

## **PEDAGOGIES OF NATION-BUILDING: CONTESTING MODERNITIES AND MODERNIZING SCHOOLS IN (POST)COLONIAL BAHRAIN**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this essay is to trace the gendered historical production of the modern school—a key political institution of nation-building. Focusing on 20th century colonial Bahrain, I use Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine archival data collected over 18 months in 2018-2020. I argue that the rise of modern education makes visible deep fissures within a dominant imaginary of the nation as a consolidated formation. My analysis illustrates how the imagined nation emerges in colonial Bahrain as multiple, contested, and fragmented. Modern education becomes a productive site for interrogating nationalist masculinist origin myths. I offer “pedagogies of nation-building” as a conceptual contribution that aims to capture the complexity and serendipity of sociopolitical forces enfolding and unfolding within the modern school. I end by reflecting on the implications of my conceptual arguments on education reform initiatives and pedagogical practices.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Bahrain, pedagogies of nation-building, Foucauldian discourse analysis, modern education

## Introduction

I landed at the Bahrain International Airport in Muharraq on an unremarkable Wednesday evening in early fall 2018, following a twenty-four-hour flight across skies, seas, lands, and time-zones. Relieved to have finally reached my destination, I eagerly walked through the fluorescent-lit air-conditioned concourse, embellished with colorful advertisement posters and large welcome signs in English and Arabic, marking my designated path towards the terminal lobby. At the lobby, I made my way up to the “Bahrain Nationals and GCC Citizens” queue through a swift security clearance process before collecting my luggage at the carousel. I found my parents waiting patiently in the arrival hall. My father leaned on a new walking cane I had not seen before. Standing by him was my mother, who held onto his arm. Her once pitch-black hair seemed slightly dull, giving way to new shiny silver streaks that framed her face. Like the little girl I once was, I ran towards their open arms, planting a soft kiss on their forehead. We slowly made our way outside to the parking lot. I remember smiling as I walked into the tight embrace of the still and musty air, thick with ḥar and lezaq<sup>1</sup>. “I’m home,” I thought to myself.

We hopped into the car, my parents up front while I snuggled in the back. We chatted for a bit before I gave in to the gentle swaying of the car. I looked out the window, noticing the patches of the world that it arbitrarily framed—a series of animated photographic

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<sup>1</sup> A popular Bahraini phrase used to describe the intense heat and humidity familiar to the islands. The phrase, “ḥar and lezaq” literally translates to “heat and stickiness”.

shots of the mundane, brought into focus within fleeting moments. Tall skyscrapers overlooking extravagant 3D billboard signs, traffic lights choreographing a perfectly timed dance between pedestrians and vehicles, and decorated streetlights and palm trees neatly assembled in a median strip rolled out in the middle of a divided highway, splitting it in half.

The posters that hung on the streetlights that night marked a key national milestone in Bahrain, “100 years of formal education”. Bahrain’s Ministry of Education (MOE) declared the school year the state’s centennial celebration of establishing the first modern school in Bahrain and the larger Gulf region, al-Hedaya al-Khalifiya Boys School. These state choreographed celebrations entailed the launching of a new commemorative logo for the year in a nationally broadcasted event held at Bahrain’s National Charter Monument. It also included organizing an international conference to commemorate this educational milestone, under the patronage of the MOE, in partnership with United Nations Children's Fund, and with the blessings of the Islamic World Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (Bahrain News Agency, 2019).

As part of the state’s celebrations, government, and private schools in Bahrain organized student-led extracurricular activities, from photography exhibitions to gardening competitions and art galleries. This was true at al-Kinar School<sup>2</sup>. The declaration was

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Kinar School is a pseudonym for my dissertation research site, during the 2018-2019 academic year. Al-Kinar is the name of an apple-like fruit, native to the islands of Bahrain.

announced during an inaugural speech by al-Kinar school administrators on the first morning assembly of the 2018-2019 school year. However, the story began in 1899, curating a different set and sequence of events that led to the inception of the first school in Bahrain and the larger Gulf region. According to this narration, the American Evangelical mission to Bahrain takes credit for the establishment of the modern school on the islands—an open-air school serving two female students on the veranda of a poorly ventilated humble Mission House tucked in the busy Old Souk of al-Manama (Zwemer, 1900).

The discrepancy between the two storylines left me curious about the competing histories of the modern school in Bahrain, an episode of what Foucault (1984) might describe as a “battle for ‘truth’ or at least ‘around truth’” (p. 74). Exploring this puzzle becomes the subject of this essay as I examine the gendered historical production of the modern school—as a discourse and development project. Contrary to the prevailing assumption of a consolidated imagination of a singular nation, which is then nurtured through the modern school, I argue that the story of the modern school in colonial Bahrain invites us to take account of the imagined nation(s) as multiple, contested, and fragmented. My analysis finds that historical records on the modern school in (post)colonial Bahrain are pregnant with tensions and silences around the heterogeneity of the modern school. The dominant storylines circulating are an effect of shifting constellations of power relations, elevating and negating actions and actors at particular historical moments to fulfill particular political ends.

Thus, the relationship between schooling and nation-building in (post)colonial Bahrain is tenuous and ambiguous. To gain a fuller understanding of the purpose of the modern school in (post)colonial Bahrain, a careful historical and political contextualization of the institution and its advocates is indispensable.

This essay begins with a contemporary ethnographic encounter, an entry point for my historical analysis of the present. I introduce three key concepts that underpin my analytical and methodological approaches: a) the nation and the nation-state; b) schooling and nation-building; c) palimpsest time and transnational space. Next, I tell the story of the modern school in 20th century colonial Bahrain—to illustrate what I conceptualize as “pedagogies of nation-building”. Pedagogies of nation-building aim to capture the complexity and serendipity of sociopolitical forces enfolding and unfolding within the modern school. Reading across competing political projects: Pan-Islamic, American Missionary, and Pan-Arabism taking shape in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bahrain, I trace the imaginaries of modernity that produce distinct articulations of the school as its vehicle. My analysis shows that modern education becomes a productive site for interrogating nationalist masculinist origin myths. The essay concludes with an invitation to consider the potential implications of my conceptual argument on the education reform policies and educational pedagogies on the islands.

## **Reviewing the literature, tracing theoretical terrains**

Central to this essay's premise is the concept of the nation and the nation-state. My understanding of the nation is grounded in feminist postcolonial traditions. I am interested in considering the nation as a discursive and material construct. Bhabha (1991) conceptualizes the nation as an "agency of ambivalent narration" (p. 3), which destabilizes one's imagination of the nation as a homogenous political community (Anderson, 1983). The discursive construction of the nation as one people, Bhabha (1991) tells us, rests upon "a double narrative movement" (p. 297). This movement entails two simultaneous and contradictory discursive strategies: a) a pedagogical strategy that constructs 'the people' historically, where individuals are told who the nation was, and b) a performative strategy that constructs 'the people' contemporaneously, where individuals are interpellated as members of the nation through repetitive performances in the everyday (Bhabha, 1991, p. 297). He goes on to argue that "this tension between the pedagogical and the performative... turns the reference to a 'people'—from whatever political or cultural position—into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of modern social authority" (Bhabha, 1991, p. 297).

The works of Jeganathan and Ismail (1995) and Ismail (2000) expand on Bhabha's (1991) theory of nation, critiquing his underdeveloped conceptualization of the nation as merely discursive, benevolent, and ambivalent. Instead, Ismail (2000) argues that nationalism as an ideology "must have presumed a community

that one cannot but understand as nation” (p. 236). The slippage that Bhabha (1991) falls into, Ismail (2000) further argues, is rooted in confusion between nation and state. The problematic, then, is not that nations are produced as an effect of nationalism since the nation was already gaining traction globally as the single most recognizable and legitimate form of political community (Anderson, 1983). Rather, the problematic is *how* nationalism, as an ideology, labors to “justify the entitlement of a particular nation to a state” (Ismail, 2000, p. 237, emphasis in original). Returning to Bhabha’s (1991) theorization of the problematic of nationalism, it is not the reference to a ‘people’ that haunts the modern social authority. Instead, linking a ‘particular people’ to the state to establish, legitimize, and stabilize the nation-state makes nationalism an inherently oppressive and exclusionary project (Jeganathan & Ismail, 1995; Khatibi, 1983/2019).

Spivak (2009) adds another layer to the problematic of nationalism by underscoring the intimate entanglement of women in this temporal imagination of the nation. Ismail (2000) argues that “nationalism relies fundamentally in maintaining the possibility of restoring, if not resurrecting, an ideal from the past” (pp. 279-280). Similarly, Spivak (2009) shares Ismail’s (2000) concern for time. She suggests that since it is women-as-mothers “who seem to bring us into temporization, by giving birth, our temporizing often marks that particular intuition of origin by coding and re-coding the mother, by computing possible futures through investing or manipulating womanspace” (p. 87). This means that in the inherently reproductive and heteronormative nation, the constant

regulation of the spaces that women-as-mothers inhabit is of critical significance. The significance of womanspace stems not only from a concern for the (re)production of a past but also from a concern for the future preservation of social order. A social order to which a particular nation is entitled, and a particular configuration of power-relations are sedimented. Hence, within this framework of nation and nation-building, the modern school becomes a key Foucauldian technology of government that labors to regulate and manipulate womanspace (Abu el-Haj, 2015, Adely, 2012, Khoja-Moolji, 2018). For example, focusing on Muslim-majority communities in the Global South, Khoja-Moolji's (2018) cross-cutting research interrogates the ongoing convergence on the figure of the ideal girl in contemporary international development policy, paying attention to the discursive construction of the "educated Muslim girl" category in the context of colonial India and Pakistan. There, she finds that discourses on the education of the girl/woman are sites for constructing not only gender but also class relations, religion, and the nation. Similarly, focusing on the context of (post)colonial Bahrain, this essay traces how the modern school—as a set of discourses, practices, and structures—mutates and operates to advance particular truth(s) of the ideal nation, the ideal girl, and the ideal school.

Before I move on to my empirical analysis, a note on how this essay reconsiders the conceptual parameters of modern time and space is in order. Breaking away from allegations of spatial and temporal boundedness fixated through a "presentist frame" (Coleman & Collins, 2006, p. 9), my understanding of time follows Jacqui



Alexander's (2005) and Ella Shohat's (2001) conceptualization of time not as linear horizontal telos, but as "a scrambled and palimpsestic time [...] with the premodern, the modern, the postmodern and the paramodern coexisting globally" (Alexander, 2005, p. 190). Reconceptualizing time as palimpsest enables analytical leaps across temporality and geography, such that an analysis of the "here and there" and "then and now" becomes not only legible but also indispensable for a deeper understanding of the histories of schooling and the politics of girlhood in Bahrain (Alexander, 2005). In other words, examining historical and contemporary records through a lens of palimpsest time allows us to trace how ideas travel between and across different historical junctures and geographical locations (Alexander, 2005; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, Ismail, 2000; Nagar, 1995). This shift in temporal and spatial analysis becomes especially relevant to my study on the politics of schooling in Bahrain, where much of the anthropological, sociological, and historical writings have been dominated by "methodological nationalism", a framework that "[privileges] the national space as the vantage point from which to interpret social phenomena" (Hanieh, 2015, p. 62). Consequently, such dominant writings often fail to account for how flows of peoples, ideas, and goods have "altered cultural practices, produced new subjects and identities, and fostered ties to multiple places" (Kim-Puri, 2005, p. 140).

## **A note on methodology and sources**

I assembled a range of texts to guide my exploration of dominant discourses articulating the purpose of the modern school in (post)colonial Bahrain. I reviewed English and Arabic data sources. These included colonial records, missionary newsletters, regional cultural magazines, and local newspapers<sup>3</sup>. I employed genealogy as a methodological approach to examine this archive and discourse analysis as a method. Genealogy is a Foucauldian methodology of tracing (dis)continuities in discourses, i.e., social practices that do the work of producing or eliminating particular subject-positions at particular historical moments (Khoja-Moolji, 2018; Lowe, 2015; Paik, 2014; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). In the Foucauldian tradition, discourse analysis does not seek to uncover an origin or a singular truth about the texts or their authors. Rather, this method prompts my inquiry into the present history, much like the curiosity about the centennial celebrations of the modern school in contemporary Bahrain that I describe in my introduction. Through discourse analysis, I “probe social and cultural attitudes” towards the school and the girl “as reflected in the historiography of this subject” (Abou-Bakr, 2012, p. 202).

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<sup>3</sup> a) The Records of Bahrain (1820-1960), an archival collection of original British government documents discussing Bahrain’s internal and external affairs—focusing on those related to formal education; b) The Arabian mission Field Reports Quarterly Letters Neglected Arabia: Arabia calling (1892-1962), an archival collection of original newsletters authored by American Protestant missionaries in the Gulf and Iraq reporting to their counterparts in the United States; c) al-‘Arabi magazine (1958-2010), a popular monthly magazine funded by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information, and founded by Egyptian and Levantine Pan-Arabist literary critics, in support of Arab culture, literature, and natural sciences; d) şada al-esbū‘ magazine (1969-2004), a weekly magazine established in Bahrain with a distinct Pan-Arabist orientation, in the aftermath of the painful defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the 1967 Six-days War; and e) State-authored textbooks (2014-2018), specifically looking at social studies and national education curricula assigned for grades seven through twelve.

Conceptualized as such, texts—like ethnographic sites—become generative “kaleidoscopic social sites” contingent on multiple entry points conditioned differently by differently situated audiences (Nagar, 1995). In other words, texts are not merely documents but monuments of a particular discursive constellation, made possible by a particular regime of truth, emerging at a particular intersection of time, place, and peoples (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Bsheer, 2020).

Picking up on a rising tradition of critical educational scholarship, I ask: how do we know what we know about the modern school and its articulated purposes? How is the girl constituted as an object of intervention? What strategies are authorized because of this object? If the modern school is the remedy, what is the social malady that it remedies? And how does this knowledge reproduce itself? (Arnot & Mac an Ghail, 2006; Huaman and Martin, 2020; Shirazi, 2011; Vavrus, 2002).

### **Contesting modernities and modernizing schools in colonial Bahrain**

Bahrain is a small archipelago (760 km<sup>2</sup>) consisting of thirty-two islands. The islands sit at the heart of the Gulf<sup>4</sup>, approximately 121nm east of King Abdul Aziz Port in Saudi Arabia, 183nm west of Bandar Taheri in Iran, 363nm to Port of Khawr al-Amaya in Iraq, and 50nm northeast of Port of Ras Laffan in Qatar (Seaports: Info,

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<sup>4</sup> The naming of the Gulf is a political question. For the remainder of this essay, I will reference this geographical local as merely “the Gulf”.

marketplace, 2018). It is home to an estimated 1.4 million people, almost half of whom are Bahraini citizens (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). In 1861, the rulers of Bahrain signed a protection agreement with colonial Britain (AlShehabi, 2019), transforming the islands into a British protectorate and designating it part of “Britain’s imperial frontier” until its official independence in August 1971 (Onley, 2007). Compared to its neighboring Arab Gulf sheikhdoms, Bahrain was often hailed as a beacon of modernization in the Gulf. Many historical writings attributed colonial Bahrain’s rapid development to the rise of the nation-state and the (trans)formation of bureaucratic institutions—like the modern school-- at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (AlShehabi, 2019).

In this section, I expand on the historical legibility of the school in Bahrain by situating the institution of the school within a constellation of irregular forces that interplay to advance competing imaginaries of “modernity”. Given that defining modernity is likely to be a futile endeavor, what I will attempt to do in this section is to “track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being modern are made” (Rabinow, as cited in Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 7). The claims attached to the establishment of the modern school are of concern to me. To do this, I situate the narratives of modernity and the modern school in particular “historically and regionally specific situations” (Abu Lughod, 1998) from within which they draw meaning.

### *Pan-Islamic modernism, anti-colonialism, and schooling*

At the turn of the twentieth century, “the migration of people and the internationalization of capitals... impinged on the spread of print culture and general education emphasized by nation-builders” (Mignolo, 2012, p. 237). New appetites for dates that emerged in the United States and a renewed desire for pearl fashion that submerged elite salons across Europe and the Americas stimulated the markets in colonial Bahrain (Hopper, 2015). An unprecedented accumulation of wealth in the region triggered the migration of workers along the eastern littoral of the Arabian Peninsula, southern Iraq, coastal Persia, Baluchistan, and East Africa (Bishara et al., 2018). Coupled with the movement of peoples and capitals was the rise of new transport and printing press technologies, transforming imaginations of time and space, self and other (AlShehabi, 2019; Anderson, 1983). Together, these transformations had a significant bearing on education for different social groups occupying the social hierarchy in colonial Bahrain.

In tandem with trade and scholarly travels, several notable families donated funds and lands to establish a different school model in late 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bahrain. Free of charge but welcoming of community donations, these privately funded schools remained closely affiliated with the local masjid. The new school model found its inspiration in heated intellectual debates among Al-Nahda renaissance figures in the Arabian Peninsula, Greater Syria,

Egypt, and the Indian subcontinent<sup>5</sup> (Bsheer, 2020; Kassab, 2010). According to this discourse, modernization in Muslim societies was to serve two objectives: a) liberation from European imperial dominance; and b) the elimination of wide-spread corruption among the powerful. Consequently, the reformed school was discursively weaved into a yearning desire for modernization. It became an institution of political socialization and scientific reasoning, designed to instill a sense of unity among the young members of a new imagined nation—one that elevated a shared Islamic religion and accentuated the reverence for a shared Arabic language. However, the transformations unleashed by this project manifested unevenly on the ground.

Indeed, social formations in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bahrain were deeply heterogeneous. Yet, the conditions that produced ethnoreligious enclaves translated to establishing schools that effectively served specific student bodies. Given the entanglement of local schools with local masjids, boys and girls had to travel long distances to attend schools beyond the boundaries of their immediate communities. This was when the only means of transportation between towns and villages were donkeys, mules, and horses, often accessible exclusively to middle class or upper-

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<sup>5</sup> Like their Muslim and Arab comrades elsewhere, the rising educated class in Bahrain were inspired by the writings of prominent anti-colonial and Islamic modernist scholars. Two influential scholars of their time were Jamal al-din al-Afghani and Mohammad ‘Abduh, whose writings were published on the pages of key periodicals such as “al-Urwatu al-Wuthqa” in Paris, magazines such as “al-Muqtataf, al-Hilal”, and “al-Manar” in Egypt, and newspapers such as “Ḥabl al-Matīn” in Iran at the turn of the 20th century (AlShehabi, 2019; Bsheer, 2020; Stephenson, 2019). Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh openly critiqued the colonial dominance of imperial Europe, as well as corruption among political and religious leaders of Muslim societies. To overcome these sociopolitical maladies, they called for reforming and modernizing Muslim communities—a project that rested on two pillars: Pan-Islamic solidarity among Muslim peoples, based on a shared faith, a shared language, and science (Kassab, 2010).

class families. Hence, youth traveling unattended—particularly those from working class families, especially girls—had little to no access to outside schools. Also, teachers were educated in distinct schools of jurisprudence, Fiqh, within the Sunni and Shi’a denominations. Many received training from Islamic education hubs in Egypt, Greater Syria, Iraq, Persia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Arabian Peninsula. This meant that parents would have likely found the teaching of Fiqh outside their schools of jurisprudence irrelevant. Further, languages of instruction could have imposed restrictions on students from different ethnic backgrounds. This would have likely been the case for non-Arabic speaking communities on the islands, such as the Balouchis and the ‘Ajam. The discursive coupling of ethnicity and religion was further reinforced by a British colonial racial order in a society that operated according to “systems which hinged on racial separatism” (Nagar, 1996, p. 64). What emerged then was a social order organized according to neatly compartmentalized ethnoreligious categories—an effect of multiple dynamic social forces of gender, class, migration, and colonialism. Of particular interest to this essay are the American missionaries in Bahrain, who were deeply invested in establishing a modern school.

### *American missionaries, schoolwork, and the girl/woman burden*

“Schoolwork” occupied a critical role as a preparatory enterprise for the evangelizing mission of America towards the “nations”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Reincarnating a particular civilizing rhetoric that developed in earlier encounters with Indigenous nations of North America and Hawaii, the mission of saving the “nations” was understood as America’s divine destiny and God’s chosen instrument for advancing His providence (Hutchison,

(Moerdyk, 1907). As an institution, the school became an instrument of progress and modernization insofar as it provided the conditions under which the Arab/Muslim<sup>7</sup> “with no existing civilization” was civilized (Hutchison, 1987). When examining early reports on the mission school, it becomes apparent that the nonmodern woman/girl is key to rationalizing “schoolwork” in colonial Bahrain<sup>8</sup>. Under the supervision of missionary women, the mission school was reported to be serving two students: a Christian convert girl refugee from the Basra vilayet and a “poor” local woman fleeing domestic abuse (Zwemer, 1900). Drawing on a familiar colonial trope of “saving the brown woman from the brown man” (Spivak, 1988, p. 297), the rhetoric of liberal feminism was discursively co-opted to justify the American missionaries’ interventions. The girl and woman identified were read as necessary victims of their oppressor, the Arab/Muslim man, producing a “logic of causality” (Mignolo, 2020) that rationalized

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1987). Consequently, Evangelical missions assumed two roles, “conversion and modernization” (Jayawardena, 2014, p. 22).

<sup>7</sup> For American missionaries in 19th century colonial Bahrain, the coupling of ethnicity (Arab) and religion (Muslim) coincided with a racialized imagination of the self/other that shaped the social and political landscape in the United States. The Naturalization Act of 1790 is an important example of how the “Arab” subject was racially coded. Introduced and passed in the United States Congress, the Naturalization Act of 1790 set into motion the first uniform rules for the granting of United States citizenship by naturalization. The law limited naturalization to “free white person[s] ... of good character”, thereby excluding all non-white individuals from the right to citizenship (Gualtieri, 2001, p. 29). According to this legislation, non-white individuals included all non-European immigrants, along with African Americans and Native Americans. Gualtieri (2001) writes that Arabs from Greater Syria, who constituted the majority of immigrant Arabs to the United States in the 19th century, petitioned for naturalization. The argument was as follows: given that Arabs from Greater Syria are white and Christian, they are no different than Europeans and therefore must be eligible for naturalization in the United States (Gualtieri, 2001). These rulings solidified the racial/religious coupling as the norm in the United States; meaning that the Arab ethnicity and Muslim religion were not only racialized but also imagined to be interchangeable. Arabs became Muslims and Muslims became Arabs until proven otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> Early missionary writings describe 19th century colonial Bahrain as an ideal location for establishing a stable presence in Arabia. As part of “Britain’s imperial frontier” (Onley, 2007), colonial Bahrain became a haven far from the reach of ideological and sectarian competitors stationed in neighboring Basra: Ottoman Turks and the American Jesuits (Zwemer, 1899).



and necessitated the intervention of the white (wo)man savior. On this discursive tactic, Ahmed (1992) argues that “whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to justify the attack on native societies morally and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe” (p. 154). We find in American missionary records some of the earliest articulations of this discursive labor of valorizing the Western woman among local communities in colonial Bahrain:

*New Bait to Catch Fish: Although our dispensary is an attraction to the sick and the poor, and we have no trouble to reach the women because of Mrs. Zwemer’s attractive powers, yet we have long felt the need of some kind of bait for the men who were strong and well (...) During the past months we have (...) tried the magic lantern (...) Views of the cathedrals and churches give a good text on the subject of Christian worship, and Queen Victoria’s portrait is a good one on the subject, “The position of women in Christian lands” (Zwemer, 1899, p. 7-8).*

Similarly, American women missionaries in colonial Bahrain, knowingly or unknowingly, deployed a rhetoric of liberal feminism that reproduced Western supremacy—a complacency connected to their “social and economic ties to a ruling, colonial class” (Naghibi, 2007, p. 2). Another powerful example of this binary representation is found in a document authored by Marion Wells Thoms, an American missionary woman stationed in 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bahrain. Pleading for “[the] need for women workers among the women of Arabia”, Thoms (1903) writes: “Ignorance, superstition, and sensuality are the characteristics which impress

themselves most strongly at first upon one who visits the Arab harem” (p.21). To unlearn these “characteristics”, Thoms (1903) declares it necessary to “teach... [and create] a desire for better things... [among] these neglected, degraded sisters—but sisters still through Him who ‘hath made of one blood all nations’” (p. 21). The sisterhood discourse deployed here hinges on a “hierarchical, pedagogical relationship between those sisters who know and those who passively await enlightenment” (Naghibi, 2007, p. xxv). This hierarchical model of sisterhood discursively constructed the Muslim and/or Arab woman in Bahrain as an antithetical Other—passive, primitive, and oppressed, in need of her white savior. In contrast, the American woman missionary was represented as the “intellectual and political vanguard at the forefront of history” (Felski, 1995, p. 149). The articulated formula identifies schoolwork as necessary to “create a desire” for enlightenment, modernization, and salvation for the Evangelical Christian nation. This becomes the discursive relationship between modernity, schooling, and nation-building according to the American colonial missionary imaginary.

### *The cul-de-sac of ethno-nationalism(s) and schooling*

While American Evangelical missionaries extolled the virtues of the mission school to advance its proselytizing work, privately funded schools in 20th century colonial Bahrain continued to grow and transform. An important marker of this growth was the steady uncoupling of ethnicity and religion as anti-colonial ethno-nationalist struggles gained momentum in Bahrain and the region.

Privately funded schools that were once attached to local mosques separated, transforming into stand-alone institutions. This separation, figuratively and literally, stood as a bold gesture to separate religion from secular education, rendering religion a private matter (Chatterjee, 1991). Simultaneously, educators were recruited from newly birthed nation-states emerging from the rubbles of crumbling empires: Ottoman and Qajar. Local transformations and transnational migrations produced a “consciousness of connectedness” rooted in an awareness of ethnolinguistic identities (Anderson, 1983, p. 56-57).

Two important examples of ethnonationalist schools in Bahrain are the al-Hedaya al-Khalifiyah School and the ‘Ajam School of Bahrain. Al-Hedaya was established in 1919 by the Knowledge Council, a local committee of fourteen members from upper class notable families of Muharraq<sup>9</sup>, including a ruling family member (Al-Khalifa, 1999). Financially, al-Hedaya relied on donations from Arab Sunni and Huwalah wealthy merchants, in addition to nominal contributions from community members<sup>10</sup>. To educate the youngest members of the imagined Pan-Arab nation, educators were recruited from Hejaz, Greater Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, triggering drastic changes in the school curricula (Al-Qouz, 1969). More weight was given to the Arabic language, Arabic literature, mathematics, and history, while religion studies became a

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<sup>9</sup> Several members of the committee had previously founded and privately funded schools in the Arab Sunni and Huwalah communities.

<sup>10</sup> While the rulers of Bahrain tended to be minimally involved in formal education, opting instead to educate their heirs among elders in royal salons, al-Hedaya School marked a turn in this attitude (Al-Misnad, 1985, p. 1). With the support of Sh. ‘Abdullah, the Knowledge Council received the blessing of the ruling family, who donated the land on which the school was built (al-Khalifa, 1999).

secondary subject that was “ecumenical in form” (AlShehabi, 2019). Eventually, this critical curricular shift severed ethnoreligious ties linking the Arab Muslims of Bahrain to Turkish coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire, Persian coreligionists in the Qajar Empire, and Indian coreligionists in colonial India. Instead, new ethnolinguistic ties were forged with Pan-Arab nation-states. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) became the marker of educated nationalists, Bahrain’s new middle class. AlShehabi (2019) writes that “al-Hedaya School was the institutionalized form in which this al-Nahda quest for knowledge manifested itself in Bahrain” (p. 105). In 1931, the government of colonial Bahrain imposed significant reforms to the formal education system. Community education committees were dissolved, and the newly created centralized *Wizārat al-m’aāref*<sup>11</sup>, the Ministry of Knowledges, took over all education affairs on the islands (Al-Misnad, 1985). In so doing, the Pan-Arabist ethnonationalist project was contained, and the nation-state-territory was consolidated. Al-Hedaya was transformed from an anti-colonial project to a project of the colonial nation-state.

The second example of the ethnonationalist school in Bahrain is the ‘Ajam School, officially named *Mubārakeh ye Iṣlāḥ* (Blessings of reform). The ‘Ajam School was established in 1913, following urgent calls from ‘Ajam migrant merchants in 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bahrain (Stephenson, 2019). The vision was inspired by intimate connections with schools in southern Iran, particularly the

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<sup>11</sup> The new ministry needed to neutralize the influence of the elites so new positions were created within the ministry to absorb some of them.

*Sa'adat* School<sup>12</sup> in Bushehr. Teachers from Bushehr were actively recruited to serve working class 'Ajam students at the newly founded school in Manama<sup>13</sup> (al-Khalifa, 1999; Stephenson, 2019). The curricula included lessons in Persian language, poetry, history, science, mathematics, geography, astronomy, English language, and functional Arabic language (al-Khalifa, 1999). Interestingly, in 1923, the 'Ajam School appeared in official records of Iran's Ministry of Education's Southern Port District as a newly established education institution (Stephenson, 2019). This reclassification transformed the 'Ajam School from a community education institution to a nationalist project, discursively erasing the localized labors of 'Ajam communities in Bahrain. In other words, the reclassification of the 'Ajam School signaled a critical ideological reorientation towards an emerging Iranian nationalist fervor<sup>14</sup> (Stephenson, 2019). Indeed, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a growing public display of loyalty to Iran and the charismatic Shah<sup>15</sup>. In 1931, the school changed its name to *Ittiḥād e Mellī* (the National Unity School), and the Iranian government became its sole source of funding (al-Khalifa, 1999; Fuccaro, 2005; Stephenson, 2019). Together, these transformations were read by Pan-Arab nationalists, local rulers, and the Resident Political Agent of colonial Britain as malicious

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<sup>12</sup> Sa'adat was well regarded, so much that it was proclaimed as the "mother of all schools in [south] Iran" (Dashti, 2006, as cited in Stephenson, 2019, para 22).

<sup>13</sup> In fact, the 'Ajam educators claimed that they "were on a mission to change the *uslūb* (method) of education so that the children would not be like their bad bakht (unfortunate) fathers" (Habl al-Matīn, 1914, as cited in Stephenson, 2019, para 24).

<sup>14</sup> This discursive erasure coincided with key transformations in the Persian state—namely the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi to power as prime minister in 1923, two years following the overthrow of the Qajar dynasty.

<sup>15</sup> Students pledged allegiance to the Shah in morning drills, dressed in standardized uniforms that included the "Pahlavi hat" (Chehabi, 1993, p. 212), and participated in public marches to Iranian nationalist music while raising the Iranian flag (Fuccaro, 2005).

attempts by Iran to place its political claims over the islands. Yet, in ways similar to al-Hedaya al-Khalifiya, *Ittiḥād e Mellī* can be read as the institutionalized form of Iranian nationalism, promising liberty and dignity for all members of the Iranian nation.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have attempted to (re)situate and (re)narrate entangled histories of the modern school in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bahrain. Reading historical records relationally, my analysis demonstrated how texts are pregnant with synergies, tensions, and silences on the question of the modern school and its intended sociopolitical purposes. Specifically, I find a plurality of contesting and converging political imaginaries anchored in multiple imaginations of modernity, nations, and schooling as a political institution of nation-building. Analyzing the story of Arab nationalism and the formal school in the context of (post)colonial Kuwait, Al-Rashoud (2017) makes a compelling argument that I find resonating. There, he writes, “[t]op-down, grassroots, and indirect processes...were intricately connected and mutually reinforcing, demonstrating the necessity of a nuanced and holistic approach to explaining the role of education in forging political identity” (Al-Rashoud, 2017 p. 339). The story of the modern school in (post)colonial Bahrain follows a similar trend. The story I tell offers further evidence in support of a “nuanced and holistic approach” when studying the relationship between political identities and the rise of the modern school(s) in (post)colonial Bahrain. Rather than departing from an assumption of a

consolidated imagination of a clearly demarcated nation—be it colonial European, missionary American, or postcolonial ethnonationalist—the story of modern education in Bahrain illustrates the plurality of imagined nations, advanced by complex, contradicting, and contesting pedagogies. These pedagogies of nation-building were deeply entangled with global movements of peoples, ideas, and capital. They seeped into the official curricula taught in the classroom, the teachers’ educational journeys, and the political commitments of community members near and far. I argue that tracing pedagogies of nation-building makes visible how multiple nationalist projects emerge, merge, and diverge at particular historical, political, and geographic junctures. More importantly, I show how such projects are then serendipitously and creatively woven into the very social fabric of everyday life, taking on a life of their own.

The conceptual argument I offer has important implications for prevailing assumptions of modern education. If education reform initiatives aim to boost academic success, then how we understand academic success is critical to formulating and evaluating education reform. Tracing and situating pedagogies of nation-building, historically and geographically, demonstrates that dominant articulations of the ideal school and the ideal girl are not banal. Rather, as my analysis shows, such ideals are entangled in ever-shifting gendered historical production, set in motion by competing imaginaries of modernity and nationalism, manifesting in and through modern education. Engaging with contemporary education reform formulations as such invites us to

move beyond surface level quantitative calculations seeking to arrive at presumably objective academic targets of gender parity. For critical educational researchers, the question to ask is not merely: In what ways can the education system better support male and female students to score higher grades in national and international tests? Instead, reading education reform as pedagogies of nation-building inverts the gaze of critique away from students. The questions to ask then are: How do geopolitical histories and gendered processes produce contemporary formulations of academic success? How are dominant storylines of the ideal school and the ideal girl (re)produced accordingly? What alternative gender ideals are teeming with otherwise possibilities just below the surface level, dwelling in the margins, and whispering through the cracks?

These questions are also relevant to education practice, particularly for K-12 social studies teachers. In the context of Bahrain, much of the social studies curricula depart from an epistemological perception of history as temporally linear and spatially contained within naturalized geographic borders. This epistemological erasure seeps into academic and popular discourses about the Gulf, which then get solidified through policies, protocols, and pedagogies unfolding in institutions like the school. For example, in my informal conversations at al-Kinar School, many students found it common-sensical to explain the erasure of Bahrain from their world history curriculum as a testament to Bahrain's irrelevance in global politics. "Nothing interesting happened here; there's no history in Bahrain," they



noted as a matter of fact. Rather, engagements with Bahrain's histories were confined to state-mandated social studies or national education classrooms taught in Arabic. This categorization reinforced the peripheralization of Bahrain in relation to what the girls at the school understood as "important countries, like the United States, Europe, Russia, and China", whose histories were taught in the English language. However, conceiving time as palimpsest and space as transnational disrupts false temporal and spatial binaries. In other words, palimpsest time and transnational space make it necessary for us to read and teach local and global historical and contemporary records *relationally* and with a degree of suspicion. Translated to practice, this approach can open new avenues for collaboration among different subject matter teachers: national history, world history, English literature, and Arabic literature. Doing so not only emphasizes the intimate entanglements between state-authorized and school authorized truths of self/other, but it can also create opportunities for students to intervene and inject official histories with equally valid oral histories and communal knowledge. Such epistemological and pedagogical shifts carry the possibilities of enhancing student-centered classrooms, where students feel seen, heard, and challenged.

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