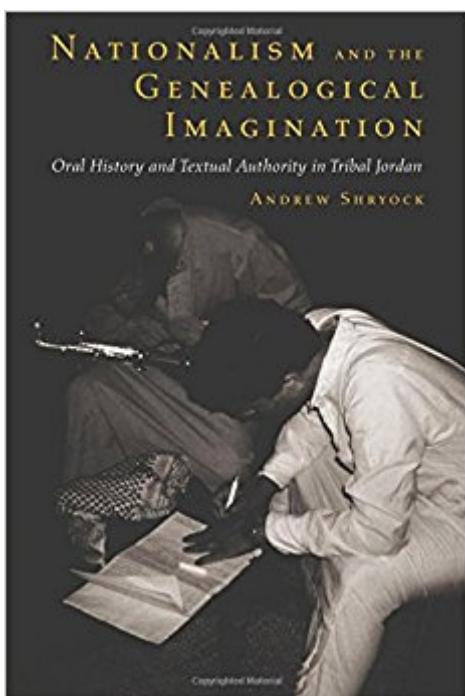


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Nationalism And The Genealogical Imagination: Oral History And Textual Authority In Tribal Jordan (Comparative Studies On Muslim Societies)



Synopsis

This book explores the transition from oral to written history now taking place in tribal Jordan, a transition that reveals the many ways in which modernity, literate historicity, and national identity are developing in the contemporary Middle East. As traditional Bedouin storytellers and literate historians lead him through a world of hidden documents, contested photographs, and meticulously reconstructed pedigrees, Andrew Shryock describes how he becomes enmeshed in historical debates, ranging from the local to the national level. The world the Bedouin inhabit is rich in oral tradition and historical argument, in subtle reflections on the nature of truth and its relationship to poetics, textuality, and power. Skillfully blending anthropology and history, Shryock discusses the substance of tribal history through the eyes of its creators—those who sustain an older tradition of authoritative oral history and those who have experimented with the first written accounts. His focus throughout is on the development of a "genealogical nationalism" as well as on the tensions that arise between tribe and state. Rich in both personal revelation and cultural implications, this book poses a provocative challenge to traditional assumptions about the way history is written.

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Customer Reviews

"Shryock's argument is as important for the understanding of historiography and national identity in the contemporary Middle East as was Benedict Anderson's discussion of 'print capitalism' for the emergence of national identities in early modern Europe." Dale Eickelman, author of

Knowledge and Power in Morocco

"Shryock's argument is as important for the understanding of historiography and national identity in the contemporary Middle East as was Benedict Anderson's discussion of 'print capitalism' for the emergence of national identities in early modern Europe."--Dale Eickelman, author of "Knowledge and Power in Morocco

I read this book for an introductory cultural anthropology course I took for personal enrichment. Although it does not at all explore the conflict between Israelis & Palestinians, it did give me some astounding insights into why conflicts in that region of the world seem so intractable to Westerners. It reveals how personal and political identities are created in societies and cultures that are tribal and oral. It challenges easy assumptions that writing things down is simple and desirable, and that talking produces political peace. This book is a scholarly ethnography with the footnotes and discussion of theory and methodology required in such books, and it is not a leisurely, easy read. But the diligent reader is rewarded with some eye-popping realizations about a culture that is very different from ours, some beautifully evocative tales from the Bedouin tradition, and even some flashes of perhaps unintended humor in Shryock's accounts of his present-day efforts to track down the 'truth' in a setting that makes the American red-state/blue-state rift blur into a pale shade of lilac. I am an admitted egghead who enjoys academic writing more than the average person, but I intend to read this book again now that I am beyond the requirements of the college course that first brought it to my attention. Perhaps Sec. of State Rice might also enjoy it?

Andrew Shryock captures the fragmented nature of oral histories among the Bedouin tribes of a Jordanian region known as the Balga. This text, which is actually an ethnography, brings into relief greater concepts of history that are often not obvious. The histories that Andrew collects have never been written, except a few segments in travelogues. This brings to mind questions about the unsubstantiated faith in written historical texts. Andrew illustrates that it is possible to interrogate the oral histories in the same way other historians interrogate archival data. Questions of the source of the document, the identity of the author, the comparison of data with other sources creates a "complete reality" of history. While Andrew flirts with this definition of history in chapter one when he compares the data he retrieves from oral histories to data found in archives, he also opens several other issues entirely. The oral histories of the Balga tribes are by their very nature fragmentary and disjointed. They do not lend themselves to a uniform, linear universal whole history. Instead, they

provide only highlights. This brings to mind a question of validity for so-called modern history. How much is filled in like the archeologist filling in the gaps in crumbled structures? Is it possible that the Balga tribes' oral histories, untouched by the pressure of conformity, be closer to historical truth than the modern version whose rough edges have been hewn squarely into a proper line? Andrew also illustrates the uses that are not directly historical. Oral histories contribute a part to building political clout and are propagated because of political clout. Moreover, the oral histories play a part in identity forming for young members of the tribes. They relate to their place in the universe, not only in the tribe, but also in relation to other tribes, Jordanian politics and the world at large, based on how they see themselves in relation to the oral histories. For these two purposes, the non-textual aspect of the oral histories is part of their significance, part of their social power. It brings into question classic historical texts all over the world. Exactly how historically accurate is everything we call history? An excellent piece of work, it's easy to see why it won scholastic awards.

The author does an excellent job of skirting the volatile plausibility of transcribing oral histories to the written word. For anyone wanting to understand both the intricacies and basic histories of the Jordanian Balga Bedouin, it is a fascinating read. Having a Jordanian father and a Palestinian mother, I especially enjoyed Shryock's investigation into their age-old rivalries. Tribalism is alive and well, as Shryock adeptly shows, and he brings it to us in clear and cunning detail.

Andrew Shryock is the oldest of five boys. All the brothers are very close and that is why I, his youngest brother, am very proud of his work. All the brothers will be home for Christmas and will anticipate reading his work of art. Andrew is a great writer as well as a great person. Number Five, Benjamin Shryock.

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