Much like many other Arab states, Qatar is a place of rapid recent cultural changes. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani is a chairperson of the Qatar Museums Authority and a significant figure in Qatar’s development as a culturally rich and recognized state. This paper aims to analyze Sheikha Al Mayassa’s “Globalizing the Local, Localizing the Global” speech at TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design) in December of 2010. TED is a set of conferences owned by The Sapling Foundation, with their core goal being the establishment of a forum to share “ideas worth spreading”. The analysis of Sheikha Al Mayassa’s speech will be based on several academic sources. These sources will include research by Barbara Johnstone, professor of English and Linguistics at Carnegie Mellon University, as well as R.S. Zaharna of American University.

Sheikha Al Mayassa began her speech with background information about Qatar, explaining why her issue is of significance. “It’s a very young nation led by young people,” Sheikha Al Mayassa stated, explaining that 60 percent of the population is under the age of 30. Much like Western youth, younger Qatari engage in social media, are interested in technology, and desire products like the iPod. This modernization, Sheikha Al Mayassa claims, is occurring alongside cultural traditions instead of replacing them. “Qatar wants to be a modern nation,” she explained, “but at the same time we are reconnecting and reasserting an Arab heritage.”

Sheikha Al Mayassa stresses that it is crucial to understand that Arabs do not want to eliminate their traditions and adopt Western ones. She exemplified this concept
by talking about her abaya dress. “This is not a religious garment, nor is it a religious statement. Instead, it’s a diverse cultural statement that we choose to wear,” Sheikha Al Mayassa explained. She continued her example with a small anecdote involving Dr. Sheikha, the president of Qatar University. When Dr. Sheikha was asked whether the abaya hindered or infringed her freedom in any way, she answered that it was actually the contrary. The abaya is not required to be worn yet women choose to do it in order to express their culture. They feel more free as they can actually wear whatever they want to underneath.

This love of culture extends to art as well, and this concept forms the strongest basis of Sheikha Al Mayassa’s argument. “Why is there an uproar when a private collector tries to sell his collection to a foreign museum?” she asks. Speaking on behalf of the Qatar people, she explains that the “mission is of cultural integration. We don’t want to have what there is in the West. We don’t want their collections. We want to build our own identities, our own fabric, and create an open dialogue so that we share our ideas and share yours with us.”

To further help cultural expansion, Sheikha Al Mayassa talked about the introduction of Qatar woman filmmakers into the region. “Last year, we didn’t have one Qatar woman filmmaker,” Sheikha Al Mayassa stated. “Today, I am proud to say [the Daha Film Institute] ha[s] trained and educated over 66 Qatar woman filmmakers to edit and tell their own stories in their own voices”. Through the use of social media and communication channels such as YouTube, Sheikha Al Mayassa hopes that every individual – especially the previously underrepresented women – will be able to share their individuality.

One of Sheikha Al Mayassa’s concluding statements exceptionally captured the central message that the speaker had been trying to reach throughout the presentation. “Over and over again, people have said, ‘Let’s build bridges.’ And frankly, I want to do more than that. I would like to break the walls of ignorance between East and West,” Sheikha Al Mayassa argued. “Culture’s a very important tool to
As the talk is ended, it becomes evident of just how broad Sheikha Al Mayassa’s topic was. The core foundation that held the presentation together was the recurring repetition and emphasis on Qatari culture versus modernization. This repetition of a central idea or phrase is a common and traditional phenomenon in Arabic rhetoric. While the talk was recorded in 2010, Johnstone examined this same aspect of Arabic persuasion as early as 1983, in the journal *Anthropological Linguistics*. She discussed an old proverb, which translates to “enough repetition will convince even a donkey” (Johnstone 48). Sheikha Al Mayassa essentially restarted her thesis several times, making it clear that maintaining culture through modernization is indeed important to her and those she represents.

It is crucial to note, however, that except for the discussion of art and the abaya, the term “Qatari culture” – the core of the speech - was never truly defined by Sheikha Al Mayassa. According to R.S. Zaharna, professor of public communication in American University, this is due to the preference of vague and ambiguous statements in Arab rhetoric versus specific communication. She argues that this concept “stems from the function of language as a social lubricant aimed at promoting social harmony. Any direct question or answer could expose the other to a public loss of face” (Zaharna 249).

Understanding the idea that certain concepts may be intentionally vague could lead to a question of accuracy, however. For instance, note Sheikha Al Mayassa’s statement about the abaya – “it’s a diverse cultural statement that we choose to wear”. As explained by Sohb, Belk, and Gressel in *Advances in Consumer Research*, the abaya in Qatar is “not necessarily religiously motivated. It is in some cases a social requirement that women are expected to conform to in order to remain loyal to local customs and traditional culture” (Sohb, Belk, Gressel 342). While the lack of religious motivations is common to both statements, the latter is phrased in a manner which suggests that the abaya is a form of
conformity. Sobh, Belk, and Gressel agree that the loyalty to wearing the abaya is equated with “national pride and dignity” (Sobh, Belk, Gressel 342), but there is no mention of the choice that Sheikha Al Mayassa spoke of. In fact, the abaya being a “social requirement” suggests that the pressures to conform are strong enough to “require” the making of the choice to conform.

It is possible that Sheikha Al Mayassa’s assertions about individual freedom – especially freedom of women – may be overstated. Alongside the abaya example is her statement about the demographics of cultural change: “You might be surprised to know that most people in the Gulf who are leading the culture initiative happen to be women”. According to Zaharna, this is another common example of Arabic rhetoric – exaggeration. “In Arabic, both the words ‘exaggeration’ and ‘eloquence’ come from the same root source. Further, some scholars have observed a tendency of overassertion by Arabs and understatements by Americans,” she explains (Zaharna 248).

It is important to note, however, that exaggeration does not necessarily mean inaccuracy. The definition of “leading culture initiatives” is not concrete, so it is impossible to determine whether or not the majority of individuals who fit the definition are male or female. Likewise, Sheikha Al Mayassa’s statement about the abaya and the concept of choice may not exactly coincide with Sobh, Belk, and Gressel, but that does not mean it is inaccurate. “Choice” is again not defined, and Sheikha Al Mayassa’s argument could be understood to mean legal or religious choice, not a cultural one. She uses these soft definitions to form an exaggeration that is beneficial to bringing her point across and emphasizing the important of culture to women, while remaining accurate.

Elements of rhetoric often associated with Western culture can also be found within Sheikha Al Mayassa’s speech, however. While somewhat lacking in the element of logos, the speech is filled with use of pathos and ethos. The lack of logos is understandable, as Sheikha Al Mayassa is arguing for the significance of a nation’s...
individual culture amidst modernization, and this is a claim not easily proven by logical means. Instead, the speaker focuses on establishing herself as an important symbol of Qatari culture – as educated woman involved in art, film, and education. Her involvement establishes her *ethos*, or character, as a reputable and significant representation of the Qatari nation.

Sheikha Al Mayassa’s established character creates *pathos* – an emotional connection – by explicitly stating that she is just like the audience. “We’re trying to be a part of this global village, but at the same time we’re revising ourselves through our cultural institutions and cultural development,” she argues. “I am a representation of that phenomenon. And I think a lot of people in this room are in the same position as myself… we’re continuously trying to straddle different worlds, different cultures, and trying to meet the challenges of different expectations from ourselves and from others.” As she likens herself to the audience, she stresses the challenges that she faces, establishing not only sympathy but also empathy. The significance of culture is easier to see when one thinks of one’s own art instead of Arabic art.

Ultimately, it is evident that Sheikha Al Mayassa uses elements of both traditional Western and Arabic rhetoric to form her arguments. According to Johnstone, “one of the main concerns of the reformers of the Arab *nahda*, or renaissance, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, was the need for a new Arabic rhetoric” (Johnstone 56). As demonstrated in Sheikha Al Mayassa’s speech, a transition to a new rhetoric was not completely successful. Johnstone argues, however, “repetition and balance, synonyms and paradigms, are essentially and authentically Arabic. They are at the heart of the language, the discourse, and the rhetoric in a way which cannot simply be disposed of” (Johnstone 56). Sheikha Al Mayassa’s speech demonstrates Johnstone’s point well, and provides a solid example of how Arabic rhetoric does not necessarily need a drastic change or redesign in order to be successful, especially when effectively combined with elements of foreign rhetoric.
Works Cited


