

Trips and Nasab in Saudi Arabia

An Interview with Nadav Samin

Interviewed by: Fatemah Al-Shamlan

First of all, I would like to thank you for taking your time and agreeing to do this interview with Hekmah.

(1) What is important role does genealogy play in the field of anthropology?

First, I was trained as a historian, but when confronting the challenge of narrating new histories of the Arabian Peninsula, I acquired secondary training as an anthropologist.

Genealogy is the representation (‘ard), whether oral, pictorial, or textual, of kinship relations. The study of kinship (or qaraba) among groups of people who believed themselves to descend from a common ancestor was one of anthropology’s original pursuits. 19th and early 20th century anthropologists were dazzled by developments in the natural and physical sciences, when fundamental principles such as Darwin’s natural selection and Einstein’s theories of relativity were being discovered. Anthropologists wanted their own fundamental rule or principle for explaining man’s social relations. They saw the study of kinship among non-Western peoples as the necessary path for identifying such a fundamental law.

The problem was that anthropologists could never agree on what that fundamental law of social relations was, because no such law exists. Kinship groups across the world are constituted in diverse ways, making it hard to identify any single principle that explains how and why they take shape.

(2) Where do empirical and theoretical methods come handy in anthropology?

There is a tendency in modern social science in general, and in anthropology in particular, to allow theory and method to get in the way of narrative. I look at scholarship as storytelling, but with more rigorous tools. A good work of research is theoretically informed, meaning that it asks or responds to abstract questions that are larger than the specific subject matter in question, for example, genealogy in Saudi Arabia. Without a strong and compelling set of empirical evidence, however, theorizing is largely meaningless, at least in my view. We can ask abstract questions all day, such as, what is identity? But without some ability to probe and test those questions in relation to texts, narratives, demographic data, or other sorts of detailed information, it is a wasted exercise.

(3) Can you tell us what made you choose Saudi Arabia in particular (in the book Sand or Soil and several other publications)?

I came from the tradition of Middle East Studies, and in that field, Saudi Arabia was poorly represented. There was, and still is, too little serious scholarship about the kingdom, particularly about the social life of the kingdom from a historical perspective. I wanted to make a contribution to my broader field, and discovered that studying the history of Saudi Arabia was both particularly challenging and particularly fascinating.

(4) From the title of the book one senses a question of existence such that found in the famous question in Shakespeare's play (to be or not to be, that is the question!) that is to choose either to be from sand or to be from soil and yet both sand and soil mingle in the same category somehow, what note were you trying to hit with such a title?

I appreciate your question. With the title, I wanted to suggest that within the genealogical culture of the kingdom, the question of whether one descends from a formerly nomadic tribe (i.e., sand) or from an agricultural oasis (i.e., soil) is a very important one, and is important in different ways. Perhaps there is some dramatic element to the title, but with *Of Sand or Soil* I was trying to capture that basic binary issue in a succinct way. Of course, there is a lot of mingling between these two sociological groups, but because Saudi Arabia was predominantly nomadic until the mid-20th century, the influence of the culture of the “sand,” I’d like to argue, is greater in the kingdom than it is in most other Arab countries. This isn’t the same thing as saying

pejoratively that the Saudis are just bedouin, but is instead an effort to take seriously the specific history of the kingdom so we can see how it helps to shape the present. With this approach, I am simply following the thread of Hamad al-Jasir's scholarship while trying to use some updated methodological tools.

(5) In the book you mention "This practice was not unique to al-Jāsir and reflected the emergence of a new sense of decorum in Saudi letters, in which women's names would be obscured from public life like their physical persons, through restrictions on dress, mobility, employment, and other aspects of life in modern Saudi Arabia." In the letters sent to al-Jāsir from women inquiring and asking, some of them were holding a PHD degree and stating their first and last name. What is your explanation for that?

With respect to the letters, these were private letters, and so the conventions they reflect are different from those of public life. I do think that women were for a long time largely excluded from the new Saudi public space. But this seems to be changing.

(6) With the advancement of science and the role of DNA some people who are trying to confirm their (nasab) are seeking to do so by DNA testing. Yet when the topic is raised in the public sphere rejection and denying the importance of belonging to a tribe seems to dominate the scene? Why do you think there is such a contradiction between what is said and what is done?

The issue of genealogical testing is an interesting one. I personally do not give much credence to such tests, but I am not a genetic scientist and so cannot say for certain how accurate and specific they are supposed to be. What I find interesting is the contradictory implications of such testing. On the one hand, DNA tests can be used to try and foster a greater sense of community among families, tribes, or even entire nations, as is happening with the UAE and its genealogical research at the National Center for Documentation and Research (NCDR). On the other, DNA testing of tribal lineages can be used to reassert hard caste-like boundaries between tribal and non-tribal people ,and so can contribute to social divisions and tensions.

I see genealogy for Saudis as a tool for creating a familiar form of meaning in the lives of a people who are undergoing rapid change. Genealogies, though usually based around a core of truth, are largely inventions of the social imagination. In the past, they were inventions of oral narrative; then of the printed page; and then of the family tree. All of these are technologies or modes (turuq) of communication. Yet what happens when that act of invention meets hard science like genetics, when speculative facts and seemingly irrefutable ones collide? I hope that someone writes a book about that subject.

(7) Do you think the interest in confirming one's belonging to a tribe is limited to Saudi Arabia or is it something that could be found in other parts of the world? What are the similarities and differences if such interest exists elsewhere?

The interest in lineage is by no means confined to Saudi Arabia. We know that DNA genealogical testing is popular in the Gulf. But family history and genealogy companies are popular in the United States, too. The US is a nation of immigrants, and so people often pay for these companies' services in order to trace their immigrant roots, typically to one or another European country. In Saudi Arabia, at least in Najd, immigrant status is not something that is typically celebrated. Original Arabness orasala is more important. If I wanted to understand Saudi genealogical culture in a global, comparative light, then I would look to the examples of places like China or Japan, to see how they have thought about and dealt with this issue across the 19th-21st centuries, rather than the US case. The US is unusual with respect to genealogies, though Americans' interest in the subject shows that societies and cultures throughout the world try to make sense of their social relations through the framework of kinship.

(8) When the translation of your book into Arabic came out, an academic has commented about his astonishment of those who translate books about (alansab) and was even more astonished of those who pay for it? Do you have any comments on that?

I would say that those who seek to erect tariffs in the marketplace of ideas are only hurting the consumer. At the same time, there are so many interesting books out there to read that one must make judicious use of their time. The academic you mention shares the sentiments of Ahmad b. Hanbal and Musa bin Maimun, who both believed that studying genealogies was a waste of time. I of course disagree!

(9) Do you think with the vision 20/30 the country is adopting and the fast turning point changes it is undergoing, that (alnasab) will still be a persistent component in the way Saudis look at citizenship and identity?

I really cannot say, but I would not be surprised if the meaning of nasab for Saudis becomes reconfigured further to accommodate new changes, including the need to account for the previously unacknowledged position of women on the genealogical map. The family tree scene in the film Wadjda is particularly moving in that regard.

My near-term view is that because nasab is a core historical aspect of Arab and Islamic heritage, it will remain a relevant component of Saudi identity, though among an increasingly smaller proportion of the population. As for whether nasab will continue to play a role in issues of citizenship, that is for the lawyers and bureaucrats to determine.

(10) Do you have any final words?

Thank you for inviting me to engage with Hekmah's readers. I wish you success with this publication.