

“ICH KANN NICHT”: GERMAN MUSLIM WOMEN CONVERTS AND THEIR STRUGGLES TO LEARN THE QUR’AN

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Abstract

This paper describes the challenges some German Muslim women converts face while learning Qur’an recitation particularly in their attempts to articulate the Qur’anic letters (makhārij al-ḥurūf). It focusses on the connection between makhārij al-ḥurūf with piety cultivation (khushū‘) and rituals (ibādāt) while adding to both Gade’s and Brusius’s work on recitation. The paper also raises positionality questions with regards to the author being both a researcher and teacher of recitation writing about her students.

Keywords: German Muslim women, *makhārij al-ḥurūf*, Qur’an recitation, piety cultivation, rituals.

Background

I am a trained Qur’an reciter who teaches recitation and who, for many years, has participated in state and national recitation competitions in Nigeria. Although I began learning what I call the ‘Arab melody’¹ at the age of nine, which came to Nigeria in the 1980s through cassette recordings and radio broadcasts, recitation had become a part of me much earlier. Growing up in Jos, a city in northern Nigeria, and attending a traditional ‘ink and slate’ Qur’an *madrasa* (Hausa: *makarantar allo*) under a large tree opposite my home, it is most likely that no one enrolled me but myself. At the age of one, when I began to walk and babble my first words, I might have become attracted by the cacophony of the recited sounds and walked barefooted (as I have seen other children do) and sat on one of the tree’s fleshy branches to begin my first recitation ‘practice’.

Researching any group of women learning to recite the Qur’an is like researching a part of myself. In the shared research space, which both my participants and I shape, I am fully aware of “where I stand in relation to ‘them’”.² From the way my questions are constructed, and the data collected and then analysed, I am mindful of how my identities, perceptions and biases have the potential to affect the research process. Although being black and Muslim-born rendered me an outsider among my informants who are mostly white German converts, even with respect to their experiences of conversion into Islam, I never saw myself as an “external outsider”,³ given that the spiritual aspects are what mostly shape our Qur’an learning space. My knowledge of the theoretical and practical aspects of recitation and its ethics, and my position as their teacher made me an “indigenous insider.” This both built trust and connected me with and granted me easy access to the women and to their information, which they kindly shared both inside and outside our learning hours.

Contrary to Lisa Brusius’s observations of herself (she also studies converted Muslim women’s vocal traditions in Berlin), after praying with some of her Muslim female informants at a mosque, she “had not felt anything and was not even sure what she was supposed to feel”⁴ as a Qur’an teacher, I not only feel what

1. By ‘Arab’ melody, I mean the recitation of Egyptian and Saudi Arabian reciters whose melody differs from the traditional ‘Hausa’ melody. For more, see Muazu 2019.

2 Merriam, S. B., J. Johnson-Bailey, M. Lee, Y. Kee, G. Ntseane and M. Muhamad, “Power and Positionality: Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status Within and Across Cultures”, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20 (5): (2001), 405–16. Doi: 10.1080 / 02601370120490.

3 Fletcher, Anna, “An Invited Outsider or an Enriched Insider? Challenging Contextual Knowledge of a Critical Friend Researcher”, in Monica Green, Susan Plowright and Nicola F. Johnson (eds) *Educational Researchers and the Regional University: Agents of Regional Global Transformations*, New York: Springer. (2019), Doi: 10.1007/978-981-13-6378-8.

4 Brusius, Lisa M., “Sensing and Vocalising the Qur’an: Muslim Inherentism and Aesthetic Universality”, chapter draft, (2017).

my students feel, but ‘teach’ them the feeling, either in the form of making *ḥuzn*⁵ (sorrow) a vocal quality, or a practice of piety in the long journey of *khushū* (humility). Thus, as an insider writing about an affective practice such as recitation, the line between objectivity and subjectivity becomes thinner, with “positionality representing only a space in which both (objectivism and subjectivism) meet, and achieving a pure objectivism becoming even a more naïve quest, as I can never truly divorce myself of my subjectivity”.⁶ As I move to the next section and describe the class about *makhārij al-ḥurūf*, I remain reflexive about my position in a “continuing mode of self-analysis”,⁷ which will continue to shape me and my findings beyond the completion of the research.

European female converts to Islam have been portrayed as “vulnerable-fanatics’ prone to ‘radicalisation’ and family troublemakers who are threatened by ‘oppressive’ Islam”.⁸ In this paper, I attempt to move away from such framings and provide readers with insight into the activities and challenges that female converts go through as they struggle to cultivate piety in their newfound faith. This research adds to both Gade’s and Brusius’s work on recitation by looking particularly at *makhārij al-ḥurūf* among my German participants. I do this through focusing on the experiences of two women, Aloysia and Hajara (not their real names) describing their struggles in their attempts to articulate Arabic Qur’anic letters (*makhārij al-ḥurūf*) and the meanings they associate with them. I raise questions such as: what are *makhārij al-ḥurūf* and how do they affect the reciters in my class? What kind of meaning does a ‘mere’ act of pronouncing letters have within the tradition of Qur’anic recitation and how is that connected to cultivating piety (*khushū*) and rituals (*ibādāt*)?

The data for this paper has been gathered through focus groups, individual interviews and active participation between 2019 to 2020. The paper is structured into three parts. In the first, I discuss the secondary literature on recitation, which situates my work within the larger framework and the gap it seeks to fill. Then I present a description of our Qur’an class (and the two women I focus on) in which I attempt to depict the different layers of struggles and *khushū* involved. In doing so, I do not limit myself to learning recitation, but also include relevant activities such as prayer to give readers an idea of other activities that take place during Qur’an classes. In the final section, I discuss why it is important for the women I study to pronounce the Qur’anic letters well.

Tajwīd, makhārij al-al-ḥurūf and cultivation of piety

In the 1970s and 1980s, Western scholars of the Qur’an, whose main focus had been on the text, began to turn their attention to its orality. The works of William Graham, Kristina Nelson and Frederick M. Denny, and later, from the 1990s onwards, the works of Anna M. Gade, Michael Sells, Anne K. Rasmussen and Michael Frishkopf. These scholars have studied the meaning of the Qur’an with regards to its aural/oral

⁵ Gade, Anna M., “Taste, Talent and the Problem of Internalization: A Qur’anic Study in Religious Musicality from Southeast Asia”, *History of Religions*, 41 (4): (2002), 328–68.

Gade, Anna M., *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur’an in Indonesia*, Honolulu: (2004a), University of Hawaii Press. Gade, Anna M., “Motivating Qur’anic Practice in Indonesia by Competing in Goodness”, *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 18 (2): (2004b), 24–42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44368693>. Accessed 28 August 2020. Nelson, Kristina, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an*, Austin: University of Texas Press, (1985).

Nelson, Kristina, *The Art of Reciting the Quran*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, (2001).

⁶ Bourke, B., “Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process”, *The Qualitative Report*, 19 (33), (2014), 1–9.

⁷ Callaway, H., “Ethnography and Experience: Gender Implications in Fieldwork and Texts”, in J. Okely and H. Callaway (eds) *Anthropology and Autobiography*, London: Routledge, (1992) 29–49.

⁸ Spoliar, Lucy and van den Brandt, Nella, “Documenting conversion: Framings of female converts to Islam in British and Swiss documentaries”. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, (2020), 1-15.

nature,⁹ orality, etiquettes and musical features of recitation,¹⁰ recitation as a product of both divine and human ordering¹¹ and recitation from the viewpoint of musicological studies.¹²

Anna Gade's¹³ work is the first detailed study of recitation from the standpoint of emotions and affect. Taking Indonesia as an example, she analysed how Muslims self-consciously try to develop and enhance normative Qur'anic abilities in dynamics of escalating engagement, while demonstrating affective patterns and proclivities that sustained or intensified long-term practices of piety, especially through modes of feeling. The practice of recitation she studied in Indonesia during her fieldwork in 1996 and 1997 is part of a transnational phenomenon of "Islamic awakening," as seen in other places such as Nigeria.¹⁴ She showed how Qur'anic activities used affect or feeling "as both a strategy and a recognition of piety within projects of Muslim learning and community building." Pious Muslims eagerly sought the sense of being "able to" engage the voiced Qur'an correctly through vocalization and according to *tajwīd* rules. All these are practices of religious piety that transform the practitioners.¹⁵ What generates such escalating dynamics of ongoing religious engagement with recitation, Gade concludes are "mood and motivation", which is foundational to Clifford Geertz's definition of religion. Although the 'ritual' of reciting the Qur'an does not change, she¹⁶ continued, "the recited Qur'an will develop over time for each reciter or memorizer ... affecting the human experience in the present ... reorienting him or her to moral sensitivity, social responsibility, and an appropriate relationship to the Creator."

In her ongoing ethnographic work in mixed Arab–German community mosques in Berlin, Lisa-Maria Brusius looks at converted women's experiences of adapting to Islamic vocal traditions such as Qur'an recitation, Arabic poetry and the singing of *anashid*. She is studying how both aesthetic understandings and aspirations shape these practices and transform the women in their daily lives. Brusius observed that the linguistic and vocal competences required to grasp these aesthetic and affective ideals differ significantly among practitioners. Performances of vocal repertoires, as she¹⁷ argues:

⁹ Graham, William A., *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1987). Graham, William A. and Navid Kermani, "Recitation and Aesthetic Reception", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, (2006).

¹⁰ Denny, Frederick M., "The Adab of Qur'an Recitation: Text and Context", in Anthony H. Johns (ed.) *International Congress for the Study of the Qur'an: Australian National University, Canberra, 8–13 May 1980*, Canberra City: South Asia Centre, Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, 143–60. Denny, Frederick M., "Qur'an Recitation: A Tradition of Oral Performance and Transmission", *Oral Tradition*, 4 (1/2), (1989), 5–26. Denny, Frederick M., "Nawawi: Etiquette in Recitation", In John Renard (ed.) *Windows on the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, (1998), 55–7.

¹¹ Nelson, Kristina, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an*, Austin: University of Texas Press, (1985). Nelson, Kristina, *The Art of Reciting the Quran*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, (2001). Nelson, Kristina, "Reciter and Listener: Some Factors Shaping the Mujawwad Style of Qur'anic Reciting", *Ethnomusicology*, 26 (1): (1982), 41–7. doi:10.2307/851400.

¹² Rasmussen, A. K., "The Qur'an in Indonesian Daily Life: The Public Project of Musical Oratory", *Ethnomusicology*, 45 (1): (2001), 30–57. Doi: 10.2307/852633. Rasmussen, A. K., "The Arabic Aesthetic in Indonesian Islam", *The World of Music*, 47 (1): (2005), 65–90. Rasmussen, A. K., *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, (2010). There are earlier works in German classified under musicological studies of the Qur'an such as Bergsträsser, G., "Hebräische Grammatik: Mit Benutzung der von E. Kautzsch bearb. 28. Aufl. von Wilhelm Gesenius' hebräischer Grammatik", (1926) vol. 2, Leipzig: F. C. W. Vogel.

¹³ Gade, Anna M., "Taste, Talent and the Problem of Internalization: A Qur'anic Study in Religious Musicality from Southeast Asia", *History of Religions*, 41 (4): (2002), 328–68. Gade, Anna M., *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia*, Honolulu: (2004a), University of Hawaii Press. Gade, Anna M., "Motivating Qur'anic Practice in Indonesia by Competing in Goodness", *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 18 (2): (2004b), 24–42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44368693>. Accessed 28 August 2020.

¹⁴ Muazu, Rahina, *Qur'an Recitation and the Nudity of the Female Voice in Nigeria*. Dissertation submitted to the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany, (2019).

¹⁵ Gade, Anna M., *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia*, Honolulu: (2004a), University of Hawaii Press, see also her Chapter 3 on 'Qur'an reading'.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 39.

¹⁷ Brusius, Lisa M., "Sensing and Vocalising the Qur'an: Muslim Inherentism and Aesthetic Universality", chapter draft, (2017).

frequently provoke underlying, although often denied dynamics of exclusion versus inclusion. Converted women who learn how to recite tend to rely on making sense of the Qur'an in a primarily sonic mode and perceive their inability to understand its referential dimension as a personal shortcoming. Nevertheless, they also turn this perceived deficit to their advantage by understanding recitation mainly as an ethical, rather than an aesthetic challenge of personal development and self-cultivation.

Brusius also analyses how listening to the Qur'an, reciting it and being affected by it were related to the difference between being Muslim and non-Muslim. She uses Frishkopf's¹⁸ 'quasi-embodied property,' to show how 'being Muslim' is understood as a "determining factor on sensibilities, abilities of vocalization, and getting affected," and on the differentiation between Muslims and non-Muslims in rituals as well as everyday contexts. Whether someone is Muslim or not influences how a person is believed to recite the Qur'an, listen to the Qur'an, and feel the Qur'an.¹⁹

As mentioned above, this research adds to both Gade's and Brusius's work on recitation by looking particularly at *makhārij al-ḥurūf* among my German participants. In Gade's studies, the Qur'an's affective and emotional engagement sustains the women's long-term recitation learning projects and transforms them. The determining factor for these transformations is better understood here not in terms of *only* 'being Muslim,' as in Brusius's work but of 'being *Mu'min*'. These categories have always been differentiated, at least in Qur'anic epistemology and spirituality, the former being a state of submission (being Muslim) and the latter a state when *iman* (faith) has really entered into the submitted heart.²⁰ In their continuous attempt to attain piety, their ability or inability to pronounce the Qur'anic letters correctly and observe all *tajwīd* rules affects how they feel about their belief and is a progressive journey from *just* being Muslim to being, living, and dying as *Mu'mināt* (female believers, sing: *Mu'mina*). They seek to achieve these three stages of 'being' through more *khushū'* and closeness to Allah by perfecting the recitation of His text, which begins with their *makhārij al-ḥurūf*.

Under *tajwīd*, *makhārij al-ḥurūf* is the branch of knowledge that deals with the proper articulation of the Arabic Qur'anic letters. Due to its utmost significance, Ibn al-Jazarī's (d.833/1429) definition of *tajwīd* centres on correct letter pronunciation (*nuṭq*) and the connection of the latter with *tadabbur* (contemplation). He defines *tajwīd* as giving each letter (*ḥarf*) its required right (*ḥaqqahu wa mustaḥaqqahu*), being gentle to the letters (*ḥuruf*), articulating them from the right point (*makhraj*) with neither reduction nor exaggeration. The difference between *tajwīd* and the lack of it, al-Jazarī added, is nothing "except the exercise of the one who ponders (*tadabbur*) over the letters with his jaws".²¹ Knowledge of the *makhārij* not only aids in knowing how letters should be produced but also determines the quality of the produced sound, its meaning and affect. A good analysis of *tajwīd* reveals that *ḥurūf* play the most significant role in the formation of the *tajwīd* rules. Not only does their correct pronunciation determine the ideal recitation, but also the majority of *tajwīd* rules are based on the relationship that the *ḥurūf* have with each other.²² The rules of dissimilation (*iḥḥār*), assimilation (*idghām*), *iqḷāb* and *ikhfā'* (the partial

¹⁸ Frishkopf, Michael, "Ritual as Strategic Action: The Social Logic of Musical Silence in Canadian Islam", in Karin van Nieuwkerk (ed.) *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps and Revolutionary Theatre: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, (2011), 115–48.

¹⁹ (Brusius, 2017: 6) Brusius, Lisa M., "Sensing and Vocalising the Qur'an: Muslim Inherentism and Aesthetic Universality", chapter draft, (2017).

²⁰ Qur'an 49:14.

²¹ al-Jazarī, Abu al-Khayr Shams al-Din Muḥammad, *Al-Muqaddima fima yajibū 'ala qarī' al-Qur'an an ya'lamahu* edited by A. R. Suwayd, Jeddah: Dar Nur al-Maktabat li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi'.

²² To find out the *makhraj* of each of the 29 letters easily, it should be made into a motionless *sākin* (a state of *sukūn*) or should be in a doubled *tashdīd* state. For instance, when one (using *sukūn*) says 'ah' to find out the *makhraj* of letter 'h', one takes notice of where the sound ends, and that exactly is the *makhraj* of 'h'. How many *makhārij* are there for the 29 letters? On this, there is also disagreement. For the grammarian scholar Sībawayhi (d.180/796/) and Andalusian scholar al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388), there are 16 *makhārij*. They took away the *makhraj* of *jawf*, which is the point of articulation of the three letters of elongation (*ḥurūf al-madd*), and divided those letters, with 'alif' and 'hamza' becoming *ḥalqī* letters, 'ya' in a state of both *sukūn* and motion (*ḥaraka*) becoming *lisanī* letters, and 'waw' also both in motion and motionless states (*sukūn* and *ḥaraka*) becoming a *shafawī* letter. The view of Ibn al-Jazarī is preferred here not only because of his leading position in the field but because he joined all the other views together making the *makhārij* into 17. After grouping letters of similar *makhraj* together, al-Jazarī classified the major points of

articulation of a syllable) which are referred to as “*aḥkām nūn al-sākina wa al-tanwīn*” are wholly determined by a neighbouring relationship. What happens to a ‘*nūn*’ in a state of *sukūn* (a diphthong or a zero-vowel level) and what kind of sound should be produced depends on the letter that follows. The rules for extended syllables (*madd*, pl. *mudūd*), the rules governing ‘*mīm*’ when it is in a state of *sukūn* (*aḥkām mīm al-sākina*), and the rules of the letter ‘*lām*’ for the ‘sun,’ and ‘moon’ letters (*shamsiyya* and *qamariyya*) are all dependent on the position of *hurūf* to each other. In the next section, I will describe the class focussing on Aloysia and Hajara and the layers of piety cultivation involved while they struggle to learn *makhārij al-hurūf*.

The Qur’an Class: Aloysia and Hajara

Our Qur’an class was held in Wedding, the multicultural district of Berlin in which I was living. On a Saturday evening during the winter of 2019, I made my way to meet a group of German Muslim women waiting for me for their Qur’an recitation lessons. In a small room, about ten of them were seated in their hijabs. Some were silently chanting from their Qur’an, practising before my arrival. The women in the group (or others who sometimes attend individual lessons at my apartment) are mostly converts in their thirties, forties, fifties and sixties. They include educators, teachers, health workers, scholars, engineers, and housewives. The reasons for their conversion are varied. While for some, it is connected to their husbands, children, extended Muslim families or Islamic family roots; for others, it is a search for the meaning of their existence on earth, and a quest to make peace with their inner selves.

At 4 pm, it was dark and time for the *Maghrib* prayer. The women had already performed their ablutions. I rushed to the bathroom, washed myself and went to join them for the prayer. They insisted, however, that I lead it. Coming from a Muslim majority country (Nigeria) that follows the *Māliki madhhab* (School of Law), leading prayer is not among the religious duties that women perform. Men lead men and women in prayer. Although I had led *Ramaḍān tarāwīḥ* prayers a number of times for a group of women worshippers, acting as a female *Imāma* still feels new and it is not one of the things I expected to see myself doing in the German capital of Berlin. Still, I proceeded. I stood in the middle, with the women to my right and left forming a long horizontal row. The woman on my left called the *iqāma*.²³ *Allāhu Akbar!* I said the *takbīrat iḥrām* aloud, raising my hands up to my shoulders, with all fingers stretched, palms facing the *Qibla*, and thumb in line with the lower earlobe. The *takbīrat iḥrām*, together with the intention (*niyya*), marked the initial opening of our prayer. Then came the Qur’an recitation. I recited *sura* (chapter) *al-Fātiḥa* and an additional *sura*. While the recitation of *Fātiḥa* is compulsory in each unit of the prayer, the worshipper chooses the *sura*/verses to recite after it, and I have always chosen from the *suwar* (pl. of *sura*) that the participants are learning in an attempt to reinforce the verses they have learned by heart. In about six minutes, we were done with our *Maghrib* prayer.

“*Wer möchte von euch heute anfangen?*” In my weak German, which I was struggling to improve daily, I asked the women, who among you wants to start today? Our classes are conducted solely in German, and this gives me an opportunity to practise. Aloysia wanted to start. She had converted to Islam in 2010. She is a sixty-year-old horticultural engineer, whose story of conversion I found interesting. As she explained, she was a devout Catholic and had been married to her Muslim husband for 22 years. Many years ago, her husband had to go abroad for a long period for professional reasons, and she, then a Christian, had to take on the main educational responsibility of raising their children, then aged 12 and 16 respectively, as Muslims. Aloysia decided to prepare herself for their questions, especially because of puberty challenges. Therefore, she read a German translation of the Qur’an from beginning to end. As she explained:

I was overwhelmed by its clear and distinct message and by the truth that was revealed to me in every verse (*Ich war überwältigt von seiner klaren und deutlichen Botschaft und von der Wahrheit, die sich mir in jedem Vers offenbarte*). It amazed me how much reference was made to the Bible and the prophets already known to me. I understood that it must be the same God in whom the Jews, Christians and Muslims believe and that it is extremely important to Allah that

articulations into five, which are: *al-jawf* (empty space in the throat and mouth), *al-ḥalq* (throat), *al-lisān* (tongue), *al-shafatayn* (lips) and *al-khayshūm* (nasal passage).

23. The second call to prayer, given just before the prayer begins.

he has no son. For he repeated this very often in the Qur'an. In one verse, finally, it said that when knowledge comes to you, you have to make a decision. So I could not help but convert.²⁴

At that time in our class, I didn't know about Aloysia's history of conversion to Islam, all I knew was that she wanted to be the first to start learning her verses that day. Therefore, I moved closer to her so that we could begin. She was supposed to learn the first five verses of *sura al-Fajr* (chapter 89). My teaching method is traditional; it follows how the first reciter (Prophet Muḥammad) learned and how he taught his first students, the *ṣaḥāba* (companions). Using the verbal tradition of the *talaqqī wa al-mushāfaha*, a strictly oral way based on proper articulation of the sound and listening (*nuṭq wa al-samā'*),²⁵ I began reciting to Aloysia, she should listen carefully and repeat after me:

wal fajr
(By the dawn)
wa layāl al- 'ashr
(By the ten nights)
wa al-shaf' i wa al-witr
(And by the even and the odd)
wa al-layl idhā yasr
(And by the nights when it departs)
Hal fidhālika qasam al-lidhī hijr

(Consider all this – could there be, to anyone endowed with reason, [more] solemn evidence of the truth?²⁶

Aloysia recites well and I always appreciate her recitation. In my attempt to ensure that all *ḥurūf* are pronounced correctly and all *tajwīd* rules observed, I corrected her a few times, stopping her, reciting the verse a few more times, pronouncing some letters separately, asking her to listen to me more attentively and to look at my lips and mouth to observe their movements. The tongue and ears are complementary to each other, I always emphasized. You need to listen, at the same time observe the movements I make with my tongue and lips.

Aloysia suddenly burst into tears "*ich kann nicht, ich kann nicht,*" "I cannot do this," she wept. Her difficulty pronouncing the letters not only disappointed her but it also embarrassed her, as she would later tell me. I consoled her. In my more than two decades of teaching the Qur'an, which I began as a teenager, I had always preferred teaching women because of the freedom of the gender-sameness it provides, no discussions on either physical or vocal nudity (*'awra*).²⁷ Apart from providing learning support, we had often shifted to other forms of support outside the context in which we were operating. The letters troubling Aloysia are '*ta,*' '*ayn,*' '*gha*' and '*da,*' which some of the other participants in the class are also making efforts to improve. The letter (*da*) is the most challenging for them because of its unique features and its absence from the German alphabet. It is one of the *lisanī* (tongue) letters that is produced after exerting pressure on the borders of the tongue. It is the most difficult letter for many recitation students, and the Arabic language prides itself for being the "language of '*da.*'" (*lughgha al-dād*).²⁸

On that day in class, Aloysia decided not to conclude her recitation lesson for the day. She told me she needed a break. Her *makhārij* 'mistakes' embarrassed her. She said that they made her feel more ashamed than motivated, so she had decided to practise on her own first until she could get into more of a routine (*das beschämte mich eher, als dass es mir einen Antrieb gegeben hätte. Daher beschloss ich, erst einmal für mich allein zu üben, bis ich mehr Routine bekomme*).

Unlike Aloysia, Hajara converted to Islam at an earlier age. She was in her twenties when she became interested in the religion. After a long period of an independent research and a deep study, she converted.

²⁴ Interview 2020.

²⁵ For more on the *talaqqī wa al-mushāfaha*, and *nuṭq wa al-samā'*, see Hammām 2019: 14–15.

²⁶ Translation of the first four verses by Muhsin Khan and verse five by Asad.

²⁷ On vocal nudity in recitation, see Muazu, Rahina, *Qur'an Recitation and the Nudity of the Female Voice in Nigeria*. Dissertation submitted to the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany, (2019).

²⁸ For more on the letter, see al-Sharīf, Naḍal Aḥmad, *Ṣawt al-dād fi al-lughgha al-'Arabiyya: Dirasa Tarikhiyya*, Ghaza: Kulliyya al-Adab fi al-Jamī'a al-Islamiyya, (2017). Sibawayh, *Al-Kitāb*, or "*The Book*", earliest book on Arabic grammar, (n.d.).

Since then, she has invested so much in learning Qur'an recitation and other Islamic sciences. When Hajara began taking the Qur'an classes, her attention was like Aloysia to improve her recitation skills, particularly her *makhārij al-ḥurūf*. She will repeat the verses and the *ḥurūf* several times to make sure she gets it right. Some of the methods she employed depended not only on what was taught in the class but on extra work at home. She would ask for my permission to record me during each class after which she listens at home. She will also record her recitation and send it to me several times to get feedback. The most difficult challenge as she says is keeping the correct pronunciation, as well as the specific rules:

I have difficulty with some letters when they are in certain places. For example, the 'ha' at the end of a word. But also, *ṣād*, *ḍād*, or in some cases the 'ayn' (*ich habe mit einigen Buchstaben Schwierigkeiten, wenn sie an bestimmten Stellen stehen. Beispielsweise das 'ha' am Ende eines Wortes. Aber auch , ṣād, ḍād oder in manchen Fällen auch das 'ayn'*). I feel good when I manage to recite the Qur'an correctly because there is a certain aesthetic in the recitation, a beauty that I could express through my recitation (*ich fühle mich gut, wenn ich es schaffe, den Koran richtig zu rezitieren, weil in der Rezitation eine gewisse Ästhetik steckt, eine Schönheit, der ich durch meine Rezitation Ausdruck verleihen konnte*). Accordingly, it is also frustrating when I fail to do it for various reasons...I feel that being able to recite the Qur'an correctly is a sort of icing on the cake of my faith (*ich empfinde es als eine Art I-Tüpfelchen meines Glaubens wenn ich in der Lage bin den Koran korrekt zu rezitieren*).²⁹

However, Hajara believes that it is also possible to have a strong connection to Allah even if one cannot recite the Qur'an correctly, as long as one tries. This potential of a good connection is what other participants in the class also demonstrated. Although recitation, and thus *makhārij al-ḥurūf*, remains a strong way in which these women seek to establish their *khushū'*, they explained that they are aware that through other practices such as prayer (which, as shown above is also an important part of the Qur'an class) their connection to Allah and their *khushū'* can also be established. In the next section, I will discuss why these women believe it is important for them to have a good knowledge of *makhārij al-ḥurūf*.

Why does it matter?

Why is the theoretical and practical knowledge of correct *makhārij* important? Why does it matter at all to have correct *nuṭq* (pronunciation) in recitation? Why would the ability or inability to pronounce a letter correctly trigger a series of emotional reactions among the German Muslim women in the group? To understand this properly, we need to understand the relationship between the Qur'anic vocal sound, *ibādāt* (rituals) and piety. The ability to pronounce Qur'an Arabic letters correctly is not only for the sense of satisfaction derived from learning Arabic but also the sense of having more *khushū'*, *ḥasanāt* (good deeds, sing. *ḥasanā*) and closeness to Allah and even, after death, eternal bliss. With this belief, differentiating for instance between letters 'ḍād' and 'dāl', *dhāl*, and 'zāl' or 'hā' and 'ḥa,' then becomes not only a linguistic challenge that their tongues have to master but also a bigger one for their minds, hearts and souls, which could for them possibly define the whole purpose of their existence on earth.

"Those who recite the Qur'an with difficulty and stutter receive a double reward, one for the recitation and the other for their efforts." As for those who recite with proficiency, observing rules of *tajwīd*, they not only get *ḥasanāt* "but will be in the company of the *safara*" (Hadith),³⁰ the noble and most virtuous angels. Being in the company of the *safara* demands proficiency in recitation, and proficiency in recitation demands first and foremost proficiency in pronunciation of the Qur'anic letters. With the recitation skills, which the women want to master by mastering *makhārij*, Hajara wants "to express the aesthetic side of recitation," boost her piety", and in paradise, "have a garden whose breadth is the whole of heavens and earth (Aloysia)," in an "eternal bliss with flowing rivers of endless water and milk" (Hajara).³¹

²⁹ Interview 2020.

³⁰ Ibn Maja, Abu 'Abd Allah Muḥammad Ibn Yazid, *Sunan Ibn Maja, Muḥammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi*, edited by Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, Maktaba al-Shamila, (2010). Accessed 20 March 2019.

³¹ See Qur'an 13:23, 88:10–16, 5:119, 47:15, 3:133 for these descriptions.

Beside the ambitions above, which begin with the feeling of “being able to” recite as Gade puts it, good pronunciation has a role in *ibādāt*. It could make the difference between acceptance of a believer’s ritual acts and their rejection. *Ṣalāt*, which is the second pillar of Islam, is an obligatory act for Muslims. Practising Muslims such as the women in this group pray five times a day, and part of the obligatory act of the prayer is the recitation of the Qur’an. At the opening of the prayer, after the *takbīra al-Iḥrām*, *sura Fātiḥa* must be recited followed by a *sura* chosen by the worshipper. The last verse of *Fātiḥa* has one of the letters over which some of the women are struggling, the letter ‘*dād*.’ There are scholars of *fiqh* who are of the opinion that failing to pronounce ‘*dād*’ or any other letter correctly invalidates a prayer, for proper recitation is an obligatory act of *salat*. Pronouncing ‘*dād*’ wrongly not only tarnishes the quality of the sound pronounced but completely changes its meaning. Instead of the worshipper asking Allah to protect her ‘from the way of those who go astray (*al-dāllīna*),’ replacing ‘*dād*’ with ‘*dāl*’ – another *lisanī* letter – as it is often done, changes the meaning and she asks for protection ‘from those who follow the right path.’

Al-Shayrazi (d.476/1083), in his book *al-Muḥadhdhab*, a comprehensive Shafī‘ī school manual of Islamic law, which the great scholar Yaḥya Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi (d.676/1277) explained, the latter (al-Nawawi)³² said:

It is essential to recite *al-Fātiḥa* in prayer with all its letters, including those that are doubled (letters with *shadda*) ... if a *shadda* is omitted or one letter is replaced by another, even though the person is able to pronounce it, then his recitation is not valid. If a person whose pronunciation is incorrect is able to learn how to pronounce things correctly, [but didn’t do that] then his prayer is invalid, and it is not allowed to follow him as an *Imam*, and there is no scholarly dispute over this. If a person with incorrect pronunciation cannot learn because his tongue cannot pronounce the letters or there is too little time, and he cannot do so, then the prayer is valid.³³

Here, we will notice that correct recitation of *Fātiḥa* with correct pronunciation is obligatory. With regard to mistakes, three issues are involved: the pronunciation mistakes of (1) those able to pronounce correctly but intentionally did not, (2) those who could have pronounced correctly but failed to learn due to laziness or negligence, or (3) those who despite all efforts cannot pronounce correctly. For the first two, namely those who could but could not either due to negligence or lack of knowledge of *makhārij*, their prayers could be invalid. For the third group (who strive towards correct pronunciation of the Qur’anic letters, especially in *sura al-Fātiḥa* but could not), then they are not overburdened with more than they can handle, and their prayers are valid. This is not only the view of al-Nawawi but also that of many other scholars, such as al-Mardawi³⁴ (d.885/1480).

For category three (those who strive to pronounce the Qur’anic letters correctly, especially in *sura al-Fātiḥa*, but cannot), while their prayers may be valid, their lack of proper pronunciation removes certain religious privileges these worshippers might otherwise have enjoyed. They cannot for instance (according to majority views) lead prayers, and those who follow them risk having their prayers invalidated, except (according to a minority view) when those who are led have worse recitation skills than the *Imam*.³⁵

Concluding Remarks

This paper begins by highlighting the challenging author’s insider position. It then points out some of the difficulties faced by some German Muslim female converts in learning Qur’an recitation, particularly in their attempts to articulate the Qur’an letters (*makhārij al-ḥurūf*). Focusing on the experiences of two women, the paper has explored the struggles of these women on their path to piety cultivation (*khushū‘*). The ability to

³² al-Nawawi n.d. vol. 4: 159, 166, 359, al-Nawawi, Yaḥya Ibn Sharaf, *Al-Majmu‘ Sharḥ al-Muḥadhdhab*, Dar al-Fikr, (n.d.). See also al-Mardawi, ‘Ala’ al-Din Abu Ḥassan, *Al-Inṣāf fi Ma‘rifa al-Rajih min al-Khilaf*, 2nd edn, Beirut: Dar Iḥya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabiyy, (2006). al-Shayrazi, Abu Ishaq Ibrahim, *Al-Muḥadhdhab fi Fiqh al-Imamal-Shafī‘i*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, (n.d.).

³³ Ibid (al-Nawawi n.d.,166)

³⁴ al-Mardawi, ‘Ala’ al-Din Abu Ḥassan, *Al-Inṣāf fi Ma‘rifa al-Rajih min al-Khilaf*, 2nd edn, Beirut: Dar Iḥya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabiyy, (2006), vol. 2, 271; al-Nawawi, Yaḥya Ibn Sharaf, *Al-Majmu‘ Sharḥ al-Muḥadhdhab*, Dar al-Fikr, (n.d.), vol. 4, 159-166.

³⁵ Ibid, vol. 4, 166).

correctly pronounce Arabic Qur'anic letters serves not only the sense of satisfaction that comes from learning Arabic, but also the sense of having more *khushū'*, *ḥasanāt*, and closeness to Allah. In addition, proper articulation is important because lack of it changes not only the sound but also the meaning, which can determine the validity of the salat.

Several hadiths have mentioned that the Qur'an will come on the day of resurrection like a pale man saying to its companions, "do you recognize me? I am the one who made you stay up at night and made you thirsty during the day." Then the reciters will be given dominion in their right hand and eternity in their left, and a crown of dignity will be placed on their heads. Their parents will be clothed in garments that surpass anything to be found in this world. They will say, "Oh Lord, "how did we earn this?" and it will be said to them, "because you taught your child the Qur'an".³⁶ They [the reciters] will be asked to "recite and rise," with each verse they recite, they will get lifted to a higher position in paradise, until they recite the last verse they memorized.³⁷ If I am to sum up the motives of the women's concentration on learning the *makhārij* and *tajwīd*, I would say they want to "recite and rise." This urge, which is based on a deep belief and seeking of *ḥasanāt*, produces and reproduces the feeling of *khushū'*.

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³⁶ al-Ṭabarani, Sulayman Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad, *Tariq Ibn 'Awd Allah*, edited by Dar al-Haramayn, Cairo. Maktaba al-Shāmila, (n.d.: 51). Accessed 14 April 2019.

³⁷ Ibn Maja, Abu 'Abd Allah Muḥammad Ibn Yazid, *Sunan Ibn Maja, Muḥammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi*, edited by Dar Iḥya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, Maktaba al-Shāmila, (2010) vol. 2, 1242, no. 3780 Accessed 20 March 2019.