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Poverty or richness?

Some ideas about the generation of Islamic texts revisited

by *Jan Just Witkam**

Imagine the scene. Respectable scholars organizing a mourning ceremony, not for the demise of a benefactor, nor for a deceased colleague but for the end of science itself. One luminary in his field after the other denouncing the recent development in the world of learning. They all agree that the news they have just received is absolutely horrifying. Of course they knew it was coming, since times are bad, yet when it came, the news still took them by surprise, and it made them feel sad ... Scholarship as they knew it had come to an end, and collective mourning is indeed appropriate.

If one would indeed imagine such a scene, what would one think? We know, of course, that academic and scholarly life is being threatened from many sides and always has been. A managerial class of semi-alphabets is taking over institutions of learning and respectable scholars are gradually being marginalized. Especially when their speciality is not recognized as of immediate importance or utility to society, they can be simply ignored. Yet these managers cannot do without them, and when scientific accomplishments must be shown, a few scholars are paraded in front of a duly impressed audience. The scholar who is unable to quickly explain to the new masters why his discipline is important at all, is ridiculed behind his back. He is treated with contempt ('senile old fool'), and his days are numbered.

But true as it may be for modern academia, the scene which I have just described is not about that. Maybe there were other reasons for mourning? Would this mourning ceremony have been staged because of inappropriate academic salaries? Can professors nowadays not do their work because of financial strains? Do they have to take second or even third jobs in their spare time? Driving taxis, writing blurbs for publishers, doing journalism under pseudonym, performing translation jobs, or selling good results in examinations, not to mention even more dubious occupations? Or are they perhaps prevented from doing their academic work because these managers continuously want to receive reports,

plans and memo's? It is all possible, and the reader may have recognized the scene as resulting from what is happening today.¹

Yet I was giving an evocation of a mourning ceremony held almost one thousand years ago. It took place in Transoxania (largely in present-day Uzbekistan). The names of its main centres, Bukhārā and Samarqand, are well known, then as well as now. The names of other centres of learning: Khīwa (where Ibn Sina took refuge), or Ferghāna (known for its astronomical expertise) ring a bell.

Transoxania, that faraway land beyond the River Oxus, the Amū Daryā, in Arabic called *Mā warā' al-nahr*, 'the land beyond the river', not so distant from the gates that protect civilization from the unspeakable evil of Gog and Magog, yet highly civilized itself. Nowadays it is, unfortunately, more of a backwater and a chain of police states, but before the Mongol and Tatar invasions it was a region of enormous scholarly accomplishments, a place where scholars were honoured. But what, for God's sake, had been going on to make science being buried and mourned for?

On Saturday 22 September 1067, two years after its foundation in Baghdad, was the official opening of the famous *al-Madrasa al-Nizāmiyya*, the Nizamiyya Academy, so-called after its founder the celebrated and all-powerful vizir of the Seljuq Sultans, Nizām al-Mulk (1018-1092).² The school was not, contrary to popular belief, the first institution of its kind, but its grandiose scope made it certainly something remarkable and as yet unheard of. The novelty, according to some Muslim authors, was the fact that the students, who were admitted to the Academy, were given boarding and received a fellowship, so that they could devote themselves to scholarly activities without having to worry about their daily material needs. The professors received handsome salaries as well. The sources mention all sorts of payment in cash and kind. This was nothing new either. Teachers had been rewarded for their teaching before, either directly by their students or through their *waqf*, the pious foundation on which they subsisted. The institutionalisation of education, of which the *madrasa* is the result, brought about the payment of regular salaries. This was not without controversy, at least for a while, but it was not uncommon either. So when the news of well-paid professorships and the leisurely fellowships for students in the newly opened Nizamiyya Academy in Baghdad became known in the outer provinces of the Islamic Empire, in Transoxania and other places, this

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¹ Any likeness to existing situations is, of course, purely coincidental.

² See J. Pedersen & G. Makdisi, art. 'Madrasa. I. The institution in the Arabic, Persian and Turkish lands', in *El*², vol. 5 (1986), pp. 1123-1134.

understandably caused an uproar. Envy is only human. But was it actually permitted, since there were many *hadith* telling that no salary should be taken for the transmission of knowledge? Only if the teacher's services remained unpaid it could be assumed that he had no ulterior motives, and only then one could be sure that he was the best person to teach.

A late-16th-century historian of Mecca, Quṭb al-Dīn al-Nahrawālī,³ summarizes the feeling:

'It is related that the first *madrasa* in the world was founded in Baghdad in the year 457 (1065). When the learned men of the Land beyond the River heard of this, they instituted a day of mourning for knowledge, and lamented over the decay of honour and science. Asked why they did this, they answered: Knowledge is a noble and excellent queen who can only be wooed by noble and excellent sons for her native nobility, and by reason of the natural affinity of these souls to her. Now, however, a reward has been set up and vulgar souls will seek her and use her for personal gain. So knowledge will be degraded by the vulgarity of these people without their being raised by her nobility ...'⁴

Other authors have related the same story, in different words and different contexts, but the essence is the same: if knowledge is paid for, it will attract all sorts of characters who come for the money and whose interest in science is only secondary. But there is no text without context and it would be interesting to look for a context of this anecdote as well. For the mourning of science in Transoxania, almost thousand years ago I can present here two Islamic contexts and one from the West.

In the early-14th-century encyclopaedia by the Egyptian intellectual Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 1348) the anecdote of mourning in Transoxania is quoted within the context of a discussion on the virtue of science and of scholars.⁵ He writes in the introduction of his work on the division of the sciences: 'whoever learns a science in order to use it as a profession, is not a scholar, but someone who only has the

³ *al-I'lām bi-A'lām Bayt Allāh al-Ḥarām*, by Quṭb al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī b. Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Qāḍī Khān Maḥmūd al-Nahrawālī al-Makkī (d. 990/1582), GAL G II, 382, who completed the work on 7 Rabi' I 985. There exist many manuscripts of this work, and also several printed edition. The Arabic quotation can be found on p. 81 in the edition Cairo 1303 (1886).

⁴ Translation loosely quoted from C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the latter part of the 19th century*. Translated by J.H. Monahan. Leiden/London 1931, p. 171.

⁵ The account by al-Nahrawālī can be read in *Irshād al-Qāṣid ilā Asnā al-Maqāṣid*, by Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 749/1348; GAL G II, 137). See J.J. Witkam, *De Egyptische arts Ibn al-Akfānī* (Leiden 1989), Arabic text, p. 15, §§ 85-96.

appearance of a scholar'.⁶ The degradation which is the result of progressing professionalism in science can best be seen – so says this Cairene scholar – in the medical sciences, where Jewish doctors have occupied themselves with it. They have thereby defiled the noble medical science without having attained some of its nobility for themselves. One suspects a case of medical competition and professional envy here. The origin of the Transoxanian anecdote must have been older than that, as it is only mentioned here in passing, not for its own sake.

The other Islamic context of the anecdote is the work from which we just quoted the relevant passage. Quṭb al-Dīn al-Nahrawālī was a late 16th-century Meccan historian and for some time he was a professor in the *madrassa* founded by the Ottoman Sulṭān Sulaymān the Magnificent in Mecca in 1565. He writes about the history of Mecca as a reflection of the acts of the great rulers of Muslim empires who influenced Mecca's history. In the tradition of Arabic historiography this is not exceptional. The History of Baghdad by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 1071) and the History of Damascus by Ibn 'Asākir (d. 1176), to name but two of many more examples, are works which are structured around the biographies of the men and women who lived in these cities. And writing about sultans, kings, princes and viziers is not exceptional either, since these dignitaries ultimately have to pay the historian for his effort. Not for nothing Quṭb al-Dīn al-Nahrawālī dedicated his personalized history of Mecca to the Ottoman Sultan Murad III (reigned 1574-1595).

With al-Nahrawālī the context of the Transoxanian mourning ceremony is later than the foundation of the Nizamiyya Academy, and slightly different. Although he mentions paid science in the Nizamiyya Academy as its direct cause, he in fact comes up with the anecdote in his paragraph about the achievements of the Abbasid caliph al-Mustanshir billāh (reigned 1226-1242), who was known to have respected scholars and theologians, and who built mosques, hospices and schools. The Mustanshiriyya Academy in Baghdad was beyond comparison in the world of Islam.⁷ Its architecture, its supporting foundations, its library, the number of its professors, their remuneration, etc., all these details were outstanding and unheard of. Al-Nahrawālī mentions the Transoxanian affair as a regrettable moment in the history of science, but now, so he writes with the Mustanshiriyya Academy in mind, science is booming and blooming again, as it was in the era of that great patron of the arts and sciences, the vizir Niẓām al-Mulk. The Transoxanian mourning anecdote is in fact used by al-Nahrawālī as a rhetorical

⁶ *Irshād al-Qāṣid*, Arabic text, p. 15, § 84.

⁷ See Hisham Nashabe, *Muslim educational institutions*, ??, ??, pp. 139-163. Presently the location of the Mustanshiriyya school is an archeological site. There is still an academic institution going by that name in Baghdad. but that was only recently established (1963).

means in order to create a contrast between the splendid scholarly life sponsored by rulers on the one hand, and the narrow-mindedness of old-fashioned, and often envious, scholars who could not keep in pace with the progress of their times, and who were unable to sufficiently grasp the advantages of royal patronage.

Three hundred years after al-Nahrawālī's report of the Transoxanian affair is quoted again, but now it is used by a Western scholar in an entirely different context. The author responsible for this is the renowned scholar of Islam, the author of a study of Mecca, written on the basis of first hand observation, the Dutch Orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936). In 1884 he had gone to Jeddah, converted to Islam and stayed from the end of February till the beginning of August 1885 in Mecca. His visit to Mecca fits in a series of visits by Christians to Mecca, who for many different reasons were fascinated by the forbidden city.⁸ Snouck Hurgronje differed from earlier and later Christian explorers of Mecca in two important aspects: his profound knowledge of Islam and his intention to describe Mecca and its inhabitants *outside* the pilgrimage season. Yet he is a child of his time and uses the discourse of late-19th-century Orientalism, which conceded that Islamic civilisation a long time ago may have had its heyday, but which stated that the glorious past is at its end. Turkey had by then become Europe's sick man and Islam was usually associated with the ailing Ottoman empire.

Snouck Hurgronje's discussion on the pursuit of knowledge in Mecca is an example of this discourse. To Snouck Hurgronje, the end of the creative period of Islamic theology and philosophy coincides with the institutionalisation of knowledge. The Transoxanian anecdote illustrates this, if it is taken at face value. Snouck Hurgronje took the anecdote from Nahrawālī's work, but quoted it entirely out of its original context. In his short history of Islamic science he mentioned a number of instances of stagnation in the intellectual development in Islam. For Islamic law, the closing of the gate of independent judgment, the *bāb al-ijtihād*, is such an instance. The creation of a mutually equal position for the four schools of law was seen by him as a union which 'has really stopped all enquiry', and which 'coincides in point of time with the political decay of Islam'.⁹ He meant to say that the Muslim has to unreservedly accept the findings of the last independent thinkers of each *madhhab*, who lived many centuries ago, but could not anymore take up a position of independence of thinking himself. When the student has studied his way through the works of the authorities of his school, all he is left with is the acceptance of their conclusions, and his

⁸ See for a handy survey of those Christians who left us an account of their visits to Mecca: Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*. London 1909.

⁹ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the latter part of the 19th century*, p. 170.

knowledge is primarily concerned with the differences of opinion between these authorities. What they have agreed about, however, he has also to agree with. Yet another instance of stagnation in intellectual life, if one follows this discourse, can be seen in the declaration of equality between the seven different systems of readings of the *Qur'ān*. And Snouck Hurgronje continues with the words: 'the spirit of research would have died out, had it not been artificially kept alive'.¹⁰ This artificial revivification of Islamic science came about, in Snouck Hurgronje's view, through the foundation of academies and it serves to show that independent research in Islam had in fact come to an end with the institutionalization of learning.

It depends on how one defines science and learning, if one wishes to consider the founding of academies as the very moment of extinction of science. At best it sounds as a provocative paradox. Snouck Hurgronje's opinion was not entirely based on Orientalist bias, however. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) in his survey of the sciences, holds opinions on the intellectual requirements necessary for the pursuit of the traditional sciences (*al-'ulūm al-naqliyya*), which are not so altogether different:

'... and a traditional kind [of science] that he learns from those who invented it.'

'[...] All of them depend upon information based on the authority of the given religious law. There is no place for the intellect in them, save that the intellect may be used in connection with them to relate problems of detail with basic principles.'¹¹

Ibn Khaldūn then continues to explain how the *Qur'ān* and the *sunna* are the two material sources for Islamic law. The Muslim is obliged to know the legal obligations placed by God upon him, and for this he needs a whole score of other sciences, both Qur'ānic and other. From this scholarly imperative all sorts of auxiliary sciences are derived.

But how different, and how much more attractive, is Ibn Khaldūn's description of the intellectual sciences. These are the sciences, he says, which are 'natural to man and to which he is guided by his own ability to think'. And he says: [these sciences] 'are the ones with which man can become acquainted through the very nature of his ability to think'. In such sciences the instruments are 'speculation and research'.¹² Ibn Khaldūn is not an agnostic scholar, yet remarks as the ones

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹¹ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddima. An introduction to history*. Translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal. London 1958, vol. 2, p. 436.

¹² Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddima*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal, vol. 2, p. 436.

just quoted may have contributed to his popularity in the West. Reasoning, according to him, always remains within the limits of the faith, and intellectual science is not the same as free, unshackled science. Ultimately intellectual sciences serve as another trajectory to the knowledge of what is correct and what is wrong. And the *Qur'ān* is the ultimate logic in this. Hence also the idea that all auxiliary sciences were developed in order to better know the rules contained in the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth*.

The Cairene intellectual Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 1348) with his work on the division of the sciences exerted a considerable influence on later authors, whereas he himself was firmly standing in the philosophical tradition set by Ibn Sīnā. Large parts of his encyclopedic work, the *Irshād al-Qāsid*, were incorporated in later encyclopaedias, usually without reference to the origin. Three important instances may be mentioned in this connection: the handbook for the chancellor *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā* by al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418), the encyclopaedic compilation *Miftāḥ al-Sa'āda* by Ṭāshköprüzāda (d. 1561), and through the latter work, that gigantic bibliography *Kaṣḥf al-Zunūn* compiled by Ḥāğğī Khalīfa (d. 1658).¹³ Such silent incorporation of large quotes from an early work into later compilations is one important instance of the generation of Islamic texts. The permutation of textual elements from many periods into later works seems a process which is as important for the taxonomy of Islamic texts as the production of commentaries and related texts.

Some Islamic authors have produced two, three or even more versions of one and the same work. A common feature is that produced a very short and a very extensive version, and one which takes a middle position between the two extremes, all of basically the same work, but destined to different types of readership. A current definition says that short books (*mukhtaṣar*) are those, whose wording is shorter than their meaning. Extensive books (*mabsūt*) are the opposite: their meaning is shorter than their wording. Those books that take the middle position (*mutawassit*) have a perfect balance between wording and content.¹⁴ Contrary to what one would think, the short books are meant for the

¹³ See for the details of these derivations J.J. Witkam, *De Egyptische arts Ibn al-Akfānī*, pp. 252-278. Ibn al-Akfānī's ideas are used here as they represent common ideas about science and scholarship in classical Islam. His work on the division of the sciences has a pivotal position, as he sums up the ideas of his famous predecessors and has become an important source for later generations of encyclopaedists and bibliographers.

¹⁴ Other terms, sometimes derived from the same stem, are used: *ṣaghīr*, *wağīz*, for the short works, *basīṭ*, *mutawwal* or *kabīr* for the extensive books, *wasīṭ* for the middle category. The division in three is sometimes purely theoretical. Of the well-known magical handbook by al-Būnī (d. 622/1225, *GAL G I*, p. 497), the *Shams al-Ma'ārif wa-Laṭā'if al-'Awārif*, *kubrā* and *ṣuğhrā* versions are known to exist in printed editions (the

specialist, not primarily for the beginner. They are meant to be introductions to a field of study. Such short books are meant to be a help to memory, and they treat the most important issues of a certain science, nothing more. Only the sharp-witted beginner can profit of these very short surveys of an entire field. The extensive books are often repetitive in their argument and therefore these make easy reading to a wider public. The third category, those that take the middle position between the two extremes, have a perfect balance between word and meaning. They are advantageous in both respects, and their use is universal. The paradigm is exemplified in the popular saying that the best of things are the middle ones.¹⁵

The personality of the author is another important element in this. Those authors who combine mastership, exercise, experience, intuition and a quick memory, are the best. Their works have come into being with the help of their powerful perspicacity, the sharpness of their thinking and the solidity of their opinions. They are the product of the author's ability of precise wording and appropriate formulating. Such books are indispensable. But not everybody is a genius. If one has a sharp wit and is able to express his opinions well, and if one finds intrinsically good books which, however, lack quality of wording, then one may search for the pearls in such compilations, and make a beautiful new string out of them.¹⁶ Not for nothing titles such as *al-Durr al-Nazīm* or *Nazm al-Durr* and the like are so popular.

In the process of string making old elements are recycled into new literary or scholarly products. The pearl stringer's name usually becomes that of the author of the new composition. Although in classical Muslim scholarship ideas about plagiarism are different from the strict rules of present-day academia, dissecting and stealing the work of someone else was never considered with great respect. Muslims scholars were in constant competition with one another and could not afford to give an opponent an easy opportunity to dispute their claims to fame, or livelihood for that matter.

manuscript tradition of the work is less equivocal). This would postulate the existence of a *wuṣṭā* version as well, but that has never been attested. See al-Būnī, *Shams al-Ma'ārif al-Ṣuḡhrā al-ma'rūf bi-Shams al-Ma'ārif wa-Laṭā'if al-'Awārif al-Ṣuḡhrā* in the edition by Abū Salāma al-Farīdī al-Falakī. Al-Dār al-Bayḍā (Maktabat al-Waḥda al-'Arabiyya) 1424/2003. The editor states that he never has come across a manuscript of the middle version (p. 5), but that it exists is beyond doubt. In my view this can only be said if one actually has a copy at hand. See also my essay 'Looking in the Sun. Remarks on the Egyptian magician al-Būnī and his work' in the Festschrift Remke Kruk, Leiden (publication by Brill's foreseen for 2007).

¹⁵ خير الأثياء أوساطها

¹⁶ So far Ibn al-Akfānī, *Irshād al-Qāṣid*, ed. J.J. Witkam, Arabic text, p. 19, §§ 179-190.

The idea, that there are texts which need further elucidation was widespread in classical scholarship. It has to do with the popular idea of the regression of knowledge. This idea can be summarized as follows: The contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad were more knowledgeable about the meaning of certain Qur'ānic words or rare expressions in *Ḥadīth* than the next generation, and so on and so forth. The more generations have passed, the more the descendants are in need of further explanation and elaboration of the old texts. The best example of this can be seen in the exegesis of the *Qur'ān*.¹⁷ It requires many sciences, such as lexicography, syntax, morphology, rhetoric and the knowledge of the Qur'ānic readings. In addition one should be aware of the history of the text: the circumstances of revelation, the knowledge of the abrogating verse, the knowledge about other revealed religions. The scholar specializing on the explanation of the *Qur'ān* can work in many different areas. He may be interested in the stories in the *Qur'ān* (as al-Tha'labī), in the linguistic aspects of the Qur'ānic language (as Ibn 'Aṭīyya), in the derivation of rules of law (as Ibn Faras), or in rhetoric in the *Qur'ān* (as al-Zaḡḡāḡ). As a modern definition of what is the essence of philology Ibn al-Akfānī's words are still appropriate.

He continues to explain: Usually when someone writes a book he will do that in such a way that it may be understood without further ado. However, even for books written by mortal authors there are important reasons for the compilation of commentaries. The classical scholar distinguished several types of authorship. Sometimes there is a gap between the elevated position of the author and the succinctness of his way of writing. This can make the understanding of his text difficult. The author himself, or others, may deem it necessary to write a commentary.

Another consideration can be the fact that an author has skipped a few arguments which he assumes to be well-known by his readers, but which they are not. This makes the arrangement of the argument disorderly. In such cases the commentator has to supply the missing arguments and to bring back order in the text.

Yet another consideration for compiling commentaries is that words may have a variety of meanings. A meaning can be very straightforward but may also be very subtle. Some texts need further elucidation, e.g. by means of metaphors.

The commentator must be aware of the purpose and preferences of the author of the original text, and he should, of course, point at the author's mistakes.

With the explanation of the *Qur'ān* all these considerations are valid and the need of such information is great. The *Qur'ān* is not an 'ordinary' book. It was sent down in the Arabic language, in the era of the most eloquent Arabs, the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad. They knew the meaning of the words

¹⁷ Ibn al-Akfānī on *tafsīr*, in *Irshād al-Qāṣid*, Arabic text, pp. 42-43, §§ 546-565.

and knew how to derive the rules of Islamic Law from the holy text. After thorough study they could not only understand the hidden meanings, but they were also in the position to interrogate the Prophet on difficult passages. Many generations later, Ibn al-Akfānī's contemporaries, whom he addresses with these words, are much more in need of explanation of the divine revelation than the contemporaries of the Prophet.

In the following I will give two examples of commentary culture as it has developed in an Islamic context, one rather simple, the other more complex, though by no means the most complicated one available. A simple example of the generation of texts can be found in the little book on Arabic syntax by 'Abd al-Qāhir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ġurġānī (d. 1078) treating the one hundred grammatical regents. It is represented in numerous manuscripts and printed editions which are preserved in almost every library in the world. I have used the survey of this text as given in the catalogue of Arabic manuscripts in Berlin to make my point.¹⁸

The *matn* of al-Ġurġānī's *Mi'at 'awāmil* is abundantly (sixteen copies) represented in the Berlin collection (Ahlwardt, Nos. 6475 – 6476). All in all, twenty-eight different commentaries (Nos. 6477-6495, 6502) are enumerated, one of which is written in Turkish (No. 6495). Apart from the actual commentaries there are four versifications (Nos. 6496, 6498-6500), and there is also a commentary on one these versifications (No. 6497), and finally, there is a commentary in Arabic on a versification in Persian of the text (No. 6501).

Carl Brockelmann, elaborating on Ahlwardt's catalogue in his 'History of Arabic literature', mentions an unspecified number of copies of the *matn* of al-Ġurġānī's *Mi'at 'awāmil*, plus some thirty-four different commentaries and nine

¹⁸ See W. Ahlwardt, *Verzeichniss der arabischen Handschriften der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*. 10 vols. Berlin 1887-1899. Vols. 6-8 contain the sections on Arabic language. First grammar, then lexicology, metric, rhetoric, poetry (which continues in vol. 7), then prose (which continues in vol. 8 for the legendary material). The works related to the *Mi'at 'awāmil* are mentioned in vol. 6, Nos. 6475-6501, 6788-6790. See on the author, al-Ġurġānī, and more manuscripts than those in Berlin: GAL G I, 287; S I, 503-504. The book was first published and translated in Leiden in 1617 (*Libellus centum regentium cum versione Latina et commentariis Thomae Erpenii*). An early translation of both *matn* and *sharḥ* published in the Orient is by A. Lockett, *The Miat Amil, and Shurhoo Miat Amil. Two elementary treatises on Arabic syntax* [by 'Abd al-Qāhir b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al- Ġurġānī], translated from the original Arabic, with annotations, philological and explanatory, in the form of perpetual commentary. Calcutta, 1814. Among the earliest Oriental Arabic printed versions are the editions Istanbul 1231/1815-1816 and Būlāq 1241/1825-1826. Because Ahlwardt's detailed catalogue of the enormous Berlin manuscript collection is arranged according to subject, it can serve as a tool for monitoring the 'life' of texts on many subjects.

versifications. Not included in such counts are, of course, the thousands of manuscripts which contain privately written marginal and interlinear notes by professors and students. The human element in these numerous additions in the manuscripts can be seen from the fact that the density of glosses decreases with the progress of reading.

In addition to all this, the title *‘Awāmil* was used by a later author for a similar work, possibly in order to somehow profit from the success of al-Ġurġānī’s earlier compilation. This new work is *al-‘Awāmil al-Ġadīda* and was compiled by the Ottoman scholar Muḥammad b. Pīr ‘Alī al-Birkawī (d. 1573).¹⁹ The Berlin collection contains three manuscripts of the *matn* (Ahlwardt Nos. 6786-6787) and three commentaries (Nos. 6788-6790). Highjacking a successful title is not uncommon in Muslim scholarship.

In 19th-century Orientalist discourse such assiduous scholarship receives a far from favourable assessment. Snouck Hurgronje, in his description of Muslim education in Mecca in the second half of the 19th century, points out that the lectures in Shāfi‘ite Law as given in the Ḥaram in Mecca have to a great extent become stereotyped.²⁰ He observes that in the period of the fifth till the seventh century of the Islamic era great scholars had expounded the entire law in their handbooks. Later generations of scholars, so he observes, only write commentaries on these great works. The successors of these commentators see their field of activity only narrowing down, and all they can do is to lose themselves in the details, by further explaining the language and the intentions of their direct predecessors, and by publishing glosses and superglosses. Or they provide choices between the few different opinions that are still allowed. At best their activity consists of writing footnotes. In their teaching such scholars have (that is in the Mecca of the 1880’s) three options:

1. They can content themselves to recite an existing commentary. This is only useful for getting the pronunciation correct or for solving minor problems.
2. They can make the reading of a commentary profitable for their students by also providing explanatory remarks, taken from the best glosses.
3. They can make out of those glosses a new compilation.

None of the three options is, intellectually speaking, very impressive. The result of the third option, the compilation of yet another next to illegible book, is that certain authors come with new compositions in which – as I quote here – hardly ‘one proposition in a thousand is the author’s own, but this is all the better for his reputation for orthodoxy, because making what is new is the work of a heretic’.²¹

¹⁹ GAL G II, 441. Al-Ġurġānī’s *‘Awāmil* are therefore sometimes referred to as *eski awamil*, ‘the old *‘Awāmil*’, in contradistinction to al-Birkawī’s new *‘Awāmil*.

²⁰ C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the latter part of the 19th century*, pp. 187-189.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Such an author, Snouck Hurgronje continues, when asked what would induce him to add a new collection of glosses to the many existing ones, would answer that his treatment of the material would fit in better with the didactical needs of his contemporaries. Their real purpose, about which they usually remain silent, is that they wish to 'perpetuate their names as authors'.

This line of thinking, and the background against which it is done, calls for a closer examination. We have seen from several Muslim sources – and I have mentioned Ibn al-Akfānī and Ibn Khaldūn only as examples –, that there is indeed the sentiment of a lost treasure, of a golden age in a distant past, which has gone into decline. 'In the old times everything was better', is the popular feeling. In the old times, people knew their Arabic language and did not need grammars and dictionaries. Ibn Khaldūn proposes this set of ideas against a background of civilizations shifting from one area to another for different reasons, and this has become a major theme in his ideas about the course of history. Turkey in the 19th century was considered Europe's sick man, and many Muslim territories were under European domination by the end of the century. It is not difficult to see stagnation and decay everywhere, including in scholarship. We see this sentiment of decline also reflected in what is still one of the greatest works on the taxonomy of Islamic texts, Carl Brockelmann's 'History of Arabic Literature'.²² The main division of the work, which in its first edition dates from 1899-1901, is quite simple. The first book treats the national Arabic literature, the second book the Islamic literature in the Arabic language, the third book the decline of Islamic literature, the fourth book treats modern Arabic literature.²³

In his discussion on decline, Brockelmann knows who are the culprits. Whereas Snouck Hurgronje let the final decline of Muslim scholarship provocatively coincide with the foundation of the first Academy, Brockelmann saw al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) as the true exponent of the end of scholarship. It is as powerful a paradox as Snouck Hurgronje's: 'The decline of literature,' he says, 'can be seen in the sad polymathy of the all-knower. It's most remarkable representative is that monstrosity of an author al-Suyūṭī, who has compiled books on all areas of interest of his time, from the secrets of the divine word, to the virtue of the flea and the joys of sexual intercourse.'²⁴

I am not so sure which book by al-Suyūṭī has offended Brockelmann's sense of decorum, but if it is the *Rashf al-zulāl*, in which a number of scholars describe

²² Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*. 5 vols. Leiden 1937-1949.

Brockelmann's single-handed effort has never been surpassed. That we do not see this decline in Fuat Sezgin's *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (12 vols., Leiden/Frankfurt 1967-2000) is because he only treats the golden age, up till the around the year 1000.

²³ Modern, till 1942 that is, when the third supplementary volume appeared.

²⁴ Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, vol. 2, p. 5.

their first wedding night in the technical terminology used in their line of scholarship, I must admit that I find the idea rather amusing, although reading this *Maqāma* I find that al-Suyūṭī could have made much more of the subject. Al-Suyūṭī's monograph on the *Qur'ān*, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, is obligatory reading for every scholar, till today. And in his trifle about fleas,²⁵ al-Suyūṭī is in the company of many scholars in East and West, who have cursed the nuisance of the little unwelcome guests.²⁶ And where Brockelmann cannot get around the admittedly impressive figure of Ibn Khaldūn, he only says of him that he had no predecessor, nor successor. The unique greatness of Ibn Khaldūn proves to him that Islamic scholarship was in decline. The unstable political situation after the Mongol invasion was one explanation for the stagnation, but Brockelmann went further than that. It was also, he maintained, the innate sense of fatalism and the easy-going mentality of the Oriental which made this stagnant life acceptable at all. And therefore, he adds, 'in these centuries [of decline] much paper in Egypt and Syria was covered with black ink, but very little was written that was of more value to us than the replacement of the lost works of an earlier period.'²⁷

In order to balance this negative image we may take a somewhat closer look at a corpus of interrelated texts which first was conceived before the fall of Baghdad (1258), which survived the Mongol and Tatar invasions, and remained alive till well into the seventeenth century. These texts are ultimately all derived from the 'Key to the Sciences', the *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm*, by Yūsuf b. Abī Bakr al-Sakkākī (d. 1229). This major work is an advanced textbook on Arabic grammar, literary art and style theory. If we make a survey of manuscripts of that text plus the texts derived from it as they survive in an average academic library, the following image emerges:²⁸

1. The *matn*, the text of the *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm*, which is often preserved in manuscripts with heavy glossing. Many hundreds of manuscript copies are preserved in libraries and collections all over the world.

²⁵ *Al-Turthūth fī Fawā'id al-Burghūth*. A copy is preserved in MS Leiden, Or. 474 (33), ff. 301a-303a.

²⁶ The famous European Renaissance scholar J.J. Scaliger (1540-1609), a man as learned in his time as al-Suyūṭī was a century earlier in his, has a famous poem about the flea which is not without *piquanterie*.

²⁷ Brockelmann, *Geschichte*, vol. 2, pp. 7-8.

²⁸ See P. Voorhoeve, *Handlist of Arabic manuscripts in the Library of the University of Leiden and other collections in The Netherlands*. The Hague² 1980, pp. 210-212.

2. The third part of the *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm*, the part on literary art and style theory, proved to be particularly useful, and independent manuscripts of that part alone start to appear.²⁹

3. Commentaries on book 3 only of the *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm* alone:

- by al-Kabindī (d. 1318)

- by al-Taftazānī (d. 1390)

- by al-Ġurġānī (1413), entitled *al-Miṣbāḥ* ('the Lamp')

4. Glosses on (parts of) book 3 of the *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm*.

- abstracts from such a gloss.

5. An abridgment of book 3 of the *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm* by Khaṭīb Dimashq (d. 1338), entitled *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ*.

- with glosses taken from the shorter commentary by al-Taftazānī

- with glosses taken from the shorter and longer commentaries by al-Taftazānī

- with glosses by al-‘Imrānī

- commentary on passages of the *Talkhīṣ*, by al-Shāmī

- commentary (*Ma‘āhid al-Taṣṣīṣ*) by al-‘Abbāsī (d. 1556) on the verse quoted in the *Talkhīṣ*.

- a revised edition of that commentary by al-‘Amir (1530)

- an appendix to the *Talkhīṣ*, by Ibn al-Ghiyāth, entitled: *al-Īḡāz fi ‘Ilm al-‘Iḡāz*.

6. A commentary by Khaṭīb Dimashq, on his own commentary *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ*, entitled *al-Īdāḥ fil-Ma‘ānī wal-Bayān*.

- copies with glosses.

7. The long commentary by al-Taftazānī on the *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ* of Khaṭīb Dimashq, *al-Sharḥ al-Muṭawwal*.

- an abstracts of this work.

- glosses on this commentary by Ibn al-Fanārī (d. 1481)

8. Combined glosses by al-Ġurġānī (1413) and Ghanīzāda (d. 1617)

9. The shorter commentary by al-Taftazānī on the *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ* of Khaṭīb Dimashq, *al-Sharḥ al-Mukhtaṣar*.

- gloss on this shorter commentary by al-Harawī (d. 1510)

- supergloss by al-‘Alīmī (d. 1651) on the gloss by al-Harawī

10. Another abridgment on part 3 of the *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm*, by al-Īḡī (d. 1355), entitled *al-Fawā'id al-Ghiyāthiyya*.

11. Notes (*taqrīrāt*) by Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Subkī (d. 1371) on part 3 of the *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm*, entitled *‘Arūs al-Afrāḥ*.

So we see a number of different types of texts derived from the *Miftāḥ al-‘Ulūm* alone. These were compiled over a period of more than three hundred years.³⁰

²⁹ This is not rare. Some other examples are the part on pharmacy in Ibn Sīnā's *al-Qānūn fi al-Ṭibb*, and the part on surgery in al-Zahrāwī's *Taṣrīf*. Either one has developed into a book in its own right.

³⁰ A much fuller survey of the literary and scholarly production, triggered by al-Sakkākī's work, is given by Brockelmann, and if one realizes that the latter's work has not been

Now, if we would believe what we have read with Snouck Hurgronje and Brockelmann, we would have but little respect for the value of the enormous literary production ('paper blackened with ink'). But this supposed poverty just defies common sense. It is simply inconceivable that the compilation over a long period of time of all these commentaries and other texts derived from al-Sakkākī's *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm* was nothing but a waste of time. And it is, of course, not true. William Smyth's study on aspects of the reception of the *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm* shows, that it is worthwhile to actually read these books. Then one will see that the intellectual environment in which such books were conceived was not so sterile as the older Orientalists let us believe. And it shows that under the cloak of endless commenting lively discussions can be hidden. All this human interaction, the relationships between authors, their competition as well, which serves to gain the attention of rulers and possible benefactors, it all reflects as many sides of scholarly activity in Islam. Or, in William Smyth's words, 'we should rather consider the format of textual explication as a *performative* dimension for scholarly method.'³¹ And he adds to this: 'The commentary form is a forum that [...] knows not time or place ...'. So, in the present collective volume on Islamic commentaries, published by the prestigious Bibliotheca Alexandrina, we have chosen this performative dimension for our own commentative remarks on the commentary culture in Islam.

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updated since its second edition of more than sixty years ago, it is evident that all this is just a very incomplete representation of the scholarly production in the field of study of the Arabic language. William Smyth, 'Controversy in a tradition of commentary. The academic legacy of al-Sakkākī's *Miftāḥ al-'Ulūm*', in *JAOS* 112 (1992), pp. 589-597, comes to a count of 'more than three hundred works, that concern themselves in some way with al-Sakkākī's work'.

³¹ William Smyth, 'Controversy in a tradition of commentary', in *JAOS* 112 (1992), p. 597.