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Paralinguistic Ramification of Language Performance in Islamic Ritual

Michael Frishkopf

Ritual practice is a powerful social force molding psychological, sociocultural, and spiritual realities, capable of adapting to dynamic environments to maintain its multiple functions. As ritual practices trace paths across social space and time, changes are induced—intentionally or not—in response to different environments: the personnel and social context of performance, language, ideology, and other cultural factors. The result is a branching structure—what I call “ramification”—as ritual practices subdivide and localize, though, due to similar environmental conditions, as well as the impact of globalization, branches may converge or diffuse widely as well.

That structure therefore maps those environments, both reflectively and formatively, as a model of and model for living in the world. Analyzing and comparing rituals, we deepen our understanding of their environments while illuminating the ritual process itself, in the tradition of ritual studies.

What is the distribution of ritual practices, and how can it be interpreted in relation to individuals, performance contexts, societies, and cultures? How does ritual achieve its psychological, sociocultural, and spiritual impact? In order to answer such questions, we require, first of all, a holistic, integrative understanding of the ritual phenomena under consideration.

For Islam, that means comprehending the nature of the vocal performance lying at the core of every ritual. While such performance appears to exhibit features of both “speech” and “song,” it should not be classified according to these categories—not even along the putatively liminal continuum between them. Rather, such performance should primarily be understood as comprising the performance of language, fusing a linguistic-referential and a paralinguistic-expressive component.


3 In this article I use the singular “Islam” (with “Islamic”) in a generalized sense, while underscoring its encompassed diversity, fully cognizant of the oft-observed dangers of reifying a concept covering such a vast scope of varied beliefs and practices. As an anthropologist engaged in local ethnography, I might refrain from doing so, or even affirm that there is no singular “Islam.” But from the perspective of religious studies, and especially when engaging the present topic, such usage cannot be avoided: I am attempting to understand patterns and connections across a coherent yet wide, even contradictory, range of related ritual phenomena. A concise name is required precisely because such a connected diversity cannot otherwise be discussed or even recognized. In my view, these connections—structural, semantic, and historical, which are recognized by a global community of Muslims, as well as contemporary discourse (of Muslims and non-Muslims alike)—support its use. As Shahab Ahmed has noted, coherence does not presuppose essence, and proponents of the anti-reification “Islams” position have not explained how a plural can exist without a singular; see Shahab Ahmed, What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 136.
The logic behind this imperative does not stem from a familiar argument (frequently invoked by ethnomusicologists) that “song” should never be used to describe Islamic ritual simply because Muslims reject the concept as a descriptor of Islamic practice, as is well known from the literature. For the most part (English-speaking Muslims excepted, a category that until relatively recently comprised virtually nobody), it is not the English word *song* that is rejected, but rather its (ostensible) synonyms in the many languages of the Muslim world. Arabic-speaking Muslims do not describe ritual vocal performance as *ghināʾ* (approximately, “song”); to do so would be taken as not merely a linguistic error but a moral one as well.

One might, however, set out to use “song” in a purely “etic” sense, according to a “scientific” definition, as a technical term to be shared across cultural, religious, and linguistic boundaries, presumably without contradicting local classificatory schemata. A similar etic definition could be formulated for “speech.”

Thus “song” could be taken to represent instances of vocality displaying a minimal degree of tonal and temporal consistency (lest “song” become “speech”), whereas speech would display maximal degrees of consistency (lest “speech” become “song”). We would thereby lose sight of the cognitive schema implied by a local taxonomy of concepts, but we would also gain analytical and comparative power. What could be the objection to that?

But application of the “speech-song” model to Islamic ritual practice remains problematic even when conceived etically. For this model distorts understanding by dividing a deeply interconnected network of vocal-linguistic-ritual phenomena through imposition of two categories whose boundaries—however defined—are largely irrelevant to the sonic ritual phenomena under investigation, while mis/underrepresenting the intervening “liminal” zone (reduced to a hyphen), as a one-dimensional, uncharted negative space of secondary importance between the *terra cognita* of the two poles. Such a model artificially separates related phenomena, while obscuring the coherent category centered on the hyphenated middle, whose scope is marked by performed language, and which is central to Islamic ritual as well.

Widening the observational lens to its maximal aperture, one observes the ritual centrality of that category, what I call “language performance,” deriving from the theological centrality of sacred texts and their referential meanings. Language performance spans all ritual genres, each one combining linguistic (mainly referential, symbolic, discursive, cognitive) and paralinguistic (mainly non-referential, continuous, affective, expressive, performative) aspects. Each genre exhibits instances scattered throughout the “liminal” space between “speech” and “song.” All are inextricably linked to Islam’s originary sources, primarily Qur’an and Hadith, and thence to each other. Linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of

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4 See, for example, Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), chap. 3: “The Samā‘ Polemic.”


each ramified at some point in Islamic history. But whereas linguistic aspects—discretely encoding discursive principles of Muslim belief—tended to rigidify, paralinguistic aspects remained comparatively fluid, adapting to environmental change without contradicting the verbal foundations of faith.

Focusing on the contrast between linguistic and paralinguistic aspects, rather than between speech and song, is thus of crucial importance in understanding Islamic ritual. Yet Islamic studies has devoted insufficient attention to the distinction between the two, and especially to the latter.

Ritual in Islam

Despite several excellent synopses and focused monographs, articles, and encyclopedia entries, Islamic studies has, on the whole, neglected ritual as compared to scholarship on history, law, literature, philosophy, mysticism, theology, art, and architecture—despite the frequent observation that Islam is a religion of orthopraxy more than orthodoxy.

More critically, even when the scholarly focus, ritual appears primarily as a linguistic form, neglecting paralinguistic features transcending textual formulations. Scant attention has been paid to the situated ethnography of ritual performance, though performance is absolutely central to Muslim experience and to the social significance of Islamic ritual as an adaptive phenomenon.

Unsurprisingly, exceptions tend to occur in ethnomusicology, if not exclusively so.

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though this literature is comparatively small, and music studies has tended to neglect phenomena for which an aesthetic dimension is not primary. The language performance phenomenon thus falls between disciplinary cracks. Equally important, most studies do not take up the role of language performance in Islamic ritual as a whole.

What is “ritual” in Islam? This English word, like “song” a foreign one for most Muslims, corresponds to multiple terms in Arabic, Islam’s sacred language, all rough equivalents or subtypes but none identical in semantic scope. Some identify specific ritual phenomena by text, theme, purpose, occasion, or mode of performance, while others are broader; some are complete rituals, others ritual elements.

Thus: ’ibāda (worship); ṭuqūs (rite, ritual); dhikr (remembrance of God generally, including short phrases [adhkār] used in prayer as well as daily life); salāh (canonical prayer—often namāz outside the Arab world—comprising movement sequences [rakaʾ āʾ] accompanied by Qur’anic recitations and adhkār), daily supererogatory prayers of the same type (e.g., sunna prayers preceding or following the canonical ones; tahajjud at night), and special prayers (e.g., tarāwīh in Ramadan, Eid prayers, funeral prayers); adhān and iqāma (calls to prayer); tilāwa, qirāʾa, tajwīd, tārīl (Qur’anic recitation); khutba (Friday sermon, typically incorporating adhkār and tilāwa); duʿāʾ (plural, adʿiyya), tawassul, ibtihāl (supplication); istighfār (request for forgiveness); ṣalawāt (requests for blessings on the Prophet); hajj and ’umra (pilgrimage to Mecca); manāsik (ceremonies, rituals, especially for pilgrimage); takbīr, tashbih, tahmıd (praise of God); mādīḥ, naʿt (praise of the Prophet or saints); inshād dīnī or anāshīd diniyya (poetic religious hymnody); mawlid (celebration of Prophet’s or saints’ birthdays); ḥadra, dhikr, wīnd, ḥizb, manzūma (components of Sufi ritual).

These named ritual practices themselves exhibit a certain degree of intersection, ambiguity, and inclusion (thus salāh contains duʿāʾ, tārīl, and adhkār; duʿāʾ includes the more specific supplications’ ṣalawāt and istighfār); their names, unruly overlaps, intertextual connections, and ambiguous definitions condense multiple factors of history, language, region, use, meaning, and function, rather than presenting a logical framework for analysis. Each culturally specific constellation reflects an emic ontology of inherent interest, yet without precluding use of the broader, if etic term “ritual” as a means of illuminating relationships among multiple types, highlighting what they share, and how they differ.

Islamic Ritual Centers on Sacred Language: Performance of an Intertext

Each of the aforementioned ritual types centers on language performance, featuring wide paralinguistic variation. Certainly Islamic ritual includes more than language. There are sacred movements (rukuʾ and sujūd, bowing and prostrating of ordinary prayer; tawāf or circumambulation of the Kaʿba); there are sacred times (daily prayers, weekly jumʿa (Friday) prayer, midmonthly “white days” (ayyām al-bayḍ), the annual hajj, the two Eids, birthdays of Prophet and saints), and sites (the

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12 For an exhaustive enumeration and explication of these forms, see Constance E. Padwick, Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use (London: SPCK, 1961).
mosques at Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem), and a sacred direction (toward the Ka’ba).

But accompanying every such action, at the spiritual core of every ritual, is the vocalized word (kalima)—a performed text and a hearing, a means of remembrance through dhikr—a word itself significantly combining dual meanings of “remembrance” and “mention”—affirming and restoring one’s connection to God. In particular, every ritual act is validated by a verbal niyya (intention), and even ostensibly nonlinguistic rituals (fasting, circumambulating) are accompanied by ad’iyya, adhkār, salāh, and other verbalizations.

Islam is relatively flexible in its ritual conditions. Generally, one can pray anywhere and anytime; anyone may serve as prayer leader (imam); no special paraphernalia are required. While ornate mosques, beautiful prayer rugs, exquisite prayer beads, professional reciters and imams may be deployed, they are unnecessary; Islamic prayer requires no special architecture, equipment, or clergy. Even the sequence of body postures (rak’a)—standing, bowing, prostrating, sitting—comprising the salāh prayer cycle is not absolutely required; movements can be reduced to gestures or “intentions of gestures,” 13 as circumstances require. The traveling, aged, or infirm are permitted to sit in a chair or even to lie down. But vocalized language is indispensable, the unified core of ritual.

Why? Because Islam itself centers on language. Theologically prior to all other ritual is a “word,” kalimat al-tawhid, or “word of unity”: la ilāha illā Allāh—nothing is to be worshipped except God, often reduced, for the Sufi, to a single syllable of pure aspiration, hu (He).

The uttered word is so central in Islam that it defines a relation to God in both directions—Divine revelation of the Word mundanely repeated by humankind in prayer, echoing word from Word. And Word is transmitted through vocalization and hearing more than seeing. Indeed, throughout the Qur’an (literally, “recitation”), God is al-Samī’—the All-Hearing, a name nearly always followed by al-ʿAlīm—the All-Knowing, for knowledge is through hearing, expressed in word:

The word of your Lord is complete in its truth and justice. No one can change His words: He is the All Hearing, the All Knowing. (Q6:115) 14

As Abraham and Ishmael built up the foundations of the House [they prayed], ‘Our Lord, accept [this] from us. You are the All Hearing, the All Knowing.’ (Q2:127) 15

Every bodily action of Islamic ritual constitutes a form whose meaning is expressed in sanctified linguistic utterances. Two of the most frequent ritual acts—supplicatory prayer (du’ā’) and Qur’anic recitation (tilāwa)—are entirely verbal. Furthermore, ritual texts are all intertextually connected via quotation, inclusion, or theme, forming a single coherent intertext.

The centrality of language performance is not surprising considering that the entire religion


14 In this article, references to the Qur’an are marked QX:Y, where X is the chapter (sura) and Y is the verse (āya). Translations are from M. Abdel Haleem, The Qur’an: A New Translation (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

15 The Ka’ba at Mecca.

16 It is noteworthy that God is named “All-Hearing” in the Qur’an 41 times; of these, 31 deploy the combination al-Samī’ and al-ʿAlīm (All-Hearing, All-Knowing). He is named as All-Seeing (al-Baṣīr) 12 times; the word is often coupled with al-Samī’ but never with al-ʿAlīm (Hanna E. Kassis, A Concordance of the Qur’an [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983]). Perhaps Qur’anic knowledge inheres in hearing more than seeing (contrast, in English: “I see that” vs. “I hear that”).
is founded on two key sacred compilations of utterance, emanating from Islam’s two central figures, God (Allah) and His messenger (rasūlah), Prophet Muhammad. Respectively, these are: (1) the Qur’an (“recitation”), God’s Speech (kalām Allāh), delivered through the archangel Jabril (Gabriel) to Muhammad, beginning with the command “recite!” (iqra’; Q96:1); and (2) Hadith (“conversation”), précis of the Prophet’s speech and action as recounted by companions and passed down, the basis for sunna (prophetic custom) shaping all ritual practices. Further, these utterances are so closely identified with their utterers that they stand for the sacred figures themselves.

According to the dominant Ash’ari theology, the Qur’an is not a book of God’s creation, a mere message (risāla) to Muhammad. Rather, the Qur’an is an uncreated Attribute of God Himself, His Speech and Knowledge, after its “heavenly archetype” (al-lahw al-mahfūz, the Preserved Tablet). God is the Word, identified with the Qur’an’s 99 Names (asmaʿ Allāh al-ḥusnā) referencing His attributes and by which the Qur’an asks that He be called (Q7:180; Sufis use several of these Names—particularly: hu, ḥayy, qayyūm, quddūs—to remember, name, and evoke Him in dhikr).

God is infinite Spoken Word, that is, Language performed, which can never be written down in its entirety, a message the Qur’an instructs the Prophet to deliver to mankind:

Say [Prophet], “If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted”—even if We were to add another ocean to it. (Q18:109)

God’s power of creation inheres in His spoken word, the simple imperative “Be!”:

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth, and when He decrees something, He says only, “Be,” and it is. (Q2:117)

Likewise, the Prophet is analogized to sacred language performed, a messenger (rasūl) receiving and carrying a revelatory message (risāla), orally impressed not only on his memory but on his very being. He thereby becomes, for many Muslims, a living Qur’an.

Mystical interpretations of Revelation uphold the Prophet’s illiteracy as a touchstone of Qur’anic authenticity, a metaphorical “virginity” whose miraculous relation to the Qur’an revealed into him is analogous to the virgin birth of Jesus through Mary. The illiterate Prophet was like a blank tablet upon which the oral Qur’an could be impressed—via recitation—without distortion, a pure matrix for the Divine Word that shaped him. In a famous hadith, Sayyida Aisha (one of the Prophet’s wives), asked about the Prophet’s character, replied: “his

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17 These are further affirmed in the shahāda, verbal testimony of Faith. The illocutionary shahāda, recited to newborn infants and at every prayer (ṣalāḥ), also suffices for conversion: “asshadu an la ilāha illsa Allah wa asshadu an Muhammadan ’abdhu hu wa rasūlah (I testify that only God is to be worshipped, and I testify that Muhammad is his servant and messenger). On “illocutionary,” see J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).


19 Esposito, What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam, 11.

character was the Qur’an” (kāna khuluqīh al-Qur‘ān).

Likewise, the Qur’an absorbs the Prophet, frequently addressing him in the second person (e.g., Q47:16), praising him (Q33:21), and calling for his blessing (Q33:56).

The Qur’an is an essentially oral, intangible text—language performed—its writing subsidiary. This status is underscored by its name (Qur’an, “recitation”), by the distinction between Qur’an and mushaf (its written representation), and by Hadith. According to the latter, Jabril taught the Prophet to recite Qur’an; God loves to hear the Prophet recite it; the Prophet loved to hear it recited; he praised those who recite with beautiful voices; he called for all to recite and receive spiritual rewards; indeed, the Qur’an calls for its own recitation (Q73:4).

But the embodiment of performed language is not limited to the Prophet, since his sunna is commended to all. The hāfiz (memorizer) has committed the recitational Book to memory, a stupendous feat not infrequently achieved in childhood. To perform ordinary prayer (salāh), one must internalize language, including requisite adhkar (e.g., takbir, tasmi’, tashahhud, shahāda) and at least two Qur’anic verses (the Fātiha and another). Many ad’iyya, as well as other prayers (e.g., Sufi hizb), are composed of elements extracted primarily from the Qur’an, some of whose verses are themselves often recited as ad’iyya (e.g., Q2:127, itself referencing recitation, partially quoted above, and Q2:286: “Lord, do not take us to task if we forget or make mistakes . . .”).

Beyond content, language also serves to prescribe performance through discursive specifications of structure, timing, sequencing, and pronunciation. Prescriptions appear in the Qur’an as exhortations (e.g., Q33:41: Ya’ayyuhu alladhīna āmanū udhkurū Allāhā dhikrūn kathīrūn, “Believers, remember God often” to perform dhikr; Q33:56: inna Allāhā wa malā’ikatahu yuṣallīnā ’alā al-nabī, ya’ayyuhu alladhīna āmanū sallū ’alayhi wa sallīmū taslīma, “God and His angels bless the Prophet—oh you who believe, bless him and give him greetings of peace” to perform ṣalawāt; Q73:4: rattal al-Qur‘ān tartīlan to recite Qur’an). The Qur’an recommends du’ā’ as the principal form of worship (Q40:60).

Then there is that other great compendium of utterances, Hadith (“narrative,” “talk,” “conversation”), describing the Prophet’s words and deeds, each introduced by a validating chain (isnād) of quoted speech, itself a form of language performance (e.g.: “X said that ‘I heard Y say that ‘I heard Z say that the Prophet said . . .’”). Thus filtered through the Community (Umma), Hadith is crucial to Qur’anic interpretation, and constitutive of religious ritual. Both the call to prayer—adhān (“announcement,” cf. Qur’an 9:3)—and prayer itself are linked thematically, textually, and prescriptively to the Qur’an, but details come from Hadith (Bukhari’s Sahih contains whole sections devoted to each type of ibādāt).23 The Prophet lives through Hadith: a corpus by which all Muslims have come to know and love him, one that is incessantly quoted aloud, which assumes his stature and becomes his presence.

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21 Ibid., 57–58.

22 Bukhari, and Muslim, English Translation Hadith of Sahih Bukhari and Muslim: English–Arabic (Birmingham, UK: Dar as-Sunnah, 2016): Bukhari 4991, 4998, 5023, 5049; Muslim 1845, 1851, 1856, 1862, 1867, 1872, 1874.

23 Ibid.: salāh in chaps. 8, 9, 10; adhān in chap. 11.
Ritual practices traced to the Qur’an and Hadith are often interpreted and represented through specialized books, for instance as formulated in explanations of ṣalāḥ,24 ḥākīm al-tajwīd, rules of reciting the Qur’an,25 and manāṣik al-ḥajj (hajj rituals).26 There are collections of ṣalawāt (blessings for the Prophet), most famously the Dalā’il al-Khayrāt of Muhammad Jazuli,27 for recitation. There are poems of wide currency—perhaps the “Burdā” of Busiri28 is most celebrated, and texts to be chanted for the Mawlid al-Nabi (especially Barzanji)29—varying in usage from regional to global. There are likewise extensive recitational traditions for each Sufi order (ṭarīqa)—especially the group litany (ḥizb or wīrd), rhymed blessings for the Prophet (salawāt), and special poetry collections (dawāwīn), often composed by a founder.30

Some genres exhibit more linguistic flexibility than others. Thus, the private du‘ā’ is a potentially free-form “intimate conversation” (munājāt) with God. In public the du‘ā’ is performed by an imam who permutes standard verbal formulae but may also add his own; famous dā‘is (public supplicants) thereby fashion a highly emotive personal style, enhanced by use of melodic sequences and emotive expressions; when performed congregationally, these engage a large number of people through collective responses, such as āmīn.

But even the relatively rule-bound congregational obligatory prayer (ṣalāh) exhibits some linguistic flexibility, since selection of Qur’an verses following the opening al-ʿĀthārīha is at the imam’s discretion.

All the many forms of Islamic worship and devotion are linked through these texts—whether serving to direct ritual, supply its textual content, or underscore its authority and legitimacy—themselves linked in a larger intertextual network. To appreciate the breadth and scope of that intertext, however, requires a broad view of Islamic ritual as centered on language performance.

Language and Ramification: Sound over Text

If Islamic ritual centers on language performance, how are its processes to be studied ethnographically? What makes such study rewarding is a deeper understanding of adaptive ramification, and the sociocultural meanings thereby disseminated through ritual performance.

Textual sanctity means that linguistic aspects are relatively fixed, while non-referential para-

linguistic aspects are relatively free. The possibility of fixity also rests on semiotics. The underlying language of ritual—spiritually charged chains of discrete signifiers and signifieds paired in semantic reference—can be disseminated over space and transmitted over time with comparatively little modification. Even in oral tradition, variation is constrained by this linkage of form and meaning, and by material inscriptions: discrete graphemes, inked on paper or chiseled in wood and stone.

While paradigmatic linguistic sequences admit a degree of permutational flexibility in performance, it is in their freer paralinguistic aspects—continuous, temporal, resisting linguistic specification, and nonreferential—that primary adaptive processes operate. Here is where one can analyze ritual dynamism as it unfolds in relation to culture at large, and where one can read the signs of localization most clearly.

In the case of the originary texts, ramification is most limited and has long since halted. At one extreme is the Qurʾan itself, a chain of signifiers, transmitted unchanged. The Qurʾan was revealed in seven aḥruf. Muslim scholars understand the purpose of this Divine ramification as addressing the multiple dialects of Arabic then current.31 The Qurʾan was then compiled as a single written text, the Uthmanic mushaf, after a standardization entailing the summary pruning of an increasingly ramified text.32 Supplemented with diacritical marks, the mushaf evolved into representations of the ten basic qirāʿāt (readings).33 These are absolutely fixed today.

Likewise, multiple collections of hadith were compiled, standardized, and written in the centuries after the life of the Prophet, mainly the seven canonical (ṣaḥīḥ) collections. Traditions of Islamic law also ramified early on as they were compiled, written, and transmitted, resulting, for instance, in the four “schools” (madhāhib) of Sunni law, and one predominant school (Jaʿfari) for the Shiʿa, but again the ramification process has halted today.

The language of the call to prayer (adḥān) evolved slightly differently in Sunni and Shiʿa contexts, but change has likewise ceased.34 More flexible are duʿāʾ and khuṭba, exemplifying recombinant elements, and new Sufi orders continue to develop textual materials (hizb, wīrd) out of such elements as well. At the other extreme of textual ramification are the myriad poetic expressions, faithfully replicating core themes (love for the Prophet, for instance),35 but everywhere formulated in locally meaningful language and metaphor.

Supported by a perception of sacrality, alongside writing, oral texts can even migrate beyond the borders of comprehension without change; the Qurʾan—always in Arabic and never translated as a sacred text—is the preeminent example, but poems like the “Būrdā” are also performed, verbatim, throughout the Muslim world in the original Arabic by those who do not understand the language.

Thus the linguistic content of Islamic ritual exhibits a limited degree of ramification, less responsive to the shifting sociocultural environ-

33 Ibid., 53.
34 Juynboll, “Adhan.” A telling exception was republican Turkey’s adaptation of Islamic ritual to Turkish nationalism; see below.
35 See Schimmel, And Muhammad Is His Messenger.
ments of its users, less readable by the scholar as indicative or transformative of local conditions, mainly completed early in Islamic history. The reverse is the case for paralinguistic features of ritual performance, which remain open to adaptive ramification to the present day.

**Paralinguistic Performance**

Vocal performance—rendering in sound, especially paralinguistic sound beyond basic phonetic articulations—is as important as the text itself. What is the underlying text, in any case? Not the fixity of words on the page (especially for oral traditions), and not their rendering as evanescent sounds, but something metaphysical (captured in Islamic cosmology by the notion of the Lawḥ al-Maḥfūẓ, the Preserved Tablet), perceptible only through inscription in the visual field, or recitation in the aural.

But whereas inscription is a largely technical act performed by small numbers of skilled, literate Muslims, vocal performance is a ritual act performed by all, as well as a social act of communication and transmission. To perform the text is to perform the ritual, to share and teach, to pass down. Instances of language performance are acts of worship, and they lie at the core of ritual, whether the talbiya or adʿiyya recited during hajj, the dhikr chanting of the Sufi ḥadra, the call to prayer, or recitation of the Qurʾan itself. Language performance, then, is the text’s primary mode of being, and accounts for its efficacy in ritual.

While some textual variation—more often, selection—is often possible, the centrality and authority of Islamic ritual language imply that scope for variation lies primarily in paralinguistic features only vaguely and incompletely regulated by texts providing linguistic content (e.g., Qurʾan) or performative rules (e.g., ʿāhkām al-tajwīd). Texts underspecify performance, resulting in “free variables” shaped by the ritual environment. The gap between “language” and “performance” is filled with sound. And it is paralinguistic sound, exceeding the bare phonetic requirements of linguistic communication, that exhibits the greatest degree of variability.

Generally, *discrete* texts are incapable of precisely specifying the myriad *continuous* variables of paralinguistic variation, including parameters of timbre (vocal sound quality), temporality (speed, pulse, accent), tonality (pitch sets, pitch functions, and melodic tendencies), ornament (tonal microstructure), melody (pitch sequence rules), and texture (the ways multiple voices combine). Textual specification of pitch and rhythm is especially difficult in Islamic ritual, which features ornamented, melismatic nonmetric vocalizations. But in Islamic practice, textual underspecification is also functional, reflecting the discursive centrality of textual content, alongside the spiritual importance of individual emotional engagement enabled through paralinguistic localization. Socially, such affective localization has facilitated Islam’s globalization, as language performance, carrying similar texts, adapts and develops affective power in each locale.

How does this happen? Sound is powerful because it is social and affective; that power is intensified through feedback. During performance, participants may vocally express internal affective states to principal performers, who respond by adjusting paralinguistic variables so as to intensify impact, a cybernetic loop culmin-

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ating in what I have termed “resonance.” Over time, resonant feedback leads to the emergence of local performative styles, each characterized by particular configurations of paralinguistic variables, adapted to their ritual environment, but without affecting discursive meaning. Throughout a range of paralinguistic recitational styles, the call to prayer (adhān), a Qur’anic verse (āya), or a supplication (du’ā) each expresses the same referential meanings.

Thus paralinguistic variables adapt and ramify for at least three reasons. First, because they are unconstrained by requirements of reference (whether of truth or request); second, because texts underdetermine them; third, because they powerfully express, shape, and unify emotion, amplifying collective ritual power through resonance.

Both linguistic and paralinguistic variation is evident, for instance, in congregational duʿā. The leader (dāʿī) may select from a wide range of possible texts or even compose his own in response to the performative situation.

Meanwhile, paralinguistic sound may be both highly melodic and strongly affective via emotional modulation of vocal timbre. During Ramadan, the month commemorating Revelation and marked by extensive Qur’anic recitations, a long call-response duʿā—known as qunūt—marking the final rak’a (the so-called witr, “odd”) of supererogatory night prayer (tarāwīḥ) generates tremendous emotion, especially during the Night of Power (Laylat al-Qadr), when the Qur’an was first revealed. At this time the dāʿī’s voice cracks as he is overcome with emotion, which quickly spreads, amplified by feedback loops. At times the ritual pauses in mass weeping as all face the reality of death, resurrection, and judgment.

While oral tradition may guide and constrain the paralinguistic domain—for example, the use of Arabic maqāmāt (heptatonic melodic modes) for many recitations—this is a matter of convention, not doctrine, and pentatonic modes also appear in Africa, or Indonesia. Provided comprehension is unaffected, manipulation of these free variables does not directly impact denotative meaning but only its affective halo (though connotative ideological meanings may also accrue). Such variables thus adapt to concentric circles of performance, social, and ideological context, particularly when performance enables formation of feedback loops (e.g., in responsorial settings).

Indeed, it is precisely via its non-discursive power that such paralinguistic sound, flying under the radar of reference, is emotionally empowered by its very unintelligibility, enjoying a freedom the text itself does not possess, and thereby encoding powerful, if inarticulate, meanings through expression or general association with ideological positions.

This freedom is even supported by Islamic doctrines affirming authentic expression, on the one hand, and the stature of the word, especially the Word of God in the Qur’an, on the other. Recitation should directly express the reciter’s true feeling in response to the Word; to set such a word to a fixed melody would be to challenge the Word’s sanctity. Thus improvisation is en-
shrined as the ideal mode of delivery.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, whereas Western church music is characterized by the development of increasingly accurate melodic specifications, such specifications are almost entirely absent in the Islamic tradition.

All these factors meant that each performance could adapt to its circumstances, so long as intelligibility of the word was maintained. Over time, with ramification, entirely distinct traditions could arise and even acquire meaning in juxtaposition. For example, while the Qur’an is one, its recitations are many, varying not just by individual reciter or occasion, but more broadly by culture area, social class, or religious ideology. These differences may begin as random fluctuations or absorptions of local culture leading to ramification. History has not recorded the process, but one can imagine, for instance, Islam entering West Africa via Arabic-speaking traders; they would have recited Qur’an, and local residents would have repeated, modulated by local sonic sensibilities. The Qur’an would have been learned verbatim, while poetic texts could be translated into Hausa or Wolof or imitated in those languages without altering their essential meanings, but deploying local musical aesthetics. Gradually there evolved a West African “sound” without altering the core Islamic message: worship of One God. In Niger today local sonic models are anhemitonic pentatonic (see below).

Likewise, the Qur’an as well as \textit{adḥān} have been recited using hemitonic pentatonic Javanese melodies in Java. In Saudi Arabia public recitation occurs in prayer, and not as an independent listening practice (as in Egypt), and a simpler recitational style thus prevails, reinforced also by ideology.

Travel and globalization have led to new sonic configurations and meanings, and sonic differences may align with religious ideology as well. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia’s less melodic style now signals a growing suspicion that traditional Egyptian recitations are excessively musical, thus marking and disseminating a more conservative Islam.\textsuperscript{41} In Java today reciters follow Egyptian sonic models due to Egypt’s long-standing global religious and (more recent) media centrality, as traditional Javanese melodies recede; a hadith has been cited to justify this practice: “recite using melodies of the Arabs.”\textsuperscript{42}

In past centuries, the absence of paralinguistic specification, far from a lack, turned out to be an enormous strength of the Islamic ritual tradition, enabling the affective empowerment of essential discursive messaging—carried by texts’ linguistic aspects—through the adaptation of paralinguistic parameters to local sonic performance traditions, thereby generating affective significance and social solidarity around texts’ discursive meanings.

In this way, Islam globalized through—not despite—localization, generating a ramified structure. In every locale, newly converted Muslims could absorb paradigmatic linguistic traditions into familiar sonic milieus through paralinguistic adaptations, without disturbing the linguistic texts or meanings themselves, blending seamlessly with the “sound world” located at the core of social life.

\textsuperscript{41} See Frishkopf, “Mediated Qur’anic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt.”

\textsuperscript{42} Mahmud Khalil al-Husari, \textit{Ahkam Qira’at al-Qur’an al-Karim} (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turath al-Islami, 1965), 114–15; Rasmussen, \textit{Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia}, 75–78, 85, 87, 112; and Hajjah Maria Ulfah, personal communication, SEM 2016.

\textsuperscript{40} See Nelson, \textit{The Art of Reciting the Qur’an}, 179, 187.
But today globalization and conservative or reformist Islamic ideologies, diffusing particular performance styles as more legitimate and demanding conformity, are altering this calculus, enabling ideologies to sediment more readily atop paralinguistic styles, and intersecting flows may induce conflict between different ramified ritual practices.\textsuperscript{43}

The Range of Adaptive Ramification: 
\textit{Adhān, Tilāwa, Duʿā́}

I turn now to consider ramification in three genres of Islamic language performance. I begin with the genre probably most familiar to non-Muslims and Muslims alike: the call to prayer or adhān (azan), recited prior to each of the five daily prayers.

As usual, the form as well as its name are linked to sound. The word adhān, cognate with “ear” (udhn), “to listen” (adhina), and “to exhort, call, or announce” (aʾdhana), also links to an architectural cognate, the miʾdhanā or minaret, and linguistic embodiment in the muʾadhdhin (muezzin) or caller to prayer. All of these meanings point centrally to the process of listening to an exhortation: the call to come and pray, at home or in the mosque (implicitly that from which the call originates).

The text combines fundamental affirmations of Islam and being Muslim with the literal call to come and pray. The former centers on the shahāda or proclamation of faith, most centrally tawḥīd (monotheism): “God is greater [than anything]; I testify that there is nothing to be worshipped but God; I testify that Muhammad is His messenger.” The remainder is the actual call—“come to pray, come to salvation.” The adhān is quietly responsorial and thus binds the community together through sound: Muslims who hear it should respond by repeating each line, except that after “come to pray, come to salvation” they respond with the ḥawqala (lā ḥawla walā quwwata illā billāh: “there is no might or power except in God”).

While the adhān is for the most part a fixed text, some minor ramifications have occurred reflecting adaptations to time, place, and ideology. First, at dawn an extra formula is inserted: “prayer is better than sleep” (tathwīb). Second, unlike other Sunnis, the Malikites (one of four schools of Sunni law) repeat the first line, Allāhu akbar, only twice\textsuperscript{44} (though arguably all repeat it twice—the difference is only that the Malikites have shortened the line to one Allāhu akbar), and there are various other minor differences in repeat counts according to school. Third, Shiʿa communities have adapted the affirmation of faith to their theology, inserting ʿAli walī Allāh (Ali is close to God) and ʿAli ḥujjat Allāh (Ali is proof of God) as well as hayy ʿalā khayr al-ʿamal (come to the best of works). Public pronouncement of these words stands implicitly as a proclamation of a Shiʿa government, and Shiʿa typically repeat the final formula twice.

Fourth, though today adhān is always performed in Arabic, the Turks experimented—for a relatively brief period (1932 to 1950)—with a Turkish version, responding to local nationalism while maintaining the meaning.\textsuperscript{45} Fifth, many


\textsuperscript{44} See Juynboll, “Adhan.” Hear “Maliki Adhan,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCC7s7_58Ac.

\textsuperscript{45} The ban (violators incurred stiff punishments) on the Arabic adhān was lifted in 1950. Hear “Adhan at turkish (old times),” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU1gLy1L3x4.
Muslims, especially those of a more mystical persuasion, consider that after reciting the core text, embellishment with ṣalawāt (blessings for the Prophet) is meritorious. Sixth, the iqāma (standing), a special abbreviated form (more speechlike, and lacking repeats), responds to context: whereas the initial call is directed externally to the community, the iqāma is directed to congregants already gathered inside the mosque, signaling that they should stand for prayer behind the imam. Thus the range of textual ramification is limited, but even this limited scope demonstrates how language adapts to varied environments—political, theological, or practical.

In performance, however, the range is far broader, through paralinguistic variants. Indeed, a closer inspection reveals that even in its textual sequencing the adhān is designed for such elaboration, facilitating localization. Each phrase (counting Allāhu akbar, Allāhu akbar as a single phrase) repeats twice. While not specified, this repetition is almost universally interpreted as a license to elaborate on the second repeat via more extensive melismas.

While it is generally understood that the first muʿadhhdin, Bilal, was selected for his beautiful voice, there is of course no record whatsoever of his performance, and the vocal timbres, rhythms, and melodies used to perform the adhān are nowhere specified in textual sources. As a result, the adhān has adaptively ramified in multiple directions and can be performed in many different ways—by a single performer at different times (responding to personal feeling or circumstance); by different performers in the same culture (reflecting individual aesthetics); or in different places (reflecting local sonic culture or religious ideology).

The adhān defines a ritual paradigm; multiple instances should be considered together as an integral whole in the comparative analysis of performance as a means of understanding Muslim cultures. But the range of instances crisscrosses the line ostensibly separating “song” and “speech,” sometimes even straying into what might be more likely to be described as a “shout.”

I have selected the adhān’s final fixed phrase (Allāhu akbar Allāhu akbar; lā ilāha illā Allāh) as the basis for paradigmatic comparisons, illustrating individual and cultural variation. Shaykh Muhammad al-Hilbawy, a famous Egyptian qāriʿ and muezzin, told me he could perform the adhān in any maqām, according to his mood.46 But his most common Egyptian models were in Ḥijāz and Rāst (see Figs. 1 and 2).47 His traditional Egyptian style, nearly indistinguishable from singing, has prevailed across much of the globe thanks to Egypt’s religious and media centrality. In contrast are localized versions, such as an example from Sudan featuring a pentatonic melody and a wide (notated) vibrato (Fig. 3). In Sanaa (Yemen), the adhān is frequently performed as a kind of intoned shout (which cannot be entirely conveyed by the notation of Fig. 4), which some claim as an expression of an injunction against melodic calls.

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46 Likewise, the celebrated Syrian reciter Sabri al-Moudallal also attributed choice of melodic mode to his mood (Shannon 2006, 188)

Figure 1: Shaykh Muhammed al-Hilbawi, a famous Egyptian reciter, performs the *adhān* in *maqām Hijāz*, probably its most common melodic mode in Egypt and elsewhere.

![Hijaz scale](image)

Figure 2: Shaykh al-Hilbawy performs the *adhān* in *maqām Rāst*, another common mode for *adhān*.

![Rast scale](image)

Figure 3: A pentatonic, high-vibrato ornamented *adhān* from Sudan.

![Sudanese adhān](image)

Figure 4: *Adhān* from Sanaa, Yemen: an intoned shout.

![Yemeni adhān](image)
All is not localization, and mass media generate broader and more unpredictable paths of dissemination, but processes of ramification continue—only now they are not constrained to slowly trace geographical lines as they often did in the past, and sometimes there are convergences. Modern transport and recordings have ensured that Islamic centers—notably Mecca and Cairo—exert global force. Today one hears a call in the Egyptian style in Indonesia or the Meccan style in India because these have been established as powerful sonic models. In fact, it is conceivable that a new form of standardization is emerging with the advent of recordings, but as the adhan is nonmetric, it seems likely that a measure of improvisation will continue to prevail.

From a Muslim perspective, the text and sound immediately convey the message: adhan, time to pray. From the non-Muslim perspective of someone unacustomed to the adhan, various words might be used to describe these performances: “singing,” “chanting,” “speaking,” even “shouting”; singing might be further subdivided stylistically, “in the Egyptian style,” “Sudanese style,” “Javanese style.” Emic perspectives may take up some of these distinctions and even criticize certain subtypes—“too melodic” or “too Javanese.” But the adhan is a unified paradigm of language performance, one that is arbitrarily split by deploying such words, precluding a holistic treatment with the capacity to illuminate Islam’s history, and sociological reality today.


Certain paralinguistic variables are constrained by ahkām al-tajwīd (e.g., pause points), but the majority are free. Figures 5–7 illustrate three ways of reciting the same text, all appearing in Egypt today via recordings, each representing an entire ramified style. Two are by the famous Egyptian reciter Shaykh Mustafa Isma’il, renowned for recitations expressing Egyptian musicality. They differ as adapted to distinctive contexts: the mujawwad (closer to “song,” slower, modulating through maqāmāt) is used for listening sessions in the mosque and funerals (ma’ātim), while the murattal (closer to “chant,” faster, remaining in just one maqām without repeats) is used by the imam in prayer, and for individual study.

Mujawwad recitation, featuring repetitions responding to listener feedback, has clearly been shaped by informal listening sessions, in which assembled listeners call out their appreciation of each phrase, driving the recitation style toward

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48 The first three Qur’ānic examples are drawn from a previously published paper: Frishkopf, “Mediated Qur’ānic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt.”

49 See ibid., 77–80.
resonance. This process has been insightfully explored by Kristina Nelson.  

The third is by the Saudi reciter Shaykh Ahmad al-ʿAjmi in a Saudi style resembling *murattal* in some respects, but more rapid, in an ethos of sorrowful chanting (the weeping vocal timbre is impossible to represent in the notation) far from the musical dimensions of Egyptian chant, which instantiates the central musical aesthetic of *ṭarab* (ecstasy). Nothing could be farther from the Saudi sound. This ideological disconnection from music is made explicit in one of his public statements:

> If you recite for anything other than God—for impermanent worldly things, reputation, or fame—then God will hold you accountable and will ask you: for what did you recite? And you answer: I recited it for you. And He responds: you recited so that it might be said that you are a reciter, and indeed it was said. And then He throws you into the Fire. And you will be among the first to burn in the Fire.

What al-ʿAjmi’s words show is that this style, which the reciter uses when leading prayer in Mecca, takes on meanings of “Wahhabi Islam” when transported to Egypt.

Yet another style requires no transcription: the recitation of the Qurʾan when praying by oneself, in which case the selected passage is recited in a form of heightened speech (*jahri*) or silently to oneself (*sirri*); the latter is used for noon and afternoon prayers.

Whereas the latter three styles resist the label “music,” and the last one particularly, it is important to consider them together in order to properly understand the relative position of each within the Muslim world and why they have differentiated in particular ways.

A completely different paralinguistic style comes from Shaykh al Rama Mouhamadou Sanoussi of Niger; his recitation comprises two pentatonic scales, one minor and used in ascent, the other major and used in descent, set a whole step apart (see Fig. 8). What cannot be represented here is also the difference in vocal timbre. Note that these two formulae, the *taʿawwudh* and *basmala*, precede all recitations and comprise another standard paradigm. As for the *adhān*, a traditional Javanese recitation deploys hemitonic pentatonic scales.

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50 In *The Art of Reciting the Qurʾan*.

51 Shaykh Ahmad al-ʿAjmi (2006), www.alajmy.com; translation by the author. The website also contains a diatribe against singing.


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Figure 7: Recitation of Qur’an 12:4 by the Saudi Shaykh Ahmad al-’Ajmi. The maqām is Rāst on C4 (E4, second line from the bottom, is half-flat); absolute pitch is Rāst on A3 (a minor third below); the horizontal axis indicates seconds. Dashes separate syllables and asterisks denote melismas. Text: \textit{idh-qaa-la-yuu-su-fu-li-a-bii-hi-yaa}. * * * * * * a-ba-ti- * * * * * ni-ra-ay-tu- \textit{a-ha-da-} \textit{a-sha-ra-kaw-} * * * * * * ka-ban-wash-sham-sa-wal-qa-ma-ra-ra- ay-tu-hum- * * liy-saa-ji-diin.

Figure 8: The ta’awwudh and basmala of Shaykh al Rama Mouhamadou Sanoussi, from Niger.

\[ \text{Minor pentatonic on D} \quad \text{Major pentatonic on C} \quad \text{Ascending and descending scale} \]

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These examples show the diversity of sonic ramifications, which leads to a wide and multidimensional array of language performance instances displaying diverse clusters of paralinguistic features generally not classifiable as “song” or “speech.”

Other forms of Islamic language performance tend not to be examined by ethnomusicologists because—unlike Qur’an and adhān—they do not approach the domain of “song.” Their consideration requires too much technical apparatus to be of much interest to those who study “speech” in Islamic studies, and too much knowledge of Islam for those based in linguistics. As a result, their paralinguistic aspects go largely unstudied, though their ramified diversity is highly revealing, particularly in the case of the call-and-response congregational du‘ā’, in which feedback processes are immediately audible.

I thus conclude with an analysis of paralinguistic variation in two examples of the congregational du‘ā’.

Naively, an outside observer would undoubtedly categorize the first instance as a kind of “speech,” because there is no consistent tonal content. Yet its paralinguistic dimension is crucial to its emotional force through an intensifying upwards progression of pitch, tempo, congregational involvement, and emotional expression, resembling the corporate ecstasy typical of Sufi ḥaḍras. Such a progression requires paralinguistic analysis to be properly understood as a means of answering key questions in ritual studies: When, where, and why is this style deployed? How has it changed over time? What is its social-spiritual impact?

I have selected three short excerpts from this performance to illustrate the phases of its development (Table 1). The C/R ratio is the length of the call divided by the length of the response. Note how this ratio decreases (indicating increasing congregational involvement) as the pitch level rises. The call/response line length shortens from 3 to 1.6 seconds, quickening the pace, then extends again as the congregation enters more actively and forcefully, progressively more involved.

Meanwhile the words shift from (1) standard supplication to (2) a supplication directed to the performing group, requesting group unity, then (3) shifting from supplication to a general testimony of faith; here the response echoes the call instead of punctuating with the usual āmīn (Amen), and emotional unity is maximized.

The second example is a qunūt, closing the witr of ṣalāt al-tarāwīh (Ramadan supererogatory night prayers), video-recorded at the Grand Mosque of Mecca during the Night of Power (Laylat al-Qadr). During this most sacred of all Ramadan nights, connections between Heaven and Earth are believed to be most open to supplicatory petitions and sacred reality (al-ḥaqīqa) most immediately present, a fortiori at the Ka’ba, sacred center of Islam. (“On that night the angels and the Spirit [Jabril] descend again and again with their Lord’s permission on every task; [there is] peace that night until the break of dawn”: Q97.) Thus the context is especially conducive to emotional resonance.

On this particular occasion, the imam’s powerful voice, amplified and resonating throughout the massive, packed mosque,56 delivering heartfelt, humble petitions transmitted via highly emotional melodic invocations, triggers mass weeping, intensified via feedback cycles that appear to affect the reciter directly.

56 The enormous open-air Grand Mosque (masjid al-ḥarām) holds as many as two million worshippers.
Table 1: Duʿā’ sequences

**Part 1:** Pitch level C#3; Line length = 3 sec; C/R ratio = 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imam’s call</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Congregation’s Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allāhumma lak al-ḥamdu ḥatta tarḍa</td>
<td>Oh God, to you is the praise until your satisfaction</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ya rabbina lak al-ḥamdu ḥatta tarḍa</td>
<td>Oh God, to you is the praise until your satisfaction</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḫamdan la yantahi ḥatta tarḍa</td>
<td>Unending praise until your satisfaction</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wa laka al-ḥamd idhā raḍāt</td>
<td>To you is the praise if you are pleased</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wa lak al-ḥamd baʿd al-ridā</td>
<td>To you is the praise after you are pleased</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 2:** Pitch level D3; Line length = 1.6 sec; C/R ratio = 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imam’s call</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Congregation’s Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wahḥid bayna qulūbinā</td>
<td>Unify our hearts</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahḥid kalimātinā</td>
<td>Unify our words</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahḥid ṣuṭṭifanā</td>
<td>Unify our rows</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanṣurnā ʿalā man aʿdānā</td>
<td>Grant us victory over our enemies</td>
<td>Āmīn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 3:** Pitch level A3; Line length = 3.2 sec; C/R ratio = 0.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imam’s call</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Congregation’s Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lā ilāhun maʿa Allāh</td>
<td>There is no deity with God</td>
<td>Lā ilāha illā Allāh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allāhu Akbar</td>
<td>God is greater</td>
<td>Allāhu akbar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Normally the imam is free to select any Qur’anic passages when leading prayer, but for witr the sequence is specified by Hadith:

Ibn Abbas narrated that Allah’s Messenger used to recite in witr the sura al-ʿālā, al-Kāfirūn and al-Ikhlās, rakʿa by rakʿa.57 (Sunan al-Tirmidhi Book 3, no. 461, 462)

As usual, however, paralinguistic content is relatively free. This freedom may manifest as varying levels of tonality, from “speech” to “song.” But it may also manifest in other ways, as we see in this instance.

In the first rakʿa the imam chants in a clear, strong tone, deploying maqām Rāst throughout. But at Q87:12, while reciting “He who will enter and burn in the greatest fire,” his voice begins to crack, on the verge of weeping. Then again in the second rakʿa, his voice reaches the breaking point while reciting Q109. Finally, reciting for the witr, his voice weeps during Q112 (Ikhlās), said to condense the entire Qur’an and thus standing for Revelation as a whole.

Then he begins his duʿāʾ, the qunūt. It is a terribly moving performance, textually and melodically skillful, navigating the maqāmāt from Rāst to related modes (Ṣīkā, Ḥuzām, and Ṣaʿāq), building emotion as he develops his petition, the vast congregation responding āmīn as his voice occasional cracks, even weeps. Finally he breaks down completely into sobbing, departing tonal expression for more primal vocal emotion, leaving long silences as the entire mosque, brimming with millions of worshippers gathered for ṣaʿūra on this sacred night, sobs along with him, with each other, tears streaming forth, his emotion projected to the group, and, from there, to each other, and back to him in a massive display of affective feedback.

Briefly they are all connected in resonant faith, sonically and emotionally, a single, solid, standing, weeping mass of humanity before God—a foreshadowing of the “Day of Judgment,” described precisely thus in Islamic eschatology, everyone contemplating his or her own life, sins, and contrition. But despite unleashing such intensive emotion, the imam remains in control. Always his voice emerges out of the wept pauses, shaky at first, then refocused and calm, returning to the tonal line, reaching upwards to Rāst on the fifth degree, then the upper octave. Finally, after about 20 minutes, he concludes the duʿāʾ with a sequence of salawāt (calls for blessing on the Prophet), and the witr ends with the final prostrations and sitting. The qunūt is not always like this; its length, intensity, and paralinguistic features have been shaped by its special spatio-temporal-social context.

This brief examination of three genres of Islamic language performance—adhān, tilāwa, and duʿāʾ—shows that ramification operates primarily in the paralinguistic domain, responding to context and feedback. While adhān and tilāwa examples provide a sense of the nature and scope of ramification, duʿāʾ examples offer a glimpse of the feedback processes themselves.

Both adhān and tilāwa have been conditioned by local vocal and musical styles—from Sudan to Iran to Java. In both cases ideological factors also come to bear, shaping, for instance, the degree of melodicity (lesser in the case of Saudi tilāwa or Yemeni adhān, greater in Egypt), or—in conjunction with religious legitimacy and the global media economy—patterns of diffusion. Paralinguistic aspects of Egyptian performance have signaled

57 The first sura of every rakʿa is al-Fātiha (Q1); thus the meaning of the hadith is that the second sura will be al-ʿālā (Q87), al-Kāfirūn (Q109), and al-Ikhlās (Q112), respectively.
and projected Egypt’s religious authority in the Sunni world; more recently, Saudi styles have done the same. The globalization of these sonic styles may sediment new layers, in parallel to local counterparts. Or they may extinguish the latter, as appears to be happening in Indonesia.58 As Saudi ṭilāwa styles have infiltrated Egyptian sonic space, they implicitly carry Wahhabi thought in their wake.59

Language performance of Islamic ritual adapts through feedback. Some feedback is indirect and slow: for using the “wrong” style, a muezzin may not be retained, a qāriʾ not invited, a preacher’s television program canceled. But many live genres invite immediate performative feedback, allowing cybernetic processes to cycle far more rapidly.

Mujawwad ṭilāwa in the mosque enables rapid feedback informally, while the congregational duʿāʾ is more explicitly responsorial. The duʿāʾ thus provides an ideal setting for micro-analysis of paralinguistic adaptation. Such feedback loops not only move participants; they also appear as the engine of local adaptation itself.

Paralinguistic sound is powerful because it is social and affective, yet nonreferential; that power is multiplied through the feedback process, toward adaptation and resonance. In Islamic ritual, paralinguistics takes on a special significance. Due to the centrality and sanctity of core texts (primarily Qurʾān and Hadith), the finality of prophecy with Muhammad, and of revelation with the Qurʾān, purely linguistic ramification is quite limited.60 By the same token, the paralinguistic sound of language performance is largely free; there are virtually no universally recognized sacred melodies in Islam. Nonreferential, unmoored by fixed meanings, flying under the radar of reference, paralinguistic features ramify widely in adaptive relation to individual, culture, society, and ideology, providing a shifting sonic map of Islamic history and societies. Their analysis and interpretation can reveal much about the diverse environments of performance, and about the ritual process itself.

58 See Rasmussen, Women, the Recited Qurʾān, and Islamic Music in Indonesia, 85.
59 See Frishkopf, “Mediated Qurʾanic Recitation and the Contestation of Islam in Contemporary Egypt.”
60 Muhammad is the khātam al-nabiyyīn, “seal of the prophets” (Q33:40), while according to Hadith: “The chain of messengers and prophets has come to an end. There shall be no messenger nor prophet after me” (Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi).