Sacred Voice, Profane Sight: 
The Senses, Cosmology, and Epistemology in Early Islamic History

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Abstract
From the time of the Qur’anic revelation (ca. 609–632 CE) up to the mid 11th century a problematic methodology of knowledge transmission dominated the discursive practices of early Muslim scholars. The methodology capitalized almost exclusively on isnad and narration for the transmission of the prophetic tradition despite widespread literacy in the urban centers of the Islamic world. The methodology was puzzling even for those scholars who practiced it as they offered different speculations about its origins. Finding their accounts wanting I proceed to propose an account for this methodology in terms of interpretive schemas that consist of three models: senso-somatic, cosmological, and epistemological. I show that the first model is composed of two sub-models: a dominant audiocentric model and a recessive ocularcentric model. I also show that the cosmological model is composed of two sub-models: the world of absence and the world of presence. The epistemological model is a propositional model parasitic on the first two models. The proposed analysis explicates these models to demonstrate two points: (1) the intra-model hierarchical structure and inter-models congruence and (2) the motivational force of these models in the persistence of the problematic methodology for more than three centuries despite extensive literacy.

Keywords
interpretive schemas, knowledge transmission, the senses and cosmology, Islamic epistemology, cultural motivation

Introduction
In this paper I offer, as an attempt to explicate a problematic methodology of knowledge transmission, an analysis of cultural models peculiar
to a specific cultural collectivity and characteristic of a definite historical moment: the Muslim scholars of early Islamic history. Central among these cultural models is what I will call the Arabic senso-somatic cultural model. As I endeavor to show, this model represents cultural knowledge about the senses and their relations to certain body organs. Moreover, I argue that this model is a dual system consisting of two sub-models articulated together with an articulator that belongs to the two sub-models simultaneously. The model involves construing the senses into hierarchical structures and linking them to body organs that are imbued with differential meanings and values. The two sub-models will be called the audiocentric sensotype and the ocularcentric sensotype. The senso-somatic model, I further argue, is itself articulated with other models, namely, cosmological and epistemological models, both of which evince a hierarchy remarkable in its congruence with the senso-somatic model. Ultimately, the analysis is intended to demonstrate the motivational force of these cultural models in the reproduction of certain discursive practices.

I begin by discussing the recent literatures, in Islamic scholarship on the problem of auditory method in early Islamic history and cognitive anthropology, on both of which I draw for construing the argument of this paper. Second, I look into the problematic methodology of knowledge production and transmission that relied almost exclusively on “auditing” and narrating the religious texts, and which dominated the discursive practices of early Muslim scholars approximately from the beginning of the 7th century up to mid 11th century. I will show that no convincing argument has been offered to account for this problematic methodology. Subsequently, I recover, describe, and analyze the three cultural models I have just mentioned, which provide the mediating interpretive schemas by which that problematic methodology is motivated and in reference to which it becomes intelligible.

Theoretical Approach, Historical Scholarship, and Texts

In the analysis advanced in this paper I draw on three categories of sources: (1) theory and ethnographies produced within the discipline of cognitive anthropology; (2) Islamic scholarship on the problem of oral/aural transmission of knowledge and literature in early Islamic history;
and (3) religious texts produced during the earliest time of Islamic history, primarily Qur’anic and secondarily prophetic texts. Within the discipline of cognitive anthropology I follow Bradd Shore in understanding the ideational side of culture as “an extensive and heterogeneous collection of models” (Shore 1996:44). However, contrary to Shore, I stress Hutchins’ thesis of distributed cognitive processes that rejects the distinction between individual mental processes and cultural mental contents in favor of only one level of adaptive cognitive processes that “accumulates partial solutions to frequently encountered problems” (Hutchins 1995:354). Adaptive cognitive processes consist of mental, linguistic, and behavioral activities that involve a flow of knowledge representations carried in linguistic mediums or in external artifacts, activities in which individual humans may be merely components in a complex cognitive system (Hutchins 1995; cf. Langacker 1987:154–165; 2008:28–30). The difference between Shore and Hutchins is that for the latter cognition and behavior must not be conceived of as two contrasting levels or stages but as an extended continuation of each other, each of which makes a part of a larger system. The concept of cognition for Hutchins can be read as a system with two extensions, ideational and real, with dialectical relationships that provide the precondition for change. Hutchins’ thesis is consistent with Bateson’s cybernetic understanding of mind as a learning and self-organized adaptive system regardless of whether it is anchored in agency or possesses intentionality or not (Bateson 1972, 1979).

This is particularly true of the problematic methodology in question since a complete, but minimal, process that typified it would involve at least four elements: a first narrator or group of narrators; a second narrator or a group of narrators, a text, and finally an act called *attahamul wal ada* which literally meant “carrying and delivering,” that is, carrying a text received from a narrator(s) and delivering the text to another narrator(s). *Attahamul wal ada* was a complex cognitive act that might extend over months of travel across hundreds of miles and hence overlap with acts unrelated to it as well as acts that might instantiate a subschema or parts of a higher schema of which *attahamul wal ada* was only a subschema. Furthermore, in the process of *attahamul wal ada* there was an informational flow of feed and feedback, control and change, adaptation and reorganization between the extensional part of the cognitive system in question and its intentional part, the part that I
will call, following D’Andrade, the interpretive schemas. Without such a flow of information adaptive change of distributed cognitive systems cannot be imagined. The adaptive change of this cognitive system will be touched on later in this paper.

I also follow cognitive anthropologists, especially D’Andrade (1989a, 1989b), Holland and Quinn (1987) and Strauss and Quinn (1997), in that cultural models or interpretive schemas are neither accessible nor inaccessible but largely lie between these two extremes (D’Andrade 1992:114) and can be explicited only via rigorous methods of analysis. I follow Lakoff (1987) and Langacker (1987, 1990, 2008), among other cognitive linguists, in that meaning is possible only in terms of concepts’ relations to other concepts articulated in cultural-cognitive schemas that are, according to Wierzbicka (1992, 1997), a combination of universal and culture-specific elements. Most crucial for the argument of this paper is D’Andrade’s thesis that cultural schemas possess motivational force, hence to understand why people act in certain ways “one needs to know their goals, and to understand their goals one must understand their overall interpretive system . . . and to understand their interpretive system — their schemas — one must understand something about the hierarchical relations among these schemas” (D’Andrade 1992:31; Strauss 1992a, 1992b).

The second category of sources consists of a corpus of modern Islamic scholarship that has been characterized by a movement from the certainty of the 19th and early 20th centuries’ scholars that knowledge in early Islam was primarily, if not solely, transmitted orally to a diminishing of such certainty in the later part of the 20th century (Schoeler 2006). Some of the most influential orientalists, particularly the mid-19th century scholar Alois Sprenger and the late 19th/early 20th century pioneer of Islamic studies Ignaz Goldziher, were advocates of a primarily oral transmission of knowledge, although both agreed that hadith, i.e., the prophetic tradition, was committed to writing from the very beginning albeit only for private reference (Cook 1997:440; Schoeler 2004:68, 2006:28). In the second part of the 20th century, however, the certainty about a predominantly oral culture of early Islam began to give way to doubt due primarily to the works of Abbott (Abbott 1957–1972) and Sezgin (1971). Abbott, for example, advocated an early and incremental written tradition based on evidence such
as Umayyad papyri fragments while Sezgin proposed a method for the reconstruction of these early written fragments from the later compilations (Schoeler 2006:28). Schoeler, however, cited several studies that tested and ultimately cast doubt on Abbott’s and Sezgin’s claims. Subsequently, Schoeler reconsidered the problem as teaching practices of the Islamic sciences. Summing up his argument Schoeler wrote:

The sources of the compilations in question... are for the most part lectures held by... teachers on the basis of written notes — read out or recited from memory — which were listened to and put back into writing by students. Thus, these notes are mostly not written works in the sense of books given their finished shape and edited by their author; on the other hand, they are in the majority of cases not purely oral traditions in the sense that the [teacher] and his audience kept the material under instruction exclusively in their memory... Arabic scholars held the view that a student should have “heard” the material being taught: ar-risalah al-masmu‘ah, the “heard” or “audited” transmission... was regarded by the Muslims as the best method of transmission. (Schoeler 2006:45; emphasis added)

Thus, Schoeler’s argument, which I will follow throughout, avers that knowledge transmission in early Islam was not as much oral as auditory; in other words, it was not speech-centered but audiocentric as will be clear in the body of this paper. It is Schoeler’s theory that I adapt here and from which I assume the following points throughout this paper:

1. Writing existed alongside narration and isnad, a fact which makes isnad and the narration method all the more problematic as I shall show below.
2. Written documents in the first 150 years of the history of Islam were analogous to lecture notes and aides-memoires rather than books for transmitting knowledge.
3. Isnad and narration were of highly privileged value in the scientific culture of early Islam which warrants calling this culture audiocentric.

In addition to these three points I also assume following Michael Cook (Cook 1997) that writing of hadith was resisted and disparaged in early Islam but contrary to him I take that as a sign of some cultural logic
operative behind the whole methodology. The disparagement of writing was not due to Jewish influence as Josef Horovitz (2004 [1918]) and Cook (1997) claim but rather to commonality of cultural knowledge and contingent solutions to shared practical problems (Schoeler 2004).

I want to illustrate this idea of commonality by a linguistic example that questions the argument from influence. The Hebrew paradigm of pronouns is almost identical to the Arabic, yet it is simple-minded to claim that that was due to borrowing the Hebrew paradigm. More reasonable is to point to the sharedness of linguistic origins. Similarly, disparagement of writing was due to common cultural origins, genealogies, and unison rather than to influence or borrowing. The combination of these points renders the methodology all the more problematic, and on this problematic nature I shall expand in the following two sections.

Finally, I draw on primary texts produced in the earliest phase of the time under consideration. These texts are drawn exclusively from the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition for two significant reasons: first, they are the earliest texts in Islam and second, they are the most authentic and hence reflexive of the Arabic culture at the time of the Qur’anic revelation.

A Problematic Methodology

Approximately from the beginning of the 7th century up to the middle of the 11th century a distinctive practice concerning the production, circulation, and transmission of knowledge, primarily by oral/aural isnad, dominated the discursive practices of Muslim scholars. The isnad involved hearing of texts, i.e., the hadith, from a teacher by a student of that teacher. This act of hearing was continuously repeated across the generations, a process that ultimately resulted in having a long chain of narrators preceding each text and testifying to the crucial importance of hearing and narrating texts as the most culturally privileged method of knowledge transmission.

Medieval Muslim scholars customarily classified knowledge into three main categories. First, there is what they called the sciences of shari’ah (Islamic disciplines). Second, there is Greek philosophy that they called ancient knowledge or, alternatively, the intellectual sciences
(al-‘ulum al-aqliyyah). And third, there are the sciences of Arabic language (al-‘ulum al-lisaniyyah), by which they mean literature, linguistics, literary criticism, rhetoric, and so forth (Ibn Khaldun 1960; Al-Andalusi 1985; cf. Zaydan 1957). Knowledge of the first category, especially the hadith,1 as opposed to that of the second, was acquired, circulated, and transmitted only through continuous cycles of hearing, memorizing, and narrating the sacred texts. Little attention, if any, was paid to the contents of the texts themselves and hence the authenticity of a text was determined by examining the credibility of the chain of narrators. The generally accepted norm was that no scholar could attain respectful status unless he became part of the chain of narrators himself. This methodology continued to dominate the Islamic knowledge practices for more than three centuries, disparaging writing as a medium of knowledge production, circulation and transmission. The following text narrated by Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi (d. 1070 CE), one of the prominent scholars of hadith who lived in the 11th century, long after the extensive spread of literacy in the Islamic world, illustrates this methodology:

Abu Said Muhammad . . . told us [Al-Baghdadi, the narrator] that Abu Al-Abbaas Muhammad . . . Al-Asamm was told by Muhammad . . . Al-Saghani who was told by Abu Al-Fath Muhammad Ibn Ahmad . . . and Abu Bakr Muhammad . . . Al-Saiyyad who were told by Ahmad . . . Al-Nasibi who was told by Al-Harth . . . Al-Tamimi . . . who were told by ‘Affan who was told by Humam who was told by Zaid Ibn Aslam who was told by ‘Atta’ Ibn Yasaar who was told by ‘Abu Said Al-Khuduri that the Prophet, peace be upon Him said “do not write down from [my discourse] except the Qur’an . . . and whoever wrote something other than the Qur’an must erase it.” (Al-Baghdadi 1975:29)

The sequence of names are the names of the narrators excluding the last narrator, Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi, the writer of Taqyid Al-‘ilm (literally, The Writing of Knowledge), the book from which I quote the above text. This chain of narrators was called sanad or isnad both of which literally mean “support (of the text),” and was accorded a great significance, even more significance than that accorded the prophetic text

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1) Hadith is the technical term used to refer to texts narrated about what the prophet Muhammad had said, done, and sanctioned. These texts have also been called the sunnah (= tradition) of the Prophet and from which the name of the largest Islamic division, namely, the Sunnis, is derived.
itself. The dots that punctuate the names of the narrators indicate the elimination of extended genealogies of the narrators. Finally, the prophetic text is in italics. This form of the prophetic tradition is not peculiar to the above quoted text but characteristic of all prophetic traditions that can be found in scores of books and compilations.

The quoted text was written down in the eleventh century by a scholar who lived in Baghdad, the centre of Islamic civilization where learning was in its zenith at that particular juncture of history. In other words, Baghdad at the time was where literacy was to be found, yet this prophetic text was transmitted by nearly thirteenth generations of narrators and for more than three hundred years. The first narrator, Abu Said Al-Khuduri (d. 683 CE), was a companion of the Prophet Muhammad (Al-Asqalani 1973:4/167; Ibn Abdalbar n.d.:4/1672), while the last narrator, Al-Baghdadi, lived and died in Baghdad in 1070 CE (Al-Thahabi 1983:18/286). Hence, this text had been transmitted verbally for approximately 380 years, that is, for thirteen generations, more or less. The text was also narrated and written down by Imam Muslim, who died in 875 CE (Al-Thahabi 1983:12/580), in his famous compilation of the prophetic tradition (Al-Qushayri n.d.:9/339–340). Al-Baghdadi, however, did not quote Muslim but narrated the prophetic text himself and thus traced the “genealogy” of the text along partially different chain of narrators. Thus, Al-Khuduri narrated the prophetic text before 632 CE and the text was narrated and written down by Muslim before 875 CE and subsequently it was transmitted by a number of narrators until about the year 1070 when Al-Baghdadi narrated and wrote down the text in his book. This example typifies the method of knowledge transmission in early Islamic history. In the next section I discuss three kinds of discursive practices that coevolved, as auxiliary disciplines, with this methodology of knowledge transmission.


Auxiliary Disciplines

Since Muslim scholars considered transmission of knowledge via *isnad* and narration as the only credible way for preserving and authenticating prophetic texts, three discursive practices coalesced around this culturally privileged methodology. First, there developed a discipline called *mustalah al-hadith*, literally the science of the support; second, a discipline called ‘ilm arrijal or the narrators’ biographical histories augmented *mustalah al-hadith*; and finally, a privileged practice of travel for “carrying and delivering” (*attahamul wal ada‘*) the prophetic traditions became the normative practice. The first discipline concerned itself with the classification of “the support” into numerous categories that were subsequently arranged along a scale of credibility, according to which the support (not the text) was judged as either *sahih* (sound), *hasan* (fine), *dha‘if* (weak), or *mawdhu‘* (fabricated). Moreover, each of these categories was subcategorized as either continuous or discontinuous, multiple or singular, and direct or indirect, and each of these subcategories was further divided into multiple subcategories (Ibn Al-Salah 2005, Ibn Kathir 1967; Al-Suyuti 1966). It is important to note that “the science of the support” was not concerned with the text, for the latter was almost completely ignored as the prophetic texts were not to be interpreted, critiqued or reasoned about but to be memorized and followed.

And again since the authenticity of the prophetic texts depended almost solely on the credibility of the narrators detailed biographies of the narrators called *‘ilm arrijal* (the science of men/narrators) were narrated, memorized and then narrated again and when they were compiled they filled scores of volumes that exceeded in number those of the prophetic tradition (e.g., Al-Asqalani 1973). It was on the basis of these biographies that the narrators were evaluated according to two fundamental attributes: cognitive soundness and religious piety. Finally, there was the normative practice called *arrihlah fi-talab al-‘ilm*, which literally means “travel for seeking knowledge.” Thus, a knowledge seeker (*talib ‘ilm*) living in central Asia, for example, would travel to Baghdad, or Kufah, or Damascus, or Al-Madina to “carry and deliver” a text typically no longer than a few lines. Similarly, a knowledge seeker living

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* Kufah is a town located in the southern Iraq near the river Euphrates.
in Spain would travel to Egypt, Syria, or Hijaz to “carry” a one-paragraph text.

It is most striking that knowledge seekers traversed hundreds of miles in caravans to listen to and memorize a few texts at a time when writing was widespread and well established in the urban centers. It is most striking too that scholars compiled hundreds of biographical histories about the narrators, biographies that were themselves narrated by other narrators about whom additional biographical histories were also compiled as a means for authenticating those biographies. It is most striking too that scholars dedicated tremendous energy examining “the supports” in light of the massive biographies rather than examining the texts themselves. No one would fail to ask: Why did knowledge-seekers and other Muslim scholars memorize “the supports” of the prophetic traditions and thousands of biographies and then exert excruciating efforts to study those biographies and the chains of narrators in a time when writing was widespread in the urban centers? Why did scholars rely on isnad and narration as the authoritative method of knowledge transmission and hence had to traverse long distances to “carry and deliver” knowledge according to this methodology? Would it not be more efficient, rational, pragmatic, and reliable to write down the prophetic texts early on and study those texts directly? I should emphasize that the problem I want to raise is not whether writing was unknown in early Islamic history. As discussed above, recent studies have confirmed the existence of writing from the very beginning of Islam. The problem is why audiocentric transmission of knowledge existed besides writing as the culturally privileged methodology and why writing was disparaged (Horovitz 2004 [1918]; Cook 1997). I want to argue that the alternative suggested in the last question above was an “impossible probability,” or less decisively, “improbable possibility.” My answer seems counter-intuitive yet highly plausible as I endeavor to demonstrate in this paper. To render this answer intelligible one needs to explicate the mediating interpretive schemas that constrained as well as motivated that methodology.

5) Hijaz is the north western part of the Arabian Peninsula that extends from Mecca to the north of Al-Madina.
Before doing so, however, I should like to briefly discuss some arguments proposed by Muslim scholars of medieval time to account for the predominance of this apparently peculiar methodology of knowledge production. The mere fact that they tried to account for this methodology indicates that they themselves found their discursive practices puzzling. In discussing these arguments I want to show that none of them really adequately accounts for the methodology in question. Historical sources documented four arguments which I will call: the naturalist, the pragmatic, the religious, and the culturalist. According to the naturalist argument, *hadith* narratives were transmitted verbally because verbal transmission was more reliable than writing especially since in early Islamic history writing, being handwritten, was liable to errors and falsification. The pragmatic argument claims that verbal transmission forestalled mixing the Qur’an with the Prophetic tradition. As to the religious argument, writing was prohibited for religious reasons, although those reasons were not specified but were subject to speculation. Finally, the culturalist argument holds that the Arabs at the time of revelation were illiterate people having a strong oral culture and tradition (Al-Baghdadi 1975; see also Schoeler 2004:77–78).

Under closer scrutiny the naturalist and the religious arguments turn out to be untenable, since neither of them can explain why the Qur’an, which is unanimously considered theologically superior to and historically more credible than the *hadith*, was written, at least partly, during the life of the Prophet and compiled shortly after his death. Nor does it explain why non-religious texts, particularly poetry, were not compiled until after three centuries of oral transmission (Dayf 1960:140–141). These historical facts also invalidate the pragmatic argument, for the writing and compilation of the Qur’an already forestalled mixing *hadith* with the Qur’an. The culturalist argument does not fare much better, since it is either tautological or incognizant of the historical fact that writing was well known in Mecca and Al-Madina before and after Muhammad. Furthermore, the continuous transmission of *hadith* via *isnad* and narration that took place for at least three centuries even in the urban literate centers of the Islamic world, weakens the argument.

Nevertheless, I believe that there is a kernel of truth to the religious argument: not that there are explicit Qur’anic commandments against writing, but rather because of some cultural ideals attested via the
Qur’an’s few pejorative allusions to writing. Writing is mentioned or alluded to in the Qur’an either in reference to religious texts or secular contracts and agreements. The Qur’an commands the believers to write their secular contracts and agreements as the following verses illustrate:

O ye who believe! When ye deal with each other, in transactions involving future obligations in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties: let not the scribe refuse to write: as Allah Has taught him, so let him write . . . Disdain not to reduce to writing (your contract) for a future period, whether it be small or big: it is juster in the sight of Allah, more suitable as evidence, and more convenient to prevent doubts among yourselves but if it be a transaction which ye carry out on the spot among yourselves, there is no blame on you if ye reduce it not to writing . . . (2:282)

Let those who find not the wherewithal for marriage keep themselves chaste, until Allah gives them means out of His grace. And if any of your slaves ask for a deed in writing (to enable them to earn their freedom for a certain sum), give them such a deed if ye know any good in them . . . (24:33)

However, there is not even a single verse that commands or recommends the writing of religious texts, the Qur’an or otherwise. In fact, references to writing religious texts are always pejorative. The following verses are illustrative:

Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands, and then say: “This is from Allah,” to traffic with it for miserable price! — Woe to them for what their hands do write, and for the gain they make thereby. (2:79)

Say: “Who then sent down the Book which Moses brought? — a light and guidance to man: But ye make it into (separate) sheets for show, while ye conceal much (of its contents): therein were ye taught that which ye knew not- neither ye nor your fathers.” Say: “(Allah) (sent it down)”: Then leave them to plunge in vain discourse and trifling. (6:91)

And they say: “Tales of the ancients, which he has caused to be written” and they are dictated before him morning and evening.” (25:5)

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6) All cited Qur’anic verses are from the English translation by Yusuf Abdullah Ali. As is customary, the first number indicates the sura (chapter), and the second indicates the verse number. Emphasis has been added where appropriate to highlight key passages.
Yet, the Qur’an was written partially during the life of Muhammad and compiled shortly after his death. I must add, however, that the writing and compilation of the Qur’an was according to Muslim sources due to sheer historical contingency that Nonetheless encountered strong resistance. It was suggested by the second Caliph, ‘Umar Ibn Al-Khattab, well-known for his pragmatism, to the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, who repeatedly rejected the suggestion. But due to relentless pressure from ‘Umar, Abu Bakr gave up and formed a committee for that task (see for example Al-Tabari 1960; Al-Mas‘udi 1965). Thus, we have finally come to encounter a confusion of historical data and no convincing account for the problematic methodology. Religious and non-religious texts were likewise transmitted via isnad for centuries, despite widespread literacy, and sometimes along with writing; the believers were commanded to write down secular agreements but not religious texts; and finally the Qur’an was compiled only by dint of the advice of one pragmatic man and his advice was initially vigorously rejected, resisted but finally yielded to. Reducing this confusion of historical facts to an intelligible account should start, I believe, from D’Andrade’s thesis that “to understand why people act in certain ways one needs to know their goals, and to understand their goals one must understand their overall interpretive system… and to understand their interpretive system — their schemas — one must understand something about the hierarchical relations among these schemas” (D’Andrade 1992:31, emphasis added).

In the remaining part of this paper I will explicate the interpretive schemas of early Muslims and specify their hierarchical structures. I will begin by a cultural-semantic analysis of the word ‘ilm since this is this word that came to refer to the subject matter of the problematic methodology. Next I will discuss the classification of knowledge in pre-Islamic time and in early Islamic history. This is a necessary step for defining the place of the prophetic tradition, the hadith, in the overall classificatory scheme of knowledge in early Islamic history.

**A Semantic Analysis of ‘ilm, ’adab, and hadith**

The principal aim of this section is to move from Arabic linguistic forms to Arabic cultural concepts. The linguistic forms are: ‘ilm, ’adab, and hadith. I will attempt to show that ’adab and hadith are two instances
of the general concept of `ilm; the former had been the old route (sunnah) to survival during jahiliyyah (literally, the age of ignorance) while the latter has been the path (sunnah) to salvation for the majority of Muslims since the death of the Prophet. This attempt requires specifying the semantic structural isomorphism manifest in both `adab and hadith, which follows for both from being instances of the general concept of `ilm.

The word `ilm, a noun that is now considered a rough equivalent to the English words “science” and “knowledge,” referred in early Arabic history to something entirely different. As is the case with almost all Arabic words, `ilm is derived from a tri-consonantal root, ‘-l-m, which gives rise to many derived stems, among which is the verb `alama, which means “to mark” or “to put a sign on something,” so that it stands out against indistinct ground. From the same root comes another noun `alam, which conveys different but related senses, and has to do with perceptual salience, prominence, or distinctness. Thus, `alam may refer to “flag,” “mountain,” “signpost,” “lighthouse,” and so forth. The same word can be extended metaphorically to mean “prominent figures,” i.e., people who enjoy high status whether by virtue of their knowledge, authority, honor or the like (Ibn Manzur 1956–1966:417–422, Al-Fairusabadi 1997:301–302). A second category of words with related meanings, albeit semantically different from the ones discussed so far, are also derived from the same tri-consonantal root. Thus, the verb `alima is a verb that means to “come to learn or to know.” In addition there are two other verbs, `a’lama and `allama, both of which are transitive verbs. The first means “to report or inform (someone),” while the second means “to teach and to educate.” Finally, `ilm, a cognate of the lexical forms mentioned above, came to mean “knowledge” and in the present time, “science,” whether natural science or otherwise. Thus far, I have identified the following two central senses of two different, but closely related, sets of lexical forms, both of which are derived from the same tri-consonantal root ‘-l-m.

• The first sense, conveyed by the verb `alama and the noun `alam, has to do with a physical figure or sign that is made, by nature or humans, perceptually distinct from its surrounding ground, and which is used, for the most part, to guide bodily movement.
• The second, conveyed by the verbs ‘alima, ‘a’lama, ‘allama, and the noun ‘ilm, has to do with a psychological trace made, by nature or humans, memorably distinct from the surrounding oblivion, and which is used to guide the inner psychological experience.

Following proposals by cognitive semanticists (e.g., Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1990), I argue that these two senses evince some corresponding structural invariants that define the meanings of each group of words as well as describe two isomorphic experiences, albeit, one is physical while the other is psychological. Here are the minimal structural equivalences between the two senses:

• **Figure**: Salient Physical form = Memorable Psychological Trace
• **Ground**: Indistinct Surrounding = Indistinct Psychological Surrounding (Oblivion)
• **Function**: Guidance of Body = Guidance of Personhood
• **Dimension**: Spatial = Temporal

Thus, the word ‘ilm came to denote “a mark or trace inscribed on memory to overcome time and forgetting, and ultimately to provide moral guidance.” Immediately before the emergence of Islam the word ‘ilm assumed a technical sense to refer to the history of the ancestors. This history consisted of narratives about war, peace, love, courage, cowardice, fidelity, treachery, honor, dishonor, feats, and defeats. For the most part, however, this history was preserved in poetry but also in narratives of different genres such as stories, fables, proverbs, legends, histories, genealogies, and oratory, in short, in all of what Arab literary critics call ‘adab, an Arabic word equivalent to the English word “literature.”

According to Nallino the word ‘adab was synonymous to the Arabic word sunnah, or tradition, a word used technically to refer to the prophetic texts (Nallino 1955[1911]:26). In Arabic it is not uncommon for the order of the three consonants in a root to alter in the derived stem to give rise to a new meaning with close affinity to the meanings of the stems that are derived from the same root but which exhibit normal order of the basic consonants. For Nallino the word ‘adab is such a stem. The basic consonant order of this word is d-’-b but after permutation it becomes ’-d-b. All the stems that are derived from the root d-’-b
have the general sense of repetition and perseverance. Thus the word *da'aba* means to keep doing certain act repetitively and perseveringly to such an extent that that act becomes a habit, routine, custom and tradition. There is always a negative sense about this word, either morally and/or physically, for doing a task repeatedly exhausts the body and dulls the mind. The act becomes mindless and arduous. But once the order of consonants is altered the new stem *‘adab* assumes a positive sense added to the general sense of repetition and perseverance. Thus, *‘addaba* means to educate someone in the tradition of one’s society and *‘adab* is just that tradition. Nallino concluded that *‘adab* was nothing but the custom of the ancestors and since this custom was circulated and transmitted via oral literature this literature, argued Nallino, was tradition or *sunnah*, that is, the ways of the ancestors.

After the emergence of Islam the word *‘ilm* acquired a new technical meaning to refer to the prophetic tradition, the speeches, actions, moral character, and even the bodily features of the Prophet. In the classificatory scheme of the Islamic disciplines *‘ilm* was designated by another more common term, namely, *hadith* (Baghdadi 1974). *Hadith* is a word derived from the tri-consonantal root h-d-th, which is related to the word *hadath* which refers to a new (and unfamiliar) event. *Haddatha* is a transitive verb related to *hadith* and refers to reporting new (and unfamiliar) events. Thus, *hadith* came to refer in the classificatory scheme of the Islamic disciplines to the discourses and actions of the prophet as well as discourses about the prophet’s discourse and actions. *Hadith*, therefore, is about inscribing unfamiliar and new traces in the familiar, as its antithesis, in order to guide personhood in temporal existence. It is possible now to specify in the concepts of *‘adab* and *hadith* the same structural invariants implicit in the concept *‘ilm*, as shown below:

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<td>Salient new customs (<em>ma’ruf</em>)</td>
<td>Surrounding old customs (<em>munkar</em>)</td>
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7) In fact, *hadith* is also called *‘athar*, a word that literally means “trace,” and *sunnah*, which means “route” or “path” (Al-Suyuti 1966). It is not difficult to discern a connection between these two words for a path is that part of space on which one can recognize foot-traces. “Sunnah” was used metaphorically to mean manner, tradition, and custom, just as the English word “way” has been used to refer to manner.
It is significant to note that 'adab referred to “old tradition,” while hadith refers to “new tradition,” yet both of them are, according to Nal-lino, sunnah. The former was the science of the ancient ancestors while the latter was the science of the new Muslims. Hadith and 'adab are, in a sense, antithetical to each other for the figure in the latter is the ground in the former. After the emergence of Islam hadith competed with 'adab on the question of which one of them was entitled to be called ‘ilm and for social, cultural, and religious reasons hadith won the competition as it assumed a religiously sanctioned authority. The following diagram represents the conceptual affinity between 'adab (i.e., poetry) and hadith:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{`ilm} \\
\text{hadith} = \text{sunnah} \\
\text{'adab (Poetry)} = \text{sunnah}
\end{align*}
\]

Conceptual Affinity between poetry and hadith

A Classification of Knowledge

Coextensively with the time of the flourishing of the problematic methodology there existed, among the Arabs of early Islamic history, certain classificatory schemata for all knowledge, the explication of which is a prerequisite for an adequate analysis of the senso-somatic model in question. I will provide a list of the various discursive and practical arts known to the Arabs about the time of the Qur’anic revelation, and then try to find an organizing principle that turns the list into an intelligible classificatory scheme. In his history of Arabic literature Zaydan (1957) provided a list of the various categories of knowledge known to the
Arabs, especially the Arabs of the regions of Hijaz and Najd. The list consists of the following: poetry, oratory, proverbs, interpretation of dreams, mythology, genealogy, history, augury, oracle, astronomy, metrology, veterinary science, and knowledge of animal husbandry. This list can be augmented by adding the practical arts that were subsumed by Ibn Khaldun (Ibn Khaldun 1960) under the first book of his *Muqaddimah*, which is about the various kinds of knowledge, including those in Zaydan’s list. Thus, an inclusive list of all cultural forms of knowledge understood in the broadest sense of the term will also comprise practical arts such as warfare skills, trade, handicrafts, medicine, and agriculture.

Zaydan made a distinction between borrowed and indigenous arts arranged into four categories that mimic Western counterparts. Thus, in addition to the indigenous Arabic forms of knowledge he classified the rest into natural sciences, mathematical sciences and metaphysical sciences. Henceforth he was compelled to find a slot for each type of knowledge under one of these titles. For example, he subsumed mythology under the mathematical sciences, while *qiyaṭah*, the art of reconstructing immediate past events from foot-traces, is placed under metaphysics. Obviously Zaydan’s scheme of classification hardly reflects the cultural classification of knowledge known to the Arabs of early Islam. Besides, borrowed discourses and technologies are almost always indigenized and in the process of indigenization borrowed elements assume, as *bricolage*, new cultural significance, henceforth the distinction between borrowed and indigenous misses the cultural logic behind indigenization.

I want to argue that the artificial Western categories must be discarded and the indigenous/borrowed opposition substituted with a different organizing principle that will render all kinds of knowledge mentioned above into a culturally intelligible classification. The validity of this organizing principle will be justified in terms of its explicative force and its congruence with the interpretive schemas analyzed in this paper. This classificatory principle is one of opposition between “saying” and “doing,” and thus the list provided above can be reduced into two kinds of knowledge: oral arts and manual arts. The latter were
geared toward pragmatic utility and hence included knowledge of warfare skills, medicine, agriculture, animal husbandry, trade, and various kinds of handicrafts. The former included multifarious forms of knowledge such as poetry, legends, oratory, proverbs, divinations and the like, which concerned understandings of the self, the other, history, life, death, and the meaning of human experience. Two main subcategories can be recognized within the latter knowledge: poetic forms and divination (cf. Al-Andalusi 1985:118; Alusi 1923:269). By poetic forms I refer to the amalgam of all the multifarious genres of expression, which are concerned with the understanding of human experience in this world. By divination I refer to all those cultural practices that sought knowledge from the other world in order to see into the future and thus guide human actions accordingly. The following diagram represents the classificatory scheme of Arabic forms of knowledge at the time of the Qur’anic revelation:
This diagram does not merely represent different categories of knowledge but constitutes a hierarchical structure of knowledge. The manual arts were not equal, but varied along a scale of value, in which the highest arts are those concerned with warfare, animal husbandry, and trade.

When a man proved himself an excellent horseman versed in warfare techniques and skills the tribe celebrated this event with great pride. Animal husbandry, agriculture and trade came second as sources of wealth, pride, and emotional attachment. Trade was another respected profession, especially in the commercial centers such as Mecca, and was practiced by the powerful and honorable tribesmen and women. Lower than warfare skills and trade came agriculture for it compelled people to choose settlement, landed property and a peaceful mode of life. The lowest of all practices were the handicrafts, especially that of the blacksmith, which were regarded as unworthy of honorable tribesmen.

Almost always only slaves and *mawali*\(^9\) practiced handicrafts in the non-subsistence economy of Meccan society. In the oral arts poetic forms were superior to divination and poetry was superior to oratory and other poetic forms. Similarly, prophecy was superior to oracle. At the time of the Qur’anic revelation the structural slot of prophecy was vacant and only oracles and auguries and similar oral practices existed at the time. This cultural map made poetry superior to all the existing forms of oral arts. This was manifest in the fascination of the Arabs with the poetic language and the scorn they had for the language of diviners. Moreover, the recurrent themes of poetry were about the best of all manual arts, those pertaining to wars, honors, heroism and the feats of the ancestors (Alusi 1923, Zaydan 1957).

The status of the poet in the tribal societies of early Arabia was accordingly elevated above that of all other tribesmen, as an equal of the warrior horseman or the patriarch of the tribe. When a man first proved himself a poet of remarkable stature the tribe would consider the event a source of pride and honor, and thus ceremoniously celebrated the event in public feasts. For the poet would become the mouthpiece of the tribe, the one who promulgated his tribe’s worth and honorable

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\(^9\) *Mawali* is the plural form of *mawla*, a term that refers to people of lower social, economic, and ethnic status. Due to their lower status they were considered weak and vulnerable and had to attach themselves to a strong tribe in order to become members, albeit inferior members, of the more powerful group.
deeds; the one who would defend his tribe’s reputation with eulogies and dishonor his tribe’s enemies with satires. Poetry was considered one of the essential components of the tribe’s experience, one that the tribe endeavored to accumulate over the generations by educating its members in its own art of poetry. Each tribe’s poet would assume the role of a tutor for his tribe’s members and especially for his own son, who as his disciple would most often assume first the role of the rhapsodist, and only after this course of education was completed became a poet of independent voice.

This was most likely due to the belief that poetry was inspired by supernatural beings, jinn. As I will show in the next section jinn were considered to have a capacity for knowledge and an ability for deeds far beyond the capacity and ability of any human beings. Poetic practices therefore involved four elements: a poet, his jinn, a rhapsodist, and the oral transmission of poetry. These four elements will be reproduced in early Islamic history under a camouflage of new words: the Prophet, the archangel, the narrator, and the oral transmission of the hadith. Yet, this reproduction signified a crucial transformation. First, the contrast and incongruity between “saying” and “doing,” a contrast in which “saying” was the act of poets whereas “doing” was the act of worldly tribesmen, was replaced by a complementarity and congruity between “listening” and “obeying,” i.e., listening to the divine revelation and obeying its commands. Obviously, listening here is not to the many evil jinn but to Muhammad, the only source of Truth, who in turn listened to the one and only Truth, whose source was God himself but through the mediation of the Archangel. To understand this transformation I will have to address three cultural interpretive schemas: the senso-somatic, ethnocosmological, and ethno-epistemological.

**The Arabic Senso-Somatic Model**

The senso-somatic model I analyze in this section is a system of concepts articulated together to form two subsystems: a dominant audiocentric sensotype and a recessive ocularcentric sensotype. The audiocentric sensotype privileges hearing over all other senses, particularly the sense of sight, as the sensory channel to a higher kind of knowledge. In fact, the sense of hearing established itself in opposition to the
sense of sight, which was considered a sensory channel to a lower kind of knowledge, and from this opposition it derived its higher value. Hearing was connected, according to the Arabic senso-somatic model, to the heart. The heart was considered the most vital of all body organs as the seat of the noblest faculties, knowledge, morals, righteousness, and faith, but also the origin of the basest opposites of all these, for the heart may suffer moral ailment. This understanding is typified by the following texts from the Qur’an:

(Such) as dispute about the Signs of Allah, without any authority that hath reached them, grievous and odious (is such conduct) in the sight of Allah and of the Believers. Thus doth Allah, seal up every heart — of arrogant and obstinate Transgressors. (40:35)

And behold! The Hypocrites and those in whose hearts is a disease (even) say: “(Allah) and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusion!” (33:12)

Of them there are some who (pretend to) listen to thee; but We have thrown veils on their hearts, So they understand it not, and deafness in their ears; if they saw every one of the signs, not they will believe in them… (6:25)

To those who inherit the earth in succession to its (previous) possessors, is it not a guiding, (lesson) that, if We so willed, We could punish them (too) for their sins, and seal up their hearts so that they could not hear? (7:100)

And We put coverings over their hearts lest they should understand the Qur’an, and deafness into their ears: when thou dost commemorate thy Lord and Him alone in the Qur’an, they turn on their backs, fleeing (from the Truth). (17:46)

And who doth more wrong than one who is reminded of the Signs of his Lord, but turns away from them, forgetting the (deeds) which his hands have sent forth? Verily We have set veils over their hearts lest they should understand this, and over their ears, deafness, if thou callest them to guidance, even then will they never accept guidance. (18:57)

Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts. (22:46)

They say: “Our hearts are under veils, (concealed) from that to which thou dost invite us, and in our ears in a deafness, and between us and thee is a screen: so do thou (what thou wilt); for us, we shall do (what we will!).” (41:5)

These are but a few verses out of numerous that reveal the cultural understandings of the heart and the ear. It is worthwhile to note the connection between the ear and the heart in most of the quoted verses
and the emphatic assertion in (22:46) that it is not the eye that is the path to faith but rather the heart. In addition to these verses one finds equally numerous prophetic traditions resonating with the Qur’anic verses quoted above. Consider the following prophetic text:

Truly in the body there is a morsel of flesh which, if it be whole, all the body is whole and which, if it be diseased, all of it is diseased. Truly it is the heart. (Al-Bukhari 1997:2/49)10

Yet, originally the heart is, as it were, a sensor for Truth, inherently good and sound. Here is a prophetic tradition that expresses this understanding:

Consult your heart. Righteousness is that about which the soul feels tranquil and the heart feels tranquil, and wrongdoing is that which wavers in the soul and moves to and from in the breast even though people again and again have given you their legal opinion [in its favor]. (An-Nawawi 1977:27/90–91)

The heart must, however, have a channel to the world of absence. I will elaborate on the world of absence in the next section, which is dedicated to the ethno-cosmology of early Arabic/Islamic history. The ear is the window of the heart onto the world of Truth as much as the heart is the receptor of Truth. It is through the ear that the heart receives the message of the world of absence. Henceforth, belief begins by hearing, which is the sense that connects the heart to Truth. Many Qur’anic verses and prophetic traditions attest to this cultural belief. Here are a few verses that convey this cultural conception:

Among them are some who (pretend to) listen to thee: But canst thou make the deaf to hear, — even though they are without understanding? (10:42)

So verily thou canst not make the dead to hear, nor canst thou make the deaf to hear the call, when they show their backs and turn away. (30:52)

Nor are alike those that are living and those that are dead. Allah can make any that He wills to hear; but thou canst not make those to hear who are (buried) in graves. (35:22)

10) Quotations of the prophetic texts are all from the English translation of Sahih Al-Bukhari by Muhsin Khan. The numbers separated by slashes are the book and the number of the Hadith, respectively.
If Allah had found in them any good. *He would indeed have made them listen: (As it is), if He had made them listen, they would but have turned back and declined (Faith).* (8:23)

Here, as in many other verses, we find enunciations that connect the ear to the heart and emphasize the critical function of hearing in receiving the divine message, the message that comes from the world of absence. But since the world of absence is hierarchically structured, as I will show in the next section, the ear and the heart can receive messages from the evil and dangerous part of the world of absence, the world of Satan, jinn, and demons. The ear and the heart are also connected to the tongue to make the audiocentric subsystem which dominates the senso-somatic model in question.

It is crucial to note that this most noble knowledge had nothing to do with the head or the brain. The head was not the author of knowledge but the master of cunning and shrewdness which were connected to the eye and associated with the world of presence. Thus in Arabic of the early Islamic period the word for cunning was *ra’y*, which literally means “seen or seeing”, but its understood figurative meaning was “opinion.” This is highly significant, for “opinion” is that belief which could be true or false; one that is as yet un-validated and uncertain. This leads to considering the ocularcentric subsystem, in which the eye and the head occupied positions structurally isomorphic with that of the ear and the heart respectively. Just as the ear was directly connected to the heart the eye was directly connected to the head but also to the tongue as the articulator of the two subsystems in the senso-somatic model. In contrast to the ear the eye was considered most fallible and unreliable, and in Islam the receptor of temptation and the target of sorcery. Here are a few verses conveying these cultural understandings:

I found her and her people worshipping the sun besides Allah. Satan has made their deeds seem pleasing in their eyes, and has kept them away from the Path, — so they receive no guidance. (27:24)

And remember when ye met, He showed them to you as few in your eyes, and He made you appear as contemptible in their eyes: that Allah might accomplish a matter already enacted. For to Allah do all questions go back (for decision). (8:44)

Said Moses: “Throw ye (first).” So when they threw, they *bewitched the eyes of the people*, and struck terror into them: for they showed a great (feat of) magic. (7:116)
When trouble toucheth a man, He crieth unto Us (in all postures) — lying down on his side, or sitting, or standing. But when We have solved his trouble, he passeth on his way as if he had never cried to Us for a trouble that touched him! thus do the deeds of transgressors seem fair in their eyes! (10:12)

And keep thy soul content with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His Face; and let not thine eyes pass beyond them, seeking the pomp and glitter of this Life; nor obey any whose heart We have permitted to neglect the remembrance of Us, one who follows his own desires, whose case has gone beyond all bounds. (18:28)

In addition to such Qur’anic expressions of the fallibility of eyesight there are three other verses highly significant in their disparagement of the eye as a means of knowing the world of absence, the higher world, in comparison with the world of presence, this world:

He Who created the seven heavens one above another: No want of proportion wilt thou see in the Creation of (Allah) Most Gracious. So turn thy vision again: seest thou any flaw? Again turn thy vision a second time: (thy) vision will come back to thee dull and discomfited, in a state worn out. And we have, (from of old), adorned the lowest heaven with Lamps, and We have made such (Lamps) (as) missiles to drive away the Evil Ones, and have prepared for them the Penalty of the Blazing Fire. (67:3–5)

These verses provide a narrative in which the eye and the ear are implicitly contrasted against a cosmic picture furnishing a background for the narrative. High in the seventh heaven there is that noble part of the world of absence, the world of al-mala’u-l-a’la — a concept which will be discussed in detail in the next section. That world is guarded by the stars against the act of eavesdropping continuously attempted by the jinn, the evil ones, to steal the divine knowledge and then communicate them to people through the medium of poetry, a form of cultural knowledge that I will discuss shortly. But as to the eyesight it can only read the signs of the perfect beauty of God’s creation after the acceptance of God’s message. It is only through hearing that the divine secrets of the world of absence can be accessed, but that world is guarded by stars, and hence knowledge of the world of absence can be received only via God’s grace when He sends down on the heart of Muhammad, via the medium of the archangel, His message to be heard, memorized, and obeyed.

The early Arabs of Mecca accused Muhammad of merely “seeing” things and hence being a false prophet. Alternatively, he was accused of
writing the Qur’an, or to have it written, from ancient books of fables and myths. Most Muslims believe that Muhammad was illiterate and consider this attribute as evidence of his true prophethood, for he had, according to Muslims, a direct connection with the divine through hearing, not through written books, which are inseparable from the sense of sight. The Qur’an defended the prophet in ways that betray this cultural understanding of writing and consequently reading as inferior to authentic revelation. Consider these Qur’anic verses:

And they say: “Tales of the ancients, which he has caused to be written: and they are dictated before him morning and evening.” (15:25)

And thou wast not (able) to recite a Book before this (Book came), nor art thou (able) to transcribe it with thy right hand: In that case, indeed, would the talkers of vanities have doubted. (29:48)

It is not difficult to associate writing with seeing and doing while reciting can be connected with hearing and saying. Nor is it difficult to find in the Qur’an verses that privilege reciting, hearing and saying. The word \textit{qara‘a}, which now means “(he) read,” had an entirely different meaning in the time of the Qur’anic revelation. The chronologically first verses of the Qur’an run thus:

\textit{Read!} in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created — Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood. \textit{Read!} And thy Lord is Most Bountiful. (96:1–3)

The word \textit{iqra‘} rendered as “read!” in the translation meant “proclaim” or “recite” and not the familiar act of reading from a book. That is hardly surprising, for there is in the historical sources no statement about or allusion to a book or the like from which Muhammad was commanded to read. Even in the present time in Bedouin tribes and among exorcists the word \textit{yaqra‘} (he reads) means to recite in order to educate the young or exorcise the jinn, or sometimes to become an ascetic as in the word \textit{taqarra‘a}, another form related to the word \textit{yaqra‘}. The latter and its inflected forms had nothing to do with books, writing, alphabets, and orthography. In early Islam reading belonged to saying, hearing, the ear and the heart, that is, to the superior form of knowledge while writing belonged to doing, seeing, the eye and the
head; in short to the inferior form of knowledge. The cultural disparaging of the eye finds an expression in the prohibition of pictorial as well as sculptural representations of living beings in Islam. The eye is also considered the channel to carnal temptations, hence the veil of women in Islam.

Muhammad was also accused of being majnun (possessed) a state of the mind in which one is “spoken to by the jinn,” and the Arabs believed that all poets were inspired by and spoken to by the jinn (Ni’mah 1961:149–170). The following texts from the Qur’an confirm this cultural belief:

And say: “What! shall we give up our gods for the sake of a Poet possessed?” (37:36)

Yet they turn away from him and say: “Tutored (by jinn), a man possessed!” (44:14)

They say: “O thou to whom the Message is being revealed! truly thou art mad (or possessed)!” (15:6)

Similarly, no apostle came to the Peoples before them, but they said (of him) in like manner, “A sorcerer, or one possessed!” (51:52)

(And some said): “He is only a man possessed: wait (and have patience) with him for a time.” (23:25)

From these verses we have evidence that during the early days of Islam the polytheists of Mecca accused Muhammad of two culturally significant accusations: reading from written sources and thereby denying the divine origin of the Qur’an, or alternatively of being possessed by jinn that talked and misguided him. Both accusations refer to lower kinds of knowledge, namely, knowledge acquired from the evil part of the world of absence, that is, from the jinn, or from the world of presence through writing, seeing, and the fallible reasoning — or better perhaps the deceptive cunning — of the head. I will address the two worlds just mentioned in the next section. I conclude this section by a brief discussion of the cultural concept of the head. The word “ra’s,” which means “head,” or any metonymic substitute of that word, occurs in Qur’anic and prophetic texts either in the context of punishment on the Day of Judgment or in reference to the head as source of vanity, deception, and disobedience, hence bowing down and touching the ground with the
head as part of ritual worship in Islam. Here are some texts conveying this understanding:

These two antagonists dispute with each other about their Lord: But those who deny (their Lord), — for them will be cut out a garment of Fire: over their heads will be poured out boiling water. (22:19)

Let him beware! If he desist not, We will drag him by the forelock, — A lying, sinful forelock! Then, let him call (for help) to his council (of comrades): We will call on the angels of punishment (to deal with him)! Nay, heed him not: But bow down in adoration, and bring thyself the closer (to Allah!). (96:15–19)

And be steadfast in prayer; practice regular charity; and bow down your heads with those who bow down (in worship). (2:43)

And when it is said to them, “Come, the Messenger of Allah will pray for your forgiveness,” they turn aside their heads, and thou wouldst see them turning away their faces in arrogance. (63:5)

The analysis undertaken thus far can be represented in the following diagram:
The relations that connect the ear to the heart and the eye to the head are complementary, while the relations obtaining between the head and the heart, and the ear and the eye are contrastive. The tongue articulates the two subsystems by being a component of both, and is consequently imbued with almost supernatural potency and creativity. I will discuss the cultural understandings of the tongue and addunia in the penultimate section.

The Arabic Cosmological Model

The analysis proposed above leads to considering the connection between the senso-somatic model and the prevalent ethno-cosmology of early Arabic culture. During and after the time of revelation this ethno-cosmology was structurally symmetric, but not so morally. Being, or the universe, in this cosmology, has two constitutive dimensions, space and time, and is populated by a myriad of beings. Space and time can be schematically represented along two axes: a vertical spatial axis and a horizontal temporal axis as shown in the diagram below:

![Arabic-Islamic Cosmological Model](image-url)
Along the vertical axis space is hierarchized; the highest is *al-mala‘u-l-a‘la*, which literally means the highest beings. It is here where Allah, angels, and martyrs, and paradise are. This is the glorious world of the seventh heaven as the following verses attest.

(37:8–9)

So they (jinn) should not strain their ears in the direction of the Exalted Assembly (*al-mala‘u-l-a‘la*) but be cast away from every side, Repulsed, for they are under a perpetual penalty.

(38:69–70)

No knowledge have I of the Chiefs on high (*al-mala‘u-l-a‘la*), when they discuss (matters) among themselves. Only this has been revealed to me: that I am to give warning plainly and publicly.

Below the seventh heaven come six heavens that are differentially valued according to their proximity to *al-mala‘u-l-a‘la*. Similarly, in this space there exist many different kinds of angels who are responsible for carrying out God’s commands. The following Qur’anic verses attest to such an understanding:

(39:75)

And thou wilt see the angels surrounding the Throne (Divine) on all sides, singing Glory and Praise to their Lord. The Decision between them (at Judgment) will be in (perfect) justice, and the cry (on all sides) will be, “Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds!”

(25:25)

In the case of those who say, “Our Lord is Allah,” and, further, stand straight and steadfast, the angels descend on them (from time to time): “Fear ye not!” (they suggest), “Nor grieve! but receive the Glad Tidings of the Garden (of Bliss), the which ye were promised!”

(*Addunia*, a word that has no exact English equivalent, occupied the middle space between *al-mala‘u-l-a‘la* and *al-mala‘u-l-‘asfal,* the latter being “the lowest beings.” In *addunia* there exist human beings and animals and all natural beings, but it is also a space frequented by jinn and angels, the former to trouble human beings and the latter to carry

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11) This term does not appear in the Qur’an or the prophetic texts verbatim. There are occurrences of the words *‘asfal* and *safilin* in the context of describing the lowest level of hell which, as some texts indicate, is in the lowest earth (Heinen 1982).
out God’s commands. Between *addunia* and *al-mala’ul-’asfal* there are the six earths where the lowest beings exist. This is the proper place of the jinn, Satan, and Satan’s genitors and demons. It is important to note that although *addunia* is in the first earth it is not equivalent to the earth, for *addunia* is a combination of space and time, that is, a spatiotemporal point; it is “the here and now”, hence *addunia* is called ‘alamu-shahadah, which literally means “the world of presence” or alternatively “the seen world.” The word *shahadah* can be defined as “ beholding” or “seeing” or “witnessing,” but the word also means “presence” or “presencing.” Thus, “presence” and “seeing” turn out to be two inseparable modes of experience, experience of “the here and now,” that is, in *addunia*. *Addunia* means, among other things, the near and the low, and this attests to its nature as a spatiotemporal point. It is lower than “the highest beings” and nearer than *al-’ulaa* and *al-’akhirah*.

The last two terms move us to considering the temporal dimension of being. *Al-’ulaa* means “the first” and refers to the beginning of time, and in particular the beginning of human life, the time when God created and expelled Adam and Eve from *al-jannah* (paradise), the highest spatiotemporal existence, that which is shared by God’s highest angels. *Al-’ulaa*, therefore, is the remotest past or the past of all pasts. At the opposite extreme end of the axis of time there is *al-’akhirah*, which literally means “the last,” the day of resurrection and accountability, when human beings are held accountable for what they did and said in *addunia*. It is crucial to note that ‘alamu shahadah (=*addunia*) contrasts with ‘alamul ghaid a phrase that literally means “the world of absence” and “the unseen world.” In a sense ‘alamu shahadah, “the seen world,” is surrounded by the world of absence, which penetrates, pervades, and subordinates (or must subordinate) the world of presence, ‘alamu shahadah.

The universe, according to this cosmology, is populated by a multitude of beings including human beings and all other living beings, but crucially also by God, the angels, the jinn and myriads of unknown creatures. Obviously, these beings are not equal. The noblest are the highest in the hierarchy of this cosmology and the nobility of beings decreases as they descend down the hierarchy of Being to the basest of all beings; Satan and his progeny of demons and jinn (Al-Jahiz 1969:6/225–231). This is a moral hierarchy of beings that corresponds
to the spatiotemporal hierarchy. Now these beings, God, the angels, and the jinn, communicate with human beings, that is, convey certain knowledge to human beings. What kinds of knowledge are possible? How can humans acquire, transmit and preserve knowledge? Is there a hierarchy of possible knowledge? Here the analysis should move on to consider the epistemology most congruent with this cosmology and the senso-somatic model explicated above.

The Arabic Epistemological Model

It is expected that a cosmological model and a senso-somatic model of such an ontological and moral hierarchy will tend to articulate with a congruent epistemology. If the world of absence was morally and/or ontologically superior to the world of presence, and if the world of presence was morally ambiguous and typically accessed through the faculty of sight, while the world of absence was accessed typically through the faculty of hearing, an epistemology grounded in hearing and speaking would be more probable than other epistemologies that were grounded in other senses. Furthermore, since the world of absence was hierarchically structured knowledge that could be obtained through contact with that world, it had also to reflect that hierarchy. Thus, there were two different kinds of knowledge; that which was acquired through communicating with the world of absence or through seeing the world of presence. Moreover, communicating with the world of absence branched into two different kinds of knowledge: that which was acquired through communicating with jinn (al-mala’u-lasfal) and that which was accessed through communicating with God and his angels (al-mala’u-la’la). The first knowledge consisted mainly in poetry (’adab) while the second consisted in prophecies and divinations.

In the pre-Islamic jahiliyyah, poetry was the highest and noblest form of knowledge. It was believed to be inspired by the jinn, hence the Arabs’ obsession with poetry, for poetry belonged to the world of absence and was communicated by beings that belonged to that world. The Arabs of early Islamic history believed that every outstanding poet had an inspiring jinni. They even defined the names of the inspiring jinni for each prominent poet. In one poem, for example, a poet by the name of Abu Annajam Al-‘Ujali bragged about his inspiring virulent
male jinni only to disparage the weak female jinn of all of his rival poets (Al-Jahiz 1969: 6/229). The Qur’an confirms this belief in a sura called The Poets. In this sura we find the following verses:

Shall I inform you, (O people!), on whom it is that the evil ones descend? They descend on every lying, wicked person, (Into whose ears) they pour hearsay vanities, and most of them are liars. And the Poets, — It is those straying in Evil, who follow them: Seest thou not that they wander distracted in every valley? — And that they say what they practice not? (26:221–226)

Poetry, therefore, came through the inspiration of the jinn from the other world, the world of absence, hence its power, potency, fascination, and magic. Yet, the power of poetry did not originate solely from its source, that is, the world of absence, but also because the inspiring jinn (al-mala’u-l-’asfal) were believed to eavesdrop and overhear the news of al-mala’u-l-a’la, the speech of God and the angels and the ordinances that were made in heavens by God. Here again the Qur’an confirms this cultural belief in a sura called The Jinn as well as in other suras. The following are two verses that express such beliefs:

And we (jinn) pried into the secrets of heaven; but we found it filled with stern guards and flaming fires. “We used, indeed, to sit there in (hidden) stations, to (steal) a hearing; but any who listen now will find a flaming fire watching him in ambush.” (72:8–9)

Then, the Qur’an appeared to establish itself in opposition to poetry as belonging to the world of absence, but significantly inspired by Allah, the highest of all beings, or rather by his archangel. It filled the vacant slot of prophecy in the classificatory scheme of knowledge discussed above. Ontologically it is akin to poetry but morally it is antithetical to poetry. The Qur’an therefore invested in the Arabic cultural knowledge to assume the highest authority and legitimacy; it was knowledge that descended from the world of absence yet was given form only through the mysterious, powerful, ambivalent, and dangerous medium of the tongue (the Arabic language), a medium that belonged both to this world and the other world.

But the Qur’an was not the only revelation for Muslims. The prophetic tradition was also a divine revelation, which belonged to ‘alamu-l-ghaib (the world of absence) and originated from God, the Supreme
Being in ‘alamu-l-ghaib as well as ‘alamu-shahadah. Consequently it had to be acquired, transmitted, and preserved through the medium of hearing by the ear, memorizing by the heart, and narrating by the tongue. The Arabic epistemology, therefore, was unmistakably audio-centric; it privileged the sense of hearing over all other channels of sensation, memorizing over visual reasoning, and narration and reciting over reading and writing.

It is worthwhile to examine a case of crucial significance in Islam, namely, the act that either redeems the soul or commits it to damnation; this is the pronouncement that “there is no god except Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”. This pronouncement is called ashabadatan, which literally means “the two testimonies.” The word “ashabatatan” is the definite, dual form of the word “shahadah” and is derived from the tri-consonantal root “sh-h-d,” which gives rise to several words, all of which refer essentially to the act of seeing or beholding. Hence the pronouncement is preceded by the phrase “I behold.” Once a person utters this statement s/he becomes a Muslim and thereby saves his/her soul. At first sight this pronouncement seems to be at loggerheads with the audiocentric sensotype I have proposed since that pronouncement appeals to the act of “beholding” or “seeing;” and yet, I want to argue, this pronouncement is in perfect agreement with my analysis. In fact, it is the strongest argument in favor of its validity. The argument that the pronouncement does conflict with the model in question would have been true if the pronouncer had really seen or witnessed something. But the “seeing” and “beholding” does not really occur in any sense. The pronouncement is in fact a speech act (Searle 1969) of consent and obedience to the prophet’s vocal message, that is articulated by the tongue of and heard from the mouth of Muhammad. Thus, the speech act of consent or testimony, in actuality, subordinates the sense of sight to the sense of hearing. In this pronouncement hearing dominates seeing.

As shown above the ocularcentric model of knowledge connects the eye, the head, and reasoning to addunia, that is, to this ambiguous, unclear, and self-contradicting world, the world of temptation, pollution, danger, and trial. According to the ocularcentric model knowledge acquired through the eye and the head is auxiliary to the divine message and hence subservient to its content. To be sure, there are many
instances of the concepts of “sight,” “thinking,” and “reflection” whose absence is lamented and condemned in the Qur’an. However, these instances refer to reading through the eyesight the divine signs scattered throughout the world of presence whose only value is to point to the world of absence, the lasting real world. Yet, the eye and the head are part of the world of presence and can lead to the denial of the divine message. In fact, this possibility is the rule that can be negated only through the divine voice. In other words, seeing and reflecting on the divine signs is impossible without having the divine voice heard first. Thus, the ethno-epistemology of the early Islamic history can be expressed in the following propositional model:

- Knowledge that comes from the world of absence is superior to knowledge acquired from the world of presence.
- Knowledge that comes from the noble beings of the world of absence (God, angels of God) is superior to knowledge that comes from the lower beings of the world of absence (Satan, demons and jinn).
- Knowledge that comes from the lower beings of the world of absence (jinn) is superior to knowledge acquired from the world of presence.
- Knowledge of the world of absence comes through the sense of hearing and is grasped by the heart, while knowledge of the world of presence is acquired by the sense of seeing and is used by the head.

It is worthwhile to conclude this section by referring to an attempt at a strategic reversal of the hierarchical structure of the senso-somatic model, an attempt that perturbed the discursive regime during the 9th, 10th, and the 11th centuries. At the beginning of this period a “rationalist” school, called al-mu’tazilah, flourished simultaneously with the wholesale translation of Greek philosophy. Muslim scholars of this school along with the early Muslim philosophers called their epistemology al-nazar, a word that literally means “seeing,” in opposition to the epistemology of the ’ahl al-hadith (traditionalists), which they called assama’, a word that literally means “hearing or listening.” “Seeing” was thus considered equivalent to rational reasoning while “hearing” was
equivalent to acceptance of traditional knowledge without reflection or reasoning. With this transformation the head became not the instrument of cunning but the vessel of the power of thinking, while ra’ý became “opinion” rather than “cunning.” However, this attempted transformation neither decentered the audiocentric view nor was the ocular-centric view banished from the discursive space of Islam. They have coexisted, ever since, sometimes in parallel and sometimes in tension.

The Tongue and Addunia

Most concepts are semantically ambiguous. Etymology and metaphorical extension are among the causes of ambiguity and multiplicity of senses. However, if the meaning of a concept is possible only by virtue of its relation to other concepts in cultural-cognitive schemas — as is now firmly established in cognitive linguistics (Lakoff 1987; Wierzbicka 1992, 1997; Langacker 1987, 1990, 2008) — and if a concept can be a member of more than one cultural-cognitive model, it follows that the ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning can be explained by reference to multiple membership in more than one cultural-cognitive model. Being members in more than one cultural model “tongue” and “addunia,” therefore, must be ambiguous assuming in consequence contradictory values, especially as they belong to two diametrically opposed models. Some anthropologists have argued that certain states or beings are dangerous, polluted, potent, and powerful because they either don’t belong to a category in a clear-cut classificatory scheme or belong to more than one category simultaneously (Turner 1967, 1977; Leach 1967; Douglas 1978). Hence, diametrically opposed senses are expected of “tongue” and “addunia.” Consider for example these texts on conceptions of the tongue:

Whoever can guarantee (the chastity of) what is between his two jaw-bones and what is between his two legs (i.e. his tongue and his private parts), I guarantee Paradise for him. (Al-Bukhari 1966:76/481)

There are two expressions which are very easy for the tongue to say, but they are very heavy in the balance and are very dear to The Beneficent (Allah), and they are, “Subhan Allah Al-‘Azim” and “Subhan Allah wa bihamdihi.” (Al-Bukhari 1966:75/415)
The pre-Islamic poet Zuhair Ibn Abi Sulma says: “the tongue is one half of man, the other is his heart and the rest is mere flesh and blood” and an Arabic proverb runs: the worth of a man is in his heart and his tongue”. Another proverb says: “man is hidden under his tongue” (Al-Jahiz 1968:1/171). Yet, the Arabs downgraded the excessive and affected exhibition of eloquence. They had a notion of the two excesses: excessive talk and rhetoric, hence the proverb runs: “the doom of man is between his mandibles”. The Prophet is reported to have said “no endowment was worse than eloquence” and “nothing sends people to hell except the harvest of their tongues”(Al-Jahiz 1968:1/194). These texts point to the mysterious, dangerous, and powerful potentials of the tongue, as an organ potent with good and evil simultaneously. The implicit analogy between the tongue and the sexual organ in the first prophetic text is highly charged with telling ambiguity, with vitality and sin, good and evil, life and death, pollution and purity. The tongue can redeem, damn, deceive, guide, and teach. It can express the consent of the heart or the dissent of the head. The heart consents by listening to the voice of the other world while the head dissents by looking at the mirage of this world. The following Qur’anic texts concern the ambivalent nature of *addunia*, this world:

Likewise did We make for every Messenger an enemy, — evil ones among men and jinns, inspiring each other with *flowery discourses by way of deception.* If thy Lord had so planned, they would not have done it: so leave them and their inventions alone. (6:112)

Know ye (all), that the life of this world is but play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting and multiplying, (in rivalry) among yourselves, riches and children. Here is a similitude: How rain and the growth which it brings forth delight (to) the tillers; soon it withers; thou wilt see it grow yellow; then it becomes dry and crumbles away . . . And what is the life of this world, but goods and chattels of deception? (57:20)

And the following prophetic text is more eloquent as to the ambiguous nature of *addunia*. It is neither heaven nor hell of the world of absence, but morally and ontologically unclear:

Once the Prophet . . . said, “The things I am afraid of most for your sake . . . are the pleasures and splendors of the world and its beauties which will be disclosed to
you." Somebody said, “O Allah’s Apostle! Can the good bring forth evil?” The Prophet remained silent for a while… Then we noticed that he was being inspired divinely. Then the Prophet wiped off his sweat and said, “Where is the questioner?”… Then he said, “Good never brings forth evil… no doubt this wealth is sweet and green. Blessed is the wealth of a Muslim from which he gives to the poor, the orphans and to needy travelers… No doubt, whoever takes it illegally will be like the one who eats but is never satisfied, and his wealth will be a witness against him on the Day of Resurrection.” (Al-Bukhari 1966:24/544)

Conclusion

The analysis proposed here is intended to render a problematic methodology of knowledge production, circulation and transmission intelligible. My aim has been to highlight the differential values ascribed to the various concepts as a result of being articulated in hierarchically structured models. It is by virtue of these differential values and the hierarchical structure that the models explicated above assumed motivational force. I should note that the analysis I have proposed is a reductive approximation of the interpretive schemas that motivated and oriented knowledge production and transmission in early Islamic history. It is reductive in practice, not in theory, for to undertake an analysis of distributed cognitive processes and cultural models entails by necessity the exclusion of many relevant data whether historical, cognitive, or linguistic. Certainly, there are, for example, cultural meanings of the words “eye,” “sight,” “heart,” and “head” that might be considered as counterexamples to the ones I suggested. However, the different meanings that these words might have can be accounted for in terms of cultural models not discussed in this paper and/or pragmatic uses of those words. As cognitive anthropologists have demonstrated, culture is a heterogeneous collection of models that are connected, overlapped, and entangled with each other through concepts having memberships in more than one model simultaneously (Langacker 1987:154–165; Wierzbicka 1992, 1997). Arguably, it is this manifold membership that permits concepts multiplicity and ambiguity of senses.

Finally a note on rules and exceptions is in order. The models I have analyzed in this paper constitute the general rule, the self-consistent mental part of the cognitive system. As mental and ideational constructs, the models are characterized by consistency and symmetry. On
the other hand, the historically contingent solutions to practical problems such as compiling the Qur’an from private writings and compilations was a solution suggested by one person to a problem perceived by the same person. It is an exception to the mental and hence inconsistent with it. The tension between the two manifests itself in the resistance of the mental to the pressure of the practical, such as the resistance of committing sacred texts to writing despite pressing needs. The exceptions do not negate the general but obfuscate it. Many exceptions can be found in the history of the subject in question and all of them are expected to be accounted for by the same reason, a dialectics between the consistency of the mental and the messy reality of the practical. Akin to the question of rules and exceptions is the question of universality. Although I have made no claims to universality, it is probable that cultural-cognitive models similar to the ones analyzed in this paper may have existed among preliterate groups or in early stages of social evolution. It is perhaps more probable that such models may have existed in cultures centered on divinely revealed messages. It remains an empirical question whether cultural constraints such as social networks, kinship systems, authority structures, ecology and modes of production correlate with a higher distribution of such interpretive schemas or not.

References


