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Material Conditions, Knowledge and Trade in Central Arabia
during the 19th and early 20th Centuries

Guido Walter Steinberg

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European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50016 San Domenico (FI)
Italy

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For further information:

Mediterranean Programme
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
European University Institute
via dei Roccettini, 9
50016 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy
Fax: + 39 055 4685 770
<http://www.iue.it/RSC/MED>

ABSTRACT*

This paper deals with the interrelations of ecology, economy and culture in Central Arabia during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Ecological factors made themselves felt in nearly every aspect of social, economic and cultural life, which was decisively shaped by an extremely hostile environment. However, this subject hasn't been treated in the literature yet. Ecological and especially medical factors and their influence on history in Najd are the subject of section 2. of my paper. In a third part, the main patterns of agriculture and trade in relation to the desert ecology are treated. Just like in the date-producing oases of the Saharan desert edge, people in Najd had hardly any alternative than to engage in trade and the transport business and emigrate to the neighbouring territories, if they wanted to survive. But the influence of ecology and material conditions went even farther: It also affected intellectual life, the poverty of which reflected the poverty of the Central Arabian environment. It is especially noteworthy that not only superficial problems like the lack of books and writing materials affected Najdi intellectual life, but that even the religious and legal outlook of the inhabitants of Najd was shaped by – inter alia – ecological and economic factors, a fact which is being worked out in part 4.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Most scholars dealing with Saudi Arabia still write its history by focussing exclusively either on political or economic or cultural matters. For example, treatment of religious aspects in writings on politics and economy is often confined to some superficial remarks insufficient to clarify the interrelations between the Weberian dimensions of culture, politics and economy, which still dominate writings on the region. On the other hand, many of those dealing with religious issues still seem to think that a treatment of religious developments alone provides us with valuable insights into the regions' history. While historians of other parts of the world and other countries of the Middle East have realized that an artificial isolation of dimensions of history – even if only for analytic purposes – should be considered a thing of the past, studies of Saudi Arabia still suffer from a serious lack of methodological sophistication, not only with this regard. Not surprisingly, anthropologists have become the better historians of the peninsula in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. One possible method to apply up-to-date historical methodology on the peninsula could be to focus on the various interrelations between the historical 'dimensions', thereby showing the shortcomings of former studies and identifying new directions for historical research concerning Saudi Arabia. While writings on religious aspects neglect the decisive role of ecological factors and material conditions for the intellectual history of Arabia, the most serious gap in the literature is its pre-oil economic history. In the following, I will therefore try to focus on some of the most important interrelations between economy and culture in Central Arabian society during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

2. ECOLOGY AND HISTORY IN CENTRAL ARABIA

To the 1950s, life was precarious in Central Arabia and the living conditions of its inhabitants more than humble. The climate was generally very hot and dry, with temperatures rising over 45° centigrade in summer. In winter, cold winds blew over the open deserts and the temperature quite frequently fell several degrees below zero. In some cases, extraordinarily cold weather destroyed the crops and even killed animals. For example, in 1879/80, the '*bard*' (arab.: cold) took a pilgrimage caravan in South-western Qasim, i.e. Central Najd, by surprise. The Qasimi pilgrims had to interrupt their journey for eighteen days and when the weather improved, most of their riding camels had perished (al-Bassam 1999/1419, 95). Even in cold winters, however, it rained only rarely, so that water became the one commodity on which life and death in Central Arabia ultimately depended. In good years, the winter rains filled the underground basins and streams, which ultimately found their outlet in Eastern Arabia, in the rich oases of al-Ahsa and Qatif. Where this water was closest to the surface, in

the wadis like the Wadi ad-Dawasir, the Wadi Hanifa and the Wadi Rimma, the inhabitants of Central Arabia had established urban settlements, some of which became centres of economic, political and cultural life on the peninsula. However, if compared to the cities of the neighbouring territories like Mecca, Medina and al-Hufuf, cities in Najd were merely big villages, where economic life was based on agriculture and modest trade with the bedouin and the trading centres of the surrounding regions.

Around 1900, the biggest towns in Najd were Ha'il in Northern Najd, Unaiza and Buraida in Central Najd or Qasim and Riyadh in Southern Najd. Ha'il was the main transit point on the trade route between Damascus and Najd and, from the 1860s on, the capital of the Rashidi state, which dominated Najd for several decades until the early 20th century. While Ha'il is said to have hosted a population of up to 20.000 people during the reign of Muhammad b. Rashid (d. 1897), the decline of the Rashidi state in the early 20th century was accompanied by falling population numbers (az-Za'arir 1997, 32). Unaiza and Buraida, the big trading centres of Central Arabia, were situated conveniently on the Darb Zubaida, the ancient pilgrimage route between Iraq and the Hijaz. Unaiza became the centre of long-distance trade in the central peninsula, while the inhabitants of Buraida were specialized in organizing transport by camel caravans all over the region. However, each town was inhabited by a population of only about 10 to 20.000 persons (IOR: L/P&S/18/B 446: Independent Arabian States, 9). Riyadh, until the early 1870s the capital of the Second Saudi State, was even smaller. After Muhammad b. Rashid had finally destroyed the Saudi State in 1891, Riyadh was in fact reduced to a village with a population of less than 10.000 souls.¹ All the other big towns of central Najd hosted a population of never more than 5000 persons.

These low population numbers had several causes. First and foremost, ecological and medical catastrophes reduced the population of the region every couple of years. Water was considered to be a divine present, but often it turned into a deadly threat. The winter rains more often than not turned into floods, filling the wadis with torrent streams within minutes. The Najdi annals are full of episodes about these flood catastrophes (see e.g. Bassam 1999/1419, 38). They destroyed gardens, palm-groves and even parts of the towns, which – in order to reach the underground water that they needed for irrigation - had to be built as close as possible to the ground of the wadis or in hollows which proved to be equally dangerous when rain fell. As a consequence, the farmers tried to protect their crops by building mud-walls around their groves and by leaving ample space for the torrents to pass the city. This proved to be only an

¹ In 1917, the British official Hamilton estimated that its population numbered about 5 to 8000. IOR: R/15/5/104: Diary Colonel Hamilton, 18.

insufficient protection against the floods. Living close to the underground water necessary for irrigation meant being periodically threatened by the floods. Besides, even in 19th century Najd mankind – with its then still limited destructive capabilities - proved to be one of the most serious ecological catastrophes. Whenever a city was beleaguered by an enemy force – which happened quite frequently during the 19th century - one of its first measures was to cut down the palm-groves surrounding the city walls. Since a palm-tree has to grow several years before carrying the first consumable dates, cutting down the trees meant seriously threatening the future livelihood of the city's inhabitants. In many cases survivors were forced to leave their hometowns for lack of food. As if this wasn't enough, the winter rains were frequently followed by the arrival of locust swarms. Their former generation had left its larvae buried in the desert and these only hatched out from their eggs when the falling rains gave them the signal that there would be food in abundance in a short time. These locust swarms crossed huge parts of the Arabian Peninsula, destroying the pasture grounds of the bedouin as well as the groves and fields of the city-dwellers. Although some townspeople developed methods to catch and kill the larvae, other swarms were left unmolested in more distant parts of the peninsula, eventually leaving the Najdis helpless (Philby 1928, 248f).

Even more devastating were the periods of drought, which hit Central Arabia quite frequently, sometimes for several years in succession. These droughts hit bedouin and townspeople alike and for centuries forced large parts of the Najdi population to emigrate to the neighbouring countries, especially Eastern Arabia and Iraq. These periods were often accompanied by political and religious strife, and in most cases it seems as if the ecological crises had triggered the turmoil or were at least among its major causes. The emergence of the Wahhabi movement, for example, followed prolonged periods of ecological disaster in the early 18th century. Given recent studies on the causal relations between the little ice-age in Europe and the witch-hunts of the early 17th century or studies about the interrelations between cholera and the European revolutions of the 19th century, these and similar speculations do not seem so unlikely any more (Lehmann 1986, 31-50; Evans 1988, 123-146). In fact, Arabian history is full of examples for political and social turmoil coinciding with ecological disaster. In 1918/9, for example, Ibn Sa'ud – who ruled between 1902 and 1953 - was hardly able to quell the rebellion of starving bedouin tribes after several years of drought, the results of which were aggravated by the blockade of Ottoman territory during the war.

At times, devastating medical catastrophes aggravated ecological disasters and caused crises encompassing the whole region. In many cases, it is impossible to establish which disease hit the region in certain years. Najdi historians frequently mention '*al-waba*' ('epidemic') or '*at-ta'un*' ('plague')

without giving any information about the exact nature of the disease. For example, in 1872, Unaiza was hit by an unknown disease, which caused severe headaches and killed a considerable number of its citizens (Bassam 1999/1419, 96). In this case, the mentioning of one of the symptoms allows us to speculate that the disease must have been either typhus or typhoid fever. In most other cases, however, we don't know anything about the disease. But although we know only a small fraction of what really happened, the Najdi medical record remains frightening: One of the most common diseases until the early 20th century was smallpox, which hit Najd periodically. Especially children fell prey to this disease, which left many of the survivors blind. Eye diseases were therefore common in Najd as elsewhere in the Middle East. Caused by smallpox, trachoma or conjunctivitis, up to 20 % of the male population was affected by severe eye diseases, leaving an important part of the population economically unproductive (Palgrave 1865, II, 34; Doughty 1888, II, 4 and 348; Dickson 1951, 506f. and 510). The second deadly scourge up to 1912 was the cholera, *the* disease of the nineteenth century. From 1830, several cholera pandemics broke out, which spread along the major shipping lines and overland trade routes in the region. Whenever a new cholera epidemic had broken out in India and found its way to the Middle East, it entered Najd either from the Persian Gulf or – more frequently because of the Hajj - from Mecca and killed major portions of the population. During the third Cholera pandemic between 1841 and 1859, Najd was hit in the mid-1850s as well. Riyadh is reported to have lost up to a third of its population at that time (Winder 1965, 56f., 90f., 168; Peters 1994, 274, 301). Not surprisingly, Najdi society was severely affected by this visit. During a wave of religious fanaticism, the predecessors of what today has become the religious police cleaned Riyadh and its environs of everything which might have caused God to punish his chosen people by sending them this deadly scourge (Palgrave 1865, 407-413).

Modern transport caused other epidemics to reach Najd. Just as the introduction of the steam traffic had brought the cholera to the Middle East, the expansion of international traffic during the age of European imperialism intensified the globalization of epidemic diseases. The most dreadful among them was the influenza, which had already affected the region in 1890, but as the 'Spanish flu' it resurfaced again and this time in a much more virulent form in 1918/9. Several features of this epidemic, which lasted for about three months, had an important impact on the history of Najd in the early 20th century. First, thousands were killed, among them the Saudi heir apparent and other members of the Sa'ud family. In Riyadh, nearly 100 persons per day are reported to have died (Doumato 1999, 173, n.2). The death toll among the bedouin seems to have been even larger (Philby 1928, 254). Secondly, the influenza mainly killed young males between the ages of 20 and 40. For example, many young *'ulama* and younger members of the big merchant

families were killed. Thereby, the disease focussed on those persons who would have formed the cultural, economic, and political backbone of Najdi society during the next decades. Furthermore, it hit Najd at the end of World War I, after a period of droughts which had ruined the Najdi economy from 1915 and which had been aggravated by the results of the fore-mentioned blockade of Ottoman territories. As a result, the Ikhwan movement in 1918/9 was on the verge of open rebellion against Ibn Sa'ud. The crisis threatened their way of living and the material basis of their existence as well, leading them to raid bedouins who had not joined their movement. While the sources do not allow us yet to elaborate the exact causes of the crisis of 1918 to 1920, it has been established that ecological and medical factors deeply influenced Najdi history up to the 20th century (Steinberg 2000, 389-396).

3. AGRICULTURE AND TRADE

Until the 20th century, agriculture and the breeding of camels, horses, and sheep were the main pillars of the Najdi economy. All the agricultural lands were situated in the oases within or close to the towns. Date palms in large orchards, surrounded by mud walls dominated the pictures of Najdi towns. On the ground, the peasants grew grain, mainly wheat and barley, but also millet, lucerne, lime and fig trees, vegetables and fruit like peaches, melons and pumpkins, the parcels being irrigated by wells which were run by camels, sometimes by cattle and donkeys. The peasants often used the irrigated space between the date palms for other produce, mainly lucerne, which was used as fodder for the valuable camels and horses. However, although every piece of cultivable land was used as intensively as traditional techniques allowed, Najdi towns were seldom self-sufficient (Philby 1928, 217). This was definitely true in times of crisis, when whole harvests were destroyed by the above-mentioned catastrophes, but also in ordinary times, when considerable quantities of food – rice, wheat and barley - had to be imported. If one compares the description of what was being produced locally with what was being consumed in the towns, this becomes quite clear. In the early 20th century, at least the upper echelons of urban society seem to have consumed large amounts of rice. While the date in that period still seems to have been the staple of the bedouin, in the towns it had already lost most of its importance to rice, which was imported from India and – in much smaller quantities – Arabistan and Eastern Arabia. Besides rice the Najdis had to import tea, coffee, tobacco, textiles, weapons, ammunition, timber and luxury items such as spices, paper, watches and printed books.

The bedouin in the desert mainly produced livestock, hides, wool, milk and butter ghee, which was used for cooking. But although the urban and the bedouin sphere each had their respective economic function, it is impossible to analyze their characteristics independently from each other. Interrelations

between the towns and the desert were rather symbiotic: one's very existence depended on the economic success of the other. First, there was no clear-cut spatial separation between the bedouin and the town-dwellers. Important parts of the bedouin tribes had settled in towns and villages and – if their settlement had taken place in rather recent times - they still stood in contact to their nomadizing kinsmen. Some nomadic tribes owned gardens in the towns, lived there during parts of the year after which they left again for the pasture grounds of their tribe. In other cases, they leased the plots to peasants. In the hot season, the bedouin in general moved closer to the cities because water was then only available in the urban wells. On the other hand, town-dwellers owned animals – mainly sheep and goats - which they sent with the bedouin herds to their pastures in the desert. Furthermore, in order to purchase agricultural and imported products, the bedouin depended on the urban markets. The towns served as the markets for a wider region, comprising the surrounding deserts and villages. Thereby, the markets strengthened the economic (and cultural) interdependence between the desert and the towns.

In general, Najd had to import considerable amounts of foodstuff and commodities from Eastern Arabia and abroad. This by itself was a big problem for a country suffering from a serious scarcity of natural resources. The inhabitants of Najd had to export something in order to pay for their imports. These exports consisted mainly of the produce of the bedouin sphere of economic life: horses, camels, sheep, butter ghee and hides. Horses went to Iraq and India, camels to Egypt, Syria and Iraq. One of the biggest markets for these products was the yearly pilgrimage, especially when the *id al-adha* approached, when enormous amounts of sheep were slaughtered for and by the pilgrims. However, Mecca and the Hijaz were not the most important trading partners of Najd. Equally important was the trade route to Damascus, which had been one of the busiest during the 18th and 19th centuries. However, the share of trade with Syria declined after 1900, when the route to Iraq and Kuwait replaced the one to Damascus (IOR: L/P&S/20/E85: Handbook of Arabia, April 1919, 94). Equally important, if more so for Riyadh and Southern Najd, was the trade route to al-Ahsa in Eastern Arabia. The oases of al-Ahsa and Qatif were the only region close to Central Arabia where water was abundant. Therefore, its inhabitants were usually able to produce a surplus of agricultural produce and livestock, which they exported to Najd and other parts of the region. Furthermore, the whole coast of the Persian Gulf between Kuwait and the so-called Pirate coast (today the United Arab Emirates) was the region's centre of pearl fishing up to the early 1930's.

During the season between June and October the pearl industry needed an enormous amount of manpower, which the small coastal cities couldn't provide (Rumaihi 1980, 49-60). On the gulf coast, local demand and supply from Najd

met. This is one of the reasons why manpower became the principal Najdi export item. Every year, a considerable, but unknown number of men mainly from Southern Najd moved to Bahrain, Kuwait and the smaller emirates in order to work as divers and pullers on the pearling boats. Most prominent among them were (settled) members of the Dawasir tribe, who each year left their villages in the Wadi ad-Dawasir in Southwestern Najd, in order to fish pearls on the Gulf coast (Philby 1933, 362). The poverty of their home country didn't leave them any alternative.

A similar phenomenon can be traced in the Qasim region around the trading cities of Unaiza and Buraida. This region was a lot more prosperous than Southern Najd. Agriculture was more successful here than in the South. Besides, the pilgrimage caravans along the Darb Zubaida and trade with the Hijaz, Syria, Iraq and the Persian Gulf region were important sources of income, which Southern Najd didn't have. Nevertheless, even in Qasim, many people had to leave the country. This was caused by a number of reasons, insufficient material conditions and the quest for alternative sources of income being but one of the factors leading to the exodus of the Qasimis to Iraq, Syria, the Hijaz and even Egypt. First and foremost, the ecological situation of Qasim invited its inhabitants to engage in trade. For the Saharan context, it has been shown quite convincingly that the inhabitants of date-producing oases more often than not had to engage in trade in order to survive in a hostile environment (Curtin 1984, 23f.). Although dates were available in sufficient amounts, their extremely high sugar contents make them only a supplement to a certain diet, not a staple. In the oases on the Saharan desert edge just like in Central Arabia, the production of food other than dates was always precarious so that their inhabitants had to look for alternative sources of foodstuff outside of their oases. In many cases, the bedouin in the deserts surrounding the oases could provide them with butter and meat, but not with carbohydrates. However, they raised camels and thereby a superior means of transport in this environment. The bedouin themselves had to sell their produce in order to acquire dates, grain and other necessities of daily life in the market towns. Thereby, the town dwellers gained control of the means of transport in order to deal with neighbouring territories. As a consequence, trade and transport became the major occupations of the inhabitants of these date-producing oases.

Political reasons forced many others to leave Najd. Since the 18th century, many inhabitants had left the Qasim and other areas in Najd because of the internal conflicts caused by the rise of the Wahhabiya. This movement was mainly supported by the inhabitants of Southern Najd, who until today are the staunchest supporters of the Wahhabiya. In Central and Northern Najd, its opponents seem to have constituted a majority. This is why the Saudi rulers only overcame the resistance in Qasim, especially in Unaiza, in the early 20th century

(Steinberg 2000, 161-175). Whenever Saudi troops conquered a town in the 18th and 19th centuries, parts of the population, i.e. *'ulama* who rejected the Wahhabiya, other anti-Saudi parts of the political elite and their followers either left the town or were exiled by the new rulers. Therefore, a Najdi-Qasimi diaspora community grew in Iraq, with smaller branches in the Hijaz and Syria. As a result, in the 19th century, Zubair, the Iraqi 'gate to Najd' on the trade route between Qasim and Southern Iraq became a purely Najdi city and an important Hanbali centre of learning (Bassam 1391/1971). Other big Najdi communities settled in Basra, Baghdad, al-Ahsa and Kuwait. In Ottoman Iraq, the *'uqaylat'*, as the Najdis were called here, served as local militia in the Ottoman army and worked in the transport business and overland trade. Many Qasimis were among the workers who constructed the Suez canal (Ibrahim 1991; Doughty 1888, II, 312).

Besides those who worked in agriculture, most people from Qasim were busy in the transport business and in long-distance trade. Especially the inhabitants of Buraida, itself an important local centre of camel and livestock trade, became active in the transport sector, most of them without engaging in trade on a larger scale (IOR: L/P&S/20/E85: Handbook of Arabia, April 1919, 94-97). Those who didn't own any camels were employed as personnel for the caravans. Others who owned camels hired these out to merchants and pilgrims crossing the deserts all over the peninsula. Small 'cameleers', as Philby called these inhabitants of Buraida, accompanied the camels which they had hired out. In 1877, Charles Doughty wrote that about a third of the (male?) population of Buraida was active in the international caravan trade. Several of the city's notables owned whole caravans (Doughty 1888, II, 312 and 319; Philby 1928, 191). As a result, many of them became extremely rich, at least by Najdi standards (Qadi 1403/1983, II, 126; al-Bassam 1419/1998, V, p.303).

Money that the merchants of Qasim didn't invest in their businesses, was used in order to purchase land, especially date-gardens in their respective hometowns. Date gardens were a relatively secure source of income, and – just like all over the peninsula - a status symbol and a source of considerable social prestige (Palgrave 1865, 379, 387, 392; Philby 1928, 279). As a consequence, the big merchant families became the largest landowners in their hometowns. Some merchants from Unaiza even invested large sums in date gardens in Southern Iraq (Philby 1928, 239).

During the 19th century, Unaiza became the most important trading centre in Central Arabia. It was home to some of the most important merchant families of Najd, like the Bassam, Shubayli, Sulaym, Qadi, Fadl and Dhukayr (Rihani, 1983, 286). These families established trade networks between Unaiza, Jidda, Mecca, Damascus, Zubair, Basra, Baghdad, Bahrain and Bombay, thereby

encompassing all the important international trade routes, which were connected with Najd. They traded in all the above-mentioned commodities, family members leading the respective branches of the business abroad. The introduction of modern transport in the early 1930s constituted a severe blow for the merchants of Qasim, especially for those engaged in the transport business. The caravan trade between Najd, Syria, Iraq and the Hijaz had always needed transit towns, where the slow camel caravans could refurbish their provisions. This is how Buraida and Unaiza had gained their importance. Their services became obsolete when automobiles, trucks and, some years later, the air-plane became the main means of transport (Altorki/Cole 1997, 7). The Darb Zubaida quickly lost its former importance. Only those merchants, who, like the Bassam family, had established branches in other cities and had diversified their businesses in time, i.e. who were also engaged in other activities than the declining transport business and pearl trade, could retain their former position at least partially.

4. MATERIAL CONDITIONS AND INTELLECTUAL LIFE

4.1. *'Ulama*, Books and Education

Until the 1950s, intellectual life in Najd was decisively shaped by the hostile environment and insufficient material conditions. First, and perhaps most importantly, the number of religious scholars (*'ulama*) was very low. In fact, to the 1950s, Najd suffered from a serious lack of *'ulama* and – because only religious education was available up to the mid-1930s – a lack of educated persons in general. Education was a luxury, which little village communities couldn't afford at all and which existed only on a very limited scale in the cities. The Najdi biographical collections are full of remarks that in a certain town at a certain time there was no teacher qualified even to teach the Qur'an or other basics of Muslim education. Besides, many village Imams seem to have shown a deplorable level of instruction, some hardly able to read and write, which didn't encourage the inhabitants to send children to their lessons (Da'ajani 1419/1998, p.120).

In order to absolve a decent religious education, young students had to move to towns where qualified scholars were teaching. In order to become an important *'alim*, students had to study in the big Najdi intellectual centres, namely Riyadh, Unaiza, Ha'il or Buraida. However, such a trip was dangerous during most of the 19th century up to 1930 and it cost money. More importantly, nearly all young men were needed to secure the economic survival of the urban communities. They either produced food as peasants or fishermen, worked as craftsmen, artisans or pearl-divers, or earned money as merchants and 'cameleers'. Therefore, even in the big centres, material conditions hindered the

development of a strong educational sector. Whenever a central authority in Najd existed in the 18th and 19th centuries, its rulers had supported the students financially. However, instability was the rule and therefore the students generally had to rely on financial support by their professors, donations by merchants or other rich personalities and *waqf* income. In short, a student's life was miserable, if he didn't have the support of a rich and influential family. This is why the number of students was generally low. Many of those who learnt to read and write left the schools as soon as they had finished the basics in order to become merchants. Others left, because they had to assist their families in agriculture. Several times, this situation became the topic of controversies between Ibn Sa'ud and influential scholars in Riyadh. For example, before 1940 (t.a.q.), Ibn Sa'ud convened some of them in Riyadh and complained about the low number of students (Al Abd al-Muhsin n.d., IV, 110). Moreover, continued the king, only those who were blind or otherwise physically handicapped studied with the *'ulama*. 'Abdallah b. Bulayhid (1867/8-1940), an important Wahhabi *'alim*, answered that the students didn't receive sufficient financial support. According to him, they were poor and not or hardly able to earn a living for themselves and their families. To add insult to injury, people treated them with contempt. Even a small sum given by the government would greatly help the students and encourage others to join the lessons in the mosques. However, money was the one thing that the Saudi government never had, or, just like other governments past and present, was not willing to invest in education. As a consequence, the situation only improved when oil royalties began to flow in the second half of the 1940s (Steinberg 2000, 51).

It is interesting that Ibn Sa'ud mentioned the disproportionate number of physically handicapped and especially the blind among the students. This remark again shows that the above-mentioned eye diseases had an important negative impact on Najdi society. Until today, many important Wahhabi scholars from Najd are blind, the best-known example being the former Saudi Grand-Mufti 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Baz (1912-1999). Among the 15 *'ulama* who signed an important *fatwa* on February 11, 1927, three had been blind since their childhood and one could hardly see any more. Two others had become blind when already in their 60s (Steinberg 2000, 51). Since education was mainly based on memorizing the Qur'an and other authoritative texts, it is possible that blind students – because they were not distracted by visual stimuli - developed better abilities with this regard than their sane colleagues. Until today, Ibn Baz is famous for having known an enormous amount of texts by heart (Qarni 1411, 12-14). However, the memorizing abilities of blind students don't seem to have been the factor responsible for the high number of blind *'ulama*. Rather, blind boys were not able to work in agriculture, trade or the crafts, meaning that they were economically unproductive and therefore a potentially heavy burden if their family was poor. In the early twentieth century, their only chance to learn a

profession and to ease the burden on their families was to study religion. This was the main reason why so many *'ulama* were blind.

Disease also took its toll. There is no evidence that the death rate among *'ulama* or students was higher than among other parts of the male population. However, the characteristics of some diseases, which tend to focus on relatively young persons, i.e. on men between 20 and 40, had a strong negative impact on the number of *'ulama*. For example, the Spanish flu of 1918/9 killed at least ten prominent students (Al Abd al-Muhsin n.d., II, 248f.; Bassam 1998, III, 140f.; Qadi 1403/1983, I, 355; Bassam 1398 (1978/9), I, 891). The three killed in Unaiza were among the most talented among the students of their generation and - if they had not died so early - would each have educated dozens of future merchants and *'ulama*. Their death was more than an individual tragedy - it was a social catastrophe. Society had invested relatively large sums in their long education - much larger sums than what was needed for the education of merchants or craftsmen - which had now been spent in vain.

As for the Saudi state, the lack of qualified religious personnel had other serious results. Together with the governors, the judges had always been an important tool of Saudi policy in newly conquered provinces. They reorganized justice and education according to Wahhabi principles and tried to control Saudi-Wahhabi rules of conduct, thereby becoming a (potentially) standardizing element in a state trying to grapple with the enormous social and cultural differences between its provinces. They reported directly to the central authority in Riyadh. However, their number was insufficient even to replace the majority of judges in the provinces. Partly as a result of this shortcoming, Saudi rule in the Hijaz, Asir and al-Ahsa, which were conquered between 1913 and 1925, remained superficial even in some of the most important fields of state activity.

The impact of material conditions on intellectual life reached even deeper. At least until the 1930s, most books available in Najd were manuscripts. The lack of writing materials was a big obstacle students and professors in Najd had to face. At least until the 1930s, a teacher had to dictate the whole text first. Then, the students added his comments and explanations by writing them down on the margins of the text.² Complete manuscripts were rare and expensive. First and foremost, paper and perhaps also ink were luxury items, which had to be imported from abroad. Pens were made out of certain stable branches of trees, which were locally available but rare, or of reed, which had to be imported from Eastern Arabia (Suwayda' 1403/1983, 214). Furthermore, many of the few

² Snouck Hurgronje has described this method in his book about Mecca. There is no evidence that the Najdis employed the same method, but I see no alternative that the Najdi students might have used. Snouck Hurgronje 1888/1889, II, 264.

persons able to read and write spent a substantial portion of their time copying manuscripts, which either they themselves needed or which were considered to be important. Even leading *'ulama* from time to time copied manuscripts.³ Other *'ulama* chose copying as a profession in order to earn a living. Furthermore, besides the big effort it required to produce a significant number of manuscripts, books in general were threatened by ecological catastrophes and – as all the merchandise which was being transported by camel caravans – subject to bedouin raids and robbery. Many biographers mention the destruction of whole libraries as a result of flood catastrophes (al-Qadi 1403/1983, I, 181; *ibid.* 1400/1980, II, 109-114). Such a flood could destroy the work of decades. The same holds true when a city was conquered in the case of war and subsequently plundered and/or burnt. Since most of the Najdi manuscripts existed only in a very limited number, their loss had far more serious consequences than the loss of printed books. Only in 1924, after Ibn Sa'ud had conquered Mecca, the Wahhabis first gained access to a printing press. During the 19th century, printed books had to be imported from abroad. Only in 1897, the Wahhabi scholar Ibn Suhman had the first Wahhabi writing printed in Amritsar/India. Thanks to intensive economic and cultural relations with India, Ibn Sa'ud had more books printed in the subcontinent and subsequently in Cairo (Steinberg, Religion und Staat, S.52-54). Even after the 1920s, however, many Wahhabi *'ulama* continued to write and copy manuscripts without having them printed. Only the introduction of the first printing press in Najd (Riyadh) in 1953 paved the way for the introduction of printed matter on a larger scale and, ultimately, the emergence of a modern public sphere.

Repercussions of this situation on the intellectual and religious development of Najd were serious. First and foremost, students and teachers alike lost time by copying manuscript after manuscript instead of dealing with their contents. Secondly, books were extremely rare. In 1862, William Palgrave called a collection of 40 books in Riyadh 'a very fair library for Arabia' (Palgrave 1865, II, 18). This was one of the reasons why the level of religious studies in Najd was relatively low. (Steinberg 2000, 71-121) On the educational level, the lack of books and the danger of losing them resulted in the practice of memorizing only those books, which were available. Important texts had to be memorized because the *'ulama* always had to keep in mind that a certain text in case of need might not be available. This is one of the reasons why they let the students learn those texts by heart that they considered to be of utmost importance or those texts which they owned (they might not have seen a difference anyway). On the other hand, only the limitation of the number of books allows students to memorize a larger amount of what is being read. The

³ In 1889/90, Sulayman b. Suhman, one of the most important Wahhabi *'ulama* at the turn of the century, spent several months in Ha'il copying books. Al ash-Shaykh 1974, 291f.

biographies are full of remarks about the astonishing memorizing abilities of certain *'ulama*. For example, knowing the *Sahih* of Bukhari by heart seems to have been considered an outstanding intellectual and religious achievement. In order to facilitate the memorization of texts, many shorter treatises were put into verses. This is a method which was not only popular (and successful) in Muslim education through the ages, but also in medieval and early modern Europe (Elias 1993, I, 77; Berkey 1992, 28).

Furthermore, memorization formed the basis of an educational system in which the monopoly of the transmission of knowledge was held by a small group of religious experts:

‘But one common feature of societies where literacy is confined to a particular group (that is to say, virtually all communities before recent times) is that the content of certain literate texts is communicated by literates to non-literates, though this material is of course transmitted only between the literates themselves.’ (Goody 1977, 151)

Only the *'ulama* understood the texts, the transmission of which thereby became an oral and perhaps even sacral action (Zeghal 1996, 119 and 116ff.).⁴ Only after long and arduous years in school the students learnt to read and write and to understand the texts that they had memorized. Thereby, the students became *'ulama*. Not surprisingly, the *'ulama* tried to preserve this educational method even when ‘modern’ schools and larger amounts of printed books had already been introduced to Najd in the mid-1930s. Then, the educational method became a political issue. However, resistance was futile. The fact that students now learnt to read and write a lot earlier and because they were not educated with the ultimate goal to become men of religion, the *'ulama* slowly lost their monopoly on knowledge and its transmission.

4.2. Material conditions and their impact on legal thought and practice

Insufficient material conditions also had their impact on the realization of ideas central to the ideology of the Wahhabi reform movement. One of the main goals of Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab had been a return to the life of the pious forefathers (*as-salaf as-salih*), thereby establishing an Islamic ideal society organized according to the model of the glorified period of early Islam in Medina. One of the ways to achieve this aim was to return to the sources of the faith, Qur’an and Sunna. According to Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s views, the development of the Sunni schools of law and ‘blind’ obedience to their rulings and positions (*taqlid*) had divided the Muslim community. In fact, his

⁴ About the transmission of knowledge in general, see Eickelmann 1978, 485-516; Gaborieau/Grandin 1997.

main concern was the rejection of the *fiqh* of the schools of law, including the Hanbaliya. He concentrated on theology, the *'aqida*, which he thought had hitherto been neglected. His preference for theology, which he thought should be reconstituted to its central position in Muslim lore, also shaped his views with regard to the issue of *ijtihad* and *taqlid*, i.e. the question to what extent a legal expert was allowed to derive his judgements independently from the sources. For Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, this was a secondary problem. He was more concerned with the conflict between *fiqh* on the one hand and Qur'an and Sunna on the other than with the (alleged) conflict between *ijtihad* and *taqlid* (Peskes 1993, 41-47).⁵

Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab had good reasons for his complaints about his Hanbali colleagues in Najd. When the reform movement emerged in the middle of the 18th century, all scholars in Najd concentrated on Hanbali *fiqh*, neglecting important fields like *hadith*, *aqida* and *tafsir*. They used the works of some younger authorities in *fiqh*, especially *al-Muntaha* by Ibn an-Najjar⁶ and *al-Iqna'*, by al-Hujawi⁷ as standard references and as the basic textbooks in their lessons. However, the Wahhabi *'ulama* rejected these books as containing positions not compatible with the Qur'an and Sunna and the rulings of Ahmad b. Hanbal himself (Ibn Qasim 1965/1385, IV, 6 and 55; Vogel 1997, 191 and 204f).

As an alternative, they promoted the use of the *fiqh*-manuals by the Hanbali scholar Muwaffaq ad-Din b. Qudama (1146-1223), especially *al-'Umda*, *al-Muqni'*, *al-Kafi* and *al-Mughni*, from which all later Hanbali writings had derived (Crawford 1980, 78). However, the Wahhabis were predominantly concerned with theology. Therefore, at least theoretically, the emergence of the Wahhabiya brought with it a shift in religious paradigms: *fiqh* as the dominant field of interest should have been replaced by *'aqida*, and especially *tawhid*, the doctrine of the absolute oneness of God. Practically, however, the Wahhabis didn't succeed in replacing the existing paradigm and this not only due to the lack of interest in *fiqh* on the part of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab. In Unaiza for instance, scholars kept concentrating on Hanbali *fiqh* until the early twentieth century. Since Unaiza was one of the most important centres of learning in Najd, its *'ulamas'* refusal to follow the lead of the Wahhabi theologians from Riyadh shows quite clearly, that the Wahhabiya was not able to fundamentally change religious and legal thought and practice in Najd. All over Najd, judges continued

⁵ For a detailed discussion of law and justice in the first half of the 20th century, see Steinberg 2000, ch. 6 and 7. For the second half of the century see Vogel 2000.

⁶ *Muntaha l-iradat fi jam' al-muqni' ma'a t-tanqih wa-ziyadat* by Abu l-Baqa' Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Futuhi (gest.972/1564), commonly known as Ibn an-Najjar.

⁷ *Kitab al-iqna' li-talib al-intifa'* by Musa al-Hujawi (d. 1560-1).

to use the fore-mentioned manuals. Perhaps because of a lack of practical alternatives, they even became standard manuals for all Saudi Arabian judges from 1928 on (Durayb 1408/1988, 86).

In the case of Unaiza, the rejection of Wahhabi theology and legal thought is not that surprising. From the 18th century, Unaiza had been one of the main centres of resistance against the Saudi-Wahhabi expansion and its *'ulama* were no exception to that. If not all of them were steadfast opponents of the Wahhabiya, most showed a marked distance towards the leading Wahhabi *'ulama* in Riyadh, notably towards the Al ash-Shaikh ('the Shaikh's family'), the descendants of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (Steinberg 2000, 161-175). However, in smaller towns with no particular record of opposition against the Wahhabis, a different explanation for the deep-rootedness of the pre-Wahhabi legal tradition must be found. Especially in Southern Najd, in the small towns south and southwest of Riyadh, where the staunchest and most radical supporters of the Wahhabis lived, this phenomenon has to be explained. Here, material conditions played an important role. Their concentration on *fiqh* might be explained by the fact that the administration of justice was simply a necessary condition for the small urban communities to survive, while theology was not. Najdi scholars simply dealt with all those issues which had a major practical importance for their society. These were primarily the settlement of disputes and the rules of inheritance (*al-fara'id*). In their society, theology was considered to be a luxury. Most *'ulama* had to earn a living and therefore didn't have the time to deal with issues which were not of primary importance in everyday life. Furthermore, books and writing materials were expensive and therefore the copyists were forced to focus on a selection of important books. Again for practical reasons, legal writings providing the judge with the authoritative views of the Hanbali law school had to be copied first. This explains why Najdi *'ulama* so rarely dealt with topics like theoretical grammar (*nahw*), hadith, and tafsir. There is even evidence that the most important Hanbali writing on comparative law, Ibn Qudama's *Mughni*, was not available in a complete manuscript before the mid-1920s. Although the book must have existed in Najd during the 19th century, manuscripts had been destroyed or had disappeared otherwise. Once the book was lost, it was an arduous undertaking to obtain a new copy from outside Najd. This is how ecological, economic and political conditions took part in preventing the reform of legal thought (On the political aspects see Steinberg 2000, 288-295).

With regard to Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab's teachings on *ijtihad*, material conditions again proved to be a major obstacle to reform. In principle, the above-mentioned return to Qur'an and Sunna – a characteristic to all reformers in the 18th and 19th centuries - implied a positive predisposition towards 'independent legal reasoning' (*ijtihad*). Not surprisingly, this tendency

can clearly be discerned in the writings of Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab and the most important Wahhabi *‘ulama* of the following generations. Nevertheless, it took the Wahhabiya several decades before an authoritative doctrine of *ijtihad* had been worked out. But even afterwards, most Wahhabi scholars evaded the issue and until today the issue has remained somewhat sensitive (Schulze 1990, 352). This problem has its roots in the early history of the movement. Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhab himself was not a legal specialist and obviously not very much interested in legal theories. In his writings, he rather concentrated on theological problems and on how society had to be reformed on the basis of his vision of early Muslim society. This is why no theoretical treatise by the founder of the Wahhabiya has come down on us. Nevertheless, the question had to be settled authoritatively, so that a second-generation Wahhabi scholar, Hamad b. Mu’ammār (1747-1810), took it up and defined the Wahhabi position towards *ijtihad* and *taqlid*. This is not the place to expound Wahhabi legal theory in toto (For a detailed discussion see Crawford 1980, 73-77; Peters 1980, 131-145; Vogel 1997, 163-165). However, it is important to understand its main characteristics. One of these characteristics is that Ibn Mu’ammār allowed even judges and *‘ulama* to follow the positions of their school of law (*taqlid*), if they hadn’t obtained the necessary qualifications for independent reasoning during their legal studies. These *‘ulama*, he wrote, knew the standard compendia of younger legal authorities like the *Iqna’* and the *Muntaha*, but were not able to trace a proof (*dalil*) in the sources, i.e. Qur’an and Sunna. Furthermore, these persons were not able to compare the positions of the different schools of law and choose the right one for their case. These scholars had to follow the accepted positions of their own schools of law, i.e. they had to apply *taqlid*. In fact, Ibn Mu’ammār in this paragraph of his treatise presented a compromise between the ideals of the Wahhabiya and the actual situation in Najd, where *taqlid* of Hanbali positions was still the rule.

He continued, that only those *‘ulama* able to apply the *ijtihad* were obliged to do so. But even here Ibn Mu’ammār argued much more restrictively than for example Ibn Taimiyya. Interestingly, he called the *ijtihad* which he promoted ‘an *ijtihad* mixed with *taqlid*’ (*‘fa-huwa jtihad mashhub bi-t-taqlid*). The *‘alim* who acted according to his theory would look for the positions in which the founders of the four schools of law (*imam*, pl. *a’imma*) had agreed. He would accept these positions as the ‘consensus doctorum’ (*ijma’*) and rule accordingly. In those cases where the four had differed from each other, he would check the proofs in the texts, which the authors had quoted. If he thought that one of the *a’imma* had quoted the correct proof, he should follow his opinion. If he didn’t find any reference in their writings, he should stick to the majority view among the four. If there was no majority view, he should compare the positions and evaluate them. He should then choose the position, which he preferred or rather stick to the view of his own Imam. This is how *ijtihad* among

the Wahhabi scholars should work. It shows that the scope for independent legal reasoning for the early Wahhabis was not very wide.

In this treatise, Ibn Mu'ammār advocated the most conservative approach towards the *ijtihād* of all the 18th and early 19th century reformers (Peters 1980, 143f.). He rather legitimized the existing methods of legal reasoning in Najd, where material conditions and legal tradition didn't allow the single judge to come to a conclusion other than that which he found in the few (possibly even only one) standard manuals that he called his own. This point again becomes clearer when one recalls that the most important Hanbali book in comparative law, the *Mughni*, was available only in parts. For a student to study comparative law, he needed a book in which the positions of all the schools of law were treated on a comparative basis. Every school of law had its standard works in this field, which were called the *kutub al-khilaf*. For the Hanbalis, their standard manual was Ibn Qudama's *Mughni*. Besides his famous treatise on legal methodology, *Rawdat an-nazir*, *al-Mughni* was Ibn Qudama's most demanding work (Crawford 1980, 78; Ibn Manī' 1397/1977, 352-361). It contained the positions of the four Sunni schools of law and his own point of view on the problem in question. It is hardly conceivable that other *kutub al-khilaf* were available in Najd at that time. For a student, however, it was impossible to develop an understanding of what the different schools of law taught without such a book. On the basis of a discussion of the content of the *kutub al-khilaf*, the student should have developed his ability to apply his own *ijtihād*. It is typical of the pitiful situation of intellectual life in Najd around 1900, that this book was only available in parts scattered all over the region. Only in the 1920s, Ibn Sa'ud instructed an *'alim* to collect the manuscripts and prepare a printed version of the book. When it had appeared in 1926/7, scholars began using *al-Mughni* in their lessons (Durayb 1408/1988, 9; Bassam 1998, I, 365; *ibid.*, III, 501).

A very striking example for the problems this situation caused for the activities of a provincial judge is found in the biography of 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Muhammad ash-Shithri (1887/88-1967). During his tenure in Wadi Rayn in Western Najd between 1920 and 1954/5 he used the Hanbali standard manuals in order to find the right judgements. He didn't own books of the other schools of law. Only when in 1954/5 he was transferred to Riyadh, he gained access to the works of comparative legal studies and began teaching their contents. Now he started to choose positions and look for differences and conflicts of opinion. In his case, and probably in many others as well, only the availability of books made the difference between a *muqallid* and a *mujtahid*.

Generally, rank-and-file judges apply Hanbali law until today (Vogel 1997, 204f.). However, the application of the *ijtihad* became much more common from the 1930s, although political pressure to stick to a common set of Hanbali legal norms continued to exist from the 19th century on. As we have just seen, the availability of books gave many *'ulama* the opportunity to diversify their legal arsenal and rethink Hanbali norms. It is not mere coincidence that scholars started to engage in independent legal reasoning, if still on a very limited scale, when - in the 1920s and 1930s - the first printed books in considerable quantity appeared on the Najdi market. Especially the works of Ibn Taymiya and Ibn Qudama seem to have encouraged the more adventurous among the Wahhabi scholars to show a higher degree of independence in their legal reasoning (Steinberg 2000, 298-302).

However, intellectual developments in the wider Islamic world now became influential in Najd as well. The influx of books from the end of the 19th century was accompanied by a growing influence of Islamic Modernism as represented by Muhammad Abduh and wider networks of Salafi scholars in the Middle East and around the Indian Ocean. These ideas spread all over Najd but had their centre in Unaiza, where the level of intellectual achievement seems to have been higher than in other regions already in the 19th century. Scholars and students used the trade relations of the city's merchants by joining them on their journeys between the Hijaz, Iraq, Syria, the Gulf and even India. This is how the city's scholars became part of the fore-mentioned Salafi networks and developed contacts all over the Islamic world. Unaiza was the place where Islamic modernism including its tendency to apply *ijtihad* had its stronghold in a society which at first wasn't very receptive towards ideas coming from abroad. Here, Salih b. Uthman al-Qadi (1865-1932) and his student Abdarrahman as-Sa'di (1889/90-1956) founded a tradition of scholarship which in many of its aspects proved to be fundamentally different from the scripturalist Wahhabi school in Riyadh. In Unaiza, openness towards intellectual developments in the outside world corresponded with intensive trade relations with the neighbouring countries.

5. Scholars and Merchants

The itineraries of the Najdi *'ulama* show clearly that they followed the merchants and/or the pilgrimage caravans when travelling in the pursuit of knowledge. The main centres of learning in Najd during the 19th and 20th centuries were Riyadh, Buraida, Unaiza and, until the the early 1920s, Ha'il (Steinberg 2000, 127-174). However, many students travelled abroad. Already in the 17th and 18th centuries many Najdi *'ulama* had studied in the Hanbali centres Damascus, Cairo and al-Ahsa (Al-Juhany 1983, 242-248). These choices were as much influenced by the presence of famous Hanbali scholars in these

cities as by their geographical proximity and the respective chances to obtain financial aid and/or earn a living by engaging in trade. During the nineteenth century, this principle didn't change. Only the destinations did. Since around 1880 Delhi and Bhopal became very popular among Najdi students (Steinberg 2000, 96-100). They went there in order to study with the *hadith*-scholars of the *ahl al-hadith*, most notably Siddiq Hasan (1832-1890) and Nadhir Husayn ad-Dihlawi (d. 1902/3) and their students. By the end of the nineteenth century, these scholars were the most celebrated *hadith*-experts in the Muslim world (Inayatullah, 259f.; Metcalf 1982, 264-296; Sirriyeh 1999, 49-51; Malik 1999, 211n.).

If one considers the ideological affinity between the *ahl al-hadith* and the Wahhabis, it is not very surprising that Wahhabi students travelled to study with them. However, India was far and the journey dangerous and expensive. Furthermore, India had never been a particularly popular destination for young students from Najd. What is especially puzzling about the journeys to India, is the fact that the Wahhabis were well aware that India was governed by a Christian power. At the end of the 19th century, though, radical Wahhabi scholars even prohibited the journey to Ottoman territories because they considered their inhabitants as unbelievers. Therefore, it seems unlikely that these scholars sent their students to a country under Christian rule. It must have rather been the ardent desire to improve in *hadith* studies and the sorry state of Najdi society during the civil wars, which prompted the students to travel to India. However, our understanding of this episode would remain incomplete if we didn't consider the economic relations between Najd and India. For the Najdi merchants, at least for those living close to the Persian Gulf shore, journeys to India were quite a common phenomenon. During the nineteenth century, especially from 1850, trade relations between the Gulf and India intensified.⁸ Since Najd imported a considerable part of its food and merchandise from India, it was no logistic problem to travel to India via Bahrain. Besides the steamships operating between Bombay and Basra and other ports of the Persian Gulf, there were hundreds of dhows crossing the Arabian Sea to Karachi and Bombay every year. In fact, most of the big Najdi family enterprises ran a branch in Bombay, because considerable parts of their business depended on their trade with India. Furthermore, up to the early 1930s, pearls were transported to Bombay and thence to Europe. Even merchants from Hawtat Bani Tamim in the relatively isolated Southern Najd were known as travelling to India quite frequently (Lorimer 1915, II B, 1357). If we consider that Najdi students had followed all the important trade routes for some centuries, it seems only logical that they did so in the Indian case as well.

⁸ For an overview of trade in the Persian Gulf see Fattah 1997.

These journeys clearly hint to the fact that knowledge and trade were closely interrelated spheres of social activity. Any clear-cut differentiation between economic and cultural dimensions would obscure these interrelations. Quite apart from intellectual considerations, students and scholars needed money. Only where merchants or rulers were able and willing to support scholars and students, the *'ulama* found a basis for a flourishing intellectual life. In many Middle Eastern cities, the *'ulama* and students were supported by the returns of rich pious foundations (*waqf*, pl. *awqaf*) or were given a part of the *zakat*. However, this support could only be financed in cities where peasants and merchants produced a considerable surplus. This was not the case in most Najdi cities, where pious foundations were extremely rare (Bassam, 1419). As a result, religious centres existed only on a very limited scale, hardly comparable with those in the big Muslim cities like Cairo or even Mecca. Furthermore, ecological, economic and political upheavals could threaten these sources of income. This is why intellectual centres developed and declined parallel to the overall development of certain towns.

However, the *'ulama* were not only passive recipients of financial aid. Rather, most students and *'ulama* engaged in trade and other professions in order to earn a living. Especially the members of the notable families – which supplied the majority of important *'ulama* and merchants – were active in trade. The *'alim* who owned a small shop in an urban market, where sometimes he even gave his lessons was quite a common phenomenon. These *'ulama*-shopkeepers existed all over the Muslim world.⁹ Others traded while travelling abroad. They took Najdi merchandise with them, sold it and lived on their profits until they were running out of money again. As members of the notable families, many *'ulama* owned gardens in Najdi towns and sold their produce on the market. In a transaction called *salam*, others bought the harvest of a certain garden several months in advance and thereby pocketed large profits (Al ash-Shaykh 1974, 355 and 359). This was a common method to obtain long-term credit in Central Arabia (Fattah 1997, 86). How profitable this method could become for the person owning the capital, was proved by the judge of Buraida between 1932 and 1943, 'Umar b. Salim (d. 1943). He started off as a poor man but became one of the richest personalities in Buraida in the 1930s (Al ash-Shaykh 1974, 359; Al Abd al-Muhsin n.d., IV, 148).

On the other hand, many merchants in Najd themselves had studied and some had even obtained religious knowledge up to a level which qualified them to be called *'ulama*. From the 1850s, more and more persons can be traced in the

⁹ The former Grand Mufti Ibn Baz (1912-1999) is said to have studied *tajwid* with such a shopkeeper in Mecca.

sources who had absolved a conventional education, but afterwards became merchants and continued their intellectual career by dealing (actively and passively) with literature, poetry, history and genealogy.¹⁰ These were not parts of the formal religious curriculum, but were rather taught in the private literary and intellectual circles in the notables' parlours (*majlis*, pl. *majalis*) of the big merchants and 'ulama or among study groups, which certain students had established (Bassam 1978/9, II, 456f.). All these persons were members of the big merchant families of Qasim, mainly the Bassam family, not surprisingly from Unaiza. This development was clearly linked to economic factors. The Bassam family had become - again by Najdi standards - extremely rich in the second half of the 19th century. Therefore, we can assume that it was their unprecedented prosperity which prompted the Bassam to pursue their intellectual interests to an extent hitherto unknown. In Najd, only the richest families could afford to spend considerable parts of their time economically unproductive. Unfortunately, there is no evidence as to whether this was a new phenomenon among the merchants or whether their ancestors had already pursued similar interests on a similar scale.¹¹ It is intriguing, though, that the growth of the family enterprises coincided with the emergence of this group of 'intellectuals'.

The Al Bassam were the most important merchant family in Najd and one of the leading notable families in Unaiza (Bassam 1419/1999). Many of its members were important merchants, but spend their spare time with intellectual, mainly non-religious activities. Especially their historical and genealogical writings, some of which haven't been printed yet, testify that the Bassams were among the most important thinkers of Najd (Bassam, 1978/9 II, 346; Bassam 1998, V, 5ff.). In many cases, it is hardly possible to distinguish whether the person in question was a merchant or rather an 'alim/intellectual. As it seems, however, commercial success was considered to be more important than intellectual interests. Although most of the young Bassams absolved a religious education, they hardly ever reached the level necessary to become important 'ulama. Rather, they interrupted their studies as soon as they had obtained the knowledge they needed in order to become successful merchants and as soon they were able to pursue their intellectual interests independently. Once having reached a certain level of knowledge, their favourite means to transmit it seem to have been the informal *majalis*. Although the development of these circles was not limited to Unaiza, reports about similar meetings in other cities are relatively rare. Thereby, they threatened the 'ulama's monopoly on knowledge and its

¹⁰ Cp. the authors' biographies in Bassam 1419/1999, and the respective entries in the biographical dictionaries.

¹¹ There is some evidence that single members of the family dealt with non-religious disciplines since the 17th century.

transmission. However, because they only dealt with issues which had always been an informal part of the religious curriculum, this development at first had no serious implications for the *'ulama*.

It is intriguing that this development not only coincided with an intensification of foreign trade, but also with the first massive influx of printed books into Central Arabia. For example, Charles Doughty in 1877 visited a local notable in Unaiza, 'Abdallah al-Khunaini. There he saw the first volume of Butrus al-Bustanis encyclopaedia, which had only appeared in 1876 (Abdel-Nour, 160). At that time, several young merchants read this book, and furthermore dealt with genealogy, history and poetry and spoke foreign languages such as English or Hindi (Doughty 1888, II, 359). Whenever possible, they read newspapers from Beirut or Cairo. If we consider how printed books in early modern Europe fostered the emergence of a group of humanists, it is not very likely that this was a mere coincidence in the case of Unaiza. Just like the early humanists in Europe, the Najdi intellectuals' education didn't differ fundamentally from that of the *'ulama*. However, as in Europe, the first intellectuals gradually distanced themselves from the purely religious core of the Wahhabi curriculum. The emergence of secularist intellectual circles, which emerged – if at all - only in the 1950s, had its origins in these 19th century developments.¹² A clear-cut differentiation between *'ulama* and intellectuals is therefore neither necessary nor useful for this period.¹³

In general, 19th century Najdi history testifies that a differentiation between cultural and economic motives is difficult. Even the economic and cultural orientations of regions or cities reinforced each other. This was for example the case in Unaiza. Its inhabitants not only travelled all over the Middle East, but also stood in close relations to the inhabitants of the neighbouring Ottoman territories. Many of its citizens were deeply influenced by Ottoman culture and religion (Philby 1928, 275; Steinberg 2000, S.169f.). In the second half of the 19th century, a public debate broke out in Najd, mainly in Ha'il, Unaiza and Buraida, about whether a true (i.e. Wahhabi) Muslim should be allowed to travel to non-Muslim (i.e. non-Wahhabi) countries, namely the neighbouring Ottoman provinces. The debate seems to have been triggered by radical Wahhabi *'ulama* from Riyadh in order to delegitimize Rashidi rule in Najd (Steinberg, 2000, 122-174). Since the rulers of the Rashid family were known for their close relations to Istanbul and their – according to Wahhabi

¹² Even in the 1950s, these new intellectuals were often former judges or had absolved at least a religious education. One of the most prominent examples was the historian Hamad al-Jasir. See Sa'ati 1400/1980

¹³ In general this differentiation does not seem to be supported by the facts. For an example see Schulze 1990, 1-3 and 27.

standards - relative laxity in religious matters, this strategy proved to be quite successful in the long run. In Qasim, the debate – in spite of the religious terms in which these topics were discussed - rather revolved around commercial necessities. The majority of the citizens of Unaiza were of the opinion that the inhabitants of the Ottoman territories were Muslims indeed and that their excommunication (*takfir*) was an error and a grave sin. If the Hijaz, Iraq and Egypt were inhabited by Muslims, then these were Muslim territories and, as a consequence, travelling there was strictly legal. Commercial interests, cultural and religious orientation and opposition against Saudi-Wahhabi hegemony combined here and predefined the opinion of the citizens of Unaiza.

In this debate, the Wahhabis in Southern Najd combined their claim to cultural and political hegemony in Central Arabia with what was a genuine religious conviction in the South. Ottomans (and Shiites) were the unbelievers par excellence. However, the Southern Najdis maintained only very limited trade relations with the Ottoman territories. This is why it was relatively uncomplicated for them to defend radical isolationist views. Once again, political, economic and cultural motives combined. Their relevance only becomes clear when we focus on the interrelations of history's dimensions. In fact, the ecological and geographical situation of Unaiza forced its inhabitants to engage in trade with the surrounding territories. These trade relations helped the development of cultural links with the Ottoman world. On their turn, these links together with commercial interests and the desire to stay independent from Riyadh predefined Unaiza's position towards the radical Wahhabiya and the Saudi state in Riyadh. Therefore, the ensuing debate was triggered by a constellation of mutually inseparable causes, comprising ecological, economic, cultural and political ones.

Guido Steinberg
Freie Universität Berlin
guido.steinberg@t-online.de

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