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The Islamic Call to Prayer and Its Origin: A Story about Cultural Memory's Permanence and Adaptability

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Abstract: For more than two centuries, Muslims have been retelling different stories about the origin of their call to prayer. While the converging details of these narratives offer a glimpse of Muslim cultural memory and its preservation, the diverging elements reflect different mechanisms that facilitate the adaption of this cultural memory to new contexts and concerns. Based on the work of Jan Assmann, the present study explores how Muslims conserved and adapted their cultural memory to keep their common identity and expand their diversity following distinctive religious, political, or personal forms of belongings. The narratives concerned with the origin of the Islamic call to prayer and preserved in various written text collections offer a fertile ground to analyze how this part of Muslim cultural memory became the vehicle of a permanent but adaptable Muslim identity.

Keywords: Islamic history; cultural memory



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1. Introduction

Ḥadīth literature that preserves sayings and actions attributed to Islam's prophet Muḥammad and his companions was formed over several generations in oral and written transmissions. Because its formative period stretched through great historical changes and radically different contexts, it often contains, in a single narrative, long-lasting old memories together with added comments, interpretations or modifications which reflect the transmitters' different times and concerns. It is therefore a rich source of information for the study of cultural memory, its permanence, and its malleability or ability to evolve. Memory, writes Jan Assmann, "is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity)" (Assmann 2013, p. 109): personal identities reside in individual memory, while cultural memory generates group identities. Cultural memory is therefore "[k]nowledge about the past [. . .] if it is related to a concept of identity" (Assmann 2013, p. 113). The past is first remembered and transmitted from one generation to the next in what Assmann coined the "communicative memory" (the equivalent of Halbwachs' "collective memory," in Assmann's jargon). Communicative memory is short-term; it connects groups within two to three generations and gives a diffuse sense of community. When the past that is remembered is used to create a common identity ("awareness of selfhood") for a given community, it becomes this community's cultural memory (Assmann 2013, p. 114). A group, unlike an individual, does not have a brain that memorizes, explains Assmann. Groups store symbols and narratives in their cultures, and those who collectively remember these symbols and narratives acquire the group identity, in the sense that "remembering is a realization of belonging" (Assmann 2013, p. 114).

Cultural memory, because it preserves the group identity, must be preserved if the group is to survive, and for that it ought to be adaptable as time goes by and as new situations arise. But how can cultural memory be preserved and adapted at the same time? How can collective identity survive in times of great disruptions that often require radical adaptations to new social, political and religious contexts? These questions can be explored in the light of a story that is found in the *ḥadīth* literature. The narratives about the birth of the Islamic call to prayer, the *adhān*, exist in different versions within several *ḥadīth*

collections. All these narratives purportedly contain the account about the introduction of the *adhān* at the time of Muḥammad. While the similarity between them could attest to the successful preservation of an old memory from the early Islamic history, their discrepancies reflect some attempts to interpret this old story anew and adapt it to different contexts or ideologies. The scope of this essay will not permit me to delve in the details of each of the numerous narratives, nor does it allow for a thorough contextualization or a large theoretical framework. This is why I shall build on the study I conducted in my doctoral dissertation and use Assmann's theory for its encompassing approach to the field of cultural memory, based on pioneers of cultural studies such as Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora. As for the context, I will briefly highlight the broad contours of the period under consideration. I invite the reader to explore further these periods and themes through the secondary literature, bearing in mind that the *adhān* story is one example among many others.

2. Context

In the first half of the seventh century A.D., Medina is thought to have had a larger population of Jews and Christians than its southern neighbor, Mecca, the birthplace of Muḥammad. The differences between these two places are in part reflected in the distinctive Meccan and Medinan chapters of the Qur'ān, which constitute important historical sources for this period and region. The Medinan verses can be distinguished through the numerous elements of distinction between Muslims on the one hand, and Jews and Christians on the other, such as the shift in the prayer direction from Jerusalem to Mecca (Q. 2:143–45), or a focus on Abraham as opposed to Jesus and Moses (Neuwirth 2007, p. 27). The *adhān* echoes this distinction process, yet it is not mentioned in the Qur'ān. The Arabic verb *adhdhana*, calling to prayer, from which are derived *adhān*, the call to prayer, and *mu'adhhdhin*, the one who calls to prayer, appears in the Qur'ān, but does not refer to a ritual. The verb usually means “announcing,” such as for example the herald (*mu'adhhdhin*) of heaven and hell who announced (*adhdhana*) God's condemnation in sūra Al-A'rāf 7:44, or the herald (*mu'adhhdhin*) who announced (*adhdhana*) to Joseph's brothers that one of them has stolen his cup in sūra Yūsuf Q. 12:77. The announcement can come from God, as in Q. 9:3, from God's messengers, as in Q. 22:27, or from simple people, as in the example of Joseph.

In the absence of references to the *adhān* in the Qur'ān, we are left with *ḥadīth* narratives from later sources, which give only a blurred and incomplete picture of the historical development of the *adhān*. We also have little information about Medina's soundscape when Muḥammad emigrated there in 622. The *ḥadīth* literature establishes a parallel between animal horns or metal (silver) trumpets and the Jewish call to prayer. However, these instruments were not used to call to prayer. Rather they were parts of larger rituals within celebrations, such as *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (also known as *yom teru'ah*, the day of blowing), and played a symbolic role in reference to biblical events like Abraham's sacrifice, as I have shown in my doctoral dissertation (Bednarkiewicz 2017, p. 11). The idea of an instrument to call the believers to daily orations seems to come from the Christians, who struck a wooden board with a small wooden stick or a mallet, walking along the streets or within a monastery to indicate the time of their religious service. The instrument, called in Greek *semantron*, in Syriac *nāqōshā*, and in Arabic *nāqūs*, is first mentioned around the fourth or fifth centuries in written sources, but its exact origin remains unknown. The *semantron* was later replaced by bells when these were adopted by Christians but the Arabic language kept the same word to designate the *semantron* and its replacement, the bell (Rassi 2015, p. 268). This creates a confusion often visible in translations of early Arabic texts in which *nāqūs* is translated as “bell,” even though bells had not yet been introduced. The word *semantron* is sometimes translated as “clappers,” which designate a smaller instrument that is the *nāqūs/semantron* to which our Arabic sources are referring. Hence, we shall keep the Arabic version of the Syriac word. The *nāqūs* barely survived the introduction of bells, and it can only be found today among some Orthodox Christian communities on Mount Athos or in Jerusalem. These vestiges allow us nonetheless to gain an idea of the ritual as it was

at the time of Muḥammad, for deeply rooted traditions that survive the challenges of more efficient traditions do not get modified easily and often preserve old features. In the case of the *semantron*, complex and diverse rhythms have been identified in different monasteries, indicating a long history of distinction processes between Christian communities. Even if the tradition has changed, one can easily imagine when hearing the *semantron* today that this profound wooden sound with its surprising variations appeared attractive—and hence appropriate—to call the believers for a religious duty (al-Bayhaqī 1994, p. 574).

After the conquests, Muslims who mention the instrument are rather concerned with its nefast disturbance at the time of the *adhān*. Most jurists advocate the regulation of its use or its prohibition. In his record of Mālikī jurisprudences, the Tunisian jurist Saḥnūn ibn Saʿīd al-Tanūkhī (d. 240/854) reports that the famous Medinan jurist Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795) forbade the use of the *nāqūs* to Christians who had rented a house from a Muslim and were probably trying to circumvent the prohibition of building new churches by creating a private place of worship (Saḥnūn b. Saʿīd al-Tanūkhī 1906–7). A contemporary of Mālik, the Kufan jurist Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. c. 161/777) was said to have compared the sound of the *nāqūs* to the fart of a donkey (Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣbahānī 1997, p. 379) and a student of Mālik, Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (2001, d. 204/820) recommended punishing the Christians who would strike their *nāqūs*. Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb (d. 182/798) is a rare exception in this landscape, as he adopted a more lenient position by requesting that Christians should be allowed to perform their ritual except at the time of the *adhān* (Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb 2009, p. 166). Abū Yūsuf’s attempt to convince his audience that cultural diversity should be preserved to protect Muslim identity was dimmed by the hostility towards Christians that transpired inter alia in the jurists’ writings cited above, as well as later ones (Rassi 2015; Bosanquet 2020, pp. 262–82). It is in this briefly summarized context and the following century that the narratives about the origin of the *adhān* were being circulated and recorded in *ḥadīth* collections that were preserved until today. Astonishingly, the *nāqūs* appeared in almost all the accounts about this event and, as we shall see, it played a rather positive role in this story.

3. The Origin of the *Adhān*

3.1. The Sources

Three types of texts retell different versions of the history of the *adhān* as it was remembered by the Muslim communities. Most narratives come from the *ḥadīth* literature, the collection of the accounts about the sayings and actions of Muḥammad and his companions. All the famous canonical *ḥadīth* collections report at least one and up to five versions of the story, ranging from almost identical to highly contradictory. Other non-canonical *ḥadīth* collections also narrate the story adding a myriad of details to the already colorful narratives. In some accounts, Muslim historians approach the theme of the *adhān* and mention its history according to their own sources or interpretation thereof. Finally, some legal texts also introduce the story in a section dedicated to the *adhān*.

3.2. The *Nāqūs*

The main storyline of the Sunnī narratives goes as follows: someone suggests adopting the Christian *nāqūs* to call the believers to the daily prayer, but the *adhān* is introduced instead. This seems to be the oldest layer of the narrative, the one that was circulated first, potentially within a larger narrative, the details of which are difficult to distinguish from the later additions or have been replaced by them. It is unlikely that the idea of adopting the *nāqūs* and the early introduction of the *adhān* were invented after Muḥammad’s death for several reasons. Muslims after the conquests were trying to regulate, and in many cases forbid, Christian practices; in this context, Muslims were unlikely to invent a story in which a companion of their Prophet suggested striking the Christian *nāqūs* to call Muslims to prayer. The disagreements between Muslims and Christians were already present during Muḥammad’s lifetime, as can be seen from the criticism against some Christian doctrines that appears in the Qurʾān, condemning the idea that Jesus was

more than a messenger (Q. 4:171, 9:30–1, 19:36, 17:111 inter alia), or highlighting that most Christians went astray (Q. 5:66). These criticisms might have generated some tensions which were further accentuated by the conquests after Muḥammad's death and the Christian resistance to Islam. The suggestion to use a *nāqūs* could therefore only occur at a very early stage of Islam's development, in which the boundaries between Muslims and Christians, Islam and Christianity, were not fully erected and their permeability allowed for a certain osmosis (Donner 2010, pp. 56, 68). This formative period is reflected in the main storyline as well as in the Medinan verses of the Qur'ān, as mentioned above. With the hostility against Christians growing, one could have expected that the *nāqūs* would be removed from the story about the genesis of the *adhān*, yet the contrary occurred: the *nāqūs* was retained in most versions, even in those where the narrators clearly expressed a disagreement with or dislike of the fact that a Muslim companion was suggesting a Christian instrument, as will be shown below. The *nāqūs* must have produced a powerful impression on the early Muslim community as it settled in Medina, and the idea of using the instrument for the Muslim call to prayer left its mark in Muslims' collective memory. The preservation of the *nāqūs* underlines the permanent character of cultural memory: that which is collectively remembered cannot be erased easily if at all.

3.3. The Early *Adhān*

The second common element in Sunnī narratives is the early introduction of a specific Muslim call to prayer. How exactly this was introduced is an object of contention, but all texts agree that it came into being early on after the emigration to Medina. Tensions and disagreements within the Muslim community existed at the time of Muḥammad, but they mostly gained prominence after his death, when the different factions chose different authority figures. This led to various splits, the most important of which being the division between the partisans of Muḥammad's son-in-law 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and those of the first caliph Abū Bakr, and his two successors, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and 'Uthmān ibn Affān. The former became the Shī'ī and distinguished themselves from the latter, the Sunnī, in part with their slightly distinctive call to prayer, in which a sentence is added referring to 'Alī: after the *shahadah* that attests the belief in God and his Prophet Muḥammad, the Shī'ī add *ashhadu anna 'alīyun walīyu-llāh* ("I attest that 'Alī is the *walī* [guardian, regent] of God"). Shī'ī sources also preserve, in their tradition, a different version of the story retelling the origin of the *adhān*. They do not seem to be interested in why the *adhān* was introduced and whether the *nāqūs* played a role there, but they stress the presence of 'Alī when the ritual was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad. The Shī'ī *adhān* and the story of its origin point to an early dating of their initial forms, of which, however, we do not have historical traces: it transpires that the ritual and the narratives about its origin were sufficiently established as marker of the common Muslim identity to allow different Muslim factions to adopt and adapt them to distinguish themselves while remaining within the community. The Shī'ī (or the proto-Shī'ī, since we do not know when their *adhān* emerged) were not the only ones. The first caliphs after Muḥammad's death were also reported to have added formulae to the *adhān* and to have tried to associate their names with the story of its origin (al-Maqrīzī 1998, vol. IV, p. 45 ss.) More tangible, however, is the preservation and adaptation of cultural memory through the medium of not only rituals, but also narratives. As we shall see, attempts to modify the narratives seem to have been as numerous and systematic as attempts to modify the ritual.

The *adhān*, or a proto-*adhān*, initially served the distinction between those who followed Muḥammad and those who did not. Other common rituals indicate this early development phase of the Muslim community, formed the basis of the shared identity between all Muslim sub-communities and factions. Among them, we find the prayer, its purification ritual (*wudū*), some of its gestures (standing, bending, kneeling, but not the movement of the hands nor the daily number of prayers), and the pilgrimage. They became pillars of the Muslim common identity and, as Assmann has shown for rituals in general, their repetitions ensure identity transmission and cultural coherence (Assmann 2000, p. 89).

The transfer of cultural memory from generation to generation also occurs through texts like the *ḥadīth* narratives retelling the birth of the *adhān*. But texts are lost more easily than old rituals are forgotten. Therefore, texts are often remembered and transmitted in codified ways which resemble rituals to safeguard the identity information that they carry, and they are interpreted by recognised authorities (Assmann calls them “institutions of interpretation”) to guarantee cultural coherence (Assmann 2000, p. 95). Like the *imām* who leads the prayer or the *muʿadhdhin* who calls to prayer, *ḥadīth* authoritative figures played an important role in both preserving and adapting the texts that were entrusted to them (Davidson 2020, chps. 1 and 2). When the *ḥadīth* canon had been established, their interpretations appear in the form of commentaries, but before the canonization, these interpretative comments seem to have been inserted directly in the texts, either orally or in written forms, and they might account for some discrepancies that occur between narratives supposedly retelling the same story. This is a phenomenon that can be observed in the story about the birth of the *adhān*, and we shall now turn to the differences between its various versions.

3.4. A Muslim *Nāqūs*?

Among the disagreement comes first the exact role of the *nāqūs*. While the sources agree that some Muslims suggested adopting the Christian instrument, they disagree about whether or not the instrument was actually used. The absence of clear temporal markers already renders the span of the story difficult to reconstruct: was the *adhān* introduced during a deliberation or over several months, maybe after the trials of different instruments? Was there a primitive form that slowly evolved into the ritual we know today? In some narratives, we have a conversation:

When Muslims arrived in Medina, they would gather and then complete the prayer, and no one would call them. One day they talked about it, some suggested to use a *nāqūs* like the *nāqūs* of the Christians, others said no, let us use the *qarn* like the *qarn* of the Jews, [but] ‘Umar [ibn al-Khaṭṭāb] said, couldn’t we send a man to call to prayer? And the Messenger of God [...] said: O Bilāl, stand up and call to the prayer. (Ibn Ḥanbal 1993, p. 399)

This dialogue must have lasted a couple of minutes, the instruments were suggested but not used, and a ritual with the voice, that is without instruments, was adopted at the end of the deliberation. In another version however,

[T]he Messenger of God [...] was worried that, when the time of [the prayer had come] he would make a *būq* (trumpet) like the *būq* of the Jews with which they call to their prayer, and he disliked that, then he ordered a *nāqūs*, and it was chiselled to be struck for Muslims for the prayer. (Ibn Hishām 1990, p. 150; Ibn Māja 2000, p. 103)

While the Prophet worries about this, a companion of his has a dream in which the *adhān* is revealed to him. He narrates it to Muḥammad, who immediately adopts it. In this version the time span has increased, it stretches over some hours, maybe some days, to accommodate the chiseling of the instrument and the dream. In yet another, similar *ḥadīth*, “Muḥammad ordered the *nāqūs* (*amar^a bi-l-nāqūs*) to be manufactured (*yuʿmal^u*) so that it could be stroked for the people [to announce] the common prayer” (Abū Dāwūd 2009, p. 371). Whether Muslims stroked the *nāqūs* or not, and the exact details of the original story will probably remain a mystery. However, the disagreement around this question makes it clear that the striking of the *nāqūs* by Muslims was perceived differently by different transmitters. With the hostile attitude towards the instrument adopted by many jurists, who were often *ḥadīth* transmitters themselves, the distance that some narratives underline between Muslims and the *nāqūs* is not surprising.

This distance is strengthened by the occasional presence of various Jewish instruments: *būq* (metal trumpet), *qarn* (an animal’s horn), and *shabbūr* (a shofar). The parallel between the Jewish and the Christian instruments, also reflected in the syntax of Ibn Ḥanbal’s *ḥadīth*

mentioned above, dilutes the inspirational role of the *nāqūs*. Two narratives in the famous canonical collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim even replaced the trumpet with a fire, which is a strange idea to call people to prayer, but gives the illusion that the *nāqūs* was just a tool among others (al-Bukhārī 2000, vol. I, p. 119; Muslim 2006, p. 207). Finally, the *nāqūs* is often mentioned alone, and when all these different versions are compared, it appears that the particular role potentially played by the *nāqūs* was problematic to more than one transmitter. This is confirmed by the next example.

3.5. He Disliked the *Nāqūs*

We find a minority of instances where a sentence has been added to indicate that Muḥammad disliked (*kariha*) the idea of using a *nāqūs* (Ibn Ḥanbal 1993, p. 399; al-Dārimī 2014, p. 307; Ibn Māja 2000, p. 104; Ibn Saʿd 2001, p. 213). This sentence reflects the will to remove all doubts about Muslims having used a Christian instrument: the *nāqūs* was suggested to Muḥammad and directly rejected by him. Most likely, the addition of this sentence was understood as an authoritative interpretation of the intended meaning and not as a modification of the original text. This interpretation fits well in the hostile context described above, where jurists advocated the prohibition of the *nāqūs*. The Prophet's dislike supports this view and the chosen verb *kariha* (he disliked) is close to "forbid" (*ḥarrama*) in Islamic normative law, which provides the following scale: obligatory (*wājib*), recommended or encouraged (*mandūb*), allowed or permitted (*mubāḥ*), disliked (*makrūh*), and forbidden, illicit or proscribed (*maḥzūr* or *ḥarām*). The meaning and scope of being "disliked" (*makrūh*) by the Prophet could vary among jurists from something being considered disapproved, controversial, questionable, or even (morally) reprehensible. An instrument qualified as *makrūh* will definitely not be used by Muslims.

There is one other example of an attempt to avoid confusion regarding Muslims use of a Christian instrument that was creatively introduced by Mālik ibn Anas, who preferred a synecdoche to the addition of a sentence. Indeed, he refers to "two pieces of wood" (*khashbatayn*) instead of the foreign word *nāqūs* (Mālik ibn Anās 1952–53). He succeeds in preserving the meaning while avoiding the explicit mention of the Christian instrument and removing therewith the clear reference to the Christian influence on the introduction of the *adhān*. Together with the addition of the Prophet's dislike, Mālik's solution confirms a certain uneasiness among Muslim transmitters around the 2nd/8th century about the *nāqūs* and its role in the genesis of the *adhān*.

3.6. The *Adhān* of ʿUmar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb

The disagreement about how the *adhān* was introduced concerns not only the *nāqūs* but also the person who came with the idea of a different call to prayer using the voice instead of an instrument. In the narrative mentioned above, it was ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb who suggested calling the people to prayer. In his version of the story, Ibn Ḥanbal used the verb *nādaʿ* for "calling," and not *adhdhana*, which is the verb that came to describe specifically "performing the *adhān*." Thus, in Ibn Ḥanbal's *ḥadīth*, ʿUmar could have initiated the practice of calling to prayer with the voice (*nādaʿ*), which would have then evolved slowly into the more elaborate ritual we know today (*adhdhana*). In other versions of the same narrative with ʿUmar as main protagonist, we find the two verbs, either as a mistake, a misinterpretation, or a will to associate the second caliph with the introduction of the *adhān* and not just a simple *nādaʿ*.

3.7. The Dream of ʿAbd Allāh

Another group of narratives replace ʿUmar in his prominent role with ʿAbd Allāh ibn Zayd, an *anṣārī* or inhabitant of Medina who converted to Islam (in opposition to the *muhājirūn*, the companions of Muḥammad who came with him from Mecca). ʿAbd Allāh ibn Zayd had a dream in which he asked a man carrying a *nāqūs* to lend him his instrument to call Muslims to prayer, and the man, often dressed in green, taught him the wordings of the *adhān*. ʿAbd Allāh narrated his dream to Muḥammad, who recognized the vision as

divinely inspired and asked Bilāl to call people to the prayer with the words from ‘Abd Allāh’s dream. ‘Umar reappears in many narratives which recount that he had had the same dream as ‘Abd Allāh. Whether the insistence on ‘Umar is historically or politically motivated, is difficult to determine. The *ḥadīth* in which ‘Umar appears alone without the *anṣārī* is narrated by his son, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar, and his *mawlá* (freed slave), Nāfi‘, which could mean that, being close to ‘Umar, they knew better what happened, or on the contrary, they had personal interest in promoting someone from their family, especially when he was criticized by his opponents during and after his caliphate. According to al-Maqrizī (d. 845/1442), an Egyptian historian from the 9th/15th century, ‘Umar is the caliph who introduced into the *adhān* a sentence praising himself as the ruler: “Peace be upon you *amīr al-mu’minīn* and God’s mercy and His blessing” (al-Maqrizī 1998, p. 48). Many rulers after him are said to have used the *adhān* to have their name resonate daily in the soundscape of their city, since “[r]eligious noise was a powerful signal of territorial control” (Constable 2010, p. 93). The emphasis on ‘Umar, whether his role in the origin of the *adhān* was authentic or not, visibly associates him with the introduction of the ritual and indirectly entitles him to modify his own invention in order to protect him against criticism, similar to the narrative that justified ‘Umar’s prayer without the Qur’ān’s verses (Sijpesteijn 2015, p. 326). The presence of an *anṣārī* could also be politically motivated, for feelings of injustice are often reported from *anṣārī* who complained about favors being bestowed upon the *muḥājirūn*, at the time of Muḥammad and after, in particular regarding those from Muḥammad’s tribe, the Quraysh. Some accounts of the history of the *adhān* allude to these feelings when they report how a person asked why a *muḥājir*, Bilāl, was chosen to perform the *adhān* instead of the *anṣārī* ‘Abd Allāh ibn Zayd, who received divine inspiration (Abū Dāwūd 2009, p. 369; al-Bayhaqī 1994, p. 574; Abū Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī 1999, vol. II, p. 425). Finally, one narrative seems to seek a middle ground by introducing as the first caliph Abū Bakr instead of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Zayd, ‘Umar, or ‘Alī (? , p. 18 [85B4-religions-1342683]). By associating the origin of the *adhān* with a particular figure, each transmitter preserved the main storyline, and was able to defend or enhance the figure he had chosen for political, personal, or religious reasons. The Shī‘ī narratives follow this strategy.

3.8. The Shī‘ī Traditions

The veracity of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Zayd al-Anṣārī’s dream was challenged by Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān (d. 363/974), chief judge of the fourteenth Ismā‘īlī Imām and the fourth Fāṭimid caliph al-Mu‘izz li-dīn Allāh (r. 341/953–365/975). According to him, the exact wording of the *adhān* was revealed to Muḥammad by God through an angel (al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān 2007, pp. 59–60). Around the same period, the famous twelver Shī‘ī Ibn Bābawayh (d. 381/991-2) does not acknowledge any of the Sunnī narratives, and simply explains that the angel Jabrā‘īl (Gabriel) revealed the *adhān* to Muḥammad, who had his head on ‘Alī’s lap: they both heard the words, and Muḥammad then taught Bilāl to perform the call accordingly (Ibn Bābawayh 1981, pp. 197–98). The two Shī‘ī scholars do not comment on the ancestor of the *adhān*; whether Muslims used a *nāqūs* or not did not seem relevant to them. Their concern lies entirely with establishing the divine revelation to the Prophet by an angel similar to the revelation of the Qur’ān. Some Sunnī narratives also attempt to stress the divine origin of the *adhān* when they add that Muḥammad recognized ‘Abd Allāh’s (and ‘Umar’s) dream as a revelation, *ru’ya*, that is a dream inspired by God. The discrepancies between the narratives about the person from whom the *adhān* originated reflect rather early debates in Islamic history between *anṣārī* and *muḥājirūn*, Quraysh and non-Quraysh, and the first caliphs. The need to attribute the origin of the ritual exclusively to God and his Prophet likely reflects later concerns, when Muslims were no longer concerned about distinguishing themselves from Jews and Christians, and instead wanted to stress the divine nature of their rituals and the equal or superior status of their religion. The message behind this was that Muslims were not performing the *adhān* because the Christians were also calling the faithful to prayer or because a companion had a brilliant idea, but because God himself told his Prophet to do so.

4. Conclusive Remarks

The foregoing discrepancies between the narratives about the origin of the *adhān* show how different groups within the Muslim community used a well-known story to advocate or stress particular points of interest, probably at different time in history: The supporters of the second caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb could promote him while the *anṣārī* had ‘Abd Allāh ibn Zayd’s dream, the twelver Shī‘ī insisted on ‘Alī’s presence beside the Prophet during the revelation of the *adhān* and those who felt the need to underline the sacred origin of the ritual emphasized its divine inspiration. Using the same foundational myth of origin and thus preserving their cultural memory, *ḥadīth* transmitters kept reinterpreting the story, allowing different groups to claim their shared Muslim identity, while at the same time distinguishing themselves from other factions. Nowadays, each *mu’adhdhin*, mosque, or community might perform the *adhān* differently, and yet it remains a hallmark ritual, the *adhān*, the Islamic call to prayer that has gathered all Muslims since the time of their Prophet, regardless of their divergences.

In this concert of voices, the historical truth might have been lost. We cannot establish who conceived the idea of a Muslim call to prayer using solely the voice, when it happened, who established its precise wording, and how it evolved. And yet, if the divergences obscure the historical origin, they preserve historical elements that were important for later generations; and because they are always attached to the same storyline, they shed light on the mechanisms of the adaptation and preservation of cultural memory. In his essay on the disappearance of rituals, the philosopher Byung-Chul Han observes, “rituals give rise to a resonance community, which is capable of a joint sound (*Zusammenklang*), a common rhythm” (Han 2019, p. 19 [my translation]). The *adhān* embodies this *Zusammenklang* which ties Muslims together regardless of their communitarian belonging and encapsulates both their collective identity and differences. None of the narratives introduce a radically different story, not only because the “past was not infinitely flexible” and could only “be reworked within certain boundaries” (Bowen Savant 2013, p. 168), but also because they participate in the preservation of this *Zusammenklang*. Through addition, modification, or reinterpretation of these narratives, Muslims could adapt their cultural memory to their new contexts and belongings. That narratives can be modified while retaining their essence make them a perfect vehicle for cultural memory as powerful as rituals and traditions. Investigating the *ḥadīth* literature further under this light will surely yield a better understanding of the complex interplay between cultural preservation and diversification.

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