

ANATOMY OF A GLOBALIZED STATE

QATAR HAS GONE FROM SLEEPY BACKWATER TO BOASTING THE WORLD'S HIGHEST GDP PER CAPITA IN A SINGLE GENERATION. CAN THE COUNTRY RETAIN ITS CULTURE IN THE FACE OF SUCH RAPID GROWTH? AND HOW MUCH OF THAT CULTURE IS ITSELF A PRODUCT OF EARLIER PHASES OF INTERACTION AND MIGRATION?

In the Art Center at the Katara Cultural Village in Doha, a picture of a Qatari woman clutching a Coca-Cola cup hangs prominently in the rear gallery. The woman, dressed in a traditional black *abaya*, cuts a striking image against the endless blue sky behind her. Her lips and fingernails have been painted to match the American soft drink's bright red logo, and her windswept chestnut hair flows out elegantly from underneath her veil as she peers into the distance, as if trying to see what changes the

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future will bring to her and her country. But as the cup in her hand indicates, the changes are already there.

"The Coke is the big obvious globalization element," says Christto Sanz, 27, the Puerto Rican-born artist. His photograph is part of *Unparalleled Objectives*, an exhibition exploring the Arabian Gulf's constantly changing societies.



The cup is just one manifestation of the Western consumerist products ubiquitous in Qatar, where women wear black *abayas*, just as in the photograph, but frequently with jeans underneath and Louis Vuitton bags in their hands; where American fast food chains and coffee shops are found on nearly every street corner; and where high rises and skyscrapers dominate the skyline.

“So much has changed in Qatar. Everything has become bigger – the shops, the houses, the whole of Doha,” says Mohammed Abdulasis, a 65-year-old Qatari who spends much of his free time in Souq Waqif, Doha’s historic bazaar. As a young man, Abdulasis would come here to buy spices and handicrafts imported from Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. He

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would sip coffee as he watched people haggle over the price of birds, sheep and wool. Today the sheep are gone and the birds sit in cages next to those housing rabbits, hamsters and kittens. Most of the “traditional” merchandise, Abdulasis says, is now made in China. The souq has been updated and refurbished and now houses dozens of souvenir stalls alongside cafés serving Lebanese, Iraqi, Malay, French and Italian cuisine.

“Before, the souq was smaller. People would buy their stuff and leave,” says Abdulasis. “Now people come from all over the world to see how Doha is growing and developing.”

Since the discovery of oil in the 1930s and full independence in 1971 (the country had previously been a British protectorate), Qatar, a peninsula of 11,437 square kilometers on the western shores of the Arabian Gulf, has experienced rapid development and unprecedented wealth. Qatar has the highest GDP per capita in the world and its growth rate was 19.4 percent in 2010. Large oil and natural gas reserves may have triggered the fast expansion of the country’s economy, but

an examination of Qatar’s population reveals another pillar of its sustained success: a majority migrant and expatriate workforce.

This has long been the case, but from 2005 to 2009, Qatar experienced an unprecedented rise in population as the country entered a new development phase. The transformation of Doha into a modern metropolis led to a colossal demand for foreign workers, whose number jumped from 706,033 to 1,409,313, while the overall population reached nearly 1.7 million in 2010 – of which less than 300,000 were Qatari nationals.

CO-EXISTING NATIONALITIES

Today Doha’s residential areas are home to an array of co-existing nationalities, many of which have been brought together indirectly by income level rather than by a shared cultural heritage.

Visibly ethnic neighborhoods, however, exist as well. Doha’s Najma and Msheireb areas, for instance, are often described as Little Bangladeshes or mini Indias because of the thousands of South Asian workers who live there.

“I am really happy to live in Najma,” says Abdul Hakim, a 50-year-old Pakistani who migrated to Doha 32 years ago. “Everybody knows about Najma – it is a very famous South Asian neighborhood and the chance of finding work here if you are an Asian is really high.”

Given the large number of South Asians in the country, particularly Indians, who comprise the largest foreign group at 450,000, such ethnic “villages” may seem inevitable. Their tangible impact, however, is anything but. Some academics such as Geoff Harkness, a sociologist and Visiting Assistant Professor in Liberal Arts at Northwestern University in Qatar, question whether the country’s predominantly semiskilled and low-wage South Asian population has truly affected and altered Qatari society and culture.

“That population in some ways is invisible. You would think that this place would be like Delhi, but it’s not because these people are not the ones designing the buildings and putting the art in the museums.”

The most obvious effect of many of Qatar’s ethnic groups has come in the form of additional aisles at supermarkets labeled “Filipino” or “Indian” food, clusters of family-run ethnic restaurants or convenience stores, and the establishment of a few

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nationality-based elementary and high schools.

There are two reasons for this lack of major cultural influence by recent migrant groups, according to Dr Mahjoob Zweiri, a historian of the Middle East and the Head of Humanities at Qatar University. “One is the nature of the immigration. People know that they are going for one purpose – money. They are expected to work and send that money to build their families’ futures. Second, the nature of the local society does not offer the opportunity for any one migrant or class group to influence too much because, as a migrant laborer, you need to match the culture and traditions.”

The West’s influence, on the other hand, is much more obvious.

“You can see that in the number of women who have entered education and the workforce,” Harkness says. “But you can also see it in terms of the sort of art and cultural products being produced here.” Examples include the establishment of Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra and the galleries that frequently showcase international artists such as the French-American sculptor Louise Bourgeois and the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami.

That is not to say that the various non-Westerners who have lived in Qatar over the years have not left a cultural imprint on the native society. In particular, experts say, the influence of South Asians is to be found throughout the Gulf; but it stems back to the 18th and 19th centuries.

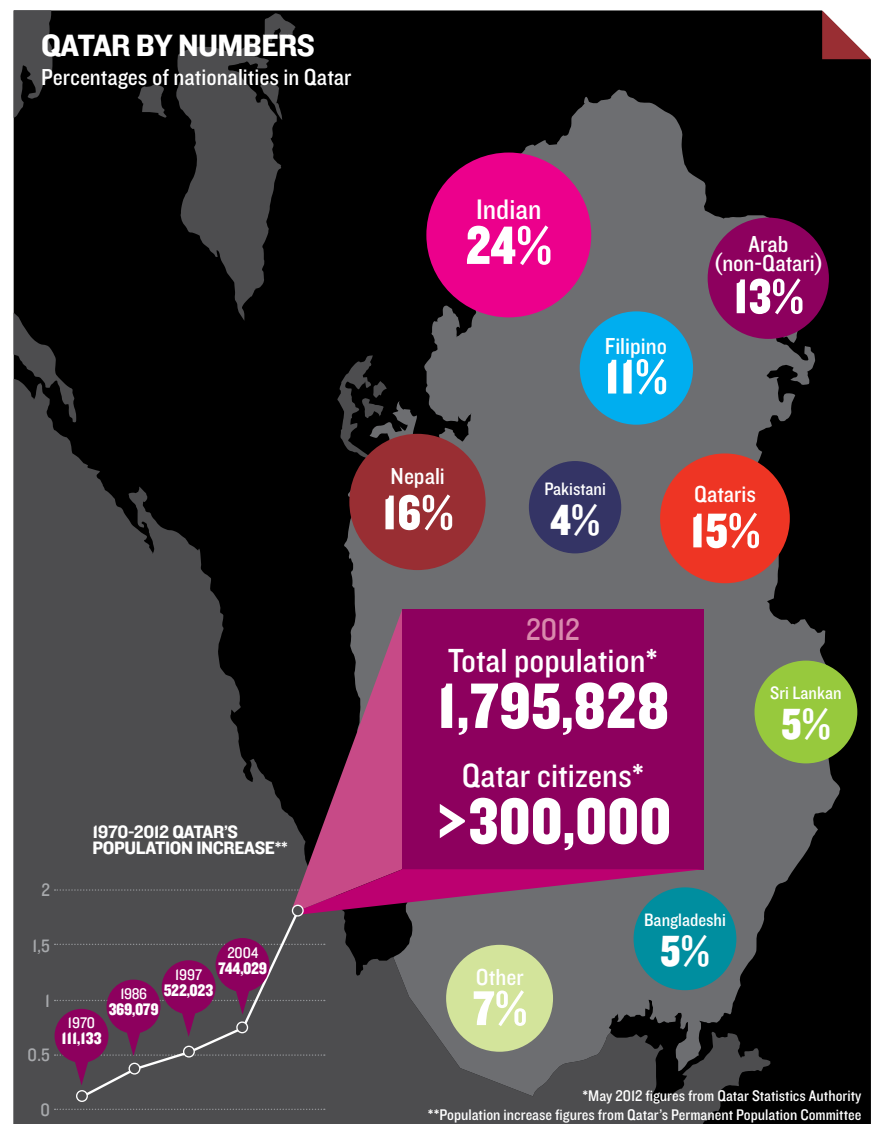
“Most of the impact of India, Pakistan and South Asia took place during the British East India Company period, when they brought a bureaucratic class from India here to open up the routes of the Gulf to India to export their economic products,” says Mazhar Al Zoby, Assistant Professor of International Affairs at Qatar University. “Economically the Gulf was not only dominated, but centrally controlled by India. The Gulf rupee, primarily based on the Indian rupee, was in circulation until 1966 in Qatar, and it was only after it was devalued that it was dropped.”

But India’s centuries-old economic influence extends beyond the Gulf’s former currency. “Just look at the trade boats, their size, the wood.” The material must have come from the tropical parts of India, he says. “We have no sorts of trees of that size.”

The Indian subcontinent has also

profoundly influenced the region’s culinary traditions. “This is obvious with foods like majboos and biryani,” says Al Zoby. “You look at the Mediterranean cuisine and Gulf cuisine and they are totally different.”

Vani Saraswathi, 38, a media professional who emigrated from India 13 years ago, agrees. She says her native land’s subtle impact on Qatari culture is evident if you know where to look. “For instance, Qatari *karak*, which means strong tea, is actually Indian. But I don’t call it *chai*, I say *karak* because for me it’s a Qatari drink. We don’t have it this way in India anymore – this amount of sugar and this strong. Even the



language – Arabic spoken by Qataris is highly influenced by Urdu compared to the Arabic spoken by Egyptians.”

Intermarriages between Indians and Gulf natives were also common during the British Raj and continued well into the 20th century. As Al Zoby puts it: “Post-oil economic conditions have intensified a process that started a long time ago.”

DIVERSIFYING ECONOMY

Nevertheless, rapid economic development has allowed Qatar to attempt to diversify rapidly from a carbon to a knowledge-based economy, perhaps best represented by the establishment of six American university branch campuses at Qatar Foundation’s Education City. The goal: to recruit more highly skilled Western and Arab expats who will in turn better educate and train Qataris to assume leadership roles in the public and private spheres.

Despite the benefits expats have brought and continue to bring, for some Qataris the sea of foreign workers – the BBC estimates that some 20 immigrants arrive in the country per hour – is overwhelming. Qatar’s migrant population is mostly male, which has resulted in a major gender imbalance – men now represent 76 percent of Qatar’s total population. Last year the Ministry of Municipality and Urban Planning ordered the removal of thousands of low-income single male workers living in residential areas to Doha’s Industrial Zone after several local families complained about “lack of respect from expatriate bachelors for local values and traditions” and “menaces to the Qatari way of life”.

Northwestern’s Harkness says he can understand the government’s point of view. “In my class, my students and I have debated many times the policy of ‘family day’ (days when single men are banned from entering many of the local malls and parks).

“In the United States it would be illegal. But a lot of my female students talk about how they used to go to malls and these guys would stare at them. It’s not just this top-down thing where it’s racist and we’re going to segregate these guys.”

Um Hussein, a 70-year-old Qatari woman, says the presence of large numbers of foreigners, especially men, can be intimidating if not downright inconvenient.

“Life was better and simpler back when I

was young,” she says. A Qatari whose family lived in tents as they traveled throughout the country, she settled in Doha when she received a Qatari passport 28 years ago. “When I was young, we could visit our neighbors, and because we knew everyone so well, we didn’t have to wear an *abaya* to visit their homes. But now if I want to go out, I have to cover up for modesty purposes because there are too many foreign men around. We also get annoyed because of how crowded it is and we don’t see as many locals as we used to before.”

‘A PROBLEM OF POPULATION’

A recent survey by the Permanent Population Committee (PPC) found that the “overwhelming majority” of young Qataris believe that “Qatar has a problem of population”. A “vast majority” of them also agree that an “increased reliance on servants and over-recruitment of expatriates” is putting the country’s culture at “risk” and that “preserving the culture of community and identity is more important than urbanization”.

Local entrepreneur Mohamed Jaidah, 30, says some Qataris’ negative attitudes about foreign workers stem from economic as well as cultural concerns.

“There are two sides to the story,” says Jaidah, founder of the Doha-based media company Firefly Communications. “There are a lot of Qataris who look at it as a cultural thing, but there are also a lot of people who see it as expats taking jobs and therefore not giving opportunities to Qataris. It comes back to the question: Do we currently have the people with the expertise to fill the required jobs?”

But if the PPC’s findings are accurate and anxieties about foreigners are prevalent among Qatari youth, they are not echoed by students at Qatar University. “No, there are definitely not too many foreigners,” says Fatima Al Naemi, 23, who is studying for a bachelor’s degree in social work. “Foreigners are good for Qatar because Qatar is becoming famous.”

Maha Al Hajri, who is currently enrolled in the university’s Foundation Program, agrees. She says the growing number of female expat professionals working in Doha has inspired Qatari women to expand their own career and education prospects. “I want to keep studying and do something to help my country,” Maha

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says. “Women should be something in Qatar, and the women are becoming stronger. It’s a very good change. Even when I get married, if my husband tells me to stop working, I won’t listen. Before my mother had to stop working when she got married, but now not anymore.”

As for warnings that Qatari culture may be eroded, the students do not seem too concerned. “We will not be afraid of losing our traditions because the leadership here has put in our mind that tradition in Qatar is the first thing,” Fatima says.

What she means is the Qatari government has repeatedly emphasized that preserving the country’s Arab-Islamic heritage and culture is key. This is stated in both the National Development Strategy and the Qatar National Vision 2030. The government is also aware of the need to better integrate foreign workers, particularly ahead of the 2022 World Cup. Initiatives include developing strategies to recruit and retain more highly skilled expats to balance the number of unskilled migrant workers in the country, the construction of an entertainment complex for workers living in the Industrial Zone, and the proposed establishment of labor unions to protect workers’ rights.

“We’re taking what’s good from the West, but keeping our identity and keeping all the good from this region – our traditions, values and religion,” says Natra Saeed Abdulla, a Qatari businesswoman who owns the Doha Montessori & British School, which educates students from 88 countries. “You really need people to work here and to stay here,” she says. “Yes, a lot of things are happening to preserve the culture, but that doesn’t mean both groups cannot be part of the community.”

DOHA COMMUNITY

A new, more integrated community is already beginning to take shape in Doha, says Vani Saraswathi, primarily because the city’s globalized cultural institutions are flourishing. “Before everything was very nationality-based. The Indians did their own thing, the British did their own, and the Qataris did their own thing. Now when you go to an event at the Qatar National Convention Centre or Katara, it’s not those communities, it’s a Doha community going there.”

Mohamed Jaidah concurs. “We are a work in progress. It’s very difficult to come today and say this is what Qatar is. Three years down the line, Qatar is going to be slightly



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different from what it is now,” he says. “But I think it’s going to be a very interesting mesh of different backgrounds and communities. I don’t believe you will see these groupings of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. You won’t have a Little India on the right and a Filipino town on the left – it’s going to be really well diversified.”

Back at the Katara Art Center, Sanz, a new arrival to Doha himself, ponders his photograph of a man wearing a t-shirt displaying the Puerto Rican flag. Like the image of the Qatari woman holding a Coke cup, the man is dressed in clothing representative of his ethnic background. But if the former represents Qataris’ acceptance of globalization, the latter signifies globalization’s entry into the country in the form of the migrant worker.

“This guy is coming to the Middle East and he is looking for the future,” Sanz says. “And he is bringing his story and his culture to Qatar.” ●

THE AUTHOR



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