

Unifying History: An examination of official national narratives in the Republic of Yemen

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National narratives offer a promising site for examining the processes of collective identity and memory formation. In 1990, the northern Yemen Arab Republic and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen unified, or as described by many Yemeni sources reunified, to form the present Republic of Yemen. This paper looks at national narrative construction in Yemen through the examination of two sites of official Yemeni collective memory and narratives: state-issued textbook and presidential speeches on national holidays. In both there are similar emphases and omissions from the Yemeni narrative. They stress the natural unity of the Yemeni nation and people and have a conspicuous historical gap between the revolutionary period of the 1960's and the 1990 unification. The omission of such recent and relevant national history can be understood by examining the structure of the narratives produced by the state and the emphasis on the theme of unity and the driving plot of unification.

The 20th century has arguably been one of state building, with the number of independent states nearly tripling by its close. Yemen, along with Germany, is one of the only examples of the unification of existing states and is a particularly interesting case study in the formation of national narratives and collective identities. In 1990, the northern Yemen Arab Republic and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen unified, or as described by many Yemeni sources *reunified*, to form the present Republic of Yemen. This paper will look at national narrative construction in Yemen through the examination of two sites of official Yemeni collective memory and narratives: state-issued textbooks and presidential speeches on national holidays.

I. Yemen's Recent History

Before looking at examples of national narrative creation in Yemen, it is necessary to briefly discuss Yemen's history, especially that surrounding unification, in order to be able to accurately understand the narratives that the government is forming.¹ While the concept of Yemen as a logically, but loosely bounded geographic region has existed for centuries, the current Yemeni state only came into existence in May 1990 when the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) joined together as the Republic of Yemen. The merger, driven primarily by economic necessity and political instability, has not brought about undisputed national unity. Historically and culturally North Yemen and South Yemen vary in ways that have made unification difficult to realize.²

¹ The narrative I present below is, of course, only one of the many narratives that can be and is told about Yemen.

² The terminology YAR/North Yemen and PDRY/South Yemen are frequently used interchangeably. I will use the terms North/South Yemen when referring to the geographic and cultural regions and the official state names when specifically referring the political states, which only exist within

North Yemen was ruled almost uninterrupted by Zaydi Shi'ites for over a thousand years, although it was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. With the fall of the Empire in 1918, Zaydi leadership reclaimed autonomy and established a theocratic state in the North until a 1962 Nasserite-inspired coup led to the overthrow of the Imamate and the establishment of the YAR with its capital in Sana'a. In contrast, Aden, on Yemen's south coast, had been held since 1839 by the East India Company because of its strategic importance to the India trade route and officially became a British Colony in 1937. Nationalist movements won independence from Britain in 1967 and established a state consisting of the areas around Aden and Yemen's eastern Hadramawt region. In 1969, socialist elements gained control of the country, making it the only socialist country in the Arab world and establishing close bilateral ties with the Soviet Union.

The 1990 unification of the tribal north and socialist south was a result of decades of alternating tension and rapprochement between the states and was eventually agreed upon after a series of economic shocks, natural disasters, and changes in global political alliances. Rather than carrying out a promised public referendum, the ruling parties of the two states ultimately acted unilaterally to formally unify the two states. The Republic of Yemen was initially formed as a power sharing arrangement that split parliamentary seats between the northern General People's Congress (GPC) and southern Yemen Socialist Party (YSP).

Further economic difficulties, defeat in the 1993 parliamentary elections, and a government move to amend the constitution in order to end the power sharing agreements soon led YSP leaders to believe that unification had been a mistake. In May 1994, Vice President Ali Salim al-Beidh, the former president of the PDRY, announced the reconstitution of an independent southern state. The move resulted in a brief civil war that ultimately led to the YSP's defeat and the exile of many of its leaders. The civil war left the south politically weak and the YSP marginalized, a situation that has persisted to the present day. Political instability in Yemen continues today in the form of a renewed secessionist movement in the South and the al-Houthi separatist conflict along Yemen's northern border.

II. Yemen's National Narratives

Classical scholars of nationalism have highlighted many methods state actors have taken to create the nation and identification with the nation. For example, Benedict Anderson draws attention to maps, museums, and censuses (1991) and Eric Hobsbawm highlights the role of invented traditions in the formation of the nation state (1983). Additionally, national narratives play an influential role and can be deployed by agents of the state to articulate the union between history, identities, and state structures. Historical narratives have become sites of political contestation among existing state bodies and those that would offer alternative visions to the status quo (Göçek 2008). Official discourse, even in a weak state system such as Yemen, has the potential to be widely spread given the state's financial and infrastructure resources, such as TV and radio.³

Textbooks often offer a fruitful site for research into national narratives and collective

bounded temporal eras.

³ This is not to say that there is necessarily a single or unified national narrative projected by the Yemeni government nor that the narratives produced are stable overtime. However, as I will discuss, there are a number of similarities in the periods of history they choose to highlight and those that they omit.

identity.⁴ For this study I examined over a dozen Yemeni social studies textbooks on Yemeni history and national education for primary and secondary school students published between 2000-2006.⁵ The textbooks are all written and published by the Yemeni Ministry of Teaching and Education.⁶ Additionally I examined public addresses given by Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh on four national holidays by from 1990 to the present.⁷ These national holidays include:

- 26 September: commemorating the 1962 coup against the Imamate and establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic in the North;
- 14 October: commemorating the 1963 revolt against the British in South;
- 30 November: commemorating the 1967 departure of the last British troops in the South; and,
- 22 May: celebrating the 1990 unification of the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen as the Republic of Yemen

In both the textbooks and President Saleh's speeches, Yemen's history begins approximately 3,000 years ago with references to the ancient empires that existed within the approximate borders of the current Yemeni state. These include the empires of Mayin, Himar, and Saba. By initiating the Yemeni narrative so far in the past, these texts lead to primordial claims about the nature of the Yemeni people and nation. One high school textbook discussing Yemeni unity specifically references that one can see that Yemen has existed for a significant amount of time due to "the many ruins and inscriptions that are found today scattered in numerous regions of Yemen."⁸ These ruins, from several ancient empires, are also reproduced on the Republic of Yemen's paper currency. When discussing Yemen's ancient empires, a book for primary school students writes of "your Yemeni ancestors," creating an explicit link between current Yemeni school children and the inhabitants of the southern Arabian peninsula three millennia ago. This link between the ancient and current residents of Yemen is reaffirmed in President Saleh's speeches, in which he addresses the crowd as "you descendents of Saba and Himyar" and repeatedly points to these empires as a source of Yemeni civilization.

The ancient character of the Yemeni people is further reinforced by ties to Islamic history. The Qur'an mentions events that took place within the boundaries of the present day

⁴ For example, Nathan Brown's work on Palestinian textbooks and Betty S. Anderson's work on Jordanian textbooks.

⁵ This is not a complete inventory of all the available texts, but offers an initial point of departure to look at national narrative formation through textbooks and I believe it is representative of the population of textbooks.

⁶ This paper does not examine or make a claim on the effectiveness of these texts in disseminating their content. According to a report published by UNICEF, of Yemeni children ages 6-11 only 45% of girls and 68% of boys are enrolled in schools (UNICEF 2005). Additionally, it is another matter entirely how effectively the textbooks are distributed to schools, especially those removed from urban centers, and whether or not they are actually used in the classrooms. However, these textbooks are still useful as they are a narrative produced by the government and Ministry of Education and Teaching in hopes of being instilled in the youth of the country.

⁷ Saleh was president from 1978-1990 in the Yemen Arab Republic and has been president of the Republic of Yemen since unification in 1990.

⁸ All quotes are translations of the author from Arabic unless otherwise indicated.

Yemeni state in several places, including the collapse of Ma'rib dam. Most notably, the Qur'an narrates the story of the Bilqis, the Queen of Saba (or Sheba, located in ancient Yemen), her encounter with the prophet King Solomon, and her conversion to Islam. Yemeni textbooks describe the story of Bilqis and other tales of Yemen from the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, such as the story of the People of the Elephant.

After the early Islamic period, there is a gap in the Yemeni narrative of nearly a millennium until the Ottomans established jurisdiction over the region in the 16th century. Alongside the history of Yemen under the Ottomans, the textbooks also provide parallel discussions of South Yemen under the British. From the turn of the 20th century onwards the textbooks elaborate in some depth on the North under the Imamate and the South under the British leading up to the 1962 and 1963 revolutions that led to the creation of the YAR and PDRY. One high school textbook emphasizes these revolutions as critical historical moments and goes into great depth describing the political, economic, and social goals of the revolutions. However, while naming them, the textbooks and speeches do not actually describe the two states that resulted from the revolutions and their nearly thirty years of independent existence prior to unification. None of the textbooks examined discuss the disputes, interactions, or border wars (1972 and 1979) that occurred during the two-state period. Instead, the narrative jumps immediately from the 26 September (1962) and 14 October (1963) Revolutions to May 22, 1990, the day YAR and PDRY unified to become the Republic of Yemen. There is no discussion of the political processes involved or the promised referendum on unification, merely that it was the will of the people that, despite long years apart, the country be "reunified."⁹ From the mid 1960s to 1990, the two-state period, the textbooks are silent.

This narrative structure is also reflective of the presidential speeches from 1990 to the present day. While the speeches do not provide as cohesive a narrative, the events emphasized in them and those forgotten are quite similar to those from the textbooks.¹⁰ The injustice of the pre-revolution period, the 26 September and 14 October Revolutions, and the 1990 unification are the three historical events that appear repeatedly throughout the 29 years of speeches examined. In particular, the speeches establish a clear dichotomy between the period prior to the revolutions and the period after 1990. The period prior to the revolutions is characterized by being dominated by the "forces of tyranny" and "struggles against invaders, occupiers, and their allies" that resulted in a "legacy of colonialism and despotism." Here the histories of the North and South are again paralleled with the North's rule under the imams and the South's rule under the British being seen as dark moments in Yemen's past. When facing political challenges that threaten the unity of the state, whether it be in the aftermath of the 1994 civil war or references to the current al-Houthi or southern rebellions, Saleh invokes the terminology of "turning the wheel of history backwards" to the period of colonialism and the Imam. When talking about disorder

⁹ The one exception in the lack of discussion of the two-state period is a bulleted list of events leading to the 1990 unification (meetings, summits, ministerial mergers, etc.). These are not described in any detail.

¹⁰ The speeches are most notable for their lack of focus on the past or specific discussion of the events that they commemorate. Instead the speeches focus mostly on the present and means to move forward (e.g. economic development, Yemen's regional political role, etc.). Discussion of the past tends to occupy two or three paragraphs of speeches many times that in length. When the past is discussed two things are emphasized: the inherent unity of the Yemeni people, and state and the contrast between the present and past prior to the 26 September and 14 October Revolutions.

the specific examples he uses are with respect to the division and disorder that existed during the British and Imamate periods, not the two state period of the 1960s to 1990, which had ample chaos and violence of its own, including coups, presidential assassinations, civil war, and armed struggles.

When discussing the 1994 Civil War, Saleh does not dwell on its details or the arguments made by YSP leaders, but describes it as a “rebellion against unity, democracy, constitutional legality, and the end of war in order to ignite sedition and secession.” Here he again presents a contrast between the pre-revolution period and the post-1990 state. Similarly, the textbooks do not provide a nuanced discussion of the root causes of the civil war. One Yemeni textbook briefly describes it as being undertaken by members of the Yemeni Socialist Party who were “secessionist traitors of Yemeni unity.”

III. Analysis and Conclusions

As Ernest Renan famously invoked, forgetting and historical error are important elements in the creation of the nation (1882).¹¹ This can be seen in the formation of Yemen’s national narratives in the textbooks and speeches described in this paper. To understand the reason for inclusions and omissions in the state’s representation of history, it is crucial to understand these works within a narrative context. As described by social and literary scholars, narratives have a beginning, middle, and end and are characterized by a central plot and themes (Somers & Gibson 1994, Steinmetz 1992, etc.). In the case of Yemen, unity becomes the major theme and unification the driving narrative plot. The theme of unity runs throughout the Yemeni narratives presented in this paper, particularly in the emphasis on Yemen’s ancient civilization. Unity of people and the land is naturalized. On the occasion of the 1990 unification, President Saleh described the event as a triumph over the “imaginary and artificial boundaries established by others.”

This ancient period represents the “beginning” of the Yemeni national narrative. The “middle” and crisis in the narrative arises with the disruption of this natural state North by the Ottomans/Imamate in the North and in the South by the British.¹² This crisis is overcome by the 25 September and 14 October revolutions, which are glorified and celebrated in the textbooks and speeches. The goal/“end” of the national narrative is the 1990 political unification that restores Yemen to its natural state, which is free of “imaginary and artificial boundaries.” However, this idealized narrative does not map perfectly onto the actual historical events, most importantly with respect to the two-state period. I believe that this is largely due to the discursive necessities of presenting a positive and progressive national narrative to serve the purposes of a unified government. The existence of the two-state period and the accompanying chaos, discord, and violence of this period interrupts the unification narrative and presents alternative political possibilities (e.g. multiple states, etc.) and disunion rather than union.

While it is outside the scope of this paper, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there

¹¹ “L’oubli, et je dirai même l’erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d’une nation.”

¹² The Imamate, especially in the Presidential speeches, is closely tied with the Ottomans and British. The reason for this grouping is implied by the non-democratic nature of these three periods and set in contrast to the nominally democratic nature of the single-party PDYR and YAR regimes, and is contrasted explicitly with the multi-party system of the current state.

are powerful alternative ways of conceptualizing Yemen's national narrative and collective identity as can be seen in the al-Houthi movement and new southern secessionist movement. The production of national narratives is not merely a discursive exercise, but one that has political and social relevance.¹³ However, of course, it remains to be seen if and how these events will progress and the ways in which they will be integrated or not integrated into future national narratives.

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¹³ Unity is viewed as a political necessity by the Saleh administration. Any threat to the government's stability is described as a "threat to national unity."

