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The 2006 Asian Games: self-affirmation and soft power

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This article is based on a study of the 2006 Asian Games held in Qatar. It was one of the first major international sporting events ever organised by Qatar that has since become a key location for such occasions. The purpose of this study was to explain the function of mega-events. They are associated with the event organisers to bring out the unique identity of a nation and to gain credibility with the international community through the use of an emotional dynamic. Analysis proposes to illustrate how this event affected Qatar internationally as part of soft power as well as the structuring role it played locally. The Asian Games were not to be perceived as an isolated sports event on the contrary, it was an integral part of a global strategy. Qatar needed to gain political recognition and to demonstrate its ability to organise other more prestigious sporting events. Moreover, this mega-event served a local purpose. It was essential in the process of identity affirmation. As a metaphor of society, sport had to symbolise excellence with regard to the values promoted. It was an opportunity to associate the modern aspect of sports with the traditional values of a political system and the Muslim faith. Previously, where sport was typically ingrained in the values that defined western society, Qatari leaders believed that social values could purify sports to become a method of socialisation. If mega-events were a means to increase Qatar's influence in international relations, they also served as a cultural instrument that would impose a model for society and further increase the country's influence.

Keywords: identity; Asian Games; soft power; values; volunteers

1. Introduction

Qatar has often made the international headlines for its ventures in the world of sports. The purchase of European soccer clubs to win prestigious competitions (such as Paris Saint-Germain), bids of candidacy to organise prestigious international events or coaxing top-level athletes to become citizens to compete and win medals for Qatar in international competitions were only a few of the initiatives that have given this tiny Persian Gulf country an opportunity to make a name for itself on the international scene.

Although Qatar will host both the 2015 World Handball Championship and the 2022 Soccer World Cup and has already bid to host the 2020 Olympic Games, albeit an unsuccessful bid, it is important to remember that these mega-events were preceded by several other important sports events. In 2006, Qatar organised the

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fifteenth edition of the Asian Games where forty-five countries were represented to compete in thirty-nine sports disciplines. According to the definition by Roche (2006), this particular mega-event was a major turning point for the perception of Qatar in the world of sports, making it a key player that in turn increased its political influence. For that matter, candidates for the organisation of other mega-events systematically refer to the 2006 Asian Games. Even if this particular sports event was considered less important (Black, 2008) due the extent of regional influence, the games contributed to the development of strategies that were later established in major world-class events. In fact, it was the first time Qatar hosted a major international multisport event. Moreover, the organisation of a major international sporting event was an opportunity to adopt a consolidated approach linked the need for recognition with a strong Qatari national identity that would necessarily affect the meaning of sports. Furthermore, it brought attention to Qatar to improve its image by way of the emotional charge created during a sporting event.

This was a deliberate choice. Merely three years after the declaration of its independence in 1974 (Fromherz, 2012), Qatar attended the Asian Games in Teheran by sending an official delegation. In 1978, a small number of athletes participated for the first time in the Asian Games.

By the end of the 1970s, Qatari authorities already believed that sports was a useful tool in building national identity (Rolim Silva, 2014) as well as a path towards international recognition, something it could not hope to achieve on a battlefield or in a geopolitical context. Subsequently, they took advantage of the economic prosperity from their vast energy resources in the hopes of gaining esteem and it also served as an instrument of propaganda to assert their identity to create nationalism as revealed by Smith (2004, 2009). Nonetheless, the country did not gain any real exposure in the sports world until the 1990s. The affirmation of its own capitalist model, visibly demonstrated by the construction of modern infrastructures in replacement of its archaic rural system, was justification for the time it took to make sports a national ambition. In fact, social transformation was the key reason for interest in sports (Guttmann, 1978). Involvement in the field of sports not only explained the social transformation but also established a soft power to convince international authorities of the respectability of the regime at a time when it had succeeded in becoming a very strong economic power (the PIB per capita 62,921 dollars in 2006 increased to 94,744 dollars in 2014). The notion of soft power, developed by Nye (1990, 2004), characterised the influence of an actor or a state on another actor or state by way of non-coercive means of a structural, cultural, social or ideological nature. The strategic and symbolic advantages were just as important as the economic gains and would then lead some states to develop innovative methods of action to increase their influence that could not merely be based on objective indicators (economics, military, etc.). Nye thus defined the ability to 'attract and co-opt them to want what you want'. The strength of a state comes from its ability to communicate by way of shared universal values, thus inspiring significance for a large majority extending beyond national borders, to attract the concerned individuals and to draw attention on a positive basis. Sports integrated this assemblage, as indicated by Grix and Lee (2013), due to its emotional appeal, in order to allow Qatar to find its place in world politics.

Although not well known in the west, the scope of the Asian Games was substantial when considering the countries in attendance such as China, Japan, Korea (North and South), India, Pakistan, Thailand and Indonesia, which represent nearly

three billion individuals or half the world's population. This particular mega-event is also a good example for sociology because the countries participating in the Games have several specificities. Bringing together various sports communities from very different ethnic origins did indeed involve considerable cultural cooperation. Care had to be taken in terms of logistics (places for worship, meeting places for athletes, etc.); however, it also gave organisers the chance to initiate different methods of practice and to promote values to create consensus. In fact, the Asian Games were conducive to developing compromise, all the more significant when a country like Qatar with a strong cultural identity was hosting the event (Fromherz, 2012). Therefore, it was important for people involved in this event to show what kind of support was needed from sports to enhance their specificities for credibility with international sports organisations. With this perspective in mind, it is worth mentioning that long before the competitions began, Qatar had broken several records: the number of countries passed through during the torch relay, the number of participating countries, the number of sports disciplines on the programme, the number of live televised hours, the number of participating athletes (approx. 10,000), the number of competitions and an unprecedented budget that equalled the organisation of the summer Olympics.

Subsequently, a study of the 2006 Asian Games held in Doha from 1st December through 15th helped grasp the importance of mega-events in the development strategy of nations as pointed out by Horne and Manzenreiter (2006), the multiplier effects in recognition of their power and influence as well as their role in strengthening cultural identities. The ultimate goal was to gain local approval for the development of leveraging strategies. From this perspective, analysis aimed to identify the international effect of the event on Qatar in the context of a soft power. It was also necessary to specify its structuring role on a local level according to the model developed by Girginov and Sandanski (2008). It was essential that this aspect be highlighted because while a soft power is often perceived from a diplomatic standpoint, it can also apply to internal affairs. In such a context, the sporting event was designed to rally citizens around a common project and offered an opportunity to communicate shared values to unite individuals.

The notion of identity, a theoretical mechanism explicitly focused on in this study, was based on the perspective of research conducted on global sports events (Tomlinson, 2006). It may also suggest a personal or social aspect. Therefore, identity was most often referred to as 'the result of successive socializations'. The concept of identity can be used to comprehend the actions of individuals whose perpetual reactions come from the configuration of a social system (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Identity corresponds to a force that is part of a social resource for recognition regulated by personal desire and difference based on reality to become a better version of that reality (Calhoun, 1994). Therefore, to successfully achieve this identity necessitated emotional and symbolic resources that were used for recognition. This situation created a dynamic of emotional responses prompted by personal investment (Solomon, 2014) directly related to the appeal of the sports event. Likewise, Grix and Houlihan (2014) clearly showed how the organisation of the Soccer World Cup of 2006 transformed the image of Germany and thus established its national identity with foreign audiences. The authors were also able to single out the various strategies depending on the country through a comparative approach with the United Kingdom. The use of international sporting events can be seen as an integrated method of various states to be used to create resources for recognition

based on the principles of soft power. Determining the motivation of those involved in the 15th edition of the Asian Games was necessary in order to see how this led to social recognition of both the event and the hosting country. This study will show that soft power operates as much on an international level as it does on a national level. Sport is not only defined by its ability to promote efficiency, progress and specific principles such as equality and the respect of others, and its accessible and quantifiable facets also characterise it. This aspect brought out an emotional dynamic, which also enabled Qatar to be associated with the values attributed to the allegoric dimension of sports. This in turn, prompted special interest in countries that hoped to acquire international recognition through initiatives that were favourably viewed. Weiss (2001, p. 401) clearly described the importance of sports:

What makes sports stand out is the unity of action and representation, a unity that is seldom seen anywhere else. Performance in sport can be reduced to a quantifiable dimension: only goals, seconds and centimetres count and so outstanding achievements or records can be understood by everybody.

The data collected for this research were constructed in two stages. Three months prior to the event, five semi-structured interviews were conducted at the executive office of Qatar's National Olympic Committee. The people in the survey were chosen because of their level of responsibility in the organisation that made them both actor and spectator of the event. The initial meetings allowed for some informal exchanges with several officials in charge of the organisation as well as access to candidate files and documents of the Asian Games organisation, press releases and internal memoranda. During the months of November and December, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with organisation member volunteers to see how the function of this event was perceived by the people directly involved. They were chosen for their various foreign origins and social distinctions to cover a wide range of individuals. In addition to these two elements, it was essential to interview people who had intervened in various locations and situations. The feedback received from a human resources assistant from the volunteers programme gave us access to the members of the Asian Games Organisation Committee (AGOC).¹

2. Organising the Asian Games

The creation of the Asian Games was initiated by Professor Guru Dutt Sondhi (member of the International Olympic Committee – IOC) with the political support from the prime minister of Independent India: Jawaharlal Nehru. Therefore on 4 March 1951, the Asian Games were held in New Delhi with eleven participating countries in six sports disciplines (athletics, basketball, swimming, cycling, weight lifting and soccer). The creation of the event originated from a desire for emancipation of former colonies under European rule, according to Hübner (2012). Moreover, from inception, the Games integrated a mission of identity affirmation. The aim of the Asian Games was meant to be a time for fraternity among peoples who were connected through colonisation; it was a way to discover the different cultures of the participating countries and a means to create a bond between those nations. At the beginning of the 1980s, the role of the Asian Games changed with the creation of the Olympic Council of Asia (1982). At first, it was a means of existence and exposure for Asian countries, but later, it would set an example and promote innovation in comparison with other international competitions. For instance, it was important

to focus on local sports depending on the organising country in order to avoid having a programme that was limited to sports activities that were promoted by western countries thus, the affirmation of cultural identity. This was a fundamental aspect in the organisation of the 2006 Asian Games that would make Qatar a renowned dynamic driving force:

How would you define Asian sports culture?

... Sports culture has the highest progression rate in today's world. I was in Seoul in March for the general assembly of the association of National Olympic Committees. And what surprised me most was that nowadays; Asia is organizing Games, almost every year. Between the *Asian Games*, the *Beach Games*, the *West Asian Games*, the *South East Asian Games*, the *Asian Indoor Games*. (Employee of the Qatar National Olympic Committee)

Qatar's involvement in organising the Asian games centred on the conviction that it would become a leader in a region ongoing major change and would contribute to the growth of sports. Consequently, the 2006 Asian Games leaned towards autonomy and differentiation in comparison with other international sports events (especially the Olympic Games).

The fifteenth Asian Games were a radical change in terms of Asian sports organisation. After the hosting city was elected on 12 November 2000, the president of the Qatar National Olympic Committee (QNOC) held elections for its general director, Abdulla Khalid Al Qahtani, responsible for the AGOC. The committee was renamed the Doha Asian Games Organisation Committee (DAGOC), created in the form of an executive office (Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992). In fact, the administration was quite centralised, and the level of formalisation and specialisation was very high. A top priority of this particular organisation committee was the high profile of the event to become a natural element of the country's society, culture and politics. The media coverage from *Al Jazeera* was massive making the network an integral part of the organisation and was evidence of its function as a soft power. The network became a part of the diplomatic arsenal seeing that it is private corporation sponsored by the State and therefore was a relay for the promotion of events (Samuel-Azran, 2013). The Asian Games then became a catalyst converging on every form of sport and concentrating on the strategic aspect for a national and international multiplier effect. The Games provided diplomatic support whose strength resided in its apparent neutrality and ability to capture the attention of the public through communication from powerful media. Every effort had to be made to promote the Asian Games giving Qatar international credibility.

What do you think of the DAGOC?

- It's a spoiled child. (Laughs) First of all, the DAGOC is our baby. The Olympic committee created the DAGOC they finance it.

- Can you give a budget estimate?

- No I can't ... what I can say is it's ... as big an organization as the Olympic Games. That's all you see, because this will be the biggest Asian Games ever held. At this scale, it's not small. (QNOC Technical supervisor)

The Asian Games were obviously a major issue for the State of Qatar; they used every means available to make an impact and to gain the trust of the international authorities. Likewise, the country, previously judged for its financial power rather

than its cultural influence, constructed a positive image using the symbolic and emotional motivations stimulated by sports. This event contributed to giving Qatar a positive image, enhanced its prestige as a result of its excellent hosting and organisation and thus increased the country's influence. It was an ongoing process of identity affirmation, an imperative for authorities considering its implicit nature.

The organisation committee of the 15th Asian Games revealed the two goals it aimed to achieve: to promote Qatari culture and to prove its competence in the organisation of mega-events. The DAGOC was given full power in its mission to gain recognition for Qatar internationally in order to maintain its independence. As an Emirate of the Arabian Peninsula, its conflicting image needed improvement. This was the reason why in 2003, Qatar announced the establishment of parliamentary elections for the following year as part of a process to gain the respectability that the Asian Games of 2006 would necessarily deliver.

Sport was chosen by Qatar as part of its political strategy because of its geographic location that was known for its major political instability. If Qatar were to become an essential part of international sports, it would not only become a full member of the international community but also receive a form of protection making the threat of annexation by a bordering country less likely to occur. The Asian Games were more than just a forum dedicated to sports competitions; it came with an army of diplomats. Basically, sport was a means to convey a political message to both its citizens creating national unity and the international community for the values that it represented as well as the public exposure it generated. Sport gave Qatar the vital political leverage it needed, much like an army, both abroad (diplomatic international relations) and at home (to establish a foundation for national unity based on a common goal). It was obviously an essential diplomatic tool that placed a form of modernity at the forefront to scale down the traditionalism linked to its regime (Amara, 2005, 493).

It then became obvious that the organisation of a sports event be part of a widespread strategy that would make this Emirate a vital participant in international relations. The nomination of IOC member, Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani's eldest son to the presidency of the QNOC was proof of the importance of sports for the international policy that Qatar set in motion. Along these lines, in the interviews conducted during the Asian Games, everyone insisted on the considerable means invested. From infrastructures to financing events, the QNOC was ever-present in regulating the development of sports within its global political policy. For this reason, the Asian Games could not be approached as a mere sports event but rather as a comprehensive strategy aimed at making a strong political impact. Qatar wanted to earn a place in the international world of sports to ensure the legitimacy required for the organisation of other prestigious sports events. As declared by Sheikh Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, the president of the fencing federation, general secretary of the QNOC and vice president of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), the Soccer World Cup and the summer Olympic Games were the two deep-rooted priorities in obtaining the Asian Games in 2000:

I have had a chance to speak with International Olympic Committee (IOC) chief Jacques Rogge. Forty IOC members attended the opening ceremony of the Asian Games and they all praised it (...). If we try to win the Olympics and don't succeed, we will keep trying until we win. But we are confident of winning the first time. Many cities have tried and failed but have also bid again.

In order to join the Olympic network, the Asian Games were an ideal opportunity for Qatar to demonstrate its competence where many international actors viewed it as nothing more than a small country. If they were to capitalise on the positive dynamic image, the international sports scene would give Qatar, it was just as important to reinforce Qatari nationalism through sports.

Sports did contribute to establishing its identity with the international community. Nevertheless, it was based on the fundamental elements of the nation's identity, which revolved around tradition and modern feudalism. The examination of sport organisations administration was evidence of a method of traditional power based on a type of legitimacy directly linked to the status of the person in a position of authority. Analysis of the organisation chart for the DAGOC shows that each director is a member of the royal family and his level of power is directly linked to his social status.

Members of the Doha Asian Games Organising Committee

DIRECTORAT

H.H. Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani: IOC Member President of QNOC.

H.E. Mr. Abdulla Bin Hamad Al-Attiyah: Minister of Energy and Industry.

H.E. Mr. Yousef Hussein Kamal: Minister of Finance.

H.E Sheikh Abdulrahman Bin Khalifa Al-Thani: Minister of Public Affairs and Agriculture.

H.E Sheikh Saoud Bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani: General Secretary of QNOC and Vice President of OCA.

Abdulla Khalid Al Qahtani: General Director of DAGOC

The connection between sports authority, political responsibilities and social status in the royal family also highlights the central function of sports. It illustrates primary forms of sociability that are proof of the remains of a version of fabricated unity (Oommen, 2004) based on a dynastic authoritarian regime as shown in the organisation chart of the DAGOC as well as among the major sports federations that are run by members of the royal family.

3. The impact of sports serving the needs of Qatar

For the sports leaders such as Robert Emmiyan, coach for Qatar's national athletics team and director of the women's athletics team,

Sport inspires values such as sharing, drive and the effort to surpass oneself; it also develops discipline, a taste for work, outdoing oneself and the desire to do more. Likewise, it helps in climbing the social ladder. (...) Success through sports is possible with hard work; it's an opportunity for travel, to cross borders between countries and to convey a message of peace. It allows politically opposed countries to confront each other without weapons (...). (Emmiyan interview: 2006)

As such, sport serves a social function because of its designated virtues (Simon, 1991). As an allegoric symbol of life in the community, sport had to set an example of the moral values it hoped to convey by promoting practice that was void of any

illicit behaviour. Even if the campaigns against cheating and violence were obvious factors, behaviour improved through all the values that sport represented in support of the chosen social system. On the international scene, the Asian Games not only served as a soft power, but also operated as a national mission to create unity among its citizens around a joint project. Neither the cost nor the financial benefits were an issue, only the values linked to sports were important for organisers. Policy was fuelled by the symbols that illustrate sports for obvious reasons: the respectability of Qatar and its capability in becoming a powerful country on the international scene. Nevertheless, these values could not jeopardise social balance; on the contrary, it had to stimulate national identity.

In Qatari society, Islam has a dominant role in the sense that legislative and judicial power is based on Koranic law (Sharia). Its origins came from Wahabism, a reference in Saudi Arabia. This political religious concept advocated rigorous practice that was founded on a literal interpretation of the Koran. If sport symbolised progress, a claim made by several Asian countries (Mangan, 2011), it had to integrate religious traditionalism imposed by the rules and standards of Qatari society and hence social practices in general. The importance of these traditions then led to the question of the place of Islam in how sport would be approached. Sport can be a major interest as long as it conforms to the principles laid down by the Muslim religion:

... What do you think about religion in sport?

Our prophet Mohamed *Sallallāhu alaihi wasallam*² said teaches your kids for shooting, riding horse, and swimming. For young people it's very important to protect yourself. Our prophet Mohamed and his friends Abou Beckr and Omar have no big stomach, they always practicing sport. They were very simple people they were Arabic and living in desert. But Koran it's a gift from Allah God knows every things of life and Koran was written many, many years ago, and all what was written it happens now. Because Allah promises to keep this book because Koran is the last book and Mohamed the last prophet and we follow it. So it's very important in our religion, Muslim, to do sport. And the five times you pray it's the best sport in our life. You know how we do? (W. -Volunteer at the Asian Games)

Accordingly, this Qatari national voiced an opinion that was generally expressed during the interviews; religious practice has a positive influence on sports practice without sports weighing negatively on religious faith. Analysis of opinion during the 2006 Asian Games illustrated a very unique view of sports. In fact, if some deviations do exist with respect to professionalism or the excessive extravagance of a sports event, the Qatari authorities believed that they needed to contribute to its regulation because of the values that characterised Qatari society. Sports had to become a means to establish national identity and would do so effectively if traditional principles were used to avoid any form of corruption (moral, etc.). The Asian Games were therefore a means to prove that Qatar is an open society as it was often stigmatised for its restraint. Having an opportunity to demonstrate excellence in social relations while respecting traditions, contributed in structuring respectability for the regime. In order to promote its principles, this event was also a means of spotlighting the country's culture as well as the political, religious, economic and philosophic ideals that characterise it.

Until then, even if the role of sports in western countries referred back to the intrinsic values it was meant to portray (Boxill, 2002), Qatar authorities believed that social values would necessarily lead to the purification of sports. With the goal

of socialisation in mind, (Horne, Jary, & Tomlinson, 2014), this directive set out to serve national interests through sports in order to communicate principles and social standards. Physical exercise was especially viewed as a means of support to defend truth, to spread the holy word as well as being a contributing factor of personal hygiene.

Because the Muslim religion played a major role in Qatar, it had to have an influence on the various types of sports training to serve the ideals that might have been overshadowed by this activity. The signs of such structural development were clearly visible in the sports complexes. In fact, each and every location for the Asian Games was equipped with a prayer room. Methods of practice were no exception to the rule.

Opportunities made available to women speak volumes. Sports practice in Qatar bore the marks of religion whose only limitation was defined by modernism. The woman's place in sports illustrates how Qatari and Saudi Arabian institutions alike truly correspond to hegemonic masculinity, according to analyses by Connell (1987), developed by the dominant group as defined by the Bedouin Muslim tribes in Qatar.

During the Doha Asian Games, forty-four Qatari women (or 12.3%) participated in eleven disciplines, while three hundred and fourteen male athletes distinguished themselves in thirty-five disciplines. The women were largely present in the shooting competitions with twenty participants, in fencing there were eight participants, archery followed with three contestants and lastly swimming, with two participants. Women's presence in archery (3 of 7 athletes) was equal to the ratio in shooting, approximately 43% with only 25% in swimming with two female athletes of the 8 swimmers. In contrast, if it was worthwhile for Qatari women, even more so if the country's actively Islamic policy was to be taken into consideration, this was not the case for the foreign athletes. Despite the major restrictions applied to women's sports, female participation represented only 32% of the total athletes in comparison with the 40.75% of women in the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. This is further proof of the importance given to sports by Qatari rulers who moderated Islamic practice in favour of reaching out to the international community and provided assurances to the other countries. The event was a means to attest to the adaptability of a country in an area where it was often stigmatised. This modern way of thinking would not affect the national social foundation; on the contrary, it would reinforce its impact.

Several sports leaders in Qatar viewed the importance of the women's place in sports as a necessity to institute a cultural model that stems from Islam:

What do you think about the women's place in sports.

I think it's natural. But ... In other words what is the strength of nations? The strength of nations is like sports, it's winning. The winner decides on the game. The one who chooses his strategy over another will come out the winner. It's the same thing with our culture and our religion. (...) For example, I know very well with western families whether they be German, French, Italian or English, when they come here, they can't walk around in T-Shirts or bathing suits. A respectable woman is properly dressed right up to her neck, not with a pair of torn jeans...That is unacceptable! (Manager of the Qatar volleyball Federation and QNOC member)

Sports were not the only means Qatar used to increase its influence in international relations, it also used the cultural angle to promote social representation in

harmony with the Qatari social model. This choice was directed addressed to the Qatari national minority within the general population made up of various workers from many different countries. In the world of sports as with life in the community in general, religious principles had to be the standard external while defining behaviour from within. The mega-events hosted by Qatar were directly linked to the strategy of cultural promotion through sports to legitimise a tradition that has been the subject of much criticism from the international community.

4. Commitment and volunteering

As with any type of sports events, mega-events require the participation of a number of volunteers to direct spectators, guide athletes or to contribute to the organisation to ensure its success. Research at the Asian Games of 2006 provided many opportunities for interviews that helped to better understand what motivated individuals from very different origins to be a part of an event held in Qatar. From the results, it was possible to characterise the social function of soft power among the local population. A volunteer is someone who commits of his own free will, to act selflessly for the benefit of society (Rail, 1988). In the study, volunteering in sports is perceived as a social phenomenon that results from the creation of large groups of people that are motivated and work on a range of activities without financial gain, for a specific period of time and for one specific sports occasion.

Initially, analysis looked at the motivations behind volunteering (Lee, Reisinger, Kim, & Yoon, 2014). Clearly and for the most part, they emerged from encouragement that was rationally managed by the media, social circles or family. Under these conditions, the volunteers were inspired by a strong attachment to the hosting country, especially as seen by the large proportion of individuals who declared being practicing Muslims (almost 70% of the people surveyed). Investigations brought out a strong desire to contribute to Qatar's success hosting the Asian Games. Volunteering was justified as a way of giving thanks that could take various forms. The potlatch notion (Mauss, 1990) to benefit the nation surfaced from analysis and the surveys conducted for this research.

For the people originating from Arab countries, volunteering took on a militant quality, the desire to ensure the international success of the Asian Games would be proof of the competence of an Arab nation to organise mega-events:

And how did you decide to become a volunteer?

To help, to make it successful for this country. All people were waiting for this Asian Games. You know this is an Arabic country and I'm Arabic so for me it's a good opportunity to make it successful to make a good picture for all of the Arabic country.

Because Qatar didn't mean Qatar only, it means all Arabic country. So I hope it will be successful and I see that it will success. (B. from Egypt)

The Arab Muslim ethno cultural characteristic was emphasised as a prime motive for commitment coupled with a genuine desire for international recognition in the sports world and therefore would contribute to the success of the Games. It's the basic need for self-esteem that is reinforced through sports (Weiss, 2001):

And how do you consider this organization in Doha?

This is perfect, I don't think that somebody can do like this. And also for the future, it will cost a lot to do the same. I don't think that somebody is able to do like Sheik

Ahmad did. For the opening ceremony, for example, for the horse who was running across the audience, it will takes a lot of time and a lot of money to do like that. Because Qatar had made a challenge, and he won this challenge! He had succeeded, and as a volunteer I succeed with Qatar. And I live with Qatari and I know their way to thinking, and for them it was a challenge, and they won. And me I feel the same!

But why is so important?

You have to win because you have to show to people that you can do ... Better than you!

We have to show to Asian, to European, to American, whatever! That Arab can do the same as you ... And better!! You understand. (A. from Palestine)

A merger of the goals of organisers along with the motivation of the volunteers was important factors stressing the strong symbolic meaning of this commitment, and the influence authorities had on the people enlisted to help during the Asian Games. Qatar literally aimed to improve its image through events to demonstrate its ability to accommodate huge numbers of spectators and by extension, anyone wishing to spend time there. In short, the country wanted to stand out among the other Middle East States that were known for their social and political instability (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014b).

The second element of analysis dealt with surveys of people from non-Arabic countries. The notion of potlatch took on a whole other meaning because people felt indebted to the hosting country they were paying tribute to for its social and economic system:

How did you decide to become a volunteer?

As soon as I came to know by friends that Asian Games is going to need volunteer, at the same time I filled the form. As I'm staying in Qatar, it's my host country so I have to do something. My duty is for doing something for Qatar, because Qatar is my second country. And if I'm not a volunteer I will not be able to do something, but now I can, so it was a good opportunity to be a volunteer. And I'm proud of it! (Y. from India)

It was not just a matter of guaranteeing the success of the event, it was more a question of ensuring their contribution to a large-scale event. Of course, a strengthened identity is illustrated through pride but first and foremost through the recognition of the importance of the sports volunteer and the essential role they play that is naturally synonymous with success:

And as a volunteer what do you think about your position in the Asian Games?

We are the base of the Asian Games. I think they are about ten thousand volunteers. If the Asian Games are like human body we are like the skeleton of the human body.

And why are you a volunteer?

Because I want to pay back. I want to show my gratitude to Doha because I've been staying here for fourteen or fifteen years. (I. from India)

For some volunteers, Qatar was viewed as a 'country of adoption'; for others, it was seen as their 'second country', an indication of the diversity of Qatar's symbolism among the foreign nationals. This led to the examination of factors of assimilation in the local community through sports as well as events. Physical attributes, native country, religion or language can be regarded as 'the best method for cultural promotion' and are important factors in the assimilation process. Sport also plays a

part in this process when dealing with the aspect of social advancement (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Success is measured by performance, which then sets the stage for events that serve as a group catalyst. Therefore, it was essential that national representatives perform well (Campbell, 2011) during the Asian Games in order for the event to play a part in social unity. The case of Stephen Cherono renamed Saif Saaeed Shaheen is a good example of how far Qatar was willing to go to achieve this goal. He was a long distance runner from Kenya who, in 2003, became a Qatari athlete and in December 2006 made the cover of the latest edition of the Asian Games monthly journal. If financial gain was a strong argument for the athlete, for Qatar, his assimilation was part of a larger picture guided by the organisation of the Asian Games based on the need of the Qatari people to identify with champions of their own nationality in order to create a community (Anderson, 1991):

What is your current job?

Within the Qatar committee I am in charge of the national team care committee concerned with social issues and some support for national federations. For example, we pay bonuses based on performance; from this we developed a pension for the athletes at the end of their career. And we also work on the athletes' salaries in other words, once an athlete reaches a certain level, he is entitled to a monthly salary from the committee. Some earn 10,000 riyals in bonuses per month but that is a very high level. Shaheen, 3000 steeplechase, Nasser Al-Attiyah, fourth in shooting at the Olympic Games for example. (Technical expert, member of the QNOC)

This QNOC member emphasised the significant resources made available for performance. It demonstrated that identity affirmation in the world of sports was an essential method of impact in the domain of international sports. Qatar was then able to participate in the development of world markets for sports for the benefit of national projects (Campbell, 2011). It is obvious that the Qatari authorities were in search of recognition. The DAGOC exploited the coexistence of several individuals from various cultural origins. With this in mind, the sports organisation created a number of potlatch-like awards to continue strengthening the social standing of the volunteers (Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2013). Two types of rationale were identifiable.

In the first instance, the DAGOC handed out official certificates³ providing legitimacy in the professional sector and eventually, a valuable document on the job market. The results from the surveys for the 2006 Asian Games showed the potlatch notion of the certificate, as intended by organisers of the volunteer programme, was simply eclipsed. Appreciation for the sports volunteering experience in terms of management *in situ* found in the surveys stressed a method of acclimatisation at a different level:

And do you think that this experience as a volunteer will help you professionally?

... Very much. I didn't think before to come here how is just going to help me. Because I come to the volunteer's program purely because I love doing community service. And I saw the volunteer's program only as a community service without thinking that it will be beneficent for me. When I joined the volunteer's program it was a self-satisfaction to serve the community. And also Qatar is a very small country and when you are hosting such an event. They need help. And I've been here for too long so it's my town. So it's time to paying back something for the country, which has being so good with me. It's why I joined the program. But after joining the program I realize that they are a lot of benefits for me. One of them is how to deal with people? From different nationalities, different temperaments. And that's not only useful in

professional life, that's very useful in real life ... Whatever happens, you have to stay cool. (S. from India)

Professional reasoning was not the central issue, whereas social recognition seemed to be essential. Once again, the symbol took precedence over reality during the event with a strong message of identity for the national community. This corresponded to a manifestation of soft power, which can be evaluated by the effect it had on individuals. The professional experience, emphasised by the DAGOC, was replaced by a meta-experience (Mauss, 1990) that enhanced integration as a member of the community:

And do you think that this experience will help you professionally?

Sure why not? I mean actually I'm learning in an English school so I know a lot of people from different nationalities and some people don't know about different nationalities and most of that people when they hear something they say: 'Oh may be Swedish, is bad' Without have seeing them. They just judge people but they got to see them and to know them but not everybody is the same. (M. from India)

Belonging to a community comes from the tools that help create the connection. It is interesting to understand how professionals ascribe value to a slogan. It has great impact and is reduced to a basic formula that is simple and accessible, an expression of the principles that are singled out during mega-events. For the organisers who have become the moral decision-makers, the slogan was a means to promote these values. A slogan is a short incisive formula, which has the advantage of being easy to memorise and de facto, is rapidly appropriated by social actors:

What do the Asian Games mean to you?

It's a good opportunity to take advantage of the best I have to offer because I think that I am talented. At least, I hope so. I also have a lot of energy, and in this environment I can give my best. And it's a good feeling (...)

What do you think defines the Asian Games?

I was really impressed by the slogan 'the games of your life'. It really means something to me. Well, for the others too. Those words are true, for Qatar and in the 'Middle East'. It will change the lives of many people and society. So 'the games of your life' is true! (S. Manager of the volunteer center)

In Doha, the volunteer programme slogan was 'be a part of the legacy'. As a result, the DAGOC set up a commemorative monument in the heart of *Sports City*⁴ (to represent a 'memorial to the volunteers') with all the names of the participants engraved on it. DAGOC strategy was based on research and staging a symbolic act (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) that could parallel an act of memory full of emotion (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008) for the community and hence, be a benefit to national identity (Halbwachs, 1980):

How did you decide to become a volunteer?

Well I first heard of it by reading a paper. And after, that one of the main reason I came, I want my name to be card in sports city. Whatever ... So that's the big reason. (J. Volunteer)

The use of this symbolic monument for its recipients implied social recognition for the actions taken by volunteers:

Ok and what are the values of volunteering?

Values of volunteering ... Is to be a part of this Asian Games and after we can do it in another competition also as volunteer, and they know that we made a good job and you will see our name in Sports city. (D. Volunteer)

During the Asian Games of 2006, strengthening a sense of identity was based on the appropriation of symbolic possessions where recognition would lead to allegiance to a social project backed by the authorities.

5. Conclusion

This study defines the role of the mega-event in structuring the identity of a country such as Qatar. Indeed, its commitment to sports is an indication of a desire to be recognised and have influence in international relations. Furthermore, the country needed to develop the necessary tools for national unity. Through analysis of the 2006 Asian Games, three aspects connected with mega-events emerged from the study. First, such events are an opportunity to organise wide-scale competitions to prove the efficiency of the hosting country in the hopes of becoming indispensable as well as credible in the organisation of events like the Football World Cup or the Olympic Games. Similarly, the Asian Games were a means of promotion to increase Qatar's influence within the international community. Qatar was able to portray its claims of modernity connected to tradition. Consequently, it was part of the diplomatic strategy more specifically, to persuade the western world of the respectability of the Qatari regime. Considering the values it promotes, with the support of mega-events, sport was truly a means of promotion affiliated with soft power. Its strength came from its ability to stir emotions from a very large public and to create support for a social context. This was how the Qatari regime was able to spread its message far beyond the world of sports. Its ability to capture public attention was a formidable international political tool (Mattern, 2005).

In addition to the international element, the Asian Games of 2006 had a national component. Directed at the Qatari people, it was a means to strengthen national unity by endorsing specific age-old traditions, which gave religion a regulatory quality in sports practice. Thus, the Asian Games were a contributing factor in reinforcing the sense of community and therefore nationalism flourished, a defining aspect of Qatar's initiatives in the world of sports. Thus, the mega-event was also understood to be a national catalyzer to promote the values that are the foundation of membership in a community. Once again, the emotional dynamics that characterise sports structured representation that went far beyond basic sports matters.

Lastly, the Asian Games helped bring together people from various sociocultural origins. In examining how volunteers perceived this mega-event, analysis was able to bring to light the singular relationship that was both ideological beliefs and passion for sports. In this regard, the mega-event deals with investment on several levels that contributes to its attractiveness to create a subservient relationship, at least symbolically for the hosting country, which lessens any form of contention concerning its political regime.

Sports can be compared to a resource to achieve influence and consequently to gain power that has as much an effect internationally as nationally. Aside from the geopolitical element, soft power plays a part nationally to ensure loyalty to a core of shared values and principles.

Over the past few years, Qatar has become an important appealing hub for sports. It is also noteworthy that its relationship with sports is not restricted to financial gain. The organisation of the 2022 World Cup, the subject of a study by Brannagan and Giulianotti (2014), will be an opportunity to use this threefold system to reinforce the vision of this tiny nation that has become a key player in the sports community making a political impact around the world.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. The data were collected by Hocine Hadji during his research project.
2. May the peace and blessings of God be with him.
3. Tawasoul, Volunteer programme newsletter, 2006, p. 3.
4. *Sports City* is in Doha. It's Qatar's ultimate sports centre that contains the Khalifa Stadium and the *Aspire* sports academy.

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