Back to the Future

State Transformation and Sentimental Repertoires of Belonging in Saudi Arabia

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دَارِي وَسِرُّ الهَوَى البَاقِي وَأُوطَانِي يَا طَيْبَةَ النُّورِ يَا رُوحِي وَوِجْدَانِي

"My home and the secret of the lasting fondness and my homeland. Oh goodness of light, oh my soul and my sentiment"
Abdus-Salam Hafeth 592: "The Nostalgia, Oh my Home"

Introduction

For centuries, Arabic poetry has been a venue of negotiation for questions of identity, social order, and belonging. Passed down orally from generation to generation, it still plays a significant role in processes of collective identity formation today. Saudi Arabia's literary scene has evolved over time and with the recent cultural opening, arts and poetry are experiencing a revival, even appearing in official government documents. Saudi poet Abdus-Salam Hafeth is one of the most significant writers of the 20th century on a Saudi renewed thought of (national) belonging (Dahāmi 151). In his poem "The Nostalgia, Oh my Home" (1993), the longing for his homeland becomes tangible, as it shapes him as an individual and thus becomes the touchpoint for his self-expression. Through his feelings towards it, his homeland becomes one with his very existence. The *sentiment*[1] he feels allows him to view himself in line with those who

1 The term "وجدان" (root "وجد") contains many meanings which span from "strong emotion," "passion," "ecstasy," "physical arousal" or "violent joy" to "sentiment" (Wehr 1003). Moreover, it is one of the myriad words for "passionate love" in classical Arabic poetry. In each way, it always contains a fundamental affective connotation.

came before him. These ancestors become symbolic "mirrors" (مَرَايِ) of himself, to which he remains bound as they "stay locked inside him by bonds of feeling" (Hafeth 592).[2] Consequently, he understands his own individual belonging in relation to a social group that he perceives anchored in a Saudi nation state to which he remains connected through emotional ties.

Indeed, at the heart of how people perceive themselves individually and collectively lies their emotional conditioning. Emotional and affective encounters throughout life form the very social fabric that individuals rely upon to make sense of the world—both as individual beings and as political subjects (Edkins). Discussing the works of affect theorists Brian Massumi and John Protevi, Jan Slaby (2017, 134) posits that affects are inherently political in nature, as they are responsible for the formation of political subjects and the shaping of their attitudes, perceptions, and habits. In addition, political leaders often seek to appeal to *the people's feelings*, employing various strategies of *sentimental leadership*—an approach exemplified early on by Max Weber's concept of "charismatic authority." These observations on the relationship between affects and politics raise questions about the genesis of nation-states and the stability and transformative power of social and political orders. While much of the research so far focuses on liberal democracies, the same questions apply to autocratic regimes as well. Since the affective turn in the 1990s (Clough), scholars have observed that autocrats increasingly strengthen societal bonds among their populations by modes of active mobilization and emotional engagement (Greene/Robertson; Pearlman), occasionally through references to the past (Demmelhuber/Thies). In the case of the Gulf monarchies, sentimentality becomes a tool of social engineering by fostering feelings of belonging to sustain political orders. This leads to the question of how ruling elites use sentimentality in their rhetoric to build collective identities during recent periods of autocratic transformation.

The Gulf monarchies and especially Saudi Arabia can be considered outstanding examples of how a governing elite employs a specific kind of sentimental leadership. On the onset of the post-oil era, Saudi Arabia moved down a difficult path of renegotiating state-society relations without being able to

2 "أين المَرَايِ يالّتِي كنّا نُعانِقُهَا وَتَحتوِينا بِإحسَاس وَ أجفَانِ؟" (Hafeth 592). The phrase of "بِأجفَانِ وَتَحتَوِينَا [...]" (literally "contain us with eyelids") in light of the common use of physiognomies in contemporary Arabic poetry is thus translated as "being locked within." "مَرَايِ" is translated as mirrors but could also relate to "appearances" (translation A.T.)

fall back on previous legitimation strategies that fed on oil revenues. The kingdom now finds itself in the latest period of social and political transformation in light of the upcoming post-oil era. Nevertheless, it has demonstrated a high degree of adaptability in the past.[3] Since the last decade, a new nationalism has been employed that aims at the elevation of affective ties connecting the populace with its leadership. In 2022, a new "Founding Day" was introduced, which is celebrated on February 22 and serves to shape a collective memory and reinterpretation of the ruling family as the founding fathers of the Saudi state. Under the slogan "The Day We Started," the regime re-contextualizes key socio-historical elements of a pre-oil era and bridges them with current political strategies of its "Vision 2030" (Saudi Vision 2030). The role of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is of exceptional importance in this context. His reinterpretation and staging, including a quite theatrical self-dramatization, in the light of his ancestors with reference to their relevance and successes in pre-oil times, aligns with the current economic diversification strategies and policy ambitions of a post-oil era envisioned under his leadership. The strategic harnessing of past events as sources of identification (repertoires of the past) and their re-contextualization for current restructuring processes primarily targets the generation that will shape the country in the future.

This contribution illustrates how the Saudi government seeks to consolidate its power in a future political order given the kingdom's recent period of transformation. Based on a data set comprising official documents, regime-affiliated newspapers, and MBS's official speeches and interviews this contribution reconstructs the top-down initiated storytelling about a nation, notions of collective belonging and heritage, and the role of sentiments therein. In doing so, sentimental codes and narratives have been identified that aim to appeal to the population on an affective level. This examination is embedded in the larger historical formation of the Saudi state in order to identify those past events that are now employed to foster collective meaning-making through sentimental practices.

3 For an exceptionally fine-grained analysis on the transformations of state and society in the Gulf, cf. Al-Naqeeb.

Investigating Sentimentality
A Necessarily Interdisciplinary Field

Political science has only recently begun to address the concept of sentimentality, building on the findings of anthropological and ethnological research (Marcus; Bens/Zenker). Concurrently, the discipline incorporates extensive debates on related terms concerning emotions and affects in the political sphere (Arendt; Nussbaum). In other disciplines, sentimentality has already been established as a concept. Literary studies in particular have long dealt with the sentimental (Bell; Zumbusch). Tracing the term from 18th century anglophone literature from where it found its way into other languages ("sentimental" in DWDS), literary studies reveal the origins, underlying concepts, but also—over the course of time—devaluation of the term "sentimentality." In the wake of these dynamics, sentimentality frequently acquired pejorative connotations that tend to still mark colloquial semantics today (Zumbusch 570). Yet, the above-mentioned works demonstrate how reductionist interpretations in 19th century sentimentalism, like understanding sentimentality as gendered and as using it to describe 'female' sensations, have long dismissed scholarly debates about the clearly more complex dynamics of sentimentality in the emotional cultures of modernity (Mendelman).

From a cultural studies perspective, Lauren Berlant established a groundbreaking foundation of a new understanding of *national sentimentality*, interpreting the political sphere of the U.S. as an affective space. In their literary critical analysis, they examine the emergence of the first mass-mediated *intimate public sphere* not only successfully addressing affect-based processes of collective consolidation but also their impact on meaning-making within political spheres (Berlant 1991; 1997; 2008). Apart from the aforementioned publications, American studies further published a significant body of work inherently essential to sentimentalism. Most notable are Anker's examination of political melodrama as sentimental politics of order (Anker) and the concept of civil sentimentalism (Paul). Finally, sociological and philosophical research provides knowledge on the affective level of human existence that is essential for investigating sentimentality in its ontological dimension. Especially the sociologies of emotion (Illouz 2004; 2018), affect theories (Massumi 1995, 2002; Peters), and social cohesion theories (Durkheim 1984; 1992) provide necessary parameters for understanding affective relationships and the constitution of social and political orders. Overall, the research field on sentimentality draws particular derivations from moral sense philosophy (Erämetsä 17). The majority

of these concepts originated and are located in the anglophone world. However, in view of the enormous interdependencies and mutual influences in a history of ideas across various geographical areas, it is long overdue to begin a scholarly conversation on the sentimental in Middle Eastern studies.

Political philosophy in the Near and Middle East has produced as rich a body of work on affective dispositions, moral feelings, and the general role of emotions in politics as its occidental counterpart (Mian). To be historically correct, both have massively influenced one another.[4] With regard to the research subject of sentimentality, Al-Farabi's political theory is of utmost significance. By seeking to reconcile reason and affect, he offers sociolinguistic groundings for arrangements of meaning in social and political orders and provides insights into early understandings of modes of affect. For example, he argues that meaning-making in the socio-political realm is rooted in the interplay of affect, cognition, and sensory perception, shaped by the physical and psychological dispositions of human bodies. He emphasizes that language emerges through emotional and intellectual engagement with the world, grounding understanding and communication in lived, bodily experiences (Mian 54). Sociologist Ibn Khaldun's notion of social cohesion (*aṣabiyya*) resembles Durkheim's later theory of collective consciousness and his understanding of mechanical and organic solidarity (Gellner 205). In general, all great Peripatetic philosophers reflect on the role of affect and emotion and the resulting respective modalities of perception which are able to influence social structures and understandings of *ruling and being ruled*. Their works in sociology, philosophy, and theology are still studied today in the region or in *niche*-disciplines of so-called 'Islamic' philosophy. Moreover, they have found their way into Arabic, Turkish, and Persian poetry and literature. While enriching Western debates, these perspectives offer insights into regional self-perceptions over time, yet they are often overlooked. Ernest Gellner's work illustrates the advantages of a combined reading of Durkheim's and Ibn Khaldun's works for a better understanding of social orders. Consequently, interdisciplinary Middle Eastern studies has not only earned a seat at the table of affect and sentimentality studies; its inclusion is long overdue.

4 E.g. Al-Farabi's influence on Leo Strauss' classical political philosophy (Tamer), Ibn Rush and Ibn Sina's commentaries on Aristotle underpinned Thomas Aquinas' own Aristotelian understanding (Borrowman) or Wittgenstein's influence on Jordanian philosopher Sahban Khuleifat in shaping his ideas of moral sense philosophy (Jarrar).

In this contribution, I follow a notion of sentimentality that understands the concept in terms of its mobilizing effect, as an enticing instrument for political actors. Thus, sentimentality allows for a construction of a unifying narrative, the sharing of common feelings and memories, and for using them as a means to foster a sense of belonging within a collective identity (Demmelhuber/Thies 1008). It has the potential to shape and transform state-society relations. How people interpret a situation and thus express (affective) reactions towards it, is shaped by their socially and culturally conditioned bodies of knowledge, so-called emotion repertoires. When having emotional experiences, people draw on these repertoires to respond to affective encounters (Poser et al. 241). The arising sentiments then shape how people feel about the *meaning* of a situation and therefore influence how they make sense of the world around them and their own positionality in it (Bens/Zenker 97). In the long-run, this creates relational spheres of belonging by either enacting or severing affectional bonds with one another, depending on the intensity and nature of individual and collective experiences (ibid.; Slaby 2014, 42).

Following Bens and Zenker, sentiments "connect cognitive processes of forming opinions and judgments with affective and emotional dynamics" (96). Sentiments prove to be decisive in such processes, as they outlast the incidents in which they are produced (Bens 209). Hence, they offer a bridge from past events to the present for the sake of meaning-making on an individual as well as collective level (Demmelhuber/Thies 1007). In applying and disseminating sentimental repertoires, reciprocal relationships are constructed between the sending and receiving end of such sentimental rhetoric, e.g. between ruling elite and populace (ibid.). Political action is thus not solely the domain of the sending actors but also a place of reception and judgment (Slaby 2017, 140, referencing Judith Mohrmann's stage model). From the perspective of political science research, this requires a certain responsiveness in order to analyze the emergent dynamics of affect and the making of effective sentiments.

Through sentimental codes, political actors are able to affectively charge and validate ideas of order (Paul). In doing so, sentimental knowledge stocks of the past, e.g. historical junctures, sorrows, hardships, or traumatic experiences can serve as sources that can be utilized in the present to ensure the survival of political orders. In the face of shattering and traumatic experiences, people are reliant upon a shared language and/or knowledge stocks in order to share and make sense of their experiences (Hutchison 10). Thus, whose experiences are processed and remembered (e.g. marginalized groups or an entire nation) becomes a decisive factor for its utilization. These knowledge stocks

are then enacted in a manner that is both, social and political (ibid.). As a result, they become a key feature of a group attribution and—when played out politically—are continuously made available for future generations. Enactments like these are achieved through material and non-material (e.g. rhetorical) practices across socio-cultural and political fields, while targeting different audiences (Demmelhuber/Thies 1007).

Transforming the State
The Evolution of a Kingdom

Saudi Arabia is definitely considered to be "a country with a present—synonymous with the global oil economy" (Bsheer 7). At the same time, the kingdom is not seldom denied a meaningful history beyond its enormous relevance of being the birthplace of the first Muslim community (ibid.). The success of the founding of the state, as it now stands, is often linked to the infamous alliance of the Al-Saud family with the religious reform movement of Ibn Al-Wahab in 1744. However, the formative processes that constitute today's Saudi state are not only partly located further in the past, they are also considerably more complex.

The history of the formation of the Saudi state tells a story of unification and fragmentation, opposition and—contrary to common scholarly belief (Al-Naqeeb; for a critique cf. Derbal)—responsiveness to the civilian population. Despite being an absolute monarchy, the kingdom has seen broader civil participation through advisory councils, religious authorities, and tribal allegiances, all influencing its governance. Thus, transformation and various forms of participation have been recurring themes in Saudi Arabia's development. While at first sight this might seem contradictory to the linear, unilateral story of the making of the Saudi State as it is fostered right now in Saudi Arabia's latest transformation period, it actually fits quite well into the picture of a state and society that proved to be impressively adaptable throughout its history. As Proctor and Al-Senussi describe it, the Saudi State went "from openness to closure and isolation followed by a dynamic burst of movement at breakneck speed" (16).

The founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 by Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, first King of the state (1932–1953), sparked a period of regional debates on identity, particularly visible in the artistic as well as cultural sector, with the construction of heritage sites. The discovery of oil

in the late 1930s revolutionized Saudi society, leading to urbanization, cultural growth, and a modern economy. Simultaneously, these dynamics led to opposition from conservative and anti-imperialist groups against this new metropolitan consumerism (Proctor/Al-Senussi 17). At the same time, Ibn Saud's reign and that of his heir Saud ibn Abd Al Aziz (1953–1964) coincided with a phase of anti-imperialist Arab Nationalism as well as secular leftist movements in the region. In order to stabilize his reign in the light of these regional processes, Saud adopted more progressive policies while trying to contain opposition from conservative forces within the ruling family (Bsheer 10).

Leaders like King Saud and King Faisal, who were quite popular among Saudi nationals, navigated regional dynamics, such as Arab nationalism and leftist movements, by balancing conservative views with more progressive policies. Faisal, known for his Pan-Islamism and pro-Palestinian stance, made strides like abolishing slavery and leading the 1973 oil boycott, while also strengthening the state's control over religious institutions (Proctor/Al-Senussi 26; Bsheer 11). Additionally, he offered refuge to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood members who fled from the threat of being executed by Nasser in an attempt to balance out Wahabi clerical interest groups, thus weakening religious conservative institutions (Bsheer 8). During this time, a first centralized narrative promoting the State under Saudi rule was created, alongside institutionalized forms of nationalism (e.g. through centralized education and unifying school curricula, Bsheer 11) and thus the solidification of a new status quo. In general, the period of the 1930s to the late 1960s is, according to scholarly literature, considered to be more liberal, modern, and progressive, with many different forms of civic engagement. State-society relations in the kingdom were far from one-sided or coercive, while Wahabi Islam was present, though more moderate (Proctor/Al-Senussi 26). However, this was supposed to change in the late 1970s.

The oil wealth and Saudi Arabia's entanglement with geopolitical issues led to a rupture, i.e. to a "period of cataclysmic change" (Proctor/Al-Senussi 24) in the Saudi society and government. The 1979 Kaaba revolt pushed the kingdom toward stricter conservatism. Although the Saudi ruling family contained the situation, the shock waves of this act changed the sociopolitical map of Saudi Arabia in a lasting manner. Determined to prevent similar incidents, the Saudi government became more conservative and repressive in its policies (ibid.). Hence, the following decades saw increased social conservatism, the shutting down of entertainment venues, the enforcing of gender segregation, and the

stifling of cultural expression overall.[5] An entire generation of Saudis had just begun to experience and collectively shape emerging scenes of culture and entertainment, which became new pillars of a Saudi national identity. The following two decades of uncompromising social and religious conservatism brought these dynamics to a halt. However, it did not eliminate political participation as society continued to engage in shaping the nation's cultural and political identity, albeit under the radar of state politics (Proctor/Al-Senussi 28; Thies, forthcoming 2025a).

The already challenging economic and socio-political situation worsened during the 1990/91 Gulf War, which marked a turning point for the Kingdom. This period saw a shift from "religious time" to "historical time" (Bsheer 19), with the introduction of satellite television breaking the religious establishment's monopoly. Thus, public support for the religious establishment began to wane (ibid.; Proctor/Al-Senussi 32). A cautious effort took shape to create commemorative spaces—lieux de mémoire (Nora)—of a past heritage that offered a state narrative as an alternative to the one focusing solely on religious roots. Some scholars, such as Rebecca A. Proctor and Alia Al-Senussi, attribute these changes to regional and global transformation processes. Others, like Rosie Bsheer, view it as an attempt to secure the permanence of the Al Saud dynasty in order to keep the regime stable via a built environment (Bsheer 131). Either way, the Saudi government used its petro-wealth to invest into neglected memorial sites whose preservation was considered heretical by some religious actors and institutions. Indeed, several conservative groups tried to sabotage the construction sites and prevent national and regional heritage projects, such as the National Museum or the heritage site of Dir'iyya (ibid. 131). However, the heritage boom could not be stopped. Today, Dir'iyya marks the place of origin of a new Founding Day story.

When King Abdullah passed away in January 2015, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud became king and his son, MBS, crown prince, thus bypassing the original line of succession. With MBS came the vision of a grand transformation of state and society (Proctor/Al-Senussi 38). He took office at a time when oil revenues were at an all-time low, which underlines his ambition, as his vision

5 The fateful year 1979 also witnessed the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both triggering a second oil shock and fuel shortages affecting Saudi state revenues. Additionally, the Camp David Accords, Zia ul-Haq's Islamization of Pakistan, and heightened Cold War tensions, affected the Saudi Kingdom (Proctor Al-Senussi 24).

was primarily aimed at reducing dependence on oil and thus diversifying the economy. The crown prince's recipe for success is above all his popularity with the young population, whose participation he demands. He himself is part of exactly that generation which witnessed the early 1990s media revival and the identity crisis that grew out of the first and second Gulf war.[6] This also includes the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, which led to a shake-up of national identity for many Saudis due to Saudi Arabia's links to this event (Proctor/Al-Senussi 38). As a result, this new nationalism seeks to come to terms with these events and creates a new idea of a common belonging and identity. Although this massive transformation started with the crown prince, his person and his actions are embedded in his father's governing efforts, which lasted over three decades (Bsheer 215).

The New Founding Day and MBS' Vision of Order, Belonging, and Civil Engagement

Narratives imbued with sentimentality about the pre-oil era, which draw on historical reference points to achieve current policy goals, are a recurring theme in the agendas of the Gulf monarchies (Demmelhuber/Thies). The Saudi state and society are particularly interesting in that regard. The Grand Strategy of the Crown Prince's Vision 2030 focuses on major transformation efforts in the light of the founding father and takes especially social and cultural scenes as venues of change. Yet again, the Vision focuses and strongly depends on the participation of its citizens, especially young people. Indeed, Saudi Arabia is quite a young kingdom. First, because its establishment dates back only three centuries. Hence, as Mark Thompson argues, whilst "Saudi Arabia is recognizably a state; it is not yet a nation" (Thompson 17). Secondly, the majority of citizens is under the age of 30 (GASTAT). On the one hand, these young adults have already experienced many transformation processes and political changes over the last two to three decades. On the other hand, however, they also seem to reminisce sentimentally about times in the past that they did

6 Both, among other things, linked to the abolition of the media monopoly 1990/91. On the one hand, movies and sitcoms shaped the cultural understanding of a young population, including the Crown Prince himself, who was six years old at the time. On the other hand, Iraq-hostile media coverage challenged the idea of a regional Gulf identity (Proctor/Al-Senussi 32).

not experience themselves (Demmelhuber/Thies 1009). In doing so, the Gulf youth supposedly draws on a collective memory, trans-generationally transmitted, as Assmann describes it in a different context, probably due to shared sentiments that are induced and kept alive by its political leaders. Hence, it is exactly this generation that is the most important target group of the crown prince's vision of "participatory nature" of the Saudi youth (Diwan 16).

The New Founding Day explicitly draws attention to the first three Saudi States[7] and intends to draw a direct line of continuity ever since. It seeks to celebrate the historical foundation of the Saudi state on February 2, 1727 by Imam Muhammad bin Saud when he became ruler of the Diriyah emirate (MoFA). The holiday was established in 2022 by royal decree (A/371) and differs from the National Day on September 23 insofar as the latter commemorates the founding of the state by Abdulaziz Al Saud in 1932. Setting the historic foundations of the Saudi state on that day further invalidates the role of the alliance with Ibn Al-Wahab twenty-two years later.

In that respect, the aim of this Founding Day on behalf of the Saudi government is to "reconstruct history in a way that is closer to accuracy and objectivity" (Al-Otaibi) and thus the Founding Day becomes "a very important event not only in correcting history, but also in dealing with reality and building the future." (ibid.). In fact, scholars interpret the recent introduction of this national holiday as a "correction" to Saudi history, one that coincides with the end of religious legitimacy in the kingdom that had prevailed for the past three centuries (Alamer). Overall, the Saudi leadership's main objectives of celebrating the Founding Day according to the Ministry of Foreign affairs of Saudi Arabia is to:

> Encourage Saudi citizens to cherish the solid roots of the Saudi State, cherish the close bonds between themselves and their leaders, appreciate the cohesiveness, stability and security established by the Saudi State, appreciate the resilience of the First Saudi State and its defense against enemies and appreciate the continuity of the Saudi State, as a reflection of the strength of its leaders and its deep roots. As well as cherish the national unity of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia established by King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al-Faisal Al Saud. (MoFA)

7 First Saudi State (1727–1818), Second Saudi State (1824–1891), Third Saudi State (1902–present) (MoC 2023c).

In sum, the message conveys that people should be proud of the achievements of the Kings of Saudi Arabia in building the country and strengthening its national cohesiveness and prosperity, as a member of the royal family and governor of the Qassim Province argues:

> Restoring memories of happy and pivotal events in human life is an important way to consolidate the positive feelings associated with this event, and the importance of consolidating these feelings increases when it comes to the homeland. (Bin Saud bin Abdulaziz; translation A. T.)

> There is no doubt that this royal order will have the greatest impact in strengthening national belonging, so that the anniversary of the founding becomes a day of witness for the Saudis, aware of the authenticity of the history of their country and its historical depth, and this history will become linked to memory, and a catalyst to serve the country by all means. (ibid.)

The strategy becomes clear and transparent. According to the Brand Guide Book published by the Ministry of Culture, its aim is to be "reminiscent of the past in order to transport the viewer back in time" (MoC 2023b, 30).

Sentimentality in Saudi Narratives
Linking Leadership, Historical Pride, and State-Society Relations

The Saudi leadership builds and structures its storytelling—the national story—along narratives of *wise leadership* of the ruling family of Al Saud in its historical continuity. A steady line of great leadership is outlined, spanning from the founding fathers in the past to the Saudi government in the present, with the crown prince at its head. This continuity of political rule is stressed not only narratively but also linguistically. In that respect, the term "Muhammedan" (محمدان, Arab. the two Muhammeds) is frequently used. The suffix of ان– (–an) signals duality in Arabic. Thus, the government chooses to bridge the continuity of the state from the founder of the Saudi state, Imam Muhammad bin Saud, in the past to the crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, in the present and future. Wise leadership is thus frequently communicated as a sacrifice made by leaders. However, the sentimental feature of such narratives is not just given by offering a bridge between the past and the present, and hence drawing on (emotional) knowledge stocks of the citizens.

The narration of the Saudi national story is sentimental in so far as it places a social emotion at its center—collective pride—which already determines how the national story is to be understood: We take "great pride in the wise leaders of a sublime homeland rooted in the depths of history since it was ruled by Mohammed bin Saud and the foundations of the Saudi state, which lasted for another three centuries until today" (Sabq, translation A. T.). These sentimental narratives ultimately lead to the idea of the ruling elite about state-society relations. Here, in accordance with the notion of the scholarly debate, the government indeed directly addresses its population. Hence, it stresses the demand and obligation of the population to actively participate in the transformation of the Saudi state. Thus, phrases are circulating such as the cultural heritage being in "the hands of all of us, and we live in it strengthened and honored" (Al-Hoseini, translation A. T.). Maha bint Said Al-Yazidi argues: "The citizen is supposed to know the historical and cultural heritage of his country. Be proud of it and be aware of the sacrifices made by the governments and its citizens of this state in its three phases of the state, and still adhere to the principles of this state." (Al-Yazidi, translation A. T.)

Prime examples of sentimentality in the Saudi rhetoric include the oscillation between the present and the past, as well as pointing to the ongoing significance of past events, as they should be experienced in the exact emotional manner in which the leadership portrays them. They specify the respective social emotions, most commonly pride and love, that are normatively assessed as appropriate in the cultural and socio-political context of the kingdom:

> […] in our sublime homeland these days, the first anniversary of the Founding Day and its essential contents and historical meanings, for the glories made by our ancestors and inherited by our parents to be honored by the grandchildren citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And remember the history of the entity of their blessed state with pride and pride in the legacy of the past, the renaissance of the present and the aspirations of the future. (Al-Kahmous, translation A. T.)

> The Founding Day is a glorious and immortal day in the memory of the sons of the Kingdom who commit to it to express the extent of their love, loyalty, and historical connection to the richness of this dear country. And the extent of their connection with its honorable rulers, after the Kingdom before the establishment was scattered and rival emirates and desertions invaded each other. […] and in the environs of its rulers from the House of Saud, a unified

> and interconnected state characterized by love, brotherhood and national cohesion among its sons. (Qaradi, translation A. T.)

Symbolism and Sentiment
The Role of Tribal Heritage in Saudi Arabia's Founding Story

The Al-Saud dynasty has deliberately built its rule on a coalition of influential stakeholders with often-conflicting interests, making elite cohesion crucial for short-term stability. These stakeholders include tribes, clerics, merchants, technocrats, and the (extended) royal family (Rundell 18). Among them, Saudi Arabia's relationship with regional tribes is particularly significant. Tribes have shaped the political order in the Arabian Peninsula long before modern nation-states and played a key role in identity politics, though their influence is fluctuating (Thies, forthcoming 2025b). King Abdulaziz's strategy of dismantling tribal autonomy while using their structures to centralize power proved highly effective and remains relevant today (Rundell 83). Yet again, tribal history serves as a political pawn, central to sentimental rhetoric and symbolism, and is reflected in the nation's founding documents.

Sentiments can be understood as trans-situational and occur through affective responses to certain discursive and non-discursive symbols (Scheve/Berg 32). Consequently, symbols act as visual markers (Vergani/Zuev 91) that potentially evoke emotional and affective reactions. The five main symbols of the new "Founding Day" are considered to be a "representation of the Saudi State's main values and figures" (MoC 2023c, 14) and are crucial elements of "vital heritage and persistent cultural themes" (ibid.). The symbols include the Saudi flag, the palm tree, the falcon, the Arabian horse, and the market (*souq*). Each has inscribed a symbolic meaning that is shared via official government documents (MoC 2023b; MoC 2023c, 14) as well as communicated in newspapers close to the regime (Al-Hosseini). The story traces the narrative of the 18th century Saudi territory with immense attention to detail using the symbols mentioned. Here, primarily socio-historical terminology is used that might resonate with the collective memory of the target group. The fact that the different target groups and audiences are taken into account is also evident in the differences between the English and Arabic versions. Whereas the example of the date as a symbol in the Arabic version of the Founding Book focuses on linguistic cultural assets and their enrichment for Saudi Arabian societies over time, the English version speaks of the hardships that the early Saudi people

had to endure, e.g. references to the unbearable heat of the date harvest (MoC 2023a; MoC 2023c, 15). In addition to the council (mağlis), which symbolizes political participation, the symbol of the horse stands out in particular. It supposedly represents the story and heroism of the Saudi people. This not only refers to the initial role of tribesmen and their cultural practices, in fact, an entire founding myth was built around the Arabian horse. According to this, the first domestication of horses is said to have begun 9000 years ago in what is now southern Riyadh, which has led to a series of archaeological efforts by the Saudi state (MoC 2023c, 16). The story is strongly challenged by the archaeological scientific community (Schiettecatte/Zouache 3). In sum, the sentimental code contained in these symbols as well as their accompanying explanations lies, on the one hand, in the harnessing of cultural, supposedly historical bodies of knowledge, appealed to in an affective way. On the other hand, it lies in the linguistic devices used.

Linguistic Devices
Collective Affiliation and Historical Continuity in Sentimental Political Rhetoric

Linguistic devices serve as a tool to ensure discursive goals such as producing, preserving, transforming, and destroying in- and out-groups. Thus, they hint at group affiliations in their social and historical contextualization, painting a picture of a constructed national identity (De Cillia et al.; Reisigl). The most common linguistic devices in "Founding Day" storytelling are deictics, either personal (*we*, *our*, *them*) or temporal (*back then*, *tomorrow*). While deictics are standard in language for referring to people, objects, and times, their specific use here is notable. Personal deictics like *we* and *us* emphasize collective belonging, often referring to the Saudi state, nation, or ancestors. Temporal deictics link past events to present or future situations, highlighting the bridging function of sentimental political rhetoric. Both types often point to imagined spaces through linguistic referencing (*Zeigefunktionen*).

> In Diriyah, the capital of the First Saudi State and the symbol of its successive future glories, the palm tree's dignity, charity, and diversity of all forms are acknowledged. Here we find Khudari, Makfazi, and Nabtat Sayf dates. (MoC 2023c, 15, translation A. T.)

One linguistic tool stands out in particular. Especially evident in the founding book launched by the ministry of culture, acts of shifting the recipient into the "realm of absent memory or even constructed imagination" (Bühler 22) are frequently employed. This type of *Deixis am phantasma*, a term coined by Karl Bühler, which has since been adopted in studies on cultural memory (West), is activated by recognition of a stimulus of or within immediate spatial-temporal context:

> If we go northwest from Diriyah toward Al-Qassim, we find the generous palm trees showering us with all kinds of delicious fruits, such as Rashoudi and Qattaar dates, famous for their sweetness and tastiness. (MoC 2023c, 15, translation A. T.)

This observation leads back to the beginning of this contribution. The observation that young people in particular seem to be affected by sentimental codes of a shared past, crisis resilience, and collective belonging, even though they have not actively experienced certain historical stages themselves, raises questions about the trans-generational potential of narratives. With regard to the linguistic devices at hand, we can assume that another dimension of this phenomenon lies in the linguistic work of sentimental codes. Thus, such linguistic devices create retrospective memories while providing information about the emotive power of memory practices (West 28) that might be able to shape peoples understanding about "their" history and their own positionality in it.

Conclusion

The formation of modern states is "actively amnesiac" (Bsheer 34), as it relies on the erasure of some pasts in favor of others in order to create a national story that fulfills the pursuit or "(re-)uniting" of an imagined nation (Anderson). More critically, Bsheer problematizes submitting to one historical narrative that is written by the victors of history, in this case the family of Al-Saud. This goes along with the fabrication of a linear narrative leading to the current nation state. For example, the Founding Book stresses that the role of state leaders and deep national solidarity and strength were a reason for the continuation of the Saudi state ever since 1727.

In the case of the Saudi Founding Day, the regime indeed uses repertoires of the past and builds bridges into the present via a supposed continuity of

state and political rule. In order to create an offer of a new political order the government thus tries to appeal to the population on an affective level through emotion-bound signifiers and concepts. They appeal to the population to become part of ongoing social and political transformation processes. The findings prove the government's intention to communicate a participatory nature of this kind of nationalism that the scholarly debates lately assumed to be there, but had difficulties to prove empirically until now. Thus, sentimental political rhetoric using the example of the Saudi Founding Day is revealed in linguistic devices, symbolism, as well as narratives that bridge the past and the present. It not only provides an offer of orientation but also a clear interpellation of its citizens as to how they ought to commemorate the foundation of the state and make sense of it with a view to a national identity, belonging, and heritage in the present. This confirms Thompson's evaluation that coherent communities exist as a result of these shared perceptions of "the past, present, and future events [. . .] linking their lives to those of their predecessors and their successors in a meaningful way" (17). MBS's policy is partly similar in its ambition to the one prior to 1979, which is why re-staging himself in the light of those statesmen seems to be fruitful. The decisive element for his success points to his invocation of sentimentally coded political rhetoric.

Many scholars have argued that this latest transformation, culminating in the ascension of the crown prince and his Vision 2030, signals an end to the conservative religious foundation of the kingdom. This is particularly evident in the use of art and poetry, which leads back to Hafeth's poem at the beginning. The official government documents for this new holiday feature poems as well as artworks by local artists. The Founding Book (MoC 2023b, 45), for example, includes a picture of the state founder. It is a comic-style drawing by an unnamed Saudi artist. After 1979, such depictions would have been considered heretical and, as mentioned, were forbidden at the end of the 20th century. Now, it is the government itself that is opening up the venues and spaces for the artistic scene. It is an ultimate example of the new shift away from the religious establishment in the kingdom. The poem by Hafeth can likewise be understood in the context of its time. It symbolizes the literary and artistic, as well as, social and political transformation of a country that continuously reinvents itself. Yet, it also represents the power of sentimentality in creating meaning and fostering a sense of belonging. Hafeth later writes that he will return to his home. Whether this return is literal or metaphorical remains unclear. For the study of sentimentality, this distinction is irrelevant, as his sentiments regarding his

homeland have already shaped his self-understanding in a lasting manner and thus influences his past, present, and his future.

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