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## **History of Slaves in Qatar: Social Reality and Contemporary Political Vision**

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### **Abstract**

Museums today play vital roles in the Arabian Peninsula in general and Qatar in particular. These functions vary between the social, economic and political. Recently, Qatar museums' practices have focused on a political role. To highlight this role, I will take the recently opened slavery museum Bin Jelmoond House (BJH) as a case study in this article. This paper aims to discuss and analyse the use of BJH in a comprehensive 'soft power' strategy to deflect international criticism of Qatar following the decision to award the 2022 World Cup to the country. Analysing BJH's narrative was problematic, as the museum chooses to display a particular history which has been politicized to fit directly into Qatar's international politics. The central questions this paper focuses on are as follows: Why was this specific social history chosen? What purpose does BJH serve? Why is Qatar trying to portray itself as liberating and open? To find the answers, I first interviewed the museum's researchers, who talked about the process of collecting that specific narrative of the museum and the audience's reaction. Second, analysing the museum's narrative shows that museum practice today creates a different starting point than it used to, such as new ideas, strategies and policies. That conveyance the museum's desire to become more open and liberal compared to previous practices.

**Keywords:** Museums in Qatar, Slavery in Qatar, Slave history, Modern slavery, FIFA 2022, Qatar's foreign policy, Bin Jelmoond House, Smart power.

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## Introduction

This article elucidates how cultural institutions' policies demonstrate how social life of slaves was of peace and happiness in Qatar. Examining slaves' lives during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, offers a real perspective on slaves' social history. Numerous studies that deal with slave history in the Middle East show different examples of what the slave museum in Qatar, Bin Jelmood House, is trying to emphasize.

In his book *Speaking with Their Own Voices: The Stories of Slaves in the Persian Gulf in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Jerzy Zdanowski used primary resources to analyse the practices of slavery and manumission in the Persian Gulf region in the first half of the twentieth century. Zdanowski exposed different stories of ill treatment and dissatisfaction through several hundred slaves' life stories. He did not provide a single story of the slaves' happiness apart from the manumission that slaves could have obtained before the pilgrimage season. In her article "The Forgotten Africa of the Blacks of Qatar", Anie Montigny presents a more complex image of the relationships between whites and blacks in Qatar, whether on the part of how slaves lost their identity or how the community did not recognize them in the social hierarchical context. Montigny explains how blacks in Qatar preformed some African rituals, such as Zar<sup>2</sup>, singing, dancing and playing African instruments; however, by no means did they consider themselves African. Rather, they were influenced by how different groups in Qatar saw themselves. Relocating the black slaves had detached them from any memory of their ancestors. That made it impossible for them to constitute tribal groups. Enslavement became a means of struggling between a notion of Qatari identity and social order. Therefore, Qatar's blacks were identified as Arab, depending on their claim from their immediate memories, which go back only three generations to the first to arrive in Qatar.

These examples are evidence of the existence of the uneasy and unfair conditions that slaves experienced in the Gulf during the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. BJH's narrative should convey more of the horror of historical slavery. On the contrary, what is on display shows that BJH has colluded to prove that slavery in Qatar was not bad. Consequently, the museum opened the door for the public to discuss such a sensitive issue.

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<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the Zar ceremony is to cure mental illness through contact with the possessing spirits which cause maladies. Though there are several methods for dealing with psychological disturbance, the Zar is the last resort which is supposed to have powerful therapeutic effect for several kinds of ailments. The Zar usually takes place in a big room which is preferably not one used by family members. A typical Zar performance opens with calm rhythms of tanbura and rango, coupled with songs. Then, the drums and tambourines come in to include fast and successive beats that change the ambiance to make it more exciting and luring to engage the audience and encourage them to interact with the music. A dancer strapping a belt with goat hooves around his waist (known as the mangor belt) adds to the sound of traditional instruments made of animal leather and derivatives. The phenomenon of Zar can be best described as the "healing cult". It involves hair tossing and swaying and it also acts as a means of sharing information among women of these cultures.

Such historical facts force us to question why Qatar is only trying to showcase the positive social history of slaves. Is the government using this museum as a functional extension to its foreign policy? Why is the establishment of BJH associated with the Western allegation that Qatar is practicing modern slavery? What is behind that allegation that might make it important for Qatar to have a slave museum at this time? How has politicians' need to politicize the museum's narrative shaped the narration of slaves' social history?

To answer the above questions, I had to research the history of slaves in the Gulf and Qatar. I also conducted interviews with BJH's researchers to explore whether the display of positive history was deliberate or represented the only history they found during their research. This policy has led to the introduction of new museum practices and ideologies in Qatar. Therefore, to explore the new museum practices, I had to first look at the presentation of slaves in the first Qatar national museum between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s. Such a comparison would allow me to explore the ideologies, purposes and policies of the new museum practice. Without doubt, researching the above questions demonstrates how BJ's narrative has been politicized. It is reflected in Qatar's museum practices today, where museums are trying to take part as national actors that play a fundamental role in Qatar.

It is worth mentioning that shortly after Qatar won the right to host the FIFA World Cup Tournament in 2022, the country received extreme global commentary regarding the issue of migrant workers. Following the announcement, the Human Trafficking Awareness Index analysis provided various articles addressing the use of modern slavery in Qatar's construction industry, especially focussing on the large construction projects related to the upcoming World Cup. The country's preparation for the event goes beyond constructing stadiums to include hotels, an airport, new roads, a new port and a metro and railway system. The projects, which are worth nearly \$200 billion, are supposed to be completed before the World Cup. Around 46 non-governmental organizations and media outlets have investigated labourers' rights and the labour situation. They have reported the existence of abusive practices against labourers in Qatar, which has drawn massive media attention in Western world.

The government recognizes it cannot solve international campaigns by using traditional strategies, such as diplomatic conversations. Alternatively, Qatari politicians have opted to use smart power, a tool considered a fundamental element in the national security imperative in the debate over public diplomacy. Smart power is an expression developed by Harvard University professor Joseph S. Nye, Jr., in 2003 to counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy. Smart power is defined as "the capacity of an actor to combine elements of hard power and soft power in ways that are mutually reinforcing

such that the actor's purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently" (Wilson, 2017: 1). Therefore, the shift in museum practice became a necessity if we consider that Qatar uses cultural institutions as a soft power tool. The impact of such soft power could be effective, especially if we consider that museums are places where relationships between local and global people are worked out. Therefore, the government might use cultural institutions to make sense of themselves in the global context while refuting Westerners' allegations against the country.

Considering Qatar's population today-of which Qatari nationals make up roughly 12% of the whole (which is 2,673,022)-Qatar is a diverse country. Therefore, museums in Qatar are expected to do their work with new starting points that bring about different ideas, strategies and policies than previously used. Thus, the government can make sure it uses cultural institutions actively and explicitly to create an image of citizens with distinct personalities while sending a global message by putting such sensitive history on display and opening it up for public discussion. However, our question is how far tolerance and space will go with the public when discussing such sensitive history in a country whose people are not accustomed to practicing full democracy.

### **Slavery in its Historical Perspective**

The history of slavery spans the world, including the Chinese, Jews, Romans, Greeks, Ancient Egyptians, Persians, Europeans and Muslims, all of whom practiced slavery using different means. One of the many reasons this trade flourished was war, through which powerful men could enslave weaker communities and utilize them economically, either by selling them or exploiting slaves in domestic work, such as farming, fighting in wars and pearling. Portugal was among the first nations who practiced slave trade in modern times that was followed by other Western colonialists. The Portuguese reached Africa and established forts and castles at the beginning of the sixteenth century. From those places, the Portuguese communicated with locals first by trading weapons and alcohol not locally available for valuable commodities, such as ivory and gold. However, soon this trade expanded to include slaves, which became the most valuable commodity of all. Slaves were imported to European markets, where they were exploited on farms and in mines. Later, competition increased in the slavery market between countries such as the Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, France, Britain and America. However, the abolition of slavery in Western countries took place by the end of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the slave trade still existed during the early nineteenth century and through the late twentieth century in the Arabian Gulf region (also known as the Persian Gulf), a region dominated by the British Empire at the time. In fact, slaves were a valuable

commodity in and around the Arabian shores. They were sold, mortgaged, bought, ill-treated and exploited. They were also treated fairly in some cases. Overall, slaves did not own anything, not even themselves.

### **World Cup 2022 and Allegation of Modern Slavery against Qatar**

In the late nineteenth century, Britain used the presence of the slave trade in the region to interfere in Qatar's internal and foreign affairs. Britain eventually brokered treaties-such as the treaties of 1868, 1916 and 1935-that abolished slavery and advanced British colonial interests. Within these treaties, Britain made sure to add clauses to benefit itself and its citizens-those in India or Britain-such as freedom of movement to and from Qatar, exemption from taxes, trade freedom, protection of British citizens and protection of routes to the Indian Ocean. Notably, Britain used slavery in Qatar as pressure whenever it needed something, such as to renew treaties with more clauses that would benefit British citizens. Especially if you consider that though Britain took the slave and weaponry trades as an excuse to sign these treaties, it did not insist on banning these practices officially. Several letters from a political officer in Qatar and from officials who visited the country in 1952-such as George Maxwell, a British secretary of the Malay States-show that Britain had no objection to the existence of slavery in the country (BJH Museum, 2016). In fact, the slave trade was only abolished in Qatar when Sheikh Ali bin Abdullah announced its abolishment across Qatar in 1952, after the country faced renewed pressure from Britain in this regard.

The subject of the slave trade in the Arabian Gulf is quite perplexing, as it seems only relevant to a vanished distant past. However, it is not, because many Western countries, notably Britain, have recently accused many of the newly established Arabian Gulf states of practicing a modern form of slavery. Modern slavery, or human trafficking, was defined recently by UNESCO as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (United Nation Educational: 2017).

Furthermore, in 2016 the Global Slavery Index defined modern slavery as "situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, and coercion, abuse of power or deception" (Elgg, 2016: 4). UNESCO emphasizes that though there are many differences in traditional and modern slavery, exploitation of people and the violation of human rights and dignity have always shaped both practices. Moreover, the International

Organization for Migration announced that today, millions of people are subjected to modern slavery; thus, the need to underscore the imperative of countries worldwide to address this critical issue and prevent human trafficking has become a must. In 2013, the United Nations reported that global migration totals around 232 million, which means 3% of the world's population live abroad. Without doubt, migration offers people the opportunity for new jobs, skills and improvement of living conditions. It also offers both countries-the origin and the host-a means of development and growth. However, such migration involves tremendous human rights abuse and inequality in most cases, especially between labourer communities. That report means almost all countries practice modern slavery and far worse in most cases, such as subjugation of women and children to this tragic fate. This leads us to question the reasons behind Britain's revival of its historical allegations against Qatar specifically and why Qatar was suddenly put under the spotlight.

A series of criticisms and accusations from international media have been raised against Qatar concerning some key issues linked directly to construction projects that Qatar is undertaking for the future tournament. Labourers' situations, living conditions and treatment are the primary focus of this campaign. For instance, in one case, Qatar was called "a country without conscience" and accused of being a country where "fundamental rights and freedoms do not exist for poor migrant workers or highly paid professional expatriates" (ITUC Special Report, 2014: 5). In March 2014, the International Trade Union Confederation published a report in which it suggested there is great potential for the construction of the World Cup 2022 facilities to kill more people than 9/11. DLA Piper, a global multinational law firm, reported that "the nature of the construction projects and the association with a universally recognized, extremely high profile sport has led to much global commentary on the issue of migrant workers in Qatar" (DLA Piper, 2014: 5).

### **Refuting the Allegations: Qatar Gets Smart**

During the nineteenth century, Britain used the excuse of slavery and piracy to appoint itself as the policing force over the Arabian sheikhdoms; today, Britain is repeating similar practices through complaints against Qatar's practice of modern slavery and is calling for reformation of the laws. Over the past few years, international opinions toward Qatar have been framed with severe negativity. Most dramatic was the call to withdraw the World Cup 2022 from Qatar. To defend itself, Qatar reached a point where different regulations and rules had to be changed for the benefit of foreign workers. The government opted to respond to Britain's allegations by using the weapon of the twenty-first century: smart power.

This strategy depends on a balanced combination of two powers-hard power and soft power-along with their resources. Why does Qatar need this blend? Apparently, Qatar is getting smart in recognizing the limited potential of what each power can produce if used alone. Smart power, then, is an alignment of tactics with objectives that would allow the government to create a powerful and efficient ‘smart’ strategy. Such a strategy reflects the government’s belief that success in today’s information age is not exclusive to which army wins but includes which story wins. Thus, Qatar wants the ability to influence the behaviour of others so they think what Qatar wants them to think. Alongside its use of hard power, Qatar also used payment and coercion. Regarding soft power to obtain the desired outcomes, Qatar used policies, culture and values. Qatar has drawn on a full range of sources and factors that can influence international opinion.

### **The Hard Power: Changing Laws**

Hard power was used by modifying many of the laws and procedures relating to migrant workers to ensure an adequate standard of living and provide all means of comfort, from health care and a leisurely life to the law of wages and contract modification, as well as the *kafala* sponsorship system. There is no doubt that such changes have required a lot of monetary expense, and they were dissatisfactory to some Qatari citizens, who did not like the changes in the *kafala* system. This is why I said Qatar used the coercion element: It imposed new laws on its citizens while trying to please others.

Some Qatari debated the decision, as it does not protect their rights if they are manipulated by the migrants. In contrast, one migrant commented on Twitter, “Qatar abolishes the last manifestation of slavery” (Morsy: 2015). Contrary to the previous law, the new law allows more freedom for the workers and expatriates in movement and switching jobs. This is indeed a significant reform in the history of the Qatari government in regards to labour laws. However, it was controversial as well. Nicholas McGeehan, a Gulf researcher at Human Rights Watch, received the new law with disappointment. McGeehan argues that to really improve the situation of migrant workers, Qatar should abolish the entire exit visa system. This reform is only a small part of the hard power Qatar used in response to the international allegations. In addition to this is the collaboration between the government and international institutions, such as DLA Piper,<sup>3</sup> human rights organizations<sup>4</sup> and the International Trade Union Confederation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> DLA Piper is a global multinational law firm located in more than 30 countries throughout the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

## The Soft Power: Museum of Bin Jalmood House

When the Qatar National Museum opened in 1975, its exhibitions included a cabinet that displays musical instruments from Africa among them were *tamboura*<sup>6</sup> instruments (fig. 1). *Tamboura* is an art that came to the Arabian Gulf from Africa during the slave trade. The museum's curators displayed these instruments with a very brief sentence: 'musical instruments, probably from Africa'. An image of an African man wearing a Qatari traditional *thoub* was displayed in the background, probably as a hint. The image of the black man performing music on an African drum reflects the historical narrative and the national heritage that obscure the contribution of those minorities in Qatari history and heritage. As cultural institutions, museums preserve and exhibit objects of historical, artistic, scientific and cultural interest and value. Considering this definition, the curators showcased historical objects but with silence. They did not explain the origin of these instruments, nor did they mention how they came to Qatar and integrated into its culture. The exhibition displayed these instruments as a thriving heritage and as cultural references to the present, but there is no sense of the place that people who perform this art occupy in the community. Museums use systems of classification while collecting, caring for and storing evidence in which human experiences are placed under macro and micro spotlights. As cultural and educational sites, museums also have to engage with questions about group identity, power, memory, inequality and so on to become richer sites that examine the representation of national history as a whole. It is not strange that none of the museums in the Gulf States talk about or display the existence of minorities, such as religious or ethnic groups. Such a practice probably concerns the claim that highlighting minorities might play a role in exaggerating differences. On the other hand, this absence might reflect the assumption that such groups have become indistinguishable from the locals in their cultures, habits and traditions.

There is also a noticeable absence of academic studies discussing the African diaspora in the region; such studies have been hugely marginalized. Consequently, there is a real absence of self-identification from those of African descents. Scholars such as Sultan Al-Qassemi

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<sup>4</sup> Many organizations around the world dedicate their efforts to protecting human rights and ending human rights abuses. Human rights efforts are most effective when their calls for reform are backed by strong public advocacy.

<sup>5</sup> The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) is the global voice of the world's working people. The ITUC's primary mission is the promotion and defense of workers' rights and interests, through international cooperation between trade unions, global campaigning and advocacy within major global institutions. Its main areas of activity include trade union and human rights; economy, society, and the workplace; equality and non-discrimination; and international solidarity.

<sup>6</sup> *Tamboura* is part of *Zar* art, which came from places such as Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Egypt and spread through performance in the Arabian Gulf. African people believed in the power of such art to eject spirits and diseases from the body.



suggest that acknowledging and respectfully celebrating the lives and roles of minorities would reinforce social understanding and cohesion. Therefore, the real story behind the movement of these cultural materials and the circumstances that brought these people to Qatar was not narrated to allow for such cohesion. As a national museum, the museum did not commemorate victims of mass dislocation and human rights violations during the slave trade, including Qatar's involvement in such historical practices.

The slave trade was very active and spread throughout the Arabian Gulf countries, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was estimated that the region received between 6,000 and 20,000 slaves annually from East African slave trading markets in Zanzibar, Abyssinia and the Upper Nile Valley. The vast majority of these slaves worked (particularly the men) in pearling and on date farms. In addition to doing work during the pearling season, they worked domestically in their owners' houses. Most of the female slaves began working as maids at the age of fifteen. The history of injustice and violence was marginalized, as at that time, the museum's portrayal went hand in hand with the political perspective in Qatar, which tended to be more conservative than today's.

The museum, therefore, does not serve as a site to engage different viewpoints through its use of historical narrative. Consequently, such a presentation does not trigger tension between and questions from visitors, who might have gained deeper insight into Qatari social, economic and political issues. In addition, the Qatar National Museum was established just three years after Qatar became independent from the British protectorate. The presentation of historical trauma at that time was a critical practice that further highlighted the limits of injustice, which was pervasive, rationalized, normalized and denied. Therefore, it was very clear that, as the first museum, its main concentration would be on the creation of the country through presenting the movement of Qatar during different time periods. Rather than concerning itself with presentation of past injustices, it was logical for it to identify the previous practices as an isolated instance of traumatic history. Darwish Al-Far, who was a director of the Qatar National Museum and a participant in its archaeological work, stated that the museum was extremely important for a ruler such as Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani (1972–1995), as it represented his commitment to enhancing the knowledge of Qatari history and identity at a time of great social change. Therefore, the historical evidence in fig. 1 did not evoke any time periods, places, acts or events as violent or breaking international laws. Rather, the Qatar National Museum reinforced the Qatari community's knowledge about itself, its values and its beliefs, as well as preserving its memory and its position in the world without highlighting any minor groups. The museum's important work was based on its role in collecting, displaying and caring for cultural materials and artefacts from the two types of Qatari

communities, the urban *hadur* and the Bedouin *Badou*, thus disseminating and developing historical knowledge and an understanding of the society by focusing on the cultural governance of the populace.



*Fig. 1.* Tamboura Instruments displayed at Qatar National Museum

In 1995, Qatar entered a transition period that led to a new administration, policies and strategy both in its internal and external practices. As the country looks to the future, traditional political practices such as diplomatic conversations and debates have become inadequate. Consequently, smart power calculations have become another choice to combine the use of hard power and soft power. Thus, Qatar has applied the strategy of soft power through employing cultural institutions to create a better understanding of the country's politics and community.

In contrast, twenty-first-century museums in Qatar are facing challenges brought forth by social structure, rapid development, new technologies, mass media, global awareness, multiple attractions and new educational systems. Museums can no longer justify their existence as only caring for and displaying cultural materials. Rather, they need to move towards the future with a clear sense of direction by observing the current political mood to push themselves into national programmes and master plans. As a result of the substantial funding currently being spent on museums as cultural institutions, museums in Qatar should also accept the measure of their contribution to political, educational, economic and social development. Michel Foucault calls for “an effective history of museums, in which we assume that rationality and order have historical, social and cultural circumstances” (Gil, 2016: 83).

In 2015, Msheireb Properties<sup>7</sup> opened its four museums, located in four traditional Qatari architectural structures in the heart of Old Doha. Each of these houses has its own social, economic and political history. Among them is museum of Bin Jelmood House (fig. 2), which was owned by a Saudi slave trader named Bin Jalmood, who used the house as a store and a show house for the slaves he brought to Qatar from different places in Africa. The museum was established to display part of Qatari history that had never been talked about before, as was announced in the museum's introduction:

In line with Qatar National Vision 2030, Bin Jelmood House exists to promote reflections and conversation on important truths about historical slavery in Qatar and the critical issue of modern slavery around the world (An introduction panel at BJH).



*Fig. 2. Exterior of BJH*

Hence, I will call it the one-subject museum. In its displays, the museum presents a painting of a musical group playing the *tamboura* with *tamboura* instruments similar to those displayed in the national museum (fig. 3). The establishment of BJH in association with the new museology in Qatar hopes to promote the remembrance of historical events and people by 'presenting evidence-based narratives of the past' (Opotow, 2015: 229). Unlike the previous museology, which tended to hide any historical violations and injustice, the new practice relies on a negative memory and a taboo subject that focuses on historical trauma.

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<sup>7</sup> Msheireb Properties is a real estate development company and a subsidiary of Qatar Foundation. The company was established as a commercial venture to support the foundation's aims, as well as the goals of Qatar's 2030 Vision.



Fig. 3. Tamboura Instruments

The curators of BJH present the painting with the following statement: ‘This painting illustrates a musical band that plays *Tanboura* in Mecca from the book of Christian Snouk from Netherlands. Snouk commented, saying, “Abyssinia slaves were favoured because of the multiplicity of their good qualities, and the hue of their skin from light yellow to dark brown”’ (Museum of Bin Jalmoud: 2016). The presentation included a confession of the educated Qatari elite about the influence and integration of African cultural materials in Qatari culture. This is a major element of the soft power Qatar is using through its culture, values and policies. Such history has always been a sensitive issue that has not been discussed or highlighted before, as shown in the example of a conservative presentation illustrated above from the first national museum. BJH works in a different context from that of the National Museum, and this new practice is allowed and expected to become part of Qatar's current policies. BJH is only one piece of the broader national plan to use culture and history to fulfil various goals. Those who know history appreciate the future; they appreciate diversity and use democracy and diplomacy to promote Qatar’s international role. Professor Ahmed Sikainga, a historian who was a member in the BJH research team, commented about the presentation of sensitive history:

A major part of the problem is that in Qatar and elsewhere in the Gulf and the Middle East, slavery is considered a taboo and nobody wants to talk about. And that also affects the gathering of information. I think the museum will certainly open the subject for debate. Whether people openly agree or disagree with the content of the museum that is a good thing (Sikainga, 2017).

Within its use of soft power, Qatar became very diplomatic, thus erasing the red lines and opening the history of slavery for debate. Part of the un-narrated history is uncovered here, which includes, meaningfully, a confession of the routes these cultural materials crossed to reach Arabian Gulf countries, including Qatar. The history of these routes is strongly linked

with the region's slave trade history. BJH was established to present part of the Qatari culture. However, this culture is part of the soft power tool the Qatari government is using politically and strategically to solidify its place as a powerful global actor and to obtain an influential and prominent place in the world. Cultural affairs have been embodied in Qatar's political international relationships; such relationships involve Qatar's global status and the enforcement of power upon it. BJH and its historical and cultural facts thus have their own politics of representation. With its political use of culture, Qatar meant to project certain values that Qatari society practiced during this historical period. The political use of its culture can also be seen in the attempts to display the Qatari government's policies as open and democratically inclusive in that such sensitive history is displayed openly. Creating a certain image of culture, policies and values has become extraordinarily important for the Qatari government in attracting positive opinions of the country.

The country is inviting and reinventing its culture, heritage and history in a critical period of social change, thus expressing its Arab counterpart in its approach to cosmopolitanism. This also includes an attempt to create a cosmopolitan nation that could participate in worldwide conversations. What skills or values must the citizens have to be a cosmopolitan nation? The new museology is trying to convey a message to the world of being more liberal by telling untold stories; however, the story of the Qatari nation goes hand in hand with the larger national vision of Qatar. The number of freedoms and rights for the Qatari is limited compared to people in the Western world. The previous government of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani announced the start of a new democratic era in Qatar, but the Qatari still have limited political rights. We cannot ignore the fact that the Qatari are not accustomed to this new culture and are still hesitant regarding how much democracy they are allowed. In her book *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*, Peggy Levitt argues that Sheikh Hamad solidified the rule of his family by spreading around power and wealth to ensure the continued support of his citizens. As a result of a comfortable life and financial satisfaction, neither the Qatari citizens nor the foreigners challenge those in power. Levitt goes further, stating that "people raising their voices politically risk severe punishment" (Levitt, 215: 120). She takes the arrest of the Qatari poet Mohammed Al-Ajmi (bin Al-Dheeb) in 2012 as an example. Bin Al-Dheeb was arrested for criticizing the political regimes across the Gulf. This incident raised international outcry. Bin Al-Dheeb's case, on the other hand, could also represent an example of the abuse of democracy amongst people not accustomed to such culture. The Qatari government is aware of this missing culture; it knew that the absence of freedom, democracy and human rights could hinder the country from becoming cosmopolitan. That could be another factor in the establishment of the new museum practice, as the country discusses the thorny history of slavery through BJH. Former director of Mesheireb Museums Scott Cooper commented that by establishing slave museums, Qatar is signalling that it is a forward-looking state ready to discuss this thorny issue boldly and

courageously to set a broken arm in its history. The idea of setting this broken arm is possible, but the question is why this history has not been presented or discussed before. This takes us to the assumption of soft power use in facing Westerners' allegations of Qatar's practice of modern slavery. This is possible, especially if we consider the last exhibition at the museum, which ends visitors' tours with a presentation of modern slavery (fig. 4).



*Fig. 4.* An entire closing section is created for human trafficking and exploitation.

For a decade, museums in Qatar did not position themselves as authorities of recognition where debates concerning sensitive social and political history could be treated. However, within today's museum practice, BJH has used the history of slavery by integrating cultural materials into a wider national narrative. This history depends significantly on oral materials, which encompasses interviews and life stories grandchildren have narrated about the lives of their enslaved ancestors. Through its use of soft power, the museum has archived, recorded, edited and displayed moments of life that were previously marginalised in Qatari history. By recording and displaying the slave narratives, BJH actually goes beyond the political role; it further transforms these narratives into a tangible heritage of slaves and Diasporas. This might influence the sustainability of Qatari heritage, as well as establishing BJH as an active institution of social cohesion and a documenter of cultural integration knowledge. However, does BJH present all historical facts from that social history in a way that acts as social cohesion and as documentation? Presentation of one side of the historical facts could undermine the museum's role as an institution for social cohesion. To act as an institution of social cohesion and cultural safeguarding, the museum has to engage new audiences-particularly youth and ethnic communities-through cultural learning by offering integrated historical facts, thus becoming more relevant to the daily life of twenty-first-century society.

## **A One-Subject Museum: The Softening of Slaves History**

The concept of safeguarding is a central point to heritage in all of its forms. It means protecting and simultaneously communicating heritage. Museums are openly fascinated by collecting and preserving intangible heritage, thus safeguarding past culture for the future. Intangible heritage today is perceived as tying the past with the future and producing an awareness of belonging. Hence, this section raises the question of how BJH presents slave history in Qatar, and I will reflect upon the exhibition's design, collection and identity as a one-subject museum devoted to slavery. My aim is to generate further thought on this one-subject museum's role, particularly in projecting certain political concepts in an uneasy political time for Qatar. We can distinguish one master theme the curators follow in their presentation strategy. They have presented slave history in the region differently from what people might have expected. Usually, slave history in Europe or America shows the amount of violence, racism and humiliation practiced against slaves. It also allows the new generation to take pride in its history by making people of that generation aware of the remarkable struggle their ancestors went through for freedom, such as the example in the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. In 1965, Charles Wright funded the museum because he believed African Americans needed an institution to preserve, document and educate black people about their life, history and culture. The museum's curators stated their mission was "to open minds and change lives through the exploration and celebration of African American history, inspire everyone toward greater understanding, acceptance and unity" (Museum of African American History: Overview). In contrast, the curators in Qatar announced that their mission was "to create trusted environments in which the people of Qatar will engage, converse and exchange thoughts about both their past and their future" (Msheireb Museums). "Every museum has its particular remit and its limitations", says Susan Opotow (Opotow, 2015: 239); the history of slavery in Qatar is a very specific history for a very specific place. Therefore, the idea is not to copy other slave museums; rather, the curators rethought what it means to be an effective cultural institution in twenty-first-century Qatar. While Qatar aspires to be a worldwide actor, it needs institutions proportionate to its new vision and ambitions. To really demonstrate the museum's value and impact, a whole narrative and additional cultural learning would offer BJH the tool to appear more relevant and bound to the community's interests and needs. At the entryway, surprisingly, BJH's narrative of slavery is softened through presenting the histories of slaves in various parts of the world. A social myth shapes the presentation of BJH, as it concentrates on the idea that some slaves were treated fairly by their owners, who were generous as far as giving their slaves similar clothes and properties (fig.5). These features make it difficult to distinguish the owner from the slave on some occasions.



*Fig. 5.* On the left appears a slave ranked as Kızlar Aghası (Kızlar Ağası), guardian of the damsels, a commandant of the corps of eunuch guards and ranked next to grand vizier and the *chief mufti*. On the right appears an Arab merchant from Mecca with his Circassian slave on his left, wearing outfits of almost similar quality.

Moving from this presentation and entering the exhibitions of slaves in Qatar, in the first room, a large picture of the previous ruler, Sheikh Ali bin Abdullah (fig. 6), is displayed with this announcement: “From 10<sup>th</sup> of April slavery is abolished from all over provinces that are under our authority”. In addition, various manumission certificates were displayed.



*Fig. 6.* Sheikh Ali bin Abdullah and his announcement regarding the abolishment of slavery all over Qatar in 1952.

In the third room, which I think includes the only testimony of violence, is an animated presentation of a female narrator who tells her experience of being kidnapped and brought to Qatar (fig. 7). The violence in this story comes from her description of how she was taken by force and separated from her family during her abduction, and then how once she reached the slave market in Qatar, she was separated from her son, as she was bought alone. This orphan



testimony has the highest emotional impact upon visitors. However, no further humiliating images are provided about how she was suddenly and permanently cut off from her native culture and homeland.



*Fig. 7.* A narrator describes her separation from her family, tribe, home and son.

The fourth room has an extensive presentation of screens showing types of work slaves used to handle, which was usually domestic work and pearl trading. The actors in these scenes appear to be wearing Qatari traditional clothes. Bin Jalmood House proposes that these duties allowed slaves to integrate with society, as they lived with their owners and were considered members of the family. Accordingly, they were treated fairly and generously in terms of food, clothing and shelter.

As a show of soft power, in BJH, the slaves' intangible history was carefully selected, manipulated and reinterpreted, thus reordering historical knowledge. Apparently, the exhibitions contribute to the myth of the satisfied slaves and their invented social sufficiency. Under the domination of both the historical narrative and evolution, slaves in Qatar are recognized as people who integrated easily and normally into Qatari social life. However, this is a very narrow and shallow narrative that does not present the entire story of slaves in Qatar. "If museums are not seen and felt to be part of the daily life of the society, they will not survive" (Earle, 2013: 536). The value and role of the museums in a society is linked directly to their social impact. Though BJH might convey its political message, softening and presenting only part of the real story might hinder the museum from making a positive difference in people's lives. There is extraordinarily disruptive tension between defending the new museological role of presenting whole cultural facts and adapting to social pressure, which is dominated by the custom of what can and cannot be discussed.

To pursue the truth, fairness and a practical resort to pardons and amnesties in the name of social peacetime and governability, BJH could have presented a more complex political history, such as periods of slaves' deadly strife for freedom. As a matter of fact, such a subject has always been a sensitive and awkward topic among the community. The awkwardness of the topic has, by necessity, influenced the exhibitions' design. The shift towards using animation and a half-appearance of the actor's body is important when the exhibition is dealing with contemporary phenomena rather than vanished history. Such a presentation aims not to reflect upon a certain race, colour or nationality, which has become largely characterized by the intention to prevent the stimulation of the audience's empathy for the Qatari slaves' story. In contrast, it is meant to start a logical and intellectual discussion. When discussing the idea of having a slavery museum in Qatar with a focus group, the rejection of the museum was apparent. A visitor commented,

What is the point of reviving such unpleasant memories among the communities? Why should we now remind people, most of whom occupy senior professions in the country, about the humiliations that their ancestors lived in the past? Or even remind them to which dynasty they belong? (Group Interview, 2016)

That probably also explains the curator's concern, as the museum was under what the curators called a 'soft opening' at that time, meaning that it was still not open officially for the general public; however, it was open for special pre-organized visits. Perhaps the curators were monitoring visitors' reactions under such a soft opening. The official opening took place in June 2016 with no real publicity, resulting in most of the community still not knowing about it.

Such sensitivity towards the topic of slaves is not exclusive to Arab countries; it is universal. For instance, it was reported that in a recent visit by U.S. President Obama to the young British royals, Prince William and Princess Catherine, the Kensington Palace aides "had to remove the word 'Negro'" (www.thetimes.co.uk, 2016) from a seventeenth-century Dutch painting by Aelbert Cuyp titled *The Negro Page* in the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's sitting room. The royals were concerned that the word 'Negro' would be offensive to their guest. Moreover, the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam had renamed a number of paintings "with potentially offensive names" the previous year (www.thetimes.co.uk: 2016); for example, *The Negro Girl* by Simon Maris was renamed *Young Girl Holding a Fan*. The Tate gallery in London is taking similar action by renaming some of its artworks that currently have offensive titles. Such action is being criticized as an attempt to rewrite history.

For the Arabian Gulf, as well as other regions, it is no less important that they approach, talk about and document history with special concern and awareness. Their primary concern is

what can and cannot be talked about. The museum, therefore, has become a source of distribution of history among some locals. For the curators, slavery is in the past, but for some locals, it is history “that isn’t quite history” (Amsden, 2015: 7). This brings us to asking what makes slavery so difficult to display, discuss and think about. We also ask how this reaction is reflected in the museum’s narrative suggesting that slaves had good experiences in the Arabian Gulf compared to slaves in the Western world. What does this reaction have to do with the possibility of the community still having a longstanding culture of racism and rejection regarding some social interactions, especially in terms of intermarriage?

From within the current interpretation of history, the curators are determined to control and constitute visitors’ opinions. They have further specified what kind of historical “knowledge is deemed to be useful indeed” (Ameds, 2012: 87). Hence, they have authorized constituting what they view as appropriate knowledge, and, in turn, they have controlled its dissemination and production. Going back to the rhetoric of the curators’ claim of creating a liberal debate, we shall further ask what kind of liberty and democracy we need our society to adopt and practice. How many social, moral, economic and political topics can an audience discuss? Museums certainly play paradoxical roles, more often influencing, guiding, reflecting or opposing popular opinions. BJH, in its interpretation, came to affirm a reshaping of historical facts. Obviously, within its politics of representation, BJH is imposing extensively cultural affairs onto political relationships. Those political relationships involve Qatar’s global status and the ability to use soft power.

### **Social History: Between Reality and Political Vision**

Qatar’s use of soft power depends on the exclusion of the real social history of the slaves. Rather, this history is employed to serve political purposes. Hence, slave history has become selective, focusing on specific stories that support the political narrative of the museum. Thus, the slaves’ social history has become shallow and non-neutral, as it clearly ignores important events that changed the course of their lives. In addition, the presentation ignored the psychological, social and physical dimensions of suffering of the slaves in the Arabian Gulf. Museums and psychology have much in common: Both have collective memories that have been shared, passed down and built and rebuilt by groups over time. Furthermore, both produce exhibitions and research studies that aim to speak to current issues and engage with sophisticated psychological questions that concern injustice, inequality, violence, group identity, memories and victimization. However, in order to extend an image of fairness in BJH, the construction of such history was critically and psychologically focussed on limiting images of injustice. Regardless of how slaves were treated or what kinds of jobs they

performed, the real definition of slaves is depriving a person from what God bestowed him, which is the ownership of himself as a human being and transferring the ownership of himself to others. Thus he loses with that all his rights as a human being. Among these rights is the right to have a dignified and stable social life.

There is no doubt such statutes prevented the slave from making any decision, signing any contract or owning anything. He himself became an object owned by his master, the same as any valuable commodity that could be sold, mortgaged, bought or inherited. Consequently, it was the master's choice whether to treat him badly or fairly as a human being.

Slaves were exploited extensively by their owners, who sent them to work on pearling boats without any earnings apart from providing them food, housing and clothing. In fact the owners had to provide these necessities because they needed to keep the slaves fit for work and diving. In fact, the owners looked at their slaves as a valuable, prosperous and worthy investment. Hence, they fed the slaves well and married them to other slaves to increase their fortune by having more slaves.

The soft power strategy has deliberately excluded the harshest parts of slave social life and only showcased the easy part of their history to enhance the BJ museum's political mission. This museum was actually established as a response to the Western world. The evidence of this is seen in the slavery presentations in Qatar's section at the museum, which presents Sheikh Ali's declaration of abolishing slavery. This 1952 declaration provides further evidence of slavery's spread all across the Arabian Gulf coast until recent years. Though the curators aimed to cover and soften the harshness of slave social history, BJH's presentation included hidden hints that reveal things not narrated about the slaves' difficult times. For example, the curator displayed the observation of George Maxwell, a British secretary of the Malay States, who visited Qatar and commented,

In a middle-class house in the towns, a slave is generally treated as one of the family, eating the same food, wearing similar clothes, and, for better or for worse, sharing the family's fortunes. Aside from the ever-present threat of rupture through sale, the lives of slaves were very similar to free Qataris (BJH Museum, 2016).

This sentence, in particular "aside from the ever-present threat of rupture through sale" (BJH Museum: 2016), contradicts the curators' presentation. It refers clearly to the contempt towards slaves' lives and the ignorance of each slave's personality and desires. Such ignorance allowed the owner to sell his slave whenever he wished without any consideration of the consequences of affecting a slave's social life or detaching him from his family. Doubtlessly, such an insecure life created confusion and distress inside the slaves. In another

example, the curators present an extract from a letter written by a political officer in Qatar on 14 April 1952, who makes similar comments:

Many slaves will of course remain with their former owners, some from choice, some, chiefly concubines, from necessity. The former will be able to insist on receiving wages for their service, but those who are dependent on their masters for their keep and that of their family cannot be expected to change their servile status if they have no alternative livelihood (BJH Museum, 2016).

It could be argued that choosing to stay with their masters does not necessarily represent having a satisfactory life. Instead, it might represent a fear of the community's rejection of slaves' interaction and association with them as free people. The Qatari historian Dr Moza Al-Jaber, who investigated the economic and social life in Qatar before oil, argues that most of the slaves refused manumission. Even though they were treated badly, slaves preferred to serve their owners, as they needed to secure for themselves lifelong food, clothing, and housing. If they were freed, they would have to fight to feed themselves in very difficult circumstances. She further adds that slaves represented a good proportion of the Qatari demography at that time, making up around 18% of the entire Qatari population. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of Qatar was estimated to be around 27000, 6500 of whom were of African origin, which meant one out of every six people was a slave. However, they could not create for themselves any social organization that might enable them to gain their freedom or modify their social status due to the absence of economic stability and the classification factor, which created a big social gap between slaves and their owners. This meant that even with manumission, they would remain in the slavery class and not receive any education. All these factors contributed to a great fear within the slaves of facing starvation, rejection and struggle alone. Thus, they did not call for their own freedom. Montigny further explains that although the black groups in Qatar try to fit themselves into the social hierarchy, they are not respected or recognized as part of the regular social class. The mark of difference can be seen clearly in the white nicknaming of children of black mothers as '*wild al abda*', meaning "child of a slave". Some exceptional cases of fair treatment have been found, as some blacks are well known today for their wealth because of their connections to previous leaders, mostly from the royal family Al-Thani. Also, in Qatar's slave history, there were examples of trust established between masters and their slaves, which resulted in the slaves receiving them some responsibilities such as collecting pearling taxes. A slave of Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed was appointed a director of the first customs office, and the sheikh's son, Sheikh Abdullah, appointed his slave as a governor of Doha. These are very rare cases and cannot be generalized, especially if we consider the legacy of

enslavement that the young generation is still facing today. For instance, it is popular for white people to identify black people with the discriminatory name ‘*abid*’, meaning slave, and intermarriage between white men and black women and vice versa is rare.

In their article “Tribalism, Identity and Citizenship in Contemporary Qatar”, Ali-Al-Shawi and Andrew Gardner (2013) explain that, as in the past, tribes and tribalism are still meaningful social facts in contemporary Qatar. The Qatari population is heterogeneous because of its long connections to India, Persia, Africa and south Asia. Therefore, among the distinct tribal components of the Qatari population, those of urban and Bedouin backgrounds, there is also the descendant of the slave population that was brought to the country from Africa. Al-Shawi and Gardner further discuss that although tribes and tribalism are reimagined in the contemporary era, they remain a functional aspect of human existence in Qatar. These tribes, which are dominated by *asabiyya*<sup>8</sup>, a dispersed call based on the pro-group against group, plays an important part in the Qatari social structure and hierarchy. We cannot ignore, therefore, that *asabiyya* hinders slaves’ descendants from gaining full integration in the society, as in the case of intermarriage. Assimilation of slaves’ descendants into the community made it possible for them to move up in social status; however, tribalism still dictates which classes or background of families should marry one another.

The slaves’ status among the Bedouin community was no better. Wadha Al-Quoze, a member of one of the famous Bedouin tribes in Qatar, commented in an interview (2016, personal interview) that her tribe owned many slaves who were gained after tribal fights. Usually, those slaves had been slaves in the defeated tribes, as in tribal fights the tribe’s free men would be freed, but the slaves would be captured. In the case of purchasing slaves, their prices were equal to five camels; they could also be exchanged for salt, sugar, rice and any other goods that were rare in the desert. Wadha added that in addition to performing ordinary jobs, those slaves were the tribe’s warriors. A slave had no rights among the Bedouin, even the right to get married, unless his owner was a good owner and bought him another slave. For the Bedouin, slaves had no human values, as they were objects exactly like any other property.

The fact that slaves were exchanged for goods such as sugar, salt, and rice, even though those were considered to be valuable and rare commodities in the desert, provides palpable evidence of the contumely and disrespect of slaves as human beings. This leads us to the point that when talking about slaves’ lives, it is impossible to separate between two powers: the

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<sup>8</sup> *Asabiyyah* define by Oxford Islamic studies as social solidarity with an emphasis on group consciousness, cohesiveness, and unity. Familiar in the pre-Islamic era, the term became popularized in Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406) *Muqaddimah*. *Asabiyyah* is neither necessarily nomadic nor based on blood relations. In the modern period, the term is analogous to solidarity.

political and economic powers that enforced the system of slavery in society, and the power of social position, which was forcibly imposed upon the slaves. In fact, the masters played a powerful role in imposing certain social lives on slaves. Therefore, it was not the slave who made his own history and reality according to his wishes and desires. His social life was instead imposed upon him by the people who had the power to do so, at a time when the slaves were powerless and could not express any rejection. Thus, determining the social needs and level of dignified life of slaves based on the availability of food, housing and clothing, as the curators and the British officers have proposed, is a prejudice towards the humanitarian rights of those men and women. Perhaps this fact explains the multiple escape incidents that were registered in the British Political Agency in the Arabian region. Whenever the slaves found hope of the possibility of having a stable and dignified life, they sought asylum at this office, and many times they created unreal stories to get manumission documents.

Of course, this social reality would not help the political mission of BJ Museum. On the contrary, it could enhance the international campaigns' attack against Qatar. In order to create a picture of Qatar that opposes how the international campaign has described it, the necessity for a refuting response imposed the need to use a strategy of soft power. This is probably what led the museum to remove shameful images and enhance the positive ones. On the other hand, the museum ignored its code of ethics by neglecting its responsibility towards the slaves' reality. Thus, we doubt whether the museum will be accountable to the slaves' actual history.

## **Conclusion**

One striking feature distinguishes museums and cultural institutions in Qatar today from their ancestors is their ability to bear soft power. As a form of soft power, these institutions have become tools that help the government to move towards a successful national liberation experience. The new museum practices have no doubt coincided closely with the country's move towards a new political era. Museums and cultural institutions, therefore, have become of central ideological and political importance for the government. These institutions are able today to work from visible models provided to them, to become institutions that consciously and intentionally aim at steering the community towards a new vision.

To build an effective history of museum practice, museums must consider that their rationality and order have social, historical, and cultural circumstances. Previously, museums in general have tended to be peaceful places that have focused on reconciling people through their ongoing narratives. They have provoked conflict over which and whose past can be told, which exhibitions could be added and what could be omitted. Such conflicts have raised

objections from some groups who see themselves as marginalised and hope for a presentation that could highlight their identity, history and experiences. The one-subject museum BJH, is not only bold with its subject, but it is also the most high-profile and debatable arena. This is reflected by the fact that it is the only museum has been bravely labelled as a ‘slave’ museum in the Middle East.

Projecting the first slave museum in the region and the shift in museum practice became a necessity if we consider that Qatar uses cultural institutions as a soft power tool. For the Qatari government, soft power means the ability to coerce others along with the ability to shape their opinions, attitudes and preferences far away from using forces. To excel in projecting soft power, Qatar needed to utilize the potential of various organizations that can work hand in hand with the government to help peacefully send positive and constructed political, social and economic messages to the world. That cannot be done without a help from organisations such as universities, foundations, culture, sport, media and any other institutions of civil society. Therefore, Qatari culture, ideals, and values became extraordinarily important, which have the ability to reflect a more realistic image about the country.

Qatar needed to influence the global view towards the country and build new perceptions about itself. The impact of such soft power could be effective and accumulate convincing deeds and good. However, if we consider that facts and knowledge are produced in museums, then BJH’s narrative would not be considered to enable and construct a whole history. Given the efforts taken by the museum’s researchers and designers to present the socio-political truth, the absence of interpretation of the past is laudable, which reflects the fact that there is no one truth.

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