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Lauren Osborne
Whitman College

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Cover Page Footnote

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The Mediated Qur'an

Religious Education and Recitation via Online Distance Learning in the Sultanate of Oman

Lauren E. Osborne

In 2016, the state of Oman—a small country in the Arab Gulf region on the southeast corner of the Arabian peninsula—debuted its new online system for distance learning of Qur'an recitation—*al-Barnāmaj al-Iliktrūnī li-Ta'līm al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Electronic Program for Learning the Holy Qur'an).¹ Students of the Qur'an throughout Oman—and even throughout the world—could then enroll in online courses on the memorization and recitation of the text, and even obtain a certificate in memorization (*hifẓ*) verified through Oman's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.² While listening, recitation, memorization, and oral transmission of the Qur'an have been central to the text since its genesis, it has most commonly been taught face-to-face, through live oral instruction from teacher to student. Historically, written materials about recitation have typically served as aids to live in-person instruction, rather than complete programs for individual study. And while the era of global media has provided both opportunities as well as challenges in terms of the Qur'an's mediation, the preference for learning recitation has still tended toward in-person learning.

In this article, I focus on the online program as a central node for exploring issues of religious education, media, and orality. I consider the program within the context of Omani history, particularly the history of religious and political authority in Oman, as well as the history of religious education. The distance-learning program marks a new phase in the centralization of

authority over both religious education and education in general in Oman as the state and its infrastructure have modernized, but it can also be connected to longer histories of mediation of the Qur'an and related concerns about access and ethical comportment. I explore the longstanding historic roots of religious education in Oman as it is grounded in both Omani history as well as traditional Islamic modes of learning. At the same time, religious education, and specifically the recitation of the Qur'an, can also be mediated via modern modes of technology. Oman's online distance-learning system for Qur'an recitation marks a key site in the mediation of the Qur'an and its recitation. Specifically, it serves as a useful site for considering the use of media in relation to managing religious education on the part of the Omani Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

Religious Education in Oman

The history of religious education in Oman is tied to the changes that took place in the country over the latter half of the twentieth century. Nineteen-seventy was a major turning point in Omani history, this being the year that Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said came to power. This moment marked the beginning of Oman's rapid modernization of state infrastructure of all kinds, and the centralization of state power in the person of the sultan. Until his death in early 2020, Sultan Qaboos was the longest-serving ruler in the modern Middle East. Over the course of his thirty-year reign, he enacted dramatic

processes of modernization that impacted all sectors of government, infrastructure, and life in Oman. The locations and shapes of religion and education were reconfigured and remediated through these processes.

This period of rapid change was prompted in large part by the discovery of oil in Oman in the 1950s and 1960s. Prior to and at that time, the state was ruled through a bifurcated system of leadership, with an Ibadi Islamic imamate controlling the interior of the country through a system of religious leadership, and a sultanate acting as an “autocratic authority” in controlling the coastal region.³ The late 1950s witnessed a series of struggles between these two regions and powers, eventually ending in the breaking down of the imamate and the centralization of political power under a single authority, Sultan Said bin Taimur (the father of Sultan Qaboos). Around this same time, Omani rule of the African island of Zanzibar (off the coast of Tanzania) also came to an end in 1963, with 50,000–70,000 Omanis who had lived there returning to Oman. Simultaneously, in the 1960s many Omanis who had traveled abroad for education (as formal education as such was not yet available in Oman) were also returning home. This period in Oman is characterized as having witnessed an explosion of ideologies becoming available—communism, Ba’thism, Arab nationalism, and religiopolitical movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to name a few—all of which represented different ideas about the proper places of and relationships between religion, the state, and education.⁴ Prior to 1971, education in Oman was primarily religiously based, informal, and decentralized. Traditional Islamic education begins with and centers on the recitation and memorization of the Qur’an. Suleiman

Salem Al Hussein describes education in Oman prior to 1971 as being “conducted sparsely, in traditional, religiously inspired settings,” focusing only on Qur’an recitation and some basic reading and writing.⁵ Literacy rates in Oman prior to 1971 were quite low, but as a part of the reforms and the broader centralization of government in the 1970s, the Omani state became responsible for administering education to the whole population. While religious education in pre-1971 Oman was theoretically open to all, as Dale Eickelman has noted, in practice it was most commonly the children of local elites who persisted in their religious studies.⁶ In the pre-1971 Oman of the imamate, “literacy implied some degree of religious learning and was consequently respected, but the practical uses of literacy and its value as a means to economic advancement were limited.”⁷ Education at a Qur’an school largely revolved around recitation and memorization, and did not necessarily imply literacy, and the quality of qur’anic education itself also varied a great deal.⁸ The reforms of the 1970s brought education more squarely under the control of a central state authority at the same time that the place and role of religion were transformed in that system. In 1971, the Ministry of Education was established. The system of state education was formalized as a “modern” one, analogous to those in other Arab countries at that time. Specifically, the Lebanese state curriculum was adopted until 1977, when the Omani Ministry of Education developed its own curriculum. Islamic studies is part of this curriculum, taught as one subject alongside the other topics of a modern curriculum. Abdulrahman al-Salimi describes the current approach to religion in this system as a “cultural approach,” which he contrasts with what

he calls a “religious approach,” meaning the ministry “shifted the focus from dogma and doctrine to Islamic culture and civilization. The expanded purview allows students to see their relation to the broader culture around them, and it precludes a myopic view of Islam’s relation to the rest of the world.”⁹ The cultural approach was adopted in 2006, following the events of September 11, 2001, and a few incidents in Oman (both after and prior to 9/11) that raised concerns about the role of religious education in possible radicalization.¹⁰ Eickelman has attested to the ways in which religious education within this system “enforce[s] current religious and cultural values,” with al-Salimi arguing further that this has *long* been the case in Omani education, given the strong tie of Islam to Omani cultural identity.¹¹ While religion had previously been the main framework through which education had been conducted, in the post-1971 “modern” curriculum, it became one subject alongside others. Moreover, the “cultural approach” presents a portrait of Islam that is ecumenical in nature – meaning nonsectarian. In Oman, Islam is the official religion of the state.¹² And although the population includes both Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims, the country is home to one of the world’s few concentrations of Ibadi Muslims, a sect of Islam distinct from those two more commonly known traditions. The Ministry of Education has taken as part of its mission to educate all of Oman’s citizens, the diversity of varieties of Islam present among them.¹³ This practice is in keeping with a general ethic of tolerance and antisectarianism that is also regulated by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs through its sites of official discourses, such as Friday sermons, official publications, and policies in schools and mosques preventing

sectarian teachings.¹⁴ There is also a system of religious education, including the online Qur’an program, that runs parallel to the Ministry of Education system in Oman. The year 1971 also witnessed the founding of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, which administers its own system of Qur’an schools and, since 2016, the online distance-learning system.¹⁵ As a part of the post-1970 reforms, religious education was also brought under the central management of the state in this way, so the Qur’an schools operate as a parallel system created out of the same gesture of centralization. The Qur’an schools continue to center recitation and memorization of the Qur’an, but now do so alongside basic instruction in reading and writing.¹⁶ Sheikh Hilal bin Hamud al-Riyami, the current director of Oman’s Qur’an schools, is also the designer of the online learning program as well as its pedagogy. Al-Riyami has also written a book that follows the same methodology through written instruction, *Manhaj al-Qilā‘ al-Sab‘ li-Hifẓ al-Qur’ān al-Karīm, or The Seven-Port Method for Memorizing the Holy Qur’an*.¹⁷ The program is available to anyone, although its origins are associated with the Omani system of Qur’an schools and it is administered through same ministry, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. All one has to do to get started is to answer a few questions and sign up for an account and they can choose from the different courses that are available and start attending and learning. The program is available anywhere in Oman where one has access to the internet, or indeed anywhere in the world, although there are some synchronous classes in the program. It is now also used by the national system of Qur’an schools in Senegal.¹⁸ The program does not merely provide media and a curriculum for students to follow on

their own, but rather is a complete online distance-learning system, meaning that students attend synchronous classes that are supplemented by asynchronous engagement (with limited asynchronous opportunities to “make up” any missed synchronous classes) and homework.

The program can be described as modern in two main respects: its use of media and its pedagogy. First, as an online distance-learning system, it is designed to transmit and facilitate the cultivation of religious knowledge and skills through the digital medium of the internet. Second, the pedagogy employed within the system is also modern in the sense that it presents a systematic and incentivized plan for memorization, and a simplified method of teaching the traditional rules of recitation (*tajwīd*). The program is designed to teach recitation and memorization in an entirely new way, with this pedagogy also developed by al-Riyami—the “seven-fort method.”¹⁹ Al-Riyami describes the method at length in an August 2018 interview and article in *Oman Daily*, as well as in his book *The Seven-Fort Method*.²⁰ The objective of the program and its method is to facilitate and motivate the memorization of the entire Qur’an, while also teaching the rules governing proper recitation known as *tajwīd*.²¹ In brief, the rules of *tajwīd* govern the specifics of pronunciation of the text of the Qur’an when it is recited aloud, including specifics of elisions between certain combinations of letters, qualities of letters and their proper articulation, when a reciter may pause (or when a pause is forbidden, discouraged, or recommended, to name a few possibilities), the pacing and extension of a particular syllabus, as well as more general points about etiquette and common practice in reciting, such as saying the *isti‘ādhah* and

the *bismillāh* before beginning to recite.²² While the division of the Qur’an that is most visually apparent on a printed copy is that of the sura (of which there are 114 total, arranged largely by length, with the shortest suras in the back of a printed copy and the largest in the front, with the first shorter sura appended as a sort of introduction), the text is also divided into thirty sections of equal size. Each thirtieth is called a *juz’*, literally, a “part.” This division is the one most commonly used in oral learning and memorization of the text. It is also used in ritual practice, when one *juz’* is recited for each of the thirty nights of the month of Ramadan, resulting in a complete reading of the text over the course of the holy month. Most commonly, those beginning studies in the Qur’an begin with the last *juz’*, known as *juz’ ‘ammā* because it begins with the word *‘ammā*, and comprises the final thirtieth of the text. This is the section that is thought of as the easiest place to begin learning and memorizing, in that it contains the shortest suras, which also largely consist of the shortest verses, and is characterized by particularly pervasive patterns of rhyme and assonance.

Al-Riyami’s method relies on breaking large sections of text down into many smaller sections, and arranging these in a cycle of memorization and repetition across the course of the week. Each *juz’* is divided into seven smaller parts, called “forts” in al-Riyami’s system. Each fort is then divided into seven subsections. Each *juz’* of the Qur’an is thereby broken up into forty-nine smaller subsections, breaking one relatively large section of text into many small parts. Each fort is rendered in the online system with an image that looks like a small castle (resembling the architecture of forts found in Oman). When a student has completed

a single fort, the next one appears before them on the screen. The program divides the task of memorization into three skills divided across the seven days of the week: memorization of new material, recitation performed for the teacher, and review. The weekly plan is as follows: “[first, there are] two days devoted to the new memorization, with the current plan being a half-page [of the printed Qur’an] each day. After that is the task of reciting for the Qur’an teacher on the third day, via the virtual live class on the day [the student] chose when he was registered in the program. This is followed by another two days for the task of the new memorization, then the skill of recitation by the teacher of the Qur’an on the sixth day. And at the end of the week a comprehensive review of what was memorized during the week takes place.”²³ The pedagogy consists of breaking down a large task (memorizing and learning to recite aloud an entire book) into smaller constituent parts, and arranging a system such that a student regularly attends to the smaller tasks on a daily basis. This pedagogy makes the student accountable to an instructor, reinforces those pieces of knowledge already obtained, and takes a cumulative approach to building up these small tasks in service of achieving the larger goal of memorization. During the week while memorizing, the student focuses on one half-page of text at a time and pursues this in the program asynchronously, with access to recordings of popular reciters to listen to and imitate.

Recitation before the teacher is typically conducted synchronously, although if a student cannot attend the synchronous meeting, they may send a recording of themselves prior to the start of the meeting. The system does enforce synchronous learning on the designated

days for the most part; a student is limited to three “free” absences, but after that point must use “jewels” that are acquired through regular attendance and complete portions of memorization to compensate for any further absences. In this way, the program allows for the learning process to be incentivized or gamified in a way that is meant to be motivational. The system of jewels and points provides rewards that have value in the context of the learning, but also serve as a mechanism of accountability such that students dedicate themselves appropriately and attend the virtual classes in real time. In the *Oman Daily* interview, al-Riyami notes that the gamification instills the students with the competitive spirit that can be motivational, all in service of the end of memorizing the text of the Qur’an.²⁴ Al-Riyami’s book on the seven-fort method follows the same methodology of breaking down the seemingly large task of memorizing the entire Qur’an into series and subseries of smaller tasks, under the same “fort” structure, and connects memorization to more general guidance on personal conduct and ethics.²⁵ The book provides pages for students to check off the parts of their program as completed, and requires signatures and assessment at various points from a guardian and an appropriate Qur’an instructor. The emphasis in the book is primarily on memorization, and this occupies the bulk of the volume. The book concludes with a list of advice and the benefits of memorizing and reciting.²⁶ These include both general guidelines (such as to work on the task every single day and to have an appropriate place set aside for memorization) as well as guidance specific to memorization. The work urges the student to avoid worrying excessively about the specific techniques

of recitation such as the rules of *tajwīd*, as this can be a distraction from the task of memorization and can “drive away humility.” Al-Riyami states that this does not mean the student should neglect *tajwīd* entirely, because it can be a means of strengthening the memorization, but the caution is about excess of attention in this regard in order to prioritize accruing and retaining portions of the text.²⁷ The volume also concludes with a page dedicated to an abbreviated presentation of some of the basic rules of *tajwīd*, including the names and symbols for various types of pauses, rules of elongation (*madd*), as well as some of the rules regarding elision between different combinations of letters.²⁸ In addition to the conclusion, the volume addresses ethics at several earlier points as well. Scattered throughout the work, pages labeled “Practical Application of Learning and Understanding the Holy Qur’an” are provided for students to indicate when they have performed certain acts or demonstrated certain values.²⁹ These pages ask for each item to be checked off, and require signatures from the guardian and instructor. The required items consist of reciting the Qur’an, honoring parents, helping others, attending science lessons,³⁰ voluntary fasting, academic excellence, commitment to the obligatory prayer,³¹ congregational prayer,³² good manners and honoring others, patience, charity, family kinship, behavior in the home, humility, and commitment to *dhikr*.³³ In the book, ethical comportment is thus posed as part of the process of learning and memorizing the text, as well as a benefit or result. The list demonstrating “practical application and understanding” can also be seen as a portrait of the ideal modern qur’anic learner, in this case. While learning to memorize,

the implication is that the learner should not neglect broader ethical alignment or concerns of morality at the expense of dedicating one’s energies to memorizing the text. The list notably contains a range of values and acts that run the gamut from those that appear to be most obviously categorized as religious (obligatory prayer, for example) to personal values and tasks, such as attending to one’s studies in school and behaving well at home. In sum, the list of practices in context in a manual on Qur’an memorization presents an ideal subject of embodied learning. To memorize the Qur’an in this way is to work to be formed into a modern Muslim Omani subject; embodied knowledge is both cultivated through these practices and results in them.

Since its launch in 2016, the online program has proved to be extremely popular. The August 2018 *Oman Daily* story quoted above states that at that time there were at least 9,300 learners registered in the system. At the date of that story, August 11, 2018, there were already over 1,000 students signed up for the currently enrolling course, with registration open until August 25 of that year. This story also attests to aspirations to take the program international, to make live instruction in Qur’an recitation accessible to even more individuals who may not have access to it. It frames the achievement of numbers of students in terms of access as well, stating that the program has been successful in providing live Qur’an recitation instruction to those students who aren’t able to enroll in one of Oman’s Qur’an schools.³⁴ The program has also achieved success on the international level, and was awarded a prize in Kuwait as the best website for the Holy Qur’an.³⁵

Qur'an Recitation and Media

While the Omani distance-learning system is modern in its form of media as well as its pedagogy, it is also continuous with the long history of memorization and recitation of the Qur'an, which plays a central role in Islamic tradition. Orality and recitation are seen as essential qualities of the Qur'an in a number of ways. The context into which the Qur'an emerged—that of seventh-century Arabia—was a highly oral milieu, with a rich tradition of orally composed and performed poetry, wherein the language of authority, power, and artistry was oral.³⁶ The Qur'an can also be seen as attesting to its orality. This point can be made with respect to certain of its rhetorical features, such as verses directing readers to “say” and “recite.” The words are also characterized by pervasive and persistent patterns of sonic features such as rhyme, rhythm, and assonance.³⁷ Some have argued that the text may also contain features that attest to an oral method of composition, such as certain varieties of repetition.³⁸ In the earliest development of Islamic tradition, the Qur'an was transmitted orally, and was not written in a fully codified version until well after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Finally, recitation plays a central role in Islamic ritual life and traditional methods of education and ways of knowing worldwide.³⁹

Pedagogy and embodied knowledge play key roles in Islamic tradition, largely as an extension of this centrality of oral Qur'an learning. In his study of Qur'an schooling in Senegal, Rudolph Ware connects the oral transmission of knowledge to a broader theory of Islamic epistemology, leading him to argue: “Against the backdrop of this epistemology of embodying the Qur'an and core Islamic texts and a tradition that requires *transmitting* them through direct

contact, we will see that perhaps Islam is best characterized not only as ‘discursive tradition,’ as anthropologist Talal Asad has suggested, but also as a dense web of fully embodied encounters.”⁴⁰ As Ware demonstrates, the role of orality and memorization results in a strong prioritization of embodied knowledge and modes of learning in Islam: “Memorization of texts allowed for a personal possession of the Word in the body, without requiring recourse to a written source external to the self. The people were the books, just as the Prophet was the Walking Qur'an. Islamic knowledge was embodied knowledge.”⁴¹ On the surface, an online distance-learning system for Qur'an recitation and memorization would seem to present a stark departure from that tradition. But as I argue here, the system must be understood in the broader history of the central role played by recitation in Islamic life, practice, and education. The use of a modern form of media—the internet—in this case could be seen as introducing a new element or concern, but this too must be understood in a longer historical context. There have always been questions about the Qur'an's relationship to the varied media to which it has been affixed.⁴² In some ways this concern begins with debates about the status and nature of the Qur'an as revelation, and as an oral revelation that is also felt via the heart. In this way, it does not easily affix to the category of scripture. New media—online media—pose new kinds of challenges as well, as Charles Hirschkind has articulated the key question asked of the mediation of the Qur'an: “how can the practical and institutional conditions that ensure an ethical response to divine revelation be upheld across new and rapidly changing media environments?”⁴³ In the case of

the Omani system, we might understand this use of media as part of a greater effort to ensure proper ethical alignment to the text and religious ideologies more broadly. While the media may in and of itself raise the kinds of concerns and questions Hirschkind signals, it can also be seen as a response to concerns about providing “appropriate” religious education in an effort to counter the potentially open nature of authority in online spheres that may intersect with modern political concerns.

Beyond concerns of ethics and proper religious authority, further theorization of media in relation to religion can also help place the online learning portal in a longer history. The Qur’an exists in a long history of mediated forms—prior to the internet, recitation circulated widely on CDs, cassettes, and every other form of recorded media. And the Qur’an as a written text has also circulated via a wide range of materials—from mass printing, to manuscripts, to slates, to notes written on parchment, or even leaves. A media studies approach to religion suggests that religion has been and is always mediated. Jeremy Stolow notes that the phrase “religion *and* media” is a “pleonasm,” explaining that “it is only through . . . media that it is at all possible to proclaim one’s faith, mark one’s affiliation, receive spiritual gifts, or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body. In other words, religion always encompasses techniques and technologies that we think of as ‘media.’”⁴⁴ In these ways, the online learning portal can be understood as providing but one example of mediated religion (to repeat the pleonasm), but also as doing so in a specific way.

In this case, the medium of internet technology is being used as a tool in keeping

with broader regulation and dissemination of religion via mass education, as well as a tool for spreading and making accessible learning that relies on oral transmission. The internet here is being harnessed by a central state authority in an effort to disseminate religious learning, one major result of which is that the state provides a platform for religious learning that can shape the religiosity of Omani youth into appropriately Omani subjects. In her dissertation on the modern construction of heritage industry in Oman, Amal Sachedina describes this type of religiosity in the following terms: “Religious knowledge as disseminated by mass education has promoted new forms of religiosity and public forms of discourse that espouse a generic form of Islam that is de-politicized even as it is rendered into private belief, moving in a liberal direction.”⁴⁵ In this way, the use of the program may be seen as fitting into a broader conversation about the relationship of internet technology to “traditional” modes of religious authority.

While studies of online Islamic education are limited, we may identify a parallel in the works on the (originally Pakistani) Islamic organization Al-Huda International, which also offers online learning of Qur’an recitation. While Al-Huda has its origins in Pakistan, its online portal now provides Qur’an lessons to women the world over.⁴⁶ Usha Sanyal points out that this context is essential in understanding its mission and method; it now provides lessons to women of wide-ranging backgrounds in various locations across the globe.⁴⁷ Sanyal theorizes the use of internet technology for Qur’an study—as understood through the women studying online through Al-Huda International—as a means through which the students are able to challenge

“traditional” modes of religious authority, providing the women with a sense of empowerment as well as challenging non-Muslim Western assumptions about Muslim women. Sanyal observes that, although the lessons taught to the women are not properly understood as “feminist” (citing Saba Mahmood,⁴⁸ Sanyal points out that understanding organizations like Al-Huda through the lens of modern Western liberal feminism would be a mischaracterization⁴⁹), they are engaged in an activity that may be understood as new and political, in that they are learning the Qur’an and integrating into their daily lives without a male authority—thereby cultivating new personal authority.⁵⁰ In the case of Al-Huda, Sanyal concludes that “technology is no more than a tool” in the overall structure of authority.⁵¹ The same cannot be said of the Omani Qur’an distance-learning program. In this case, as I have described, the technology is a key component of the methodology. The use of internet technology also fits into the broader framework of modernity and innovation that is integral to the program. While some of the methodology (the division of material into smaller units, “forts”) can also be conveyed in a book (as is done in al-Riyami’s parallel publication *Manhaj al-Qilā’ al-Sab’ li-Hifẓ al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*⁵²), the system of live instruction and incentivization in the online program clearly brings the method and the means of presentation together in an integral way.

Modernity, Sound, and Tradition in Omani Nationhood

Oman’s online Qur’an learning system can then be understood both as part of a

longer history of mediation of the Qur’an and its recitation, and in relation to processes of modernization of Oman’s state infrastructure and mass education. The system teaches embodied knowledge that is to be enacted orally—memorization and recitation—through a distinctly modern means (the internet), using innovative modern methodology (the pedagogy). The system also parallels a broader program through which religion can be used to construct properly modern Omani Muslim subjects, and in this case is done so through a state-instituted apparatus.

In describing the educational reforms of the 1970s, al-Salimi points out that, while the modern educational program can be described as reinforcing Omani religious and cultural values, this relationship is not unique to the post-1970s era. Rather, there was already a long history of education reflecting the broader cultural, political, and religious milieu of the state; in the modern reforms, the Ministry of Education “sought to preserve . . . positive aspects of the system” while updating methodologies.⁵³ And even further, al-Riyami’s innovative pedagogy of the seven-fort method can be seen as a further extension of this modernization.

The online Qur’an learning program can certainly be understood within this longer trajectory of maintaining a strong tie between the religion of Islam and Omani national identity.⁵⁴ We may also understand this reconfiguration of the relationship between religion and national identity within the broader framework of other values and practices that may be cast as “traditional.” Amal Sachedina points to a parallel set of issues in the broader historical literature on Oman, wherein “if modernity is associated with creativity, choice, and adaptability to

change, tradition is conceived as holding contrastive values characterized by a static repetition of habits handed down from the past and inflexible to conscious modification.”⁵⁵ Sachedina explains that, in the case of the use of these categories in the historical literature on Oman, the problems of conceptualizing modernity and tradition within this dichotomous framework are manifold. Tradition may become the measure through which the validity of modern practices can be assessed. This logic has led to problematic assertions in much modern scholarship on Gulf states in suggesting that the modernities enacted therein are somehow incomplete or inauthentic.⁵⁶ Correspondingly, material sites of Omani heritage are reconfigured as pedagogical models of tradition in the cultivation of new modern sensibilities and new forms of religiosity.⁵⁷ The “seven-fort” methodology may be seen as a particularly clear example in this regard. Forts are a common symbol of Omani cultural heritage and are frequently invoked as a symbol of national tradition. As Sachedina considers, as a part of the building of the modern Omani heritage industry, hundreds of forts and associated sites have been restored, and they figure prominently throughout the landscape of Oman as a visual reminder of traditional defensive architecture in relation to national heritage.⁵⁸ So too, the online Qur’an learning system uses forts as a visual symbol and metaphor in the pedagogy, hearkening to that national tradition and heritage within this modern system of Qur’an education.

Much anthropological literature on the Middle East has already served to break down and reframe any assumed and problematic dichotomies of tradition and modernity, religion and secularity.⁵⁹

In this regard, Oman’s Qur’an online learning system serves as yet a further example contributing to this longstanding conversation. The role of orality and sound in relation to these dichotomies in this case adds a further layer. The rapidity of Oman’s modernization and development of infrastructure and religious education—specifically Qur’an recitation—featured most prominently in discussions of the pre-1970 informal, decentralized, and “traditional” sites of education. Two features of this history are worth highlighting in order to consider the ways in which the online Qur’an learning program runs up against discourses about orality and memorization and corresponding embodied ways of knowing, as well as the ways in which this learning can be seen as being related to broader religious and cultural values.

First, as discussed in the previous section, there has always been a strong tie to orality and memorization in relation to the Qur’an, and its recitation has always played a prominent role in tradition, ritual, and even daily life. In terms of the narrative of the development of education in Oman, recitation and memorization feature prominently in the descriptions of past educational methods, implying that these practices, and sonic and embodied ways of knowing, are inextricably associated with past methods. The implication is that oral methods are part of the religious past and that through a process of modernization, they are left behind in favor of modern methods and modern ways of knowing. Herein, orality, sound, embodied knowledge, religion, and tradition are seen as diametrically opposed to secularity, modernity, and modern (presumably not embodied, not oral) ways of knowing.

Embodied and sonic pedagogies and epistemologies, such as the recitation and memorization of the Qur'an, occupy an awkward place within those assumed-but-dismantled dichotomies. In the case of Oman's online system of religious learning, orality and sound are longstanding qualities of tradition, and also not at all opposed to modernity. The use of modern media specifically facilitates traditional oral learning. Charles Hirschkind indicates that "the modern concept of religion is founded upon a certain moral skepticism in regard to sonority."⁶⁰ The role of sound and sonic practices in religion is something that has been regarded with some degree of suspicion. As he explains, underpinning the modern concept of religion is an implied "sensory epistemology that, since the early modern period, has played a significant role in shaping the way religious practices are evaluated, criticized, defined, and emplaced within secular social and political orders."⁶¹ Hirschkind demonstrates that particularly Islamic practices of listening, orality, and broader ethical "attunement" serve as key examples that demonstrate that sonic ways of knowing are not necessarily antimodern. Rather, "an art of listening mediates one's relation to a practical and moral world, one with both natural and supernatural dimensions. More than serving as a vehicle for a symbolic content, sound and aurality are part of the material-sensory world that human life must accommodate and respond to in the course of constructing a valued form of life."⁶²

Through the processes of modernization, the categories of religion, secularity, and tradition have been reconfigured in Oman, as have the relationships between them. In the "modern" curriculum of Oman's public

schools operated through the Ministry of Education, religious knowledge is relegated as one subject along others and taught as a "de-politicized" form of cultural heritage.⁶³ Considered more thoroughly, it is not really the case that religion and embodied knowledge have been relegated to the past as a part of Oman's process of modernization, giving way to a modern liberal state of secularity. The online Qur'an distance-learning program demonstrates these relationships in a particular way.

The Omani state cannot be categorized as simply religious or secular; such characterizations flatten the ways in which religion figures in state structures. The role of head of state—the sultan—is not religiously based; historical narratives typically cast the unification of Oman under this dynastic monarchy as replacing the previous decentralized rule that was partially characterized by religious leadership under the structure of the imamate. But the language of secularism and the assumed categories of a secular/religious dichotomy do not describe the relation and understanding of religion to governance in Oman. The modern state of Oman does have an official religion—Islam—and religion is regulated in many areas and through some of the government structures discussed here, primarily the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, and to some extent the Ministry of Education as well. Religious education is maintained in many areas—first, the Islamic studies curriculum in the "modern" system of education; second, the parallel Qur'an schools; third, diverse contexts and institutions at the level of higher education; and finally, the online system of distance education focused specifically on recitation of the Qur'an. Sachedina

further describes the place of religion in the modern Omani national framework as follows: “Religion is entering into a space already built on secular assumptions erected on the foundation of the ‘Omani personality’ – naturalized and acculturated as part of teleological History. . . . Religion itself becomes part of the natural order of things, given the same status as one among a number of other social components that have been the foundational building blocks in the construction of the distinctive nature and culture of the ‘Omani personality.’”⁶⁴

In the case of modern Oman, the categories of religion and secularity are most properly understood when one considers how they are generated in the case of Omani history specifically. When understood as categories generated outside of the Omani context, they do not necessarily neatly fit to accurately describe modern life and practices. As this article has explored, the case of the online Qur’an distance-learning

program, as generated within and operated under the state authority of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, particularly confounds the idea of religion and secularity as an assumed dichotomy, around which ideas of tradition, modernity, and the role of oral and embodied practices and ways of knowing can also not be relegated to one place or another. But even more, the distance-learning program must be understood in the context of broader histories of orality and pedagogy in Islam, and within the history of the mediation of the Qur’an therein. In this case, the modern tool of internet technology of course opens up new possibilities for speed and ease of access of religious learning, but more specifically, it also fits in a longer history of pedagogy and the inscribing of the Qur’an in various modes of media. Most specifically in Omani history, it marks a new phase of the role of media in state regulation and presentation of religion.

NOTES

1 “*Al-Barnāmaj al-iliktrūnī li-ta’līm al-Qur’ān al-karīm*,” <https://quran.mara.gov.om/> (accessed Jan. 2, 2020). For readers who may appreciate a short video overview of the system, the following video on the YouTube channel associated with the online learning program may be of interest: “*ta’rif wa-sharḥ barnāmaj ta’līm al-Qur’ān al-Karīm ‘an bu’d*,” Feb. 6, 2017, <https://youtu.be/jIwi5ZB7lhY>.

2 The wording on the home page attests to this certification: “after having completed the program of memorization, you are given the certificate of completion of the program certified by the ministry.” Throughout this article, all translations from Arabic are my own.

3 Abdulrahman Al Salimi, “The Transformation of Religious Learning in Oman: Tradition and Modernity,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21/2 (2011): 147–48.

4 *Ibid.*, 138.

5 Suleiman Salem Al Hussein, “Religious Education in General and Higher Education in Oman: Reality, Rationale, and Institutional Practices,” in *Oman, Ibadism, and Modernity*, ed. Abdulrahman al-Salimi and Reinhard Eisener, Studies on Ibadism and Oman 12 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2018), 272.

6 Dale F. Eickelman, “Ibadism and the Sectarian Perspective,” in *Oman: Economic, Social and Strategic Developments: Selection from Contributions to a Symposium Held by the Centre for Arab Gulf Studies at Exeter University from 9 to 11 July 1985*, ed. B. R. Pridham (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 34–35; and Eickelman, “Religious Knowledge in Inner Oman,” *Journal of Oman Studies* 6/1 (1980): 164–66.

7 Eickelman, “Religious Knowledge in Inner Oman,” 166.

8 Mandana Limbert attests to a commonly cited statistic that in 1970, Oman contained only three “Western” (meaning nonqur’anic) schools. In *The Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 6.

9 Al Salimi, “The Transformation of Religious Learning in Oman,” 155.

10 *Ibid.*, 155.

11 *Ibid.*, 149–50. In note 11 on page 150, al-Salimi cites Eickelman, “Ibadism and the Sectarian Perspective.”

12 The wording in the Basic Statute, the law that functions as the constitution of Oman, reads, “The Sultanate of Oman is an Arab, Islamic, Independent State with full sovereignty and Muscat is its Capital.” “Basic Statute of the State-Ministry of Legal Affairs-

Sultanate of Oman,” <https://www.mjla.gov.om/eng/basicstatute.aspx> (accessed March 3, 2020).

13 Al Salimi, “The Transformation of Religious Learning in Oman,” 149.

14 Valerie J. Hoffman, “Ibādism: History, Doctrines, and Recent Scholarship,” *Religion Compass* 9/9 (2015): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12164>. An extensive review of Ibadī doctrine and tradition is beyond the purview of this article, but can be found in the article by Valerie Hoffman cited here, as well as her monograph, *The Essentials of Ibadī Islam* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012). As Hoffman notes in her article, the relationship of the Omani state to Ibadism is complex. Her discussion on pages 304–05 serves as an overview of those complexities.

15 The state system of Qur’an schools is not to be confused, however, with the presence of private Qur’an schools in Oman. The latter exist under shifting degrees of state oversight and regulation. As private institutions unrelated to the federal online Qur’an learning system, they are beyond the purview of this article. The ministry also operates religious education at the post-secondary level, and while a detailed examination of Qur’an-based learning at such institutions would be a worthy avenue of further study, it is beyond the purview of this article. The role of media in such institutions is also developing. Suleiman Salem Al Hussein examines some information on religious education at the level of higher education, including qualitative data from interviews with students and employees of those institutions. He brackets the body of Qur’an schools of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs as existing separately outside of the parameters of his research because they focus only on “the basic skills that children require, to be able to read and write and recite the Holy Qur’an.” Al Hussein, “Religious Education in General and Higher Education in Oman,” 271.

16 *Ibid.*, 272.

17 Hilāl Ibn Ḥamūd Ibn Sālim al-Riyāmī, *Manhaj Al-Qilā’ al-Sab’ Li-Hifẓ al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, al-Ṭab’ah al-Thānīyah (‘Umān: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa al-Shu’ūn al-Dīnīyah, 2019).

18 Hilal al-Riyami (@HilalAlRiyami), “At the request of the Senegalese Republic, represented by the Union of Holy Qur’an Schools, we have implemented training courses in the Seven Fort Method for memorizing the Holy Qur’an in all regions of Senegal, *alḥamdulillāh*. Wish us good luck.” Twitter, Feb. 12, 2020, 1:51 A.M., <https://>

twitter.com/hilalalriyami/status/1227530622891151360?lang=en; and Hilal al-Riyami, WhatsApp message to author, Feb. 14, 2020.

19 The “fort” here is a specific reference to Oman’s cultural heritage, which I explain further below.

20 Sālim al-Ḥusaynī, “Hilāl al-Riyāmī: 9300 Dāris ‘abra al-Barnāmij al-Ilīkrūnī li-Ta’līm al-Qur’ān al-Karīm wa-Nas’ā li-Taṭwīr Naṭāfihi ‘Ālamīyan,” *Jarīdat ‘Umān* (Oman Daily), Aug. 11, 2018, <https://www.omandaily.com/?p=619569>.

21 One comprehensive review of the rules of *tajwīd* in English can be found in Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

22 The *isti’ādḥah* is an opening formula comprised of the sentence in Arabic “I take refuge in God from the accursed Satan,” and the *bismillāh* is the text that appears preceding every sura of the Qur’an except the ninth (and in the case of the first sura it is the first verse): “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.”

23 Al-Ḥusaynī, “Hilāl al-Riyāmī.”

24 The Arabic word used in the article is *al-taḥfīz*, meaning to incentivize or incite someone to do something. The context of the discussion of the use of jewels as a system of rewards in the game leads me to understand this as a method of gamification. See *ibid.*

25 Al-Riyāmī, *Manhaj Al-Qilā’ al-Sab’ Li-Ḥifẓ al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*.

26 *Ibid.*, 51–58.

27 *Ibid.*, 51–52.

28 *Ibid.*, 58.

29 “al-Taṭbīq al-‘Amalī li-Ta’līm al-Qur’ān al-Karīm wa-Fahmihi.” *Ibid.*, 30, 38, 44.

30 *Durūs al-‘ilm*, “science,” here could either refer to “science” specifically or be used in a broader sense indicating other categories of knowledge.

31 *Ṣalāh*.

32 *Ṣalāt al-jamā’ah*.

33 *Dhikr* here most likely means mentioning, remembering, or reminding of God. Al-Riyāmī, *Manhaj Al-Qilā’ al-Sab’ Li-Ḥifẓ al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, 30, 38, 44.

34 Al-Ḥusaynī, “Hilāl al-Riyāmī.”

35 “Jā’izat Afḍal Mawqī’ Ilīkrūnī Li-Khidmat al-Qur’ān al-Karīm,” <https://quran.mara.gov.om/blog/19?v2=1> (accessed Jan. 2, 2020).

36 Many of the English-language scholarly works written on Qur’an recitation attest to the orality of the Qur’an’s milieu, but those cited here provide the most comprehensive examinations of the Qur’an’s orality in light of its aesthetic power of reception on the part of its most immediate audience: William A. Graham,

Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); William A. Graham and Navid Kermani, “Recitation and Aesthetic Reception,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 115–41; Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, trans. Tony Crawford (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015).

37 The sound patterns of the Qur’an have been explored most thoroughly thus far by Michael Sells and Devin Stewart. Michael Sells, “Sound and Meaning in ‘Sūrat al-Qāri’a,” *Arabica* 40/3 (November 1993): 403–30; Michael Sells, “A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Sūras of the Qur’an: Spirit, Gender, and Aural Intertextuality,” in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’an*, ed. Issa J. Boullata, Curzon Studies in the Qur’an (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 3–25; Michael Sells, “Sound, Spirit, and Gender in Sūrat Al-Qadr,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111/2 (June 1991): 239–59; Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*, 2nd ed. (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2007); Devin J. Stewart, “Saj’ in the Qur’an: Prosody and Structure,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21/2 (September 1990): 101–39.

38 Andrew G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur’an* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

39 The following works offer a sampling of the English-language literature on Qur’an recitation in relation to systems of transmission of knowledge and education: Frederick M. Denny, “Qur’an Recitation: A Tradition of Oral Performance and Transmission,” *Oral Tradition* 4/1–2 (1989): 5–26; Anna M. Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur’an in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004); Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur’an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Rudolph T. Ware, *The Walking Qur’an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*, *Islamic Civilization & Muslim Networks* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

40 Ware, *The Walking Qur’an*, 76.

41 *Ibid.*, 49.

42 Charles Hirschkind, “Media and the Qur’an,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington, DC: Brill, 2009), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00117.

43 Ibid.

44 Jeremy Stolow, "Religion and/as Media," *Theory, Culture & Society* 22/4 (2005): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405054993>.

45 Amal Sachedina, "Of Living Traces and Revived Legacies: Unfolding Futures in the Sultanate of Oman" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 7.

46 Usha Sanyal, "Al-Huda International," *Hawwa* 13/3 (Oct. 15, 2015): 440–60, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15692086-12341292>.

47 Ibid., 443–45.

48 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

49 Sanyal, "Al-Huda International," 456–57.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 457.

52 Al-Riyāmī, *Manhaj Al-Qilā' al-Sab' Li-Ḥifẓ al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*.

53 Al Salimi, "The Transformation of Religious Learning in Oman," 149–50.

54 Ibid., 156–57.

55 Sachedina, "Of Living Traces and Revived Legacies."

56 Ibid., 8, 12.

57 Ibid., 2, as well as chap. 2 more broadly.

58 Although the role of forts figures prominently throughout the dissertation, their role as a visible symbol of heritage is perhaps most concisely explained in *ibid.*, 5–6.

59 There are numerous works in which these ideas are engaged, including but certainly not limited to those cited here, which represent a range of perspectives in this broader conversation: Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

60 Charles Hirschkind, "Religion," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 165.

61 Ibid., 165.

62 Ibid., 168.

63 Sachedina, "Of Living Traces and Revived Legacies," 7.

64 Ibid., 79.