

**Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen:
Ruling Families in Transition**

Gabriele vom Bruck

New York: Palgrave, 2005. 348 pages.

The anthropological literature on Yemen has had little to say about the class of *sadah* (plural of *sayyid*) who dominated the Zaydi imamate in North Yemen from the tenth century until 1962. Gabriele vom Bruck's account of the *sadah*, based on interviews and an extended stay in Yemen starting in 1983, includes a wide range of information on perceptions of this class, especially after the 1962 revolution, with an emphasis on how personal identity is established and attitudes about marriage with non-*sadah*. There is an extensive bibliography of western sources, but little indication of the wide range of relevant Arabic sources available. It should be noted that vom Bruck almost totally ignores the *sadah* of southern Yemen as well as of the Tihama, although her text sometimes reads as if it were describing a generic class of *sadah* for Yemen as a whole.

The author's stated goal is "to examine the relationship of experience, social practice, and moral reasoning among the hereditary elite in the context of revolutionary change" (p. 5). Her theoretical focus is on the social process of remembrance as the *sadah* were forced into new roles after the imamate's demise. Vom Bruck argues that we should avoid "a monolithic understanding of sayyid as a 'vessel of charisma' and 'paragon of piety'" (p. 250) and suggests that the "descent metaphor" (p. 6) was the "principle self-defining criterion" of the *sadah* as well as the "core of the Imamate's political culture." (p. 6) However, the idiom of descent has also been the defining feature of Yemen's tribes, so the role of descent *per se* is less relevant as a distinguishing marker than how the *sadah* relate to other social categories.

Although the relationship with tribesmen is mentioned at several points, it is not analyzed in depth apart from anecdotal evidence. For example, it is highly problematic to label musicians *al-akhdam* (p. 44), who were actually quite rare in Zaydi towns and villages, a nuanced pariah category. There is little sense of how the *sadah* fit into actual communities, and no effective integration of the available literature previously published on Yemeni social categories (including Tomas Gerholm's *Market, Mosque, and Mafraj* [Stockholm University Press: 1977] and Eduard Glaser's important late-nineteenth century articles).

The first chapter, "The House of the Prophet," is a rambling account of the Zaydi school's origins with a focus on Sanaa. The author, an ethnographer by training, relies on derivative sources for her understanding of Zaydi Islam, most notably the work of Wilfred Madelung, rather than probing the many available Arabic texts. For example, a paragraph (p. 37) on the first Yemeni Zaydi imam, Yahya ibn al-Husayn, cites four English references and ignores a valuable printed Arabic biography (Ali ibn Muhammad ibn 'Abid al-'Abbasi al-'Alawi, *Sirat al-Hadi ila al-Haqq Yahya ibn al-Husayn* [Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1972]). Her decision (p. 275, note 9) not to examine the extensive literature of published memoirs and officially sponsored publications on the 1962 revolution makes it very difficult for the reader to make any kind of informed judgment on the informants' comments. Moreover, her book, with multiple references by informants to the perceived history of the *sadah* in Yemen, would benefit from a systematic comparison with the historical tradition.

A major problem is that the information provided is mostly anecdotal and is not placed within the social context. The Yemeni informants' recollections are fascinating, but the result is more a journalistic account than a substantive ethnographic analysis. This is the case in chapter 4, which is an interesting story about three individuals but contains no analysis. Another example is

mujtahid Sayyid `Abd al-Qadir's lengthy autobiographical note (pp. 114-19), which mentions his textbooks and teachers, his focus in training, relations with the imam's family, and judiciary appointments. Unfortunately, this information is barely analyzed. The thriving Yemeni biographical genre, which should have been of great value, is virtually ignored, even though this genre, in large part, validates the virtues of past notables in elite families.

One of the main methodological failures is the lack of detail on how the material was collected. There are many examples of extensive quotes from interviews (e.g., Sayyid al-Mansur on pp. 36-37) but the Arabic is not provided and there is no indication of how these were translated or by whom. Were recordings made? Were the interviews written down by hand, as indicated for some examples? Were the translations done in the field with help from Yemeni informants? At times, the quote has a vague attribution such as "a governor's daughter" (p. 59), "a friend" (p. 109), "a diplomat" (p. 181), "a university lecturer" (p. 191), and "a businessman" (p. 213). The author does not explain why so many informants are not named, while intimate details are given of some of the major families. Indeed, the author provides a list (pp. 256-68) of professional histories for two major families, but does not analyze them in the narrative.

It is also sometimes unclear where or when the information was gathered. Although at one point the author says she lived in a village given the fictitious name of Falih (p. xiii), there is no indication of a village context (apart from mentioning that she stayed with a family) or the actual length of her stay there, and it barely figures in the narrative. What does it mean to be "working in Falih" (p. 160), when we have no data on the community's size or social make-up? Where were most of the many interviews carried out, especially given the focus on male respondents? The issue of how she functioned as a single female researcher among males from the elite is not discussed, apart from an acknowledgment that men "figure more prominently" (p. 24) in her study than women. The lack of attention to the methods used compromises the material's usefulness for comparative purposes.

While the book contains a lot of valuable information, I cannot recommend it for use in a classroom. As an ethnographic account, it has serious methodological flaws, for it largely relies on anecdotal evidence and thus lacks the reflexivity and analysis needed to contextualize the stories. Students would find it tedious to sift through the many stories and be disappointed at the brief conclusion. There is little theoretical innovation, despite quotes from a myriad of critical scholars.

Given the importance of history in the *sadah* identity, the author could have consulted the wide range of relevant Arabic sources, especially the

biographical genre and memoirs on the 1962 revolution. The reader interested in the Zaydi school will find little of their doctrines and legal thinking. Those who know something about Yemen can use the book with caution, but other readers should perhaps look elsewhere.

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