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Globalized, yet local: Football fandom in Qatar

Charlotte Lysa[a]*

[a]*Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway*

*Charlotte.Lysa@nchr.uio.no, Twitter:@Charlottelysa

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Scholars have examined the political role of football for Qatari authorities, but what football means to citizens remains unexplored. This paper seeks to answer the question "what is Qatari football?", through four parts: firstly, the introductory part identifies the gap in the literature and situates the paper in relevant academic discussions (in particular related to the concepts of glocal and modern traditionalism). The second part provides the historical and social context, while the fourth, empirical part reviews the history and development in football in Qatar and discusses and how traditional social markers and tribal identities is reflected in football in Qatar through interviews with young players and supporters. This part also highlights an ambivalence towards commercialization and politicization of Qatari football among supporters. Finally, the paper concludes that Qatari football is very much like the country itself; neither modern nor traditional, affected by both globalization, politics and distinct local features.

Keywords: Football, Glocalization, Identity, Qatar

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Introduction

Commentators critical of awarding the FIFA World Cup to Qatar have argued that Qatar is unfit to host the World Cup due to, among other and more serious accusations, the lack of "football culture".[1] Interestingly, what exactly comprises "football culture", and why Qatar is deficient in it, remain unclear in the reports. It is true that football stadiums in Qatar are often far from full, that the national team has never qualified for the World Cup, and that development of the sport is being driven by a non-democratic state with global ambitions, fuelled by petroleum revenues. Furthermore, there is indeed a body of literature arguing convincingly that Qatari investments in football are state driven and part of a larger political strategy. This, however, is not the complete story of Qatari football. Ideas about a lack of heritage in Qatar, Exell and Rico argue, are based on a pre-existing expectation of what such heritage should look like[2] – an accusation that might also be directed at European commentators on Qatari football. In this paper I refrain from going into a discussion on what conditions constitute "football culture", or if these conditions are present in Qatar, but rather turn the question upside down to engage in a discussion of *what is Qatari football?*

Status of knowledge

Ever since FIFA awarded the 2022 World Cup to the tiny desert state of Qatar, the legitimacy of the decision has been questioned. Scholars have examined Qatar's motivations and the implications the mega-event might have for Qatari society and the state itself. Jonathan Grix and Donna Lee mention Qatar's World Cup in discussing trends of emerging states hosting international sports events, a trend they argue is motivated by perceived soft power and public diplomacy gains.[3] Thomas Ross Griffin argues that Qatar's bid for the World Cup is motivated by a need to place itself on the global stage through hosting the first Muslim and Arab World Cup, though to succeed has to convince the world that the image it presents is a legitimate one.[4] Danyel Reiche argues that Qatar's investments in sporting success are primarily a policy tool, where possible motives range from soft-power ambitions, such as boosting tourism and diversifying the economy, to improving the health of the population.[5] Nadine Scharfenort sees the World Cup as both accelerating infrastructure and urban development, while simultaneously working as a tool to articulate criticism such as of the condition of migrant workers.[6] On a related note, Paul Michael Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti have argued that Qatar now finds itself in a position where on the one hand, a soft-power strategy that looks to paint the picture of an attractive and well-managed modern nation-state; and on the other, the international reputation of a citizenry that lacks integrity, honesty, friendliness and compassion towards citizens of other nations, including those working within Qatari borders. They describe this as soft disempowerment.[7] Elsewhere, Brannagan continues the discussion together with Joel Rookwood and shows through interviews with international sports fans that they do not share the same level of "moral panic" over issues such as treatment of foreign workers as international media, though many do express concern over domestic laws, and in particular the freedom of women and homosexual fans.[8] James Dorsey argues that the Qatar World Cup could act as a catalyst for

change, but that the Qatari government thus far has done little to grasp this opportunity.[9] Kelly Knez, Tansin Benn and Sara Alkhaldi argues that the World Cup already has been a catalyst for change for women football players, two years afterthe bidwas won.[10]Charlotte Lysa shows that only a few years later the picture is a bit more complicated as the national team is struggling both with funding and recruitment, and is no longer competing internationally.[11]

Although these discussions on the political objectives and motivations of the Qatari government, and also the possible opportunities and challenges that engagement in global football brings with it, are important and much-needed contributions to the scholarship on politics and football in Qatar, they are for the most part taking a top-down approach. Thus, there is an important gap in the literature on football and politics in Qatar, as it does not discuss football from the viewpoint of local supporters. This article seeks to contribute to closing that gap. As Mihaly Szerovay et al. have noted, few studies on football and globalization have been carried out in countries located on the periphery of international football.[12] As Qatar is arguably both a peripheral football country and one scheduled to be the host of the largest global football event, it is even more interesting as a case study.

Through interviews and observations in Qatar, and government and media reports, I will examine how football in Qatar has developed since the turn of the millennium.[13] The early 2000s arguably marks the start of a new wave of state-driven sports development characterized by internationalization, such as import of international sporting stars and hosting of major international sporting events. When examining the dynamics of football and its relations to existing features of Qatari society, it is clear that Qatari football is, much like Qatar itself, a hybrid. Football in Qatar is highly *glocalized*, a term used by Robertson and Giulianotti to describe a process where individuals and groups seek to transform, adapt, interpret and create global phenomena at the everyday level.[14] The concept of glocalization

thus encapsulates the interdependency of homogenization and heterogenization linked with globalization.[15] A distinct feature of Qatar is what Geoff Harkness and Rana Khalid have dubbed *modern traditionalism*.[16] Qatar is a young state that has gone through rapid development sparked by the discovery of oil in 1949. Contemporary Qatar is indeed marked by globalization, technological modernization and a comprehensive nation-building process while local customs remain important. This has led to multiple identities being played out in the support for football teams: the global, the national and the tribal. Arguably, Qatari football is not as exceptional or constructed as it might seem at first glance. Rather, Qatari football was brought by British workers as in many other countries and has mirrored the development in Qatar. Despite top-down efforts to develop a highly globalized Qatari football, it has indeed retained certain local elements. Therefore, in order to understand the traditional features influencing identity formation in Qatari football fandom, I will start by briefly reviewing the state formation and continuity and change in social structures and identifiers.

State formation and national identity in Qatar

Qatar's history and state formation is highly affected by the nomadic lifestyle traditionally dominant in the Arabian Peninsula. Bani Tamim, the tribe of the ruling Al Thani family migrated from Najd in central Arabia, and settled in Doha in the mid-1800s.[17] Sheikh Muhammed bin Thani soon emerged as a leading figure in the vacuum left after years of conflict over the territory, primarily between the Al Saud of today's Saudi Arabia and the Omani sultanate.[18] The next century saw a number of agreements between Al Thani and Al Saud, which constitutes the first known external recognition of the Al Thanis as the rulers of Qatar.[19]

As Michael Herb argues, tribal and family affiliations were important not only during state formation, but continue to be so through social hierarchies, intermarriages and

alliances.[20] The Qatari national identity is a quite recent phenomenon, while tribal affiliations go back centuries. In fact, reports on the first emergence of a "Qatari" identity trace it back to the 1950s, when the ruler, sheikhs, merchants, and the Qatari workers, both free and enslaved, formed a coalition against the British oil company, which led the company to promise to give Qatari nationals preference in employment.[21]

As the Arabian Peninsula was historically dominated by Bedouins with nomadic lifestyles (although many settled centuries ago), members of one tribe can often be spread out across several countries. Many of the tribes that settled in Qatar had branches in other Gulf countries, so migration was frequent. According to Jill Crystal, one consequence of this tribal mobility is that it limited the ruler's powers, as clans using their outside ties could easily leave the country.[22] The persistence of such transnational ties was made explicit by the 2017 boycott of Qatar led by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as human rights organizations pointed out how many families were separated as a consequence of the closure of borders between the countries.[23]

The rulers of Qatar are aware that a large proportion of citizens cultivate a sense of belonging to a different entity that might eventually pose a threat to the Al Thani rule of Qatar. The government has therefore engaged in nation-building to compensate for "the absence of a collective shared nation-building myth", to quote Ulrichsen.[24] Since Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani seized power from his cousin shortly after independence was won, and later under the rule of his son Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who deposed his father in a bloodless coup in 1995, the development of a distinct national identity has been high on the agenda. Central in this process has been the construction of a narrative of Jassim bin Muhammed Al Thani as the father of the nation. Hence, the date of the national day of Qatar, first celebrated in 2007, is the day Jassim came to power, rather than the day Qatar declared its independence.[25] In football, the promotion of Jassim as the founding father is reflected in the

name of one of the most important football cups: the Sheikh Jassim Cup, played between the winner of QNB Stars League and the Emir Cup. As Silva has shown, sport was central in the formation of a national identity already in the years around state foundation.[26]

Social categories and distinctions

At first glance, Qataris can appear as one homogeneous group. Qatari citizens constitute only about 10 percent of the country's total population of about 2.6 million, the rest being expatriate workers with anything from a few years to several generations residing in Qatar. This particular demographic situation has contributed to the idea of Qatari citizens as one consistent group, and scholars have pointed to the presence of a large proportion of foreigners in Gulf countries as contributing to the development of a distinct national identity.[27] This is also reinforced by years of policies intended to increase a sense of national belonging among Qatari citizens, and at the same time prevent integration of non-citizens.[28]

Looking beyond the dichotomy of citizens/non-citizens, however, a number of divisions within the group of Qatari citizens prevail, including but not limited to religious, ethnic and cultural distinctions. As Sharon Nagy explains, there are differentiations along multiple overlapping axes like family, sect, geographical origins and cultural history.[29] For example, in regard to the origins of Qatari citizens, one distinguishes between *Arab* and *Ajam*, in addition to descendants from freed slaves. Ajam are descended from merchants from Persia, of whom a majority were Farsi-speaking Shi'ites. A minority, however, were *hawla*, Sunnis claiming Arab ancestry. Finally, Arabs are descended from tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, most with a nomadic background. As Nagy notes, often the term *Bedu* (Bedouin) is used interchangeably with *Arab* to refer to this group.[30]

The opposite of Bedu, people descending from nomadic tribes, is *Hadar*, referring to settled townsfolk. Interestingly, as Nagy notes, this distinction is still important among Qataris although most Qataris – both Hadar and Bedu – today live in permanent urban

settlements.[31] Nagy argues further that as such distinctions, like geographical or cultural origins, generally overlap with the complex kinship structures, they are generally discussed using an idiom of "family" or "relatedness".[32] Hence families falling into similar categories are also often interconnected through marriage. Family remains the basic unit of organization in Qatar.[33] Historically, settlement patterns have also followed kinship, and according to Nagy, physical closeness in residential patterns among families remains a strong cultural ideal.[34]

As kinship and historical distinctions remain important social categories in Qatar, similar trends can be found in other spheres as well. A. Hadi Alshawi and Andrew Gardner argue not only that tribes remain socially meaningful in Qatar today, but also that there has been a resurgence of tribal identities.[35] This trend is not exclusive to those of tribal background, because non-tribal components of the Qatari population are also now re-envisioning themselves as clans and tribes. A strong indicator for the persistence of tribalism is voting patterns in municipal elections. In a survey conducted by Alshawi, no less than 78 percent of the 800 participants reported that they voted for a candidate from their tribe.[36] Although, as the researchers acknowledge, the study does not consider other variables that might affect such a decision, it nevertheless demonstrates the vitality of tribalism in Qatar.[37] The findings are supported by other figures revealing similar trends; according to the Qatar Statistics Authority 42 percent of marriages that took place in 2016 were between people with first- or second-degree relation.[38] As noted by Geoff Harkness and Rana Khaled, consanguineous marriages are not only commonplace but on the rise in Qatar, including among people with higher education.[39] However, such indicators of the persistent importance of kinship and tribal identity as social markers should not lead to an essentialist approach to Qatar as a tribal society. Rather, a critical approach should acknowledge that there are several intersections of identities and affiliations in present-day Qatar, but that tribal identities remain

highly relevant. This is in line with Harkness and Khaled who, when discussing the trends in consanguineous marriage within larger cultural practices, coined the term *modern traditionalism*.[40] As the next section will show, this concept is useful for the purpose of analysing Qatari football.

The emergence and development of football in Qatar

As in many other places, football has been intertwined with modernization and globalization since the game was first played in the country in the 1940s. At the time, Qatar was a British protectorate, and British Petroleum was the company that got the contract to extract the first oil. As a result, many British workers migrated to the Qatar, and brought with them the game of football, as they had done in so many other places. The British workers reportedly enjoyed playing football for recreation.[41] The first Qatari teams were started not long after, inspired by their encounters with the sport through the British workers.

Football was already being played before the first league started taking form in 1963. Local clubs would meet for friendlies around Qatar, and the first tournament was organized by Qatar Petroleum in the city of Dukhan, the site of the first oil discovery in the country in 1950/51.[42] Qatar became a member of the international football federation, FIFA, in 1972, one year after gaining independence. The same year, the first official season of the local league was played. It was not until 2008 that QSL adopted its current name, after the Qatar Football Association had set up a committee to develop professional football in Qatar two years earlier.

The oldest registered football club in Qatar is al-Ahli, founded in 1950.[43] Of the clubs that are still active today, al-Arabi, founded in 1952, is the second oldest. Half of the clubs were founded between 1950 and 1980, whereas the other half was founded in a second wave, starting from 1995. However, several of the clubs were subject to changes mostly ordered by the Qatar Olympic Committee, chaired by then Deputy Emir Tamim Al Thani in 2003/04.

[Table near here]

As is evident from Table 1 a majority of Qatari football clubs have undergone name changes, and of the nine clubs that were rebranded, all adopted the name of the region or neighbourhood they represented. Al-Hilal (The New Moon) became al-Kharaitiyat, al-Attihad (The Union) became al-Gharafa and al-Shabab (The Young Guys) became Muaither Club. Al-Taawun adopted the name of al-Khor in 2004 by decision of the Qatar Olympic Committee, according to QSL, in order to accurately reflect on where the club's headquarters are located.[44] In addition some clubs, such as al-Shahaniya and al-Mesaimeer, were moved.[45] In the case of al-Mesaimeer the idea was to build the club around the community in the area of Mesaimeer.

Qatari clubs are not privatized but rather are semi-governmental and thus partially funded by the government through QFA. In a move that surprised many observers, Lekhwiya bought al-Jaish and rebranded it as al-Duhail, as late as 2017. In the years before the two teams had been among the top of the league. Al-Jaish, whose name means "the army" and which was connected to the Qatari military, won the second division in its first season after being established in 2011, ended up second in the QSL and went on to win the Qatari Stars Cup in the 2012/13 season, and the Emir Cup in 2014 and 2016. Lekhwiya, named after the special police, won the Qatar Stars League no fewer than five times after being promoted from the second division in 2010, and won again after being rebranded as al-Duhail. Lekhwiya won both the Qatar Cup and the Sheikh Jassim Cup twice, and the Emir Cup once in the same period. In addition to following the same pattern as earlier rebranding, the two teams' domination of the league is likely to have caused worries that it might contribute to the supporters' lack of interest in the local league. In 2018, the newly founded al-Duhail won the Qatari treble: the Qatar Cup, the Emir Cup and the QNB Stars League.

In the 2003/2004 season name changes were not the only development for the QSL teams. The same year the teams in what was then called the Q-League were reportedly given QR10m each by the QOC, for a total of QR 100m, to spend on players.[46] Notably, in the same season Qatar saw the arrival of international stars like Pep Guardiola (al-Ahli), Steffen Effenberg (al-Arabi), Fernando Hierro (al-Rayyan), Claudio Caniggia (Qatar SC) and Gabriel Batistuta (al-Arabi). In the 2005/2006 season Qatar started seriously investing in international football players. While in the previous season (2004/2005) Qatar had invested 2.18 million British pounds in the international transfer market, the amount increased to 13.5 million pounds the following year. According to *The Guardian*'s data set on football transfers from 1900 - 2013, between 0 and 2 players transferred to Qatar every year until the turn of the millennium. From then on, the number increased rapidly, and in 2012/2013, the last season included in the data set, 32 players transferred to Qatar for a total amount of 26.9 million pounds.[47]

Foreign or foreign-born players are present not only at club level, but also in the national team. As Reiche and Tinaz notes discussing naturalization-policies for athletes in Qatar and Turkey, nationalism is a main driver behind following international sporting events.[48] While naturalization of athletes are neither new nor unique to the Middle East region the authors point out that Qatar has naturalized a number of athletes far above the international average, and that many of these have little or no connections to the country.[49] The international football federation's policies on naturalization is however stricter than most other federations, and in 2004 FIFA amended the rules on international eligibility, in part after intervening in the planned transfer of three Brazilian players to the Qatar men's national football team.[50] Rulers and officials are well aware that the low number of citizens makes it challenging to attract a significant numbers of both supporters and players alike. As a step to improve the latter the talent academy, Aspire Academy for Sports Excellence was opened in 2004 and a

majority of the players on the national team that won the AFC Asian Cup in 2019 are Aspire graduates. In 2014 the Qatar Football Federation announced new regulations, limiting the number of professional foreign players to three players on each team.[51] As the investments in building a competitive generation ready to take on the responsibilities of the host nation in the 2022 World Cup are large, it is not unlikely that Qatar has reduced its dependence on foreign-born players for the future.

From the very independence of the country, there have been strong indicators that sports have played a part in Qatari strategies and efforts to develop its image, especially for an international audience.[52] At the same time, as the above account has shown, the very establishment of the first football clubs is strongly rooted in local engagement. Much of the existing literature on sports in Qatar combined with the empirical data presented above would suggest that Qatari football has little or no historical roots in Qatari history and tradition. But this approach is flawed; Focusing only on football as a political tool leaves out of the account what football means in society and among the Qatari citizens. This will be the topic of the following section.

Tribal club identities

Kinship and traditional belonging following the social lines as described above is indeed present in football club affiliations as well. Traditionally, different families would reside in certain towns or neighbourhoods.[53] When the early football clubs were founded in the 1950s and ’60s, they would typically be linked to one area, and thus to the family or tribe residing there. A teacher recalls how a student once denounced a comment she made in the classroom, referring to how badly “her team” was doing. The teacher asked her student why he thought he knew what her team was. “Your team is al-Arabi,” he replied, making a reference to her family name.[54]

However, as patterns of settlement have changed with urbanization and subsequently the rapid growth of Doha, families have remained affiliated to the clubs their families originally founded. One supporter explains how her family members keep their loyalty even after moving: “A lot of my cousins are very big supporters of al-Gharafa, because of the family affiliations. People who live in small towns or abroad, they could be so loyal to the club.”[55] That families relocate to different and new areas, one supporter suggests, explains why some of the more recently founded clubs have fewer supporters than older clubs such as al-Rayyan and al-Arabi. “What is strange is people that live in al-Kharaitiyat, al-Sailiya, they don’t support al-Sailiya (….) it’s mixing now. People who are supporting al-Rayyan and al-Sadd are living in al-Kharaityat, are living everywhere ...”[56] Another fan, who supports al-Rayyan while living in Umm Salal, makes a similar statement: “All of Umm Salal is mixed [between] al-Gharafa – al-Rayyan”.[57] However, acknowledging that kinship is still an important identity marker in football, resettlements and intermarriages might also lead to conflicting affiliations, demanding that supporters choose one or the other. One supporter explains how her uncle and cousins are al-Arabi and give her and the rest of her immediate family a hard time for being al-Sadd supporters. “Growing up I looked up to my brother, and he’s with al-Sadd so whatever he supported, I supported”,[58] she explains. Another supporter tells how her mother is an al-Sadd supporter, while her father supports al-Rayyan and the children are torn, half supporting the mother’s side, and the other half the father’s side. “My dad’s side of the family is more Bedouin, and that’s kind of their team, Rayyan is a Bedouin team; my mum’s side is more non-Bedouin.”[59]

Al-Rayyan, both the area and the club, is indeed referred to as the Bedouin team throughout the interviews. The distinction between Hadar and Bedu is thus present in the fan bases of different teams. When asked if it was true that al-Sadd supporters were Hadar, Khalid replied: “Hadar, yeah. I’m a Bedouin so I’m al-Rayyan. Not the main reason but he [who says

so] has a point." When asked who the supporters of the different teams are, Mohammed explained in similar terms:

> Al-Rayyan would be the people of the, the families, we call them Bedu, like Bedouin, you know, people coming from the desert. So their geographical area is there, most of them are living there so it's their team, and al-Arabi is the people coming from the sea and the people of the city, and al-Sadd is the same almost as al-Arabi, they're people of the city and similar families, so it's about the city, and the family, both."[60]

His account is interesting in that it differentiates the supporters along two lines, families and Bedu/Hadar. He describes the supporters of al-Arabi and al-Sadd, in contrast to al-Rayyan, as "people coming from the sea and the people of the city" – thus Hadar. Nagy argues that Hadar or Bedouins do perceive a degree of relatedness derived from shared lifestyles within each group although they are not all related to each other.[61] This is reflected in Mohammed's accounts of al-Arabi and al-Sadd supporters being from *similar* families.

Kinship and traditional social distinctions have remained meaningful in contemporary Qatar simultaneously with rapid modernization and globalization affecting state and society. Tribal belonging is also very much alive in support for football clubs. Football supporters in their twenties express attachment to the teams their fathers, uncles and grandfathers took part in. This is evident not only in what teams people of different tribal background claim to support – but when people discuss Qatari football support in general they make clear references to such distinctions. "The rivalry is mostly on social media these days," a supporter said, adding that many of those arguing don't even follow the teams, they just claim their affiliation during derbies, underlining how football teams are still part of their identity and sense of belonging.

Contemporary challenges in Qatari football

As established above football was welcomed by locals in Qatar from the start, and teams were founded with strong roots in native communities. Simultaneously, Qatari football was subject to effects of globalization and a number of top-down efforts to develop the sport. Still, affiliations with the local teams remains strong among younger supporters. In other words, few professional Qatari players with international success, or the lack of spectators at games, do not necessarily mean that football is not popular among Qataris. On the contrary, it is viewed as deeply integrated in the community, as illustrated by the response from a Qatari female in her twenties when asked about football in Qatar:

> In the Qatari culture it is the number one sport. In school it is the number one sport. At home it is the number one sport, to watch with family. I remember when I was little we used to sit with the family and watch the Qatari league. If there was a final, if the national team was playing. It was an event that brought us together more than anything. So it is the number one sport.[62]

In addition to being the most popular recreational sport, football is also the most popular spectator sport. Although few supporters make it to the stadium for most of the games in the local league, except for some derbies, Qataris do enjoy watching football. However, as is the case around the world, the combination of globalization and technological development has brought the best football teams of the world into the Qatari majlises.[63] A supporter in his late twenties adds that he and his friends would fly to Europe for the weekend to watch football games: "The "classico"[64] is more important here, you know what I mean? It's football, the fact that these clubs have a history, they stand for something ... People know here in Doha, you ask them about the Catalan history, they'll tell you! (…) And you're like: Dude! You're in Qatar!"[65]

"Most people here follow La Liga, Real Madrid or Barcelona," a Qatari football fan, Mozah, explains. "I grew up watching Qatar Stars League. (...) I used to watch al-Gharafa because I'm from that neighbourhood. But the level is not that high, so I don't watch them [anymore]."[66] Aljoharah, another football fan, makes a related argument, claiming that there's a cultural reason why people don't go to the stadiums, in addition to the quality being low compared to La Liga and the Premier League: "There's a perception that football is integrated within the culture, it is! Privately, but publicly it's not as integrated ... Even guys, they watch football in their majlis. Girls, they watch it at home."[67]

The Qatari government has indeed implemented several measures, including bringing in foreign talent, to improve the calibre of football played in the domestic league. Instead of increasing the league's popularity, however, it seems the efforts might have had the opposite effect. Mozah expressed her discomfort with the presence of foreign players:

> I don't even watch the national team. Most of them are not actually Qataris. You're not supporting home-grown talent. When I watch Manchester United, because a lot of them are home-grown, I am more connected with them than with my own country. When I watch my national team, there's a guy named Fabio! You know what I mean?[68]

A similar argument is presented by Aljoharah, a supporter of and player on her university team, when discussing how football is different for her generation than it was for that of her fathers:

> My dad used to show me pictures. They didn't have even proper attire, they wore booty shorts, baggy shirts, they just played! And the quality was good, because they played for their teams. Even the fan base was relatively fine compared to the population because they played for the country. My dad played for Rayyan, and he

> lived in Rayyan, so he played for his community. It's just different when you bring expats, who are not as invested in what you stand for. And (…) with the introduction of the high budget, it kind of ruins the authenticity of the whole thing.[69]

Balancing between the global and the local

The attitudes differ when it comes to famous foreign players and the influx of a high number of foreign players in general. While supporters tend to be critical of the phenomenon in general, individual players can be viewed more favourably. One football supporter and professional player argued that one of the reasons that not as many people came to watch the games anymore was related to the large number of foreign players, thus taking the "place" of Qatari players in the teams, something that was not "fair". When asked directly about the presence of Xavi,[70] he, himself a supporter of al-Rayyan, said he was supportive: "Of course, I am happy to see him here, all the people are happy to see him in Qatar, because they like Xavi and Barcelona, so most will like to see him in Qatar, even if it's not on his team".[71] Another supporter expressed his support for Rodrigo Tabata, a naturalized, Brazilian-born player, who at the time was playing for al-Rayyan: "He's one of us, he loves the fans, every time he scores he comes to the fans immediately. When we get upset, he feels the pain, we can see him suffering, just to make us happy."[72]

Another issue brought up by supporters was the influx of capital strengthening teams that were founded later and thus did not have the same historical legitimacy as the oldest teams. These "new teams" were brought into the discussion by one supporter when discussing "fairness" in Qatari football. Differentiating between what he describes as the "people's clubs" – referring to older clubs like al-Rayyan, al-Sadd, al-Arabi and al-Gharafa, and the "new teams" – al-Jaish and Lekhwiya[73] – he argued that the latter made Qatari football less fair, due to financial support from "high-up people in the country":

> Most people still have strong connection with their clubs but they are frustrated because their teams don't win anymore. But the competition is not fair anymore, there are teams [that] are getting paid more, having stronger players and have a lot of support from the strong people in the country, so every sheikh will take one team, he will give money and bring players and [the other teams] are left behind, but they still love their teams but they don't go to the stadium, they are not connected anymore."[74]

In several ways, supporters are expressing that the football is not "theirs" anymore, but that rather it has been taken hostage by people with a political agenda. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note how one player-supporter made the distinction between the new clubs and the "people's clubs".

By differentiating between the clubs, he highlights how some of the Qatari clubs are viewed as more "authentic" than others. This would typically refer to the clubs with a traditional affiliation to families or tribes. Thus, while Qatari football is highly affected by globalization, both directly, as through the international transfer market, and indirectly, as in football fans' support of non-Qatari teams, it is also strongly rooted in specific local features. The above statements highlight an ambivalence among supporters with regards to developments in Qatari football; on the one hand they want to see Qatari football succeed internationally, while still preserve the "authenticity" and distinct local features. In other words, they express a need to balance the global and the local.

From a fandom perspective, foreign players and influx of capital is only two of many developments affecting patterns of football support among Qataris. In a 2014 survey Qatar Statistics Authority asked 1079 participants about match attendance, and among the most common explanations for not going to the stadium was TV, traffic and weather – in addition to the presence of paid spectators.[75] In addition, 51% listed "lack of desire" as one of the

reasons.[76] Low stadium attendance or lack of interest in going to the stadium is not however equivalent to a lack of affinity for the teams. The identity factor remains – even when supporters do not follow the local teams as closely.

Conclusion

What is perceived as increased commercialization and politicization of football by supporters is together with globalization of football making the local league less attractive to them. They do still however have strong affiliations with their teams, and this affiliation is intertwined with tribal identities. These traditional affiliations are a central feature of the glocal character of Qatari football, and if this element disappears there are less reasons for supporters to favour their local teams vis a vis international ones. However, for Qatari football to keep its glocal-ness it is crucial that decision makers balance the global and the local in their efforts of promoting and developing Qatari football in order to not alienate local supporters. Only then will they achieve success in the supporter stands as well as on the field.

The paper started off with the question "what is Qatari football?", and has outlined how the very existence of football in Qatar is deeply linked to globalization processes. Its development is formed by them – by the global ambitions of the regime, the global state of football, and the increasing support for foreign teams. Qatari-based international football star Xavi is both a product and a symbol of such processes. At the same time local elements and affiliations were predominant in the formative years of the local league. For Qatari supporters, these features and affiliations remain strong and play a big role in the everyday support of local teams. These have persisted not because of the efforts from the government but rather, it seems, despite such efforts.

Football in Qatar is thus a product of globalization processes, top-driven political initiatives *and* local identities. It is, like Qatar, neither global nor local, neither modern nor

traditional. Rather, it underlines how thinking of such concepts as binaries is misleading. Qatari football mirrors present-day Qatar in that it is highly modern, with significant tribal features. Social distinctions like Bedu and Hadar are still present in contemporary Qatar. Tribalism and kinship are central in the history of Qatar, and identities attached to traditional and tribal origins predate a national Qatari identity. Although the Qatari identity, like the global identity, is strong, it has evolved not at the expense of but alongside tribal and traditional identities. Traditional social distinctions and identities are not only very much present in football fandom, but are reproduced through the support of teams with a certain affiliation. This is, together with the globalized attributes of the sport, a distinct feature of Qatari football.

Notes

[1] See for example: The Express Tribune, 'Seven Reasons Why World Cup 2022 in Qatar will be more Sand than Sail', *The Express Tribune,* March 2, 2015, http://www.tribune.com.pk/story/846587/seven-reasons-why-world-cup-2022-in-qatar-will-be-more-sand-than-sail (accessed August 10, 2017); Joe Hall Hall, 'Qatar 2022 World Cup: The Six Biggest Problems with the Controversial Tournament', *City A.M.,* February 25, 2015 www.cityam.com/210256/qatar-2022-world-cup-eight-biggest-problems-controversial-tournament (accessed August, 10 2017) John Duerden, 'Qatar's World Cup Résumé: Zero Games. 2022 Host', *The New York Times*, April 1 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/04/01/sports/soccer/qatar-world-cup-2022.html (accessed August 10, 2017); Robert Booth, ''We will be Ready, Inshallah': Inside Qatar's $200bn World Cup', *The Guardian,* November 14, 2015, www.theguardian.com/football/2015/nov/14/qatar-world-cup-200-billion-dollar-gamble (accessed August 10, 2017).
[2] Exell and Rico, ''There Is No Heritage in Qatar': Orientalism, Colonialism and Other Problematic Histories'.
[3] Grix and Lee, 'Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction'.
[4] Griffin, 'National Identity, Social Legacy and Qatar 2022: The Cultural Ramifications of FIFA's First Arab World Cup'
[5] Reiche, 'Investing in Sporting Success as a Domestic and Foreign Policy Tool: The Case of Qatar'.
[6] Scharfenort, 'Urban Development and Social Change in Qatar: The Qatar National Vision 2030 and the 2022 FIFA World Cup'.
[7] Brannagan and Giulianotti, 'Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment: Qatar, Global Sport and Football's 2022 World Cup Finals'.
[8] Brannagan and Rookwood, 'Sports Mega-Events, Soft Power, and Soft Disempowerment: International Supporters' perspectives on Qatar's acquisition of the 2022 FIFA World Cup Finals'
[9] Dorsey, 'The 2022 World Cup: A Potential Monkey Wrench for Change'.
[10] Knez et.al, 'World Cup Football as a Catalyst for Change: Exploring the Lives of Women in Qatar's first National Football Team – A Case Study'.
[11] Lysa, 'Qatari Female Footballers: Negotiating Gendered Expectations'.
[12] Szerovay, et al., ''Glocal'processes in Peripheral Football Countries: A Figurational Sociological Comparison of Finland and Hungary'.
[13] This paper is part of a larger project in which I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Qatar in 2017, and approximately 30 interviews, around 1 hour each, about sport in Qatar with officials, fans and athletes, primarily in football. In addition, I attended five football matches.
[14] Giulianotti and Robertson, *Globalization and Football*.
[15] Ibid., 31
[16] Harkness and Khaled, 'Modern Traditionalism: Consanguineous Marriage in Qatar'.
[17] Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 15.
[18] Davidson, *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*, 115.
[19] Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, 15. This era of Qatars history is complex, with multiple actors competing over influence. For a thorough discussion on the political history of Qatar see Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*.
[20] Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies*.
[21] Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*,143-45.
[22] Ibid., 113

[23] Human Rights Watch, 'Qatar: Isolation Causing Rights Abuses', *Human Rights Watch,* June 12, 2017 https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/13/qatar-isolation-causing-rights-abuses (accessed May 25, 2018).
[24] Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*., 39
[25] Ibid., 39
[26] Rolim Silva, 'The Establishment of the Qatar National Olympic Committee: Building the National Sport Identity'.
[27] Khalaf, 'Globalization and Heritage Revival in the Gulf: An Anthropological Look at Dubai Heritage Village'; Khalaf, 'National Dress and the Construction of Emirati Cultural Identity'; Longva, *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion, and Society in Kuwait*; Fargues, 'Immigration without Inclusion: Non-Nationals in Nation-Building in the Gulf States'; Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*.
[28] Fargues, 'Immigration without Inclusion: Non-Nationals in Nation-Building in the Gulf States.'
[29] Nagy, 'Making Room for Migrants, Making Sense of Difference: Spatial and Ideological Expressions of Social Diversity in Urban Qatar'.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Mitchell, et al., 'In Majaalis Al-Hareem: The Complex Professional and Personal Choices of Qatari Women'.
[34] Nagy, 'Making Room for Migrants, Making Sense of Difference: Spatial and Ideological Expressions of Social Diversity in Urban Qatar'.
[35] Gardner, 'Tribalism, Identity and Citizenship in Contemporary Qatar'.
[36] Ibid.
[37] For example, if a person lives in an area dominated by her tribe and voted for a member of that tribe, there would be a high possibility that many (if not all) of the candidates were from the same tribe. Even if the tribal connection then might not have been the primary motivation for the choice of candidate the fact that the area was populated after tribal linkage this information would itself support the claim that tribalism still persists.
[38] Qatar Statistics Authority, 'Marriage and Divorce', *Qatar Statistics Authority,* 2016, https://www.mdps.gov.qa/en/statistics/Statistical%20Releases/Population/MarriagesDivorces/2016/Analytical_Summary_Marriage_and_Divorce_2016_En.pdf (accessed August 10, 2017)
[39] Harkness and Khaled, 'Modern Traditionalism: Consanguineous Marriage in Qatar'.
[40] Ibid.
[41] 'Company House', Mshreib Museums, Doha, Qatar. Visited 19 October 2016
[42] Būḥaqab, *ذكريات الرياضية لفترات الخمسينيات والستينيات والسبعينيات والثمانينيات [Sports Memories for the Periods Fifties, Sixties, Seventeies and Eighties]*.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Qatar Stars League, 'The Story of al Khor', *Qatar Stars League,* http://v2.qsl.com.qa/en/News/view/5181/the-story-of-al-khor (accessed May 10, 2018)
[45] Mesaimeer Sports Club 'نبذة عن النادى [About the Club]', *Mesaimeer Sports Club* https://www.mesaimeerclub.com/aboutus.php (accessed May 10, 2018)
[46] Barnes and Britcher, *The Middle East: Opportunities in the Business of Sport,* cited in Amara, '2006 Qatar Asian Games: A 'Modernization'project from Above?'.
[47] The Guardian, '113 Years of International Football Player Transfers', *The Guardian,* http://www.theguardian.com/football/datablog/interactive/2013/nov/14/113-years-of-international-football-player-transfers (accessed April 27, 2015)
[48] Reiche and Tinaz, Policies for Naturalisation of Foreign-Born Athletes: Qatar and Turkey in Comparison.

[49] Reiche and Tinaz, Policies for Naturalisation of Foreign-Born Athletes: Qatar and Turkey in Comparison.
[50] BBC Sport, 'Fifa Rules on Eligibility', *BBC Sport*, March 18, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/internationals/3498082.stm (accessed April, 27 2015).
[51] Shabina S. Khatri, 'Qatar to reduce number of foreign football players in the coming seasons', *Doha News*, April 10, 2014, https://dohanews.co/qatar-reduce-number-foreign-football-players-coming-seasons/ (accessed September 5, 2019)
[52] In addition to the contributions discussed in page 1, see Amara, '2006 Qatar Asian Games: A 'Modernization'project from Above?'; Rolim Silva, 'The Establishment of the Qatar National Olympic Committee: Building the National Sport Identity'; Lysa, 'Gåten Qatar 2022'; Peterson, 'Qatar and the World: Branding for a Micro-State'.
[53] Nagy, 'Making Room for Migrants, Making Sense of Difference: Spatial and Ideological Expressions of Social Diversity in Urban Qatar.'
[54] Author field notes, 2017
[55] 'Mozah', interview with the author, Doha, 14 November 2016.
[56] 'Ali', interview with the author, Doha, 28 November 2016.
[57] 'Khalid', interview with the author, Doha, 20 September 2016.
[58] 'Haya', interview with the author, Doha, 27 November 2016.
[59] 'Aljohara', interview with the author, Doha, 14 November 2016.
[60] 'Mohammed', interview with the author, Doha, 28 November 2016.
[61] Nagy, 'Making Room for Migrants, Making Sense of Difference: Spatial and Ideological Expressions of Social Diversity in Urban Qatar.'
[62] 'Haya', interview with the author, Doha, 27 November 2016.
[63] Majlis in Gulf culture refers to a place where people gather, often in conjunction with someone's home.
[64] The classico refers to a football game between Spanish clubs FC Barcelona and Real Madrid.
[65] 'Abdullah', interview with the author, Doha, 20 September 2017.
[66] 'Mozah', interview with the author, Doha, 14 November 2016.
[67] 'Aljoharah', interview with the author, Doha, 14 November 2016.
[68] 'Mozah', interview with the author, Doha, 14 November 2016.
[69] 'Aljohara', interview with the author, Doha, 14 November 2016.
[70] Xavi Hernández Creus is a Spanish football player who after playing for Barcelona FC played, and currently coaches Qatari team al-Sadd
[71] 'Mohammed', interview with the author, Doha, November 28, 2016.
[72] 'Khalid', interview with the author, Doha, September 20, 2017.
[73] The interview was conducted prior to the merger of al-Jaish and Lekhwiya.
[74] 'Mohammed', interview with the author, Doha, November 28, 2016.
[75] Qatar Statistics Authority, 'The audience are reluctant to attend football matches at stadiums', *Qatar Statistics Authority*, January 26, 2014, 26.01.2014, https://www.qsa.gov.qa/eng/News/2014/articles/6.htm (accessed April 26, 2015)
[76] Ibid.

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Founded	Name	Change of name	Previously named
1950	al-Ahli		
1952	al-Arabi		
1959	Qatar SC	1972 and 1989	al-Oruba and Al Esteqlal
1959	al-Wakrah		

1961	al-Khor	2004	al-Taawun
1967	al-Rayyan		
1969	al-Sadd		
1980	al-Shamal		
1979	al-Gharafa	2004	al-Ittihad
1995	al-Markhiya	2004	al-Ittifaq
1995	al-Sailiya	2003	al-Qadsia
1996	al-Mesaimeer	1998 and 2004	al-Nahda and al-Shoala
1996	Muaither Club	2004	al-Shabab
1996	Umm Salal	2004	al-Tadamun
1998	al-Shahaniya	2004	al-Nasr
1996	al-Kharaityat	2004	al-Hilal
2009	al-Duhail	2009 and 2017	al-Shorta and Lekhwiya
2011	al-Duhail*	2017	al-Jaish

*Table 1: The football clubs of Qatar 2017. *In 2017 al-Jaish was merged with Lekhwiya to form al-Duhail.*