From Orality to Image: Traditional Qatari Narratives and the Visual Media

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From Orality to Image: Traditional Qatari Narratives and the Visual Media is a UREP project whose aim is to preserve and re-present traditional Qatari culture by adapting cross-generational oral narratives into text and graphic form. We are using traditional Qatari oral folk tales as the basis of a series of graphic stories. These graphic stories will be collected in an anthology targeted at all readers who are interested in Qatari culture in general, and young adult readers in particular. We believe that these stories, which are both informative and engaging, could be of valuable use in the classroom and beyond to educate young readers about traditional Qatari culture and lore, to promote literacy, and to instill an appreciation for reading and the visual arts.

The main aims are: To increase awareness of Qatari history, tradition and culture among the general reading public and particularly among young adults in Qatar and beyond; To increase reading among young adults who may be resistant to books and other materials that do not support their specific learning styles and/or relate to their socio-cultural context; To provide opportunities for general and young adult readers to explore a text-based graphic medium to stimulate interest in reading, the visual arts, and Qatari culture; and To encourage bilingual literacy in Arabic and English by presenting versions of the graphic stories in both languages.

Overall, we regard our project as a way to help realize important national objectives and, moreover, that furthering these initiatives will in turn play a critical role in the development of a robust knowledge-based society in Qatar enriched by the contribution of the arts and humanities. The development of science and technology plays an important role in the growth of any modern society, including Qatar, but for a knowledge society to truly thrive, it must also develop artistic and humanistic values, including creativity, innovation, literacy, preservation of heritage and the fostering of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

A quiet social revolution with far-reaching implications is underway in Qatar: many Qatari men marry women who are not Qatari by birth.

I have focused on what I have termed “the New Qataris:” Western women who are neither Muslim nor Qatari by birth. Who are these women and how do they go about the business of becoming and being Qataris/Muslims? How do their conversion and their new nationality affect and influence their identity formation?

The research involved an extended period of participant observation, as well as focused discussions. Much useful information was gleaned from “living the life” with women – at coffee mornings and at religious lectures followed by food, etc.

Many of the New Qatari women I observed choose to be ultra-Qatari in their lifestyles as part of their assimilation strategy, forging a new Muslim-Qatari identity in the process. They adopt and adapt the honor-modesty-piety code of the country, sometimes conflating it with the requirements of the Muslim way of life, but often in full knowledge that some of their particular lifestyle choices are cultural rather than religious.

It is possible that on an unconscious level, in order to diffuse their otherness, these New Qataris try to live the identity of a remembered but vanishing way of life. They live in a self-consciously and publicly “Muslim” way and/or to uphold old-fashioned Qatari values and life-styles, very often to a greater degree than their born-Qatari contemporaries. Thus, surprisingly, they are often the traditionalists, the upholders of the old ways of dressing, being and living, while the “born-Qatari” women at a similar stage of life often seek to be more “modern” and more western. This holds true even for those women who have chosen a more secular life-style.

These New Qataris create a fusion of a universalist Islam, Qatari culture and that of their home countries. Their alternative chosen identity is not only the result of their belief system: it is created by the way they enact ritual, by ways of using language (blending Arabic and English, for example), and ways of dressing, working, eating, living, and making friends.