

What is the “culture” in cultural diplomacy? Three responses from Qatar

Temanummer: Kulturdiplomati

Cultural diplomacy is a well-established branch of diplomatic practice. It is commonly understood as a governmental tool to mediate the relations between polities through mutual recognition of societal distinctions in ‘cultural’ domains, such as music, sports, education, or art. Examples may include celebrating the success of national athletes at international sporting events or the opening and hosting national language institutes in foreign countries. Given the “soft”, seemingly cushy, and eventually unmeasurable effects of such practices, cultural diplomacy often remains side-lined in serious studies of diplomacy that prefer to focus on conflict mediation or multilateral negotiations. This side-lining, I argue in relation to the cultural diplomacy efforts of Qatar – a young, emerging, and little discussed country in international relations – is short-sighted as it overlooks cultural diplomacy’s political edge in first imagining and then performing a national “culture”. Rather than analysing the effects or comprehensive contents of Qatar’s cultural diplomacy, I focus in this paper on its everyday enactment in state institutions – including the Qatar Tourism Association, Qatar Museums, and the Katara Cultural Vil-

lage – to show how they are intimately involved in imagining the national (hi)story of the state. To get at that, I take a step back from programmatic analyses and simply ask: what is the “culture” in Qatar’s cultural diplomacy? Three responses emerge, two in the form of streamlined stories of national origins and futures, and one in the form of a characterisation of political style. In the first, “culture” is equated with authenticity, historical heritage, and romanticised accounts of what it truly means to be “Qatari”. In the second, “culture” is equated with having a strong and sustainable vision for the future where Qatar sits among the most developed states in the world as global cultural “hub”. In the third, “culture” becomes a way of doing things, here tied to the way in which Qatar is imagined to be moving forward on its journey to (international) development as guided by the vision of its ruling elite. Overall, the analysis shows that cultural diplomacy should be taken seriously as a domain of international political practice, as it is here that we can get an insight into the meeting of global and local politics, including struggles over authority, identity, and legitimacy.

A textbook case of cultural diplomacy

On August 2, 2021, the bar at the Olympic high jump station in Tokyo was set to 2.39 meters six times. Three times it was missed by Italy’s Gianmarco Tamberi and three times it was missed by Mutaz Barshim from Qatar. Both athletes had successfully cleared the 2.37 meters mark minutes before and were now offered a jump-off to determine the winner. But before a decision was made, Barshim just asked “can we have two golds?” The referee said this was “a possibility” and after exchanging one short look celebration broke out between Tamberi and Barshim, footage from Tokyo showing the two athletes hugging, screaming, and waving their national flags. “This is the best thing ever”, Tamberi said, “this is the Olympic spirit” – “This is the message we deliver to the young generation”, Barshim added, “this is beyond sport”.¹ Over the next hours, the story of the shared gold medal went viral and observers from around the world commented on it being “historic”, “heart-warming”,

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and a moment of true “international sportsmanship”. In Qatar, the Doha Debates program, a subsidiary of the state-run Qatar Foundation, called the event a “moment of magic”, and the Italian Embassy in Doha sent out a tweet congratulating Tamberi and Barshim for “the joy of winning together”.² Besides being a crowning moment for two professional athletes and a feelgood moment for Olympic observers, the shared gold medal and official reactions to it also resemble a textbook case of cultural diplomacy. Through jointly winning at an international sports event, Italy and Qatar could call out their friendship and their Olympic Committees were celebrated for putting their states onto the international sporting map.

In Qatar, the small Gulf sheikhdom this paper focuses on, Barshim has over the past decade become something of a national hero and international poster child for Qatar’s efforts to “take on the world in tracksuits” (Spiller and Böhm, 2015: 2). Barshim, a Qatari national of Sudanese origin, is but one piece in an elaborate effort by the Qatari state to promote “world class” development across a number of cultural sectors, including art, education, music, and sports. Through projects like the opening of the Museum of Islamic Art in a stunning building by the Chinese star-architect I.M. Pei in 2005; the founding and construction of the Qatar Philharmonic in 2007; the opening of the Education City campus that currently houses branches of eight international elite universities including Carnegie Mellon and Georgetown University in 2011; the opening of the *Katara Cultural Village* on the occasion of Doha being chosen as the “*Arab Capital of Culture*” in 2010; and, perhaps most famously, the bidding for and imminent hosting of the *FIFA Football World Cup* in 2022, Qatar has over the past two decades pursued an aggressive strategy of inscribing itself and its “brand” into the international cultural circuit (Kamrava, 2013; Eggeling, 2020).

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In parallel and partly in response to these advances, international (often highly educated Western) observers have voiced their criticism by remarking that “there is no heritage in Qatar”, no “authentic history” or “culture” to speak of, and hence no basis for the small state to become a staple in the international art world or the host of some of the world’s biggest sporting events (Exell and Rico, 2013: 670).³ Such assessments, cultural theorists as well as archaeologists working on the Arab Gulf have argued, should be treated with suspicion in the context of post-colonial heritage debates and probed for what they say about our (biased) understanding of what counts as “culture”. This tension is particularly interesting in the context of Qatar, a state that has been “catapulted into modernity” in a matter of decades (Windecker and Sendrowicz, 2014) and seems to be (re)inventing its national identity narrative in front of a global audience in real time.

To explore cultural diplomacy in Qatar, this paper is divided into four parts. The first is a short introduction to Qatar and its recent history. The second is an introduction to the concept of cultural diplomacy and a short consideration of the concept of “culture”. Following anthropologist readings of the term, I suggest that culture is better understood as an allegory, a story to be constantly told and retold and a set of practices to be constantly performed, rather than an immutable object – an “it” – that can be straightforwardly communicated, diplomatically or otherwise. In the third part, I take a close look at how “culture” is imagined by the Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA) and reproduced in two core cultural institutions, Qatar Museums (QM) and the *Katara* Cultural Village. While the analysis is focused on the (self)representation of Qatar in these institutions, the analysis is methodologically informed by three years of broader (field)research on Qatar’s nation-branding efforts from the mid 1990s to the late 2010. This part of the paper proposes two possible responses to define the “culture” in Qatari cultural diplomacy. Respectively, they understand “culture” as a story of national authenticity and future possibilities. In the fourth, concluding part of the paper, I argue that these two conceptions are synthesized and “balanced” in a third understanding of culture as a political style that invariably ties understandings of the Qatari state – including its culture – to the ruling Al-Thani elite. Overall, the analysis shows that cultural diplomacy should be taken seriously as a domain of international political practice as it is here that we can get an insight into the meeting of global and local politics, including struggles over political authority, identity, and legitimacy. We should therefore be weary both of claim that “there is no culture” in any given place, as well as of claims that cultural diplomacy is an affair of niceties that resembles a “soft” and hence, less serious concern for international politics.



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Qatar

Qatar is one of seven states surrounding the waters of the Arab Gulf.⁴ Considered an economic backwater and political “vassal” of Saudi Arabia well into the 20th century, Qatar has over the last two decades transformed itself into an influential regional powerbroker, whose citizens are today considered to be among the richest in the world (Kamrava, 2013: 3). If its capital Doha was but a small pearling village in the 1940s, life in the city today takes place against the background of shiny skyscrapers and iconic landmarks, many of which have been designed by the world’s most famous architects. Fuelled by natural resource wealth from a large offshore gas field, in Qatar, as in other newly

rich Gulf states, a single generation has come to separate two wildly distinct lifestyles, often “resulting in feelings of anxiety and a desire for preservation of ‘the past’ on the part of the older generation and a lack of knowledge of this earlier lifestyle on the part of the younger” (Exell and Rico, 2012: 676). This anxiety has become more pronounced since the mid 1990s, when the Qatari government started to invest billions of US\$ into updating and expanding but also safeguarding and preserving its social and cultural institutions. Building up these “soft sectors” has stabilised Qatar’s profile as an independent nation (Fromherz, 2013), enabled it to virtually increase its small territorial size by normalising claims about grandiose international standing (Eggeling, 2017), and produced a confident version of the Qatari state that has led its government, some suggest, to considerably “punch above its weight” in international relations (Roberts, 2011). Since 2008, these efforts were anchored in the announcement of the “Qatar National Vision 2030”, a streamlined development plan published by the General Secretariat for Development and Planning seeking to both “define broad future trends and reflect the aspirations, objectives and culture of the Qatari people” (QNV, 2008: 2).

Three institutions that have been at the forefront of actively performing the cultural elements of the Qatar National Vision are QTA, founded in 2000, the Katara Cultural Village, inaugurated in 2011, and Qatar’s museums authority, founded in 2005. Together with a number of other institutions (see for instance Rolim-Silva 2014 on the Qatar Olympic Committee or Eggeling, 2017 on the Qatar Foundation), QTA, *Katara* and QM play key roles in the practicing of cultural diplomacy in Qatar. While some analyses exist on their organisational structures, budgets, international cooperation, and flagship projects, I want to take a step back and ask, more fundamentally, *what is the “culture” in the cultural diplomacy they practice?* Especially the QTA offers an interesting case in this context, as it is the first, and often the only “version” of Qatar. By looking at how its narratives are reflected in QM and *Katara*, we begin to see how stories geared at international consumptions may also expose a strong domestic disciplining effect.

The version of culture that can be read from these institutions is one imagined from the top down and the inside out. It is tied to the official account of the state and its rulers rather than a grassroots, historic, or bottom-up imagination. This is important as it points to the politicisation of cultural diplomacy, which in Qatar (and surely elsewhere!) is tied to its monarchical system and the power and legitimation of its political elite. The latter is centred in the Al-Thani tribe, Qatar’s large royal family that has been ruling over the Qatari peninsula since being recognised as the chief local tribe by British colonists in the late 1800s (Crystal, 1990; Kamrava, 2013). For the better part of the 20th century, Qatar remained a British protectorate until, some argue reluctantly, becoming independent in 1971 (Cooke 2014). Since then, Qatar has been ruled by three Emirs (eng: *kings*), Sheikh Khalifa Al Thani, his son Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani who deposed his father in a bloodless coup in 1995, and, since a peaceful handover of power in 2013, Sheikh Tamim

Bin Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani. Especially Sheikh Hamad is considered as the great moderniser of Qatar, having opened up the country to the world through cultural and political prestige projects like the ones named above and, for example, the creation of the Al-Jazeera (*eng: the island*) TV station in 1996. While there are nascent democratic developments in Qatar (such as municipal elections and the formation of political councils in the early 2000s), the state remains a centralised, near absolute monarchy.

Cultural diplomacy: Linking diplomacy and “culture”

Cultural diplomacy is a fuzzy concept that can simultaneously mean “this and that” (Goff, 2017: 420, see Geir Vestheim in this special issue). In academic discourse, it bears resemblance to a number of other political science concepts, including public diplomacy, propaganda, and nation branding (Melissen, 2005; Eggeling 2020: 2-12). In practice, it has variably been interpreted as a strategic tool to create a basis for mutual understanding (Cummings, 2003), a creative expression of national identity (Laqueur, 1994), or a diplomatic practice of governance in support of a state’s foreign policy goals (Mark, 2009). In general, cultural diplomacy is therefore linked to the management of external state relations. Yet, a smaller number of voices are also pointing to the domestic effects of crafting an internationally (often in English) communicable version of cultural identity and the “disciplining effects” this can have on domestic populations who are incentivised to act in line with the proposed “brand” (Aronczyk, 2008; Desatova, 2018). As Goff (2017: 421) puts it, “while it is relatively easy to generate examples of cultural diplomacy, it seems much more difficult to arrive at an uncontested definition of the concept”. For our purpose, the contentedness of the concept speaks to the argument of this paper: There is no one way to define cultural diplomacy, as there is no one way to practice it, and no one understanding of culture that informs this practice. In relation to the concept of diplomacy, this conceptual openness is well developed in the so-called “practice turn” in diplomatic studies (see for instance Pouliot and Cornut, 2015) that takes and studies diplomacy not as static political exchanges but as an evolving set of practices – including negotiating, holding meetings, giving speeches, or producing documents, etc. – through which we can study the “mediation of estrangement” (Der Derian, 1987) between polities, generally nation-states.

Similar debates on the concept of “culture” are less advanced in political science but have been developed for years in anthropology. Seminally, and largely uncontested in basic terms since its publication in the mid 1980s, I draw inspiration here from the contributions in Clifford and Marcus’ ([1986] 2009) influential volume “*Writing Culture*”. The anthropological approach proposed here, takes culture(s) as something “continually under construction, something made in time and space, through processes of inscription” (Fortrun, 2009: vii). In this view, “cultures are not scientific ‘objects’, but “our views of ‘it’ are produced, historically, and are selectively contested” (Clifford, 2009: 18). This production can be grasped in “the constant re-constitution of selves

and others through specific exclusions, conventions, and discursive practices” (Clifford, 2009: 24). In other words, speaking of culture becomes an allegory, a layered practice of self-fashioning. As Clifford concludes (2009: 100): “there is no culture itself”, there is only culture in how “it is told and storied”. Seen through this lens, a “culture” can be the way something is done as well as an object that something can be done about. The latter allows of the sectoral view on culture prominent in most discussions of cultural diplomacy and the idea that culture resides in social sectors like music, sports, art, or education. The former, moreover, allows us to look at how these sectors are then made to become meaningful vis-a-vis the relations and identity of the state. This way, cultural diplomacy becomes a practice in which we can both observe how cultural self-understandings are made, and a site in which we can link these understandings to the inter/national politics of calling something “culture” in the first place.

“A world-class hub with deep cultural roots”: Examining understandings of “culture” in Qatar’s cultural diplomacy

In the context of Qatar and beyond, scholars are writing about cultural diplomacy as a practice to attract global attention and display a unique national profile beyond, or in addition to, other means of diplomatic engagement (Melissen, 2005). A major part of Qatar’s investments into this profile concentrates on the re-fashioning of its image through a long list of cultural prestige projects centred on its capital city, Doha. Current day visitors experience a modern, urbanizing environment that seems to provide all the luxuries and amenities of a truly “global city”. To make their capital appear this way, the Qatari government has invested billions of US\$ over the last two decades into updating its infrastructure and communicating a unique cultural identity. While Doha was described as “the dullest place on earth” in the popular Lonely Planet tourist guide in 2000 (cited in Scharfenort, 2014: 79), the city was named the *Arab Capital of Culture* a mere ten years later, succeeding such ancient cultural cities as Jerusalem (2009) and Damascus (2008). In the early years of copious spending (usefully summarised by Epstein, 2012; Panero, 2013 and Walt, 2013), Qatar “with all its petrodollars” resembled other rentier states around the world that “akin to a member of the *nouveau riche*, who, having come into money, has now diligently set about acquiring and displaying status symbols” (Bissenova, 2014: 128). As noted above, one of the first projects of this kind was the launch of Al-Jazeera, which became more international with the beginning of its English broadcast in 2006. While official sources emphasise Al-Jazeera’s independence from the Qatari government, the channel has nevertheless developed into a unique tool of “media diplomacy” (Samuel-Azran, 2016: 2), which “allows the state to regain control over the message transmitted to global audiences”. While maybe the best known internationally, Al-Jazeera is, however, far from Qatar’s only outward communication line.



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Three other institutions set up around the same time and mandated with communicating Qatar to the world and, indeed, to itself, are the Qatar Tourism Authority, *Katara*, and Qatar Museums. The QTA was founded in 2000 in the context of “an increased focus on heritage development within the context of the development of a globally recognisable national identity” (Excell and Rico, 2013: 678). In other words, in the context of the assumed need for an institution to define and defend Qatar’s “traditional” culture in the face of globalisation and rapid socio-economic change. In 2000, its mission was to “organise, enable and supervise tourism industry development (...) as well as promote Qatar as a quality tourist destination for leisure, business, education, and sport” (Henderson, 2014: 355). Since then, the QTA has undergone several rounds of institutional transformation, including the launch of the *Qatar National Tourism Strategy* in 2014 with the aim to increase the sector’s contribution to the nation’s GDP to over 5 pct. in 2030. As part of the strategy, the QTA summarised the “idea of Qatar” in the slogan “a world class hub with deep cultural roots”. In support of this image, the QTA re-designed its promotional materials in 2016, which next to glossy images present a streamlined national identity narrative that highlights certain characteristics, places, and practices as uniquely “Qatari”. This self-fashioning has again been updated in the years since and in 2020/1 in the context of the global coronavirus pandemic, where the QTA currently presents Qatar as “open” and “one of the safest countries in the world, with pleasant winters and irresistible sights and sounds”.⁵

Qatar Museums (QM) is a second major governmental institution involved in arranging and spreading Qatari culture. Founded by Sheikh Hamad Al Thani in 2005, it is headed by his daughter and sister to the current Emir, Sheikha Mayassa Bint Hamad, Qatar’s “culture queen”, who has been deemed to be one of the art world’s most powerful women (The Economist, 2012). Initially tasked with collecting cultural artefacts and overseeing the building of numerous museums in and around Doha, the institutions scope of activities broadened over time, as Qatar’s leadership expressed ambitions to “transform Doha into a world class ‘cultural hub’” (Eggeling, 2017: 725). Over the past years, QM has re-fashioned it from a governmental authority into a cultural instigator in its own right, and positions itself as a major link in the delivery of the Qatar National Vision. In the words of Sheikha Mayassa, “We don’t want to be the same (...) we want to build our own identity, our own fabric” (cited in Eggeling, 2017: 725). One of QM’s most central cultural diplomacy projects is the “Years of Culture” initiative that since 2012 has led to bilateral cultural cooperation agreements between Qatar and Japan (2012), the United King-

dom (2013), Brazil (2014), Turkey (2015), China (2016), Germany (2017), Russia (2018), India (2019), France (2020) and the United States (2021). According to QM CEO Mansour bin Ebrahim Al Mamoud, “the Years of Culture made the world take a closer look at Qatar, acknowledge our ancient civilization and understand reasons behind our swift cultural renaissance”, “cultural renaissance” here meaning that even in times of rapid modernisation, Qatar is remembering and embracing its cultural roots, eager to stress that its “history as a nation goes back centuries before the discovery of oil and gas” (cited in Eggeling, 2017: 276).

Katara, finally, is one of the places within Qatar where cultural self-fashioning is actively put into practice. Constructed as a “village” within the bounds of municipal Doha, the site presents itself as a “guardian to the heritage and traditions of Qatar”. Since opening in 2010/11, *Katara* has come to resemble a mix of an amusement park and an outdoor museum where one can shuffle back and forth between renting a jet ski, buying traditional Arab handcrafts, reasting in the shadow of (rebuilt replicas of) vernacular architectures, and smoking waterpipes in culture-themed restaurants.⁶ *Katara* was among the cultural projects launched by the Qatari Ministry of Culture at the beginning of the 2010s after Doha had been selected as the Arab Capital of Culture by UNESCO’s Cultural Capitals Programme in 2010 (Mirgani, 2017, see Carsten Staur in this special issue). The latter – a major cultural diplomacy tool – was initiated by the UN in 1998 with the aim to “promote the cultural aspects of development and increased international cooperation” (Boms and Spyer, 2008). *Katara* is run today by *the Katara Cultural Village Foundation*, a government entity under the Ministry of Culture and Sports, that understands its mission as “an exceptional project of hope for human interaction through art and cultural exchange – a project made possible thanks to the inspired vision, solid faith and wise leadership of HH Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Father Emir of the State of Qatar”. The name of the site is said to go back to the year 150 AF, when “Catara” was supposedly written down as the name of the Qatari peninsula by the Alexandrian geographer Claudius Ptolemaeus.

In what follows, I introduce the understandings of “culture” as promoted by the QTA and reflected in QM and *Katara* to show how practices of cultural diplomacy in Qatar are intimately tied to practices of identity (re)construction and political legitimation. Upon arrival in Qatar, the QTA promises cultural experiences in the form of “adventures, shopping, food and drink, wellness and spa, and family fun”. It particularly invites visitors to get inspired by the captivating landscapes of the peninsula, as well as its thriving arts and culture scene that “showcases the country’s history along with contemporary art featuring Arab artists”. This showcasing, accordingly, can be experienced through three entry points – museums and galleries, public art, and the eyes of locals and experts that pose as curators of the country – and in the form of four sets of cultural practices, namely architecture, arts and crafts, heritage sites, and the performing arts. These parameters define the “frame” of how culture is understood, which implicitly reproduces dominant (Western)

global discourses of where culture can be found (in museums, for instance), what it consists of (traditional things), and how it can be shared (in dialogue). So, what can we find inside the museums, what do dialogues centre on, and what is a “traditional” thing? In other words, *what is the “culture” in Qatar’s cultural diplomacy?*

Response 1: Culture is heritage, authenticity, and the need to retain “the past”

The first understanding of culture that we meet is a narrative of heritage and authenticity, highlighting the cultural richness of Qatar’s “past” and the need to preserve it. Visually, this narrative is represented in about half the content displayed in QTA materials that show some women in abayas – long, black veils – and men wearing traditional dishdashas – the ankle-long, white robes – and ghutras – the white headscarves fixed and folded in distinct ways across the Gulf countries; low, sand-coloured buildings with vernacular details and carved wooden doors; and romanticised images of the Qatari landscape featuring rock carvings, forts, dhows (small wooden boats), falcons, or camels. The images are professionally shot but made to depict supposed everyday scenes of a mother or a father walking with a child, a man writing in a book, or a caravan passing in the desert. Such images, which are reproduced not only across tourism brochures but also in murals in shopping malls, at the airport arrival, in ministry receptions, hotel lobbies or other public spaces, essentially present a romanticised, tribalized, and “re-orientalised” version of Qatari life and culture before the onset of “modernity” (Cook, 2015).

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Crucially, given the timeline of Qatar’s recent development, what is here imagined as an idealised past happened just decades ago and still belongs to the living memory of many of Qatar’s older residents. “Every culture”, the British travel writer Jonathan Raban wrote in the late 1970s, “has a certain point in history in which the past is simply the past (...) In most cultures, that point is located several centuries before the present; in Qatar more or less anything that happened before 1950 belongs to legend” (Raban, 1979 cited in Exell and Rico, 2013: 679). The relative closeness of this past and the in turn active mythologisation of recent history into “heritage” reflects the identity anxiety that Qatar’s cultural self-representation has been diagnosed with. It also, however, shows how official narratives about Qatari culture are being clothed in dominant discourses of what is globally recognisable as “culture”, “firmly attached to a tangible, often monumental, and historical past” that can be read from

artefacts (such as clothes), buildings, and landscapes that become imagined as “traditional”, “typical” or “national” (Exell and Rico, 2013: 679-80). The smoothness of these representations moreover suggests that there is but one version of official history, which in this case is bound to the city of Doha and particular places within it – such as the Al Koot Fort that belonged to Sheikh Abdulla bin Qassim Al-Thani who is remembered as the “founder” of Qatar and a predecessor of the current Emir; and the practices of the city (such as pearl fishing) as the economies of the past. As Fromherz (2012) argued, the creation of such legends serves to conceal potentially alternative, contradictory, and today politically awkward tribal histories that may serve as counterarguments to Al Thani rule. To underline its rightfulness, Fromherz (2012: 154) argues, “the current regime is going through incredible lengths to re-write the history of the state focusing on Al Thani lineage as the key to Qatar’s existence”.

This last point as well as the re-orientalising and in many ways self-stereotyping images of Qatar’s cultural heritage are actively reproduced in the *Katara* village. At *Katara*, visitors are “taken on a journey through art and culture” that include a range of annual and international festivals, such as the “Traditional Dhow Festival”, the “International Hunting and Falcons Exhibition”, the “International Arabian Horse Festival”, or the “Traditional Handicrafts Exhibition”, as well as a number of smaller scale events such as after-school Quran memorization sessions, events celebrating the work of local agricultural companies, fashion shows, or chess tournaments. Admission to *Katara* is free and the site is open daily. In addition to promoting the more intangible elements of Qatari cultural heritage – horse breeding, falconry, or handicrafts – *Katara*’s self-understanding of its main attractions however again reproduces Western understandings of what counts as tangible, globally recognisable “culture”. A classic Greek Amphitheatre, a Drama Theatre, a number of art galleries, two mosques and an Opera House pose as its main attractions. Some of these locations have in the past featured as settings in which international embassies, the UNESCO office, or other agents involved in the global diplomatic circuit hold events for local residents.

Besides holding local events and quite literally offering a stage for cultural activities, *Katara* is also made to speak to various international audiences. In 2021, for instance, the village is one of the main sites of the celebration of the American-Qatari “Year of Culture”, a “cultural exchange programme that aims to convey Qatar to an international audience” through “promoting mutual understanding, recognition and appreciation between countries”⁷. The selection of the US as a cultural exchange partner follows a long list of strategic partner countries since 2012, often chosen in a year where a for Qatar significant international event occurs such as the partnering with Russia in 2018 when it hosted the FIFA World Cup. Besides partnering with international significant others, *Katara* also becomes a place where Qatar engages with its regional neighbours. A decade after having been the *Arab* capital of culture, Doha in 2021 has been designated as the “*Capital of Culture in the Islamic World*” by the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Or-

ganisation (ISESCO). Highlighting the influence of Islamic culture on Qatari identity, Khaled Al-Sayed, Director of Events and Cultural Affairs of *Katara*, said that Qatari culture, like Islamic culture, “depends on human values, tolerance and cultural diversity”, all of which shape Qatar’s role in “strengthening its relations with all Arab and Islamic Peoples”⁸. At the same time, celebrating religion in such ways is seen as a way to “preserve the treasures of Islamic heritage” and “strengthening the role of culture as a framework for preserving identity and promoting citizenship”⁹. Besides such targeted and longer-term cooperation arrangements, *Katara* is also promoted as the ideal “stop-over” destination for international travellers through Doha’s Hamad International Airport (HIA) to get a glimpse at authentic Qatari culture. For those passengers who have chosen to travel with *Qatar Airways*, Qatar’s national airline and another jewel project in crafting an international image, the bus trip that takes tourists “past [Doha’s] iconic attractions and cultural monuments”, including *Katara*, is even free¹⁰.

This narrative of preserving and re-connecting with the past – its habitual, relational, architectural, and religious elements – is the first narrative of how official Qatari institutions present and understand national “culture”. Even though “the past” they are referring to is neither that long ago nor lending itself all too well to be packaged into museums, architectures, or other artefacts that have shaped the Western discourse of what counts as cultural heritage, this is nevertheless what they attempt to do. At the same, and as I will lay out in the next section, the emphasis on looking back is constantly paired to a narrative of future ambitions, development, and being open to change. As the QTA slogan promises, while there are “deep cultural roots”, Qatar is also an aspiring “world-class hub”.

Response 2: Culture is ambition, a promising future, and the possibility of a “world-class” life

The second narrative of presenting Qatari culture is one of ambition, future promise, and Qatar’s path to becoming a “world-class” hub for education, arts, sports, and culture. Whereas one side of Qatar’s cultural coin underlines the heritage and authentic markers of identity linked to “the past”, the other side looks ahead and into a bright, post-carbon, knowledge-run future. Upon first sight, this narrative is captured in QTA materials through snapshots of futuristic skyscrapers along Doha’s skyline, close-ups of sleek glass and steel architecture, and the insides of modern cultural spaces such as concert halls, libraries, or museum lobbies.



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Much has been written in recent years about the visual appearance of Doha, the city's urban development and the claims to modernity that are constructed into Qatar's built spaces (Al Raouf, 2012; Koch, 2014; Gardner, 2014). "The future" can here be understood to be both the justification and the informing cultural ideology for the re-fashioning of Doha into a "modern capital city" finished with skyscrapers, business districts, ring-roads, and iconic architecture; as well as for how this appearance is becoming part of Qatar's cultural self-understanding. On the one hand, references to the future are employed as a sense-making tool to justify large expenditures following a logic of "if you build it, they will come", anticipating more tourists, investors, and residents to help Qatar to diversify its still resource-dependent economy (Eggeling, 2019). On the other hand, spectacular urban developments are understood as symbolic structures that already embody elite visions of the bright future that Qatar awaits, following a logic of "if we built it, the vision becomes true". As such, architecture especially has become a way to express and solidify selected interpretations of Qatari identity in permanent concrete structures that stand as a daily reminder across the city of where Qatar is coming from, where it is going, and who is responsible for this development. For instance, according to QTA, visitors should spend some time looking at "10 architectural wonders in Qatar" that are "designed by award-winning architects from around the globe yet inspired by local tradition".¹¹ Three of the ten "wonders" are football stadia for the 2022 World Cup: the Al Janoub stadium, designed by famous British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, the Al Thumana stadium, designed by the Qatari architect Ibrahim Jaidah, and the Al Bayt ("the house") stadium, a temporary structure said to "marry heritage with sustainable vision". The latter is an exemplary project of Qatar's cultural identity discourse as expressed in architecture. Visually said to resemble the traditional tents used by Bedouins in the Arabian desert, the stadium is planned to be dismantled into its smaller component parts and shipped to "developing nations in need of sports infrastructure" after the 2022 event. These buildings, as well as what is happening in and around them, the narrative goes, will help Qatar claim its place as a developed, modern state, a benevolent member of the international community, and one of the cultural hubs of the 21st century.

Next to architecture, the QTA suggests that in order to experience Qatari culture, one could visit the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra to enjoy "world premiers" of Western or Arabic compositions or listed to the Siwar choir, an initiative of the Al-Jazeera children's channel to give youth a platform to improve their musical skills while "learning about the Arab world's rich music traditions".¹² Alternatively, one could visit one of the many places where public art is exhibited in Doha and around the country, for example the statues by Richard Serra (similar in style to the one exhibited in the garden of the Danish modern art museum Louisiana in Humlebæk¹³). One is placed in the inner harbour of the Doha Bay and the other in the desert north of the capital. The first of those is a steel obelisk, nearly 80-feet tall called "7" that is a "homage to the spiritual significance of the number seven in Islamic culture". The second, "East-West/West-East", is a 1km long installation comprised of four 14m

tall steel plates is “nestled between limestone rock formations (...) standing in stark contrast to the soft brown hues of the desert surrounding it, offers a comment on isolation and the passage of time”¹⁴. QM, the authority who commissioned the works in 2011 and 2014 respectively and is reported to have spent an average of US\$1bn per year on art at that time (Niarchos 2014), celebrates the “shared philosophy” between Qatar and the American artist Serra when it comes to the meaning of art as a public good.¹⁵ In many ways, the East/West desert artwork is emblematic of a cultural product of modern Qatar. The spot where it has been built, Serra reflected in an interview, was suggested by Sheikh Hamad Al Thani, who “remembered it as a place from his youth, where hers of antelope gathered” (Niarchos, 2014). This is how the modern sculpture links to Qatar’s past and the Al Thani tribe. Yet the name of the work also mirrors the globalist dimension of Qatar’s identity discourse that locates the small Gulf state as a turning point not only of time, but civilizations, a “meeting place” between east and west, a “bridge” and a “hub” in which peoples, religions, ways of life, the past and the future meet (Eggeling, 2020: 225-26). In a third register, having one of the most famous contemporary international artists commission two monumental works of public art in Qatar is contributing to the self-image of the small state as becoming a not-to-be-missed staple of the international artworld (Foster, 2014).

Both the more in- and backward-looking side of the Qatari cultural discourse, and the more out- and forward-looking sides are equally visible when it comes to *Katara*. Next to narratives of preservation and guardianship outlined above, the village – like most other cultural state institutions in Qatar – also outlines a specific vision and mission for the future of Qatar, and beyond. In the context of hosting the UK-Qatar Year of Culture in 2013, for instance, (then and now) General Manager described *Katara*’s vision as hosting “events and cultural festivals of different countries, based on the firm belief to make Qatar a beacon of global thought, culture and convergence – a starting point for all kinds of all kinds of arts and creativity and area for communication and openness” (Gulf Times, 2013). This vision has stayed constant, and one can today read *Katara*’s self-description to be anchored in a “vision to be a world-leader for multiple-cultural activities” and to encourage the building of innovative people who are “aware of their cultural surroundings and knowledgeable about global cultures and values”.¹⁶

Conclusion: “Cultural diplomacy” as political style

Cultural diplomacy in Qatar is a serious affair that billions of dollars are spent on, numerous institutions founded, histories (re)imagined, and futures evoked for. While it is easy, as Goff (2017: 421) puts it, to “generate examples of cultural diplomacy” – in Qatar, one does not need to look further than the official tourism agency to be overwhelmed with a long list of cultural projects to be visited, admired, or enjoyed – “it seems much more difficult to arrive at an uncontested definition of the concept”. Qatar, as I have laid out, is a state in rapid transition, where over the span of a single 20th century generation entire

lifestyles changed, new economies were developed, and aspiring aesthetics and narratives of national identity were formed, thus inciting anxieties of safeguarding traditional “heritage”.

To manage these transformations, the Qatari government has been crafting a cultural identity narrative that aims to incorporate both the past and the future, traditional clothes and handicrafts and global standards of art and modernity, vernacular sand-coloured architectures and glass and steel skyscrapers. In this crafting, there emerges a third understanding of what “culture” means in the context of Qatari diplomacy and its politics more generally. This understanding takes “culture” less as the object of institutional communication and more as a political style. As suggested, culture can be both the way something is done as well as an object that something can be done about. The latter allows of the sectoral view on culture prominent in most discussions of cultural diplomacy and the idea that culture resides in sectors like music, sports, art, or education; whereas the former allows us to look at how these sectors are then made to become meaningful for the relations and identity of the state. In Qatar, this “becoming meaningful” is merged and centred in the interpretation, presentation, and legitimation of these projects as part and parcel of fulfilling the *Qatar National Vision*. This vision, in turn, is the vision of the regime, of Qatar’s ruling elite that since its institutionalisation as a hereditary monarchy in the late 19th centres on the ruling tribe of the Al Thani family. The current Emir, his father, sister, or other family members are actively positioned to be the instigators, patrons, and visionaries behind Qatar’s cultural projects, and the ways in which the story of Qatar is told through its heritage-inspired architecture, public art installations, or cultural achievements is invariably tied to legitimating the centrality of the Al Thani’s to Qatar’s past, present and future. The third understanding of culture then becomes the ever-present and more or less implicit understanding to do things the “Al-Thani-way”, which in practice has translated into centralised practices of cultural diplomacy of balancing at times contradictory, at times overly ambitious, and at times simplifying and re-romanticising versions of what it means to be “Qatari”. This balancing, in turn, is stabilised by relating everything back to the Al Thani’s vision at the core of Qatar’s (cultural) history and development and by pursuing policies and projects that constantly re-state the royal family’s importance and legitimacy.

➤➤ **A third understanding of what “culture” means takes it less as the object of institutional communication and more as a political style legitimating the centrality of the Al Thani’s to Qatar’s past, present and future. “Culture”, in this sense, is the ever-present understanding to do things the “Al-Thani-way”. This has translated into centralised practices and projects of cultural diplomacy that constantly re-state the royal family’s importance and legitimacy**

All three narratives, in a way, can be seen as connected in the person of Mutaz Barshim, the joint-Olympic gold medallist in Tokyo, who already after winning Olympic Silver in Rio in 2016 was nicknamed “*the pride of Qatar*” (Bambrough, 2017). To become a global success, Barshim has gone through years of training at the state-run elite sports academy *Aspire* and today excels at an ancient sport while also being known for wearing futuristic sunglasses.¹⁷ The past, the future, and the state, it seems, are always connected in proud cultural moments, which Qatar has learned to use well as part of its diplomatic agenda.

Notes

1. See <https://olympics.com/tokyo-2020/en/news/qatar-s-mutaz-barshim-and-italy-s-gi-anmarco-tamberi-share-gold-in-the-men-s-high>; Quotes from <https://amp.theguardian.com/sport/2021/aug/02/tamberi-barshim-share-olympic-gold-mens-high-jump-reaction> and www.arabnews.com/node/1904311/sport
2. See <https://twitter.com/ItalyinQatar/status/1421832739016298509>; www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/qatari-and-italian-athletes-praised-sharing-gold-medal-olympics670)
3. For an exemplary Western critique of this point see the claim that there is no “sporting culture” in Qatar and hence no basis for them to host the 2022 World Cup in www.weekendavisen.dk/2021-11/kultur/blodbold; Criticism of the latter is also linked to the working conditions of the “kafala system” under which thousands of labour migrants are currently building the state’s (sporting) infrastructure. For critical analysis of this system see Kamrava and Babar (2012) and Babar (2017).
4. Observers usually refer to the region as the *Arab Gulf* when their descriptions include – from North to South – Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman and as the *Persian Gulf* when they also, or perhaps primarily, include Iran at the eastern side of the shore.
5. See QTA website (August 2021): www.visitqatar.qa/en/campaigns/qatar-reopening
6. All quotes are taken from the current version of its English-language website (version August 2021): www.katara.net/
7. See <https://yearsofculture.qa/about/>
8. See www.dcciw.qa/en/dcic_news/ministry-of-endowments-and-katara-participates-in-the-activities-of-doha-capital-of-islamic-culture/
9. See www.dcciw.qa/en/dcic_news/qatars-role-in-the-spread-of-islamic-culture-and-preserve-world-peace/
10. See “Briefly visiting Qatar”, <https://dohahamadairport.com/airport-guide/at-the-airport/transfers>; and “Doha City Tour: A Journey within a Journey”, www.qatarairways.com/en/offers/doha-city-tour.html
11. See www.visitqatar.qa/en/things-to-do/art-culture/architecture/10-architectural-wonders-in-qatar
12. See www.visitqatar.qa/en/things-to-do/art-culture/performing-arts
13. See www.kunsteder.dk/case/richard-serra-naar-kunsten-staar-i-vejen
14. See www.visitqatar.qa/en/things-to-do/art-culture/public-art
15. See <https://qm.org.qa/en/visit/public-art/richard-serra-east-west-west-east/>
16. See www.katara.net/About-Katara
17. See www.gq.com/story/high-jump-olympics-style

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