“A masterful account...Messick draws fascinating analogies between shifting styles of writing and the design of cities, the organization of education, and the provision of justice.”

—Sally Engle Merry,
Law and Society Review

“The Calligraphic State throws completely fresh light on non-colonial yet modern systems of legality and moral power...The picture given of Islamic legal education and practice is one of the best available, as too is the lesson in how to read non-Western documents as something other than dead 'sources'...a compelling read and a fine book for teaching.”

—Paul Dresch, Oxford University

“The Calligraphic State is part of a new generation of works on the Middle East that finally brings Middle East studies into the conversation of contemporary theory.”

—Michael M. Fischer,
Rice University
THE CALLIGRAPHIC STATE

Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society

BRINKLEY MESSICK

The creation and interpretation of texts, ranging from sacred scriptures and scholarly treatises to ordinary contracts, are among the fundamental ways complex states establish and maintain their authority—yet few scholars have considered how these processes work and how they change over time, especially outside the western world. In this innovative combination of anthropology, history, and postmodern theory, Brinkley Messick examines the changing relation of writing and authority in a Muslim society from the late-nineteenth-century Ottoman period to the contemporary republic.

*The Calligraphic State* is both a reconstruction of the venerable textual polity of Yemen—at the end of the manuscript era of “carved wood pens and personal seals, of handwritten books and professional copyists, of lesson circles in the mosque and reciting from memory, of court judgments on lengthy scrolls and scribes behind slant-topped desks”—and a social history of the transition to the modern world of the printing press, new method schools, codified forms of law, and the
nation state. Intensive ethnography is linked with innovative readings of written sources that include doctrinal works in Islamic law, highland histories, and a broad spectrum of local legal documents. Highlighting interlocking assumptions in institutions of authorship, instruction, adjudication, and documentation, Messick addresses how a discursive culture mediates the relation of knowledge and power. He explores the structure and transformation of literacy, law, and statecraft in Yemen and raises issues that are of comparative significance for studies of the textual grounding of political life in other Muslim and nonwestern states.

BRINKLEY MESSICK is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan.

Jacket illustration: Seal of Imam Yahya on legal docu-
ment, 1934 (A.H. 1355).
Jacket design: Janet Wood
The Calligraphic State
Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies
General Editor, Barbara D. Metcalf

1. Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning, edited by William R. Roff
2. Libyan Politics: Tribe and Revolution, by John Davis
3. Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahwali Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background, by Yohanan Friedmann
4. Shi'ite and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam, edited by Katherine P. Ewing
5. Islam, Politics, and Social Movements, edited by Edmund Burke, III, and Ira M. Lapidus
7. Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan, by David Gilmartin
8. Islam and the Russian Empire: Reform and Revolution in Central Asia, by Hélène Carrère d'Encausse
10. The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey, edited by Raymond Lütich
11. The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society, by Carol Delaney
13. Arab Voices: The Human Rights Debate in the Middle East, by Kevin Dwyer
15. Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town, by Robert Launay
16. The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society, by Brinkley Messick
University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
University of California Press, Ltd.
Oxford, England

Copyright ©1993 by
The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Mesick, Brinkley Morris.
The calligraphic state: textual domination and history in a
Muslim society / Brinkley Mesick.
p. cm.—(Comparative studies on Muslim societies; 16)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Islam—Yemen. 2. Manuscripts, Arabic—Yemen—Public opinion.
I. Title. II. Series.
BP63.Y45M47 1992
297.1975—dc20
91-44118
CIP

Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984 ©
CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS / ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / xi
INTRODUCTION / 1

PART I · AUTHORITY / 13
Chapter 1. Genealogies of the Text / 15
Chapter 2. The Pen and the Sword / 37
Chapter 3. Disenchantment / 54

PART II · TRANSMISSION / 73
Chapter 4. Audition / 75
Chapter 5. The New Method / 99
Chapter 6. Print Culture / 115

PART III · INTERPRETATION / 133
Chapter 7. Relations of Interpretation / 135
Chapter 8. Shari’a Society / 132
Chapter 9. Judicial Presence / 167
Chapter 10. Court Order / 187
## CONTENTS

**PART IV - INSCRIPTION**  /  201  
Chapter 11. Evidence of the Word  /  203  
Chapter 12. Spiral Texts  /  231  

**CONCLUSION**  /  251  
**BIOGRAPHICAL GUIDE**  /  257  
**GLOSSARY**  /  259  
**NOTES**  /  265  
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**  /  317  
**INDEX**  /  333  

---

## ILLUSTRATIONS

**MAP**  
1. The Republic of Yemen  /  9  

**FIGURES**  
1. Ibb ca. 1950  /  10  
2. Terraced agriculture near Ibb  /  11  
3. Commentary by al-Ghazzi on text by Abu Shuja’. Late-seventeenth-century copy  /  32  
4. ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Haddad seated next to Sa’id Pasha, ca. 1915  /  46  
5. Ibb governor Isma’il Basalama with two sons, ca. 1920  /  47  
6. Khatam celebration for Ibb governor al-Sayaghi’s son, 1950s  /  82  
7. Opening pages of register listing endowment properties for the support of instruction in Ibb  /  96  
8. The Ibb mufri writes an evaluation of a cut on a young girl’s face, 1976  /  157  
10. A spiral letter from Imam Yahya to Ibb governor Isma’il Basalama, 1917 [a.h. 1336]  /  232  
11. Movements of the spiral text  /  233  
12. Old sale contract, dated 1856  /  235
ILLUSTRATIONS

14. Register of endowment land pertaining to the Great Mosque of Ibb / 238
15. Seal of Imam Ahmad on Appeal Court ruling, 1958 [A.H. 1378] / 243
16. Republican seal printed on official stationery, 1974 / 244
17. Signature and seal of republican official / 245
18. Old and new city, Tunis / 246

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding for two periods of research in Yemen was provided by a Foreign Area Fellowship (September 1974 to March 1976) and a post-doctoral grant (January to June 1980), both from the Joint Committee on the Near and Middle East of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies.


Among the many other individuals who helped me along the way, I want to mention my teachers, Schuyler Cammann, L. Carl Brown, Avram Udovitch, and especially Hildried Geertz; Lawrence Rosen and Dale Eickelman; fellow scholars concerned with Yemen, John Kennedy, Etienne Renaud, Paul Dresh, Martha Mundy, Jon Mandaville, Daniel Varisco, Najwa Adra, Shelagh Weir, Robert Burrowes, Tomas Gerholm, Jon Swanson, Jeffery Meissner, and Lucine.
Taminian; Amherst Law Seminar colleagues John Brigham, Patricia Ewicke, Christine Harrington, Sally Merry, Ron Pipkin, Austin Sarat, Susan Silbey, Adelaide Villmoare, and Barbara Yngvesson; two very helpful readers for the University of California Press; and anthropology students and faculty at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) and Brandeis University.

Special debts are owed to Margareta Sander, who accompanied me on both trips to Yemen, and to Robert Tyler Sander-Messick, who made the second trip at six months of age. From the inception of this book, and as her own work on Morocco evolved, Stefania Pandolfo provided invaluable intellectual support. Parts of the work date to a period, in 1983–84, of regular interchanges with Timothy Mitchell, who had begun his own important work on related issues in Egypt. At a late stage, historian of Islamic law David Powers generously read and suggested revisions for the entire manuscript. Reading and rereading difficult passages over many months, Karen Seeley has patiently helped me bring the work to completion.

None of these individuals is responsible for any of the remaining deficiencies.

Parts of Chapters 7, 8, and 11 have appeared previously in Messick 1986, 1988, 1989, 1990.

I am grateful to Robin Page of Jenkins and Page, New York, for preparing the map of Yemen and the diagram of the spiral text.

Introduction

This book examines the changing relation between writing and authority in a Muslim society. Its backdrop is the end of an era of reed pens and personal seals, of handwritten books and professional copyists, of lesson circles in mosques and knowledge recited from memory, of court judgments on lengthy scrolls and scribes toiling behind slant-topped desks. As understood here, the calligraphic state was both a political entity and a discursive condition. My aims are to reconstruct one such textual polity and detail its gradual transformation in recent times. In highland Yemen, located in the southwestern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, the initial inroads of the printing press, new-method schools, and novel conceptions about the state and its texts date to the late nineteenth century, but many aspects of the venerable local manuscript culture persisted well into the twentieth.

Textual domination, in this analysis, entails the interlocking of a polity, a social order, and a discursive formation. I focus attention on a number of discursive features, particularly modes of authoritative expression, that are shared by several categories of texts and built into the practices of a number of important institutions. I trace connections between the literary processes behind the constitution of authority in texts and the social and political processes involved in articulating the authority of texts. For all its complexity, however, textual domination is a partial phenomenon, one that intersects in each historical instance with other dimensions of authority and with the relations of a specific mode of production. In the case at hand, neither the patronial-bureaucratic aspects of state authority nor the agrarian context of the associated production system are given the full treatment they deserve.
While it is perhaps well understood that complex Asiatic states, from the hydraulic (Wittfogel 1957) to the theater (Geertz 1980), have derived legitimacy and exercised control by means of various types of written texts, precisely how they have done so in particular settings is not. From the formal interpretation of sacred scriptures to the mundane recording of administrative acts, textual relations have underpinned diverse polities. To investigate the role of texts in a specific state, however, requires a view of writing that stresses its cultural and historical variability rather than its universal characteristics, and its implication in relations of domination rather than its neutrality or transparency as a medium.

This inquiry differs from a standard political history with respect to its categories, chronologies, and choices of significant institutional sites. As is indicated by the compounds (textual authority, textual domination) I use to qualify Max Weber's familiar terminology, this is partly the consequence of narrowing a project that he elaborated. Other differences derive from extending a type of analysis developed by Michel Foucault (1970; 1977) to a non-Western setting. While Foucault's studies of shifts in "epistemological space" in the West must be adapted to the currents of a different history, his detailed investigations of the "small acts" and the "micro-physics" of disciplinary power assimilate readily to ethnographic method. Both Foucault and Benedict Anderson (1983) suggest new ways anthropologists and historians can read texts for their changing "rules of formation." I have drawn on Anderson's path-breaking analysis of the print foundations of that relatively recent type of "imagined community," the nation-state. My efforts to depict the calligraphic state are, in part, a response to his call to understand nationalism in relation to the "cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being" (1983:19).

Writing at the time of his collaboration in the 1950s with the Islamist Gustave Von Grunebaum, Robert Redfield predicted that the then existing division of scholarly labor in research on the literate "world civilizations" would eventually yield to a convergence. He wrote that "the contextual studies of anthropologists will go forward to meet the textual studies made by historians and humanists of that same civilization" (1967 [1955]:30). For the Middle East the anticipated convergence has spawned divergent outcomes, which have been assessed by Talal Asad. At the conclusion of his review, Asad advocates a redoubling of textual efforts: "If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam, one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts" (1986:14).

Two research activities, local-level ethnography in a provincial town and textual analysis of works of Islamic jurisprudence, have been brought together here. A distinctive feature of the resulting presentation is the juxtaposition of circumstantial detail concerning recent highland history and practice with the arguments and rationales of formal Muslim scholarship. Such juxtapositions raise several questions. While the principal texts referred to have been important in the highlands for centuries, they are with one exception neither indigenous nor specific to Yemen, having enjoyed equivalent esteem in places as different from the highlands as Egypt and Indonesia. Such texts have thus figured centrally in the processes of unity and diversity in interregional thought in Islam. While the book is intended to contribute to the specific history of Yemen, it also addresses textual concerns of broader civilizational and comparative relevance.

Another question concerns the nature of the formal textual thought. The specific types of text involved are basic manuals of shari'a jurisprudence and their commentaries. Containing concise summaries of principles intended for memorization by advanced students and for reference by practicing scholars, manuals were the representative and authoritative works of the several schools of shari'a thought. Although legal phenomena are a major concern of the following chapters, caution must be attached to the conventional gloss for the shari'a as "Islamic law." The shari'a is better characterized, to adapt a phrase from Marcel Mauss (1967:1), as a type of "total" discourse, wherein "all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral and economic." "Political" should be added to this list, for the shari'a also provided the basic idiom of preenlightenment political expression. For the social mainstream, the shari'a represented the core of Islamic knowledge, while the basic shari'a manuals were the standards of formal instruction. This total discourse was first modified and displaced, creating something approximating the form and separate status of Western law, as part of the larger processes that brought about the rise of nation-states. Given its former discursive range, the codifications and other, often radical changes worked upon the shari'a were fundamental to the creation of these new states, in far more than the narrow legal sense.

In treating the shari'a as the centerpiece of a societal discourse, I place emphasis on the appropriation of its idioms, the flexibility and interpretability of its constructs, and the open structure of its texts. In
this manner I have moved away from an understanding framed in terms of the Western standard for law, which has obscured the shari'a's different range of social importance and its distinctive modes of interpretive dynamism. While suggesting that the discourse was considerably less ideal and rigid than has frequently been claimed, I recognize that the practical status of the shari'a has varied widely according to place and time in the Muslim world. In Yemen, the level of shari'a applicability has been comparatively high. In the twentieth-century inaminate in particular, shari'a courts provided the principal language of statecraft, shari'a manuals were studied by all advanced students, exclusive-jurisdiction shari'a courts handled both civil and criminal cases, and the shari'a uthe on agrarian production was the main source of government revenue. In addition, a spectrum of jurisprudence-anchored transactions, dispositions, and other types of relations structured undertakings ranging from commercial dealings and agrarian leases to the transmission of family estates. Not to be underestimated, however, are such important local limitations to the scope of the shari'a as the predominance of tribal custom beyond the sphere of the state and the roles of administrative and commercial custom within it.

A question remains concerning the relation of shari'a text to social practice. I devote considerable attention to fine points of doctrine in works that are in some cases many centuries old and in others, mainly contemporary shari'a-based legislation, too recent to have been fully implemented. The simple justifications for such attention are that the old manuals were considered actively authoritative by local scholars until recent decades and that the new legislation had become the law of the land. Recognizing, nevertheless, the often substantial remove of such law “on the books” from many aspects of ordinary experience, I have also examined several types of what might be termed intermediate texts. An important example is the collection of interpretive guidelines on specific doctrinal matters established for court application by ruling Yemeni imams, including those of this century. Still closer to local realities are documents and writings that pertain directly to practice. The corpus I have utilized dates mainly from the last century and a half and was obtained from private individuals and official sources in the provincial capital Sanaa. These texts include complaints, nonbinding opinions, and court judgments; deeds of sale and other contracts; estate papers of several types; and various sorts of bureaucratic records. Although purely local in address, most represent documentary genres known to other Muslim societies. Such writings formed the basis for a specialized ethnography of texts, an inquiry into practice and its written representation, resulting in a genre-by-genre view of structure and change in textual authority.

Historical writing provides another perspective on the relationship between formal doctrine and local practice. I have made use of the works of a long series of distinguished Yemeni historians, beginning with Ibn Samura of the twelfth century A.D. and continuing down to such transitional figures as Zabara, al-Wasi'i, and al-Jirafi, from the first part of the twentieth, and such contemporary scholars as Muhammad and Isma'il al-Akwa'. All these historians shared a common intellectual formation in the texts of shari'a jurisprudence. As is true also of the shari'a manuals and the other types of texts I have used, the histories are both sources for and objects of analysis. In particular, the important genre of biographical histories is vital for tracing the lives of individual carriers of shari'a knowledge and for examining manifestations of the genealogical theory of intellectual transmission. In older annalistic works, I looked for structural assumptions and methods rather than dynastic chronologies, while in the first printed works, by the quasi-official historians of the present century, I read for evidences of a discursive rupture.

My approach to the on-the-ground reality of textual domination is thus twofold. In taking account of formal shari'a doctrine and such mediating texts as imamic opinions, local documents, and highland histories, I have endeavored to balance colloquial understandings with the viewpoints of a body of knowledge not constituted as an "informant's discourse" (Bourdieu 1977:18). The unusual extent of my emphasis on the doctrinal is necessitated also by the fact that we have not yet properly understood the rationales contained: the appropriate sources, notably the shari'a manuals and commentaries I focus on, have not been given the contextual attention they deserve. Within the doctrinal corpus, reasonings and assumptions have not been understood systematically, in terms of their widely ramifying interconnections. Far from being unfound of the ideological nature of the intellectual world presented by the jurists and historians I have read, I maintain that the requisite first steps in understanding the power implications of a discourse are to know its constructs and arguments, to analyze its linkages across domains, and to identify its modes of situating, appropriating, and silencing the world of the dominated. If the manuals and other texts cannot be taken as unproblematic sources for the derivation of
practice, they at least offer important clues to the construction of the terrain.

While in a structural sense such domains of activity as authoring, instruction, opinion giving, and notarial writing seemed to persist, in Marx’s phrase, “untouched by the storm-clouds of the political sky,” in another sense discursive reproduction was as decisively shaped by the presences (and absences) of states as it was by the movements of intellectual history. Reconstructing from highland history, my broad intentions are to indicate what an account of a textual polity might generally consist of while also identifying the predispositions particular to such a phenomenon in a Muslim society. As presented here, then, a textual polity entails both a conception of an authoritative text, involving structures of authorship, a method of instructional transmission, institutions of interpretation, and modes of documentary inscription, and a pattern of textual authority, which figures in state legitimacy, the communication of cultural capital, relations of social hierarchy, and the control of productive resources.

Historical materials are differently mobilized in two distinct sets of chapters. Mainly in the first set (chapters 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11), evidence from various periods and of several categories is used to create a composite view of the calligraphic polity and discursive condition. Although based in large part on historical evidence, the picture created is nevertheless relatively timeless, as emphasis is placed on elucidating structural consistencies across the several domains of the textual polity. Interspersed in this presentation, the second set of chapters (3, 5, 6, 10, 12) is primarily devoted to a specific course of historical change in highland Yemen over the past hundred years. These two historical motives overlap, however, inasmuch as the reconstruction is close to the facts of earlier periods of Yemeni history and the specific history of recent change makes use of analytic constructs.

Chapter 1 introduces the culture of the authoritative text, taking the manuals of one school of shari’ā as a specific instance. With the Quran as paradigm, the genealogies of textual transmission were anchored in recitation, a leitmotif of this “written law” tradition. Coupled with a distinctive emphasis on the efficacy of human presences, recitational methods recurs throughout key domains of textual practice, as is demonstrated in later chapters on instruction, court witnessing, the conduct of state affairs, and the creation of property instruments. In contrast to the theoretically self-sufficient legal codes that would eventually replace them, shari’ā manuals were “open” texts, built of contending viewpoints and always necessitating interpretive elucidation. Chapter 2 extends the discussion of manuals to a second major highland school of shari’ā thought, that of the former ruling imams. An ideal imam was a commander capable of wielding the pen as well as the sword. In this century, the shari’ā politics of the imams was initially turned against the occupying Ottoman Turks and was later challenged by the emergent discourse of the nation-state.

Chapter 4, on instruction, presents the methods and rationales of transmission in Qurbanic schools and in advanced lesson circles. In this complex “culture of the book,” the recitational reproduction of authoritative texts relied on the backgrounded services of writing, while in a coexisting textual sphere reading and writing techniques were standard. Chapter 7 concerns the division of interpretive labor between two categories of worldly interpreters. An appreciation of the activity of interpreters called mufassīs is central to an understanding of the continuing vitality of the shari’ā. Chapter 8 examines the relation between interpretation and social hierarchy as defined by the dominant shari’ā image of society. Together with various legitimations, the contradicitions of shari’ās doctrine reinforced its hegemonic efficacy. Chapter 9, on the judgingship, further develops the ideal of presence as it relates to shari’ā court processes and to governmental practice under the imams. Chapter 11 investigates the use of ordinary legal documents such as contracts and deeds, and considers why their value as evidence was questioned.

While this first set of chapters reconstructs the textual polity, the second set concerns the course of recent changes. Introducing themes relevant to the analysis of discontinuities discussed throughout the book, chapter 3 examines the transformation of authoritative shari’ā texts through the process of codification. It begins with the pioneering nineteenth-century Ottoman code, considers the colonial-period contexts for such discursive shifts, and concludes with a brief account of shari’ā’s legislation by the Yemen Arab Republic in the late 1970s. Chapter 5, on instructional changes, opens with a contemporary Yemeni skit that looks back at the old Qurbanic school. It then traces the late-nineteenth-century appearance and later imamic hybridization of “new method” schools. Chapter 6, on the local advent of print culture, examines twentieth-century textual initiatives in state publishing, library reform, and official-history writing. Chapter 10 analyzes the history of court reform and concludes with another recent skit, this one critical of former judicial practices. Chapter 12 departs from a
discussion (at the end of chapter 11) of how notarial practice has been changed by the intervention of the state and goes on to develop a summarizing spatial analysis. Shifts in the design of writing in genres such as letters and legal documents are related first to parallel developments in bureaucratic record keeping and in official seals, and then, by extension, to alterations in physical space and changes in the “space of knowledge.”

YEMEN

The corner of Arabia bordering on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean entered the colonial age in 1839 with the British seizure of the old port of Aden; the highlands to the north were incorporated in the Ottoman Empire in 1872. At the turn of the twentieth century, the region found itself on the periphery of two great world empires: the British, with imperial interests focused on India, and the Ottoman, with its center of gravity in the eastern Mediterranean. British control in the south would not be lifted until 1967 (with the creation of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen), but that of the Ottomans in the north ended in 1918 with the collapse of the empire at the close of World War I. At that time, the highlands passed into the hands of the Hamid al-Din line of Zaidi imams, who ruled until the Revolution of 1962, which gave birth to the Yemen Arab Republic. Political artifacts of the colonial era, the two Yemens were finally unified on May 22, 1990, as the Republic of Yemen (map 1).

The recent political history of the highlands involves entities as different as a bureaucratic empire, a patrimonial imamate, and a national-state republic, while a colonial enclave was active immediately to the south. Unlike the countries of North Africa and the Arab successor states to the Ottoman Empire in the central Middle East, all of which came under some form of European control, the highland portion of Yemen was independent from 1919, avoiding a direct experience of colonial rule by a Western power. Imamic rule in the years 1919–1962 meant relative isolation from the rest of the world as the inaccessible mountain topography complemented an explicit policy of keeping Yemen closed to all but the most necessary outside influences. The clear and dramatic impacts of foreign rule in much of the “Third World”—colonial architecture, colon populations, appropriations of land, foreign-owned enterprises, extensive missionary activity, impositions of Western law, colonial languages, and so forth—did not occur in highland Yemen. Prior to 1962 the main Western influences were mediated through Ottoman-introduced institutions or filtered northward along the trade routes from colonial Aden.

A challenge posed by this history is to understand a course of change that occurred amidst determined internal constraints and at an unusual remove from Western contacts. Despite its relative isolation, however, twentieth-century imamic Yemen was neither a medieval kingdom nor a cultural fossil “virtually unchanged,” as one observer put it, “from the pre-Islamic or early Islamic period.” According to now standard political histories (al-Shamahi 1972; Wenner 1967; Salim 1971; Stookey 1978; ‘Afif 1982; Peterson 1982; Douglas 1987), the traditionalism of highland society was disturbed first by the rise of a nationalist opposition, starting in the 1930s, and then later and more decisively by the actions of former military cadets trained and radicalized by foreign advisors. Without detracting from the significance of these events, this study begins by assessing earlier restructurings under Ottoman rule at the turn of the twentieth century.

Ibb town (see fig. 1), where I resided for a total of two years in the mid-1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s (Messick 1978), is located
Figure 1. Ibb ca. 1950.

in the southern highland region known as Lower Yemen (al-yaman al-aṣfal). Upper Yemen begins with the higher elevations beyond the Sumara Pass north of town. The north–south road linking the principal highland towns runs from the capital, San`ā, south to Dhamar, descends into Lower Yemen at Sumara, and arrives at Ibb before continuing on to Ta`izz, the capital during the 1950s. With Dhamar, also a provincial capital, Ibb shared the rank of fourth largest urban center in the Yemen Arab Republic with a population that has grown from 17,494 at the time of the first census in 1973 to 48,806 in 1986. At one point or another in Yemeni history most of the major highland towns and some of the coastal Tihama towns served as capitals for ruling groups, but Ibb has been perennially provincial.

At 6,700 feet above sea level, the town sits on a spur of the towering Jabal Ba`dan massif and looks out over a seasonally verdant mountain valley. Stone villages dot the landscape, and here and there a few trees edge the cultivation, but there are no forests to soften the rugged scenery. Until recent decades, producing terraces came up to the town walls. During the dry winter months, stone retaining walls of fallow terraces mark off the undulating valley floor and step up the mountainsides like curved contour lines on a map (see fig. 2). In the wet summer, these contours are obscured as sorghum, first a brilliant green and later a ripening yellow, blankets the countryside (Tuutwiler and Carapico 1981; Varisco 1985). In the higher elevations of Ba`dan to the east, wheat is more common, while the lower slopes and wadi bottoms of al-`Udayn to the west specialize in two important cash crops, coffee and qat. Yemeni coffee acquired international commercial renown in the sixteenth century, but qat, the tender, alkaloid-containing leaves of which are consumed by many Yemenis on a daily basis, has retained a purely regional significance (Schopen 1978; Weir 1985; Varisco 1986; Kennedy 1987). Although there is some spring-fed irrigated cultivation, most of the local agricultural abundance is made possible by regular rains (nearly 1,500 mm mean annual). Pumped northward by the Indian Ocean monsoon system, moisture-bearing clouds begin to form over the valley about midday during the late spring and summer, providing spectacular afternoon storms.
Stored grain was the foundation of the old agrarian polity. During the fall harvest and for weeks thereafter, long lines of donkeys laden with grain earmarked as state tithes, endowment revenues, and landlords’ shares still make their way up the old stone roads to Ibb. Carefully measured and recorded, the grain is stored in numerous underground grain-storage pits located beneath houses and other buildings, and later disbursed as in-kind salaries, distributed as official charity, sold to grain traders, and directly consumed. Together with this redistributive flow of grain, long-distance trade, to which the region contributed agricultural and pastoral products, is as old as the town itself. Before the late 1950s, when the more dynamic members of the local merchant community began to move out to larger stores in a new commercial district fanning out below the main gate, Ibb’s small shops, warehouses, and merchant hostels were strung along the two narrow thoroughfares that fork just inside the main gate and meet again before reaching the Great Mosque on the other side of town.

In former times (and to about 1960) Ibb was astride a major camel caravan route through the mountains, which linked the port of Aden with San'a', the principal northern highland town. Ibb was also a stopping place on an old pilgrimage route to Mecca. Foreign travelers of several centuries admired the cut stone steps with which the old road traverses the mountain passes at either end of the Ibb valley. Paved in 1975, the new main road reduced a six-day trip from Ibb to San'a' to three hours.

The capital since 1946 of a province bearing its name, Ibb was referred to as a town (nadina) as early as the tenth century A.D., although in the immediately following centuries it was also described as a village and as a fortress. Under the rule of local dynasties in the thirteenth through the fifteenth century, the town was securely walled and endowed with such important facilities as an aqueduct, a public bath, and a number of mosques and schools. An eighteenth-century Danish traveler (Niebuhr 1792, 1:351) estimated there were eight hundred houses in the town. Closely clustered, multistoried buildings permitted a relatively large population to reside in a relatively small, walled-in space. Everything in the town, buildings, paved streets, walls, and bastions, was of locally quarried grey stone, creating an effect relieved only by the curves of whitewashed domes and the occasional tree in an intersection of alleys or in the market square. Until the 1950s, when expansion outside the walls began, the caretaker of the old main gate would call out for stragglers before locking up for the night.
CHAPTER 1

Genealogies of the Text

The theoretical descent of Roman jurisprudence from a Code, the theoretical
ascription of English law to an immemorial unwritten tradition, were the chief
reasons why the development of their system differed from the development of
ours. Neither theory corresponded exactly with the facts, but each produced
consequences of the utmost importance.

Sir Henry Maine

Viewed in detail, the development of the shari'a across the Muslim lands
was a phenomenon involving specific men and specific texts. We know
something about the particulars of this history because of the existence
of accounts arranged in the form of biographical entries. Created by
early Muslim historians, these biographical works played a crucial role
in tracking the transmission of Islamic knowledge across regions and
through successive generations. One such work, composed in twelfth-
century Yemen, covers the early generations of Yemeni shari'a scholars.
It also traces the arrival in the highlands of authoritative shari'a texts
of the era, describing the specific teacher-to-student connections by
which they were introduced and then diffused. A local node in one
reported line of transmission was a man by the name of Faqih al-Nahi,
until his death in 1171 a resident of the town of Ibb. The text in
question was a famous one, authored by an eminent shari'a jurist of the
preceding century named al-Shirazi who lived and taught in Baghdad,
an international center of Islamic learning.

"Between me and the author are two men," al-Nahi of Ibb used to
say to his colleagues. In this shorthand manner al-Nahi expressed the
particular legitimacy of his stature as a scholar and teacher. It was a
remark worthy of citation in an intellectual world in which the texts of
knowledge were literally embodied, their conveyance reckoned in terms
of known relayers. Authority of this sort relied upon the specification
of human links between intellectual generations. Al-Nahi could explain
that he had learned the text from his teacher, who had received it from
an individual who had acquired it directly from al-Shirazi, in the
author's Baghdad lesson circle. Then, as now, Yemeni scholars were
travelers, circulating in search of teachers and knowledge not only throughout their native highlands but also northward to Mecca and beyond to Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad. Completing his studies with al-Shirazi, the traveling scholar in question returned to reside in Yemen, where he taught the text to his own students, including a man who would later teach it to a third generation, which included al-Nahi of ‘Ibb. Each of the two intervening scholars identified in al-Nahi’s personal line of reception is the subject of a separate entry in the same biographical history.

Authoritative texts are as fundamental to the history of shari’a scholarship as they are to the history of the other intellectual disciplines. Such a text was “relied upon” in a place and time? the knowledgeable consulted it, specialists based findings upon it, scholars elaborated its points in commentaries, teachers clarified its subtleties, students committed its passages to heart. Authority in a text depended on a combination of attributes both ascribed and achieved; there were the built-in features of textual ancestry and authorship as well as an acquired reputation and record of dissemination. The fate of such texts were diverse, ranging from an enduring general prominence or more limited respect among the cognoscenti to a purely ephemeral authority and the all-but-forgotten status of the superseded. Since this authority would change radically in the course of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, its modalities must be examined in some detail.

A primary sort of textual authority was derived: it followed from the existence and importance of an original, genuine, and ultimately reliable text, which refers back to the position and identity of the Quran. “In the genealogy of texts,” Edward Said writes (1983:46), “there is a first text, a sacred prototype, a scripture, which readers always approach through the text before them.” A genealogy of authoritative texts in Islam must begin with a consideration of the Quran as the authoritative original. The paradigmatic, Urtext qualities of the Quran concern both content and textual form. Substantively, the Quran and the Sunna, the practice of the Prophet, constituted the two fundamental “sources” (aul, sing. aif) for the elaboration of shari’a jurisprudence. Discursively, the Quran represents both the end and the beginning of the kitab (text, scripture, writing, book). Just as Muhammad was the last, the “seal,” of the Prophets, and also the first Muslim, the Quran was the definitive and final kitab, whose particular authority would initiate and delimit a discursive tradition.

A central problem in Muslim thought concerns the difficult transition from the unity and authenticity of the Text of God to the multiplicity and inherently disputed quality of the texts of men. A concurrent underlying tension was generated in shari’a scholarship where an unresolvable gulf opened between divinely constituted truth and humanly constituted versions of that truth. Purists of all eras, including many contemporary “fundamentalists,” have made a distinction between the divine shari’a, defined as God’s comprehensive and perfect design for His community, and a humanly produced shari’a, or, more precisely, the corpus of knowledge known as fiqh (usually translated “jurisprudence”), a necessarily flawed attempt to understand and implement that design. In this gap between divine plan and human understanding lay the perennially fertile space of critique, the locus of an entire politics articulated in the idiom of the shari’a.

If the transition from the divine plan to its human versions was difficult, it was also necessary, for the truth of Revelation could only be implemented through the medium of human understanding. With the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, the Muslim community found itself cut off both from further Quranic Revelations and from the Prophet’s own practice, that is, from further elaborations of the two “sources” of secure knowledge. Thereafter, the community confronted the problems of developing a more detailed corpus of rules and procedures while continually adjusting to new social realities.

The growth of the fiqh as a body of knowledge, resulting from the work of jurists in the early centuries of Islam, brought with it the inevitable disagreements associated with purely human creativity. Authoritative fiqh works endeavored to further define the already definitive. Their derivativeness was both necessary to their nature and the crux of their problematic: they were texts in the world of the Text. Participating with self-assurance in an authentic tradition, such texts had their recognized antecedent sources and their means of establishing legitimacy. At the same time, they pertained to history rather than to the eternal; to societies of riffs and hierarchies rather than to the ideal communities of the umma; to difference rather than to certainty.

Condensed and practical fiqh manuals, known as the mutan (sing. muth, lit. “text”), were a distinct category of authoritative text. At first glance, such manuals seem to have little to recommend their consideration. Since they contain neither the elaborations of material nor the refinements of method that characterize the field as a whole, the mutan might be thought the least impressive works of the jurisprudence literature, their bare-bones presentations being notable mainly for feats of
compression. But these handbooks took on a significance that went far beyond their modest literary qualities, and they eventually became the most widely disseminated of all shari'a texts. As instructional standards, they were influential gateways to the central academic discipline, representing for many the sum total of advanced (that is, post-Qur'anic-school) instruction. Particular manuals came to be symbols of the separate "schools" of shari'a thought, which in the Sunni tradition were one and the same as its principal subdivisions. Containing simple but authoritative statements of position on the range of substantive issues, manuals were studied by all educated adherents of a school at the outset of advanced instruction, and they were later referred to by scholars in their various interpretive activities. In addition, these compact works were among the typical source texts upon which the expansive commentary literatures of the fiqh were based.

Manuals appeared on the intellectual scene at a relatively late date, however. These were not the earliest works, handed down from the formative centuries of Islam, but were instead the products of a more mature, developed, and institutionally established later thought. In contrast to the discourse-setting sort of originality of the foundational fiqh works, by jurists such as Malik, Abu Hanifa, al-Shafi'i, and Ibn Hanbal, for whom the four standard "schools" are named, the manuals were determinedly derivative. They offered creative synopses, in which a body of doctrinal views pertaining to a particular school was sifted, selected, and summarized. While most of the earlier classics were in the category of exhaustive (literally "long") works, manuals were examples of an "abridgment" genre that became common across the intellectual disciplines.

Manuals were similar to the long jurisprudence works in overall topic coverage but differed radically in depth of presentation. They included sections on ritual matters, such as ablutions, prayer, fasting, the tithe and alms-giving, and the pilgrimage; the numerous types of contracts, transactions, and dispositions covering agrarian production, commerce, and the family; rules concerning evidence, court procedure, and punishments; and a variety of miscellaneous matters, such as hunting and dietary rules. Principles connected with the leadership of the Muslim community were covered in sections concerning the conduct of war, certain types of crimes, taxation, and the administration of justice.

The great Ibn Khaldun, who died in 1406, viewed with disapproval the routine use of such abridgments in his era. They have a "corrupting influence on the process of instruction," he wrote, because they "confuse the beginner by presenting the final results of a discipline to him before he is prepared." Ibn Khaldun's general pedagogic concern was with the acquisition of a properly developed intellectual habitus. While he believed that the "crowded" meanings of the abridgments were an obstacle to this acquisition, he deemed contact with the "repetition and lengthiness" of the long works "useful." Regardless of Ibn Khaldun's opposition, however, some manuals went on to become classics in their own right, remaining basic to the intellectual landscape for centuries, until the moment of modern changes in the nature of schooling, knowledge, and the law.

SHAFTI TEXTS

One of the four standard schools of Sunni legal interpretation, the Shafi'i take their name from the early jurist Muhammad b. Idris al-Shafi'i (died 820). The word madhhab, conventionally translated as "school," literally means a "path," and in technical scholarly contexts the reference is to those jurists who claim intellectual descent from an eponymous jurist, in this case al-Shafi'i. In a broader, nontechnical sense, madhhab identities were a means of expressing geopolitical loyalties. In Yemen the Shafi'i school is associated with Lower Yemen, where Ibb is located, and with regions further South and East—the territory, until the unification of 1990, of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen).

Prior to the tenth century, the Maliki and Hanafi schools, both developed earlier than the Shafi'i, represented the main currents of Yemeni legal thought. Although al-Shafi'i held a brief appointment (and is said to have engaged in political intrigue) in Yemen, the main centers of his teaching and later influence were Cairo and Baghdad. Ibn Samura, the historian who reported on the biography of Faqih al-Nahi, documented the advent and initial spread of Shafi'i thought in the Highlands. In succeeding centuries, al-Shafi'i's intellectual descendants rose to predominance in instruction and judgships throughout the central Middle East. With the sixteenth-century spread of the Ottoman Empire, however, the Shafi'i school was officially (but not always popularly) supplanted in most of these areas by the Hanafi school, which was favored by the Ottomans. Nevertheless, the Shafi'i school today probably has more adherents than any other in the Muslim world, its main centers other than southern Arabia being Egypt, East Africa, and populous Southeast Asia.
For many centuries now, Ibb has supported an active community of Shafii scholars. Despite their seemingly remote mountain valley location, town jurists were far from parochial. In terms of texts studied, theirs was not an unconventional local version of the shari’a. Beginning with Ibn Samura and continuing to the present century, biographical histories provide views of the changing scholarly community in Ibb. A recently published work (Zabara 1979) devoted to noted individuals of the just-completed (fourteenth) Hegira century contains an entry on a distinguished Ibb scholar and prominent political figure who lived from 1876 to 1922, some seven and a half centuries after Faqih al-Nahi. Like al-Nahi, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Haddad was an adherent of the Shafii school of shari’a jurisprudence. Both men were connected to the school through their relations with particular teachers and specific texts. In al-Haddad’s case the teacher was his father, and the key text was a celebrated old manual known as Al-Minhaj. His biographical entry opens as follows:

The learned scholar and man of letters, the bright and sagacious ‘Abd al-Rahman, son of ‘Ali, son of Najii, al-Haddad, the Shafi‘i, the Yemeni, the Ibbi, was born in the town of Ibb in the year 1293 [1876] and received instruction from his father, in Shafi‘i jurisprudence [beginning with] Al-Minhaj.

Ibb scholars such as ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Haddad and, in the next generation, men such as his nephew and son-in-law, Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Haddad, whom I knew in the 1970s as an old man and a practicing court judge, commenced their higher studies with two standard Shafi‘i texts, the just-mentioned Al-Minhaj by Muhyi al-Din al-Nawawi, a Syrian who died in a.d. 1277, and a still more radically concise manual, known as Al-Mukhtasar (“the abridgment”) or simply as the main, the “text,” of Abu Shuja‘a, a resident of Basra active in the twelfth century.

Both were classics of the Shafi‘i school widely studied beyond the boundaries of Yemen. Al-Nawawi’s and Abu Shuja‘a’s manuals are to the Shafi‘i school what Khalil’s well-known Abidgant, for example, is to the Malikii school predominant in North and West Africa. In nineteenth-century Cairo, students of Shafi‘i jurisprudence at the famous al-Azhar mosque-university began with the shorter work by Abu Shuja‘a, while Al-Minhaj was a principal intermediate text in the typical sequence of study. At the same time, at the eastern end of the Muslim world, in Malaya and Java where the Shafi‘i school was pre-dominant, the same two texts were fundamental in both instruction and Islamic court rulings. Both were translated from Arabic into French, Al-Mukhtasar just after mid-century and Al-Minhaj two decades later. For use in British-administered colonies, including the nearby Indian Ocean port of Aden, an English translation of the French edition of Al-Minhaj was available by 1914.

In the following two sections, I examine the recitational and open identities of the fiqh-manual genre as a means of introducing some of the main features of the core discursive tradition. I elaborate upon the paradigmatic qualities of the Quran and make comparisons with the texts of the collateral science of hadith.

RECITATION

Writing is the outlining and shaping of letters to indicate audible words which, in turn, indicate what is in the soul. It comes second after oral expression.

IBN KHALID

Concise fiqh manuals were explicitly designed to be memorized. The extreme brevity of Abu Shuja‘a’s text was intended, as the author notes, to “facilitate its study for the educated and simplify its memorization for the beginning student.” Referring to a larger work summarized in his manual, al-Nawawi says, “Due to its great size, many contemporaries, except for the most dedicated, are unable to memorize it, and I therefore undertook to shorten it to about half that size to simplify its memorization.”

Recitation and memorization were at the foundation of Muslim pedagogy, in both literal and general methodological senses. In neighborhood Quranic schools in Ibb, as elsewhere in the Muslim world for many centuries, young children began their instructional lives by acquiring the sacred text by rote. The goal was recitation from memory, and the basic method was oral repetition, which was supported by the technology of the pupil’s individual lesson-board. The passage to be learned was written on the board, and once it was memorized the writing was washed off, to be replaced by the next passage to be acquired. A similar pattern was repeated at the higher academic level, in training in the shari’a, the principal subject matter of advanced instruction. At this level Ibb students worked to memorize basic manuals, such as Abu Shuja‘a’s Al-Mukhtasar and al-Nawawi’s Al-Minhaj.

Pedagogical activity, in primary instruction as in advanced work, proceeded ideally from an initial oral recitation (or dictation) by the
teacher to the listening student. The student later repeated the text segment on his own, often until memorization was achieved. Finally, returning to the teacher, the student endeavored to accurately reproduce the original recitation. Writing intervened in these procedures in facilitating the work of repetition; its role was decisive but understated. Manuscript copies were often made by advanced students in the course of study, but these were considered by-products of the learning process. Students eventually received licenses to teach, which entailed permission for risaya, the “oral transmission” of a particular text or texts through recitation.

The paradigm for this was the Quran. Received orally by a Prophet who, according to doctrine, could neither read nor write, the revelations contained in the Quran are considered the spoken Word of God. The textual character of the Quran is quite different from that of the Bible, or at least the Gospels, which are considered humanly authored and which constitute a “book” in a sense closer to the contemporary Western meaning. The Quran, by contrast, is a recitation-text. The Prophet was instructed by the Archangel Gabriel to “recite,” and the Quran, an extended “recitation,” was received by him and then orally recouenved in this way to his companions. As the Quran circulated in the world, recitations were repeated and memorized, the text was preserved in human hearts, and, in the event, a discursive style was set in place. The Quran’s written form, the physical text located “between the two covers,” would always be grounded in relation to its emphasized recitational identity. A century ago, Snouck Hurgronje urged Western scholars “to give up the erroneous translations of Quran by ‘reading,’ and [the root verb] qara’a by ‘to read.’” By attending to the revealed Word and recitational (versus read) qualities of the Quran, recent scholarship has begun to revise earlier assumptions about the identity of this sacred text as a book or scripture in the conventional Western sense.

If the links of recitational reproduction were crucial to the authoritative character of both teacher and transmission, they were essential as well beyond the lesson circle. Recitation (qira’a) is the mode in which the Quran figures in ritual life, and a recitational style also structures the articulation of basic shari’a principles in legal practice. Trained jurists such as shari’a court judges did not have to refer to written versions of authoritative legal manuals any more than professional Quran reciters (or ordinary individuals in prayer) had to “read” the Quran: both recalled the text directly from memory. Memorization of

at least a small portion of the Quran is essential to the performing of daily prayers, a hallmark of membership in the Muslim community. Although memorization of the whole Quran was highly valued, the minimum necessary for prayer is the brief first section known as the fa’itha, or “opening.” Unlike the restricted scholarly lineages associated with the authoritative texts of the intellectual disciplines, the “descent group” of the paradigmatic authoritative text comprised all those who identified themselves as Muslims. In contrast to this community-defining status, shari’a scholarship passed down narrow channels, through such men as Fagih al-Nahi of Ibb.

Elements of the recitational complex were set in place early on, in dialogue with a reciprocally constituted form of “writing.” A parallel to the patterned receipt and transmission of shari’a scholarship existed in the separate but closely associated scholarly discipline of hadith studies. The most significant hadiths report on the words or actions of the Prophet Muhammad and are, therefore, crucial in ascertaining his sunna, the statements and acts that represent his authoritative practice. Like the memorized and recited Quran, the once only orally transmitted hadith reports were also set down in written recensions, but this occurred despite specific Prophetic orders (also in the form of hadiths) to the contrary. Those who would undertake the recording of such reports had to contend with contradictory dictums (e.g., “Abu Sa’id al-Khudra said: ‘I asked the Prophet permission to write the hadith down but he refused it’”; “Do not write down anything from me except the Quran. He who has noted down anything from me apart from the Quran must erase it”); but, on the contrary, “Abed Allah b. ‘Amr asked the Prophet permission to write the report down. It was granted!”, and, generally, “Commit knowledge to writing”). Some early scholars held it was forbidden to place hadith reports in writing; others advocated memorization and cautioned about the unreliability of writing. One warned: “Strive eagerly to obtain hadiths and get them from the men themselves, not from written records, lest they be affected by the disease of corruption of the text.” The recording process went forward, but only after a century during which such reports were transmitted by exclusively oral means. As had occurred when the Quran was set down in a definitive written text, the human interventions to preserve such reports in writing were fraught with intracommunity conflict. Collections of reports of established authenticity became the foundational works in the field of hadith studies.

In Ibb such studies were integral to scholarly activity. For example,
another of the town’s twelfth-century cohort of scholars was a renowned specialist in hadith, nicknamed Sayf al-Sunna ("Sword of the Sunna"). In the year 1184, he traveled from Ibb to Mecca to hear the recitation of one of the most authoritative of all hadith collections, a work known as the Sahih, by Muslim b. Hajaj (d. 875). Returning to Ibb, Sayf al-Sunna taught this text in the same recitational way he had received it, licensing in his turn a number of regional scholars to transmit it to their own students.

As the field of hadith scholarship developed, the essential critical activity was to sift authentic from fabricated reports. Methodological emphasis in this discipline was placed on the close scrutiny of the individual transmitters. Since reports were initially handed down orally, attention was focused on the character and circumstances of the human links in the “chain” (imād) of transmission. It was said that “knowing hadith reports means knowing the men.” The reliability of a handed-down oral report of what the Prophet had said or done depended on the existence of an unbroken and unimpeachable series of reputable and reliable word-of-mouth transmitters. A “science of men” (ilm al-rija‘), as it was called, grew up at the center of hadith studies, influencing also the early development of biographical histories. The parallel orientation in the discipline of shar‘ scholarship is indicated by Fāqih al-Nāhil’s previously cited statement that “between me and the author are two men.” In later centuries, the great length of intellectual genealogies as well as breaks in their links would contribute to local crises of textual authority.

Both a whole fiqh manual and the one or more sentences of the typical hadith report were referred to as a mutna‘. “basic text.” Manuals and individual reports shared a kind of textuality in which writing, or the text in its written form, was considered secondary and supplementary. The privileging of the recited word over the written text and an associated concern with the specific connections of oral-aural transmission marked both genres of authoritative text. Paradoxically, these distinctive attitudes grew up within the context of an encompassing literate tradition and a thoroughgoing social reliance on writing. Walter Ong (1982: 26) has written that Muslim cultures “never fully interiorized” writing. Both Ong and Jack Goody (1968: 14) refer to such privileging of recitational forms as “oral residues,” features indicative of a “still” partly oral society. But this recitational emphasis is perhaps better understood as a complex motif of a fully realized type of civilizational literacy. Muslim societies elaborated diverse, historically specific textual worlds, central elements of which were their particular understandings, and relative valuations, of the recited and the written. It is only with the application of Western-modeled yardsticks for complex forms of literacy and for universal (evolutionary) routes of oral-to-written shifts that cases such as the Muslim one can be made to appear incomplete, marked by residuals, or stalled in development.

One version of the divine-to-human transition was in the specific relation, and movement, of recited word to written text. Although there are major differences in structure and history, the associated Muslim attitude toward writing may be initially compared to one Derrida (1974) has detected in the Western tradition, beginning with Plato and continuing down to such figures as Rousseau and Saussure. According to Derrida, concrete writing has been consistently denigrated while a metaphorical writing, a kind of natural or divine inscription associated with the spirit, the voice, and speech has been exalted. In relation to this primacy of the spoken word, concrete writing was considered exterior instead of interior, human instead of divine, and artificial rather than natural. Consonant with the central Western metaphysical concern for “presence,” speech was deemed the valued locus of truth, the means of direct voicing of the spirit, and, for Saussure, the proper focus of scientific linguistics. Writing—secondary, representational, supplementary—was frequently condemned as evil or contaminating. As such philosophical, theological, and theoretical positions were taken, however, it was concrete or “fallen writing” that was the consistent medium of intellectual discourse.

In Muslim societies, a culturally specific logoscentrism, as Derrida terms this privileging of the spoken word, has had widespread institutional implications, many of which are connected to the recitational cast of the basic texts. In its varied forms, recitation purported to convey an authoritative genuineness of expression by replicating an originally voiced presence. Recitational logoscentrism went hand in hand with a concern about the problem of authorial absence in certain written texts. While recitation was thought to maintain a reliable constancy of meaning, the secondary medium of writing was seen as harboring a prospect of misinterpretation. “Once a thing is put into writing,” as Plato has Socrates say in the Phaedrus (1952: 158), “the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place.” Extending the authority-giving presence of an original author to other places and times would be the work not only of recitational devices but also of writing. In written form, however, the general misreadability of the