A Study of the Etymology of the Arabic Word "Istorah": A Historical and Comparative Outlook

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Abstract

This paper revisits the meaning of the Arabic word ðustˤu:rah in the Qur'anic text, arguing that this word means a written-down narrative, regardless of accuracy of its content. ðustˤu:rah may thus denote a true or false piece of writing. This encounters the orthodox viewpoint that ðustˤu:rah, which appears nine times in the Qur'anic text in the plural as ðasatˤi:r, means qisˤsˤah (tale), xura:fah (legend), and/or hika:jah (fable). We contend that ðustˤu:rah is associated with the form of the narrative rather than its informative value. This reasoning helps us resolve, among other things, the contradiction resulting from viewing ðustˤu:rah as a synonym of fictitiousness-oriented words like qisˤsˤah, xura:fah and hika:jah on the one hand and on the other, introducing mastˤu:r, an adjective derived from the same Arabic tri-consonantal root of ðustˤu:rah (S-T-R), to praise the nature the Holy Qur'an itself, as evident in (ʔatˤ-tˤur: 2).

Keywords: Historical linguistics, Literary translation, ðustˤu:rah narrative form, Holy Qur'an.

1. Introduction

The word ðustˤu:rah, which appears nine times in the Holy Qur'an in the plural as ðasatˤi:r (see appendix 1), is dated to the early beginning of the seventh century (602 A.D.) and is defined in the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic1 as "the speech that is loaded with lie and exaggeration and is associated with reality in order to distract". This definition obviously associates ðustˤu:rah with the act of lying and falsifying facts. Simultaneously, it associates the word with the different acts and forms of speech whether oral or written. Thus, ðustˤu:rah is usually associated in modern Arabic with qisˤsˤah, xura:fah, and/or hika:jah. According to The Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic, qisˤsˤah is dated to 632 A.D. and is defined as "a piece of news and tale". Xura:fah is dated to 665 A.D. and is defined as "a pleasing weird speech that is usually made of lies". Hika:jah is dated to 747 A.D. and is defined as "the reported tale". Obviously, these definitions emphasize the content-based nature of ðustˤu:rah, qisˤsˤah, xura:fah, and hika:jah, thus paying no attention to their form or layout.

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The same approach is adopted in the several English translations of the Holy Qur'an. The word ʔustˤu:rah in the Qur'anic context is translated into English as 'tale', 'legend', and 'fable'. It is translated into 'tale' in Sahih International, 'legend' in Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language, and 'fable' in tafsir ʔal-dʒalalajn. Regardless of why the first translator prefers 'legend' to 'tale' or 'fable', the second prefers 'tale' to the other two, and the latter uses 'fable', it is interesting that the Oxford English Dictionary defines 'tale' as "a fictitious or true narrative or story, especially one that is imaginatively recounted". Also, it defines 'legend' as "a traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but not authenticated" and 'fable' as "a short story, typically with animals as characters, conveying a moral ... a false statement or belief". The Oxford English Dictionary uses the same approach of the Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic in defining qisˤsˤah (tale), xura:fah (legend), and ħika:jah (fable) without paying any attention to form, which indirectly associates such words as well as ʔustˤu:rah with content's moral value, (in-)accuracy, and informative functionality. The many Arabic interpretations and English translations of the Holy Qur'an sacrifices the lexical meaning of ʔustˤu:rah at the benefit of the intuitive cultural referentiality of the word. They all view ʔustˤu:rah as a synonym of the supernatural and uncanny, which have nothing to do with the word's lexical meaning that seems related to the form, rather than content, of composition or writing.

While there seems to be no problem in viewing ʔustˤu:rah as a synonym of certain fictitiousness-oriented words like qisˤsˤah, xura:fah, and/or ħika:jah, it is hard to believe that ʔustˤu:rah is an act of lying while mastˤu:r, an adjective derived from the same Arabic tri-consonantal root of ʔustˤu:rah (S-T-R), is used to celebrate the nature of the Holy Qur'an, as in (At-Tur: 2). Thus, this paper revisits the meaning of the Arabic word ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an attempting to define it in light of its lexical meaning as indicated in Arabic dictionaries like al-Ain by al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Faraheedi, Lisan ʔal-ʔarab by Ibn ManḌoor, and al-Qamus ʔal-muḥi:tir by al-Fayrooz Abadi. We claim that ʔustˤu:rah has nothing to do with accuracy or inaccuracy. Rather, it refers to the form of writing, scripting, or documentation.

Interestingly, associating ʔustˤu:rah with the form rather than content of writing disagrees with the orthodox belief articulated by Mohammad al-Qurtubi, Jalaluldin al-Suyuti, Mohammad al-Tabari, and many others. Al-Qurtubi, for instance, discusses ʔustˤu:rah as a narrative borrowed from foreign cultures. Jawad argues that the word refers to a certain literary genre. Al-Suyuṭi suggests that ʔustˤu:rah refers to magic. Al-Bustani associates it with the act of lying. Bashoor claims that the word refers to narratives about unreal events. Ibn Ka/lic contends that the word implies the absence of truth as it refers to man-wrought products. Al-Tabari states that the word refers to a piece of news that says nothing serious or wise. Hussein defines it as the creative documentation of people's communal memory, a process that aims at advertising humor and certain unreliable news. Similarly, Qism al-Dirasat wa al-Buhoofi defines ʔustˤu:rah in light of its scientific content, thus associating it with the divine and the magical.

These viewpoints seem insightful, but they all define ʔustˤu:rah in terms of content, which is an unfounded approach that totally ignores the word's lexical denotation in favour of certain connotations. Accordingly, our paper provides an interpretation of ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an based on the word's
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lexical denotation arguing that the word is all about form rather than content. Thus, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the meaning of ʔustˤu:rah as stated in Arabic dictionaries and Qur'an exegesis. Section 3 presents our theory regarding the meaning of ʔustˤu:rah. Section 4 concludes the research.

2. An Overview of ʔustˤu:rah in Arabic Dictionaries and Qur'an Exegesis

Obviously, interpreting and translating ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an into qisˤsˤah (tale), xuraːfah (legend), and/or hikaːjah (fable) mirrors the various definitions of the word by most authoritative Arabic lexicographers. In the oldest Arabic dictionary ever known, al-Ain, al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Faraheedi defines ʔustˤu:rah as speeches that have no order or logic as they do not stem from reality and totally rely on falsification. Similarly, Ibn Manˤoor's eighteen-volume dictionary, Lisaːn ʔal-ʕarab, one of the most comprehensive and authoritative classical dictionaries of Arabic, refers ʔustˤu:rah back to the Arabic verb saːt ar, and defines it as ŋabatːiːl (lies) and speeches that are anonymous and have no value. He also reports that the verb saːt ar means to compose and invent. Many other dictionaries and references of Arabic such as muːʕjam ʔal-Maːni ʔal-dʒaːmeʕ, ʔal-Qamuːs ʔal-muːhiːt, ʔal-Muːḏgам ʔal-Wasiːt, ʔal-Muːḏgам ʔal-yani, and ʔal-Muːḏgам ʔal-Raʔid, define ʔustˤu:rah as the speech that has no origin or reference at all. They all note that ʔustˤu:rah indicates a tale, fable, or legend about unusual events and entities, thus connecting the word ʔustˤu:rah with the acts of conjecturing and inventiveness without referring to any aspect or form of documentation or writing.

Remarkably, the negative lexical interpretation of ʔustˤu:rah echoes the most authentic Qur'anic interpretations of ʔasatˤiːr ʔal-ʔawaliːn, which is viewed as the lies or hallucinations that are inscribed in the books and codex of the ancient pagans and former people. al-Ţabarī, for instance, suggests that ʔustˤu:rah means either ʔifkohah (jesting) and ʔudˤħuːka (joke) or what has been written by the ancient people. Al-Qurtubi proposes that ʔustˤu:rah means either ʔuːħdoːθah (tale) and ʔaḥadiːθ (speeches) or what has been inscribed by ancient people in books. Ibn Kaθeer views ʔustˤu:rah as what has been taken and quoted from the ancient people. Likewise, tafsিːr ʔal-dʒalalajn indicates that ʔustˤu:rah means "the lies of the ancients, similar to their jokes and strange tales" (altafsir.com). Obviously, the four distinguished references do not stress the literal etymology of ʔustˤu:rah and therefore fail to associate it with the process of writing down something. They marginalize the word's lexical or literal meaning and eventually define it as a false and inaccurate narrative.

The most eminent Qur'ānic scholars and interpreters, namely al-ţabarī, al-Qurtubi, Ibn Kaθir, and al-Suyuṭi as well as the most eminent Arabic lexicographers like al-Faraheedi, Ibn Manˤoor, and al-Fayrooz Abadi define the word ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'ān as a fictitious narrative that has nothing to do with either accurate historiography or the act of documentation and its formats. Whether Arabic lexicographers owe their understanding of ʔustˤu:rah to Qur'ānic scholars or vice versa, defining ʔustˤu:rah lexically and interpreting it theologically do not consider all the lexical reverberations of the literal meaning of saːt ar, which means to draw a line, put something in form of a line or row, and/or inscribe something on the line (almaany.com). Noticeably, the verb saːt ar does not indicate inaccuracy or falsification; therefore, it
seems reasonable to question the negativity of the lexical and theological consensus about the meaning of ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an, something we take up in the next section.

3. Discussion

To better understand the meaning of ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an, it is necessary to point out that viewing ʔustˤu:rah as qis'sah (tale), xura:fah (legend), and/or hika:jah (fable) inspires translating ʔustˤu:rah into 'myth', which is often associated with fictitiousness and weirdness. Thus, to clearly understand ʔustˤu:rah, it is noteworthy that 'myth' is derived from "French Mythe (1818) and directly from Modern Latin mythus, from Greek mythos 'speech, thought, story, myth, anything delivered by word of mouth'" (Online Etymology Dictionary). In the Dictionary of English Folklore, myths are "stories about divine beings, generally arranged in a coherent system; they are revered as true and sacred..." (254). For the Oxford English Dictionary, a 'myth' is derived from "modern Latin mythus, via late Latin from Greek mythos", and it means "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events." These many authoritative references associate 'myth' with the supernatural, but none of them assert or suggest any valid relationship between 'myth' and fictitiousness. They all agree that the original Greek mythos, which means 'speech' or 'word', involves the logos, "the Word of God" (Coupe 9, 11), which suggests that doubting the accuracy of mythos inevitably implies doubting the accuracy of logos.12 Laurence Coupe warns us against "asserting belief in logos while forgetting its origin in mythos" (85). This is not to advocate any system of disbelief but to emphasize that promoting the logos at the cost of the mythos is absurd and invalid. In Coupe's words, "mythos precedes and informs logos. Without Homer there can be no Plato" (113). The validity of mythos is associated with and guaranteed by the validity of logos. This implies that 'mythos' and 'logos' are integrated with each other; nevertheless, "from 1840 the word [myth] has been modified to mean 'untrue story, rumor'" (Online Etymology Dictionary). The semantic parallelism and inevitable interrelatedness of logos (Word of God) and mythos (Word of Man) is now obsolete. Accordingly, to think of 'myth' as a good English equivalent of ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an is inappropriate and nonsensical.

Since 'myth' does not stand as a good modern English equivalent of ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an, it is necessary to find an appropriate modern English word that does not necessarily connote falsity and inaccuracy. To meet this demand, 'history' seems as the most appropriate English equivalent of ʔustˤu:rah. What makes this suggestion reasonable, besides the sound resemblance between the Arabic ʔustˤu:rah and the English /hɪst(ə)ri/, is the fact that the word history, similar to ʔustˤu:rah, fuses together the sense of past time on the one hand and the act of documentation on the other. The Online Etymology Dictionary reports that 'history' is derived "from Old French estoire, estorie 'story; chronicle, history' (12c., Modern French histoire), from Latin historia 'narrative of past events, account, tale, story,' from Greek historia 'a learning or knowing by inquiry; an account of one's inquiries, history, record, narrative,' from historein 'inquire,' from histor 'wise man, judge, 'from PIE *wid-tor-, from root *weid- to see" (etymonline.com). The word 'history' denotes the act of documenting the events of the past in the form of narrative, thus seems feasible to reflect certain connotations of ʔustˤu:rah. This finding becomes more
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valid as one realizes that 'history' has always been related to 'story', which is a "shortening of Anglo-Norman French estorie" (Oxford English Dictionary) and "Latin historia", which means "connected account or narration of some happening" or a "narrative of important events or celebrated persons of the past" (Online Etymology Dictionary). This suggests that the word 'story' does not necessarily connote fictitiousness and historical impreciseness but primarily the narrative documentation of the past.

The Oxford English Dictionary and the Online Etymology Dictionary indicate that the word 'story' used to denote the exact meaning and have the same connotations of 'history', as evident in nowadays French histoire. In modern French, histoire stands for both 'history' and 'story', which makes of 'story' a synonym of history rather than fiction. The Online Etymology Dictionary defines 'story' as a "recital of true events" or a "narrative of fictitious events meant to entertain" in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In other words, the word 'story' has never been different from history until 1500s, but 'story' becomes a euphemism for 'a lie' in 1690s. Again, the words 'story' and 'history' have been identical before the sixteenth century, as they used to refer to the same process of chronological writing and/or documentation of the past. Until almost the end of the sixteenth century, 'story', similar to 'history', has always been related to the act or process of accurate recording of events rather than any form of lying or speculation. Thus, to think of ʔustˤu:rah in light of 'story' as well as 'history' is never invalid.

What supports the belief that ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an may imply historical accuracy and can therefore be viewed as a form of history is the fact that Arabs did not know the word tari:x, the modern Arabic equivalent of 'history', until 642 A.D. (al-Fayrooz Abadi). This explains why the Holy Qur'an does not use the word tari:x at all, which suggests that either Arabs before 642 A.D. did not think of historiography at all or that they used to use a different word from tari:x to refer to the act of historiography. Regarding the assumption that Arabs might have never cared about the accurate documentation of history and therefore did not have a word to describe it, one needs to know that "Assyrian annals", "South-Arabian inscriptions", and "Graeco-Roman" documents are pre-Islamic Arabic documents of history. Arabic historiography has been widely known and practiced before Islam, which suggests that the non-existence of the word tari:x in Arabic is a lexical, rather than a cultural, issue. Whether or not this has anything to do with Arabs' illiteracy before Islam, it is hard to deny that reporting and documenting events have been part of the Arabic-Islamic civilization. This is evident in many Arabic books and references of history composed by Arabs before and after Islam, such as an-Nadr b. al-Harith (d.624), Makmara b. Nawfai az-Zohri (d.741-2), Ibn Ishaq (d.768), and Ibn Hisham (d.833).

The non-existence of the word tari:x in the Arabic lexicon before 642 A.D does not mean that Arabs did not know or care about the craft of historiography but that they might have used another word, such as 'anba' and 'akhbar, which are synonymous words that denote 'news' or 'information', thus constituting the content of 'history', as stated in Lisān al-ʿArab and al-Khamoos Al-Muḥtiʾ. Significantly, the Holy Qur'an uses 'anba' in (Yusuf: 102) and akhbar in (The Convulsion: 4) to indicate tari:x, which is translated into 'history' and 'news' in Sahih International and other authoritative references (quran.com).

While tari:x seems to be the most appropriate Arabic synonym of ʔustˤu:rah, it is noteworthy that the defining context of the nine occurrences of ʔustˤu:rah in the Holy Qur'an does neither prove nor refute any sense of tari:x (history or historiography). The word ʔustˤu:rah appears in the Holy Qur'an nine
Zuraikat, Jarrah, Al-Jarrah

times in the plural form as āṣatˤi:r and is always modified by ʔal-ʔawali:n, which is viewed by all authoritative Arabic dictionaries and Qur'anic interpretations as an adjective that refers to ancient people. The mutual relationship between the Noun and its modifiers within the same phrase suggests that the Noun āṣatˤi:r in the Holy Qur'an should always involve the temporal sense implied by ʔal-ʔawali:n but does not necessarily connote historiography. Thus, the Arabic verb ʔatˤar and the singular noun āṣṭˤurah as well as its plural āṣatˤi:r necessarily connote neither spuriousness nor historiography. Rather, their possible connotations in the Holy Qur'an should always maintain the word's root-based meaning, reject associating the word with falsity and inaccuracy, and reflect the sense of the past time implied by the contextual phrase āṣatˤi:r ʔal-ʔawali:n.

4. Conclusion

Defining āṣṭˤurah in the Holy Qur'an in light of its contextual phrase āṣatˤi:r ʔal-ʔawali:n does not mean that the word always implies a fact or historical truth and therefore should always be viewed as a reference to accurate historiography. Rather, we believe that the phrase āṣatˤi:r ʔal-ʔawali:n has nothing to do with either accuracy or inaccuracy. It refers to something like a narrative that is directly related to old nations and former people, which can be folktales, theological stories, or/and historical narrations. Thus, it is infeasible to restrict the meaning of āṣṭˤurah, as used in the Holy Qur'an, to the fictitious and the supernatural at the cost of the word's root-based sense, which implies the act of drawing a line or writing down something in form of a line. The word āṣṭˤurah, due to its lexical definition that is to write on the line or to draw a line, refers to the shape or form of documenting.15

Accordingly, to associate āṣṭˤurah with the act of lying appears in later stages of the historical development of the word where the act of scripting/writing starts to be denoted by the verb yaktub, which is used in the Holy Qur'an to imply the process of writing true incidents as evidenced in so many Qur'anic verses, such as (Al-Baqarah/the Heifer: 178, 180, 183, 187, 216, 246, 282, 285). In all these verses, the verb katab, the past form of yaktub, and its cognates are always associated with God's "decree", which is taken by Qur'anic scholars and readers as the most authoritative and accurate judgment. For instance, verse 178 of Al-Baqara explains some acts related to Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, and uses the phrase "what Allah katab" to indicate God's decree and its sense of obligation as well as accuracy rather than form. The verb katab in this verse is not interpreted or translated as the act of writing down but as God's decree. This means that the semantic sense of the verb yaktub in modern Arabic is possibly the result of narrowing down the semantic sense of āṣtor, which is now associated with writing down fictitious or inaccurate content or narratives. This apparently needs further investigation, something we leave open for further research.
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دراسة معنى كلمة "استورة" من منظور تاريحي مقارن

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الملخص
تقدم هذه الدراسة معنى مفردة "استورة" في النص القرآني من منظور جديد، وتناقش فكرة أن هذه المفردة تشير إلى النص المكتوب بغض النظر عن دقة المحتوى. وهذا يدل على أن مفردة "استورة" قد تشير إلى نص صحيح أو غير صحيح في أن واحده، الأمر الذي يتناقض مع الاعتقاد السائد بأن مفردة "استورة" التي تظهر في النص القرآني تساع مرات بصيغة الجمع "أساطير" تعني قصة، خرافه، أحكاية. نناقش هنا فكرة أن "استورة" مرتبطة بشكل السرد وليس بقيمته الخبرية. وعليه، فمثل هذا الطرح قد يساعد في حل التنافل الناتج عن الفهم التقليدي للفهم "استورة" كقصة أو خرافة أو حكاية مقارنة بالفهم التقليدي لمفردة "مسطور" المشتقة من الجذر الثلاثي ل"استورة" التي تعني بها بطيئة القرآن الكريم - كما الحال في سورة الطور.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ترجمة تاريخية، ترجمة أدبية، أسطورة، الشكل السردي، القرآن الكريم.
This reference is the only available dictionary of Arabic that focuses on the etymology of Arabic words. It consults with several authentic references of Arabic language and literature, thus providing a holistic description and definition of every single entry. https://www.dohadictionary.org/ (accessed 5 August 2020).


Al-Qurtubi, *tafsi:r Al-Qurtubi*, p. 382.


Al-Tabari, *tafsi:r Al-Tabari*, p. 94-95.

Fadhila Hussein, *Fikr Al-İstorah*, pp. 51-87.


The resemblance between ʔustˤu:rah on the one hand and the Greek word *historia* and English 'history' on the other is noted by some linguists and researchers as mentioned in Wadi Bashoor, *Al-Miyhtologia al-Suryiah: Asati:r Aram*, Beirut: Dar Fikr for Research and Publication, 1981, (p.9-11), Qism al-Dirasat wa al-Buhooth. *Al-İstorah Tawthi:q Hadhari*, Damascus: Kiwan, 2009, p.21-23, and Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* 2ed, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968, p.42. They all believe that although ʔustˤu:rah is similar to *historia* and 'history' at the sound level, the Arabic word connotes implausibility while the other two refers to different forms of narration and documentation. While this viewpoint is noteworthy, we totally reject it in our paper because ʔustˤu:rah, as we contend, has nothing to do with content and should not accordingly be judged in terms of plausibility or accuracy.
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16 The English translation of Qur’an verses is quoted from Rashad Khalifa. https://www.masjidtucson.org/quran/frames/ (accessed 22 July 2020)

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www.baheth.info/all/ Accessed 01 May 2018.

Appendix: the nine occurrences of ʔasatˤi:r ʔal-ʔawali:n in the Holy Qur’an

[6:25] Some of them listen to you, but we place veils on their hearts to prevent them from understanding, and deafness in their ears. Thus, no matter what kind of proof they see, they cannot believe. Thus, when they come to argue with you, the disbelievers say, “These are tales from the past.”

[8:31] When our revelations are recited to them, they say, “We have heard. If we wanted to, we could have said the same things. These are no more than tales from the past!”

[16:24] When they are asked, “What do you think of these revelations from your Lord,” they say, “Tales from the past.”

[23:83] “Such promises were given to us and to our parents in the past. These are no more than tales from the past.”

[25:5] They also said, “Tales from the past that he wrote down; they were dictated to him day and night.”

[27:68] “We have been given the same promise in the past. These are nothing but tales from the past.”

[46:17] Then there is the one who says to his parents, “Woe to you; are you telling me that (after death) I will come back to life? How come those who died before us never come back?” The parents would cry for GOD’s help and say, “Woe to you; please believe! GOD’s promise is the truth.” He would say, “Tales from the past!”

[68:15] When our revelations are recited to him, he says, “Tales from the past!”

[83:13] When our revelations are recited to him, he says, “Tales from the past!”