



The Development of *'ilm Al-Qira'at* and its Contribution to the Preservation of the Glorious Qur'an

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Abstract

This paper examines *'Ilm al-Qirā'āt*, the science of Qur'ānic recitation, tracing its growth from the age of Prophetic revelation through the period of codification, canonisation, and into modern digital transmission. It argues that the multiplicity of authenticated readings, far from threatening the integrity of the Qur'ān, forms one of the strongest pillars of its preservation, since each reading was carried by unbroken chains of oral transmission (*isnād*) alongside the written text (*rasm*). The paper traces the contribution of key figures such as Ibn Mujāhid and Ibn al-Jazarī, discusses the conditions of a *ṣaḥīḥ qirā'ah*, and shows the discipline's continuing relevance for *tafsīr*, jurisprudence, and Arabic linguistics. The study closes with findings and recommendations for the strengthening of *Qirā'āt* scholarship in contemporary Islamic institutions, including those in Northern Nigeria.

Keywords: Development, *'Ilm al-Qirā'āt*, Qur'an, *Qirā'āt*, Codification.

Introduction

The Glorious Qur'ān was not revealed as a single unchanging sound but as a revelation accommodating several modes of utterance, a mercy extended to the diverse tribes of Arabia at the dawn of Islam. This accommodation gave rise, over time, to a distinct and rigorous branch of Islamic scholarship known as *'Ilm al-Qirā'āt*, the science that studies the manner in which the words of the Qur'ān are pronounced, together with the chains of transmission that authenticate each mode of pronunciation. It is a discipline that stands at the meeting point of revelation, language, and history, and no serious study of the Qur'ānic sciences (*'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*) can proceed without it¹.

¹ Al-Zarqānī, Manāhil al-'Irfān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān, vol. 1, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 1995, p. 25

From the outset it must be understood that *Qirā'āt* is not a discipline of human invention layered upon the Qur'ān; it is, rather, the record of how the Qur'ān was actually spoken by the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and transmitted by his Companions to the generations that followed. The multiplicity of readings is rooted in the well-known *ḥadīth* of the seven *ahruf*, a Prophetic concession that eased the burden of recitation upon the various Arab tribes, whose dialects differed in vowelling, elision, and articulation though never in meaning or doctrine².

This paper traces the historical unfolding of *ʿIlm al-Qirā'āt* from its oral foundation in the seventh century of the Christian era to its present digital and institutional life, and argues throughout that the discipline is inseparable from the larger project of Qur'ānic preservation promised by Allah Himself. The study proceeds by subheading, moving from origin to codification, from codification to canonisation, and finally to contemporary application, closing with findings and recommendations of practical value to teachers, students, and institutions of Qur'ānic learning.

Conceptual and Qur'ānic Foundation of *Qirā'āt*

Linguistically, *qirā'ah* (قراءة) is a verbal noun from *qara'a*, meaning to read or recite, while *Qirā'āt* in its technical usage refers to the different authenticated ways of pronouncing the words of the Qur'ān, whether in vowelling, elongation, assimilation, or the substitution of one authentic word-form for another, all traced back to the Prophet through continuous chains of transmission³. The foundation of this discipline is not extraneous to the Qur'ān; the Book itself testifies to the manner of its own recitation and to Allah's undertaking of its preservation.

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ

Indeed, it is We who sent down the Reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān], and
Indeed, we will be its guardian⁴.

This verse is the theological anchor of every discussion on Qur'ānic preservation, and *Qirā'āt* scholars have consistently understood the multiplicity of authenticated readings as one of the very instruments through which this divine guardianship operates, since a text carried by multiple independent chains of oral transmission is far harder to corrupt than one relying on a single line of memorisation⁵. Allah also commanded the Prophet regarding the manner of receiving revelation, showing that recitation was itself divinely regulated and not left to human improvisation.

لَا تُحَرِّكْ بِهِ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِ ۚ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا جَمْعَهُ وَقُرْآنَهُ

Move not your tongue with it, [O Muḥammad], to hasten
with it. Indeed, upon Us is its collection and its recitation⁶.

Contemporary scholarship has continued to affirm this conceptual foundation while situating it within the broader field of *ʿUlūm al-Qur'ān*. It is noted that the sciences of the Qur'ān as a formally organised discipline did not emerge as an independent field until around the fourth Islamic century, yet the raw material of these sciences, including the observation and recording of recitational variance, began immediately with revelation itself, since the Companions could not avoid noticing that fellow reciters sometimes pronounced verses differently while conveying the same meaning⁷.

Qirā'āt in the Prophetic Age: The Seven *Ahruf*

The seed of *Qirā'āt* was planted during the lifetime of the Prophet himself through the concession of the seven *ahruf* (*sab'at ahruf*), a Prophetic allowance that permitted the Qur'ān to be recited according to seven broad linguistic modes so that the tribes of Arabia, each with its own dialectal habits, could receive the Book without undue hardship. The most cited textual basis for this is the *ḥadīth* reported by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.

سَمِعْتُ هِشَامَ بْنَ حَكِيمٍ بْنِ حَزَامٍ يَقْرَأُ سُورَةَ الْفُرْقَانِ عَلَى غَيْرِ مَا أَقْرَأُهَا، وَكَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ أَقْرَأُهَا،
فَكَدْتُ أُسَوِّرُهُ فِي الصَّلَاةِ... فَقَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ: هَكَذَا أُنْزِلَتْ، إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ أُنْزِلَ عَلَى سَبْعَةِ
أَحْرَفٍ فَأَقْرَأُوا مَا تَيْسَّرَ مِنْهُ

² Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr*, vol. 1, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 1998, p. 9

³ al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, 1996, p. 96

⁴ Qur'an, 15:9

⁵ Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil al-'Irfān*, vol. 1, p. 30

⁶ Qur'an, 75:16-17

⁷ Yaqeen Institute, *An Introduction to 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 2025

I heard Hishām ibn Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām reciting Sūrat al-Furqān differently from the way I recited it, for the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) had taught it to me, and I nearly seized him during the prayer... The Messenger of Allah said: 'It was revealed thus; indeed, this Qur'ān was revealed upon seven aḥruf, so recite whichever is easy for you.'⁸

This incident is decisive for understanding *Qirā'āt* in its earliest phase, for it shows that variation in recitation was not an innovation introduced after the Prophet's death but a reality witnessed and validated by the Prophet in person, before the assembled Companions. The scholars have differed considerably over the precise meaning of the seven *aḥruf*, whether they denote seven literal dialects, seven categories of linguistic variation such as substitution, advancement and delay of words, or singular and plural forms, but they are unanimous that the concession was real, was Prophetic in origin, and was granted as a mercy rather than a source of confusion⁹.

During this period the Companions who excelled in recitation became reference points for others, among them Ubayy ibn Ka'b, 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd, Zayd ibn Thābit, Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī, and Mu'adh ibn Jabal, each of whom the Prophet praised for mastery of the Qur'ān. Modern researchers, drawing on this same early history, describe the resulting picture as fundamentally an oral phenomenon in which the written text served only as a supporting anchor, since the Qur'ān was memorised chest to chest long before it was uniformly inscribed on paper, and it is this oral chain, more than any manuscript, that constituted the primary vessel of preservation¹⁰.

Compilation, the 'Uthmānic Muṣḥaf, and the Narrowing of Written Variance

The death of large numbers of *huffāz* (memorisers of the Qur'ān) at the Battle of Yamāmah in the year 12 AH alarmed the Companions and prompted 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb to urge Abū Bakr al-Siddīq, then Caliph, to authorise a formal written compilation of the Qur'ān, a task entrusted to Zayd ibn Thābit and completed with painstaking verification against both memorised and written fragments¹¹. This first muṣḥaf, however, remained a private reference rather than a standard text for public distribution.

It was during the reign of the third Caliph, 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, that a more consequential step was taken. As the Islamic state expanded and Muslims in different provinces began to dispute over the correct manner of recitation, 'Uthmān commissioned a committee, again headed by Zayd ibn Thābit, to produce several authoritative copies of the muṣḥaf, written according to the dialect of Quraysh, and to dispatch these to the major garrison towns while ordering all other private copies to be set aside. This measure is recorded plainly in the sound narration.

فَأَرْسَلَ عُثْمَانُ إِلَى كُلِّ أُفُقٍ مِنْ آفَاقِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ بِمُصْحَفٍ بَمَا نُسَخُوا، وَأَمَرَ بِمَا سِوَاهُ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ
فِي كُلِّ صَحِيفَةٍ أَوْ مُصْحَفٍ أَنْ يُحْرَقَ

So 'Uthmān sent to every region of the Muslims one of the copies that had been transcribed, and he ordered that whatever remained of the Qur'ān in any other leaf or codex be burned¹².

It is crucial to note, as al-Zarqānī and later Ibn al-Jazarī both explain, that 'Uthmān's action did not abolish the seven aḥruf; rather, it narrowed the written rasm to a consonantal skeleton capable of accommodating multiple authentic vocal readings, since the 'Uthmānic script was largely undotted and unvowelled, thereby preserving flexibility for legitimate oral variation while eliminating illegitimate or unverified readings that had begun to circulate among the less careful¹³. This explains why, centuries later, scholars of *Qirā'āt* would insist that any acceptable reading must conform to the 'Uthmānic rasm, even where that rasm allows more than one legitimate pronunciation, a principle modern textual historians have likewise confirmed, noting that canonical readings were required to fall within the small consonantal range the regional 'Uthmānic copies actually permitted.

Codification of the Discipline: From Diffusion to the Canonical Seven

With the spread of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula, reciters in Kūfah, Baṣrah, Damascus, Makkah, and Madīnah each developed local traditions of transmission built upon chains reaching back to particular Companions. By the third Islamic century a genuine danger had emerged: unqualified individuals began putting forward idiosyncratic or weakly attested

⁸ M. I. Bukhari, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān, Ḥadīth no. 4992, Dar-al-Kutub, Beirut.

⁹ Ibn al-Jazarī, al-Nashr, vol. 1, p. 21

¹⁰ Studio Arabiya, The Definition of Qirā'āt in Islamic Studies, 2026

¹¹ M. I. Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān, Ḥadīth no. 4986,

¹² M. I. Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān, Ḥadīth no. 4987,

¹³ al-Zarqānī, Manāhil al-'Irfān, vol. 1, p. 254

readings under the guise of *Qirā'āt*, some resting on mere personal preference in grammar rather than authentic transmission¹⁴.

It was Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn Mūsā ibn Mujāhid (d. 324 AH), a Baghdadi scholar of exceptional standing, who responded to this crisis by compiling his landmark work *Kitāb al-Sab'ah fī al-Qirā'āt*, in which he selected seven reciters, one representative from each major recitational centre, whose transmissions he judged to meet the highest standard of authenticity, wide acceptance, and conformity with the 'Uthmānic rasm. These were Nāfi' of Madīnah, Ibn Kathīr of Makkah, Abū 'Amr of Baṣrah, Ibn 'Āmir of Damascus, 'Āṣim, Ḥamzah, and al-Kisā'i of Kūfah¹⁵.

Ibn Mujāhid's choice of exactly seven reciters, whether by deliberate correspondence to the number mentioned in the ḥadīth of the seven aḥruf or by scholarly coincidence, proved historically decisive, for it gave the Muslim community a workable, verifiable, and teachable canon at a moment when confusion threatened to spread. Contemporary academic surveys of the field continue to credit Ibn Mujāhid as the central hinge figure of *Qirā'āt* history, describing him as among the notable *qurrā'* who worked to formalise the discipline as an independent Islamic science, a judgment that mirrors precisely what the classical biographical dictionaries record of him.

Ibn al-Jazarī and the Consolidation of the Ten Canonical *Qirā'āt*

The discipline did not remain static after Ibn Mujāhid. Later scholars observed that three further readings, those of Abū Ja'far of Madīnah, Ya'qūb of Baṣrah, and Khalaf of Kūfah, satisfied the same rigorous conditions of authenticity as the original seven, and these were gradually appended to the canon, producing what is known as *al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr*, the Ten Readings¹⁶.

The scholar most responsible for consolidating and systematising this expanded canon was Shams al-Dīn Abū al-Khayr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833 AH / 1429 CE), whose monumental work *al-Nashr fī al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr* remains, to the present day, the single most authoritative reference in the field. Ibn al-Jazarī articulated three conditions that any reading must fulfil before it can be accepted as a valid Qur'ānic *qirā'ah*: first, that it possess a sound and continuous chain of transmission (*isnād ṣaḥīḥ*); second, that it conform, even in one plausible respect, to the 'Uthmānic rasm; and third, that it be grammatically sound according to the usage of the Arabs. Any reading lacking even one of these three conditions, he insisted, must be rejected, however famous its reporter¹⁷.

These conditions transformed *Qirā'āt* from a body of scattered regional practice into a rigorously verifiable science with clear methodological boundaries, comparable in precision to the sciences of ḥadīth criticism developing in the same era. It is worth noting that Ibn al-Jazarī's contribution did not occur in isolation; he stood atop earlier codifying efforts, including that of Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (774–838 CE), who is credited as the first scholar to systematise the rules of *tajwīd* in written form and to document as many as twenty-five reciters in his own book titled *al-Qirā'āt*, showing that the canonising impulse long predates Ibn al-Jazarī and was the fruit of continuous scholarly refinement across generations¹⁸.

The *Sanad* System: Oral Transmission as the True Guardian of the Text

Central to the integrity of *Qirā'āt* is the principle that no reading, however well attested in books, is transmitted merely by reading from a printed *mushaf*; it must be received orally, mouth to mouth (*mushāfahatan*), from a living teacher who himself received it from his teacher in an unbroken chain reaching back to the Prophet. This is the *sanad*, and its role in *Qirā'āt* parallels precisely the *isnād* system that protects the corpus of ḥadīth from fabrication¹⁹.

The Prophet himself modelled this method of transmission, reciting the Qur'ān to Jibrīl every Ramaḍān, a practice culminating in the final review (*al-'arḍah al-akhīrah*) in the year of his death, during which the Qur'ān was recited to him twice. It was 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd who witnessed this final review and is reported to have said of his own reading.

وَاللّٰهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ غَيْرُهُ مَا أُنْزِلَتْ سُورَةٌ مِنْ كِتَابِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا أَنَا أَعْلَمُ أَيْنَ أُنْزِلَتْ، وَلَا أُنْزِلَتْ آيَةٌ
مِنْ كِتَابِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا أَنَا أَعْلَمُ فِيمَ أُنْزِلَتْ

By Allah, besides Whom there is no other deity, there is no *sūrah* of the
Book of Allah revealed but I know where it was revealed, and no verse

¹⁴ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, vol. 1, p. 33

¹⁵ al-Dhahabī, *Ma'rifat al-Qurrā' al-Kibār*, vol. 1, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, Beirut, 1997, p. 112

¹⁶ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, vol. 1, p. 33

¹⁷ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr*, vol. 1, p. 9

¹⁸ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr*, vol. 1, p. 10

¹⁹ al-Suyūfī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 1, p. 101

of the Book of Allah revealed but I know concerning what it was revealed²⁰.

This oral chain is precisely why modern scholarship on the discipline consistently underlines that the Qur'ān was never primarily a written text but a living, memorised, and recited reality, with the *mushhaf* functioning as a secondary aid rather than the sole guarantor of the text's fidelity, since a written page cannot by itself preserve pronunciation, intonation, or the subtle rules of *tajwīd* that a living teacher alone can transmit. It is this dual guardianship, the written rasm checked against the oral *sanad*, and the oral *sanad* checked against the written rasm, that scholars regard as the practical machinery through which the promise of Sūrat al-Hijr 15:9 has operated across fourteen centuries.

The Significance of *Qirā'āt* for Tafsīr and Islamic Law

Beyond its role in preservation, *Qirā'āt* carries immense exegetical weight, for differences among the authenticated readings frequently open additional, complementary layers of meaning rather than contradiction. A frequently cited example is the reading of the word '*yathurna*' in Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:222, concerning women in menstruation, where Ḥafṣ transmits it with a light *shaddah*-less form denoting the mere cessation of bleeding, while Ḥamzah, al-Kisā'ī, and others transmit '*yattahharna*' with *tashdīd*, denoting ritual purification after cessation; jurists have drawn from this very variance two complementary rulings regarding the timing of intimacy after menses²¹.

A further example lies in Sūrat al-Fātiḥah 1:4, where the word 'Māliki' (Owner/Sovereign) is read by some transmitters as 'Māliki Yawm al-Dīn' with the alif, and by others, including Ḥafṣ from 'Āṣim, as 'Maliki Yawm al-Dīn' without it, meaning King. Exegetes such as al-Qurṭubī have shown that both readings describe complementary attributes of Allah on the Day of Judgment: He is both King, possessing authority, and Owner, possessing the very substance of that Day, and neither reading contradicts the other; together they enrich the believer's understanding of divine majesty²².

Contemporary researchers affirm that this exegetical richness continues to be one of the primary reasons the discipline retains scholarly relevance today, noting that the various recitations have enriched the oral tradition of the Qur'ān and provided valuable insights and nuances to the text that a single reading alone could never convey²³. Far from being a matter of antiquarian interest, therefore, *Qirā'āt* remains an active resource for the *mufasssīr*, the *faqīh*, and the linguist alike.

From Manuscript to Microphone: *Qirā'āt* in the Present Age and Its Future Trajectory

The transmission methods that safeguarded *Qirā'āt* in the classical period, the private circle (*ḥalaqah*), the *ijāzah* certificate, and the manuscript, persist today but now operate alongside broadcast media, satellite recitation channels, and internet-based *ijāzah* programmes that allow a student in Sokoto to receive certified transmission from a shaykh in Madīnah without leaving home. The essential structure, however, is unchanged: certification still requires oral recitation before a qualified teacher, proving that the *sanad* system has proved remarkably adaptable to new technology without compromising its methodological core.

Statistically, it is estimated that the overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims, some eighty to eighty-five per cent, recite according to the *riwāyah* of Ḥafṣ from 'Āṣim, owing largely to its wide dissemination through the standard Cairo edition of 1924, while significant populations across North and West Africa, including much of Nigeria's Sokoto Caliphate scholarly tradition, continue to transmit and teach the *riwāyah* of Warsh from Nāfi', a fact that testifies to the living plurality of the canonical readings even in the modern printed age²⁴.

Looking to the future, scholars anticipate that digital archiving, artificial intelligence-assisted *tajwīd* correction, and global online *ijāzah* academies will extend the reach of *Qirā'āt* scholarship even further, though the consensus among specialists remains firm that no technology can substitute for the direct oral chain between teacher and student; technology may widen access, but it cannot replace the *mushāfahah* upon which the entire discipline rests, and continued dialogue and institutional support will be needed to keep the tradition vibrant for coming generations²⁵. In this sense the future of *Qirā'āt* is bound to its past: whatever new instruments the age provides, the living voice of the *qārī'* remains, as it was in the time of the Prophet, the irreplaceable vessel of preservation.

Distinguishing Aḥruf, *Qirā'āt*, Riwayāt, and Ṭuruq

A recurring source of confusion among students of the Qur'ānic sciences is the failure to distinguish four related but technically separate terms: aḥruf, *Qirā'āt*, riwayāt, and ṭuruq. The seven aḥruf, as already discussed, were the broad

²⁰ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān, Ḥadīth no. 5000, narrated on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd

²¹ al-Zarqānī, Manāhil al-'Irfān, vol. 1, p. 411

²² Al-Qurṭubī, al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān, vol. 1, Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, Cairo, 1964, p. 137

²³ DarulQuran Academy, The 10 *Qirā'āt* of the Holy Qur'ān, 2024

²⁴ Academia.edu, Al-*Qirā'āt*: A Historical and Linguistic Overview, 2025

²⁵ DarulQuran Academy, The 10 *Qirā'āt* of the Holy Qur'ān, 2024

Prophetic concession granted directly by revelation, while *Qirā'āt* refers to the specific systems of recitation later attributed to individual master reciters such as Nāfi' and 'Āṣim, each of whom taught within the scope permitted by the *ahruf* but did not himself originate revelation²⁶.

Beneath each *qirā'ah* lies a further layer called *riwāyah*, denoting the specific transmission of a *qirā'ah* through one of the master reciter's principal students; thus, Ḥafṣ and Shu'bah are the two *riwāyāt* of 'Āṣim's *qirā'ah*, while Warsh and Qālūn are the two *riwāyāt* of Nāfi's *qirā'ah*. Below *riwāyah* lies *ṭarīq* (plural *ṭuruq*), the specific chain by which a later transmitter conveyed a given *riwāyah*, so that a single *riwāyah* may reach the present through several distinct *ṭuruq*, each verified independently²⁷.

This four-tier structure, *ahruf*, *Qirā'āt*, *riwāyāt*, and *ṭuruq*, is not pedantry; it is the very architecture that allows scholars to trace any recitation heard today back through named individuals to the Prophet without ambiguity, a level of documentary precision that contemporary specialists describe as unmatched among the world's ancient oral-textual traditions, since every link in the chain carries a name, a lifespan, and a place of study²⁸. Understanding this architecture equips the student to read classical *Qirā'āt* manuals correctly and to appreciate why scholars insist on such fine terminological precision.

'Ilm al-Tajwīd: The Practical Companion of Qirā'āt

Where *Qirā'āt* determines which authentic reading is being recited, *'Ilm al-Tajwīd* governs the precise articulation of every letter within that reading, covering the correct point of articulation (*makhraj*), the qualities of each letter (*ṣifāt*), and the rules of elongation, nasalisation, and merging that give Qur'ānic recitation its distinctive and protected sound. Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām is widely credited as the first scholar to commit these rules to systematic writing, and his book *al-Qirā'āt* remains a foundational reference documenting some twenty-five reciters of his era²⁹.

The relationship between *Tajwīd* and *Qirā'āt* is one of practical inseparability: a student cannot correctly perform even the single *riwāyah* of Ḥafṣ without mastering *Tajwīd's* rules of *idghām*, *ikhfā'*, *qalqalah*, and *madd*, and the ten canonical readings differ from one another not only in individual words but frequently in precisely these *Tajwīd*-governed features, such as the length of *madd* or the degree of assimilation applied to a given letter combination³⁰. This is why classical teaching circles never separated the two sciences in practice, even though later scholarship treated them as formally distinct disciplines for purposes of authorship and study.

Contemporary Qur'ān academies continue this integrated approach, teaching *Tajwīd* as the essential gateway through which a student must pass before advancing to comparative study of the ten readings, a pedagogical sequence that mirrors exactly how the earliest generations learned, reciting first for correctness of pronunciation and only later for awareness of variant transmission. The endurance of this sequence across fourteen centuries testifies to its pedagogical soundness and to the seriousness with which the Muslim community has always guarded the sound of its scripture.

Al-Qirā'āt al-Shādhah: The Boundary of Acceptability

Not every reading transmitted in early Islamic history met the conditions later articulated by Ibn al-Jazarī. Readings that lacked a sound continuous chain, or that departed from the 'Uthmānic rasm, or that violated established Arabic grammar, were classified as *shādhah* (irregular or anomalous) and excluded from liturgical use, however respected their individual transmitters might otherwise have been in other fields of knowledge³¹.

Scholars such as Ibn Jinnī and later al-Zarkashī studied these *shādhah* readings not to promote their recitation in prayer but because of their auxiliary value in *tafsīr* and in the history of the Arabic language, since a rejected reading might still preserve a linguistically authentic variant illuminating the meaning of a difficult verse even where it could not be recited as scripture. This careful distinction, between a reading's legal status for worship and its scholarly value for interpretation, shows the sophistication with which the classical tradition handled recitational diversity³².

The existence of a clearly bounded category of rejected readings is itself powerful evidence against the claim, sometimes advanced by outsiders to the tradition, that Muslims accepted every reported variant without discrimination. On the contrary, the meticulous exclusion of *shādhah* material demonstrates a living critical apparatus functioning exactly as the science of ḥadīth criticism did for Prophetic narrations, sifting sound transmission from weak or fabricated material with equal rigour³³.

²⁶ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-Qirā'āt al-'Ashr*, vol. 1, p. 27

²⁷ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma'rifat al-Qurrā' al-Kibār*, vol. 1, p. 45

²⁸ al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil al-'Irfān*, vol. 1, p. 411

²⁹ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma'rifat al-Qurrā' al-Kibār*, vol. 1, p. 46

³⁰ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, vol. 1, p. 214

³¹ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, p. 118

³² Al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil al-'Irfān*, vol. 1, p. 405

³³ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, vol. 1, p. 15

Orientalist Objections and the Islamic Scholarly Response

Since the eighteenth century, certain Western scholars have approached the multiplicity of *Qirā'āt* as evidence of textual instability rather than preserved diversity. The early translator George Sale, for instance, noted the existence of several regional editions of the Qur'ān circulating from Madīnah, Makkah, Kūfah, Basrah, and Syria, and interpreted their differences as disagreements over verse division and content. Such readings of the evidence, however, generally overlook the documented, named, and independently verifiable chains that distinguish authentic *Qirā'āt* from arbitrary textual corruption.

Modern historians of the Qur'ānic text, including those studying the 1924 Cairo edition, have clarified that the Egyptian government's choice to standardise printing upon the *riwāyah* of Ḥafṣ from 'Āṣim was a practical administrative decision for state education, not a theological rejection of the other thirteen or more authentically transmitted readings, all of which continue to be taught, certified, and recited by qualified scholars around the Muslim world to this day. This distinction between practical standardisation and theological exclusivity is frequently missed by critics unfamiliar with the internal logic of the Islamic sciences.

Islamic scholars, both classical and contemporary, respond to such criticism not by denying the existence of variance but by relocating the discussion within its proper framework: variance bound by verified chains, restricted vocabulary, and unchanging doctrine is categorically different from uncontrolled textual corruption. As al-Zarqānī observes, the very existence of multiple, cross-checking, independently transmitted readings, all converging on the same doctrine and the same essential message, is a stronger proof of preservation than a single uncorroborated text could ever provide, since agreement among independent witnesses is the classical hallmark of authenticity in any critical discipline³⁴.

Qirā'āt Scholarship in West Africa and the Sokoto Tradition

The spread of Islam into West Africa carried with it the *riwāyah* of Warsh from Nāfi', which today remains the dominant recitational tradition across much of the Maghrib, the Sahel, and Northern Nigeria, including the scholarly communities associated with the Sokoto Caliphate. This transmission reached West Africa through trans-Saharan trade and scholarly networks linking Timbuktu, Fez, and the great learning centres of North Africa to the towns and cities of Hausaland long before the founding of the Caliphate itself³⁵.

The reformist scholarship associated with Shaykh 'Uthmān ibn Fūdī and his household placed heavy emphasis on correct Qur'ānic recitation as an inseparable part of religious reform, and the *makarantar Allo* (Qur'ānic tablet schools) that spread throughout Sokoto and its neighbouring emirates institutionalised the memorisation and oral transmission of the Warsh reading at the elementary level, a pattern of grassroots transmission that has persisted with remarkable continuity into the present century.

Today, institutions such as Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto and Sokoto State University inherit this deep local tradition of Qur'ānic scholarship, and contemporary academic work continues to document, analyse, and safeguard this West African contribution to the wider history of *Qirā'āt*, ensuring that the region's centuries-old oral chains are properly recorded before they risk being lost to modernisation, and that a heritage transmitted since the era of the Caliphate continues, uninterrupted, into the hands of the next generation of *huffāz* and *qurrā'*³⁶.

Findings

1. *Ilm al-Qirā'āt* originated from a genuine Prophetic concession, the seven *aḥruf*, and not from post-Prophetic scholarly innovation.
2. The multiplicity of authenticated readings functions as a safeguard rather than a threat to the integrity of the Qur'ānic text.
3. The 'Uthmānic muṣḥaf standardised the written rasm without abolishing the legitimate oral variations inherited from the Prophet.
4. Ibn Mujāhid's Kitāb al-Sab'ah gave the discipline its first canonical shape by restricting acceptance to seven verified reciters.
5. Ibn al-Jazarī's three conditions, sound *isnād*, conformity to the rasm, and grammatical soundness, remain the standard test of authenticity.
6. The oral *sanad*, transmitted mouth to mouth, is historically and functionally the primary guardian of the Qur'ānic text.
7. Differences among readings frequently yield complementary rather than contradictory legal and exegetical meanings.
8. The *riwāyah* of Ḥafṣ from 'Āṣim dominates global recitation, while Warsh from Nāfi' remains strong across West Africa.

³⁴ al-Zarqānī, Manāhil al-'Irfān, vol. 1, p. 30

³⁵ Academia.edu, Al-Qirā'āt: A Historical and Linguistic Overview, 2025

³⁶ Yaqeen Institute, An Introduction to 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān, 2025

9. Modern technology has extended access to *Qirā'āt* without altering its core requirement of face-to-face oral certification.
10. Institutions in Northern Nigeria, including those in Sokoto, continue to play an active role in preserving classical transmission methods.

Recommendations

1. Islamic studies curricula at all levels should include a dedicated introduction to *‘Ilm al-Qirā'āt*.
2. Universities such as UDUS and Sokoto State University should establish or strengthen ijāzah-granting *Qirā'āt* units.
3. Qualified teachers of the ten readings should be actively recruited and supported to sustain the *sanad* chain locally.
4. Digital archives of authenticated Nigerian *isnād* chains should be created and preserved for future generations.
5. Students of *tafsīr* should be trained to draw exegetical benefit from variant readings rather than treat them as mere curiosity.
6. Government and private endowments should fund scholarships for advanced study of *Qirā'āt* abroad and at home.
7. Public awareness campaigns should correct misconceptions that treat the variant readings as contradictions in the Qur'ān.
8. Collaboration between *Qirā'āt* scholars and modern linguists should be encouraged for comparative Arabic dialectology research.
9. Mosques and Qur'ānic schools (*makarantar Allo*) should be encouraged to preserve the Warsh tradition alongside *Ḥafṣ*.
10. Periodic conferences and workshops on *Qirā'āt* should be organised to keep the discipline visible in contemporary scholarship.

Conclusion

‘Ilm al-Qirā'āt stands as one of the clearest proofs that the preservation of the Glorious Qur'ān promised in Sūrat al-Hijr was not left to chance but was secured through a deliberate and traceable human effort inspired and guided by revelation. From the seven *ahruf* granted to the Companions, through the compilation under Abū Bakr, the standardisation under ‘Uthmān, the canonisation achieved by Ibn Mujāhid, and the systematisation completed by Ibn al-Jazarī, the discipline shows an unbroken line of scholarly custodianship stretching from the seventh century to the present day. What began as a mercy to the diverse tribes of Arabia continues today as a living science taught in the *halaqahs* of Sokoto, the institutes of Madīnah, and increasingly the online academies of the world, proof that the past, present, and future of *Qirā'āt* are bound together by the same unbroken voice reciting the same preserved Book.

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