

The Experience of the Recited Qur'an**LAUREN E. OSBORNE**

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In this thought piece, I use the recited Qur'an as a case study for asking what it may mean to feel sound—and more specifically, “religious sound,” or sound in a religious context. A range of scholars, including myself, have asked related questions about what the recited Qur'an sounds like, and why it may sound the way(s) it does.¹ Here I consider the sound of the Qur'an on the level of experience or nondiscursive meaning, asking what the recited Qur'an feels like.

As I sketch the beginnings of an answer, I bring Qur'an recitation into conversation with performance theory and theories of emotion and affect, thereby complicating the often assumed dichotomy between interior and exterior on the level of emotional experience and the self. My sources include historical/aesthetic studies of the Qur'an and my interviews with reciters, which I consider in light of the theoretical background described above, recent works on the role of emotion in ritual in Islam, and recent works on listening cultures and similar studies making up the interdisciplinary field of sensory studies. In doing so, I argue that theories of performance that emphasize process are helpful not only in considering the wide range of possibilities for how Qur'anic recitation may occur, but also in their broad conceptualizations of multiple layers of context and, most importantly, their incorporation of the role of the listener and listening cultures. I consider recitation an “emergent phenomenon” involving collaboration between performer and audience. Thinking about the recited Qur'an in this way, I examine the “how” of Qur'an recitation in order to draw out a sense of process and the multiplicity of determining factors.²

With this framing of the subject, a number of questions arise. What constitutes the context of recitation? What is the occasion? Are we concerned, for example, with a single individual reciting in salat (prayer), a group of students attending recitation classes at their community mosque, or a reciter performing a passage before a varied audience at an interfaith event or conference? Who is the listener (if there is one)? What are the contextual factors that may contribute to the actual act or moment of reciting (or listening)? What are the current attitudes and discourses surrounding the topic of the recited Qur'an?³ And what is the role of recordings? What about the shopkeeper who plays a CD of a recitation in his or her shop, or the individual who finds recordings online?

One way I have tried to situate the recited Qur'an through interviews is by asking reciters and listeners whether they have a preferred sura or passage for reciting or listening. The nature of the responses varies widely. In my interview with one North America based reciter named Fatima, she pointed out that she recites for a variety of different occasions. In identifying her preferred sura for recitation, she cites the various factors that drive her reasoning. One of these is content: the message of mercy in *sūrat al-rahmān*, for example. Another is style: Fatima says she prefers shorter verses. She cites *sūrat al-mu'minūn* as one sura with short verses that she enjoys to recite, explaining:

When the sura has short verses it is easier to recite. You recite one verse, take a break and take a breath, and recite the next verse; it is just easier to recite . . . Usually people who can hold their breath for a long time, like Husary or Minshawi, can recite the whole verse—even if it is two or three lines—without a break, which is really hard.

In addition to preferences related to content, Fatima cites considerations of the body (breath control) and techniques of reciting (decisions about pauses).

‘Abd Allah, another reciter in North America, describes a number of factors that may impact choice of passage or sura for performance. These factors often depend on relations between the text’s discursive content and occasion or context, particularly the audience likely to be in attendance.

There are some passages in the Qur’an that are very legal—[for example,] sections that deal with inheritance laws . . . You’ll rarely find that a *qāri*’ [reciter] is reciting that at a public performance. And even if you go to the mosque for prayer, it is rare that somebody recites a passage like that, whereas if somebody reads from *sūrat al-rahmān*, it resonates with people; it calms people down after a long day of work.

Later in the interview, he states this point somewhat differently, suggesting more clearly that it is the subject matter of *sūrat al-rahmān* that makes it a likely choice for recitation:

If a reciter is picking something to recite, they’re not going to pick a random section from *sūrat al-nisā*’ dealing with inheritance laws, they’re going to pick a section like the end of *furqān* that has general inspirational guidance, or a section from *sūrat al-rahmān* that celebrates the mercy and the bounties of God—things like that.

‘Abd Allah frames the reciter’s choice of subject matter in relation to an audience’s preference for a certain theme or topic in the text; he also points to the opposite—material from which a reciter might shy away because of the nature of the occasion or expected audience. He describes a type of event typical of the North American context, where a reciter may be asked to perform before a primarily non-Muslim audience—an interfaith event, or one driven by a mosque’s or Muslim community’s public outreach to non-Muslims: “there are sections in the Qur’an that a lay person might find problematic without additional context, information, or so on, and especially in reciting to a non-Muslim audience you’re a little more aware of that.” Essentially, a reciter is unlikely to choose a passage that may offend a non-Muslim audience, or that such an audience would find problematic. And by contrast, a passage on God’s punishment of unbelievers, for example, would not be appropriate for a Muslim audience: “[take, for example,] a whole chapter dealing with punishment for unbelievers. It is unlikely that in a Qur’an recitation gathering that’s going to be recited . . . It’s not of utmost relevance to that context.” As ‘Abd Allah and Fatima clearly highlight in these examples, a reciter’s choice of passage is heavily influenced by his understanding of the context and occasion as well as the likely audience.

In addition, ‘Abd Allah points to larger social conventions and the role of listening cultures in impacting an individual’s choices for both reciting and listening. These factors work alongside expectations and preferences regarding subject matter, but are not always directly in conversation with the words of the text. For example, he mentions that there are verses from *sūrat al-rūm* that are often recited at weddings; these verses are

a common choice because they mention that God created spouses (*azwāj*) from among humanity as a sign (*min āyātihī*).⁴

But as ʿAbd Allah indicates, although this verse, when taken by itself or within the context of surrounding verses, is appropriate material for a wedding, when read within the context of *sūrat al-rīm* it may seem less so. The sura as a whole is understood as addressing the rise and fall of empires in human history, such as the rise of the Persians at the expense of the Byzantines,⁵ in relation to God’s ordering of time and the universe⁶—hardly inspirational material for a wedding. Nevertheless, verse 30:21—referencing God’s creation of spouses (*azwāj*)—is commonly read on the occasion of marriage. The verse on its own is understood to be about an appropriate subject matter; and when it is recited at weddings time and again, it comes to be recited at more and more weddings.

The issue of preferences in recitation and listening is complex, and the way in which the preferences of listeners come up in interviews bears consideration in light of the conceptions of performance discussed earlier and more recent research on listening cultures. For example, when asked about her favorite reciters, Fatima expresses a preference for older generations of Egyptian reciters:

I listen to Husary . . . and also Minshawi . . . They repeat a lot. Their recitations are really strong and clear. There are a few others, a lot of them recite like al-ʿAfasī. He recites in a good way . . . but I prefer the old school better than the new school . . . They recite slowly. Their pronunciation of the letters is more clear; they don’t make any mistakes. [As for] the new ones, lots of them recite fast, or they have their own records, which, for me, disturbs the real roots. I prefer the classic ones . . . And of course the voice—their voice tones are nice. You know in reciting the Qur’an, it’s not just the rules, it’s also how beautiful the voice is . . . it’s personal, you know? Some people prefer one thing over others? The same thing for some reciters.

Here Fatima cites a number of factors that drive her preferences as a listener. She puts strong emphasis on clarity, particularly through repetition.⁷ She also expresses the view that the high degree of commercialization typical of al-ʿAfasī and other more modern reciters is at odds with what she views as the authenticity (“the real roots,” as she puts it) of the recited Qur’an. Moreover, Fatima mentions the beauty of the voice, but adds that preferences regarding beauty are personal. While it may be true that perceptions of beauty and vocal quality are in part personal, it is worth noting that the reciters she prefers—Husary and Minshawi—are not exactly uncommon choices. Their popularity attests to the quality of their recitations, though other social and historical factors are at play as well, and they are worth addressing. In considering Qur’an recitation, a conceptualization of performance that includes the listener is useful. It signals the very important point that there is not a straightforward dichotomy between performer and audience/listener, or sender and recipient. Performance, when understood broadly and in the way that anthropologist and folklorist Richard Bauman proposes, does not always consist of actions performed before passive spectators or listeners.⁸ Indeed, the ways in which people listen to and understand material are historically and culturally contingent. As noted earlier, while Fatima does cite personal preferences regarding vocal quality as a driving factor in her own listening choices, the reciters and suras she mentions are common choices at the present moment.

An individual’s listening preferences may also be shaped by their own personal history in terms of their exposure to reciters, as Abd ʿAllah states in response to a question about favorite passages or reciters for listening:

When I was small, I used to listen to a cassette of this certain section and now [when I hear it] I always like it. Sometimes there's not that much thought put into it, but it's just, you heard a good recitation of it a long time ago. Like *sūrat yūsuf* for example—for a long time I had a CD of Shaykh Mutawalli reciting [that sura] and I just like it because of that. It's just there with me that I used to listen to it a lot. *Sūrat al-ḥujarāt*, for example—that's a favorite for me in terms of its meaning, but also when I was a kid we had a cassette and it was a nice recitation.

One point that emerges from these examples is that there is not one way in which people, whether reciters or listeners, engage. The quotations from my interviews have highlighted a number of possibilities—a small Qur'an recitation group, a mosque in prayer, a community event such as a wedding, a public event that may involve individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds (e.g., an interfaith or community-outreach event meant to present the Islamic tradition and community to those outside of it), or recordings on a variety of media (cassettes, CDs, or online). Within this range of possible encounters with the recited Qur'an, there is a complex network of interrelated factors at work in determining what the performance may sound and look like. Ultimately, an understanding of this network of factors, and how each may determine the shape of recitation, provides a fuller picture of the possibilities for contextual impact on the moment of recitation.

So while recitation itself is in some ways a highly structured religious ritual, with precise rules dictating how the text must be pronounced and expectations for purity and etiquette on the part of both reciters and listeners, many of the contextual factors (including some considered in this essay) are more historically and socially contingent than is often recognized. A detailed consideration of listeners and listening cultures of the recited Qur'an reveals that there is not a single archetype of the listener of the Qur'an; nor is there a single archetype of listening practice and listener-reciter dynamics or of recitation style. Rather, individuals listen from and with reference to their particular circumstances—personal, cultural, historical, and contextual (in terms of the occasion of listening or reciting). By understanding the recited Qur'an as a performance contextually situated on a variety of levels, we may include the listener and listening cultures, rather than focusing solely on the reciter and the moment of the recitation (be it live or recorded).

Prior to concluding, it is worth considering the absence from this discussion of emotion as traditionally understood on an “interior” or “personal” level. Traditional theories of emotion in religious ritual have seen ritual as a space for “conventional” rather than “genuine” emotion, wherein emotion is channeled through and/or confined strictly to the ritual context, defined quite narrowly.⁹ In her article, “Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of ‘*ṣalāt*,’” Saba Mahmood, speaking specifically about Cairene women's participation in *salat* (prayer) and their understanding of the practice as inseparable from daily life, argues that:

The conscious process by which the mosque participants induced sentiments and desires in themselves, in accordance with a moral-ethical program, simultaneously problematizes the “naturalness” of emotions as well as the “conventionality” of ritual action, calling into question any *a priori* distinction between formal (conventional) behavior and spontaneous (intentional) conduct.¹⁰

Similarly, my discussion of Qur'an recitation may serve to counter the misconception that, in ritual, emotion is confined to the ritual space and time. This is borne out not only

by the diversity of listening cultures and contexts associated with the recited Qur'an, but also by the range of broader influences shaping recitation for both reciters and listeners. So while Fatima, for example, framed some of her preferences as personal, they are also best understood within the broader context of culture and history.

NOTES

¹Frederick M. Denny, "The Adab of Qur'an Recitation: Text and Context," in *International Congress for the Study of the Qur'an: Australian National University, Canberra, 8–13 May 1980*, ed. Anthony H. Johns (Canberra City, Australia: South Asia Centre, Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1981), 143–60; Frederick M. Denny, "Qur'an Recitation: A Tradition of Oral Performance and Transmission," *Oral Tradition* 4 (1989): 5–26; Michael Frishkopf, "Mediated Qur'anic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt," in *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 75–114; Anna M. Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1985); Lauren E. Osborne, "From Text to Sound to Perception: Modes and Relationships of Meaning in the Recited Qur'an" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2014); Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010).

²Roger Abrahams, "The Theoretical Boundaries of Performance," in *Proceedings of a Symposium on Form in Performance: Hard-Core Ethnography*, ed. Marcia Herndon and Roger Brunyate (Austin, Tex.: Office of the College of Fine Arts, University of Texas, 1975), 18.

³I considered this question with respect to the use of pitch and melody in "From Text to Sound to Perception: Modes and Relationships of Meaning in the Recited Qur'an," chap. 5.

⁴Q 30:21.

⁵The second verse of the sura is usually understood as referring to these events when it says *ghulibati al-rūm* (Rome was defeated).

⁶Abd Allah Yusuf 'Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 10th ed. (Beltsville, Md.: Amana Publications, 2001), 1006–7.

⁷Clarity of pronunciation and repetition of phrases is typical of the older Egyptian reciters in the *murattal* style, such as Husary; Minshawi also performed in the *murattal* style, but he is known for melodically florid *mujawwad*-style recitation.

⁸Richard Bauman, "The Theoretical Boundaries of Performance," in *Proceedings of a Symposium on Form in Performance*, 28–44.

⁹Saba Mahmood, "Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of 'Ṣalāt,'" *American Ethnologist* 28 (2001): 827–28; Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, Symbol, Myth, and Ritual Series* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977).

¹⁰Mahmood, "Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual," 828.