

Thinking Islam Through Things: From the Viewpoint of Materiality of the Qur’ān*

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Introduction

Several decades have passed since anthropological works focused on “material,” “things,” “object,” “substance,” and “artifact,” and such findings have been called the “material turn,” “material-cultural turn,” or “ontological turn.” Although these turns were started vaguely, such as in the *Journal of Material Culture*, which was published in 1996 and in the late 2000s, those discussions were compiled in a handbook such as the *Handbook of Material Culture* in 2006 and *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* in 2010. Although various studies have been compiled into one stream by involving different disciplines such as archeology, design studies, history, and anthropology, this turn focusing on material aspects has become one of the mainstream topics in the human sciences in recent decades.¹

From a general perspective, this turn emerged to overcome previous studies that focused on immaterial objects. As Dan Hicks summarized, “such a material turn would shift beyond an earlier ‘cultural’, ‘linguistic’, ‘literary’, or ‘textual’ turn associated with the scholarship of the 1980s” [Hicks & Beaudry 2010: 1–2].² However, on religious anthropology, Sonia Hazard points out that Clifford Geertz was the first to consider material culture using the symbolic approach, then after Talal Asad critiqued Geertz’s study, religious study evolved to focus on material disciplines [Hazard 2013: 60–62]. Therefore, the first turning point in material cultural turn was caused by the controversy between Geertz and Asad, who studied Islam. After Asad’s shift from symbolic approach to material disciplines and power, Saba Mahmood took the concept of material disciplines further. For example, in *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, she focused on bodily discipline and habits such as wearing a headscarf to discipline the body and maintain the state of piety [Mahmood 2005]. This perspective on material disciplines and power was inherited by recent studies on material religion. According to the editor of the first issue of the journal *Material Religion*, which

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1 Of course, anthropologists have more or less dealt with cases in the field of material objects for more than a few hundred years. Chris Tilley et al. show that the first dealings on material objects by anthropologist dated back to the early nineteenth century [Tilley et al. 2006: 2].

2 However, there are various perspectives on genealogy of works focusing on materiality and things. For example, Dan Hicks argued that from the 1970s, the idea of “material culture studies” developed from a desire to reconcile structuralism and semiotics. In addition, in his understanding, another genealogy focusing on practice theory emerged from Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens and the theory by these two scholars were inherited by Ian Hodder and Daniel Miller [Hicks & Beaudry 2010: 25–98].

started publishing in 2005,

... religion is not regarded as something one does with speech or reason alone, but with the body and the spaces it inhabits. Religion is about the sensual effects of walking, eating, meditating, making pilgrimage, and performing even the most mundane of ritual acts. Religion is what people do with material things and places, and how these structure and color experience and one's sense of oneself and others [Editorial statement of *Material Religion* 2005: 5].

Thus, one of the points to consider when analyzing religion through material things is how people practice using material things, body and the spaces.

Discussion on Material Things in the Islamic World

There is another flow that deals with material things in the Islamic World by focusing on commodities. For example, in 2012, a special feature, titled “Popularizing Islam: Muslims and Materiality,” was published in *Material Religion* 8. In this issue, authors concluded that it is pointless to think per the preconceived notion of whether or not the subject is religious. For example, Julie McBrien discussed Brazilian soap operas, which are not related to Islam but became a source of religious information and inspiration for viewers in Kyrgyzstan. He argued that “... ambiguously classifiable objects—those that fall outside of the undeniably religious/non-religious dialectic—play in ‘doing religion’” [McBrien 2012: 375]. In another article of the same issue, Annelies Moors mentioned that “Things do not have either a religious or a secular, non-religious, status; rather, the ways in which forms become or cease to be religious may well shift in the course of their production, circulations, and consumption, and depends on the intentions of those engaging with them” [Moors 2012: 276]. Although this issue mentioned that it is important to focus on material forms, there was not much discussion on the properties of materiality since the concern was mainly on their course and role, in other words, the context that such things have meaning.

The Qur’ān as Things of Text-material

Although the Qur’ān is an absolute sacred text in the lives of Muslims, there has not been much academic discussion on between the Qur’ān and its physical materiality until this decade. Recent works that focus on its materiality, such as studies by Jonas Svensson and Natalia Suit, pointed out that both Western scholars and scholars of Islam have not focused on its physical characters but only on its theological, political, historical, or literary production [Svensson 2010: 31–32; Suit 2013: 1–2]. However, recent decades of material cultural turn began to make researchers focus on the materiality of the Qur’ān. This paper introduced in these previous researches and clarify the issue to deal with material things in Islam. At the same time, showing the cases I have experienced in my field research in Tunisia, this paper

considers several perspectives of analyzing Islam through material things, focusing on the Qur'ān.

When considering the Qur'ān and its materiality, it is important to know that it comes from *qarā'* that means read and recite. In contrast, Muṣḥaf comes from *ṣuḥuf*, which means pages that “contain” the Qur'ān. Thus, there is a long history of many scholars of Islam stating the importance of the Qur'ān and that of the Muṣḥaf is fundamentally different and that oral recitation is more superior than the written text [cf. al-Nawawi 2003]. As such, Messick calls it a logocentrism in Islam [Messick 1993: 25]. However, there is also an accepted idea that the written text of the Qur'ān is second in importance after oral expression and that even possessing the Qur'ān or merely glancing at the text are meritorious acts [Afsaruddin 2002]. Both historically and in modern times, there are subtle differences in what elements of the Qur'ān are most important and what are secondary. For example, broadly speaking, the so-called Islamic reformists consider that recitation and proper understanding must be prioritized over other actions with the written text. However, so-called popular Muslims engage with it not only in a reformist way; they relate in various other ways with the Qur'ān and the written text Muṣḥaf. This section considers these cases.

The second point is that Qur'ānic verses are not immutable; however, the media to convey them have been changed through Islamic history.³ From being copied on parchment, it changed to being written on paper, and then to being produced by the printing press in the sixteenth century,⁴ In these forty years, the Muṣḥaf has been printed in many places, notably at the King Fahd Holy Qur'ān Printing Complex in Saudi Arabia, which conducts the largest printing operations in the world and has distributed a maximum of ten million copies per year from 1985 [cf. Albin 2001: 273]. Recently, the media of the Qur'ān has changed dramatically through cassettes and CDs to applications on mobile phones such as the *iQuran*. By reviewing the changes from handwriting to printing the Muṣḥaf, Natalia Suit consider that the printing technology and the use of computers has changed it from having a unique existence to be a mass existence [Suit 2013: 10–17]. Next section points out the issue of mass-produced Muṣḥaf and how Muslims relate to them.

From these aspects, we understand that the Qur'ān has two opposing factors: one is the aspect of immutable verses to recite, and the second is that the text is described on some material things as such Muṣḥaf. However, the text of the Qur'ān and the material things it contains are not separable. Natalia Suit points out how the physical character of the Muṣḥaf is important for Muslims respecting and treating the Qur'ān properly [Suit 2013]. She experienced

3 Changing the text of the Qur'ān is strictly punishable. In Egypt, the Department of Maṣāḥif at al-Azhar must issue permits and certificates to print it. If it has any inaccurate text, it will be confiscated and the publisher's permission to print will be withdrawn by the department [Suit 2013: 18–19].

4 The first complete Arabic Qur'ān was printed in Venice in 1537 or 1538 and the next printing was in Hamburg in 1694 [Albin 2001]. In Egypt, its first printing was complete in 1822 by Būlāq or in 1833 by Raḍwān [Albin 2001: 269–270].

that, in her fieldworks in Cairo at the library of *Dār al-Kutub*, the oldest and biggest Maṣāḥif were covered in dust and were not treated properly by workers, unlike the contemporary Maṣāḥif, which are sold and familiar to them. She pondered on the reason for this situation, that the visual features such as calligraphy, ornamentation, and their pages do not resemble the Maṣāḥif they are used to [Suit 2013: 8–9].⁵ From this we can understand that its sacredness and proper treatment comes not only from the text itself but from its materiality as well.

Svensson shows some examples of this phenomenon that, even if they do not know what the text contains, it is a sacred text and object for Muslims around the world that transfers power, which is the basis for their faith and rituals [Svensson 2010: 32–34]. The same attitude was frequently seen during the fieldwork I conducted regarding how the Qur’ān ornaments are placed in their space. From my fieldwork experience, there are some persons who cannot understand the sūrah and the meaning of the verses of the ornaments [Futatsuyama 2013]. In addition, when asked which chapter is described in the frame, there were times when the owner of the Qur’ān ornaments answered the wrong sūrah.⁶ It can be said that for the owner, the important things to be placed in their space is based not only on the verse that is written but also on the fact that it is the Qur’ān.

However, it does not mean that only the visual character of the Muṣḥaf is important. It shows the inseparability between the text and materiality. For example, wiping off the ink of the characters of the text in the Qur’ān is recommended if the worn out Muṣḥaf has to be disposed of, as described below [cf. Sadan 1986], we understand that the element of sacredness is in the text because the book without the verses of the Qur’ān can be disposed of even if it has the visual characteristics of the Muṣḥaf. As Suit considered, “... in Islam the Qur’ānic text and its materiality have not been epistemologically separate” [Suit 2013: 3].

To consider that the text and meaning of the Qur’ān and the material which are described in it is not separable, there are many studies using amulets and talismans with some verses of the Qur’ān or miniatures of the Muṣḥaf. Although there have been negative opinions about those practices, as Zadeh shows, many early Islamic scholars including juridical thought accepted talismanic practices of ingesting Qur’ānic verses [Zadeh 2009: 464–465]. Even in the present, those practices are common in the Islamic world as many anthropologists reported, there are various types of practices and purpose for its use. For example, the remedy for illness is one of the main reasons to use it as what al-Nawawī described as drinking the water immersed with verses of the Qur’ān in ink [al-Nawawī 2003]. In addition, it is common to use them to protect against misfortunes; such as the temptations of *Iblīs* (an angel of Islam),

5 Suit shows the various illustrations of the Qur’ān such as signs for vowels, verses numbered, calligraphic style, size and color of letters, spaces between them, and margins ornamental text frames [Suit 2013: 10–17].

6 Most of the owners of space understand the sūrah described on it, but because those frames are given by their friend or family, sometimes they do not understand what are described.

against *jinn*s and evil eye of human envy [Meri 2001: 495–496; Svensson 2010: 38].⁷ Starrett shows Egyptian cases in which commodities with Qur’ānic verses are used merely to obtain a good score in examinations [Starrett 1995: 53–54, 59]. This means that there is someone who understands the Qur’ān itself as protecting from misfortunes and bringing good things.

Thus, we can understand the point that first, although the Qur’ān has superiority on oral recitation, the text described has also power to conjure the Qur’ān. Second, the text and meaning of the Qur’ān and the material used to described it are not separable. The inseparability of the two factors means that even if one side does not appear, the other side conjures to include in another side. Let me continue to show some examples to illustrate this phenomenon.

Various Way of Handling the Text of the Qur’ān

In my field work in Tunisia, I described some *sūrah* in my notebook to use for my own practice, recitation, and memorization. However, sometimes my acquaintance would offer to teach me Tunisian slang and wrote them in the same notebook. One day when I was chatting at the cafe in my field in December 2014,⁸ one of my friends noticed my notebook and became in a bad mood. The reason for his anger is that some slangs were written in the same notebook which contained sacred verses even if they were not overwritten and tainted and were found on another page. However, he could not accept it and overwrote on pen ink over the slang characters. That is one of the forbidden practices about described texts of the Qur’ān.

Previous studies have reported various other cases of treatments of the *Maṣāḥif* and texts of the Qur’ān. For example, Starrett presents the case of Egypt, where Qur’ānic commodities such as clocks, frames, greeting cards, decorative items, and ceramics, among others, with Qur’ānic verses, should be placed in respected and protected positions [Starrett 1995: 56]. Suit also shows another many examples that some of her friends do not carry the *Muṣḥaf* and pendant in the shape of the *Muṣḥaf* into the bathroom. She introduced other examples of controversial handling of the *Muṣḥaf* in relation to its location and protection: for example, licking one’s fingers to turn its pages, and keeping it open at the display window to protect the shop from robbers [Suit 2013: 26].

Although the verses of Qur’ān 56: 79 mentioned about touching the Qur’ān that “which none but the pure may touch,” there are many discussions about who can and cannot touch it [cf. Svensson 2010: 36; Suit 2013: 26].⁹ This discussion becomes more confusing when we

7 The evil eye itself and the use of things to protect against them are not the only culture of Islam, but some Muslims associate this custom with Islam because it is mentioned in some *sūrah* such as *al-Falaq* [Qamar 2013; Futatsuyama 2020: 9].

8 I stayed in the village 550 km from Tunis capital in Tataouine and Kebili governorate several months in a year from 2010. This case happened in village C, with 404 inhabitants as of 2014, comprising 98 households [National Institute of Statistics: see in 2015. 03.16].

9 Such as one who, after their excretion, menstruating women, non-Muslims and even non-Muslims who

think it includes the part of the verse of the Qur'ān such as amulets, embroidered on clothes, and even coins. Of course, it is difficult to say that non-Muslims and impure people avoid touching the coin with Qur'ānic verses. In addition, "Voices have been raised to claim that there is no clear scriptural evidence for prohibiting the "impure" from touching copies of the Qur'an" [Svensson 2010: 36].

Although there have been many discussions by Islamic scholars on touching the Muṣḥaf by a clean person and on how pure and impure is defined, disposing the Muṣḥaf becomes a vivid problem after it has been mass produced after the modern era. Futatsuyama also shows the case in a countryside in southern Tunisia, where, because free calendars with Qur'ānic verses are widely circulated, the people are in a dilemma regard to how to dispose of it [Futatsuyama 2016]. In this case, Qur'ānic calendars with company advertisements free of cost are circulated widely to advertise their names, and the clients can get New Year's calendars from the company. However, their users face the problem of how to dispose of them once the year has passed because they are calendars, and they devise to remake and transform it to poster or flames to avoid discarding Qur'ānic verses. In addition, although most companies make free calendars with Qur'ānic verses, some companies did not choose Qur'ānic models to avoid the risk that sacred text might be discarded. Thus, even in one community, there are differences in its treatment of it.

From several previous research, *fatāwā*, and his field research, Svensson also shows many ways of disposing the Qur'ān text and others such as 99 names of Allāh and the name of the Prophet [Svensson 2010: 39–50]. Svensson mentioned that during the early Islamic era, copies of the Qur'ān were precious; on the contrary, mass produced Maṣāḥif and copies of the Qur'ān are difficult to dispose them after they have been worn out. He also shows many ideas and practices to dispose them, such as by wiping off the ink from the pages, placing them in safe storage, burial where the ground would be trampled, or sometimes burn them, and concludes that "... there is no simple answer to the question of what to do with worn-out copies of the Qur'ān" [Svensson 2010: 44].

We can understand several points from these cases of handling the Muṣḥaf and the described text of the Qur'ān. After the modern era, the Muṣḥaf and text of the Qur'ān have been mass printed and produced and circulated widely in the Islamic world. Under this situation, Muslims have faced the problem as to handling them properly and devised solutions to this problem as shown in the cases of Futatsuyama and Svensson. However, these workarounds depend on the situations of the Muslims, such that putting a Muṣḥaf in the dirt is considers as lack of faith, however, burning worn out the Muṣḥaf by their piety is proper practices. Suit considers from this cases that "... it is often hard to draw a clear line between what is permissible and what is prohibited ..." and "The interplay of discursive tradition and want to learn it [cf. Svensson 2010: 36; Suit 2013: 26].

textual materiality creates a situation in which the Maṣāḥif can partake in practices that, when juxtaposed, should exclude each other.” [Suit 2013: 25–26].

Things Described in the Qur’ān

If we think that meaning of the text and material practices cannot be separate things, then we must consider not only the materiality of the Qur’ān but also the things described in the Qur’ān as showing meaning and material behavior. In the Qur’ān, many concrete things are described, from plants and animals to food. Let me show the case from my field study focusing on the relation between *baraka* (blessing) and *zaytūna* (olive) in the case of Tunisia to illustrate how Muslims related to things described in the Qur’ān.

Baraka is mentioned 32 times in the Qur’ān, including *mubāraka* and *tabāraka* as a derivative of *baraka*. It refers to a blessing from Allāh and is based on the belief that all sources of *baraka* come from Allāh. A number of anthropologists focused on this concept of Muslims recognizing Allāh’s metaphysical power as coming into physical view through some things or events. Early research on such a point of view reveals enormous amounts of reports by informants explaining *baraka* [cf. Doutté 1984(1908); Westermarck 1926], because although some informants mentioned *baraka* in the Qur’ān, everything that brings positive behavior to Muslims are considered as a blessing from Allāh. Then, based on anthropological turns such as structuralism, structural functionalism, and symbolism, research on *baraka* changed to focus on which context and role that community realizes it as *baraka*. As Leaman discussed, during a drought, the rain was interpreted as *baraka*, but when a flood occurred, Muslims did not interpret it as *baraka* [Leaman 2006: 110]. For example, Abu-Zahra considered it as a key concept of relationships to maintain their honors [Abu-Zahra 1978] and Jamous considered its role and context as enabled into the relationship between saints in traditional Moroccan life [Jamous 1981]. Thus, this concept is considered through community relationships, with the concept of honor and saint veneration. This trend has an affinity with the sanctity of the Muṣḥaf and proper treating of it is determined by each Muslim and the context as discussed above. However, physical materiality of the things realized as *baraka* is not considered to analyze this concept.

When I stayed in the village and conducted informal interviews, there were several instances when informants explained various reasons including the material character of why the olive tree is considered as *baraka* [Futatsuyama 2012]. If intentionally categorizing this explanation, we understand that first, they mentioned the character of olive trees described in the Qur’ān as *baraka*;^{10, 11} second, they mentioned that the character of olive trees on the

10 For example; “Olive tree means tree of *baraka*. In addition, olive tree is sacred and different from other trees. The reason is that it is mentioned in the Qur’ān” [October 10, 2010 60th man].

11 *Zaytūna* is mentioned six times and also *zaytu* (same roots of z-y-t) are mentioned three times in the

ecological perspective such that it has immortal character and alive at intense dry season;¹² third they mentioned the character of the olive trees by using such as effective medicine.¹³ Thus, the reason why inhabitants considered it as *baraka* is not only that the olive is mentioned in the Qur'ān, but because of other contexts where it was used positively because of its physical character as an olive tree and oil.

To analyze the concept of *baraka* for Muslims, emphasis have been placed on the meaning of the Qur'ān that previous studies did as mentioned above. However, this method leads the researchers to the ends that the concept of *baraka* would be restricted to what is described in the Qur'ān or cover everything the informants narrate as *baraka*. However, *baraka* is not always realized by the same things that previous studies have pointed out. Another way to consider this phenomenon is to analyze the context in the community, such as honor or saint veneration, as previous studies did. However, this method would be criticized in the same perspective of material turn in that they overlooked the behavior of material things to consider these social contexts. The case of Tunisia shows that *baraka*, the concept of blessing of Allāh mentioned in the Qur'ān, is embodied by practices and events in the context with specific physical material character; in other words, it cannot be revealed without concrete material characters. As Akahori mentioned, Muslims realize this concept through visualizations or tangible occurrences in their lives [Akahori 2004: 241].

Thus, the concept and meaning mentioned in the Qur'ān are embodied by practices and events with materials, however, on the other hand, olive and olive oil are also realized as *baraka* at some cases. It leads the Muslims to think and act in various aspects. For example, in my field site, it is said that the olive tree should be respected and some inhabitants think that cutting of this tree is sinful.¹⁴ Let me show another example of practices with olive in Tunisia; generally, the olive tree as an ornament is also considered as things that bring *baraka* and it is considered custom to put them in their space.¹⁵ It is not only the tree itself or ornaments, but also the words “*zaytūna*” and “olive” are used for the sake of good things and *baraka*. In Tunisia, various companies and institutions are named after them such as the *Jāmi' al-Zaytūna* (Olive Mosque), *Idhā'a al-Zaytūna* FM (Olive Radio), and *Maṣrif al-Zaytūna* (Olive Bank). This means the words themselves evoke or are consider as bringing positive things as *baraka*.

Qur'ān and especially 24: 35 is one of the most famous verses which explained the relation between *baraka* and *zaytūna*.

12 For example; “Because of its vitality. Olive tree never die. It is said that even if other plants died from dryness, only olive tree keep their greenness” [October 23, 2010, 10th woman].

13 For example; “Olive oil become medicals, all sort of medicals. When we have a sore throat or arthritis or when we have a high cholesterol, it is good effect for our health. (omission)” [March 9, 2012, 60th man].

14 For example; “I don't want to work making charcoal. Because cutting olive tree is not good things. It is *ḥarām*. In the Qur'ān, there are a lot of mentions about olive. There is a man who works about it, however, the old man doesn't think it was a good thing” [October 10, 2014, 20th man].

15 Tunisian people present as gifts olive motif ornaments for the sake of receiving or giving *baraka*, in particular, prolific and fertility.

This shows that olive motif ornaments and words are separated from the physical character and practices with olive as mentioned above. However, it is better to consider this phenomenon that materiality of the olive are included in its symbol as motif ornaments and words, instead of viewing the word *zaytūna* and olive motif as having a power apart from the material practices with the olive tree. As we considered in first section thinking the relation between text-material, the other side conjures to include in another side; words *zaytūna* and olive conjure *baraka*, mentioned in the Qur'ān and materiality of olive, ornaments of olive also conjure this relationship, material character of olive conjures the text of the Qur'ān; the verses of the Qur'ān conjures olive material character as *baraka*.

In this section, we consider the things described in the Qur'ān from the case of *baraka* and olive. Like the Muṣḥaf and pendant in the shape of the Muṣḥaf as things, the things described in the Qur'ān as *baraka* should also be respected to handle it. However, it is not only because it is mentioned in the Qur'ān, but also because the physical materiality of the olive tree and oil such as immortal tree, have many medical utilities, making the connection between olive as *baraka* strong. In addition, once this connection became stronger, one side conjures to include in another side.

Discussion

Since there has not been much academic discussion on physical materiality related to the Qur'ān, this paper considers several perspectives on the materiality of the Qur'ān from the point of aspect of text and material, handling of the Qur'ān text, and descriptions in the Qur'ān.

At beginning, we considered the relation between its text and meaning and the material things written in it. Although the Qur'ān is characterized by superiority in oral recitation, some cases show the importance of visual character and materiality. To consider this relation, this paper shows from various cases, how Muslims handle this inseparable but conjuring connection by including other things. For example, Muslim faces the problem in difficulties in proper handling and disposing them, after mass-produced the Muṣḥaf and the text of the Qur'ān circulated widely in the modern Islamic world. The last case shows that the concept of the *baraka* is embodied by practices and events in the context with specific physical material character. And at the same time, the ornaments of it and the words conjures to include the material character of the olive tree.

Suit considered, "... in Islam the Qur'ānic text and its materiality have not been epistemologically separate." [Suit 2013: 3]. In addition Mhamood also considered the case of Muhammad's cartoons and concluded that modern concept of religion owes "... to institute the distinction between the transcendent world of abstract concepts and ideas and the material reality of this world," however, that is different in Islam [Mahmood 2013: 72–73]. The cases

indicated in this paper also shows how text and idea and its material reality are inseparable in Muslims practices.

In addition, from many cases, we can understand that there is no simple answer and there are differences in its treatment by each Muslims and by contexts. Starrett analyzed through the social context that makes it commodities or respected the Muṣḥaf, and other previous studies on Islamic religious commodities, mentioned above, also focused on the context and their role that religion becomes present. However, Suit critiqued Starrett that the material behavior to make this phenomenon, as mentioned that "... the muṣḥaf's exchangeability is not its only socially relevant feature. What sets it apart, in despite of its exchange value as a commodity, is its materiality, ..." [Suit 2013: 21]. Surely it is the contexts and the Muslims who decide proper practices to handle it, however, material character behave an important role to make this context. In other words, one of the anthropological researches on Islam need to analyze how this context occurred, that is by material behavior.

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