Aga Khan University’s Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC) was established in 2002 in London. The Institute’s goal is to strengthen research on, and promote understanding of, the cultures of Muslims, past and present. It works to address important issues of contemporary societies, including social justice, governance, moral and legal thought, and the environment. Its activities and educational programmes apply the methodologies of the humanities and social sciences to the study of Muslim cultures and seek to create opportunities for interaction amongst a wide audience across intellectual disciplines.

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Pre-18th century Muslim cultures may be said to be ‘book cultures’. There is little need here to stress the enormous expansion of writing and the accumulation of written compendia in Muslim contexts during the centuries that preceded the 18th century, and the deep influence it had on the making of a social order and the founding of structures of authority. In a novel which has greatly impressed the imagination in recent years, Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name is Red* captured the spirit of a time, the ethos of large communities of artists, miniaturists, calligraphers, binders—professionals of bookmaking—who lived for centuries in an area stretching from Central Asia to the Atlantic Ocean. However, what he so strongly conveyed was only one, albeit significant, part of the story.

Miniaturists’ workshops spread throughout these areas were probably the tip of an iceberg, encompassing large communities of scholars, copyists, painters, bookmakers, their apprentices, etc. Illuminations and illustrations were designed for relatively small circles of wealthy and powerful clients. However, those who handled and copied texts alone (absent of illuminations or illustrations) enjoyed unchallenged prestige in much wider circles, its men and women (for there were women too) the keepers and transmitters of what the community considered to be its most precious treasure. The vast corpus of knowledge thus transmitted encompassed not only the word of God and the hadith of His Prophet, but also exegesis works, commentaries, compendia of law, books on grammar, etc.; its accumulation over many centuries and across a vast geographic area was impressive not only in its quantity and variety but also its impact on collective consciousness. It defined, as much or more than any other institution, the ethos and worldview of one of the largest, and oldest, communities in the history of mankind. The views and conceptions which were disseminated through written literature were endowed with the authority of what was considered to be ‘ilm (Science). This literary corpus laid and sustained systems of authority, in terms of conception of the world, history and men, and at the level of norms which were formulated to rule individual and communities’ lives.
The aspect that is probably most relevant to us nowadays is the ways in which this immense body of literature entrenched prevailing ideas about the self, the other and the world and shaped the historical consciousness of Muslim communities. Classification, systematisation and dissemination of knowledge played a vital role in the process of transmitting the views of scholars—together with the truths they strongly assumed—to the public. Indeed, systematisation of knowledge was a temptation which came well before the emergence of Muslim cultures. Yet one can safely say that Muslims pushed the endeavour (or endeavours) as far as one can imagine, thereby defining a mindset and attitude which weighed enormously on how individuals and societies felt about their lives and the world around them.

Their was a world which seems as remote to us today as the one brought to life by Pamuk. Of course, in some madrasas here and there, some impoverished, tattered remnants of this world have survived. But nowadays, forms of knowledge built on pre-eighteenth century accumulations look obsolete even within the most conservative circles, where bits and pieces of this particular heritage are still in use. What prevails and impresses large strata of Muslim societies, are modern reconstructions, which have cast aside the ideal of organising and mastering knowledge as it seemed at the time, in order to preserve as much as possible the sense of a distinct identity, together with a strong drive towards the implementation in real life of what is perceived as the ‘Islamic’ way.

Thus the influence of the old remains, although not in explicit and easily perceptible ways. There is no strict rupture between past and present. Among those who are permeated by these attitudes, we still do not find the idea of knowledge as a progressive accumulation of facts and continuous adjustment of views about the world, history and ourselves. The attitudes of modesty, openness and acceptance of difference that humans learnt through modern scientific endeavours are conspicuously absent. What we see in fact does not take the form of an easily recognisable, formally traceable link between the massive accumulation of writings in the past and particular views, conceptions or attitudes in what can be observed nowadays. It remains an immense, yet not quite understood presence that acts as an obstacle to the adoption of modern attitudes to knowledge and its role in building representations and attitudes. It is as if the impact of the pre-18th century outlook remains, even though the substance of the then prevailing views has become obsolete, and generally unac-
cepted. In consequence, the prevailing conceptions that Muslims hold about their religion, their history and their position in the world are, today, at least in good part, built on knowledge that was thus systematised. We are in a situation in which this presence is overwhelming but needs to be clearly acknowledged and its effects clearly assessed.

One can point to the fact that, after the 18th century, the drive to produce encyclopædias survived or returned in force within Muslim contexts. A large number of encyclopædic projects are today in progress in many areas where Muslims constitute a substantive majority. A rapid survey reveals that the number, the scale and the geographic distribution of these projects is impressive. Should we link this fact to some particularity in Islam or Muslim contexts, as many observers do whenever they detect any form of continuity between the past and present in Muslim cultures? Here, one can immediately see that these contemporary projects are designed and implemented with different assumptions in mind, and with different attitudes to knowledge. Contemporary encyclopædic projects are produced within properly modern frameworks, including modern nation-states, institutions (many state-funded), and through distinctively modern scholarship. They seem to be, in a way, attempts to reappropriate knowledge and the control of memory and history, endeavours which remain in line with the nationalist ethos of our times. Many of these projects mobilise new energies, younger generations of active scholars, sometimes under the supervision of older scholars. However, these new accumulations are still in process, and have not yet permeated public consciousness nor even school curricula. They require specific attention, since they are set to bring about an important move in how knowledge about Muslim cultures and societies, both present and past, is apprehended.

At this stage then, and not only for chronological reasons, let us turn to the pre-18th century genre, or complex of genres, which lay behind dominant perceptions. From the wildest dream of collecting all possible ‘pieces’ of knowledge, which could lead to multi-volume collections such as the monumental Bihār al-Anwār of the 17th century Shiite scholar Muḥammad Majlīsī, to summaries and catalogues, sometimes arranged in verse to facilitate assimilation and retention by students, the mass of ‘monuments’ which defined and shaped the intellectual landscape in many Muslim contexts, lies before us as a substantial part of the heritage which awaits examination.
This is what motivated the organisation of the conference Organizing Knowledge: Encyclopaedic Activities in the Pre-Eighteenth Century Muslim World. As a first large scholarly gathering organised by the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, it was intended as a means to initiate a dialogue among scholars and researchers, in the ways in which scholarship, while remaining faithful to its vision, objectives and ethics, can provide clues to understanding the significant ways in which the past can influence the present, and thus the means to approach substantial questions of our time. The follow-up to the reflections endeavoured in this volume should be done in future through a gathering of scholars and a publication which, it is hoped, will bring about new insights into a phenomenon not yet fully acknowledged: the emergence of a large number of new encyclopaedic projects in the second half of 20th century Muslim societies.

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