

**The desert rose as a new symbol for the nation:
materiality, heritage and the architecture of the new National Museum of Qatar**

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Brief bio:

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Abstract

The desert rose, a fragile formation of gypsum or barite crystals including sand grains, is gaining momentum as the new symbol of Qatar. Chosen by Jean Nouvel as an inspiration of his design for the new National Museum of Qatar which opened for the public in March 28, 2019, the building, which encircles the first National Museum of the country, is intended to be both a monument and a metaphor: a huge sculpture that will pay tribute and encourage emotive associations of contemporary Qatar with values such as rarity, fragility, beauty, timelessness. At the same time, the same symbol is used by the tourist industry, with desert roses being introduced into Qatari Museums shops, where visitors are invited to purchase desert roses to “pay tribute to this nature’s marvel”, but also to participate to the creation of a new heritage symbol, that connects the land with its people, the past with the present. This paper uses this particular object to explore the simultaneous construction of heritage narratives and the use of museums in the construction of a new identity in Qatar.

Key Words: National identity, National symbolism, Desert rose, Qatar National Museum, Museums in the GCC, Heritage and Tourism, Heritage Narratives, Identity building

I. Introduction

In July 2018, FIFA released a 2.45-minute video advertising the 2022 World Cup to take place in Qatar. The video starts with the image of a young Arab boy walking in the desert, picking up from the sand a beautiful desert rose; while admiring it, a huge desert rose emerges from the sand just behind him with an oryx, a native antelope almost extinct in the wild, on top. The huge desert rose is the iconic building by Jean Nouvel of the new National Museum of Qatar, which opened for the public in March 28, 2019, after many years in the making. The boy looks at it with awe and pride; his eyes lock to the knowing eyes of the oryx standing on one of the Museum’s “petals”. He then continues his journey in the endless desert, walking along the Arab Gulf, exactly at the edge, where the land meets the sea (Qatar World Cup 2022 Official Video 2018).

These few seconds that the camera captures the encounter between the boy, the desert rose and the oryx offers a synopsis of a rather complex process of national symbol production, at the heart of which the new National Museum of Qatar is uniquely placed. Its building becomes an icon that materializes a new identity for the nation, as this is envisioned and supported by the leadership of the small Gulf State; being the building of *the* National Museum makes the symbol stronger than if this impressive construction housed any other purpose, given the symbolic weight of museums in the construction of the nation (Bennett 1995; Knell *et al.* 2011; Aronsson and Elgenius

2015). This paper offers an exploration of the process of nation-making currently taking place in Qatar, asking questions about the role of heritage, and museums in particular, in this process. The main focus is in the way in which the desert rose is used to address very specific needs within Qatar at this particular moment in time, to construct a space of collective memory, revitalize and repurpose natural symbols and connect the land with society, its present and future.

The role of museums and heritage in the making of national identities in the GCC is still little understood, attracting attention only recently (see Exell and Rico 2014; Exell 2016a; Erskine-Loftus *et al.* 2016). Scholars writing about the museums of the region interpret the new museum developments of the last twenty years as a continuation of the traditional association between museum building and nation making (Exell 2016a; also articles in Erskine-Loftus *et al.* 2016). Exell (2016a), for example, discusses the institution of the museum in the Arabian Peninsula and argues that it serves as a “symbol of modernity” (p. 42), though she suggests that its potency is weaker as it still remains “unnatural and ineffective” (p. 43) in the context of the Middle East. Thus, while she argues that national museums in particular become instruments for the production and the legitimization of the State and “form part of a broader heritage industry which connects the ruling family to the country’s past” (Exell 2016a, 42), the extent to which this is an effective strategy remains to be seen. For Exell, the potential problem lies in the fact that museums are a western-style heritage technology that does not consider local traditions and culturally appropriate ways and modes of engaging with the past. Elgenius (2015), on the other hand, discussing the development of national museums in Europe, also associates the building of new museums with the building of new nation states, suggesting that national museums are “strategic markers of nation building introduced at pivotal times” (Elgenius 2015, 145). She, furthermore, allows the possibility that the way this is being done gives these institutions the opportunity to “transfer and visualize the nation into the present” (Elgenius 2015, 148). Taking its cue from these writers, this paper analyzes how the new National Museum of Qatar, and primarily its building is used within a complex process of top-down nation-building in this small Gulf state. At the point of this writing, in the autumn of 2018, the National Museum was not open yet and little was known about its narrative and displays. All people working for the new museum had signed strict confidentiality agreements that prevented them

from describing the progress of the work or the contents of the museum. While the Museum opened to the public in March 28, 2019 with a lot of media attention, this paper focuses exclusively on the architecture of the Museum.

Analyzing how the use of the desert rose as the visual language of the New National Museum can offer interesting insights into the nation-building processes of the Middle East and the role of heritage within it, this paper argues that there is currently an ongoing process aimed at making the powerful tool of the national museum “natural and effective”, by using the architectural shape of the museum as a visualization of a new identity supported by the ruling family. Furthermore, this paper argues that the introduction of this new marker follows “the strategic use of symbols in identity and recognition politics, which is in turn connected to debates and struggles about membership, nationality, ethnicity, citizenship and integration” (Elgenius 2015, 146). In doing so, the aim is to explore the extent to which the desert rose is being used to re-negotiate ideas of membership and belonging by introducing a symbol of a “common space” that exists “when the desert meets the sea”, to use a phrase by Jean Nouvel (2010), even before we can consider Sage Mitchell’s (2016) argument that the narrative developed for the new museum, is an effort to make the new National Museum a space of shared membership for Qataris and expats.

As argued in this paper, this is a process, which is well under way through the ubiquitous presence of desert roses, standing as symbols of the museum in Qatar’s museum shops. Such a presence is itself supported by a touristic heritage discourse which, in “shaping and selling” (Bryden 2000) this object as a new symbol of the nation forms an important part of the production of meaning and the creation of a new symbol for the nation. Bringing this iconic artifact into daily life brings it into the space of what has been called “banal nationalism” (Billig 1995) and makes it an important focus of collective identity-building.

This paper is based on the analysis of available literature on museums, heritage and national identity in the Gulf, informal interviews with key stakeholders in Qatar, as well as field research in museum and heritage institutions in Qatar and the UAE. It develops in three parts: first, the interrelation between materiality, architecture, national identity building, museums, heritage and tourism; then, a discussion about

how this interrelation operates in the case of Qatar. Finally, the focus will turn on how all this is brought together by the desert rose, through its architectural, commercial and touristic expressions.

II. Heritage, Architecture, Materiality and the Idea of the Nation

Smith (2002), following an ethno-symbolic paradigm, suggests that symbols, memories, myths, values and traditions are important parameters that shape collective cultural identity and define the nation. In modern nations, myths of origins, commonly used to define an ethnic community, are often complemented, or even replaced, by other myths, such as those of common heroes, a glorious historical past, moments of important decisions or other historical milestones that bring together the people belonging to this particular community. Furthermore, a key component of the definition of the concept of the nation is its relation to a specific landscape (Smith 2002, 22). Based on the influence of Romanticism, the idea that communities take their shapes by their living environment has been central in all discussions of nationalism and has led to the “territorialisation of memory” (Smith 2002, 23). In other words, it is the congruence of people and the land they come from that provides a basis for national identity. This notion has taken many shapes, from localizing communal memories on specific landscapes (*lieu de memoire*), to making spiritual claims on certain ancestral lands or even launching irredentist efforts to regain them. “Symbolic self-definition; myth-making and memory-selection; the creation of a public culture; legal standardisation and ritual codification; and the territorialisation of memory and hardening of space” (Smith 2002, 23) are the key social and symbolic processes used to bring a nation together, or, in their absence, to lead to its dissolution.

These national mythologies are embodied in objects and practices. They become highly visible through their material and pictorial representations or expressions. Usual depictions and material objects become *loci* of historical experience, since they either facilitate the process of directing national feelings or they serve as reference points for such affects (Zubrzycki 2011, 25). In many cases, a single image or a single object is enough to provide a specific interpretative frame through which to understand the present (Zubrzycki 2011, 31). These objects or images become the

tools through which the mythologies or ideas created by elites are transmitted and received by the general population; they become the medium through which “myths” are experienced and performed, they become concrete. A shared repertoire of images and objects shape collective memories and identities (Morgan 1999, 8) and can be used as a strategy to de-construct and re-construct national identity on new bases.

Architecture, monuments and the landscape are among the material embodiments through which individuals experience national myths, whereas these are also used in the hands of the elites for what Mukerji (2012) calls “political pedagogy”, i.e. to facilitate the creation and shaping of shared consciousness and collective identity. Political regimes throughout history, and most particularly from the nineteenth century onwards, have commissioned cultural icons (buildings, public art, exhibitionary complexes and so on) to materialize their political visions, aims and values in a meaningful manner and thus create or activate national publics (Jones 2011, 49). Cultural buildings in particular have been used similarly to other national symbols, such as the flags, national days, and anthems, but also, they have been used to house other materialities and institutional rituals that are crucial to such invented traditions. Following Anderson (1991), the idea of the “nation as an imagined community” is to provide the impression of a “united, coherent group moving together through history towards a common future” (Jones 2011, 51).

Museum buildings have been particularly important in this process. Architecture, and indeed the buildings of national museums have been part of the course through which the community has been presented as a continuous and “natural” entity on a shared trajectory to the future (see also Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983). Very often their exterior emits stronger messages than their contents (Chung 2003, 230). Research on the development of national museums in Europe suggests that museum architecture from the nineteenth century onwards has followed a “specific grammar of national identification” (Berger 2015, 27; also Knell 2016). The trend of inviting well-established and experienced architects to build these museums is not new, as even in the nineteenth century architects, were invited to build museums in various European states of the time. For instance, the Bavarian Leo von Klenze, was invited to build museums in different states, from the small, new kingdom of Greece, to the large old empire of Russia (Poulot 2015).

Monumental or iconic museum buildings continued to be built throughout the twentieth century, even though the “grammar” changed (Tzortzi 2015). They have often been used to give some capitals a “marked *museal* identity” (Poulot 2015, 104), especially after the 1970s and to contribute towards the creation or reinforcement of the national self to both internal and external audiences, usually on par with the development of tourism. In some cases, even museums that were not strictly speaking national have been used as part of the national image of a community, as for instance has been the case with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao in the 2000s (Poulot 2015, 105).

However, as Jones argues (2011, 85), this is not only to do with the building itself: “what goes inside the building” but also how the building is experienced is also very important. The ritual of the museum visit serves to collectively remind and communicate social memory; the museum space becomes a setting for performing the “ritual” of visiting and consuming material and visual embodiments of memory. These “ritualized circumstances” (Park 2014) can be effective on a national level as well as on an international one: nationals are encouraged to construct and reconstruct their cultural and national identity performing the ritual of visiting a museum, while an international perception of such an identity is helpfully also constructed and communicated through the same space and the same ritual (see also Palmer 1998). The role of tourism in this process is important, since it encourages and supports the creation and consumption of both icons and performances. As Suzanne McLeod argues (2013, 1) “Governments all over the world are recognizing the power of culture, and particularly cultural buildings to spark international interest, speak of economic investment and growth – regardless of the realities – to generate tourism in post-industrial centres and to make global and local statements about national and sub-national identities”.

In other words, landmark buildings, especially those housing museums, have been, and continue to be used to “flag” the nation (Jones 2011, 52; also Exell 2018, 8) and to become the focal point, the symbol of the nation’s myths, to construct “bonds of loyalty” (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983, 283). They serve as “unifying signs” (to borrow Bessière’s term on heritage) (1998, 26) for a community, used by cultural,

social and political elites, but also other social entities, to authenticate their power, to promote their own narratives as “natural”, and ultimately to legitimize their authority. At the same time, these iconic buildings can be used through tourism and commodification to bring ideas about the nation to the everyday life, to anchor them into the vernacular, the mundane and the routine and thus objectify, naturalize and strengthen their appeal (Billig 1995). National museum buildings, therefore, are multi-faceted material realizations of imagined communities, symbolic condensations that anchor social, political and cultural meanings (see, also, Alexander 2008).

II. National identity and the National Museum in Qatar

In Qatar, the first national museum was established soon after the independence of the State. British archaeologists and the communication company of Michael Rice, who also developed national museums in other Gulf States (Rice 1977; Exell 2016a), were instrumental in its development. The museum opened to the public in June 23, 1975 (Rice 1977; Exell 2016a; 2016b). A Collection Committee of Qatari men was involved in the acquisition of the collection for the new museum, especially of objects from the more recent past (Al-Mulla 2013). The museum, despite the involvement of foreign experts (see Exell 2016c) was considered representative of Qatari identity, and it was well admired and visited by Qataris and non-Qataris, tourists and residents alike. The role of the first national museum as a political statement of the Qatari leadership of the time, HH Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, as well as its role in a complex political technology has been discussed in the literature (see Exell 2016a, esp. chapters 1 and 2; 2016b; Al-Mulla 2013; 2014). Al-Mulla (2013; 2014), based on interviews with people involved in establishing this institution back in 1975, argues that the political aim behind this first museum – and in particular the choice of the building where this was housed – was part of an effort to “prove to people, especially foreigners that we had always been here and did not exist in the world through them” (Al-Far 1979, cited in Al-Mulla, 2014, 119).

The choice of the building for this museum has being made by Sheikh Khalifa himself (Al-Mulla 2014, 124), who had decided to have it housed in the Old Emiri Palace, the restored palace of Sheikh Abd Allah bin Jassim Al Thani (r. 1913-1949), where Sheikh Khalifa himself had grown up. The reasons for this selection were political –

to create the “national myth” right at the moment that Qatar was starting its course as an independent new state. The building was traditional and modest: preserving it and making it a focus for the presentation of national history offered many different messages to the visitors, especially Qataris. It offered the message of a need to turn to traditional forms in order to find and articulate national identity; the need to preserve what was left from this traditional past and make it a focus for the definition of the new state; to create, or build upon the nostalgia for a past that “was no longer there” (Al-Mulla 2013, 112). But most importantly, it made the point of a new government era for the state, connecting Sheikh Khalifa and his sovereignty to the ongoing presence of the Al Thani family and demonstrating his success compared to Qatar’s former rulers (Al-Mulla 2014, 124). The museum, housing mostly archaeological and ethnographic collections, narrated a story of progress in time, of concern for the preservation of local heritage, while being a tool towards strengthening the political position and power of the ruler (Al-Mulla, 2014, 124; also Exell 2016b).

The creation of a “civic myth” was at the core of the Al Thani rule during the sovereignty of Sheikh Khalifa, from 1973 onwards, but also the new emir, HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, from 1995 onwards: Sheikh Hamad encouraged the development of a heritage industry, where national symbols embodying Qatari pride and identity, among them falconry and camel races, were created (Kamrava 2015, 123). This use of heritage, and in particular the heritage revival phenomenon in the Gulf has been discussed in the academic literature since the 1990s (Khalaf 1999; 2000; 2009). Khalaf (1999: 87) argues that an active and instrumental construction of the past, mostly in the form of cultural nostalgia has been used for the development of a political discourse in the countries of the Gulf by their leadership that aims to “preserve national identity, strengthen its own legitimacy, and solidify its authority structure”.

This seems to be the case not only regarding the revival of traditions, and the creation of the first National Museum of Qatar, but also in the case of the new museums in the region, whether these are already in place or in preparation. Authorized heritage narratives in the Gulf States are articulated in these new museums housed in impressive landmark buildings designed by international star architects to achieve all the three goals mentioned above. The Saadiyat Island Cultural District in Abu Dhabi

received the first visitors to the Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2017, the first of the new museums that, according to Exell (2016a, 63), are going to make this part of the Gulf “a world-class” tourist destination. The building was designed by Jean Nouvel – as is the case in the National Museum of Qatar as well – and it is “inspired by the cupola, a distinctive feature in Arabic architecture” but also “from the palm trees of Abu Dhabi” (Louvre Abu Dhabi 2019). Similarly, the second museum that is planned to open on the Island is the Zayed National Museum designed by Norman Foster and developed in collaboration with the British Museum. This time the design of the building is based on the feathers of a falcon and according to the press release issued in 2010 when the museum was announced, the design aims to create “an iconic symbol for the nation” (see *Zawya* 2010; also Exell 2016a, 65). In the words of Elsheshtawy (2010, 136) “buildings are the means by which nations [in the Gulf] represent notions of power and identity, and mediate the nation in the gaze of the world”. The spectacular buildings serve this dual purpose as well (see also Exell 2018; Wakefield 2015).

However, if revival and looking at past traditions or symbols for the inspiration and roots has been the case in the past, the new leadership of the state of Qatar since 2013, HH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, has gone a step further. Instead of looking at the past in search of materialities or processes that could enhance national identity and structures through a heritage discourse, as in the case of the Abu Dhabi museums, for instance, Qatar’s leadership has taken a different approach: that of re-inventing the “self”. As this paper argues, the desert rose is being used to invite a re-consideration of who belongs to the national body and what brings and keeps this body together, through the creation of new symbols, not the revival of old ones. The significance of the desert rose is that it can be used to overcome divisions and encourage an effort towards a more homogeneous and unified national belonging.

According to the Annual report published by the Ministry of Development, Planning and Statistics, in April 2018, Qatar’s population numbered almost 2.8 million people (Qatar Monthly Statistic Bulletin, April 2018); since data about nationality are not available officially, according to a 2017 privately compiled report (Priya Dsouza 2017), people from 87 nationalities live in Qatar, with the Qataris being just 12.5% of the total population of their country. The rapid development of the country after its

establishment in the 1970s resulted in a large number of expatriate workers (both blue and white collar) needed to provide the necessary workforce for the building (literally and metaphorically) of the country. Furthermore, despite the fact that to the outside world, the Qatari population seems rather homogeneous, social distinctions of geographical origins, of cultural histories and religious sects are still important and meaningful features in Qatar's social organization (Nagy 2006, 128; Gardner 2018). Tribes and tribalism have an active presence in contemporary Qatar; they are constantly re-imagined and re-articulated to “come into cadence with the contemporary state” and to navigate along the complexities of an increasing, cosmopolitan, multicultural, heterogeneous society that, as obvious from the numbers mentioned above, places extra pressure on Qatari population (Alshawi and Gardner 2013, 57; Peterson 2018; Tibi 1990).

The social tribal stratigraphy is rather complicated. The main cultural distinction is between *Badawi/Badu/Bedu* (originally desert nomads) and *Hadar* (settled townfolk). Nevertheless, other groups are also present, making societal structures rather more elaborate and complicated: *Huwala/Huwala/Hawala* Arabs originally from coastal Iran, *Ajam* (Shi'a Persians), *Baharna* (Shi'a from Bahrain and the eastern province of Saudi), Yemenis, Baluch and slave descendants participate to a larger or smaller extent in the national body (see also Exell 2016a, 72, note 8; and Carter, pers. com. 2018). These distinctions have been important throughout the history of the Arab Islamic society. They formulate a salient feature of self-reference for each group and are an important source of social differentiation among Qataris (Nagy, 2006, 129; Longva 2006). People belonging to the same group tend to respect each other more, socialize, marry and live among their peers. They take pride in their tribe and the values that relate to it. It is through their tribe that they create “imaginary communities” of belonging and it is through their tribal identity that their national identity is mediated or completed. “[T]he internal complexity of the tribes and lineages [...] and their multifaceted allegiances and histories” is an important element in the construction of contemporary national identity in Qatar and the Arabian Peninsula (Exell 2016a, 53). An important aspect of this pride resonates with the tribe's geographical spread, but also how far back it goes in time. This notion of “going back in time”, of having roots that connect people with a certain – however

broadly defined – space, and longevity, is how heritage and national identity are connected, how people apprehend their culture and their self (Cooke 2014).

All of this means that the issue of national belonging in the Gulf States is rather complicated (Partrick 2012). In response to tribal allegiances, local leadership and other local elites have emphasized the nation against other levels of identity, with the aim of intensifying state coherence. They have, therefore, put at the core of their role the need to cultivate and support the “myth of cultural homogeneity” as an essential part of national identity building, seeing it as essential to what keeps the nation together in the face of cosmopolitanism, diversity and change. This has often meant – and still does – omission of reference in the public sphere to complex regional contested histories (Exell 2016a, 55) and an increased emphasis on defining and separating “us” from the “others”, even within the borders of the same state. An exception to this lack of complex contested histories can be seen in the Bin Jelmood Museum, part of the Msheireb Museums (Cooper and Exell 2016). In this sense, “us” includes all those belonging to the national body, despite their tribal identities. Within this framework, Sage Mitchell (2016) has argued that the new National Museum is part of the state’s attempt to “combine the separate *hadar* [...] and *badu* [...] narratives into an idealised historical unity” (2016, 60) and thus “...downplay the societal distinctions in favour of an inclusive national identity” (p. 63).

The complexities of Qatar’s labour force, on the other hand, has meant that this national identity has been constructed with exclusions as well. The leaders of the State, but also influential individuals, have been trying to protect this heritage against perceived threats posed by the presence of multinationals by imposing a distinction between nationals and non-nationals – the significant numbers of mostly Asian, northern Arab, American and European populations who play key roles in helping to develop and diversify Qatar’s economy. These distinctions are also supported by an economic aspect to the citizenship-based-on-nationality status in which Qatari citizens enjoy financial benefits which are not available to non-Qataris; consequently, the urgency and importance of exclusions is even greater.

The blockade imposed by a coalition of Arab States under the leadership of Saudi Arabia in June 2017, however, seems to have started to shift this way of drawing the

boundary between who is “us” and who are “them” or outsiders to the nation. The blockade seems to have created a need for a more coherent, but also “unproblematic” co-existence narrative. This is not just a question of bringing the different tribes, families, and social and ethnic groups that form the Qatari national community together, but also of creating a “united front” for those who live and work in the country, those who have stayed in the country despite the political problems, against the “others” – the Arab states that have imposed the blockade. A reconfiguration of who these “others” are, is currently in place, as well as a need to redefine “us” and make the links among “us” stronger. Whereas in the past, the discussion about “us” excluded non-tribal and non-Arab communities, now “us” is being redefined to include, at least partly, those who have supported Qatar and continue to do so – Asian, northern Arab or Europeans and Americans who live and work in Qatar.

This has had a double effect. As in all cases of external threat to the nation, no matter where this comes from and how it is expressed, a rise of nationalism is always the result. This has also been the case in Qatar. The blockade has increased the need for national symbols, making the role of national institutions in bringing these symbols together and becoming themselves such symbols even more important. The extent of the importance of the National Museum of Qatar in this case becomes evident when we consider that the first official appearance of the State’s leader after the blockade was on the site of the new National Museum. It is also indicative that in a post on social media, a year before the opening of the Museum, Qatar Museums’ chairperson, HE Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, had urged both citizens and residents to contribute to the content of the new Qatar National Museum:

The Qatar National Museum will tell the story and history of Qatar in all its aspects and celebrate the rich heritage of the country. (...) I have the honour to invite all citizens *and residents* to participate in building the content of the Qatar National Museum with their documents or collectibles that are part of Qatari’s memory and history to be preserved in the Museum’ (*emphasis added*) (*The Peninsula Online* 2018).

This approach differs greatly to the one Al-Mulla describes as taking place in the mid-1970s, when the acquisition of collections for the then new museum was entrusted to a Qatari-only committee (2013; 2014, 120-122; also Exell 2016a, 29-30; Exell 2016b, 263-4).

Regardless of whether the national narratives presented in the new museum include foreign residents or other sub-national groups or not, the establishment of a set of symbols that will bring everybody (nationals from all tribes, but also residents) together seems to have acquired greater importance and support, if not from all Qataris, at least from the State's leadership. The leadership needs to "re-invent" the national community and to provide for it symbols upon which to anchor their affect for the State, their sense of belonging, their loyalty. The desert rose is, perhaps, the most potent symbol currently being constructed.

III. Creating new symbolisms

Within this framework, the need for a new symbol that does not have existing associations with the *Badu* or the *Hadar*, with this or the other tribal group's materialities, is paramount. The need to find something that could be used to bring together those living in the State, whether they belong to one or the other tribe or to none, becomes apparent. The desert rose performs this function admirably and luckily, it had already been chosen by Jean Nouvel as an inspiration for the new National Museum of the State. Drawing inspiration from natural forms is quite common in architecture, and Jean Nouvel has drawn on the natural world in the case of the Louvre Abu Dhabi he also designed. The Louvre's official press release states that the building created by Nouvel "creates a moving 'rain of light,' reminiscent of the overlapping palm trees in the UAE's oases" (as much quoted in the media, see Ma 2017), thus highlighting an important, as already discussed, parameter of national museums – their relation to the landscape. In the case of the UAE this connection does not seem to be that strong today, since this reference is lost in the Louvre Abu Dhabi's own webpage on its architecture (Louvre Abu Dhabi 2019).

In the case of Qatar, however, this connection has not been lost. On the contrary, it has grown to become a dominant one. The plan for the new National Museum was announced in 2010 (Ouroussof 2010a; 2010b). During the long period of the museum's creation, and as the political situation in the Middle East has been developing, it became apparent that this new symbol of the land should be adopted and systematically used to promote the country's new image, to internal and external

audiences, contributing towards the re-invention and re-definition of the national. An impressive architectural form that was originally selected for spectacular global visibility and branding, is now being adapted to accommodate an additional vision, as the political and social landscape around it shifts.

[IMAGE 1: ABOUT HERE]

The desert rose is not a re-invented tradition, but a cultural icon that contributes to the re-invention of the self. It is not backwards looking, but forward facing; instead of re-inventing an old tradition, the decision to focus on the desert rose and brand it widely – and through it Qatar – is an addition to the old traditions, the creation of a new form of heritage. Thus, the new National Museum becomes a medium for reinforcing this new tradition, it creates a material embodiment of a new national myth, while creating a ritualized common memory that connects instead of dividing.

The desert rose brings together various disparate parts of the national discourse: a fragile geological formation of gypsum or barite crystals including sand grains, desert roses are part of the country's landscape, literally and organically, and as old as every natural formation is. The new museum, in the shape of a desert rose, encircles the old palace, thus making another political claim. If indeed the old palace was used to house the first national museum and expresses the link of the current leaders to the early Al Thani authority, the fact that the new building engulfs the old palace makes this continuation even more prominent. In fact, it materializes in the most explicit manner one of the key-aims of the country's *National Vision 2030*, i.e. "modernization while preserving traditions" (General Secretariat for Development Planning 2008, 7). This is a new modern building that looks like a part of the land, but also modern, incorporates the old museum, the old traditions and values it symbolizes and presents a new self for Qatar. This self is rooted in the past and in the land, but is ready to go beyond the traditional; beyond the oryx and the pearl, the coffee pot, the dhow, the falcon or the incense burner; without rejecting them, but by embracing them.

However, the use of a natural symbol to create this new identity for Qatar returns the question, posed by Exell, of whether or not these developments will be successful,

given they are, at their heart, western ideas. Many nationals view the new museums as a case of “engulfing” local narratives in Western cultural forms and resent the involvement of foreign experts and consultants in the museum scene of the country (see Exell 2016a, 33. Cf. to Exell 2016c). As any number of scholars have pointed out, the idea of a “natural symbol” is one of the mechanisms that gets used to naturalize nationalism (Anderson, 1991, 143; Gellner 2006, xxxiv; Exell 2016a, 40). It is this process of naturalization of the nation that has been at the heart of much of the discussion regarding modern Western states, raising the question of whether or not the new National Museum in Qatar is an effort to bring or impose similar “civic” identities in the Middle East.

For the audience inside the nation, the museum building, as a huge object, will fill the need for a new cultural icon that will be given new meaning, forge links and redefine the nation’s identity as one that has its roots in the desert, in the land, but that it is not traditionally part of any of the main cultural groups, neither the *Bedu* nor the *Hadar* or any other, or even of Qatar alone. Like the Al Thani family itself, who claims a dual presence, both in the desert and in the city, this museum building is very cosmopolitan and outward looking, and aims to become a symbol of a new citizenship, one that manages to comprise all and thus be the vehicle of homogenization and unity for the national self. It will materialize, in the words of Jean Nouvel, “... the beauty that happens when the desert meets the sea...” (Nouvel 2010). Since, “the sea and the desert in the Arab Gulf symbolize our past and present”, as Hamad bin Abdulaziz Al-Kawari (2015, 4) former Minister of Culture claims in his autobiography and Darwish Mostafa Al-Far, director of the old National Museum claims in his booklet (Al-Far n.d., 10).

In other words, the museum building is both a monument and a metaphor: a huge sculpture that pays tribute to and encourages emotive associations of contemporary Qatar with values such as rarity, fragility, beauty, timelessness. The building as a work of art itself contributes to the affirmation of a particular discourse that aims to encourage a different perception and understanding of this small State, both for internal and external audiences. To the outside world it signals that instead of a “nouveau riche” country – as usually perceived – owing its prosperity to oil and gas, this is a timeless, fascinating, unique and elaborate cultural reserve, that respects the

past and based on the power of the land gazes – firmly and knowingly like the oryx in the video we described at the beginning – at the future. This is a very strong political message indeed, along with a bold branding move.

This new symbol allows residents to participate in the “national myth”; despite the fact that they may not share symbols of belonging to the local culture, they co-habit the same land and the invitation by HE Sheika Al Mayassa to contribute to the new modern state implies that the state is actively exploring ways to move on to a more inclusive citizenry. This is the time for a new “civic” and not just “national” myth to be developed. Whether this will be advanced or not remains to be seen and will depend on many national and international political developments, as well as on the people’s response to it; but the inclusion – or, rather, not exclusion – is an interesting positive change on behalf of the country’s elite, if only currently on a symbolic level.

III. Reinforcing new national icons

For this non-excluding argument to be made even more powerful, to be more deeply internalized, both nationally and internationally, the new cultural icon had to be reinforced. This is currently happening through the tourism industry, the museum shops and the tourist agencies. Desert roses have been introduced into Qatari Museum shops since at least 2017: visitors can purchase decorative desert roses in three sizes, or even cashmere scarfs that “pay tribute to this nature’s marvel” (IN-Q 2019). According to the Qatar Museums on-line shop (IN-Q 2019), the desert rose was one of the best-selling products of all Qatar Museum stores even before the opening of the National Museum. This was despite the fact that the roses themselves do not come from Qatar but from the Sahara Desert, imported to the country to be sold in the museum shops, as the note on the side of the packaging boxes available before the opening of the National Museum explicitly indicated. The new boxes in which desert roses are currently (autumn 2019) purchased in the museum shops in Qatar do not mention the Sahara Desert. The text has changed, and it now reads: “It [the desert rose] is mainly found in sandy deserts.”. It seems that the awkwardness of selling and presenting as a “national symbol” an object which was clearly imported was realized and amendments were made to acknowledge the fact that this object is available in many parts of the world, while adopting it as a special symbol for a land that does

indeed mostly consist of “sandy deserts”. As a matter of fact, the presence of desert roses is not limited in Qatar; they can be found in north Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya Morocco, Algeria), other countries of the Middle East (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan), Europe (Spain), the USA (central Oklahoma, Arizona, Texas), but also Australia and Namibia. In Oklahoma, for instance, it is considered the official “state rock” (see Oklahoma Historical Society, n.d.), there is a festival dedicated to this natural formation and there is even a dedicated museum (Timberlake Rose Rock Museum) in Noble, Oklahoma.

The note accompanying the objects for sale inside the shops reads:

The Desert Rose is a 100% natural sand stone made of gypsum, salt and sand grains. The beauty lies in its multiple natural petals that reflect the light and grow in different directions, making each desert rose a unique piece. The architecture of the Qatar National Museum is fully inspired by the marvelous natural beauty of the Desert Rose.

The desert rose that can be purchased in the museum shops therefore becomes a metonymic sign (to follow Beverly Gordon’s discussion on souvenirs, 1986): it stands as, or is considered to be an actual piece of the land – “unique”, “100% natural” – as well as a metaphor, a symbol of the new National Museum, itself “inspired by the marvelous natural beauty” of the authentic object that the visitor can actually acquire.

[IMAGE 2: ABOUT HERE]

It is worth mentioning that museum stores in Qatar Museums, run by IN-Q, do not stock traditional crafts or other products that can be considered as coming from “exotic or different people” (Gordon 1986, 143; also Migrani 2018). As clearly stated on a label in the main shop of Qatar Museums, the Museum of Islamic Art, about one of the companies that design objects offered for sale, it “works closely with designers to help transform the rich and layered heritage of traditional crafts into elegant contemporary gifts, thereby building a virtuous circle between regional craftsmanship and the international market.” The same message appears accompanying another series of objects, the “Mal Lawal” series, a brand named after the homonymous exhibition of private collections that took place in Qatar in 2012 and 2014 (see Exell 2014): “... it stands for the dialogue between the past and the present, the connection

between the old, what has been lovingly collected and preserved, and the new, the unique works of art being created today.” These messages, addressing local and international visitors express the same values: the depth of time along with the contemporary, the past being re-interpreted, re-invented in the present, traditions being reworked in order to belong to a modern world and not to be thought of as simply “traditional”.

At the same time, the search for desert roses has become an important part of efforts to “lure tourists”, according to the local press (Bukhari 2016). Organized trips to the desert for “rose hunting” are further supported by references to the intangible qualities of these delicate objects that can “neutralize bad energy, purify and heal”, according to an online blog (Kennaley 2019). During the last year or so, changes have been taking place on that front as well: despite the fact that there is not an environmental regulation in place actually prohibiting removal or destruction of desert roses and online instructions about where and how to dig for desert roses are still available, everybody in the country from tourist guides and environmental groups to professional archaeologists knows that these desert roses are not to be taken away from their natural environment anymore; they are protected. A few posts on the Internet – not presently available – mentioned people getting in trouble with police for hunting fossils and desert roses. The general environmental law stating that any destruction or alteration of the natural environment and its biodiversity is prohibited seems to be all that is officially available. While tourist trips to the desert hunting for desert roses are still available, their purpose seems to have changed: these are trips to “discover” and admire the objects in their natural environment. More and more references are made online connecting the new National Museum and the desert roses that reinforce the main message: “this is the new national museum, this is a reflection of the land, of our natural space of living, a sign of our relation to the earth”. In a kind of nostalgic spirit, we read in the blog of an expat couple, Bob and Cindi:

In Qatar nothing is as it was. There are no more pearl divers. Salty sea water is desalinated, sand is processed, even the sun is filtered to assure arctic interiors as outside temperatures soar to somewhere between hell and death. (...) It seems that nothing and no one is from Qatar. Except (oil and) one rare and beautiful thing: the Qatari earth still shapes its own desert roses (Kennaley 2019).

The desert rose, not considered as a symbol of Qatar prior to being used by Jean Nouvel as inspiration (Exell 2016a, 66; Chatziefthimiou, pers. comm. 2018), not even that uncommon or unique seems to be a reference point for Qatar, evoking nostalgia even to people “outside” the national body.

Conclusions

In this paper it has been argued that the desert rose has been selected by the State of Qatar through the mediation of an international star architect – this relationship itself a political choice – to become a new cultural icon for the State, the symbol and the image of a new, much needed “civic myth” (Kamrava 2015, 123) that aims to reinforce the “normative depth” and the “symbolic legitimacy” of the ruling family, the brand of this small Gulf state (Kamrava 2015) and to reflect Qatari’s position “both regionally and globally” (Sheikha Al Mayassa 2008 quoted in Al-Mulla 2013). In addition, this new symbol will contribute towards a more unifying and homogenizing narrative in terms of Qatari tribes, and possibly residents as well, a much-needed unification in the current political situation of the blockade imposed to Qatar by other Arab states in June 2017. This carefully constructed and systematically delivered argument on behalf of the State is supported by one particular “object”, the building of the new National Museum, and it is further enhanced by the reproduction of this object for sale in the Qatar Museum shops and by the touristic discourse developed by local tourist agencies.

The new National Museum of Qatar has just opened yet and regardless of its content or narrative, the museum building itself is already part of a tradition, invented anew (Hosbawn and Ranger 1983, 8) to establish and symbolize Qatari social cohesion, to reinforce a sense of membership to the group for locals and residents. The desert rose becomes a very convenient social and political symbol that takes the emphasis away from the “two cultures”, the Bedouin people and the Hadar/town people, or away from the division between Qataris and the “others” living in their country. Desert roses with no particular cultural value in Qatar before, have been identified as the right symbol for the new era. They take the emphasis away from the traditional symbols of local culture to something neutral, reworked, but at the same time something that brings the attention back to the land, the natural environment and the

“deep” relationship of the people to their land. It makes the claim to origins that is very familiar from national museums in other parts of the world as well, it makes the point that Qatari people are related to the sand, are “ancient” and “naturally” local, but also rare, valuable and fragile. It thus provides a material focus that aims to generate sentiments of national belonging and emotional attachment to the nation, becoming a tool of “political pedagogy”.

The new National Museum is a “modern caravanserai that morphs modernity at the intersection of desert and sea”, argues Jean Nouvel (quoted in Cooke 2014, 83); most importantly it is intended to be the place to bridge social divides and give a more homogeneous citizenry to internal and external audiences, following the political vision of the country’s leadership. A desert rose that symbolizes an ancient but constantly blooming nation. Whether this aim will be achieved, or not, remains to be seen.

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Captions

Image 1: The new National Museum of Qatar: inner courtyard. (Photo: the Author, March 2019)

Image 2: Desert roses in one of the Qatar Museums' Shops. (Photo: the Author, 2018).