Our Ancestors, Our Heroes: Saudi Tribal Campaigns to Suppress Historical Docudramas

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Introduction

Scholars of Arab media like Christa Salamandra and Marwan Kraidy have explored key aspects of Gulf- Levant media integration in the wake of the privatization of Arab media over the past several decades. Kraidy has drawn attention to an intriguing subtext of this integration, namely, that because countries like Saudi Arabia and Lebanon “occupy the poles of the Arab socio-cultural spectrum,”¹ tension between Lebanese content producers and Saudi consumers and censors over programming is all but inevitable. Salamandra has explored this integration from an ethnographic perspective, embedding herself with Syrian producers of dramatic television series, or musalsalāt.² Both scholars tend to see the controversies engendered by this regional media integration in terms of the threats posed by Syrian and Lebanese artistic productions to Gulf religious

sensibilities, and the constraints these sensibilities impose on content producers. Yet behind these Gulf- Levant tensions, there is also a different cultural logic at work, one that engages other dimensions of culture apart from the religious, and concerns the relationship between documentation and authority in a once predominantly nomadic society. This logic was brought to the fore in the controversy over the Syrian-produced, Gulf-financed, television series Finjân al-Damm (“Cup of Blood”). With the Finjân al-Damm controversy, which transpired in 2008-09, one can observe an intra-Arab cultural contest that has very little to do with the balance between Islam and secularism in public life. In this post-9/11 era of Middle East studies, in which culture as an analytical category has become a de facto subset of religion, investigating alternative narratives of cultural contestation in the region becomes crucial not only for advancing understanding about its history and social life, but for maintaining a broader vitality and diversity of views within the discipline.

Finjân al-Damm is a serialized television program that was created for broadcast in the Arab world during the 2008 Ramadan holiday season. It is a “bedouin serial,” a genre devoted to reenacting the lifestyles of nomadic Arabs, dramatizing their rivalries and love affairs against highly stylized, quasi-
historical backdrops. The appearance of bedouin on television seems to have coincided with broader shifts in Arab societies experiencing the gradual decline of nomadism and the sedentarizing of formerly mobile kin groups. In Egypt this process began in earnest in the mid-19th century. Bedouin sedentarization in Saudi Arabia, however, is very much a phenomenon of the 20th century. In 1950, approximately 40 percent of the total population of Saudi Arabia was thought to be nomadic, a proportion that would decline steadily thereafter. In the course of these sedentarizations, bedouinism in the Middle East was largely transformed from a mode of social and political organization into an “identity” associated with

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3 Historically, Arab societies have tended to be classified along a spectrum that encompasses particular kinds of economic activity and orientations toward ecology. At one end of this spectrum is camel nomadism, or bedouinism, which involves the seasonal migration of camel herders in search of pasturage and water sources (rain-fed seasonal streams or underground aquifers) in semi-regular patterns. The antithesis of camel nomadism is sedentarism, and is typified in Arabia by the small agricultural settlements that have historically occupied the oases of the Peninsula. In between these two poles are categories that combine elements of both sedentarism and nomadism in various complex ways, such as sheep nomadism. The categories of nomad and townsman, of badw and hadar, have historically been fluid, and are today continually invoked toward varied symbolic ends. For more on these categories, see Saad Sowayan, al-Ṣahrā’ al-‘Arabiyya (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2010); Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Natalie Peutz, “Bedouin ‘Abjection’: World heritage, worldliness, and worthiness at the margins of Arabia,” American Ethnologist 2 (2011), pp. 338-360.


certain conceptions of heritage and culture. Yet, as Ali Jihad Racy has rightly pointed out, the emergence of bedouinism as an identity in Arab countries should not imply that it is a homogenous quality, or one that goes uncontested. The staggered history of bedouin sedentarization across the Arab region amplifies this fact, and would suggest that the conception of bedouin identity within modern Arab society varies from country to country. In the case of Finjān al-Damm, the reimagining of "bedouinism" by Syrian television professionals - some themselves of bedouin origin - has engendered a variety of spirited reactions by bedouin-origin Saudis, the substance of which will be the subject of this paper.

Bedouin serials first appeared in the 1970s, at a time when governments still monopolized television broadcasting, and only one or two state channels existed in every country. The first bedouin serial was the 1975 epic Wadhā wa Ibn ‘Ajlān. Produced by Jordanian television and written by former member of parliament and tribal advocate Aḥmad al-‘Abbādi, the series helped define the genre for years to come. Essentially an inter-tribal love story, Wadhā wa Ibn ‘Ajlān brought bedouin

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costumes, poetry, and social life to Jordanian living rooms in comfortable and predictable doses. Others of its kind soon followed, most notably the 1976 drama Ra's Ghulayṣ. By the middle of the 1980s, however, the genre had lost some of its appeal. Twenty years would pass before the bedouin serial resurfaced, this time in hypercharged guise.

The past five years have seen a revival of bedouin serials, with multiple big-budget epics appearing on state and private media channels such as MBC, Dubai TV, and Abu Dhabi television. Part of this revival can be attributed to developments in Arab media, specifically, Gulf- Levant media integration. The privatization of Arab media has introduced important changes to the Arab television landscape. Chief among these is the new financing dynamic, which has rendered many Lebanese and Syrian artists, not to mention journalists and television professionals, beholden to Gulf financiers and media companies for their professional sustenance. When a Syrian producer is shopping a script with a station like Dubai-based MBC, he

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1 Ra’s Ghulayṣ and Wadḥā wa Ibn ‘Ajlān were remade in 2006 and 2007, respectively, and updated for the 30-episode Ramadan primetime format (the original Wadḥā wa Ibn ‘Ajlān ran for 13 episodes).
2 The renewed attention to this type of programming is arguably also a manifestation of a broader revival or reconstitution of tribal consciousness in the Gulf region. For more on this revival see Abdallāh al-Ghadhdhāmī, al-Qabīla wa-l-Qabā’iliyya (al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī: Casablanca, 2009); Nu‘aymān ʿUthmān, al-Qabaliyya: ‘Ajz al-Akādīmī wa-Murāwaghat al-Muthaqqaqf (Beirut: Jadāwil, 2011).
understands that his work must be aimed first at Saudi
audiences, Saudi Arabia being the largest advertising market in
the Arab world.\textsuperscript{10} Salamandra captures the resentment bred into
this new relationship in an interview with a prominent Syrian
director, who complained: "we have become like merchandise,
slaves to a bunch of bedouin who have no appreciation for our
urban civilization. We are reduced to doing silly comedies and
fantasia."\textsuperscript{11} This sense of resentment has taken on important
political coloring in the wake of the Arab League's censure of
the al-Asad regime for its brutal response to the popular
uprising in Syria. In a January 2012 speech, Syrian president
Bash\textsuperscript{\textcircled{a}}r al-Asad echoed the director's sentiments when remarking,
with reference to the Gulf states, that "countries can rent and
import some history with their money, but money does not make
nations and cultures."\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Author interview, Riyadh, January 2012; Marwan Kraidy, "The Rise of
Transnational Media Systems: Implications of Pan-Arab Media for
Comparative Research" in Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western
World, Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge

\textsuperscript{11} Christa Salamandra, "Television and the Ethnographic Endeavor: The
Case of Syrian Drama," Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal, 14
(2005), p. 13; see as well Christa Salamandra, "Spotlight on the
Bash\textsuperscript{\textcircled{a}}r al-Asad Era: The Television Drama Outpouring," Middle East

\textsuperscript{12} "Syrian Leader Vows 'Iron Fist' to Crush 'Conspiracy','" The New York
Times, January 11, 2012
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/11/world/middleeast/syrian-leader-vows-
Syrian art professionals and political leaders alike, chafing under the yoke of “bedouin” culture importers, consider that when they produce cultural products for the Gulf region, they are doing so into a kind of vacuum, where the traditional markers of Arab civilization – literature, architecture, music, religious sciences, philosophy – have been historically absent. In one sense, the absence of a lengthy, continuous record of historical and cultural production in most parts of the Arabian Peninsula confirms these attitudes. Yet the non-literate backdrop of Arabian history does not mean that culture was absent from Arabia before the onset of mass literacy and oil wealth-driven art patronage. When Saudi tribal figures rose in complaint of the bedouin serial Finjān al-Damm and applied pressure to have its broadcast postponed for one year at the cost of many millions of dollars to advertisers,¹³ it became clear that a different conception of culture was being invoked, one that traded in unsteady oral traditions and the competition for prestige and recognition within Saudi historiography. The substance of these tribal complaints included anger over the appropriation of the names of famous personalities from tribal

history, and, more significantly, the depicting of tribal leaders in Finjān al-Damm as dishonorable and treacherous.

This paper argues that it is in the reactions by Saudi and Gulf tribal leaders to Syrian artistic productions about their putative ancestors that the cultural politics of the Arab Gulf are most vividly revealed, and that examining Saudi culture through this lens can help scholars understand a great deal about the nature of contemporary social and political life in the Arabian Peninsula. Specifically, the Finjān al-Damm controversy helps illuminate the nature of censorship in the contemporary Arab Gulf; the nature of citizen activism in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies; and the Saudi state's attitude toward tribalism. Underlying these concerns, the Finjān al-Damm story speaks to a new consciousness about the relationship between documentation and authority in societies transitioning from predominantly oral to textual cultures.¹⁴

Finjān al-Damm

¹⁴ While Salamandra's studies examine the content producer side of Arab television dramatic production, this study investigates the consumer side, that is, Gulf Arab reactions to the bedouin serial Finjān al-Damm.
The Finjān al-Damm series began as a drama school project scripted around the year 2000 by a young Syrian writer of bedouin origin, 'Adnān al-'Awda.\textsuperscript{15} Al-'Awda's script was bought by the Syrian television production company Sama Art Production, which secured for it a production contract with the Dubai-based Arab satellite television channel the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC). MBC is a Saudi-owned private satellite television broadcaster established in 1991 by the brother-in-law of the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. It is a quasi-private company that functions as a profit-generating enterprise for members and associates of the Saudi royal family, and as such, is in competition for audiences with other such broadcasters within the kingdom, including Rotana, which is owned by Saudi prince Walīd b. Ṭallāl. These and other Gulf-owned Arab satellite stations are staffed heavily by Lebanese and Syrian media professionals and are broadcast throughout the Arab region, making them true pan-Arab phenomena. Based initially in London, MBC transferred its operations to Dubai in 2000, where it enjoys a measure of editorial freedom impossible in Saudi Arabia and,

\textsuperscript{15} Al-'Awda was born and raised in the rural northeast of Syria, is of Shammar tribal origin, and possesses some knowledge of local bedouin dialects.
by some accounts, functions as a “blowhole” through which the stuffy conservatism of the Saudi kingdom finds benign release.¹⁶

Finjān al-Damm was scheduled to be aired over Ramadan (September) 2008, and production had begun in the period leading up to the broadcast. On the night of its premier, MBC possessed 10 episodes of Finjān al-Damm, with Sama planning to finish the production during the early weeks of Ramadan. At 7:00 pm that evening, three hours before Finjān’s scheduled airtime, MBC was allegedly contacted by a Saudi government official and told that it would have to refrain from broadcasting the series until a full review of its contents could be undertaken.¹⁷ Pressed on this question, a high-ranking official at the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information denied that the Saudi government had anything to do with the delay in the series’ broadcast.¹⁸ His emphatic claims aside, it was evident on the basis of insider accounts and the history of censorship in the kingdom that the decision to delay Finjān’s broadcast had originated within the Saudi government in response to pressure from the populace. In fact, ten days after this incident, another Syrian-produced,

¹⁶ MBC’s programming is stocked with American films and television series, as well as Arab adaptations of popular Western reality television programs and game shows such as “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.”
¹⁷ Author interview, Riyadh, January 2012.
¹⁸ Author interview, Riyadh, April 2011.
Gulf-financed bedouin serial, *Sa’dūn al-‘Awājī*, was cancelled midway through its run by the ruler of Abu Dhabi, reportedly at the request of the Saudi government and under pressure from members of prominent Saudi tribes.\(^{19}\)

One day after *Finjān*’s aborted premier, MBC issued a statement announcing the program’s delay, citing negative reactions to the series’ trailer by members of prominent tribes from around the Gulf. These individuals and families were concerned about the possibility that the series might spark tribal conflict on account of the incidents of historical violence it invoked. “Out of respect for its viewers,” MBC said, it was announcing the delay, until all of the episodes had been completed and reviewed by the company.\(^{20}\) After the aborted series launch in August 2008, Sama Art Production completed the 30 episodes of *Finjān al-Damm* (shot mostly on location in the desert area surrounding Tadmur, Syria) and submitted them to

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MBC. Its content having passed censorship, the *Finjān al-Damm* series was aired one year later, inducing a new round of protests and complaints from tribal-origin Saudis and others. What was the substance of these complaints? How influential were they? Why were they issued in the first place? To begin answering these questions, some background about the series is in order.

*Finjān al-Damm* ("Cup of Blood") tells the story of three bedouin tribes encamped in the northern reaches of the Nafūd desert, the great sandy expanse in north Central Arabia that lines the base of the Hijaz mountains and isolates Najd from the Syrian steppes. The story takes place across roughly twenty-five years, during the first quarter of the 19th century. The series' chief protagonist is the *aqid*, or principal commander, of the al-Mazāyida tribe, Nūrī al-Hazzā'. Nūrī and the Mazāyida coexist uneasily with their main regional rival, the Maʿyūf tribe. Through the course of the series, the two tribes wrestle for influence in the area, while trying to prevent Ottoman imperial authorities and British missionaries from encroaching further on their traditional domains. The third tribe in the series, the Banī Ghānim, are bedouin of lesser stock, who ride

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21 According to Sama, no changes were made to the script between the cancellation of the series in 2008 and its broadcast in 2009.
22 For Saudi censorship of tribal media, see p. 32 below.
donkeys instead of horses and camels, and who cannot intermarry with members of the two noble tribes in their vicinity, yet align with one or another of the latter depending on the political and social balances of the moment.

The cup of blood in the title refers to a practice that was common among bedouin in Arabia until the establishment of centralized, modern states:

"There was a cup and it was called the cup of blood, a simple one like this coffee cup. This cup was the cup of such-and-such person. Meaning...there would be a warrior...who always caused the defeat of his opponents, or, his opponents weren't able to attack [their rival clan] because of this courageous horseman. So [the opposing tribe's leader] would say, 'this is the cup of such-and-such, who will drink from it?" For the person who drinks, this means that tomorrow, he goes and requests a match with the enemy."\(^23\)

In the series, the cup of blood becomes a metaphor for vengeance and the futility of conflict. As characters are killed off in raids or moments of anger, new resentments are born and plots of vengeance hatched. Inter-clan violence is an important subtext to the series, one that proved combustible when combined with the producers' efforts to historicize the material. These efforts were driven in part by a particular dynamic within

\(^{23}\) Author interview with tribal historian, Riyadh, March 2011.
Syrian television drama production first identified by Christa Salamandra.

Salamandra demonstrates how the creators of Syrian Ramadan serials are often billowed by religious pressures, emanating both from Islamists at home and from the new Gulf markets and Gulf station owners who buy the broadcast rights to these series. At the same time, many Syrian television professionals see themselves as pedagogues “at the vanguard of a modernizing process,” an understanding derived from the Soviet-inspired tradition of social reformist art that has prevailed for many decades in Syria.\textsuperscript{24} In one sense, then, by producing bedouin serials for Gulf audiences, Syrian television producers are able to skirt the Islamism-modernism debate, while projecting some of their attitudes about social reform onto the fictional politics of the Arabian desert. In the fractiousness of \textit{Finjān al-Damm}’s clans and their incessant conflict, for example, one can read a pan-Arab critique of the modern Arab condition.

While challenging the conservative norms of their Gulf audiences, the Syrian creators behind \textit{Finjān al-Damm} also looked to maintain sensitivity to their values and expectations. This balance is most evident in the way in which bedouin social

\textsuperscript{24} Salamandra, “Spotlight on the Bashār al-Asad Era,” p. 162.
hierarchies are portrayed in the series. Parallel to the ongoing conflicts among Finjān’s tribes, multiple love affairs, both realized and unrequited, run throughout the plot. One realizes early in the production how readily the politics of inter- (and intra-) tribal love can be manipulated toward soap operatic ends. In episode 8, Haifā’, the daughter of the deceased leader of the al-Mazāyida tribe, stuns her entire community when she chooses to marry a sheep herder over one of the warriors who had been competing for her hand. When the suitors step up to recite poems in her honor, the warriors wax predictably about their bravery and nobility, while the sheep herder recites tender words of love and affection, winning Haifā’’s heart in the process.\(^{25}\) Though seemingly innocuous, the scene addresses an important issue in bedouin culture, and one of the more sensitive issues in Saudi society today, the question of lineal compatibility in marriage. Haifā’’s decision marks her de facto marginalization from the affairs of the tribe, demonstrating the creators’ effort to balance unconventional choices with conventional consequences, surprise and predictability. A similar challenge to traditional social roles is embodied in the character of al-A’mash, played by Saudi actor ‘Abd al-Muhsin al-Nimr. Al-A’mash, the series’ itinerant bard, is a member of the middling Banī Ghānim tribe. As the

\(^{25}\) Finjān al-Damm, episode 8.
story progresses and al-A'mash distinguishes himself in combat alongside one or another of the two noble tribes, his riding animal is upgraded from a donkey to a horse, a sign that he has achieved by his merit an important privilege of tribal nobility. Yet al-A'mash has one insurmountable problem - he is in love with 'Aliyā, the daughter of the al-Ma'ŷuf shaykh and a "ḫurra," a freeborn bedouin woman, who can marry only tribesmen of noble stock. When in episode 24, al-A'mash proposes marriage to 'Aliyā, her brother provides the family’s sobering response: "khuwwa is one thing, but marriage is another, oh son of a herder." In the series' finale, after the ranks of the featured clans have been decimated by inter-tribal conflicts and war with the Ottomans, al-A'mash is shown riding through a ruined landscape on the back of a donkey, reciting one final poetic refrain. This reversion to his original riding animal marks a return to his previous status, in an Arabia since transformed by the introduction of British missionaries, guns, and colonial agents.

Space often seems collapsed in the series. Though place names are dropped frequently - Medina, the Nafūd Desert, the Euphrates River - the viewer has only a vague sense of the

26 Khuwwa here means a political alliance between a strong and a weak tribe out of which bonds of affection might form.
protagonists’ geographical orientation. *Finjān* is a bedouin fantasia designed for family consumption, yet one that works subtly to appeal to Saudi and Gulf audiences. One early in the series effort to periodize the drama is particular resonant in that regard. In episode 4, a message is passed through the Ottoman administrative chain of command that the “Imām of Najd” has conquered the holy city of Medina, destroying paganistic worship sites and canceling taxes apart from those Islamically sanctioned. While the “Imām” remains unnamed, there can be no doubt as to the historical allusion. Between 1805 and 1806, Sa‘ūd b. ‘Abbād al-‘Azīz, head of the recently established Āl Sa‘ūd dynasty, together with his Wahhābī fighters from Central Arabia (Najd), conquered the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina and instituted a range of restrictions on Ottoman and Arab worshippers and pilgrims there. The notion of the restoration of Mecca and Medina to Wahhābī control, if not fully resonant with broader Arab audiences who are uneasy with the often fierce conservatism of contemporary Saudi Wahhabism, was sure to appeal to target audiences in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Gulf. Wary of the implications of too healthy a dose of historical realism, however, *Finjān*’s creators consciously avoided referring to the Āl Sa‘ūd ruling dynasty by name. As will be

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demonstrated below, they would not be so cautious with other periodizing names drawn from Arabian history, specifically, tribal familiar names (algāb, sing. laqab).

In the interest of lending credibility to their historical drama, the authors of Finjān al-Damm selected names for their lead characters that had resonance in recent Arabian history. The screenwriter, director, and producer all saw a need to accentuate the historical and social backdrop against which their period bedouin drama was to be staged, a backdrop often left unexamined in other works of its kind.\(^\text{38}\) In important respects, this process of authentication began with the integration of periodizing details, in particular, names. One such name was Nūrī al-Hazzā'. As noted, in Finjān al-Damm, Nūrī al-Hazzā' is the lead warrior and eventual shaykh of the fictional al-Mazāyīda clan of the early 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century. Historically, there could have been only one source from which this name was borrowed: Nūrī b. Hazzā' al-Sha'īlān, the leader of the powerful Rwala bedouin tribe in the first half of the

twentieth century. The real Nūrī lived more than a century after his fictional namesake, and achieved posthumous notoriety largely on account of his close relationships with the numerous Ottoman and British officials, explorers, and anthropologists who visited him in his tribal territories, which spanned modern-day southern Syria, eastern Jordan and, after 1909, the al-Jawf area of northern Saudi Arabia. T.E. Lawrence described Nūrī as “the fourth figure among the precarious princes of the desert,” a group that included the eventual rulers of the region, the Āl Saud.

Within today’s ‘Anaza tribe and its Rwala subclan, whose memberships stretch across the national boundaries of the modern states of Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, Nūrī is a symbol of a proud and independent past. Summoning this sentiment is the original (2008) Finjān al-Damm trailer, which establishes a very Asterix-like premise for the series. “All of [the bedouin] fell under the Turks,” the show’s narrator and bard, al-A’mash, explains. “All of them – except one [i.e. Nūrī

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30 T.E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1991), p. 163.
31 In the famous Asterix comic book series by French illustrators Goscinny and Uderzo, each story begins with the following preface: “The year is 50 BC, and all Gaul is occupied. Only one small village of indomitable Gauls still holds out against the invaders.” See Asterix the Gaul (London: Orion, 2004).
b. Hazzā')." In reality, the Rwala chief Nūrī b. Hazzā' al-Sha'lān, while beginning his career as a traditional tribal chief, was, like the other "precarious princes," a client of the imperial powers in the region, receiving subsidies from the Ottomans and collecting taxes on their behalf. Madawi al-Rasheed explains that as he moved further into the imperial orbit, "Ibn Shaalan was no longer a traditional tribal sheikh. The basis of his authority changed as he was drawn closer to international politics and central states interested in subjugating and encapsulating his tribe. His power now rested on his slaves, the taxes which he collected on behalf of the central government, and his contacts with a wider political elite." The real Nūrī was in fact so integrated into the new power structures of the region that he was thanked in the acknowledgments section of a 1935 scholarly article by a visiting British anthropologist, who had come to the Rwala to take blood samples, fingerprints, and cranial measurements.32

This once-sophisticated method of classifying the nomadic peoples of north-central Arabia was an aspect of the process by which an undefined bedouin culture was being inscribed into the broader sweep of documented history.

History and Orality

In historiographical terms, there is a stark contrast between coastal and mountainous Arabia on one hand, and inland Arabia on the other. Whereas the social and political life of Yemen, Oman and the Hijaz have been documented across successive centuries of Islamic history, very little by way of recorded history exists for inland Arabia, an area which comprises the vast majority of the Peninsula.\textsuperscript{33} Despite some arguments to the contrary,\textsuperscript{34} the population of inland Arabia is widely held to have been predominantly nomadic throughout much of its history.\textsuperscript{35} As such, an oral culture predicated on personal transmission of cultural knowledge predominated there for long centuries. History remained a record etched into living

\textsuperscript{33} Central Arabia's marginal historiographical position would be less significant if it weren't for the fact that Najd comprises the center of power and authority in the kingdom today. The once peripheral hinterland is now the arbiter of culture and national identity, a fact we must reckon with when considering the controversy over artistic production in the kingdom.


memory, that might disappear with the dissolution of a clan on account of conflict or famine.36 With the appearance of Ottoman administrators, European travelers, and, later, British colonial authorities and skull measurers on Arabia’s shores, the recording of information about inland Arabia’s tribal populations began in earnest. It is with the arrival of these record keepers that the oral culture of Arabia’s tribes begins to converge with, and grow reliant upon, the written – and overwhelmingly foreign – record.

To say this is not to suggest that modern Arabian history, because borrowed, is somehow inauthentic, or irretrievable apart from the fleeting impressions of hostile or sympathetic foreigners. While the records of foreign travelers and administrators contain practical information about the political and social structures of tribal groups like the Rwala, these forms of knowledge were instrumental, external, and traded in conceptions that were little valued by bedouin tribes. What’s more, these records often exhibit a deep animosity toward the tribes, as they were written by urban administrators who associated bedouin with instability on the roads and insecurity of empire. Instead, the intimate details of cultural and social

exchange, the lifeblood of any society, were captured in oral narration, in poetry and genealogy. Poetry was the primary form of cultural transmission among the predominantly nomadic tribes of Arabia. As one Saudi historian of tribal origin explained, “In our gatherings today...when one of our elders tells a story [yesāwlif], he recites a poem. [The elders] consider the relationship of a poem to a story as that of a witness to an event.” One of the other important connecting links within this oral culture was the preservation of genealogical chains of ancestry, which lent definition to a clan and expressed its obligations to a larger confederation of kin. In Arabian towns, family genealogies were often documented by local scholars and scribes. Among nomadic clans, where even basic literacy was wanting, genealogies were more often committed to memory. A bedouin could credibly recount his ancestry up to the fifth generation, and sometimes earlier still. Beyond this, a clan might maintain scattered recollections of famous warriors or historical personalities within their kin group, which would be kept alive through oral poetry and prose narration. The

37 Saad Sowayan and Marcel Kurpershoek have documented hundreds of examples of narrative poems throughout Arabia, which demonstrate the importance of oral poetry as a storehouse of historical memory. See Saad Sowayan, Ayyām al-'Arab al-Awākhir (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2010), and his Nabati Poetry: the Oral Poetry of Arabia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Marcel Kurpershoek, Oral Poetry and Narratives from Central Arabia, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2002).

38 Author interview, Riyadh, January 2011.
centrality of genealogy to Arabian oral culture had the effect of sanctifying the names of certain historical personalities. Today, for reasons that will be described below, the memories of these personalities are invoked uneasily in anything but the most local of contexts.

One further qualification is in order. Though the relationship between documentation (or its absence) and authority is crucial for understanding disputes like the one concerning Finjān al-Damm, this relationship does not always express itself in a predictable fashion. There are undoubtedly gaping holes in Arabian historiography, which force in part a reliance on Western historical sources – but this fact does not necessarily frustrate or concern Saudis. In my interviews with members of the traditional ruling house of the al-Fuqarā clan of the al-Manābahā branch of the 'Anaza tribe, a sense of deep pride in the ruling lineage’s association with successive generations of Western travelers was openly manifest. In fact, the al-Fuqarā shaykh Fahd b. Sulṭān periodized his ancestral lineage by referring to the Western travelers who had visited with each of his predecessors.39 What’s more, the popularity in Saudi Arabia today of translations of the accounts of early modern Western travelers in Arabia cannot be overstated. These

39 Author interview, al-'Ula region, December 2011.
volumes represent links to a vanished past that are difficult to duplicate within the material legacy of the oral tradition.

With this unsettled backdrop in mind, we can now try and make sense of the controversy engendered by the bedouin serial Finjān al-Damm, drawing inferences that are rooted in a sense of Arabia’s transformation over the past century from an oral culture into a culture of documentation. The first such inference is that any creative personality who would hope to advance some conception of bedouin history today, whether in prose, poetry, or film, is, to invoke Saad Sowayan’s formulation, a prisoner to this oral tradition. Any effort to impose a definite casing on scattered historical narratives that are by definition incomplete and unending, has proven tremendously problematic in modern Saudi society. The creative license taken by al-‘Awda and the producers of Finjān merely accentuates what is typically a more concealed, but never less combustible, state of combat over the way tribal history can be invoked toward contemporary social and political ends. Amplifying the state of contention is the Gulf-Levant dynamic and its social and commercial resonances. As a revolutionary republican Arab state, Syria has, in certain respect, moved beyond its bedouin history. The conservative Gulf monarchies,

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40 Sowayan, al-Ṣahrā’, p. 34
however, are only a few steps removed from bedouinism, and there
is a more visceral sense among them that something is at stake
in the enactment of bedouin history. The friction engendered by
this forced co-habitation between Syrian and Gulf art producers
and consumers was reconciled somewhat by a savvy embrace of
bedouinism on the part of Finjân al-Damm’s Syrian producers.
Yet, nothing could prepare them for the collision between
varying conceptions of culture and historical memory embodied in
the responses to the serial.

The second inference concerns the institutional framework
in which such conflicts over cultural production are embedded.
In a region where the state dominates both civil society and the private sector, the line between
autonomous social phenomena and state-driven discourses is often hard to make out. Given
this fact, the qualities ascribed by scholars like Shryock and
Sowayan to the vestiges of oral culture - sensitivity over the
portrayal of the past, reticence to document or permit the
documentation of historical narratives - must be examined not
simply in cultural terms, but in relation to a broader complex
of elements that is structured and determined in large measure

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41 Pascal Menoret, *L’empire du dérisoire - Lecture d’une série
by the state. Chief among these is the domain of censorship, in which, at the very least, the fractious culture of orality and the Saudi regime are joined in amorous embrace.

The Tribal Complaints

Examining in detail the complaints lodged by Arabian tribal leaders toward MBC and the Saudi government concerning the Finjān al-Damm series allows us to unpack some of the themes adduced above. The tribal complaints and critical commentaries that I have collected date from Ramadan 2009, and the most significant of these from the second half of the month, or, after more than half of the series had been broadcast. One of the best publicized of these complaints was a letter addressed to Walid Āl Ibrāhīm, the owner of MBC, by five leaders of the Āl Muhayd family, the traditional ruling family of the al-Fadān clan of the 'Anaza tribe (recall, Nūrī al-Sha'lān’s tribe). The letter, edited for brevity, is reproduced below:

"Your excellency the esteemed Shaykh Walid Āl Ibrāhīm",

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43 Walid al-Ibrāhīm is the brother-in-law of the late King Fahd, and his ownership of the company dates from King Fahd’s reign.
Peace be upon you, and the mercy of God and his blessings,

The MBC channel in your [media] group is presenting a work during the month of Ramadān titled Finjān al-Damm... We have been pained by what has been presented in the above-mentioned work, by the use of the familiar names [alqāb] and [real] names of [authentic historical] personalities, who play important roles throughout [the program]. Its author [i.e. 'Adnān al-'Awda] says on al-'Arabiyya [satellite television channel] that it is a work of fiction, but the actions being broadcast cause one to imagine the bedouin to be purely evil. These actions don’t represent the bedouin, and we suffer on account of them. You are one of the sons of this Peninsula, and you understand full well what we are saying. So why do you wish to have a part in the author’s assault against the rights of a [historical] personality, who has achieved renown within a well-known family, or have a part in damaging this family by using its familiar name [alqāb]?... We hope that you command those responsible to cease the presentation of this work, until such point as the necessary steps have been taken against the author. You are among those who know best the importance of the media - that it is a form of documentation, and in the future, will become a reference [marji']. On account of this distorted work, there will be a shameful blot on the Arabian Peninsula and on its prominent historical figures [rumūz].

In conclusion, please accept our greetings."

The Āl Muhayd complaint letter is a useful starting point for isolating the substance of the controversy. The letter is addressed to Walid Āl Ibrāhīm, the owner of the Dubai-based MBC station and someone close to the Saudi royal family through marriage. The Āl Muhayd shaykhs complain that the producers of the Finjān al-Damm series used the "familiar names" of well-

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known figures from Arabian bedouin history. In Saudi culture, a familiar name is a nickname by which a person is known, which often describes certain qualities they possess. In the series, the familiar or nickname Mšawwit bi-l-‘Ashā (“The One Who Calls Others for the Evening Meal”) is associated with Nūrī’s al-Mazāyida clan. Historically, this name is widely attributed to the Āl Muhayd family, who, as mentioned above, are the traditional ruling house of the al-Fad‘ān subclan of ‘Anaza. The al-Fad‘ān are one of numerous bedouin clans who, fleeing 18th-century hardship, migrated from central Arabia to the Syrian desert south of the Euphrates River, an area known as Bādiyat al-Shām.\textsuperscript{45} To be known as “The One Who Calls Others for the Evening Meal” is to be a symbol of generosity in a society where scarcity reigned.\textsuperscript{46} As Saad Sowayan has noted, “generosity is the sole investment one can depend upon in a society that knows no [capacity for] accumulation and storage.”\textsuperscript{47} Transposed to the

\textsuperscript{45} Muhammad al-Khālid al-Shar‘abī al-‘Anazı, al-Bādiya bayn ‘Arāqat al-Māḏī wa-Âṣâlat al-Ḥādir (Damascus: Maṭba‘at al-Kāṭib al-‘Arabī, 1996), p. 514. This transnational history helps explain how the familiar name Mšawwit bi-l-‘Ashā was resonant with both the Syrian bedouin screenwriter ‘Adnan al-‘Awda and the Saudi descendants of the Āl Muhayd.

\textsuperscript{46} Saudi historian Ḥamad al-Jāsir recounts the story of a shaykh of his ancestral village, al-Burūd, who was known by the familiar name M‘ashshī al-‘Awsaj. Known for his generosity toward visiting bedouin and townsfolk alike, the shaykh’s vision weakened when he grew old, so that whenever he would approach a boxthorn tree (‘awsaj), he would order people to prepare a feast, as he mistook the tree for guests. See Ḥamad al-Jāsir, Baldat al-Burūd: Mawqi‘an, wa Tarīkhan, wa Sukkānān (Riyadh: Majalat al-‘Arab, 2000), p. 246.

\textsuperscript{47} Sowayan, al-Ṣaḥrā‘, pp. 407-8.
present, the association of one’s ancestors with a familiar name connoting generosity becomes an important means of asserting lineal pride in a genealogically conscious society. Any dilution of this association is treated as a violation of the tribe’s “literary rights” [al-ḥuqūq al-adabiyya].

The unjust manipulation of familiar names was the substance of a separate complaint against the series by Makāzī b. ‘Affās b. Sa‘īd al-Shammarī, a descendant of the former shaykh of the al-Dughayrāt clan of the Shammar tribe, who was known historically by the familiar name M‘ašshī al-Dhīb (“The One Who Provides Dinner for the Wolf”). The motif invoked by the familiar name M‘ašshī al-Dhīb, the inviting of a wolf to share a meal and a campfire, has a long history in classical Arabic literature, that stretches back to the 7th-8th century Umayyad-era poet al-Farazdaq, and further to the pre-Islamic era. In Finjān al-

49 ‘Arrāk al-Furaysī al-Jarbā, al-Muwaththaq fi al-Ansāb (Damascus: Dār ‘Alā’ al-Dīn, 2006), p. 411. In an interview, the grandson, a Kuwaiti national, took credit for influencing the postponement of the series. When the series was broadcast in 2009, and the name M‘ašshī al-Dhīb - which, according to Makāzī ‘Affās, should have been removed - was mentioned, the latter took to his media pulpit and lodged his complaints.
50 I thank Khalid Radhan for this observation. For more on this motif see The Muفاذاة السادة: an Anthology of Ancient Arabian Odes, Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918), pp. 172-73; Anthology of Arabic
Damm, the name M‘ashshī al-Dhib is associated with the rival al-
Ma‘yūf clan. Despite the lengthy provenance of the wolf motif,
the appropriation of this precise familiar name proved
unacceptable in the eyes of Makāzī and his kin. In an interview
with a Kuwaiti newspaper, Makāzī threatened legal action against
MBC if it failed to stop the broadcast. He indicated that he
was coordinating his responses with his cousin in Saudi Arabia,
Sa‘īd.”\(^{51}\) Notable here is Makāzī’s use of the term amīr to
describe his Saudi cousin. Amīr is a title reserved by and
large for members of the royal family, and one from which a
ceremonial tribal leader like ‘Abdallah b. Farḥān b. Sa‘īd would
be officially excluded. It would appear that the appropriation
of names and titles is a process in which the descendants of
tribal leaders are engaged as both opponents and advocates.

\(^{51}\) Some conspiracy minded ‘Anaza observers considered that the
screenwriter al-'Awda, who is of Shammar origin, played favorites with
his fictional tribes, casting Ma‘yūf sympathetically as a surrogate
for Shammar. ‘Anaza and Shammar are two of the most prominent
northern Arabian tribes, and were historical competitors in the pre-
state period. See “Finjān al-Damm: credibility has been lost, and the
veils torn,” The Official Rwala Discussion Forum,
http://www.rwlh.net/vb/t31581.html#post331945, accessed March 30,
2012).
For the producer of Finjān al-Damm, Syrian media executive Adīb Khair, Makāzī al-Shammarī and the Āl Muhayd shaykhs’ personal attachment to bedouin familiar names rings hollow:

"...when you use these familiar names, and they were never attributed historically and documented, they never belong to anybody. The familiar name does not refer to a specific person, it is a label given to any person who is thought to be very generous. They [i.e. the tribal complainants] wanted, I mean, this is where the fight started, they wanted every tribal leader [in Finjān al-Damm] to be labeled as [an actual] Shammar leader who lived [at such-and-such point in the past]...We are saying, no, no, no, no, we are talking about two tribes that have nothing to do with that. You want to label them whatever you want, go ahead."\(^{52}\)

Khair’s attitude is conveyed in the disclaimer that precedes each episode of Finjān al-Damm, which reads:

"While some of the events, poetry, personalities, and familiar names in this series may rely on a realistic grounding, they are completely fictitious, and, in their dramatic context, do not refer to any individual specifically.

It is wrong to interpret this work to be the story of any particular tribe or individual.

Any correspondence between the events and characters in this series and the history of the bedouins and their characters must be interpreted in an artistic and dramatic context, not in an historical or realistic one."\(^{53}\)

For the Saudi tribal historians and leaders I interviewed, however, the Finjān al-Damm disclaimer was insufficient to absolve Sama of responsibility for tampering with history. Many saw the utilization of famous names as a marketing ploy designed to bolster interest in the program. Even its

\(^{52}\) Interview with Adīb Khair, Cairo, March 2012.

\(^{53}\) Finjān al-Damm, MBC (2009).
cancellation was viewed as a larger plot to call attention to the production. Others considered that bedouin serials that purport to be realistic are bound to stir up ancient tribal rivalries, which can only unsettle the fragile peace prevailing in contemporary Saudi society. While some Saudi interview subjects found the series highly entertaining, all who were apprised of the details of the controversy demonstrated an acute sympathy with the aggrieved tribal groups, and felt that their claims against MBC and Sama were just.\textsuperscript{54} From where does this broad sense of grievance derive? Is it simply a question of the dilution of a family’s honor? In what other ways was \textit{Finjān al-Damm} seen to violate the value systems of Saudi and Gulf tribal leaders?

\textbf{Oral Poetry and Authorship}

The anthropologist Jack Goody has challenged scholars to think in painterly terms about the varied range of communication styles to be found in societies transitioning from predominantly oral to textual cultures. Goody cautions against considering the nature of oral

\textsuperscript{54} Author interviews with various Saudi tribal leaders and historians, Saudi Arabia 2011-12.
transmission in a purely oral culture and one in which a written component exists or predominates as one and the same. Where textual culture and its authority are present, oral transmission almost always occurs in relation to written texts or by literate individuals, scribes, rabbis, or priests. Goody has also urged scholars to consider "the possibility that changes in the means of communication subsequent to the adoption of speech may have important implications for the structure of ideas, as well as for the structure of society." Saudi tribal figures are acutely conscious of the relationship between documentation and new kinds of authority, particularly in the age of satellite television and the Internet. The Āl Muhayd shaykhs convey their sense of the power of the media as "a form of documentation" that will produce future sources of historical authority, eclipsing their own historical memories in the process. Another tribal complainant, whom we'll meet subsequently, approximates this sentiment when remarking: "it is truly unfortunate that the series was broadcast on such a famous channel [i.e. MBC], as a huge number of Arab viewers will watch it, and many of them have

no expertise in history, and might be deceived by some of the series' delusions concerning the bedouin Arab tribes and their customs and traditions."\textsuperscript{57} The power of popular film and television to shape consciousness about history is a problem that plagues every contemporary society, yet one that is exacerbated in societies where the textual record is so shaky and contested.

The dynamic relationship between orality and textuality and the epistemological implications of this dynamism find expression in another facet of the tribal complaints, the question of oral poetry and authorship. Among the concerns registered by Makāzī al-Shammārī is that the producers of Finjān al-Damm attributed poems to M'ashṣī al-Dhīb that are not of his authorship. He argues that this false attribution is likely to stir the anger of other tribes, "whose heroes are being invoked on a daily basis...without any concern from officials at MBC."\textsuperscript{58} Nightly batteries to tribal sensibilities notwithstanding, the complainant's reference to the question of the authorship of tribal poetry is significant. As Sowayan has demonstrated, historically, of the two governing elements

\textsuperscript{57} "Finjān al-Damm: credibility has been lost," Official Rwala Forum.
\textsuperscript{58} "Grandson of M'ashṣī al-Dhīb,"al-Ra'y, September 2, 2009.
of central Arabian oral poetry, authorship and narration, the role of narration was far more significant than that of composition.\textsuperscript{59} A recitation was evaluated in terms of the quality of the narrator's performance and the faithfulness of their transmission from previous narrators, not the innovativeness of their composition, as might be the case in a Western poetry recital.\textsuperscript{60} The reciter, who was the object of praise and the center of attention, did not write poetry, he conveyed or transferred it to the audience. As with the study of genealogies and Prophetic Traditions (\textit{hādīth}) in Islamic societies, the chain of transmission of an oral poem is a crucial measure of its authenticity and value. One dimension of this value system is that some tribal poems are attributed to many different sources or narrators. In his index of bedouin poetry, Sowayan counted 100 instances of disagreement over the attribution of orally transmitted poems.\textsuperscript{61} For Goody as well, there is nothing unexpected about this finding. Writing of oral compositions, Goody says that "what one hears on a particular occasion is less likely to be the product of a

\textsuperscript{59} For countervailing evidence from sedentary tribal communities in Yemen, in which authorship is the prized practice and recitation devalued, see Steven Caton, "Peaks of Yemen I Summon": Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 8.

\textsuperscript{60} Sowayan, \textit{al-Şahrā'}, p. 231.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. p. 271.
single human mind at a single point in time than it would with a literary work. The notion of individual signature at the bottom of the canvas is out of place when the mural has been touched and retouched by numerous hands in the course of its preparation." In an age of documentation and textual authority, in a Gulf society dominated today by textual protocols and bureaucratic formalisms, being prisoner to an oral culture means asserting one's traditional identity in terms of the new standards demanded by this society. The question of who gets credit for an oral poem's authorship thus becomes primary, and it is only a short leap from a debate over authorship and the authenticity of names to one over intellectual property and the monetary value of the bedouin historical inheritance. In fact, one report noted that the Āl Muhayd shaykhs were seeking material compensation from MBC for the injury inflicted to their historical reputations. With the modern transformation of Saudi society, in which tribal leaders have seen their fortunes, both material and political, decline, the suggestion of a financial motive behind the tribal campaign against Finjān al-Damm is not unreasonable. Yet, a more thorough review of the series'
plot demonstrates that 'following the money' can lead one only so far when notions of tribal prestige and honor are at stake.

**Courage and Dishonor**

In his insightful new volume on traditional Arabian society, *al-Ṣahrā' al-‘Arabiyya*, Saad Sowayan identifies generosity and courage as the two principal values of "the culture of the desert," which find frequent expression in oral narrations and poetry. With a large segment of contemporary Saudi society enjoying the benefits of oil wealth, generosity has become a somewhat easily reproducible value, one with continued currency and material resonance in the daily lives of Saudi citizens. Generosity is everywhere on display among citizens in Saudi society, and every manifestation of hospitality demonstrates continuity with the past and provides a comforting buffer against the dislocating transformation of the oil age. Tribal courage, however, is a far less translatable quality in the present day. The steady

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64 Generosity within the tribal context can still be a combustible value, however. A debate currently rages between members of two major Saudi tribes, 'Urayba and Ghāmid, over which of the two is the authentic and deserving possessor of the nickname *al-Haylā*, "The Generous One."
expansion of the state into the traditional domains of the tribe, the provisioning of economic goods and physical security, has largely eliminated the tribal system’s *raison d’être*. The tribe today exists as a shell of its former self, a fact which, paradoxically, has made controversies over tribal history all the more combustible. When notions of tribal honor are challenged, as they were in episode 17 of *Finjān al-Damm*, the consequences can reverberate substantially.

Based on the timing of the Āl Muhayd letter and other complaints, it appears that one scene proved particularly irksome to tribal leaders. In episode 17, we find Nūrī and his clan raiding a caravan of Ḥajj pilgrims. Earlier, Nūrī had reached an agreement with the local Ottoman administrators to protect such caravans in exchange for compensation. Political arrangements of this kind, in which weak central governments paid the equivalent of protection money to autonomous, often recalcitrant tribes, are a recurring theme in Arabian history, and can be traced to the pre-Islamic period.65 Mistrusting of the local

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65 The scenario outlined in *Finjān al-Damm* agrees with the historical understanding of the political relationships between the Ottoman authorities and the ‘Anaza sub-clans of the Syrian desert. See Al-Bādiya, p. 515. For the pre-Islamic relations between the Byzantine
Ottoman authorities, who are portrayed in true Arab
nationalist fashion as being treacherous and out of touch,
Nūrī decides to launch a surprise raid on a caravan in
which, to his misfortune, the mother of the Ottoman Sultan
happens to be traveling. Struck with fear from the
violence of the raiding tribal warriors, the Sultan's
mother has a heart attack and dies on the spot.

The Āl Muhayd complaint letter was made public on September
13, 2009, after 23 episodes of Finjān al-Damm had aired. Cast
in the language of high ceremony that is central to the ritual
of Saudi public life, the letter alludes to "damage" and "pain"
caused to the reputation of the Saudi tribes by the series. Yet
the Āl Muhayd letter does not announce any specific grievances,
a pursuit best left to the relatively unpoliced quarters of the
Internet. On September 9, 2009, an anonymous 'Anaza tribesman
published a detailed rebuttal to the series on several 'Anaza
tribal Internet discussion forums. Such forums proliferated
after the introduction of the Internet to the kingdom fifteen
years ago, and remain important loci of tribal cultural
expression. In a lengthy and detailed critique of the first 18
episodes of the series, the author, who goes by the screen name

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Empire and the Arab tribes, see Irfan Shahid, Byzantium and the Arabs
66 Ramadan 2009 began on Friday August 21.
al-Muhallib al-Ruwaylî, discusses the nature of his and other tribesmen's complaints against Finjân al-Damm, the most grievous being Nūrî’s pilgrim episode: “Nūrî’s betrayal of the pilgrims, and his attack against them, and the murder of the Sultan’s mother, as the author [i.e. 'Adnān al-'Awda] claimed, is the greatest calamity, and the worst injury, and the straw that broke the camel’s back!” he concludes. That the Sultan’s mother died from shock as opposed to violence is immaterial to the author. What is being threatened by the Finjân al-Damm scenario is the hallowed myth of tribal nobility (and by a so-called “bedouin” author no less).67 Al-Muhallib al-Ruwaylî continues: “There were indeed tribes that would rob the pilgrims, but they are not Shammar and ‘Anaza. Rather, they are other well-known tribes, [but] there is no need to mention their names. For his part, Nūrî was faithful in the service of the Ottoman state, and in protecting the caravans...and there are numerous Ottoman documents that confirm this.”68 This apologetic depiction of the historical Nūrî appears to leave out some details from his biography. According to the Czech explorer Alois Musil, who spent decades traveling with the Rwala in northern Arabia, Nūrî

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68 “Finjân al-Damm: credibility has been lost,” Official Rwala Forum.
became head of the Rwala after instigating the murder of his own brother. As T.E. Lawrence relates in his tendentious yet relevant fashion:

"...[Nūrī’s] was the chief family of the Rualla, but Nuri had no precedence among them at birth, nor was he loved, nor a great man of battle. His headship had been acquired by sheer force of character. To gain it he had killed two of his brothers. Later he had added Sherarat and others to the number of his followers, and in all their desert his word was absolute law. He had none of the wheedling diplomacy of the ordinary sheikh; a word, and there was an end of opposition, or of his opponent. All feared and obeyed him..."  

That Nūrī’s fame may have been achieved precisely on account of his ferocity and ruthlessness does not mesh easily with the discourse of tribal dignity and honor that has become the currency of contemporary Saudi culture in many quarters. The sort of raiding depicted in Finjān al-Damm has no place in the modern lexicon of tribal virtue, and many Saudi tribal historians work overtime to revise the dominant narratives of their own tribe’s historical conduct, which sometimes included the raiding of pilgrim caravans. It is this religion and oil wealth-infused tribal discourse that has begun to impose itself in unlikely places like the consumer end of a television production.

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70 Lawrence, Seven Pillars, p. 163.
Orality and textuality aside, prestige is a quality contested in every society. The concern is therefore to identify the particular contours of the contest in the case before us. At one level, the intense interest in Finjān al-Damm by Saudi Shammar and 'Anaza tribesmen and their lobbying of the series’ producers was no more than an effort to ensure that their tribes’ perceived fictional shadows emerged triumphant in the drama’s final reckoning. "We received visitors from both parties," Finjān’s producer Adīb Khair explained. "At the end of the day, they all wanted to know, who won the final battle?" And yet, the apparent incapacity of tribal complainants to achieve any of their aims beyond the series’ 2003 postponement speaks to a different dimension of Saudi society, one that concerns the relatively marginal position of the bedouin.

Bedouin occupy a difficult position in contemporary Arab societies. While bedouin culture is embraced by many modern, urban Arab citizens for the pristine and nostalgic qualities it embodies, the often retrograde socio-economic reality of contemporary bedouin-origin populations is a source of elite unease and a frequent excuse for their neglect. The scholar of contemporary Saudi Arabia Pascal Menoret has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork among bedouin youth in Riyadh, and has

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71 Interview with Adīb Khair, Cairo, January 2012.
demonstrated convincingly their profound disenfranchisement vis-à-vis broader Saudi society.\textsuperscript{72} In historical terms, Abd al-Aziz al-Fahad has argued that the establishment of the Saudi state was a town-centric project that was in many respects anti-bedouin.\textsuperscript{73} Compounding this condition today is the fact that Saudi media is controlled largely by members of the traditional settled elite, which renders most dramatic representations of bedouin life, if not rife with caricature, then at the very least, infused with the tension inherent in the historical relationship between bedouin and settled. Assertions of bedouin culture in the public sphere can therefore be read as efforts to compensate for this marginal position, in other words, to reinscribe dignity into the portrayal of bedouin in popular media. In this respect, the entry of tribal complainants into the Gulf media fray is a marker of their arrival, in a society dramatically reconstituted on account of sedentarization, the domination of a strong centralized state, mass literacy, and new media. Of the thirty episodes of \textit{Finjān al-Damm}, each begins with a chorus of stern and serious voices singing the refrain:


The bedouin were,
The bedouin were,
And if they hadn't been,
Then we wouldn't be.

Empowered by new media and a reinvigorated sense of tribal pride, Saudi and Gulf Arabs of
debouin origin are qualifying this refrain with a “but we’re still here!”

**Censorship**

Having moved through a number of themes relating to the
*Finjān al-Damm* controversy, this paper has yet to address one
crucial dimension of the story. Why do objections to artistic
productions about tribal culture invariably manifest themselves
in campaigns to shut down, censor, or muffle their creators?
Why is censorship the first-order solution for both governmental
and societal actors? To begin to answer these questions, we
must first look briefly at the history of censorship in the
Saudi media and how it relates to broader transitions in Saudi
society over the course of the twentieth century. After the
institutionalization of the Saudi media in the 1950s, censorship
became the province of two types of authorities, religious and
royal. Newspaper editors of that era were forced to maneuver
through narrow journalistic straits, to avoid both the
disparaging of religious sensibilities, broadly conceived, and,
after 1958, any hint of sympathy toward the Egyptian leader
Gamal 'Abd al- Nāṣir's pan-Arab nationalism. Moral and political policing by religious authorities like Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm and government officials from the Communications Directorate ensured a mostly anodyne media discourse.\textsuperscript{74} Ironically, it is partly on account of these constraints on permissible content that a robust literature on tribes and tribalism came to emerge in the 1970s, and has continued to thrive until today. Censors of earlier generations could not envision that tribalism would prove so combustible a subject when transferred to print, or one so threatening to the social and political fabric of the country.\textsuperscript{75} Saudi Arabia was too atomized, too regionalized for the notion of a nationwide public discourse on tribal heritage to have any valence at that early stage. When tribal poetry and genealogy began to migrate from oral accountings to the restrictive confines of the Saudi media, however, a new class of censors was born - tribal censors. With

\textsuperscript{74} In 1964, independent newspapers were brought under the control of the government through the Press Institutions Decree, which marked the beginning of state media development and consolidation. The political resonance of media in Saudi Arabia was felt perhaps most acutely with the 1965 introduction of television. Like the introduction of girls' education to the kingdom several years earlier, the arrival of television was met with discontent by religious conservatives. These included a nephew of King Faisal, who was killed for his involvement in anti-television protests. Ten years later, the nephew's brother assassinated King Faisal in his majlis. See Madawi al-Rasheed, \textit{Politics in an Arabian Oasis: the Rashidis of Saudi Arabia} (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p. 251.

\textsuperscript{75} For a list of subjects prohibited by early Saudi censors, one that, notably, does not include tribalism or tribal issues, see Kraidy, "The Rise of Transnational Media Systems," p. 145.
the emergence of projects promoting the documentation of Arabian lineages like that of Saudi historian Ḥamad al-Jāsir, the occasional misattribution of tribal affiliations seemed inevitable. Yet, as the Finjān al-Damm case clearly demonstrates, scholarly misstep was an insufficient excuse for the denial of a symbolic patrimony. The new Saudi genealogy, and the broader documentation of Arabia’s oral culture it epitomized, generated heated reactions by Saudis of tribal (and non-tribal) origin throughout the kingdom, who began to push back in earnest against these novel, mechanically circulated artifacts of their identity. By the 1990s, the Ministry of Information was beginning to heavily censor all tribal media, to the point where today, it is extremely difficult for a tribal historian, serious or amateur, to have his book approved for publication within the kingdom. A spokesman for the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information described the procedure for preventing tribal publications from entering the country illegally:

We have our checkpoints at the boundaries, in the airports, in the seaports...We have our people there, sitting...we have offices in all the gates, so we will take the book, we will check it, we will look at the record,...we will take one copy and...just go through it and see if it is approved or not. Otherwise, we will stop it at the checkpoint, and ask them to take it back, you see. Some of them will smuggle ten copies, fifteen copies....This is

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something that [exists] even in the [United] States, they smuggle drugs...But this is the way to handle it in our ministry. 77

The pervasiveness of the state and its domination of the Saudi economy lead inevitably to the circulation of roles, so that the government censors of yesterday are the tribal historians of today. This is the case with one prominent tribal historian I came to know quite well during my field work in the kingdom. A decade ago, this historian worked as a consultant for the Ministry of Culture and Information, where he was tasked with reviewing tribal monographs and determining whether their contents were sufficiently free of error and potential for backlash by disapproving members of the author’s tribe. Today, he is a well-known tribal historian, who has been harassed at his workplace by members of his own tribe because they reject his claims concerning their lineal affiliation. The historian has initiated legal action against these individuals for slandering his character, and his case is now tied up in the courts.

The Saudi regime’s aversion to a robust tribal media has in part to do with its deep ties to the various prominent tribes of central Arabia. King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, founder of the modern Saudi state, contracted a number of marriages with female

77 Author interview, Riyadh, April 2011.
members of the Shammar tribe, whose ruling house he had
defeated. In addition, it has long been held that the Saudi
royal family descends from the 'Anaza tribe. The significance
of this perceived lineal affiliation with the royal family
emerged in the responses to al-Muhallib al-Ruwaylī’s
aforementioned critical review of Finjān al-Damm on an Internet
discussion forum. As one 'Anaza respondent explained:

"I am following the series and my blood pressure is rising.
Oh tribe, [this is] an injustice and a defacement of the
man [i.e. Nūrī]. The author must, must, be held to
account... Look at the serial Sa’dūn al-‘Awāji, the ‘Awājis
[i.e. another 'Anaza branch] got it stopped. So why are we
not capable of stopping something worthless [tāfiḥ] by a
worthless person, when we are of the king’s lineage, have a
strong position in society, and are well-known."

It is perhaps sentiments of this nature that prompted
Prince Salmān b. 'Abd al-'Azīz to proclaim in a 1999 speech
marking the kingdom’s 100th anniversary that the Āl Sa‘ūd
were in fact descendants of the ancient tribe of Banī
Ḥanīfa, whose presence, and thus capacity to lobby for
favor in the way of ‘Anaza tribesmen, is hardly to be
counted in modern Saudi society.

78 Madawi al-Rasheed, A History of Saudi Arabia (Cambridge: Cambridge
79 Saudi historians were split on this question, but according to Ḥamad
al-Jāsir, the majority opinion favored an 'Anazī lineage. See Ḥamad
80 Emphasis original.
81 Author interview, Riyadh, January 2012. For evidence of this shift
see for example, "Governor visits Al Madinah Islamic University,”
Ministry of Interior: Emirate of Riyadh Province, March 30, 2011,
Despite this heightened sensitivity over the documenting of tribal history and genealogy, Saudi tribal media has experienced a growth spasm in the past decade. Satellite television channels like al-Šahrā' and al-Šāba pump out heritage content on a constant basis. These channels often feature video clips of camels grazing while anāshīd (praise poems for the king and royal family) blare in the background, or wedding celebrations of the children of prominent tribal figures. This sort of heritage content is thoroughly uncontroversial, as it pretends no relationship with specific facets of Saudi history. When history does protrude onto the surface of Saudi public life, as occurred with Finjān al-Damm, the raw emotions it stimulates call attention to the fragile nature of the narratives surrounding the kingdom’s past, the precarious position Saudis occupy within these narratives, and, ultimately, the weak legitimacy of the Saudi state.\footnote{One might think of censorship here in Arendt’s sense, as a kind of cultural violence whose pervasive exercise betrays the state’s weak legitimacy.} Today, Sama Art Production continues to receive phone calls and petitions from Saudi tribal figures, requesting certificates that attest to the fact that the familiar names used in the Finjān al-Damm series refer directly to their own famous ancestors.\footnote{Author interview with Adīb Khair, Cairo, January 2012.} As surviving artifacts of historical memory, Arabian tribal names are the starting
point for assertions of authority in an age of documentation, 
defying modern authors to ignore the fluid cultural dynamic from 
which they emerged.