A few minutes later, Dr. Yasin walked into the office. He must have heard

us talk. Teasing the man humorously, he said “It would have been better if you discussed her research.” We left to a chorus of *ma’a salamas* (good-byes).

The Saudi professor walked out with us. Hearing that my research had to do with the Quran, he gallantly invited me to come to Mecca. Before I managed to think of an equally courteous reply, Dr. Yasin interjected, quickly changing the subject to advantages and disadvantages of using the Egyptian dialect. I sensed that he did not want me to answer. His Saudi visitor had a taxi waiting for him and we took the metro to Abbasiyya to the Mosque al-Nur. Alas, sheikh Abd al-Rahim was not feeling good and had gone home before our arrival. The library was closed. Dr. Yasin was agitated, having expected the sheikh to call him or me about cancelling our meeting. After a few minutes of deliberations, he came up with another plan: “Let’s go to the Center for the Blind in Nasser City.”

The Center was located on the ground floor of a tall, administrative building. A few customers quietly went about their business, creating a monotonous buzz of voices and audio recordings. We approached a woman sitting at the computer and helping one of the visitors. She finished her search and brought us four *masahif*: Egyptian, Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Tunisian. They all had covers printed in regular script. The Egyptian *mushaf* was the oldest. It did not have a date but looked as if it had been produced in the fifties or sixties. It followed the system described earlier by Dr. Yasin in which perforation for *tashkil* was placed above the line of consonants. I turned its thick, perforated pages that looked like strips of an old-fashioned computer print out. An Azhari student from the College of the Fundamentals of Islam joined us at the table and offered help in deciphering the differences between the *masahif*. I watched him run his fingers over the little bumps and indentations covering the page. He was moving his palms from left to right. The letters, then, were arranged in the direction opposite to the Arabic

script. They were, as in the Western system of writing, directed from left to right. I had a fleeting thought, “He is reading in a wrong direction...” The *mushaf* was very large in size, making it difficult for the librarian to bring all six volumes at once. Unlike Arabic books, it opened on the left side instead of on the right. The front page was printed in regular Arabic. I noticed that the print itself must have been typeset. The letters had minute cracks and lacked precision; blobs of ink made them thick and blurred. It was obvious why calligraphers were not enamored when the Quranic message appeared in typeset format.

The Saudi *mushaf* was much smaller in size, although still larger than a regular book. It was almost new, printed in 2006 at the request of the Ministry of Education by the Press of the Custodian of Two Noble Mosques.¹⁹³ I recognized its green covers from pictures in the news posted on the Saudi websites. This particular edition has already reached its fourth reprint.¹⁹⁴ Both the Saudi and Kuwaiti *mushaf* followed a different system of text arrangement than the Egyptian one. Here *tashkil*, instead of being placed in a separate line, were interspersed between the consonants. Drawn by our voices, a few other visitors to the Center gathered around the table. Someone said “This system is harder to read than the Egyptian arrangement.” Others agreed. I asked the Azhari student how he learned to read the Quran in Braille and he replied that he knew some from al-Azhar. After a moment of hesitation he grumbled under his breath “It is hard to find someone there who can teach it to the students...” The Tunisian *mushaf* was in *qira'a-t Qalun* but followed the *tashkil/rasm* arrangement of the Saudi *mushaf*.

The 1950's edition of the Egyptian *mushaf*, in spite of the disagreements that surrounded its publication, was not an isolated attempt to distribute the Quran in Braille. There was another

¹⁹³ مطابع خادم الحرمين الشريفين

¹⁹⁴ السعودية: طباعة مصاحف جديدة خاصة بالمكفوفين!

<http://www.farfesh.com/Display.asp?catID=179&mainCatID=147&slD=84244>

reprint (or maybe reprints) that, according to Dr. Yasin, was also rather imperfect -- a problem about which he wanted me to remind Sheikh Ma'asarawi during my visit to the *Mushaf* Committee. "Tell him that the mistakes are still there because they print each page from one, whole tablet, which make it difficult to make the necessary corrections." Dr Yasin knew that the Mushaf Committee was working on a new *mushaf* Braille. I had found out about it from the newspapers. In May of 2012 an Egyptian news agency reported that al-Azhar had inaugurated a project to create special *masahif* for people with disabilities. The project was launched under the aegis of the Islamic Research Council and carried out by a committee led by the Grand Mufti 'Ali Goma'a and a group of scholars from al-Azhar. The work of the committee was supported by the Braille specialists from the Mosque al-Nur and organizations caring for the deaf and mute who sought to create a recording of the Quran in sign language and a new edition of the Quran in Braille.¹⁹⁵

Mushaf Braille and its producers

Perhaps what contributed to the launching of this project were the growing complaints expressed by the blind and vision-impaired members of the Muslim community. In February 2012 a group of Egyptians started a Facebook page entitled "Towards the Egyptian Mushaf Braille without errors."¹⁹⁶ It aimed to gather Muslims interested in creating a support network "for those brothers and sisters who suffer from the presence of multiple printing mistakes in *mushaf* Braille in Egypt and to exchange ideas on how to solve this problem." A few people responded, mainly with comments about which editions had fewest errors and which were the most problematic. The Egyptian and the Saudi *masahif* were criticized the most, although two

¹⁹⁵ محمد مرسى، "الأزهر يبدئ مشروع تسجيل القرآن الكريم بلغة الإشارة وطريقة برايل"، أوركيدا، ٢٩ مايو ٢٠١٢.
<http://orkidza.com/Middle-East/Egypt/2012/5/28/114>

¹⁹⁶ نحو مصحف برايل مصري بدون

respondents claimed to be able to read from them without any difficulty. One member of the group had worked for a committee preparing *mushaf* Braille in Libya. The committee used the Saudi and Jordanian *masahif* as their models and -- as he admitted -- they tried to retain the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* as much as possible but in order to make it easier for users to read they had to modify it in some instances. Another member disapproved of the Egyptian system that -- as in early regular printing -- separated lines of *rasm* from diacritics. He claimed that it was much easier to read when the *tashkil* were integrated with the writing and for that reason he preferred Saudi and Palestinian *masahif*. Someone suggested that they appeal directly to al-Azhar as an institution responsible for printing of *masahif* in Egypt and demand a review of the existing edition. The postings practically ended in April except for a reply made two years later to my inquiry about whether there was any further news on this subject. The founder of the page wrote, “Unfortunately not.”

The messages posted on Facebook suggests a few things. First of all, various editions have attempted to accommodate the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* but in the end its full preservation turned out to be impossible if the correct pronunciation of the words were to be preserved. Thus, makers of *mushaf* in Braille faced a dilemma: either follow the tradition that adhered to the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* as the correct form of inscription -- but this lead to problems involving incorrect recitation and the need to have additional instructions from the teacher; or follow a modified orthography that would render the correct recitation but entailed an “incorrect” spelling. Second, no single edition was unanimously voted best, indicating that *masahif* in Braille are still undergoing experimentations and adjustments to the new technology of writing in Braille and its very different inscription system. The lack of agreement among contributors to the website on whether to place *tashkil* within or above the main line of the text demonstrates the versatile

preferences of Braille users, which at this point may only be satisfied by a variety of editions produced in different countries. Those who preferred the Saudi system of arranging the text probably followed the news coming from Saudi Arabia closely.

A short note released in 2013 on a Saudi website al-Muwatin and some other sites as well, announced that a six-volume *mushaf* in Braille had just been finished and would be distributed for free among the centers and institutions that serve the blind and vision-impaired both within and beyond the Kingdom. The Press of the Custodian of Two Noble Mosques, known for its services for Muslims with sight problems, had produced the *mushaf*. The Press's General Director, sheikh Nasir Ibn 'Ali al-Musa, wrote that the project had been necessitated by the needs "of millions of Muslims who have been looking forward to acquire the Glorious Book of Allah according to Braille, especially imams and preachers, teachers and students of science, and so [the Press] will continue to fulfill its responsibilities to print the Glorious Quran in Braille."¹⁹⁷ Al-Musa also explained that the services of the Mekkan press would be complemented by another edition in preparation by the Malik Fahd Complex that would take over responsibilities for publishing *masahif* in Braille.

It seems that in Saudi Arabia, as in Egypt, the decision to boost the production of *mushaf* in Braille might have come in response to the requests of Braille users and the organizations that represented them. A year earlier, Saudi newspaper "Al-Iqtisadiyya" ran a short article on an organization "Ibsar" (Vision), purportedly one of the first to address the needs of people with sight disabilities in the Arab world, that was struggling to meet the needs of blind and vision impaired Muslims in America, France, and Spain in addition to Muslims in Sudan, Iraq, Jordan,

¹⁹⁷ استجابة لتطلع الملايين من المكفوفين لاقتناء كتاب الله الكريم مطابع خادم الحرمين تنتهي من طباعة المصحف بطريقة "برايل" "إذ إن هناك ملايين من المكفوفين يتطلعون إلى اقتناء كتاب الله الكريم بطريقة برايل، وخاصة أئمة المساجد والخطباء والمدرسين وطلبة العلم، وستستمر في أداء مسؤولياتها بطباعة القرآن الكريم بطريقة برايل." "استجابة لتطلع الملايين من المكفوفين لاقتناء كتاب الله الكريم: مطابع خادم الحرمين تنتهي من طباعة المصحف بطريقة برايل"، المواطن، ٢ يوليو ٢٠١٣. <http://www.almowaten.net/?p=36472>

Palestine, and, of course, Saudi Arabia. The Secretary General of the organization in veiled terms expressed his disappointment in veiled terms to the lack of response to the organization's needs on the part of the "concerned authorities." He found it particularly discouraging that the organization itself owned only three copies of *mushaf* in Braille, while three-quarters of the people who turned for help to the organization needed assistance in reading it. Therefore, he called on the authorities and the 'ulama' responsible for printing *mushaf* to implement more efficient support for the blind and vision impaired. For the latter, he also suggested other improvements. It would be beneficial, he said, to simplify fully the letters of the traditional calligraphic style *naskh* currently used in *masahif* and to increase the contrast between fonts and their background to enable people with poor eyesight to read from regularly printed *masahif*. Yet all these efforts and ideas would be pointless if the difficulties in contacting the King Fahd Complex, the Ministry of Education, and other institutions dealing with the production of *masahif* in Braille persist, he concluded.¹⁹⁸

I do not know how to account for the communication problems between Ibsar and other establishments responsible for the production and distribution of *masahif* in Braille (purportedly, at the end of 2013 Ibsar distributed two hundred such *masahif* in the Kingdom and beyond). However, what I find significant is that both pieces of news convey a certain sense of urgency and an undeniable need to increase the number of *masahif* available for the visually disabled. All this in spite of the easy accessibility of the recorded Quran on compact discs, mobile phones, computers, the Internet, TV and radio stations, and other electronic devices. The conviction that there is a demand for *masahif* in Braille may be a product of a wider campaign in the Arab world

¹⁹⁸ "«إبصار» تواجه عبء تأمين «مصحف برايل» لمستفيديها من المكفوفين." الإقتصادية ، ١٢ يوليو ٢٠١٢. http://www.aleqt.com/2012/07/12/article_673805.html

to increase the awareness of the needs of the disabled and of efforts to produce more books in Braille in general. But the campaigns of activists cannot fully explain the growing numbers of *masahif* in Braille. I would argue that what has led to such increased production is precisely the intensified and unresolved discussions about Braille by the religious authorities in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim countries.

In a 2008 interview, the director of a printing house in Cairo that employs mainly blind and vision impaired workers admitted that they had toyed with the idea of printing a *mushaf* in Braille for a very long time but the impossibility of adapting the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* to Braille deterred them.¹⁹⁹ To solve this problem, they turned to al-Azhar, which created an advisory group consisting of a few blind members and a few experts in *qira’at*. After intensive discussions, the group agreed to replace *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* with *al-rasm al-impla’i* (the orthography that spells words according to their pronunciation). But they agreed to do it only in cases where it was absolutely necessary to avoid any confusion about the way the word was to be pronounced. The advisers based their decision on *fatawa* that had justified writing the words of the Quran according to *al-rasm al-impla’i* in situations where such a surrogate was crucial for correct learning and recitation, as in Quranic verses for children. The rest of the signs and letters that could be represented in Braille without confusing readers were to remain unchanged. This statement suggests that it was a rather arbitrary decision by members of the advisory group that defined which words were confusing and had to be modified, and which could stay unchanged. Unfortunately, the article did not mention when these decisions were made. They may have concerned the edition of the *mushaf* in Braille kept in the Center for the Blind, as the *mushaf*

¹⁹⁹ فوانيس رمضان، " المصحف الشريف بطريقة «برايل»... وقصة مطبعة مصرية جميع عمالها من معدومي البصر، " الراي، ٢١ سبتمبر ٢٠٠٨.
<http://www.alraimedia.com/Articles.aspx?id=69090>

described in the article also consisted of six large volumes (each of them 35 x 25cm large), and was characterized by a very thick paper (150-160 grams) -- twice the weight of regular printing paper.

What attracted my attention, apart from mention of the advisory group, was a description of the process in which workers of the printing house inscribed the Quranic message in Braille:

“The director of the printing house pointed that the steps to print mushaf in Braille start from a translation of the Quranic writing into the perforated writing on the tin plates. It happens via recitation to the blind expert who specializes in Braille and who transposes what he hears into the letters written in Braille.”²⁰⁰

It is interesting that in the context of this practice the author of the article, or perhaps the interviewee, chose to use the word “*tarjama*”, translation. This word is typically used in reference to translation from one language to another. The Quran in Braille is technically a script translation. Reading in Braille may produce the same sound as those produced when a person reads from a regular *mushaf* but the writing system used is only a *translation* of the ‘Uthmanic *rasm*. Yet when I asked Dr. Yasin what the Quranic text written in Braille is he said, “It is the *mushaf*.”²⁰¹

Is it a *mushaf*?

The Egyptian ‘*ulama*’ must have discussed the relationship between *mushaf* in Braille and *mushaf* printed in Arabic script as it was brought up by the Saudi sheikhs as well. I could not

²⁰⁰ يشير مدير المطبعة... إلى أن مراحل طباعة المصحف الشريف بطريقة برايل تبدأ بترجمة كتابة القرآن الكريم إلى الكتابة البارزة على لوح صفيح، وذلك بتلاوة القرآن الكريم على أحد المكفوفين المتخصصين في الكتابة بطريقة برايل الذي يحول ما يسمعه إلى حروف مكتوبة بالخط البارز. " فوانيس رمضان، " المصحف الشريف بطريقة «براييل»... وقصة مطبعة مصرية جميع عمالها من معدومي البصر،" الراي، ٢١ سبتمبر ٢٠٠٨.

<http://www.alraimedia.com/Articles.aspx?id=69090>

²⁰¹ هو مصحف نفسه.

find materials on these discussions but I did discover an insightful research paper by a Saudi scholar, Dr. ‘Abd Allah al-Khamis, a professor at the Department of Jurisprudence and Graduate Studies at the College of Muslim Law at the Islamic University of Muhammad Ibn Saud in Riyadh.²⁰² His paper uses the standard classical sources to summarize opinions of ‘*ulama*’ belonging to different schools of law in regard to the idea of replacing *rasm al-‘Uthmani* with the *rasm al-implai*. This review allowed the author to address the permissibility of such substitution in the case of *mushaf* in Braille. Clearly, Dr. al-Khamis thought that defining the degree of similarity between the writing system in *mushaf* Braille and the script of the regularly printed *masahif* was crucial for a correct pronouncement on the use of Braille. In an introduction to the part of his research that directly addresses *mushaf* in Braille he writes,

It appears from what has been said that the prevailing opinion is that of adherence to al-rasm al-‘Uthmani in a mushaf. In regard to writing Quranic verses in places other than masahif, such as books for children, newspapers and academic journals, it is permitted to write them in a rasm different than the Uthmanic one. This concerns writing for the sighted. When it comes to the Braille system, or what is called khatt al-bariz (embossed style), do the same rules apply to it as well? Or, is it a specific code that has no relation to al-rasm al-‘Uthmani or impla’i, and requires a specific exigency? Does what has been said about the replacement of the ‘Uthmanic rasm with the phonetic spelling apply to the replacement of al-rasm al-‘Uthmani with the Braille system?’²⁰³

Al-Khamis’ way of dealing with these questions was very systematic. He first inquired into the structure of the Braille system and obtained specific examples of Quranic words that cannot be reproduced in Braille. Next, he searched for religious literature on the subject of

²⁰² قسم الفقه والدراسات العليا بكلية الشريعة بجامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية بالرياض.

²⁰³ ظهر لنا مما سبق أن الرأي الراجح هو وجوب التزام الرسم العثماني في كتابة المصحف، وأما كتابة الآيات في غير المصحف للمتعلّمين من الصبيان وكذا في الصحف والمجلات فيجوز كتابتها بغير الرسم العثماني، وما سبق خاص في الكتابة المرئية. وأما نظام برايل أو يسمى بالخط البارز فهل ينطبق عليه نفس الحكم، أو هو رموز محددة لا علاقة لها بصورة الرسم العثماني أو الإملائي دعت إليها ضرورة معينة. وأن ما يقال عن استبدال الرسم العثماني بالرسم الإملائي لا ينطبق على استبدال الرسم العثماني بنظام برايل؟ عبد الله الخميس، "كتابة القرآن الكريم بنظام برايل للمكفوفين"، <http://www.amoslim.net/node/83459>، ٤ نوفمبر ٢٠٠٦.

Braille but admitted that he was not successful in finding any. This encouraged him to express his own views and to make suggestions about how to resolve the problem. He began by advocating complete adherence to the ‘Uthmanic *rasm*. Strict endorsement of the traditional orthography, he concluded, meant that a rendition of *mushaf* in Braille was not permissible; such a ruling did not prevent the blind person from learning the Quran through listening of course. However, this argument could be countered by the claim that among the blind are people with different capabilities and talents, and not everyone is able to memorize the Quran by listening, as such skill is bestowed by Allah according to his will. Moreover, not everybody has access to an audio device that helps to teach the Quran so it is advisable not to leave such a person without assistance while waiting for lessons in recitation. Besides, it would be a regrettable decision to deprive millions of the blind of the opportunity to read the Quran. In any case, said al-Khamis, a prohibition on printing *mushaf* in Braille in the Kingdom would not prevent others from producing such a book; therefore, it would be better to make sure that it is done properly. As for those who opt for the use of fully phonetic spelling in *mushaf* printed in Braille, he pointed out that their arguments are based on the fact that in Jordan, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt the *masahif* with a phonetic spelling have already been printed and many people benefited from these editions, so it is hard to find evidence against them. There is also a third path, suggested al-Khamis, to keep what can be preserved from *al-rasm al-‘Uthmani* and to use the *imla’i rasm* only when it is impossible to write a word according to the Braille system. He personally preferred this approach, “as the benefits of printing *mushaf* in Braille outweighs the evils of its prohibition.”

Al-Khamis’ research paper was published in 2006 on a website that disseminates *fatawa* and other religious writings for Muslims. In 2010 a journalist who covered developments in

printing of *mushaf* in Braille at the Press of the Custodian of Two Noble Mosques quoted al-Khamis, juxtaposing the researcher's conclusions with the opinion of a member of the Organization of Senior Scholars of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, sheikh 'Abd Allah Ibn Muni'a,²⁰⁴ who had said, "We have been familiarized with the case of *mushaf* in Braille but we restrained ourselves from issuing any decision in that matter." Differences of opinion existed among members of the Organization about the application of the rules of the "Quranic *mushaf*" to the *mushaf* Braille.²⁰⁵ They arose from the fact that the Board of the Organization had refused to recognize *mushaf* in Braille as a *mushaf*.

The decision of the Board, as well as numerous articles announcing the printing of *mushaf* Braille in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have been circulating the Internet in the last seven years. In addition, some internet activists have publicized al-Khamis' paper, including the owner of an Egyptian religious blog who plagiarized the research, extensively using uncited excerpts on his website "Light of the East."²⁰⁶ All of this news, along with opinions, and pronouncements, increasingly accessible to the public in different Arabic speaking countries, do not clarify what, from a theological perspective, a *mushaf* in Braille actually is.

On a practical level a *mushaf* in Braille constitutes a unique combination of the Quran and its translation, placing itself in a curious position between "original" and a significantly transformed copy. The lack of consensus among 'ulama' about the *mushaf*'s status as a carrier of

²⁰⁴ عبد الله بن منيع

²⁰⁵ وذكر الشيخ عبد الله بن منيع عضو هيئة كبار العلماء "لقد عرض علينا موضوع كتابة المصحف بطريقة "برايل"، غير أننا توقفنا عن إصدار أي قرار حوله"، ولفت إلى أن أعضاء مجلس هيئة كبار العلماء، اختلفوا حول إعطاء مصحف برايل أحكام المصحف القرآني، مؤكداً على رفض مجلس الهيئة اعتباره مصحفاً. "السعودية: الانتهاء من طباعة مصحف برايل وسط تحفظ كبار العلماء"، العربية، ٢٨ ديسمبر ٢٠٠٧. <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/12/28/43470.html>

²⁰⁶ محمد الحسين سلامة، "حكم الإلتزام بالرسم العثماني ومدى جواز الكتابة الإملائية في كتابة آيات القرآن الكريم"، نور الشرق، ٥ يوليو ٢٠١١. http://mahamadelhosseney.blogspot.com/2011/07/blog-post_8415.html

the Quran reflects the competing priorities and objectives of scholars at al-Azhar. For some, it is spreading the message, albeit at a cost, that counts the most. Others are more concerned with attending to the medium through which the message is disseminated. And these priorities matter to different degrees. It is certain, though, that disagreements about the permissibility of using the *imla'i rasm* in *masahif* for blind and vision impaired Muslims has once more separated scholars into those more inclined to see the orthography and, by extension the *mushaf*, as an integral part of the message and those who, in particular instances, step in the direction of divorcing the Quran from its graphic and tangible representations.

None of the Azhari scholars, however, will claim that the same can be done in regard to sound. In the case of the acoustically mediated Quran, the meaning and the sound do not operate separately, invalidating any attempts to apply synonyms for the vocabulary used in the Quranic message. For that reason in the eyes of all Muslim scholars the Quran is essentially untranslatable. Editions of the Quran in languages other than Arabic are thought of as mere “commentaries” or “glosses” on the Quran in Arabic. The angel Jibril *recited* the Quran to the Prophet, emphasize the ‘*ulama*’, and this made him a depository and disseminator of the words, not a narrator. So it seems that the relationship between the message and its acoustic form is more stable than the one between the Quran and its graphic representation. Yet, from what has been said above it is clear that the latter is nevertheless stable enough to produce anxiety and uncertainty about how to think of the Quran in a script and orthography entirely different from the ones instituted by the Prophet’s Companions and endorsed by the Muslim community over centuries of use. In spite of the religious context in which *mushaf* in Braille has been produced, its radically different materiality puts it in the precarious position of being a text that points to the message but is not fully one.

PART III: THE USERS

CHAPTER 7: HOW PRINTING CREATED MANUSCRIPTS. AESTHETIC AND HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO MASAHIK.

The question whether a *mushaf* in Braille is de facto a *mushaf* can be rephrased in this way: what other transformation do carriers of the Quranic text produce? The previous chapters pointed to script and orthography as elements that have the potential to reformulate the relationship between the message and the *mushaf*. In this chapter, I turn to another source that generates change -- the technology of making *masahif* -- and its reframing capabilities.

In order to do this, I temporarily extend my scope by discussing manually written *masahif* in relation to printed ones. The relationship between printed and handwritten Quranic texts is not simply a matter of substitution, newer technology replacing an older one, or a mechanically reproduced book displacing a handwritten one. To highlight the nature of the connection between a printed and a handmade Quranic text, I turn matters around. Instead of treating this relationship chronologically -- writing precedes print -- I reverse the perspective by asking: how did the appearance of printed *masahif* affect those written by hand? What happened to handmade Quranic copies when printed *masahif* became widespread commodities? And, how does the way of making the book mediate the Quranic message when printing and writing are juxtapose as two, mutually redefining technologies?

In this chapter, I consider a situation in which printing turns a handwritten *mushaf* into something unprecedented. I specifically address Quranic *manuscripts* -- texts written by hand

that, by virtue of the way in which they were made, have become objects whose primary value no longer is the message itself but rather the fact that they are *not printed*. What gives these things value is not what is written in them but the length of time that had passed since their production as well as the artistic sensibility the calligrapher poured into them. Because in Quranic manuscripts writing itself can be treated as an object rather than as knowledge, they veritably test the boundaries of the notion of “book” as a text to be read. The capacity of Quranic manuscripts to act as “books” is limited by their physical properties: calligraphy, ornamentation, parchment or paper, binding etc. In the aftermath of print, handwritten *masahif* may/have become items in private and public collections, acquired for their historical importance, artistic qualities, and -- in the case of the museums -- for their academic significance for both Muslim and non-Muslim (especially Euro-American) scholars. This transformation of Quranic *masahif* into *makhtutat*, manuscripts, could fully take place only when mechanical printing became not only possible but also ubiquitous. From this perspective, printed *masahif* did not only precede handwritten ones; they also, in an important sense, created them, transformed them into the all-encompassing category of *makhtutat*.

Handwritten Quranic texts were not the only kind of textual production that underwent dramatic change with the introduction of print technology. Brinkley Messick, who examined the changing relation between writing and authority in the nineteenth-century Yemen, noted that with the spread of print culture “the old diversity of handwritten texts, including the drafts and autographs of famous scholars, calligraphic exercises, copies made as pious pastimes, artifacts of formal study, products of professional copyists, and so forth, would eventually be reduced from the point of view of a print-oriented society, to a single basic and increasingly archaic type, the ‘manuscript,’ to be collected and curated, kept in library sections that would begin to resemble

museums.”²⁰⁷ However, unlike many of genres of writing that disappeared after the introduction of printing, the Quranic text continued to be disseminated, acquiring new forms of authority vis-a-vis the handwritten *masahif* and clearly relegating the latter into a category of objects rather than texts. How has this happened? What follows in this chapter is a closer look at the conditions under which a Quranic text may be referred to as *makhtut* rather than a *mushaf*: conditions created through practices of preservation, collection and academic investigation.

Practices of preservation

How exactly does a *mushaf* become a *makhtut* or, anthropologically speaking, what kind of practices reconstitutes *masahif* into *makhtutat*? A conversation with the specialist in charge of the manuscript collection in the Cairo National Library offers a glimpse of activities through which the Quranic message is rendered irrelevant and the material characteristics of the book are accentuated. The *masahif* filling the storage rooms, the specialist explained, go through basic preservation, like other *makhtutat*. Basic preservation involves physical protection from the environment, or more specifically from dust, mold, and moisture. That means the *masahif* are kept in air-conditioned rooms, in boxes, at an optimal temperature and humidity to prevent the decomposition of parchment and paper. Some are selected by the staff to be digitized, a process that allows conservators to preserve a text without having to make costly little repairs to the object itself. The 3-D technology used for this purpose displays the *mushaf* in multiple ways, showing not only the text but also elements of its binding, the thickness of its paper, and other physical characteristics. Anybody interested in them (mostly academic experts) may view them

²⁰⁷ Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State. Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 117.

on a computer screen, usually not at its original size but significantly enlarged and in fragments. “It all comes down to this,” the specialist summarized his mini-lecture, “What does the manuscript need to be used for?”

Preservation, then, is a matter of use. It is a set of practices (chemical treatments, manual repairs, digital reproduction, etc.) that determine even further in what capacity the text will be used after it has been physically stabilized. Thus, handwritten *masahif* are not merely texts but objects entangled with potential practices through which they may be reconstituted into generic manuscripts. In other words, the material properties of the *mushaf* – the fact that it is handwritten and adorned – render it suitable to become an object of conservation and potential display: two acts of translation (in a Latourian sense) during which the Quranic text becomes a *makhtut*. In these circumstances, the need to attend to the Quran – the actual message – is not necessary. “If you want to look at a *mushaf*, the text is already known,” declares the specialist, “So what are the other things that we are looking for? There are different kinds of priorities: things viewed as treasures get preference in conservation, that includes illumination and the name of the calligrapher. Copies of the Quranic text with titles of chapters, markings indicating where to take a break in reading, signs facilitating recitation and so on are always more valuable than the ones that lack these additions.” After a pause he adds, “Some manuscripts are preserved because of their pseudohistorical value. In this case...” here the man hesitates slightly, “...it is the sentiments that matter.” I realize that he is alluding to a Quranic copy that plays a special role in the religious landscape of Muslims in Cairo, one of the famous *masahif* prepared on the order of the Caliph ‘Uthman Ibn ‘Affan. “There is a list on the internet that mentions a whole number of them in different places in the world. Of course, it is hard to say whether they really are the

authentic ones.”²⁰⁸ His skepticism does not reflect the wider Egyptian public opinion about this *mushaf* which serves in the popular imagination as one of Egypt’s more treasured possessions eclipsing for Muslims in a material way centuries of the Quranic endurance and integrity.

The specialist seems relieved when our conversation ends. Perhaps, my questions intruded into the unsteady realm of the politics of preservation. It is a delicate matter to discuss conservation of the Quranic copies with an outsider for a lack of discretion may have serious ramifications internationally, and people working in the field are very much aware of this. The most recent example of frictions born of publicized information concerning the discovery and study of Quranic manuscripts comes from Yemen. The candid comments of one of the researchers involved in the study were picked up and broadcasted by the American and, later, Arab press, stirring up tensions between the Yemeni government and the local researchers in charge of the collection.²⁰⁹ A description of the particularities of this conflict does not belong here but it is the case that helps to understand why specialists involved in the Quranic conservation project in Cairo may prefer to be cautious about publicizing their endeavors. In Egypt, the *makhtutat*, including the Quranic ones, also lie at the center of a complex network of exchange and dependency, entangling Egyptian cultural authorities responsible for preservation

²⁰⁸ On the list of ‘Uthmanic masahif there is a copy brought by the Russians in the mid-nineteenth century from Samarkand and kept for some time in the Imperial Library in St. Petersburg, that attracted the attention of Orientalists and Muslims alike and contributed to ongoing disputes about the origins of the Quranic text. In 1905 a facsimile edition of this manuscript was printed, distributed as a gift to foreign diplomats, and sold to bibliophiles. After the October Revolution, Lenin donated the manuscript to Muslims in the city of Ufa but in 1924 it moved again, this time to Tashkent where it has remained ever since. Numerous scholars have run a range of radiocarbon tests on the Samarkand manuscript with different results. In 1997 the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan nominated it to the UNESCO “Memory of the World” register, an international initiative to protect valuable examples of the world’s documentary heritage. Apart from the *mushaf* kept in Tashkent, there are a number of codices that bear names of the caliphs ‘Uthman and ‘Ali but most manuscript specialists describe them as forgeries. “Memory of the World” UNESCO <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/homepage/>

²⁰⁹ Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, “Šan‘ā’ 1 and the Origins of the Quran,” *Der Islam* 87, no. 1-2 (March 2012): 1-51.

of the Islamic heritage, the financially needy National Library, foreign book preservation experts, and international publishing companies that, for a variety of reasons, are willing to invest in book conservation in Egypt -- such as Tradigital, a German-based publishing house which through its support of conservation activities at the Egyptian National Library has an open access to books rarely seen by the public.

As a result of their arrangement with the National Library, Tradigital has been able to carry out a number of reprinting projects. The one most relevant here is the creation of a Quranic copy that imitates the calligraphy used in a beautifully executed personal *mushaf* belonging to King Fu'ad I and written by a renowned calligrapher sheikh Muhammad 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Rifa'i. Tradigital's success in producing a computer program that accurately recreates the calligraphic Quranic letters in a digital format without photocopying them is a recent technological breakthrough in the production of the Quranic texts to which I will return in the next chapter. It is also an undertaking that has allowed the company to produce a "new Mushaf Fu'ad." Incidentally, this name creates some confusion between those Egyptian practitioners who refer to the Mushaf Fu'ad as the 1924 typeset and printed edition of al-Amiriyya and have never heard about the personal, handwritten copy made about the same time for the king and kept now in the museum collection. The "new Mushaf Fu'ad" purveyed by Tradigital -- thanks to its artfully reproduced handwriting -- offers simultaneously the individuality of a masterpiece and a personalized relationship with the text allowed by the multiplicity of a printed edition. Yet, this is not a typical Quranic edition. The text is printed in gold, blue, red, brown, and black on thick, glossy paper with a gold embossed Balacron leather cover. One may read it at home but it is not a *mushaf* that would be -- like many ordinary *masahif* -- carried in a pocket or a bag on the streets of Cairo. It is not designed to be affordable for most Egyptians either: its cost (\$40.00)

and workmanship make it a display book, hardly one that would be read in public. In addition, it is not a complete *mushaf* as it contains only a thirtieth of the whole Quranic text. *Masahif* divided into thirty smaller sections for easy use outside of home are common in Egyptian bookstores, but in the case of this particular *mushaf* it is the only part available on the market so far and sold exclusively via the Internet. It is, essentially, an object produced mainly for elites among the Western and Gulf Muslim consumers.

Tradigital advertises its products -- the “new Mushaf Fu’ad” and other religious publications -- as an attempt to “reinvent the Arabic book.”²¹⁰ What the company means by that is that it aims to produce highly artistic books that are illuminated according to the models and designs developed by the Arab book artisans in the times when book production was a well developed and highly appreciated craft in the Middle East. The official website of the company explains their venture as a project that “successfully cultivates the traditional art of bookmaking” by appropriating old designs and adjusting them to the modern artistic sensibilities of contemporary Muslims: “The designs of the current books produced by Tradigital follow the designs of typical, old Arabic manuscripts and when necessary, develop their ideas further. For this, traditional documents are studied and examined intensively, in order to pick out the typical patterns and the specifications used in combination with their contents.” This project is sustained by the company’s access to manuscripts in the National Library and carried out by Tradigital’s experts who study the holdings in order to recreate the most “typically Arabic” patterns of book illumination. As the Quranic texts have never been illustrated with the anthropo- and zoomorphic representations, the designs incorporate discrete combinations of spandrels, mandorlas, stars,

²¹⁰ Tradigital <http://www.tradigital.de/products.htm>

polygons, and arabesques that correspond with particular book genres, different ones for the Quran than for *ahadith*, or *sunna*. Tradigital experts recreate the geometrical arrangements and use them in the books published by the company, giving their books a distinctive “manuscript-like” character.

The arabesque illuminations used in the “new Mushaf Fu’ad,” along with its font, paper, and decorative binding, turn this book into an object that one should *have* but not necessarily *use*. In this context, the manuscript-like copy of the Quranic text potentially becomes an index of the owner’s religiosity -- presence of the Quran at home -- as much as his or her artistic sensibilities and connoisseurship, as *masahif* are often displayed in the house in a prominent manner. A *mushaf* that looks like a museum object connects its owner with imagined past generations of Quranic users, members of the historical Muslim community who owned similar looking although differently made objects. On the other side of the spectrum, a manuscript-like reproduction participates in building the prestige of contemporary institutions that own “valuable objects,” particularly the one that owns the original manuscript from which the reproduction was made. At the same time a manuscript-like book, such as the “new Mushaf Fu’ad,” has the potentiality to create an interest in the original manuscript by popularizing particular physical features -- such as ornamentation and calligraphy -- among those who are not museumgoers. An artistically adorned, manuscript-like *mushaf* on display in one’s house creates, then, an atmosphere of sophisticated religiosity that communicates the personal piety and worldly refinement of the owner to visitors. Likewise, when presented as a gift to another Muslim, such a Quranic copy is a safe yet stylish purchase that is not likely to be criticized or refused. All of these effects may be produced without the owner or gift recipient ever reading the “new Mushaf Fu’ad.”

Aestheticizing the written

Undeniably, Muslim readers collected *masahif* on the basis of their aesthetic qualities and as objects of aesthetic pleasure before printing existed. Historical sources speak of connoisseurs of penmanship who gathered calligraphic specimens, including *masahif* produced by famous calligraphers, as early as the ninth century.²¹¹ Demand created supply, and even forgeries. The story of the accomplished calligrapher and illustrator Ibn al-Bawwab is worth telling in particular because it throws light on the workings of the artistic markets in the eleventh-century Middle East. According to the twelfth-century chronicler Yaqt, the acclaimed tenth-century Ibn al-Bawwab himself stated that he had successfully imitated the hand of ninth-century master Ibn Muqla. Ibn al-Bawwab was in charge of the library of the Buwayhid prince Baha' al-Dawla in Shiraz. During his appointment, he found in the library a copy of the Quranic text written by another famous calligrapher, Ibn Muqla. The text was divided into thirty parts and those parts were scattered among other manuscripts in the library. One of the valuable volumes was missing and Ibn al-Bawwab could not find it despite a thorough search. The calligrapher reported the loss to the prince who asked Ibn al-Bawwab to make a new copy of the missing part, imitating Ibn Muqla's hand. They agreed that if the prince could not tell which volume was forged he would give Ibn Bawwab the handsome sum of one hundred dinars and a robe of honor. Ibn al-Bawwab prepared the missing portion and showed the whole *mushaf* to the prince. Baha' al-Dawla examined the volumes but could not tell which of them was written by Ibn al-Bawwab. The story says that the prince did not give Ibn al-Bawwab the promised reward but instead offered him

²¹¹ Yasin Hamid Safadi and Martin Lings, eds., *The Quran: Catalogue of an Exhibition of Quran Manuscripts at the British Library, 3 April-15 August 1976* (British Library, 1976).

sheets of Chinese paper from the library for his own use, which were also quite valuable.²¹² After Ibn al-Bawwab's death his own work became widely renowned and, at times, forged by others.

Apart from calligraphic collections, wealthy Muslim elites both kept richly decorated *masahif* and presented them as donations to particular mosques, where such gifts occupied storage shelves, sometimes for centuries. Connoisseurs of calligraphy did not collect just any *masahif* but only those written by particular artists. Khalifs and sultans did not commission plain copies of the Quranic text but rather abundantly decorated versions. Yet, there is a difference between these older practices that led to accumulations of Quranic copies in royal libraries and private households and the institutionalized collections that began emerging in the nineteenth century in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. Within an institutional framework, highly decorated *masahif* were gradually seen less as beautiful repositories of THE Quran and increasingly more as objects carrying other kinds of meaning. A shift in emphasis that took place during that time resulted in transformation of *masahif* from being primarily Quranic texts to being above all objects of art, creating a precedence in which *mushaf*'s formal qualities trumped its semantic content. Museum collections in which Quranic texts have been displayed as objects praised for artistry of their production, are epitomized now by permanent displays of Islamic art at the Smithsonian's Museum, Louvre, Victoria and Albert, as well as their counterparts in the Muslim countries: Islamic Art Museum in Doha and Beyt al-Quran in Bahrain. In all of these institutions *masahif* serve primarily as didactic tools for lessons in history of art.

²¹² D. S. Rice, *The Unique Ibn al-Bawwab Manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library* (Dublin: Emery Walker, Ltd., 1955): 79-80.

Institutionalized collections

Egypt has a long history of institutionalized display of artifacts. In Cairo today, there are two major collections of Quranic texts: one exhibited in the Museum of Islamic Arts, the main museum devoted to Muslim art in Egypt, established in 1881 and considered as having one of the largest collections of manuscripts in the world; the other at the recently opened Museum at Bab el-Khalq that displays famous manuscripts from the holdings of the National Library. Both institutions are well known among art historians and Islamic Studies scholars for their acquisitions of Quranic copies produced in various historic periods and geographical regions. The *masahif* exhibited in these institutions no longer serve the original purpose of a Quranic text. They cannot be read, pondered, recited, nor otherwise engaged in daily worship. As parts of *collections*, they are permanently thwarted in the task for which they were made: namely, giving guidance to individual practitioners of Islam. Instead, they are on public display and are to be looked at, like other museum artifacts. They are showcased to serve particular purposes of the institution that owns and displays them.

In the Museum of Islamic Arts, collections of *masahif* are emphasized as *Muslim* artifacts. It is only the rarest, the most aesthetically pleasing, specimens that constitute this collection, paradoxically creating an impression of the ubiquity of such objects through the uniqueness of the ones on display. Thus, even though the average *masahif* in use were quite ordinary, the museum viewers -- mainly local school groups and foreign tourists -- leave the institution with an image of beautifully crafted Quranic texts as quintessential “Qurans.” These *masahif* are cumulatively displayed as great achievements of Islamic art for the purpose of educating the public about the “Golden Age of Muslim civilization,” which in fact does not coincide with the period of Golden Age as understood by many conservative Muslims today.

Attention of the viewers is drawn here to the mastery of production, perfection of design, and development of ideas, all discussed within the framework of what constitutes Islamic art.

Beyond their role as vehicles of aesthetic pleasures and historical knowledge made available to the public, these *masahif* contribute to the making of Egypt's national heritage. From this vantage point they are a part of the legacy of the Egyptian nation. The catalogue issued on the occasion of opening Bab al-Khalq calls the whole exhibit the "memory of a nation" and claims that the history of the manuscripts from the museum's collection – including *masahif* – "represents earnest efforts in preservation of the historical and intellectual legacy left by the passed generations of this great country." In the Museum of Islamic Arts, collections of *masahif* belong to Muslim history, while in the Museum at Bab al-Khalq they are labeled *national* treasures. Thus, national and religious agendas dovetail in the display of *masahif*, connecting what it means to be Muslim and Egyptian.

But what most differentiates today's collections of *masahif* from earlier ones is that these manuscripts are viewed as products of an outmoded technology that can be contrasted with newer, contemporary forms of dissemination. In this regard, they literally become *makhtutat* – objects written by hand. Any handwritten book may be a *makhtut* but only the carrier of the Quranic text bears the name of *mushaf*. Yet, at Bab al-Khalq and the Museum of Islamic Arts, Egyptian archivists in charge of old *masahif* commonly call them *makhtutat*, not *masahif*. The archivists know the manuscripts contain the text of the Quran and occasionally refer to one as "*mushaf*" or "the Quran" but it is clear that what makes these books valuable from an archival point of view is not the text that they carry but the fact that they are "handwritten and old." As such, they become objects of academic interest and investigation.

Private collectors

Of course, the spread of institutionalized public displays of the Quranic manuscripts in the nineteenth century did not completely eliminate the practice of collecting *masahif* by private connoisseurs, although it limited the availability of the manuscripts on the market and circumscribed their circulation from a legal perspective. Private collectors now had to compete with the state sponsored institutions and with time became also limited in their purchases by the laws defining circulation and trade of art objects. Nevertheless, the aesthetic qualities of Quranic manuscripts have been appreciated by all sorts of collectors, foreign as well as Egyptian. The foreigners especially constitute a diverse and somewhat fuzzy group, including Western collectors who have no interest in the text itself to Muslim buyers from the West and the Gulf countries who are familiar with the content of the Quran. The purchases are often a private affair with only some manuscripts advertised in places such as the Arab equivalent of Amazon, Suq al-Kutubiin. This fact helps to establish, even as it already responds to, the audience interested in purchasing such objects. Non-Muslim foreign collectors visiting Egypt, in spite of the national law that prevents export without license of any objects over fifty years old, must be interested in making such purchases, judging from the number of offers I received from sellers around al-Husseyin Mosque who were ready to look for a Quranic manuscript if I wanted to buy one.

The reasons for which such objects are sought after vary, but in most cases it is their rarity that propels the desire to obtain them and thus turns purchased *masahif* into pecuniary investments. Where art and economy intersect, political concerns are likely to arise. A few years ago, the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities launched a campaign aimed at combating trade in illicit antiquities and aiding in the recovery of stolen artifacts. As part of an effort to retrieve objects considered part of Egypt's heritage, the Council has started monitoring items

offered for sale at auction houses in France, England, and America. In 2013, the Paris Fontainebleau Osenat Auction house scheduled for sale on June 9 a Quranic manuscript that bore a handwritten note, "This script was part of the books of the mosque at El-Azhar Kaire. It was saved from pillage and fire the days when this mosque was taken by the French on the revolts of the city who had their general neighborhood ..." ²¹³ News of the auction reached the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Ṭayyeb, who turned to the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Muhammad Kamal 'Ali 'Amr, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) chairman, Irina Bokova, and Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) director general, 'Abdel 'Aziz al-Tawaijri, to take action against the sale of the manuscript. Initially, the auction house refused to accommodate his request and stop the sale on the grounds that the manuscript had been removed from Egypt before 1970, the date the UNESCO convention on the protection of cultural property established as a cutoff for legal excavation or export of artifacts from a source nation without government permission. The national newspaper al-Ahram reported,

Ossama El-Nahas, reporter at the ISESCO and director of the department of the repatriation of antiquities, called for the immediate return of such rare manuscript because it was taken from Egypt during the French expedition, which is against the UNESCO convention that stipulates the prevention and prohibition of illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property in a combat, conflict and colonised country. "The French expedition led by Napoleon Bonaparte was a colonization," said El-Nahas.

Yet, when the Egyptian Embassy in Paris became involved in the dispute, the director of the

²¹³ Nevine El-Aref, "Egypt requests French auction house stop sale of Quran manuscript," *ahramonline*, 2 June 2013. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/9/43/72963/Heritage/Islamic/Egypt-requests-French-auction-house-stop-sale-of-Q.aspx>

house, Jean-Pierre Osenat, decided to pull the manuscript from the auction. He said “We are aware of the feelings that the proposed sale has provoked in Egypt and after friendly exchanges with the embassy, we decided to withdraw the manuscript from this weekend’s sale.”²¹⁴ The Egyptian ambassador, Muhammad Mustafa Kamal, followed this decision with a letter to Osenat, in which he wrote “The withdrawal of the said manuscript from the auction scheduled for June 9 reflects a great understanding of the very high moral and cultural value of this manuscript.” Yet, in spite of the al-Azhar request “to bring back the manuscript and other relics from Azhar's great human heritage,”²¹⁵ Osenat declared that he would have to think about what to do with the book as it belongs to a private collector.

The story of this particular manuscript is a part of a longer history of the violent appropriation of objects by the Europeans and takes us back to the French occupation of Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century. Only three months after Napoleon’s arrival, the Cairene population, tired of the French presence, excessive taxes and the hygienic regulations they imposed, rose up against the occupiers. French troops brutally suppressed the uprising. In a memoir written by one of the Napoleon’s savants, Jean-Joseph Marcel, a note for October 1798 describes the desecration of the Grand Mosque in Cairo as punishment for Egyptian insubordination.²¹⁶ This act of revenge cost many Egyptian lives and provided French scholars with a chance to rummage through the collection of manuscripts stored in the mosque. Jean-

²¹⁴ “Quran Auction Halted after Egyptian Protests,” *Daily News Egypt*, 6 June 2013.
<http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/06/06/Quran-auction-halted-after-egyptian-protests/>

²¹⁵ “Azhar Aims to Recover Quran Manuscript,” *Egypt Independent*, 6 June 2013.
<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/azhar-aims-recover-Quran-manuscript>

²¹⁶ Nina Burleigh, *Mirage: Napoleon’s Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007): 86-87.

Joseph Marcel, who had linguistic skills and interest in printing, kept one of the particularly adorned copies (as did other scholars who had gone to the mosque) and, in spite of the tragic finale of the Napoleonic expedition, he was able to bring it home. What prompted this French traveler to keep this object stained with violence as it was, and carry it a long way to another place? Was it a souvenir? A piece to add to collection of items in a cabinet of curiosity, so popular at that time? Did he read it or display it to tell the story of his adventure? I do not know but what I find significant is that the French savant singled out this *mushaf* on the grounds of its material properties and, when the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar two hundred years later sought to claim it, it was also treated as a *makhtut*, a “manuscript of cultural value.”

The temptation to treat religious texts as artifacts may take different forms but for non-Muslim collectors who cannot and do not have the need to read such texts, it is only the text’s format that affects its future use. Another example of this aestheticizing and objectifying practice in relation to the Quranic text comes from Ebay. With accessibility of the Internet, the location of an object no longer limits its global circulation. Purchases, sales and general information about such activities are theoretically available in any place and to anybody. In early 2013 an American seller auctioned three handwritten pages of Quranic text. He had purchased them years ago, appreciating beauty and artistry of the miniature writing (the pages were very small) and obviously seeing in them something else than the Quranic message, even though he did refer in his advertising to the text’s “spiritual energy.” The pages were – like *mushaf* from the Cairo Grand Mosque -- objects of violence, this time executed on the book itself by the original seller. The book had been cut into pieces before being sold, which did not distress their new owner who simply posted his listing without trying to excuse or explain his sale of separate pages:

*These three miniature pages of hand-written calligraphy in Arabic from the Holy Koran are magnificent works of art with strong spiritual energy. The writing is on the front and back side, but the back sides seem to have smeared ink and a blurred image, as shown in the photos. I believe I purchased these in Algeria or Tunis many years ago.*²¹⁷

This destruction of the book in order to sell its fragments is, of course, an extreme example of the violation of the relationship between the text and the object that carries it. In the eyes of the ‘*ulama*’ such act goes beyond an acceptable, although always somewhat risky, appreciation of the beauty of the written Quranic text. However, as I mentioned earlier, the *mushaf* can be divided into smaller parts, as it is often done to facilitate carrying it and reading. Yet, a fragment of the text always forms part of a whole that should be read. A portion of the text that stands on its own without being preceded or followed by another act of reading has a potential to surpass the whole message. It may divert the onlooker from *what it is* to *how it looks*. It may become an object in itself and, therefore, turn into an idol.

Manuscripts as objects of academic investigation

The practices of preservation, display, reproduction and collecting of which I have spoken so far emphasize primarily the aesthetic value of manuscripts. Conservators, spectators, connoisseurs, and collectors who look at the manuscripts as expressions of artistic skills, are mainly interested in their embellishment, in calligraphic craftsmanship, and in the kinds of materials used to produce them. These elements matter for both private collectors and for those in charge of the museum collections, who treat adorned Quranic manuscripts in the category of potentially displayable and tradeable objects.

²¹⁷ This ad is no longer available on-line but the pages were advertised under the item number 19df0f8298.

But another set of practices partly overlaps the ones just described, practices through which the Quranic manuscript becomes a subject of academic attention as an historical artifact. This approach is not very common in Egypt's academic centers where theological interest in the Quran's content prevails. Incidentally, the phrase "Quranic studies" has always had a different meaning in Muslim and non-Muslim scholarly communities. While Muslim scholars focus on exegesis of the text, non-Muslim scholars are as interested in the object that carries it as in the text itself. Moreover, Quranic studies in Europe grew out of desire to investigate the origins of religious texts under the assumption that their history involved no evidence of divine intervention. Instead, manuscripts have been used as tools to construct theories about the Quran's foundation. Such methods of inquiry have been irrelevant to scholars at al-Azhar, although some Egyptian researchers have undergone a western "Quranic studies" training and specialize in the history of Quranic manuscripts. Thus, the approach of which I am speaking is characteristic mainly of the Euro-American academic institutions and could in theory be disregarded. At the same time, however, neither the approach nor the conclusions that foreign scholars have reached have gone unnoticed by Egyptian *'ulama'* familiar with Western studies of Quranic manuscripts and they occasionally respond to such theories in academic journals in Arabic, English, German, or French. Both Muslim scholars and educated Egyptians know -- through academic networks, media, and religious apologetic publications -- that the Quranic text is also the object of secular investigation. When Egyptian *'ulama'* discuss orientalist research they confront a very different kind of science and must engage with the materiality of the *mushaf* in a way that does not have a precedence in their own field. What does this kind of "Quranic studies" entail?

In this tradition, *masahif* become historical artifacts that do not simply "carry" the text but apparently communicate information additional to the truths of the message they transmit;

information independent of the circumstances for which the books were made and used. For centuries, inscriptions of the message aimed to ensure its preservation. Nobody expected the objects that contained the Quran to reveal more than the Quran itself. Yet, in archival labs, *masahif* as *makhtutat* became tools to question the history and veracity of Muslim revelation itself. Non-Muslim scholars deploy radiocarbon dating, chemical analysis, and paleographic examinations as scientific warrants that may put in doubt the text's uniformity across time and space, and contest Muslim certainties about the Quran's divine origins. In museums and academic halls, a Quranic *makhtut* holds answers to scholarly questions about the origins of the Quran -- and by extension -- Islam. The efforts to answer them concentrate on the manuscripts as unique material proofs of scientific theories. The things themselves serve to sift truth from mere belief.

CHAPTER 8: ENACTING THE QURAN

A quick search online for the word “Quran” shows that in popular English, the Quran is often referred to as the Muslim “holy book.” Yet strictly speaking it is not a book. Nor it is “holy” in the common understanding of this word. Neither the book nor the message are “holy” in the way the Bible is referred to in the Christian tradition. In the Arabic language, the word *muqaddas* and its derivatives do not index the Quran or its tangible body. Perhaps it is because *al-kitab al-muqaddas* -- the “holy book” -- is the phrase already reserved by the Arabic speaking Christians to describe their own scripture, the Bible. My friends in Egypt never spoke of the Quran or *mushaf*’s holiness but instead always emphasized the notion of “deference” (*ihitiram*) which should be directed towards the book that carries the text of the Quran. The word *ihitiram* etymologically comes from the root *harima* “to be prohibited, to be forbidden, to exclude or withhold, which in some of its derivative verbal forms has the connotation of being set aside or inviolable. But, etymology should not be our guide in understanding the realities of the *mushaf* and the Quran. Rather than tracking the word’s semantic field, I suggest we turn to the actual practices of *ihitiram* performed by Quranic users, people who read and handle Quranic copies in the course of daily activities, and to think of them as meaning-making enactments of the Quran.

The basic premise here is simple: in practices things are enacted and their meaning is created.²¹⁸ The Quran is enacted in multiple ways through the acts of its recitation, exegesis, display, burning, calligraphy, and so on. What I want to focus on this time are the enactments

²¹⁸ Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple*, 33.

that specifically engage the tangible medium of the Quran in the hands of those who have no control over its form, the laymen. The acknowledgement that the Quran is the words of Allah does not only happen through speech. Muslims do not only say that the Quran is unique, they also enact it through what they do with the *mushaf* as an object. The reality of something utterly other is brought into being through what is done with something very familiar, common and tangible, a book.

What follows then is a description of instances in which the Quran is enacted through the daily routines of worship and piety known as the etiquette of the *mushaf* or *adab al-mushaf*. These practices, however, are inseparably entangled with technology. A book made of paper is not the same as the Quranic text on the screen of a phone. A text visible on the page does not necessarily appear in the same way as its digitized version under a plastic cover. When the medium of the message changes, the etiquette of the *mushaf* changes as well, and practices of *ihitiram* are redefined to accommodate this new and unprecedented materiality of the text.

“None Touch It Except the Purified”

Quranic copies available on the Egyptian book market whether small and plain or decorated and hardbound have a similarly titled cover that simply says “al-Quran al-Karim.” Usually, nothing else appears there except this austere looking but meaningful phrase. A few specialized *masahif* -- such as the earlier mentioned *Mushaf of Fourteen Schools of Reading* by sheikh Ma‘asarawi -- may include additional subtitles that indicate an academic content but ubiquitous copies are simply titled: “al-Quran al-Karim.” Yet, occasionally, a slightly different

title can be spotted on the shelves: *The Glorious Quran. None Touch It Except the Purified*.²¹⁹

This “subtitle” is actually a part of the Quran and belongs to *sura* fifty-six, verse seventy nine:

“Indeed, it is a noble Quran (77) In a Book well-protected (78) None touch it except the purified (79).” Apart from the Quranic text, the same pronouncement appears in another source, a famous *hadith* attributed to ‘Amr Ibn Hazm according to whom the Prophet Muhammad said: “No one touches the Quran except the pure.” What does this phrase pertain to and why might it appear on the cover of a *mushaf*?

The Quranic text occasionally, and rather enigmatically, discloses the existence of a book called *Umm al-Kitab*, the “Mother of the Book” (Surat al-Ra‘d 13:39, Surat al-Zukhruf 43:4). Preserved on a tablet in heaven and adorned with precious stones this primordial text is a wellspring for the Torah, the Gospels and the Quran. The different terms used to refer to this book are somewhat equivocal. Sometimes it is simply called “the Book,” sometimes, “the Preserved Tablet,” and sometimes “the Mother of the Book.” Verse seventy-eight speaks of a “Book well-protected” and it is commonly understood that “the book” in this case refers to the heavenly “Mother of the Book,” not the Quran. It is not clear, however, whether the pronoun “it” that appears in the next verse (79) points to the Quran or to the Book well-protected from which the Quran descended. The Quranic text mentions that “the Mother of the Book” is protected in heaven by angels who are perfectly pure creatures.

Thus the passage quoted on the cover of the *mushaf* may be read in two ways. It may mean that only the angels can touch the heavenly book from which the Quran originated. Some scholars propose such an interpretation, pointing to *ahadith* that relate a story of an exchange of letters that took place between the Prophet Muhammad and the ruler of a certain non-Muslim

²¹⁹ لَا يَمَسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ

tribe. These scholars argue that if verse seventy-nine referred to the Quran then, being familiar with this prohibition, the Prophet Muhammad would not have sent letters containing passages from the Quran to infidels who were not in a state of *tahara*, ritual cleanliness.²²⁰ The most popular interpretations, however, maintain that this verse speaks of the Quran and therefore of the *mushaf* because, as some of the scholars pointed out, no one can touch the abstract message. Although Muslim scholars have not unanimously accepted the *hadith* of Ibn Hazm as fully trustworthy, most ‘*ulama*’ have traditionally supported it as reliable and there is no indication in their writings that the phrase “none touch it except the purified” refers to anything else but the material and tangible books that contain the Quranic text.²²¹

The *hadith* of Ibn Hazm has become one of the key narratives cited in the debates of a very practical nature: is it permissible to touch a *mushaf* without making ablutions? As with the interpretations of verse seventy-nine, no unanimity prevails among Muslim scholars on this matter, but most accept Ibn Hazm’s words to mean that an impure person is prohibited from touching the book. Yet, depending on the school of law and debates that prevail within each of them, scholars disagree about precisely what degree of impurity prevents one from touching a *mushaf*.²²² According to prevailing opinion a) non-Muslims are not in the state of *tahara* and therefore should not touch a *mushaf*; and b) Muslims should be in the state of *tahara* when handling the book. A Muslim practitioner puts herself a state major impurity (*al-hadath al-akbar*) through sexual activities, menstruation, giving birth; or a physical contact with a corpse; or a minor state of impurity (*al-hadath al-asghar*) through, for instance, using the bathroom,

²²⁰ ناصر بن أحمد بن النجار الدمياني. حكم مس المصحف بغير وضوء (القاهرة: مكتبة اولاد الشيخ للترا، ٢٠٠٥): ٢٢.

²²¹ Ibid. ١٧، ٢٩

²²² Ibid. ٢٧.

falling asleep, or vomiting. In order to remove a major state of impurity one has to perform *ghusl* (full ablution), washing the entire body. A minor impurity calls for *wudu'* (partial ablution), in which only certain body parts need to be cleansed. Ablutions must be performed before prayers and before reading the Quranic text.

Many classical scholars recognized the difficulty of following the rules of purity in all circumstances and at all times. A well-known example cites the case of pupils in the Quranic schools who, if the rules were upheld, would have to perform ablutions after every urination or defecation, which would disrupt the class and take too much time away from instruction. Therefore different provisions and exceptions have been made. These include holding or touching the book with other objects or between the outer parts of one's palms. These provisions and exceptions have become incorporated into daily routines, and are even more necessary as trans migratory life in Cairo makes following the rules more cumbersome: for instance, the long hours of commuting to work could be spent on reading the Quran but making the required *wudu'* beforehand is not always possible. It is, therefore, left to the conscience of individual practitioners how to reconcile *adab al-mushaf* with the contingencies of rapidly changing lifestyles.

When I traveled with Rahab to her family's cabin on the shores of Marsa Matruh, I was not aware of the rules that guided the handling of a *mushaf*. At the end of the day, I sat on a comfortable bed and stretched lazily, not being able to decide if I was too tired to read anything. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a book on the bedside table and picked it up. It was a *mushaf*. I flipped through the pages absentmindedly. Rahab walked into the room and saw the book in my hands. "Do you mind putting it away?" she said somewhat sheepishly, "you are... you know... your hands are not clean." "I just washed them," I said, not sure what she meant. "That's not it."

She was clearly uneasy. “You are... you are not a Muslim so... you shouldn’t touch it.” Rahab did not want me to hold the *mushaf*; because we were good friends she could openly ask me to put it away, although it was not a comfortable request to make. In my interactions with other people, I occasionally saw a fleeting hesitation and an almost instinctive jerk of the hand in a protective gesture when I reached for a *mushaf*. Once or twice it was silently removed from my hands with a quick but telling motion. But Rahab was one of few who candidly referred to my impurity.

Human friendships do make relationships with some objects more complicated, forcing the practitioners to make uneasy choices about whether their allegiances lie with people or things. I know I was at times the cause of such dilemmas. “A *mushaf* shouldn’t be sold to any non-Muslim,” said Hisham, another good friend. “It’s a book just for Muslims. It can’t be touched by any person who is not Muslim and he is not washed, pure. For example ‘Umar al-Khattab, when he was not yet Muslim, entered the house and found his sister, who was Muslim, holding some scripts in her hands and reading the Quran. She asked him to wash first and then allowed him to read it. But you can’t sell it to anybody who won’t use it properly, who won’t put it in a proper place and it’s my responsibility as I give it to him.” Yet, Hisham did not object to studying the Quran with me and allowed me to touch the book in his presence.

Marcel, an American living temporarily in Cairo, described to me a scene that neatly illustrated the conflict between *mushaf* and friendship even more vividly. Late one morning Marcel’s friend ‘AbdAllah knocked at his door. In a pile of things that he brought was a gift, a *mushaf* that contained both the Arabic text and its English translation. ‘AbdAllah was in a hurry so he handed the *mushaf* to Marcel, quickly turning around on his way out. Halfway through the turn he was suddenly arrested by a thought. “You have taken a shower since you had sex last

time, haven't you?" he said, looking in a meaningful way at Marcel's girlfriend coming into the room. Marcel was not Muslim. Yet in the hierarchy of states that cause impurity, 'AbdAllah chose to focus not on the fact that Marcel was a *kafir*, a person inherently incapable of fulfilling Muslim requirements of purity, but instead addressed the kind of impurity that his friend could actually remove. Such choices, though, complicate the logic of *tahara* in city like Cairo, where adherence to purity is already hard to exercise.

As a non-Muslim I was not in a state of *tahara*, but neither was Rahab that evening in Marsa Matruh. At her request I put the *mushaf* down. She immediately picked up two other books from the coffee table and using them as tongs carried the *mushaf* out of the room. "I'm having my period," she said in a matter-of-fact voice, responding to the surprised look I threw at her contraption. By not touching the Quranic text while menstruating, Rahab followed the rules of handling the *mushaf* habituated by generations of Muslim women. Nonetheless, not all take for granted this particular bodily comportment with the book. The piety movement that is becoming more popular among Egyptian women has produced female practitioners who want to learn more about their religion. By ejecting modern and secular values promoted by the government, they turned to religion for empowerment. These women choose to fully embrace and to submit to Islamic principles that require diligence. Women's religious education in Egypt has expanded significantly over the past couple of decades, familiarizing them with many classical writings and interpretations. The knowledge gained from studying works by Muslim '*ulama*' allow women to speak about these texts in ways relevant to their own needs and interests. In most cases, their readings of scriptural tradition result in emphasizing and de-emphasizing material to accommodate their points of view. This is how I interpret Dalia's take on the rule of whether and how a menstruating woman may touch a *mushaf*. A self-taught and

pious woman who is familiar with the less common exegesis of the verse “None Touch It Except the Purified” as an *aya* referring to the primordial text of the *Umm al-Kitab*, she explained to me

I read the Quran. I touch the mushaf, not the Quran. I do everything. The only things I don't do when I'm in menstruation are: I don't pray the formal prayer -- because the formal prayer requires ablutions -- and I don't fast. Otherwise I... again... there are different sheikhs who are giving their opinions or fatwas about this. And 99% of the sheikhs that have given fatwas about this are men. They don't menstruate so they don't know what the hell they are talking about! The point is that a believing person, a practicing person would not want to cut the relationship with God because she is menstruating. You can be in menstruation a quarter of your life. There is no hadith, no single verse that says “do not deal with the Quran when you are in menstruation.” So I don't give a damn about these fatwas. Mind you, I don't make my own fatwas ... One of the great scholars, which is Ibn Hazm, gave a fatwa that there is no problem concerning this. The only verse related to this is the “junub.” It is different than menstruation. “Junub” is... a man and a woman have an intimate relationship. A Muslim, a man or a woman, after they finish the intercourse they have to shower. To refresh the body and to clean the private parts from the liquids. But if you did not take a shower you are “junub.” In this case you should not enter a mosque or deal physically with the Quran. Why in this case there is a rule? If you are in “junub,” it takes five minutes to take a shower. But when you are in menstruation you can be in menstruation for a week. You see the difference? The history of Islamic fikh is just like the history of the world, it's very what do you call it, patriarchal? Dhukuri, masculine... Men have control of the words and you will find it for instance among the priests. You know more about the priesthood - even the pope of the Vatican is a man. The same here, the sheikh of al-Azhar is a man. You will find throughout the history that most of the people who wrote fikh were men, so you need to read the Quran or read the hadith of the Prophet for yourself.

The reactions of my female friends and acquaintances to the issue of touching a *mushaf* during menses illustrate modern shifts in the attitudes towards one's own body. Some of the women, like Rahab, considered menstruation as a state of impurity and simply accepted the fact that in that state they could not read the Quran. Others were unsure about how to think of their own menstruating bodies, perceiving the prohibition not so much a matter of ritual uncleanness but rather a tradition that should be upheld. These women often find creative ways around the rules that separated them from the actual text, such as listening to the recordings on their mobile

phones or reading the Quran on a computer screen, that does not require touching the text. Some distinguished touching the text itself from touching the blank corners of a page. Still others, like Dalia, treated menstruation as a biological function that should not prohibit a pious person from cultivating a personal relationship with Allah, including holding the words of the message mediated in a tangible way by a *mushaf*. She supported her point of view by the absence of more precise regulations concerning that matter in the Quran itself.

Imam al-Nawawi (631–676 AH / 1234–1277 AD), a scholar of jurisprudence well known in Egypt, wrote in his widely popular *Guide to the Etiquette of Dealing with the Quran*: “He who exposes the *mushaf* to impurities becomes an infidel.”²²³ By impurity Imam al-Nawawi meant not only the ritual uncleanness caused by menstruation or sex, but also the qualities of particular places and activities. For instance he, as well as many other scholars of *fikh*, considered bathrooms spaces of particular concern, where a *mushaf* should not be brought nor the Quran recited. Once when I went to service my cell phone I saw someone putting Al-Nawawi’s opinion into practice. A customer in the waiting room had a pocket size *mushaf* in a black briefcase on his lap (some practitioners think that a bag with a *mushaf* inside should not rest on the floor). After a while, he decided to use the bathroom. He opened the bag and handed his *mushaf* to a customer sitting next to him. When he returned, he took the *mushaf* from the hands of the helpful stranger and put it back in his briefcase. The owner of the *mushaf* could not know whether the stranger had performed a *wudu*’ but religious legal provisions stipulate that it is permissible to hand a *mushaf* to a person without a *wudu*’ rather than to let it be exposed to impurities in a public bathroom.

²²³ "ولو القاه (المصحف) مسلم في القاذورات، صار الملقى كافراً." الإمام أبي زكريا يحيى شرق النووي. التبيين في آداب حملة القرآن (القاهرة: دار السلام، ٢٠٠٢): ٣٠٩.

Al-Nawawi's *Guide*, as well as other classical writings popular in Egypt (including collections of narratives about the Prophet by al-Bukhari and al-Muslim, or *Fikh al-Sunna* by Sayyid Sabiq) instruct Muslims in various aspects of daily life, including handling the Quranic text. What practitioners know about these matters comes from lessons at the mosque, education at home, mass media, and self-study, and pertains to multiple situations in the course of daily activities. Over time, I trained myself to pay attention to the small gestures of deference that surrounded the *mushaf* in private and public spaces. I learned to notice that a *mushaf* was not left open turned upside down, was not covered with other books and objects, was not left on the floor or on a table with food. I watched these acts of deferment implemented daily through gestures of *ih tiram*, I saw my friends and strangers uncover a *mushaf*, pick it up, move it, put it away; I learned where and when it could be left undisturbed, at least as much as life in crowded and polluted spaces allowed. In interviews, I was given many examples of what not to do with the *mushaf*. I was warned not to wet my finger with my saliva when turning the pages; not to read it in bed; not to sit, sleep, or lean upon a *mushaf*; not to throw it; not to put anything between its pages except empty sheets of paper; and not to scribble notes on it. I was curious to know how contemporary scholars reconciled the latter with the tradition of writing commentaries on the Quran in the margins of the book. Producing commentaries on the Quran, I was reminded, has always been considered a very profound religious activity and cannot be compared with notations of a personal and private character by a layman. Although it may be interpreted in many ways, the essential principle -- as one of the sheikhs put it -- is not to "mix into the Quran what is not of it." In other words, it is preferable not to mix the text of the Quran with frivolous texts or random objects. For the same reason citations from the Quran in religious writings are usually fully vocalized and separated from the rest of the text by brackets or other forms of font

enhancement. Sometimes ordinary acts of respect would take me by surprise or frustrate me. I remember Rahab's mother removing a pair of golden earrings I accidentally put on her *mushaf*. I also remember working in a library in Cairo where an anonymous stranger would persistently remove a *mushaf* from the lower shelf where its call number would put it to the top shelf, out of cataloging order.

My favorite story includes both a practical display of *ihitiram* and an illustration of the dynamic existing between printed and written Arabic letters, two techniques of inscription that are much more entwined than their equivalents in the places where Latin script is used. I was in the metro on my way to Ma'adi. The carriage was not crowded but it was hot. I could feel drops of sweat slowly sliding down my legs. The man standing next to me was reading from a small pocket *mushaf*. His lips were moving silently while a loud Quranic recitation blared from the cellphone of a man sitting in front of him, his eyes closed, his lips motionless. My friend 'Ali was already waiting at the station when I arrived and we headed for Cafe Beano's, our usual meeting place. Most of the customers were congregating around the tables outside, enjoying an occasional cooling breeze, rare in the summer. 'Ali and I sat inside with our books and laptops spread out on a big table without feeling guilty about taking up too much space while ordering only one chai latte and a small espresso. With a big smile, 'Ali pulled out of his bag a *mushaf* and handed it to me saying, "It's like the one we used yesterday. You can have it." I took and opened it. It had the familiar, beautiful font of *Mushaf al-Shimarli*. "Did I tell you that Sa'ad likes this *mushaf* because of its calligraphy?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it was handwritten and scanned."

"I didn't know that. How do you know that it was handwritten?"

“It has the calligrapher’s name on the first page,” I replied, “and also some of the letters have shapes you would not be able to reproduced with computer software. Now that you know it’s special, do you want it back?” I joked.

“No, it’s yours,” he said and with a swift move kissed it and raised it to his forehead touching it slightly. Then he handed it over to me.

It would be easy to dismiss these acts of deference as simply reflections of the extraordinary nature of the Quranic message. But I cannot overlook the material mediation of the *mushaf* in the fabric of religious practice, affect, and knowledge because not all rules of *tahara* that apply to the act of reading from the book apply as well to recitation. In other words, the limitations on interaction with the object are stricter than limitations on the circumstances in which the text may be recited. The previous Grand Mufti of al-Azhar, ‘Ali Juma‘a declared in his fatwa number 485 for the year 2004: “It is not forbidden to recite the Quran without ablution with the exception of touching it according to the words of the Highest: *Only the pure can touch it*.”²²⁴ Similarly, a *fatwa* issued on the popular Internet site Islam Web states that “God willing, there is nothing wrong with touching a cassette tape or an electronic *mushaf* [on which the sound is recorded] by a person who did not perform ablutions because the conditions that forbid [touching a *mushaf*] regard only a written one, in an Arabic calligraphy. [A recording device] preserves the voice of a specialized reciter who preserved the words of the Quran in his heart.”²²⁵

Attention to the corporeality of the book does not mean that the Islamic theological

²²⁴ "لا مانع شرعاً من قراءة القرآن بغير وضوء مع عدم مس المصحف عملاً بقوله تعالى: (لَا يَسُسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ)." "قراءة القرآن بدون وضوء"، رقم الفتوى: ٢٢٦، دار الإفتاء المصرية ١٣ مايو ٢٠٠٩. <http://www.dar-alifta.org/ViewFatwa.aspx?LangID=1&ID=266>

²²⁵ "فإن مس المحدث للمصحف الإلكتروني أو المسجل على أشرطة الكاسيت لا حرج فيه إن شاء الله تعالى، لأن شروط منع مس المصحف للمحدث أن يكون مكتوباً، وأن يكون بالخط العربي، أما المصحف المسجل فإنه ليس بمكتوب؛ وإنما ثبت فيه صدى صوت القارئ بطريقة يعرفها أهل الاختصاص، فصار أشبه بالقرآن المحفوظ في الصدر، فيجوز لصاحبه الدخول به في الحمام، ويجوز لمسه من المحدث والجنب والحائض. والله أعلم." "حكم لمس المصحف الإلكتروني بدون وضوء"، رقم الفتوى: ٣٢٤١٠، مركز الفتوى، Islamweb.net ٢٤ مايو ٢٠٠٣. <http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=32410>

pronouncements that stand behind the rules of *adab al-mushaf* assign priority to the object over the message. Yet the same pronouncements attest to the fact that it is very hard to demarcate a clear boundary between the immaterial, eternal words of Allah and their material mediators in the form of perishable ink, paint, and paper. Acts of deference towards a *mushaf* enact the Quran. The scholars don't define the acts but they define the rules and make statements. Yet, the '*ulama*' are cautious in what they say in order not to create an impression that the acts of deference go only as far as the object itself. On a practical level, disentangling the relation between the book and the message is only possible when the medium that carries the message is drastically changed. The introduction of digital technologies in the dissemination of the Quran provides us with an opportunity to ask: how does a change in medium circumscribe the message? How does one enact a "digital Quran"?

"Electronic Qurans"

Digitization of the Quranic text is a relatively new phenomenon. In Egypt, only within the last decade software and apps companies started offering electronic editions of the Quran in Arabic (English translations have been available since mid-to late 1990s). It is the technology itself that for long happened to be the obstacle. In spite of growing interest in digitization of the Quranic text, boosted by the spread of new technologies and skills, rendering the Quran in a digital format presented numerous conundrums for programmers and religious authorities. Although practitioners with access to computers and other electronic devices saw benefits of using the digitized Quran, it was the programmers' inability to properly reproduce the Quranic text in an electronic format that impaired its spread at the end of the twentieth and first years of the twenty first century. Even though programs that allowed typing in Arabic have been used for

over twenty years, the complexity of the Quranic script and grammar prevented programmers from creating software that would allow them to render the text in a way that followed the calligraphic conventions of handwritten/printed copies and the ‘Uthmanic orthographic rules. In other words, the Quran was only available in a form of a *digitized picture* but it was not available as an *independent, searchable text* that might be practically used in study and learning in different computer applications. The question was how to properly encode the Quran in a computer as text?; and the problem was multifaceted.

First, the discussion over the simplification of Quranic spelling that could alleviate some of the challenges facing the computer engineers working on the Quranic text, eventually came to a dead end. Second, the adherence to particular calligraphic styles in printing did not help the matters either. Although there was no *sunna* that assigned particular styles of writing for the Quranic text, yet the officials at the Mushaf Committee chose not to allow any innovations in that regard, perhaps out of conviction that the new font designs responded to different communicative needs of the public that were not relevant to the dissemination of the Quranic text. The calligraphic styles used over the centuries for writing *masahif* and imitated through the lithographic and offset printing -- that facilitated continuation of many calligraphic traditions in mechanically reproduced texts of the Quran -- have produced their own regimes of authority and authentication that would be hard to recreate through a font style that did not participate in the tradition of Quranic calligraphy. “The paths traced by calligraphic scripts, movable type, and digital fonts carve different spaces of meaning,” notes J.R. Osborn.²²⁶ It is particularly true when we consider how the introduction of typographic print in Egypt disrupted the semantic system of

²²⁶ J.R. Osborn, “Narratives of Arabic Script: Calligraphic Design and Modern Spaces,” *Design and Culture* 1, no. 2 (2009): 289–306.

distinct calligraphic styles and their fields of signification by visually unifying texts belonging to different spheres of religious, political and economic practice. With the introduction of printing, a variety of calligraphic styles that communicated different contents of the text was replaced by one uniform printing font that lost its capacity to convey meaning through format. However, as we saw in the story of Mushaf Fu'ad, the state of disruption in the case of the Quran was not permanent. A Quranic typeface soon recreated its own distinctive visual format that in many ways was much more grounded in the pre-print scripts than in then-contemporary secular printing, full of innovative designs.

Third, when digitization entered the printing and dissemination markets in Egypt at the beginning of the nineties, it preserved the Quranic calligraphic tradition by reproducing handwritten copies or printed *masahif* as uneditable, undividable text blocks that could not be copied or searched. By that point in history adjustments in religious visual culture (prompted in particular by Quranic editions such as Mushaf Fu'ad and in general by the modern aesthetics of the secular texts) had changed the reading habits of Muslim practitioners. People desired to read the text of the Quran that was “legible” and print-like and they wanted it to be like other easily accessible and usable electronic texts. Therefore, the push to digitize the Quran in Egypt did not come from scholars at al-Azhar but through the initiatives of individual practitioners who were interested in both the correct spelling/diacritics and usability of the text.

And here the fourth problem emerged. The basis of the digital revolution, the Unicode system used worldwide for encoding texts in different writing systems is grounded in a typographic, Latin-script based tradition. A particular code is ascribed to a particular letter or sign in a sequential order. This system does not support the variant glyphs of primary graphemes with additional signs floating above or below the baseline, which is crucial for the Arabic script.

It does not support complex combinations of letters either, such as for instance the medial letter “h” that changes its form depending on the letter which precedes or follows it. One of the renowned developers of Arabic digital fonts, Tomas Milo from DecoType, aptly sums up the challenge faced by graphic designers who want to create an Arabic script in a digital format: “Writing Arabic involves more than just lining up letters. The connected letters assimilate with each other. They are highly adaptable, which makes it impractical to describe each variant individually. In Arabic script the graphic unit of writing is the letter compound: a string of connected letters.” Unfortunately, the programs initially developed for writing in Arabic, which Thomas Milo described as a “visual equivalent of Beethoven’s *Für Elise* played by a cell-phone,” reproduced the structure of Latin script, treating letters as isolated graphemes and obtaining -- as a result -- a visually simplified form of type that did not include *tashkil* or any other signs uniquely characteristic of the Quranic text, and setting aside aesthetic concerns entirely. Moreover, the elements of the text that could be reproduced were easily shifted around when transferred to different file formats or search engines. For instance, one of the most common problems was the unstable position of *fatha*, *kesra*, *damma*, *sukku*, *tanwin damma*, *tanwin fatha*, *shadda*, and *tanwin kesra* which are placed on a secondary baseline in relation to the main line of glyphs. These little *tashkil* signs were (and still are in many programs) notoriously hard to place over the correct letters. So the Quranic text written in such software was not only lacking many specifically Quranic signs. It was also easily distorted and altered because each letter was treated by the software as an individual sign, uncorrelated with the rest of the diacritics and letters around it.

The response of the Azhari scholars towards the new digital medium was cautiously supportive, unlike their response when print was first introduced. What the ‘*ulama*’ wanted to

consider this time was not whether the new technology would be suitable for the dissemination of the Quranic text but rather how to reconcile the benefits of digitization with preservation of the graphic format of the message already adopted for print. Members of the Mushaf Committee did not endorse software editions that did not graphically replicate the authorized printed texts in a satisfactory way. They could not recommend such a simplified, prone to error and “uncontrollable” Quranic text as a primary source for reading or memorizing the Quran. But the ‘*ulama*’ had no objections to digitized Quranic texts that were photocopied from the handwritten or printed *masahif*. Such a solution, although less than ideal for computer specialists, was very satisfactory for the members of the Mushaf Committee. Accidental glitches or alterations of the content of the message (not speaking about the purposeful ones) were not possible when the text was fixed in a format that could not be edited. However, what protected the text from distortion at the same time made it difficult to quote or reproduce fragments of the Quran, which Muslim practitioners wanted to do.

The popularity of Muslim religious websites has exploded over the past decade. In the unstable political environment of recent years, many young Egyptians have been feeling more inclined to express their religious views on discussion boards and blogs devoted to Islamic doctrine and practice than in public. A formal display of arguments required quotes from the Quran but this was problematic on the Internet because copying and pasting the Quranic words did not necessarily preserve the text’s correct format. Even the text fairly stable in one digital environment might be completely jumbled up and full of illegible signs when transferred to another program, computer, or electronic device. Technically, it was not difficult to copy and paste the Quranic text but the results were often disastrous. From this perspective, the ease of transferring text from one format to another, or from one electronic device to another was,

ironically, one of the biggest predicaments of disseminating the digitized Quran. The challenge was to create a program in which the Quranic text would be stable enough, yet editable, not easily manipulated but transferable... But such a Quranic text presents a problem for the scholars. One of the language consultants for the Egyptian software companies, Badr 'Orabī explains the dilemma in this way:

*The easiness of writing and modifying the electronic text, and the easiness of its editing -- whether for review and licensing purposes or not -- means that any institution or individual who want to change the electronic Quranic text (deliberately or by accident) can do it without difficulty. In this case the only way to ameliorate the consequences is to review the original text again and to obtain a new license. And sometimes -- I do not say always -- the authorities giving a permit overlook the additional review after the initial acceptance of the text arrangement has been given because an extra revision requires time, money and effort, which they do not need to spend.*²²⁷

As we can see, the rules governing the spelling and graphics of a digitized Quranic text are entangled with the technology of its making, methods of disseminating it, the economic conditions of its production, and efforts to supervise the text by religious institutions. The lack of standardized control over electronic texts of the Quran and the problem of lumping them together with the reviews of the text on paper are, in the opinion of Badr 'Orabi, to be blamed for the chaos existing among the digital copies of the Quran. He means by that the influx of Quranic software from abroad that users can easily download but al-Azhar cannot check for its correctness. He suggests that a solution to this problem might be achieved if the multiple and diverse efforts of small companies producing electronic Quranic texts were unified into one large

²²⁷ "سهولة كتابة وإعداد النصوص الإلكترونية، وسهولة التعديل فيها سواء أكانت مراجعة ومجازة أم لا، مما يعني أن أي جهة أو فرد تريد أن تغير بقصد أو بدون في النص القرآني المجاز فسيكون ذلك سهلاً عليها، وفي هذه الحالة فلا تعديل مضمون العواقب إلا بمراجعة جديدة وإجازة جديدة، وغالباً ولا أقول دائماً يتغاضى أصحاب الإجازات عن الرجوع إلى الجهات المجيزة بعد إجراء التعديلات؛ لأن ذلك سيكلفهم كثيراً من الوقت والمال والمجهود، وليس ثمة ما يلزمهم بذلك." بدر محمود ابراهيم عُرَبي، "كتابة المصاحف الإلكترونية: مشاكل والحلول. مجلة البحوث و الدراسات القرآنية". ١٨٦. <http://jqs.complex.gov.sa/Quran>

institution dealing with the specificities of the Quranic text in an electronic format. But this solution is not welcomed by those for whom the production and dissemination of digitized Qurans is not only a pious activity but also a source of income. Beside, theoretically the only institution authorized to carry out such an enormous undertaking is al-Azhar. But al-Azhar's ability to invest money in large religious projects has been long undermined by the removal of profit-making *awqaf* (donated lands and properties) from under their supervision. The financial independence of al-Azhar ended at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Muhammad 'Ali took control over the *waqf* revenues to pay for his extensive program of national modernization. Succeeding rulers of Egypt were not inclined to let go of such a lucrative source of income; neither was the new, republican government which confirmed the governmental control over the finances of al-Azhar by placing *awqaf* under the administration of the Ministry of Religious Endowments in 1961.

At any rate, were al-Azhar -- or any other institution -- to launch a program to standardize and improve the digitized Quranic text, according to 'Orabi, they would have to work on three distinct but interrelated problems: the design of the Quranic fonts and their unique aesthetics, the coding of the Arabic graphemes and their unification, and the efficiency of the software that provides a link between the coded letters and their arrangement on the page. "I think that the only sound and healthy approach to an electronic Quran is the one that brings together the text, calligraphic styles, and programming, with the emphasis on the latter."²²⁸

A comprehensive approach to a digital Arabic script that incorporated knowledge of calligraphic traditions and the specificities of computer design was taken up by an earlier

²²⁸ "وأرى أن المطابقة الإلكترونية السليمة والصحيحة، هي التي تقوم على كل جوانب العملية الإلكترونية من النصوص والخطوط والبرمجة، بل وتتعدى ذلك إلى البرامج." بدر محمود إبراهيم عُرَبي، "كتابة المصاحف الإلكترونية: مشاكل والحلول. مجلة البحوث و الدراسات القرآنية". ١٨٧ : [http://jqrs.complex.gov.sa/Quran](http://complex.gov.sa/Quranhttp://jqrs.complex.gov.sa/Quran)

mentioned Dutch font designer, Tomas Milo. In the last few years he and a group of engineers from his DecoType company were able to develop a plug-in called “Tasmeem” that operates inside WinSoft’s Middle Eastern version of Adobe InDesign.²²⁹ Instead of treating Arabic glyphs as separate units, this program -- unlike most products available on the digital market -- offers a unique method of seeing the text in a multi-lineal dimension where parts of letters and *tashkil* form combinations of signs in relative positions to each other. The basic unit in Tasmeem is not a letter but a carefully analyzed calligraphic pen stroke translated into a digital code. In other words, instead of redesigning the Arabic letters to make them compliant with the typographic bias of most text editing programs, Milo and his team reworked the technology to fit the demands of traditional Arabic calligraphy. As a result his team produced a text that very closely imitates the dynamic features of Arabic handwriting, while remaining searchable and compatible with the international Unicode system. It is interesting that for the first two font types reproduced using Tasmeem, Milo chose the calligraphic style *naskh* and the metal typeface of the printing of *Mushaf* Fu’ad (which he called font *Emiri*), allowing computer users to create both kinds of text: common/secular and religious. Milo wrote on his website presenting Tasmeem that it is finally possible to create a Unicode based searchable Quranic text with the familiar appearance of today’s printed editions, that is typographically stable and orthographically flawless, regardless of the operating system or the type of web device.²³⁰ Yet some contemporary Arab font designers criticize DecoType’s philosophy of transforming technology to embrace the principles of calligraphy -- so useful in printing the Quranic text. They prefer to explore new directions in font design instead of returning to old canons.

²²⁹ “Tasmeem Manual,” Deco Type, 2006. http://www.decotype.com/pdfs/Tasmeem_Manual.pdf

²³⁰ Ibid.

Apart from DecoType, others continue to make efforts to overcome the calligraphic and technological challenges in the software for printing the Quranic text. An attempt to create a program that would allow searching, copying, and pasting the Quranic text without distortion of the position of the letters, or changing them into numeric signs and symbols, that should be mentioned here has been undertaken at the King Fahd Quran Complex. Its team of engineers has recently released to the public domain a font application that is also compatible with Unicode. This application is available for free on the Complex's website and has been developed specifically for the text of the Quran according to *al-rasm al-'Uthmani* following the reading of Hafs.²³¹ The shape of the letters are, as in the printed Mushaf al-Madina, designed by the calligrapher 'Uthman Taha but in its style and composition the script is far from artistic. Unlike Milo's product, it is based on one letter-one code system and therefore does not imitate features of Arabic handwriting (beyond adherence to *naskh*), despite being designed by a calligrapher. Its primary function is to reproduce, without distortion and in different digital environments, all of the graphemes present in the Quranic text.

The transition from print to digital has offered new possibilities for transmission of the Quranic text and has produced alternative philosophies of interaction between script and its digital medium (including DecoType approach to script design versus King Fahd Complex). It has also engendered a critical change in the ways practitioners perceive Quranic text as an integral part of the *mushaf*. The "electronic Quran" is not a book in the ordinary sense of this word at all. It is a text mediated by the screen of a computer, an electronic device, or a mobile phone, where it shares memory space with other texts and images. An electronic device can hardly be called a *mushaf*. Moreover, it evokes different responses and concerns for Muslim

²³¹ "مجموعة الخطوط الحاسوبية"، complex.gov.saQuranhttp://fonts.

users.

A Muslim practitioner once told me that computers are ideal carriers of the Quran because they make its text immaterial. The assumption that a digitized text, unlike a *mushaf*, has no physical body is common. But when I asked some practical questions -- may you take your mobile phone to the bathroom if you have downloaded onto it a copy of the Quran? -- responds reveal that there are no obvious and easy answers. A quick search through the popular *fatwa* websites indicates that many sheikhs do not consider electronic devices that carry the Quranic text as *masahif*. For that reason they say it is permissible to bring a mobile storage device containing the Quran to the bathroom. A *fatwa* on one Internet site simply states: "There is nothing wrong with entering a bathroom with a mobile phone that stores the Quran because it is not considered to be a *mushaf*."²³² Another site quotes an anecdotal *fatwa* that has been circulating on the Internet in different versions, which I also heard from people on a few occasions: A man asked a sheikh whether it was permitted to bring a mobile phone with the Quranic verses to the bathroom. The sheikh answered, "It is permissible because the verses are in the memory of the phone."

The man asked again, "But sheikh, we are talking about the Quranic verses and the most beautiful names of Allah, and you are saying that it is permitted to enter the bathroom?"

The sheikh replied, "Have you memorized anything from the Quran?"

"Yes," said the man.

"Well then," retorted the sheikh, "when you go to the bathroom, leave your head outside

²³² فلا حرج في دخول الحمام بالهاتف الجوال الذي قد خزن في ذاكرته القرآن الكريم؛ لأنه لا يعد مصحفاً، والشئ في معدنه لا حكم له. يوسف، عبد الحي. "دخول الحمام بالقرآن." شبكة المشكاة الإسلامية <http://www.meshkat.net/content/28700>

and go in.”²³³

These examples, although suggestive, do not offer much in the way of explanations concerning the logic of *fatwa* on “electronic Qurans.” It is only through “evidence” or justification provided in more elaborate *fatawa* that the complex mediation of the electronic devices becomes fleshed out. “There is nothing wrong with entering a bathroom with a mobile phone, and tapes, and CD’s that contain the Quran,” says Sa‘udi sheikh, Khaled Ibn ‘Ali al-Mashiqh, “because the Quran present in these devices is not visible but it is hidden inside the parts of these machines. Therefore, it [an electronic device] does not abide by the rules of the text visible to people which the ‘*ulama*’ described as prohibited from entering a bathroom. [For that reason] if a person without ablution touched such things or devices, there is nothing wrong with it.”²³⁴ Sheikh Khaled ‘Abd al-Muna‘im al-Rifa‘i, an Egyptian freelance mufti working for the same website Islam Way as sheikh al-Mashiqh, makes the same point although in a roundabout way. Having reviewed different sunna accounts, he says: “If the phone carries the written text of the Quran or includes the name Allah, it should not be brought to the bathroom, as mentioned, unless it is feared that it will be lost, then one can bring it in. However, this applies [to the situation] when the pages with the text -- the software -- are open in the time of entering the bathroom. Otherwise, there is nothing wrong with entering a bathroom with a phone if the

²³³ "أحد جاء يسأل أحد المشائخ عن حكم إدخال الجوال اللبي فيه آيات في ذاكرته الى دورة المياه جاوب الشيخ ان لا بأس لان الآيات في ذاكرة التلفون رد مره ثانية وقال يا شيخ اقولك آيات قرآنية وأسماء الله وتقول لا بأس تدخل دورة المياه؟ قال له الشيخ: انت تحفظ شي من القرآن؟ قال السائل نعم، قال الشيخ فلما تدخل دورة المياه خلي راسك برا وادخل." سبلة عمان، ٢ يناير ٢٠٠٩ <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=367870>.

²³⁴ "لا بأس في دخول دروات المياه بمثل هذا الجوال، وكذلك أشرطة الكاسيت والسديهايات التي تحتوي على القرآن الكريم؛ لأن القرآن الموجود في هذه الأجهزة غير ظاهر، بل موجود داخل الجهاز في شيء مخفي في أجزاء هذه الآلات، فلا يأخذ أحكام القرآن الظاهر أمام الناس، والذي نص العلماء على حرمة الدخول به إلى دورات المياه، ولهذا لو أن الإنسان أمسك بهذه الأشياء، أو بهذه الأجهزة وهو على غير طهارة فلا بأس بذلك إن شاء الله تعالى." خالد بن علي المشيقح "دخول الحمام بأجهزة تحتوي على القرآن الكريم"، طريق الإسلام ١٦ يناير ٢٠١٢. <http://ar.islamway.net/fatwa/36228>

software is turned off, as the words of the Quran do not appear on the screen.”²³⁵

A brief review of discussions and posts present on Muslim religious blogs and websites makes it clear that the physical presence of the text on the screen of the phone is the key element that the sheikhs take into consideration in addressing the etiquette of electronic devices. An Azhari graduate gave me a related example, this time addressing computers, “If the Quran is visible on the computer screen you can’t sit in front of it with your feet on the table directed towards the screen but if the text is not there you may do it if you want to.” It also seems that the *fatawa* on the subject of “electronic Qurans,” whether issued by Saudi or Egyptian sheikhs, agree in implicitly or explicitly comparing the memory of electronic devices carrying the Quranic text with human memory. In such a case the rules that guide *ihitiram* towards the object do not apply unless the Quranic text is manifest on the surface of the screen. So, unlike a closed book, a turned off electronic device dematerializes the message.

To further clarify this issue, in 2011 al-Azhar issued a statement that expressed its support for a *fatwa* given by a Saudi preacher, Muhammad Ibn Salih, who ruled that it is necessary to be in a state of ablution while touching a phone or any other electronic device that contains the Quran, but only when the verses appear on the screen. “In the case when the Quran shows up on the screen of the phone the same rules that guide handling of a regular paper *mushaf* apply, as it came in the precious *aya* ‘No one touches it except the pure.’”²³⁶ The Head of the

²³⁵ "فإن كان الجوال مكتوباً عليه شيء من القرآن أو ما اشتمل عليه اسم الله، فيكره دخول الحمام به لما ذكرناه، إلا أن يخشى عليه الضياع فيدخل به، وهذا إن كانت صفحات القرآن البرنامج مفتوحة وقت دخول الخلاء، ولكن إذا كانت تلك الصفحات مغلقة فلا بأس بالدخول به لعدم ظهور القرآن على الشاشة." خالد عبد المنعم الرفاعي "دخول الخلاء بالجوال"، طريق الإسلام ٥ سبتمبر ٢٠١٢. <http://ar.islamway.net/fatwa/39023>

²³⁶ "اتفق الأزهر مع فتوى الداعية السعودية محمد بن صالح المنجد بوجوب الطهارة قبل لمس قرآن الهاتف الجوال أو الأجهزة الإلكترونية المشغلة للقرآن الكريم، مؤكداً في مجمل رده أنه في حالة ظهور القرآن على شاشة الهاتف الجوال ستطبق عليه نفس أحكام المصحف العادي الورقي، وفقاً لما جاء في الآية الكريمة «لا يمسه إلا المطهرون»." "الأزهر يؤيد فتوى سعودية أوجبت الطهارة قبل لمس «قرآن الجوال».. ويمنع تداول المصحف الصيني"، الشرق الأوسط ١١ أكتوبر ٢٠١١. http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=17&article=644426&issueno=12005#.U1_I3MeaF8s

Association of Scholars and Preachers at al-Azhar, sheikh Ahmad Qandil Turkiyya, confirmed this decision, saying: “A person without ablutions is not prohibited from handling a device and using it because it is not a written *mushaf* and he does not touch the verses with his hands, merely the device. However, if a Quranic verse appears on the screen this instance requires prohibition of touching, as indicated by the *aya*.”²³⁷

Al-Azhar needed to issue an official statement on the issue of electronic devices carrying the text of the Quran because the use of mobile phones has skyrocketed in Egypt over the past decade. In 2012, 92,000,000 phones were reported²³⁸ while the population of the country was only about 82,000,000. Most phones now come with a screen that allows the display of pictures and text. The number of phone applications available on the market with the text of the Quran, its recitation, commentaries, and other options is also growing very fast. Such apps are easily available and also inexpensive, quickly multiplying the number of users of the “electronic Quran.” Less accessible because of the price but also popular are electronic devices designed specifically to display the Quran. For instance, Penman Digital Quran -- apart from the Quranic text in Arabic -- contains six different voice recordings by famous reciters, translations of the Quran in eight languages, commentaries, books of hadith, a device showing the *qibla* direction for prayer, prayer times for each day of the year, the ninety nine names of Allah, a guide to *hajj* and *umra* (pilgrimage), and circumstances of the Quranic revelation. Additionally, this “digital Quran” has a “stylish slim design, built-in stereo speaker, earphone jack, and a rechargeable

²³⁷ "لا مانع من حمل الجهاز لغير الطاهر واستخدامه لأنه ليس المصحف المكتوب، فهو لا يلامس الآية بيده فهو مجرد جهاز، أما إذا ظهرت الآية القرآنية على الشاشة فإنها في هذه الحالة تأخذ حرمة المس الذي أشارت إليه الآية الكريمة." "الأزهر يؤيد فتوى سعودية أوجبت الطهارة قبل لمس «قرآن الجوال».. ويمنع تداول المصحف الصيني"، الشرق الأوسط ١١ أكتوبر ٢٠١١
http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=17&article=644426&issueno=12005#.U1_I3MeaF8s

²³⁸ ICT Indicators in Brief Arab Republic of Egypt Ministry of Communications and Information Technology
http://www.mcit.gov.eg/Upcont/Documents/Publications_1992012000_Eng%20Flyer-August2012-last.pdf

battery.” It costs about a hundred dollars and resembles a Nintendo. This and similar devices are often brought to Egypt from the Gulf and exported from China, and al-Azhar can exert only limited control over their circulation and use. Only in particularly egregious cases is the Mushaf Committee able to intervene. It did, for instance, when a Chinese company put forward a plan to produce a device that featured a recitation of the Quran illustrated by the text transliterated in the Latin script, which of course was not acceptable to the ‘*ulama*’ on the Committee.²³⁹

The *fatawa* Azhari scholars issue are authoritative but this does not mean that they constitute a law. Disagreements are possible and practitioners may question the grounds on which a pronouncement was established. The novelty of the “electronic Quran” issue creates a fertile environment for an exchange of opinions between scholars and the public alike. The readers’ comments that appeared below the article summarizing the Azhari standpoint reflect a continued lack of consensus about how to approach the Quranic text mediated by a mobile phone in spite of the official *fatawa* issued in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. “Sheikh al-Munjid, may Allah protect him, has reviewed the issued together with the sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Barak, may Allah protect him,” wrote a reader from Jordan, “deciding on permissibility of reading the Quran from the electronic *mushaf* without *tahara*. They also permitted touching the screen on the grounds that the screen constitutes a barrier. It is true what came in the *fatawa* news from al-Azhar and it is a hasty [move] on their part because [other] sheikhs pronounced it permissible and I think that an [increased] rigorism in that matter is not good. There is also a previous *fatwa* by sheikh ‘Othaymin, may Allah preserve him, that gives permission, too.”²⁴⁰ Another reader

²³⁹ "الأزهر يؤيد فتوى سعودية أوجبت الطهارة قبل لمس «قرآن الجوال».. ويمنع تداول المصحف الصيني"، الشرق الأوسط ١١ أكتوبر ٢٠١١. http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=17&article=644426&issueno=12005#.U1_I3Meaf8s.

²⁴⁰ "الشيخ المنجد حفظه الله كان يراجع الأمر مع العلامة الشيخ عبد الرحمن البراك حفظه الله وفي الأخير تقرر منهم جواز قراءة القرآن من المصحف الإلكتروني بدون طهارة وجواز مس الشاشة على اعتبار أن الشاشة هي حائل.. وإن كان صحيحا ما جاء في الخبر من الفتوى من الأزهر فهذا تسرع منهم

questioned altogether the interpretation of the *aya* “no one touches it except the pure” as a base for the ruling, pointing out that grammatically this verse does not represent an imperative form but merely a statement that needs to be considered in the context of the surrounding sentences. Since it came as a part of a rebuttal against those who claimed the Quran to be a *jinn*’s doing, it is only natural to interpret that the pure who have access to it are angels. Moreover, if non-Muslims were not allowed to touch the *mushaf*, the second caliph, ‘Amr Ibn Khattab would have never converted, as he expressed his desire to embrace Islam only after having read -- and touched -- the Quranic text preserved by his sister.

Most readers who responded with comments to the article about the Azhari *fatwa* thought that the requirement of ablutions when the Quran appears on the screen was not well justified and therefore unnecessary, although this *fatwa* does make the use of the Quranic text preserved in a mobile phone easier in comparison to a book -- unlike a *mushaf*, a phone can be brought to the bathroom. A Palestinian woman emphasized this point in her comment: “I think it should be stressed that having the Quran on my phone helps me to read while traveling without having to carry a *mushaf* with me. If I put it [a *mushaf*] in my purse it would prevent me from going to the bathroom. And if I put it in a pocket in may fall out on the floor. So I prefer the phone. I like to listen to it when I’m traveling or having my period. So the Quran on the phone, whether the sound or text, is the best.”²⁴¹ It seems that this practitioner only listens to the recording of the

لأن المشايخ أفتوا بالجواز وأعتقد أن التشدد في هذا الأمر غير جيد كما أن هناك فتوى سابقة من الشيخ العثيمين رحمه الله بالجواز أيضا. " الأزهر يؤيد فتوى سعودية أوجبت الطهارة قبل لمس «قرآن الجوال».. ويمنع تداول المصحف الصيني،" الشرق الأوسط ١١ أكتوبر ٢٠١١ http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=17&article=644426&issueno=12005#.U1_I3MeaF8s

²⁴¹ "أعتقد هنا انه فيه شيء من التشديد لاني انا موجود في جوال القرآن الكريم وهذا يساعدني على قرأته اثناء السفر دون الجوء الى حمل مصحف معي لاني اذا وضعته في شنطة اليد سوف اضطر لدخول الحمام واذا وضعته في شنطة الملابس سوف تلقى في الارض فجوال افضل شيء بنسبة لي وانا احتاج ايضا لسماعة اثناء السفر او الحيض فالقرآن المسموع او المكتوب على الجوال افضل شيء." " الأزهر يؤيد فتوى سعودية أوجبت الطهارة قبل لمس «قرآن الجوال».. ويمنع تداول المصحف الصيني،" الشرق الأوسط ١١ أكتوبر ٢٠١١ http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=17&article=644426&issueno=12005#.U1_I3MeaF8s

Quran on the phone during menstruation and she does not read the words on the screen -- an option available in most apps. Such behavior would be consistent with the *fatwa* issued by al-Azhar. But it is not uncommon among the Egyptian women to also read the Quranic text from a mobile phone during that time, following the opinion of the Jordanian reader: an electronic device constitutes a carrier and a barrier of the text at the same time. It is a safe barrier as it cannot be crossed -- one cannot directly touch the digital letters. In this case menstruation has no effect on the practical use of the Quranic text.

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that practices of *ihtram* directed towards the book, including the practices of ritual and physical cleanliness, enact the Quran. I also described the ways in which the Quran is enacted through the practices of handling a physical book and changes to the etiquette directed towards the object that emerge when the Quranic text becomes mediated through digital devices rather than a book. I think it is important, then, to ask what happens to the Quran when its enactments start quite suddenly differing from the ones carried out by the previous generations of practitioners? Annemarie Mol suggests that when we foreground the practices surrounding things we are able to track how those things come into being. If the practices differ, new things appear and the realities are multiplied. Instead of a passive thing in the middle seen from multiple perspectives we are faced with new things constantly coming into being. Yet the multiple objects do not fall apart, but as she puts it, they “tend to hang together somehow.” For Muslim practitioners the Quran in a phone that can be touched without ablutions is not suddenly different from the Quran in a *mushaf* that cannot. This happens because practices that have ability to create new realities are always entangled with practices that stabilize things, give them a kind of inertia, and make them “hang together.” The practices that enact the Quran can turn it into something else as much as they have the power to

sustain it.

CONCLUSION

I started this story of an object that mediates the Quran with an image of a printing press arriving in Egypt with Napoleon Bonaparte and his savants. This image encapsulates the ideas of modernity and progress that soon permeated many aspects of Egyptian life and also affected the history of Muslim scripture. While contributing to this history, I track various actors: fonts, scholars, mobile phones, publishers, spelling, the blind, and of course, the *mushaf* itself, mapping out circuits of their agency and work. None of these actors had total control over these events and each of them contributed in a unique way to this particular configuration of people and objects, at the center of which is the *mushaf*.

This project had three goals. First, most general, was to draw attention to the way in which objects and technology make us do things. If publishers have difficulties printing the Quran because new technology cannot accommodate the correct spelling, we can't *only* blame the situation on designers and engineers. If the same words written on a page and displayed on the screen of a mobile phone do not evoke the same responses, we have to admit that this difference is not *just* a matter of "changing tradition" or "modernization." Digitized Quranic texts provisionally contained in electronic devices mediate the Quranic message in new ways. They evoke different expectations and cause different reactions, they appeal to different demographic groups and occupy different social spaces, ultimately instigating the production of new knowledge. As Webb Keane points out, our reactions to objects do not depend entirely on our dispositions, knowledge, emotions, and so on. We enter into relationships with objects and

our actions are often modified, limited, encouraged, or thwarted by their material qualities.²⁴²

Therefore, objects do not only stand for something else -- an idea, a belief, a desire -- they also provoke action. The *Mushaf* Committee came into being precisely because there was a need to make sure that a mechanically reproduced *mushaf* does not contain orthographic mistakes.

Egyptian parliament members spent many hours of their working time meeting with publishers and Azhari officials, discussing the circumstances of *mushaf*'s production. Electronic *masahif* have brought rapid changes in the understanding and application of traditional etiquette towards the Quranic book. These events, of course, may be explained in terms of human action shaped by cognitive processes and performed upon material objects. But seeing them as a result of interactions between things and people opens up a new arena for understanding the politics of objects and highlights still barely explored forms of human/non-human becoming.

The second goal, also general, was to contribute to a corpus of anthropological literature on religion that treats religious practice as meaning-making necessarily entangled with materiality. The focus on the material comes from the fact that, as Webb Keane again reminds us, "religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms. It is in that materiality that they are part of experience and provoke responses, that they have public lives and enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences."²⁴³ Attending to materiality and to practices involving things allows us to trace processes through which meaning is constructed. As a result, we need not separate religion from the domain of power, a problematic tendency widespread in many disciplines against which Talal Asad warned us some twenty years ago

²⁴² Webb Keane, "On the Materiality of Religion," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 4, no 2 (2008): 230 - 231.

²⁴³ Keane Webb, "The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no.1 (2008): 124.

already.

Finally, there was an unoccupied niche in the anthropology of Islam created by an historically conditioned lack of interest in the practices surrounding material copies of the Quranic text, and I wanted to explore this. Unlike other scriptures (the Torah, the Bible, some Buddhist or Hindu texts) whose material forms and effects have recently received some attention, especially by the scholars associated with the Iconic Books project at Syracuse University, the *mushaf*, not only the history of its production but also its use, has been overlooked. My dissertation aimed to fill this niche by bringing to scholars' attention the multitude of religious, political, and economic spheres in which *masahif* operate in Egypt. I should add that these spheres are never purely religious, economic, or political. The difficulty of compartmentalizing the reality of which I was writing was one of its main characteristics. Cautioned by Latour to avoid explaining what I encountered by the presence of enigmatic social forces, I stuck to the tangible book, its circulation and use, and the debates generated by its physical form. These realms would have otherwise been left unnoticed had I not chosen this peculiar method of materializing them through the materiality of the *mushaf* itself.

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