

Wujud: A political philosophy of justice and presence in the Arabian Peninsula

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Abstract

This article sets forth the Arabic vernacular of 'wujud' (presence, being, and existence) as a concept that articulates political and social struggles for citizenship, rights, and justice. Through an account that centres the subaltern life-worlds, rights politics, and political struggles of the once nomadic and pastoralist Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula who later became stateless Bidoon Jinsiyya (without citizenship) in Kuwait, I examine the conceptual, philosophical, and political work that 'wujud' does by tracing how it appears as an empirical finding in this specific location of statelessness and nomadic history. The article presents wujud as a crucial concept that places emphasis on the significance of questions of historical injustice, incessant violence, and moral harm in subaltern struggles. Drawing on an ethnographic and oral life history project concerned with the intimate documentation and storytelling of the Bidoon's everyday lives under intergenerational and gendered conditions of statelessness, I investigate the political possibilities opened up by their conceptual vernacular of wujud through examining the specific ways in which it is invoked. In theorising the insistence on wujud as an insistence on presence, being, and existence in resistance and refusal of statist and colonial authority, I argue that studying wujud can bring into view alternative political imaginaries of citizenship, rights, and justice emerging in different sites of subaltern struggles against historical injustice, erasure, denial, and continuous violence. I posit that wujud is a concept that captures a political philosophy of justice and presence that moves beyond demands for inclusion into an existing citizenship regime, the universalised formulations of human rights, the limits of law, and the set terms of statist recognition. In its move towards telling stateless stories differently, the article further complicates the privileged Eurocentred political and critical theories often used in studies of statelessness, citizenship, and human rights.

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Introduction

This article sets forth the Arabic vernacular of 'wujud' (presence, being, and existence) as a concept that articulates political and social subaltern struggles for citizenship, rights, and justice. Through an account that centres the subaltern life-worlds and political struggles of the once nomadic and pastoralist Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula who later became stateless Bidoon Jinsiyya (without citizenship) in Kuwait, I examine the conceptual, philosophical, and political work that 'wujud' does by tracing how it appears as an empirical finding in this specific location of statelessness and nomadic history. The article presents wujud as a crucial concept that places emphasis on the significance of questions of historical injustice, incessant violence, and moral harm in stateless subaltern struggles. I am specifically concerned with investigating the epistemic and political possibilities opened up by wujud through examining the ways in which it is invoked. In tracing how the assertion of wujud is articulated, practised, and insisted upon against historical and contemporary forms of colonial and statist dispossessive violence, I argue that it shows an insistence on presence, being, and existence in resistance and refusal of statist and colonial authority. The article thus posits wujud as a relational, collective, and vernacular concept that offers epistemic interventions to accustomed thinking on statelessness, citizenship, rights, and justice as it challenges state-centric, developmentalist, and Eurocentred frameworks. I argue that studying how the insistence on wujud is invoked can bring into view alternative political imaginaries of citizenship, rights, and justice emerging in different sites of subaltern struggles against the continuities of historical injustice, erasure, and violence. Through an exploration of what is politically engendered through the usage of wujud in the context of statelessness in Kuwait, I argue that it captures a political philosophy of justice and presence that moves beyond demands for inclusion into an existing citizenship regime, the universalised formulations of human rights, the limits of law, and the set terms of statist recognition.

The philosophical underpinnings of the conception of rights and the stories told about human rights have tied implications to how statelessness is represented. The historiographies of rights that often begin from the 'foundational' events of the declaration of the rights of a man and citizen during the French and American revolutions form the same setting within which the emergence of statelessness as a modern condition is located. While not necessarily always directly addressed in dominant and critical scholarship on the notion of 'inalienable' human rights, statelessness constitutes an important dimension of the discussions on global human rights and what informs their shared philosophical concerns. In this article, I argue that the 'origin story' of statelessness is a Eurocentric one, and that it eclipses other stories of statelessness, rights, and subaltern struggles for justice that emerge when we are committed to an epistemic accounting of the particular histories of the stateless in 'most of the world' (Madhok, 2021). This Eurocentred story of modern statelessness holds implications for inherited theorisations in contemporary political thoughts on systems of sovereignty, human rights, citizenship, and political

membership. The historical and legal narratives that trace statelessness in the location of 20th-century Europe, the temporality of the pre- and post-WWI and WWII context, and the 'moment' of human rights' ostensible universality: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) shape the dominant canon of statelessness and rights. The political philosophy and theory emerging from this context continues to inform recent studies on statelessness and citizenship struggles in the language of 'the right to have rights' (Arendt, 1958). This scholarship has produced a methodological nationalism and statism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) in its representations of statelessness and in how it sets forth 'solutions' to statelessness. The epistemic erasures and traps this literature sets for the conception of a stateless political subjectivity are mired in a prevailing depoliticising language and practices of humanitarianism that banish the stateless to being unassignable, floating 'ghosts' 'trapped in this legal limbo' (UNHCR, 2007) and exiled to a state of exceptionality (Agamben, 2003) where law, history, politics, and time are suspended.

The dispossession and displacement of the Bidoon, both historically and contemporarily, have yet to preoccupy a central concern in this literature. Studying the significance of the particularities of Bidoon statelessness demands shifting the space of time in which the condition of statelessness comes into being during the 20th century from the European context to the Arabian Peninsula; a region that is regularly 'exceptionalised' (Kanna et al., 2020), and a location rarely privileged as a site of knowledge production beyond limited representations as cases and objects of study. The region is exceptionalised through dominant tropes of the rentier state, capitalist development, and modernization theories that operate within a traditional paradigm that places it outside of histories of imperialism and capitalism and erases the British empire's central role in the territorialisation and imposition of bordering and colonial bureaucratic practices following the end of Ottoman rule. Such orientalist approaches further elide histories of migration and trade prior to the discovery of oil in the region (Fuccaro, 2021), paying little attention to the historical ties between the port cities of the Arabian Peninsula with wider networks of the Indian Ocean. The region is thus placed outside of the historical processes of coloniality, modernity, empire, and capitalism; when it is permitted into these processes, it is under the developmentalist terms of teleological modernity. In addition to the marginalisation of this site of statelessness, the scholarship on statelessness has also rarely dealt with the nomadic experiences of statelessness. Despite the striking losses suffered by nomadic tribes around the world following WWI and WWII (Manby, 2021), little attention is given to these experiences in relation to statelessness, and even less attention is given to the Bedouin nomadic tribes living in the Arabian desert. In this sense, there is a doubled exceptionalisation of the Bidoon's statelessness in terms of both their history and location as they are placed outside of global processes. In turn, I ask: what can be learned by foregrounding the Bidoon's differentially located encounter of statelessness and centring their occluded stories as people routinely condemned to 'an imaginary waiting room of history' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 7) where they are denied 'the permission to narrate' (Said, 1984)?

The majority of the stateless Bidoon in Kuwait derive from northern Arabia's pastoralist, nomadic Bedouin tribes who once had established autonomous collective relations to land, journeyed on annual migrations looking for rainfall and pasturage for their herds,

and held complex knowledge of the wide landscapes and steppes of the Arabian desert prior to the establishment of the modern state, the British imperial administration of the desert, and the imposition of territorialising borders cutting across their tribal territories between Kuwait, Iraq, and Najd (Alshammiry, 2022; Fletcher, 2015; Toth, 2005). While not all Bedouin tribes are Bidoon as some tribes were granted citizenship during their early settlement in the urban city port, the case of the nomadic Bedouins differs as many of them were actively excluded from citizenship since its introduction. As I further explain in this article, many of the nomadic Bedouins also refused documentary citizenship as a proof of their belonging and resisted the settled existence imposed with the rise of the nation-state (Alexander, 2020; Alshammiry, 2021). The term 'Bidoon Jinsiyya' (without citizenship) first emerged as a homogenising, constructed, and imposed 'non-identity' born out of bureaucratic and 'administrative violence' (Beaugrand, 2018). However, it has since been re-articulated as a collective and political subjectivity by the Bidoon themselves through their resistive acts against the current dominant statist categorisation of them as 'illegal residents' in Kuwait. Since their categorisation as 'illegal' in 1986, the state's oppressive, institutional, documentary, and bureaucratic practices have not only denied the Bidoon a set of rights that they once had but have also aimed at making the Bidoon an unknowable and ahistorical people. While it can be assumed that the number of Bidoon make up around 400,000 today, there are no reliable statistical figures identifying their exact number given the statist policies towards them. Since 2010, the Central System for the Remedy of Illegal Residents was formed as the main institution tasked with 'resolving' the Bidoon's situation. Yet rather than 'resolving' their statelessness, the Central System has operated in terms of a bureaucratic sadism through which it has 'reduced' the number of Bidoons by means of coercion, 'blackmail' strategies, and fraudulent practices (Beaugrand, 2020). By representing them as 'post-oil migrants' and as 'latecomers' to citizenship (Beaugrand, 2020: 4), the Kuwaiti state 'foreignises' (Benswait, 2021: 91) the Bidoon through both the denial of their nomadic origins and varying traditions of land and belonging that are not bound to fixed demarcated borders and the erasure of their contemporary existence as Bidoon.

In this article, I am drawing on an ethnographic, oral, and life history project that begins its political theory from the life histories of the Bidoon; places their contemporary stateless subaltern struggles in a critical, historical light; and produces conceptual descriptions of their actively suppressed stories. Through the intimate ethnographic documentation and storytelling of 23 oral life histories with Bidoon narrators, my research challenges the assumption that stateless people exist in a realm belonging outside of politics, history, and time. Instead, it brings the Bidoon into view as historical protagonists and active political subjects. During my 3-year long fieldwork research with the Bidoon in my home country of Kuwait, I have been investigating the forms and possibilities of their subaltern self-activity with a specific focus on studying the intricacies of their struggle, resistance, and refusal, detailing the intergenerational and gendered state violence that they face. The oral histories I gathered show that this violence is not only characterised by the dispossession shaping their everyday lives under statelessness but also includes the state violence that emerges to suppress their resistance and direct confrontations with power. What cuts across the historical and contemporary violence that the Bidoon have experienced is the denial of their wujud; in terms of their historical and

contemporary presence, ontological being, and existence. This article is concerned with examining how the Bidoon's insistence on *wujud* appears as an alternative politics of citizenship and rights in response to unrelenting oppression, historical injustice, violence, dispossession, and loss. With Bidoon political activists, organisers, and narrators, I have documented their collective struggle and 'episodes of resistance' (Chalcraft and Noorani, 2007: 2) since the late 1980s and until 2022. This included a narration of their various forms of protest, sit-ins, demonstrations, and hunger strikes. The Bidoon's collective struggle shows that they are not only re-articulating 'Bidoon' from an imposed category into a political subjectivity, but they are also re-articulating hegemonic notions of rights and citizenship. While the Bidoon's resistive politics do include demands for inclusion into citizenship that are directed towards the state, their struggles also manifest an alternative and wider politics of '*wujud*' (presence, being, and existence) in ways that transcend the desire for citizenship and statist recognition.

The article is organised around three main sections. First, it elucidates what an orientation towards this location of statelessness offers in terms of complicating the formulaically patterned and privileged political and critical theories often used in studies of statelessness, citizenship, and global human rights. It seeks to challenge the developmentalist and state-centric views present in knowledge production on statelessness as it argues for a move towards telling stateless stories differently. Second, beyond its challenges to the epistemic harms of the dominant literature, the article gives an account of the historical and contemporary violences shaping the Bidoon's statelessness, including its gendered and intergenerational dimensions. Third, the article theorises how '*wujud*' has appeared as significant conceptual, moral, and ethical vocabulary engendered in this site of struggle. I explore how the assertion of *wujud* appears in recognition that the injustice and moral harm of statelessness cannot simply be remedied through citizenship acquisition. I argue that how *wujud* is invoked shows a form of world-making through which people assert their historical presence, ontological being, and contemporary existence despite and against power, further highlighting alternative relations to land, rights, and belonging. In this sense, this article makes the case for *wujud* as an alternative political imaginary of citizenship and a philosophy of presence and justice that draws on meanings outside of statist thinking and holds deep attachments to the rich layers of history, memory, and power alive in this struggle.

Telling stateless stories differently

Pluralising a global political history of statelessness requires a perspectival shift that moves us out of the 'standard' backgrounds of European and North Atlantic scholarships (Madhok, 2020: 397) that have marked much of the epistemic thinking on statelessness and its entangled web of questions on modernity, nation-state sovereignty, global capitalism, state developmentalism, citizenship, human rights, and the international legal order. As Chakrabarty (1992: 337) argues, while these 'standard' backgrounds are 'provisional' and produce theories and concepts that emerge out of their located historical, political, and social settings, Europe continues to work as 'a silent referent in historical knowledge itself' and as the locus of universal history. Indeed, it is the mass displacement of people in the wake of World War II in Europe that forms this standard background, and it is the

refugees, illegal immigrants, political exiles, and denaturalised citizens in Europe (Stonebridge, 2018) who come to represent the main figures through whom historical, legal, and political accounts of statelessness as 'rightlessness' (Arendt, 1958) and 'bare life' (Agamben, 2003) are represented. The legacy of Hannah Arendt's political theory is undeniably present in the literature on statelessness, which credits her for how she recognises the place of the stateless and the refugee 'at the center of political thought' (Allerton, 2017: 252) and highlights 'the abject status of those who have ceased to belong to any state' (Hayden, 2009: 3). Arendt argues that by losing their membership in a political community, being deprived of a legal status, and having 'been ejected from the old trinity of state-people-territory', the stateless have no human rights and as such only possess 'their natural givenness' (Arendt, 2004: 358–383). The conclusions drawn from Arendt's writings on statelessness and her paradox of the 'right to have rights' have shaped the citational landscape of most writings on statelessness. Alongside her in the referential canon is Giorgio Agamben's conceptualisation of 'bare life' as represented by the stateless refugee. Agamben argues that the figure of life that is represented by the stateless refugee shows 'the fundamental categorical pair of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion' (Agamben, 1995: 12). While making indispensable interventions, the ways in which the two scholars' work has been taken up have produced a conceptual formula that imposes its repetition in the contemporary political thought on statelessness, systems of sovereignty, and political membership. The embeddedness of universalised citizenship and human rights, the nation-state paradigm, and logics of modernity have resulted in a depoliticising, decontextualising, and developmentalist narrative binding statelessness to a definition of a legal absence of recognition that is presumed to be remedied through the acquisition of citizenship. The language of statelessness as bare life is not simply confined to statelessness research but is similarly mirrored in practices of humanitarianism set up to address statelessness, such as in the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) and the European Network of Statelessness, and whose descriptions of statelessness represent it in terms of ghostliness, voicelessness, invisibility, and legal exile. The Arendtian and Agamben canon has also led to an abstracting narrative given that it does not contextualise the meanings of citizenship nor does it expand on what the inclusion to citizenship looks like.

However, this Eurocentric story of statelessness has not gone without being critically challenged by scholars concerned with statelessness, citizenship, non-citizenship, refugee studies, critical migration studies, and human rights (Butler and Spivak, 2007; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016; Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Ranciere, 2004; Sigona, 2016). There have been scholarly interventions troubling the central premises in the Arendtian account for how it relies on 'the hegemonic framework of the international state system' as well as its 'conceptualization of the state as an emancipatory actor' (Sköld, 2019: 220–221). Arendt's conception of the 'right to have rights' is critiqued for privileging the nation-state as its main analytic object in a methodological nationalism that naturalises colonial and statist conceptions of sovereignty, territoriality, and citizenship. Scholars in the emerging field of critical statelessness studies have further challenged the presumed durability of Arendt's 20th-century account and its relevance to contemporary contexts of statelessness (Bloom et al., 2017: 5). They have argued for moving beyond the language of 'legal triumphalism' (which 'reduces identification to documentation' (Allerton, 2017: 253)). In addition, they

have shown the importance of recognising the complexities of different situations of statelessness, forcibly displaced, irregular migrants, nomadic peoples, and Indigenous nations where, rather than ensuring rights, citizenship can mean forced displacement and forced settlement (Kingston, 2019). As Lana Tatour shows, settler-colonial contexts make clear that ‘citizenship is not failing’, instead ‘it is doing what it was created to do: normalize domination, naturalize settler sovereignty, classify populations, produce difference, and exclude, racialize, and eliminate indigenous peoples’ (Tatour, 2019: 11).

I draw on these scholars’ interventions as they complicate the attachment to citizenship as a normative and universal concept. The context of nomadic historical dispossession shaping contemporary statelessness in Kuwait shows the limitations of the logic of inclusion and equality embedded in notions of citizenship acquisition as a resolution to statelessness. I write from a site of struggle in which the demands for citizenship cannot be separated from questions of justice. As such, I am moved towards the necessity of addressing the structural violence that produces statelessness and the complexities of structural injustice that reveals limitations of the ‘solution’ of citizenship acquisition (Balazo, 2019: 1–6; Redclift, 2013; Vlieks et al., 2017: 160). I find the concern with justice and violence as allowing for possibilities of thinking on statelessness and rights beyond attachments to statist and developmentalist framings that shape the persistent and idealised belief in the state as the protector of rights and main container of citizenship.

Considering the epistemic erasures within the Eurocentred story of statelessness, my thinking further builds on feminist, decolonial, anticolonial, postcolonial, Black, queer, and Indigenous scholarships who have shown how coloniality continues to inform the prevailing knowledge system as I draw on their refusal of imperial hierarchies and their attentiveness to othered epistemic life-worlds that are often erased by colonial ways of thinking (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Cetinkaya, 2023; Kapur, 2018; Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Scholars concerned with the pervasiveness of the ‘coloniality of human rights’ have shown the links between universal human rights and colonialism (Odysseos, 2024: 1252) and how it operates within hegemonic conceptions of the human (Wynter, 2003). This set of literature not only reveals the ‘politics of origins’ in global human rights (Madhok, 2021) but further explores alternative epistemologies and genealogies of human rights, different imaginaries of citizenship, and forms of sovereignty highlighting alternative relationships to land and belonging beyond frames of inclusion, legal positivism, and the colonial and liberal politics of recognition (Coulthard, 2014). Through an emphasis on producing critical thinking that is attuned to the historical, local, and contemporary particularities of subaltern struggles, the following section begins from a different political history and story of statelessness.

Historical injustice, violence, and erasure

In his critique of the ‘nomadist discourse’ produced by poststructuralist and postcolonial critics, Mokhtar Ghambou challenges Deleuze, Guattari, Braidotti, Foucault, Khader, and Gabriel for their treatment of the nomadic subject. Mokhtar shows how ‘nomadology’ is theorised as ‘an avant-garde concept’ whereby ‘nomad thought’, which draws on ‘non-European histories and cultures’, is represented as ‘non-dialectical modes of thought and “wild” modes of social affiliation’ (Ghambou, 2001: 67). In this representation of the nomad, we find a mythical, exotic, and elastic figure who can be stretched and called upon when

needed. The nomads' 'wild' modes of living and thinking are proposed as having the capacity to save us by serving the function of providing a non-normative alternative to the relations of power and domination that structure the world. This discourse of nomadology performs a desire to vacate the nomad from the very contextual histories and materialities of nomadic losses caused by the historical violence of empire, territorialisation, land acquisition, and border demarcation. One might assume that the nomads have long disappeared and no longer exist in our 'modern' condition; they are destined to dwell in a historical past sealed away, only appearing through metaphorical forms. However, the Bedouin nomads roaming the open steppes of northern Arabia did not disappear but rather their life-worlds were marked by different exclusionary processes that included some of them as naturalised citizens and left others without citizenship in the newly established states. As Toth (2002: 202) argues, 'the anti-bedouin pattern of thought' guiding narratives transmitted about nomads of northern Arabia places them outside of 'history-producing societies' as they are either romanticised for their 'noble values' or represented as 'barbaric and aggressive 'Other' in the urban-biased narratives.

The dramatic historical transformations experienced by Bedouin nomads in the period following WWI meant a 'historic defeat' that weakened the preservation of their political economy and autonomy in the territories they inhabited in Arabia (Toth, 2005: 146). The historical violence of land acquisition and border demarcation was further intensified during the 1922 Uqair Convention where borders of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq were redefined by the British imperial powers who dismissed the tribes' indigenous knowledge and disregarded their marked territories, considering them 'uncivilised' boundaries. Nomadic Bedouin tribes were confronted with the erosion of their pastoralist political economy as their herding practices and trading routes became criminalised as 'smuggling' (Toth, 2006). This resulted in the loss of nomadic grazing land, the exploitation of their labour power as the desert becomes a site for capitalist accumulation, and their forced sedentarisation from wide landscapes into the secluded areas where the Bidoon currently live in Kuwait. This is the historical violence shaping the Bidoon's modern statelessness. Yet the 'postcolonial' continuities of what they suffered at the hands of imperial and statist powers rendering them stateless are rarely acknowledged. Once mentioned, nomadic lifestyles are used as a justification for their contemporary statelessness. As Areej Alshammiry (2020) notes, such narratives argue that nomadic Bedouins were too 'ignorant' and 'unaware' of the value of registering for citizenship given that they were living 'far away in the desert' during the introduction of citizenship committees in the urban settlement. This is what constitutes the so-called 'original failure' defining the Bidoon; as Claire Beaugrand (2018: 488) writes, the failure 'to comply with either the registration process of the Nationality Committees (between 1961 and 1965)' becomes 'an offence passed on from generation to generation'.

Through my oral and life history research with the Bidoon, I have documented how, despite the violence imposed on them by colonial and statist powers, nomadic Bedouins were not passive subjects but rather actively resisted such processes. In the Bidoon's collective memory, the refusal of citizenship appears as an alternative articulation of rights that is premised on an insistence of their nomadic being and dignity against the dispossession they faced. Their refusal emerges out of their attachments to the land and commitments to their herd as an assertion of their 'wujud', the Arabic word used by my narrators to conceptualise their relationship to a sense of belonging to land and presence

as one that cannot be bound to a formal document and paper evidence. In this sense, nomadic refusals were articulated as an explicit resistance to the loss of their ways of being and living in the world and as a rejection of the restrictions placed on their freedom of movement and confinement, rather than in ignorance of the values of modern citizenship. It is the ahistorical presentism of teleological colonial modernity and its civilisationalist and developmentalist lens that make ‘unthinkable’ (Trouillot, 1995) refusals of citizenship, given that such frames are only capable of seeing the past through a present in which territorial sovereignty and citizenship are naturalised.

Since then, the 1980s marked another significant period for the Bidoon as the state shifted their classification. While they were once historically known as *abna’ al badiya* (nomadic tribes) and Kuwaitis ‘without proof’ of citizenship, their categorisation as ‘illegal residents’ meant their deprivation from rights they once had. This included the right to public schooling, healthcare, and employment, as well as the denial of registrations of birth, death, and marriage certificates, alongside other documents such as passports and driving licences. For over 60 years, the state has continuously made promises to grant the Bidoon citizenship, yet this has not materialised. Instead, the institution set up to resolve their situation has worked to erase the Bidoon’s historical presence and reduce their numbers through assigning false nationalities, coercing them into procuring fraudulent passports, removing their family names that indicate their tribal lineage, and ultimately erasing them from the category of Bidoon altogether under the guise of having ‘regularised’ their documents (Beaugrand, 2020). This is the context of ongoing violence that has further shaped the Bidoon’s insistence on *wujud* against the historical injustice of continuous dispossession. For the Bidoon, the statist practices have produced a sense of betrayal and disillusionment whereby they can no longer trust in the state’s claims given that it has sought to ensure that their presence, both historically and contemporarily, is not registered.

My narrators’ biographical accounts emphasise the violence shaping their statelessness as both intergenerational and gendered. It is intergenerational in that the heightened conditions of control and suppression continued to worsen over generational lines without resolve. In addition, the oral narratives of Bidoon women further describe how gendered violence is exacerbated by their statelessness struggles and vice versa. Bidoon women experience a ‘doubled violence’ (Al-Aonan and Breteau, 2023) due to the policies of expulsion, deprivation, and the dispossession of rights carried out against them. They are confronted by both state and gendered violence at once, with gender having implications in further restrictions around access to education, mobility, and employment (Salem, 2020).

Moreover, the state violence deployed to suppress Bidoon collective practices of resistance has increased over the years. In my documentation of the Bidoon’s contemporary history of resistance with narrators directly involved in the scenes of political protest and organising, I have registered the overwhelming presence of violence including the coercion, humiliation, intimidation, and restrictions imposed on Bidoon families to silence all forms of resistance, all of which has had a significant impact on their lives. The years of violence, loss, dispossession, imprisonment, and death suffered by the Bidoon are narrated in recognition that, no matter when and if citizenship naturalisation may occur, the implications of the historical injustice, psychic and physical violence, betrayal, and moral harm the state has enacted against them cannot be forgiven or easily

resolved. The statist attitudes towards the Bidoon have produced the recognition that it seeks to erase their presence, being, and existence. Hence, it is their wujud that is at stake in this struggle. The significance of the state's betrayal and violence has meant that, rather than seeking recognition from the state, the Bidoon turn the question of legibility back to the state, which must prove itself accountable to them.

Theorising wujud

Wujud is the Arabic word for existence, presence, and being. It etymologically derives from the root word *wjd* and can also mean 'to find' and 'to be found'. The varied but related meanings of *wjd* can mean that 'to be' is 'to be found there', or in other words, to 'be' can mean 'to appear' and 'to presence' (Dobie, 2007: 313). In the Islamic Sufi philosophical intellectual history, the concept of wujud not only occupies a significant matter of study for mystic thinkers such as Ibn 'Arabi and al-Farabi but has engendered an entire 'philosophical universe of discourse' on the nature of reality, the world, *wahdat al-wujud* (the oneness of existence or totality of being), the self, life, the cosmos, consciousness, knowledge, and truth (Nasr, 1989: 428).

Over the course of my research, the Arabic vernacular of wujud was continuously invoked in the life histories of Bidoon narrators. The persistent appearance of wujud compelled me to follow the term by tracing the meanings it held and examining how it was being taken up by the Bidoon. In doing so, I arrived at a theorisation of wujud that was shaped by bringing together the notion of wujud in Islamic political philosophy with the traditions of resistance and refusal in critical, feminist, and Indigenous scholarships.

The explicated treatment of the multifariousness of wujud in the Sufi philosophical approach allows me to go beyond its descriptive potential or limited translations which might render wujud as attached to a singular English translation of it either as 'existence' or 'being' or 'presence' and thus losing its multivalent character. In the Sufi tradition, wujud can denote at once 'Being, being, Existence, and existence, each of which has a specific meaning in the context of Islamic metaphysics', with differentiations between the capitalised and non-capitalised terms (Nasr, 2006: 66). Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1989: 409) argues that the rich vocabulary of Islamic philosophy makes it impossible to define wujud 'in the usual meaning of definition as used in logic that consists of genus and specific difference'. This is because wujud contains meaningfully varied connotations that are attached to the context in which it is studied, invoked, and practised. The study of wujud necessitates understanding the concept in relation to the etymological terms from which it derives, as well as in relation to the terms that are themselves derived from 'wujud'. Each word deriving from wujud holds great philosophical importance in adding to the concept's multifariousness. The diverse ways in which wujud can be conceptualised elucidates its capacity to engender expansive philosophical imaginaries that make it a powerful word to think with. In addition, wujud is not only used in Arabic but also in Farsi, Urdu, and Hindi.

My approach to theorising wujud is further shaped by the critical, feminist, and Indigenous scholars in how they challenge the dominant, statist, and colonial knowledge and modes of thinking rooted in a developmentalist, depoliticising, dehistoricising, and decontextualising methodological nationalism. Through the concept of refusal (Simpson, 2014) and the framework of vernacular rights cultures and epistemologies I draw on the

attentiveness to the political and social imaginaries held within subaltern mobilisations, including the conceptual grammar they use, and the significance of the ‘alignment of the politics of rights and the politics of justice’ (Madhok, 2021) for subaltern groups.

Considering this, my study of *wujud* relates it to the context of historical injustice, violence, and erasure in which it appeared. My exploration of what is politically engendered by *wujud* in the Bidoon’s stateless subaltern struggles shows that *wujud* appears as a relational, collective, and vernacular concept that captures a political and epistemic imaginary of justice brought forth by the continuities of struggle against unrelenting, historical, and ongoing forms of dispossessive violence. In this sense, for the Bidoon, *wujud* meant an affirmation of historical memory and nomadic presence in direct refusal of statist narratives of their absence, but also as an assertion of a particular mode of being and existence; one that conceptualises belonging and attachments to land and to human and non-human life in ways that are not organised around the logics of citizenship and documentary evidence. Beyond this articulation, my research further documents different practices in which the Bidoon enact their persistence on *wujud*. Bidoon narrators have described how storytelling, writing, documenting collective memories and oral histories, as well as sharing their struggles through different mediums all represented practices of *wujud* through which they produce a counter history to the statist erasure. The insistence on *wujud* is present in the works of Bidoon poets and writers such as Nasser Al-Zafiri, who understood novels as ‘oral stories that documented histories of the oppressed’ and storytelling as a practice of truth-telling (Alshammiry, 2020). Given the compounded violence they face, the oral life histories of Bidoon women further show how the assertion of *wujud* can emerge as a gendered practice. Through writing and collectively sharing their experiences and analyses of the complexities of situations as Bidoon women, my narrators describe how such practices challenge the marginalisation of their experiences that is carried out by the state and the wider society and its oppressive gendered norms.

In this article, I have argued that what is laid bare in the oral narratives of the Bidoon is that while the state has aimed at making them unknowable and erasing their nomadic Bedouin ties to the land, the ways in which they invoke *wujud* shows an assertion of their existence and of who they are despite and against power. *Wujud* offers an ethical and political alternative to demands for inclusion to a state that continues to violate their rights and deepens their oppression without accountability.

While I have specifically focused on exploring *wujud* in the specific location of Bidoon statelessness and their nomadic history, I posit that *wujud* holds conceptual relevance to different sites of subaltern struggles against ongoing historical injustice and violence. While there is little written on *wujud* as a political concept, there are two studies that offer ways to think with *wujud* as a notion emphasising resistance and refusal. In the context of Palestine, Tamara Taher (2024: 265) documents the material and symbolic practices of *wujud* as presence. Taher locates the assertion of *wujud* as a part the wider ‘constellation’ of Palestinian *sumud* (steadfastness) as she argues that the practices and forms of Palestinian *sumud* give meaning to a material and cultural *wujud* (as existence/presence) in ways centred on the relationship with the land. As Taher shows, *wujud* both embodies ‘presence in the face of catastrophe’ and ‘the diversity of Palestinian ontologies and the multi-vocality of Palestinian epistemologies’ against ‘the Zionist conception of history and its material project of expansion and land annexation’. Taher argues that practices of

wujud represent 'alternative understandings and imaginations of time, meaning, and presence' against the settler-colonial desire for their elimination and annihilation. In another study of Shaheen Bagh resistance in New Delhi, India, in the wake of the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), Fahad Hashmi (2022: 8) briefly mentions 'wujud' as assertion of existence. He argues that the protestors at Shaheen Bagh clearly knew that 'wujud (existence), *tashakhus* (identity), and *baqa* (survival) of *qaum* was at stake'.

I conclude by noting that it is worth asking: what other epistemic and political possibilities can be opened up when we take wujud seriously as mattering conceptually? And what can tracing wujud offer for different context, histories, and locations of struggle against incessant violence, historical injustice, and erasure?

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