Concluding remarks: from the aural to the read

In their procedures for teaching and for transmitting knowledge, the disciplines of Islamic scholarship in the early and classical periods, from the late seventh century to the tenth century, are characterised by the coexistence of oral dissemination on the one hand, and dissemination based on writing on the other, with a shift in practice, over the course of time, from the former, the aural, to the latter, the read. Did such a coexistence characterise the eleventh and later centuries, when the madrasah, or college of law, came to dominate formal academic instruction? It is reasonable to wonder whether transmission through personal contact and audition could survive when actual books were circulating on a very large scale.

Aural transmission in fact persisted, not only as an ideal, but also in practice: reading books under study our loud (i.e. samā', audition proper) survived, and dictated lectures (i.e. imāl, another kind of audition) survived. Audition continued to be practised and held in high esteem, primarily in the field of Ḥadīth, but also in other traditional disciplines, such as law, exegesis, history, grammar, poetry, adab, even medicine and (though later, and more rarely) natural sciences and philosophy. The difference was that audition in the age of the madrasah always relied on a written text, a manuscript of the work under study. It is true that explanations of the text could be provided by the professor from memory, without notes, but very often these comments were written down by the students and included in their own copies, as marginal notes, glosses, or even formed the basis of a new work, a commentary, or sub-commentary, compiled by the student and published under his own name. Audition (sama') even generated a new document (and procedure), namely the appearance of a large number of certificates of audition (iżāba al-samā', or just samā') in numerous manuscripts; these first appeared at the beginning of the eleventh century and proliferated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The names cited in these certificates include those of the teacher in whose presence the reading was done (al-shaykh al-musāim), of the one doing the reading (al-qādir), sometimes identical with the teacher, and of the auditors (al-mustamīn). It was not ownership of a manuscript that autho-

ised transmission of a given work, but participation in audition that did so; thus it often happened that auditors did not make a personal written copy of a given work until they wanted to make use of their authorisation to transmit it further. The session during which a Ḥadīth collection was read out loud was even considered a ceremony by the auditors, one in which they saw themselves through the uninterrupted chain of authorised transmitters — as directly and personally linked to the Prophet Muhammad, the originator of the traditions they recited.

The value accorded to the spoken word would remain a feature of the Islamic Middle Ages, not only in the transmission of knowledge and of poetry but also in other areas of intellectual and artistic culture. One example is the liturgical recitation of the Qur'ān and the overwhelming effect it provoked in its listeners; another is the recognition by Muslim jurists of the probative value of written texts only when the contents were orally corroborated by trustworthy witnesses.

And yet, books, writing and literacy had long since carried the day. In most of the 'ulamā' ghātim (the so-called 'ancient sciences'), in the natural sciences, in philosophy and in dialectical theology (kalām), literacy and written transmission had been predominant from the outset, i.e. around the end of the eighth century. Instruction and learning in these sciences were essentially private in nature and conducted on the basis of written texts, though in the age of the madrasah, under the influence of the teaching system in the traditional disciplines, audition was occasionally also practised in philosophical and scientific instruction. In adab, or belles-lettres, the 'turn' to literacy had taken place in the ninth century at the latest; al-Jāḥiẓ, Ibn Abī al-Dunya' and others had published actual books in large numbers and for a broad readership, one occasioned by the very availability of paper and books. The fact that al-Jāḥiẓ preferred books to oral and aural communication when instructing his audience is clear from his statement: 'You will get more knowledge out of one book in a month than you could acquire from men's mouths in an age.' The same stance, seen from the perspective of al-Jāḥiẓ's readership, was expressed by the caliph al-Ma'ānir who is reported to have declared about one of al-Jāḥiẓ's works, 'This is a book which does not require the presence of the author (to be understood), and needs no advocate.'

Another sign of the impact of literacy was the emergence and spread of the iżāba (licence'), a method in which the student did not need to have (had) any contact with the teacher, but was nevertheless authorised to transmit everything that the latter had compiled. We have seen that even al-Bukhārī had already given students such licences in the ninth century, and that from the tenth century on, scholars increasingly issued iżābas. The fact that the practice of dictation sessions fell time and again out of use and that the traditionalists and
jurists consequently had to insist on maintaining it, or reviving it, was a sign of the decline of aural transmission. 14

There is another development that shows that the main emphasis in the transmission procedures in the traditional disciplines had shifted, namely the urgently felt need – in the thirteenth century, at the latest – for something akin to critical editions of authoritative texts in Hadith, the oral and aural discipline par excellence in Islamic scholarship. As Johann Puszk pointed out in an important article, the eminent scholar Ibn al-Shālah (d. 643/1245), author of the standard work in the field of Hadith science, had to admit that in his time, and for generations before him, the uninterrupted chain of transmitters (isnad) was no longer a guarantee that one was in the presence of reliable texts; Ibn al-Shālah expressed the view that scholars were holding on to the isnad for the sole reason that they regarded it as a characteristic and exclusively Islamic feature of scholarship. 15 From this Ibn al-Shālah concluded that the only way to have (and recover) an authentic and reliable text was to collate as many correct manuscripts of the different extant recensions of a work as possible.

Ibn al-Shālah’s call was answered by the traditionist al-Yununī (d. 701/1301), who prepared a ‘critical edition’ of al-Bukhārī’s Sahih. As Rosemarie Quiring-Zoche has pointed out in a detailed study of al-Yununī and his Rūmuz ‘alā Sahih al-Bukhārī, collating various manuscripts, al-Yununī left a copy of the Sahih [the so-called Yamiryyah] which was probably very close to the original … Containing variants with notes and signs in a critical apparatus, it was less suited for transmission by reading and listening. 16 All the texts of the Sahih available today are likely based on the Yamiryyah. The most eminent traditionists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Ibn Hajar al-’Askālānī, al-’Aynī and al-Qāṭālīnī, followed in al-Yununī’s footsteps, each producing a recension of al-Bukhārī’s work on the basis of different manuscripts. 17 What is more, they wrote lengthy commentaries on the Sahih, showing that they were cognizant of the written character of the work, just as the commentators of the Kitāb of Shihāb al-Dīn al-’Aqā, and the Kād al-Amthāl of Abī ‘Ubayd had done.

The growing awareness of the need to establish correct texts was felt in other fields too. It is true that the correction of texts often took place in teaching sessions, during the process of audition and recitation, when students checked their own copies against the text being recited. Far more often, however, the scribe or owner of a manuscript simply collated his copy with one or two other copies; he would then write the variants in the margins of his own copy. Consequently, many manuscripts include such notes of collation (mu’taqalāh, muqāblatāh), 18 an īṭtāḥ to transmit a book further could also be given through such a muqāblatāh. 19

Concluding remarks: from the aural to the read

Very few cultures in the world have literatures that can compare with the vastness of Arabic literature. So much was written in Arabic that in spite of periodic attempts to catalogue this phenomenal output – Ibn al-Nadīm in the tenth century, for example, Hājjī Khalīfah in the seventeenth century and, in recent times, Carl Brockelmann and Fuat Sezgin 20 – we still do not have an inventory of everything that was written. All in all, only a tiny part of this enormous literature was ever transmitted personally and by audition. In practice, as this book has tried to show, Islamic scholarship and Arabic literature both transitioned, irrevocably and irreversibly, from the oral to the written – from the aural to the read.

Notes

1 For remarks on the origins of this Islamic system of transmission (indigenous development and, or aspects borrowed from an other tradition), see Schoeler, The Oral and the Written, pp. 42 ff.


5 See Chapter 3 above.


7 For Plato’s defense of the spoken word, see Phaidros (Stephanus) 735a–776a; for an English translation, see Plato, Phaedrus, tr. C. J. Rowe, rev. edn (Warminster, 2000), pp. 133 ff; cf. Schoeler, The Oral and the Written, pp. 85–5.


Glossary

adab General culture and refinement; belles-lettres; writerly culture. Also, more generally, conduct; good manners; professional knowledge.
adhib pl. adhāb A cultured man of letters; a practitioner of writerly culture.
Anār Lit. ‘Helper’; the Medinan followers and supporters of the Prophet Muhammad.
‘arabiyah ‘Pure’ Arabic, notably the language of ancient poetry and the Qur’ān.
‘ard see qur’āh Companion Someone who knew or met the Prophet Muhammad (Ar. ṣāḥib, pl. ṣāḥāb).
dawān, pl. dawāwīn The collected poetic works of a poet, or tribe; a chancery.
jāhīr Systematic study of Divine Law, or Shari‘ah.
ḥadīth Lit. ‘saying’, a tradition about the words or deeds of the Prophet Muhammad or one of his companions; also, the whole corpus or genre of such traditions; report.
ḥalāqah (or ḥalaqāt), pl. ḥalaqāt Study circle; teaching circle.
hypomnēma, pl. hypomnēmatâ (Gk) Notes, notebook, aide-mémoire.
įtāš Authorisation to transmit, sometimes granted by a letter in which case the student need not read or have read the authorised work with the teacher granting the authorisation.
‘ilm Lit. ‘knowledge, science’; frequently refers to knowledge of the Hadith corpus.
imālā Dictation; dictation session.
isnād A chain of transmitters who transmit a report or account, especially in the field of Ḥadīth.
kāšīb Any piece of writing, e.g. a note, letter, contract, inscription, book.
kāshāh A method of transmission dependent on the authorised written copy of a work.
μαγάθα: Lit. 'campaigns', but in fact more generally, life of the Prophet.
μαγία, pl. μαγίας: Lit. 'a place of sitting'; a scholarly session for discussion or instruction; a literary gathering.
μουδάκαρα: Recitation from memory by a student; a session during which students repeat and review hadiths.
μουνωδά: A method of transmission in which the teacher entrusts his student with his autograph manuscript or with a collated copy.
μουκβάλα: Collation, i.e. textual comparison of a manuscript with another of the same work.
μουμακμαμ, pl. μουμακμαμίν: A work systematically subdivided into thematic chapters.
μουμακμαμ, pl. μουμακμαμίν: A compiler of a μουμακμαμ.
μουμακμαμίν: μουμακμαμάδ: A copy or 'codex' of the Qur'an.
μουμιάλ: pl. μουμιάλ: A work in which traditions or hadiths are organised according to the names of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad who initially transmitted them; the Companions are often arranged chronologically by date of conversion to Islam.
μουτι, pl. μουτι: Reciter (Lit. 'reader') of the Qur'anic text.
μουτι: A method of transmission in which the student recites or reads the text with (i.e. in the presence of) a teacher.
μουτι: In grammar, rule; later, analogical deduction.
μουτί, pl. μουτί: A transmitter, a person entrusted with the recitation and transmission of a poet's works.
μουτι: A learned transmitter of poetry; often synonymous with μουτί.
μουτί, pl. μουτί: A personal juridical opinion (lit. 'view').
μουτιλα: pl. μουτιλα: Letter, epistle.
μουτιλα: Transmission of knowledge; a chain of transmission at the beginning of a manuscript.
μουτιλα: μουτιλα: Lit. 'transmission through words', i.e. transmission in which the exact wording is scrupulously followed; verbatim transmission.
μουτιλα: μουτιλα: Lit. 'transmission through meaning', i.e. transmission in which only the sense of the text is preserved.
μουτιλα: or μουτιλα: pl. μουτιλα: (or μουτιλα: or μουτιλα: or μουτιλα: or μουτιλα:) A person whose knowledge derives solely from books or notebooks.
μουτιλα: Audition. A method of transmission in which the student ('auditor') listens to ('audits') the text recited by the teacher. Also a certificate or endorsement of 'audition', attesting to this.
μουτιλα: Comment.
μουτιλα: or μουτιλα: or μουτιλα: Elder, tribal chief, teacher.
μουτιλα: The belief that Arabs are not superior to other Muslim peoples.
μουτιλα: pl. μουτιλα: (Gk) A consciously literary work, an actual book.
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Abbreviations

AGAHK Abū Ṣa‘īd al-Khalīlī, Kitāb al-Iṣbaḥānī, 20 vols (Bulaq, 1285 H [= 1868]).

AKM Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes.


Fihrist Kitāb al-Fihrist al-Nadim, ed. R. Tajaddod (Teheran, n.d. [†1393 H = 1973]).


JA Journal asiatique.

JAL Journal of Arabic Literature.


JRSA Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.

JSAS Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam.

RSO Rītītsa degli Studi Orientali.


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