

***Of Sand or Soil: Genealogy & Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia.* By Nadav Samin.**

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 283 pp., ISBN 978-0-691-16444-1

**Review by Gabriel Vom Bruck, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS
University of London**

A few weeks after Saudi Arabia dissolved diplomatic ties with Qatar on June 5, 2017, the Saudi Grand Mufti ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Shāikh and members of his family denied that they had kinship ties with the Qatarī ruling House. Emphasising their national belonging, they noted that they had never been proud of their tribal affiliation, and that indeed this was discouraged by the Qur‘ān. They also demanded that the Qatarī mosque named after their illustrious ancestor, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, be re-named. Not only was this disparaging statement meant to relegate the Āl Thānī to a lower position than themselves by denying them ‘authenticity’ of (tribal) descent, but also demonstrated the rhetorical use of genealogy and ‘tribe’ in the political life of the Gulf states.

The themes alluded to by the mufti – genealogy and kinship as criteria of a person’s worth and vital symbols of the political authority of the Gulf states’ rulers – are prominently dealt with in Nadav Samin’s original and carefully researched book. Focusing on Saudi Arabians’ preoccupation with their genealogies in the process of state consolidation, Samin has done an excellent job looking at anthropology’s traditional *Steckenpferd* with fresh eyes. It is one of the book’s merits to demonstrate how the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘genealogy’ are conceptual categories employed in social action and used in diverse contexts for a variety of political purposes. The book’s hero is the genealogist Ḥamad al-Jāsir (d. 2000), who took it upon himself to document the genealogies of the inhabitants of Saudi Arabia (with the exception of the foreign labour force) with the aim to compose a modern historiography for Saudi Arabia. Due to oil wealth, this rentier-based, kinship-organised polity shaped by puritanical orthodoxy has undergone a Durkheimian-style transformation. As an orally based culture gave way to a textual one which was to classify the subject-citizenry, people conventionally categorised as either “tribal” or “non-tribal” came to cohabit a unified territory as potentially equal citizens. Thus, genealogies were historicised and refashioned on behalf of the third Saudi state. Genealogical reckoning is conceived of as part of the process of political subject formation in the kingdom and as a

form of biopower. As argued by Ann Stoler and Yael Navaro-Yashin, documents are ideological artifacts and affectively charged, and symbolise permanence not just in European states. The book demonstrates that what ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Al Fahad (2015: 265) has referred to as “genealogical resurgence” – that is, people’s determination to have their pure tribal origins confirmed – was the result of existential angst related to “their marital futures [and] their belonging within the nation” (Samin, p.10) rather than nostalgic longing for a past life organised by closely-knit kinship networks. Somewhat reminiscent of the *naqīb al-ashrāf* who since the ‘Abbāsīd period verified or dismissed claims to the possession of consanguineal ties to the House of the Prophet, al-Jasīr was faced with the unenviable task of deciding which piece of evidence provided by those claiming *aṣīl*-status (pure tribal origin) was to afford it epistemological virtue. Samin explores how “genealogical signification” (p.56), once a practice embedded in and subject to the vagaries of social life, became objectified in response to forced sedentarization. Separating the wheat from the chaff by distinguishing the bearers of symbolic patrimony, the ‘pure-blooded’, from non-tribal Saudis, the Shī‘a, and the foreign labour force, meant that genealogical documentation acknowledged relations of power and constituted a kind of moral evaluation of the Saudi citizenry.

This is well demonstrated with respect to marriage practices. Although Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb proclaimed that the principle of descent-related equivalence of spouses (*kafā’a fī-’l-nasab*) was not required in a marriage between Arabs, it is admissible at Saudi courts, revealing ambivalent orientations among the judiciary. High profile divorce cases, for example the annulment of a conjugal contract between a Najdī woman of recognised tribal descent and a man her brothers suspected had lied about his *aṣīl*-status when asking for her hand, attracted much criticism in the media. The flamboyant Saudi arms dealer, the late ‘Adnān Khāshuqjī (Khashoggi), was one of those who were excluded from the privileged circles of those considered to be ‘rooted’, the ‘*arīqin*. Although born in Mecca and fabulously wealthy, by reason of being classified as a ‘*jamī* (non-Arab, foreigner) he was an ineligible marriage partner of ‘pure-blooded’ Saudi women and ended up wedding European and Iranian ones. Likewise, Najdīs often disapprove of marriage with the Ḥijāzīs due to their perceived genealogical ‘deficiency’. Dismayed by the Najdīs’ doubtful attitudes towards their tribal roots and discriminatory labelling at the workplace, some Riyadh residents of Ḥijāzī origin feel provoked to assert their tribal provenance and to refer to the Prophet’s descent from the tribe of Quraīsh located in their region of origin (Sawaf, p. 55-6).

Samin notes in passing that “in modern Saudi Arabia, tribal lineage was only one of a set of qualities that made for a desirable marriage partner, the lack of which could in some cases be mitigated by wealth, piety, or personal status” (p. 116). Here I would have welcomed a broader contextual analysis, possibly with reference to Saudi Arabians’ lived realities, of the ways in which genealogical hierarchies (including those within specific genealogical categories) are offset by other status criteria. Since a middle class has consolidated itself within the framework of a free market economy, one is left to wonder whether business partnerships have in some cases transcended solidarities based predominantly on putative tribal background. The lineage of the robots which are to inhabit Neom, the transnational mega-city to be built in Tabuk which according to the heir-apparent Muḥammad b. Salmān will have no room “for anything traditional”, is yet to be determined

(<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-24/saudi-arabia-to-build-new-mega-city-on-country-s-north-coast>).

Al Fahad suggests that the consolidation Saudi state may have contributed to the entrenchment of descent-based identifications (op.cit., 265). From the view point of the state, the documentation of lineages has been aimed at building a historical body of knowledge about the past. This went hand in hand with the royal family’s concern to trace the country’s origins back to antiquity. In line with its new self-image as a regional hegemonic power seeking international recognition based on its political and economic weight, and ancient civilisation, “Roads of Arabia”, an exhibition displaying archaeological objects from Saudi Arabia in a number of European museums in 2012, presented the country at the cross roads of Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian and ancient Greek civilisations. It was to forge a unified concept of history and a common identity that transcends regional identities.

According to Samin, since the 1960s its “genealogical rule of governance” (p. 200) was crucial to the political emasculation (Al Fahad, op.cit., 277) and eventual conversion of tribal formations into a *concept* of tribal solidarity. The state is said to act as “the final arbiter of genealogical legitimacy”, thus ensuring the loyalty of “the dominant status group – *ḥaḍar* [traditionally the sedentary population] of pure tribal origin” (pp. 80, 85). However, this claim makes it somewhat difficult to comprehend how this genealogical rule, one of the regime’s most subtle instruments of coercion, can simultaneously encompass “bedouin and sedentary, tribal and non-tribal alike” (p. 200). In the context of dynastic legitimacy it is noteworthy that within the genealogical

pantheon of noble Arab tribes, King Salmān, enthroned in 2015, distinguishes his lineage from those of other subject-citizens by making it known that he traces his family's descent to two tribes, Bani Ḥanīfa and 'Anaza, rather than one.

Readers might ask themselves what light the partially state-orchestrated genealogical practices described in the book throw on the authority of the Wahhābī religious establishment, and the extent to which they cultivate ambivalent attitudes towards them. For example, the late Grand Mufti 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Bāz (d. 1999), himself lacking tribal roots, maintained that Islam "makes no distinction between Arab and non-Arab, white and black, rich and poor ... for they are all brothers who love one another in God" (Mouline, p. 126). Like Ibn Sa'ūd's descendants, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's have built their own dynasty, making sure that only they would occupy key positions in the religious hierarchy. The Āl al-Shaīkh provide an important juridical interface between the ruling dynasty and their subject-citizens. The judgments made by members of the Wahhābī-inspired judiciary in the divorce cases referred to above indicate that they are prepared to split families in order to preserve the 'purity' of blood lines.

Of Sand or Soil is an excellent addition to recent studies by Andrew Shryock on popular genealogical nationalism in Jordan and by Nadia Abu El-Haj on the entanglement between genealogical science and politics. By focusing on the social and political implications of a specific form of evidentiary practice during a crucial period of transition in Saudi Arabia, the book opens a window to the still under-researched domain of personal and public legitimation and processes of making subject-citizens legible. Eloquent and jargon-free, it testifies to the ways in which genealogy, a particular kind of object of knowledge production, intersects with other dimensions of authority such as a highly personalised form of governance. It convincingly demonstrates how as part of the bureaucratisation of a kinship-based state, practices of naming, verifying and negotiating identities serve to instantiate the national imagination's past and present. I highly recommend this book to scholars and students interested in kinship studies, state making, personhood, object fetishisation, and textual authority.

This is the accepted version of a book review published by Brill in *Die Welt des Islams* Vol. 58, 249-553, 2018. Published version available from: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700607-00582P05>

Accepted version downloaded from SOAS Research Online: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/25968/>

‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Fahad, Rootless trees: Genealogical politics in Saudi Arabia, In Bernard Haykel et al., (eds.) *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2015, pp. 263-291.

Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2014.

Zina Sawaf, *Encountering the State: Women and Intimate Lives in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*. PhD dissertation, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva 2017.

Gabriele vom Bruck

SOAS, London