

Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations: A Study of Nigerian Cultural Institutions



Okeugo, Oluchi Chris¹, Obioha, Jane Onyinyechi² & Florence Onyebuch Orabueze³

Abstract

Cultural diplomacy represents a significant dimension of Nigeria's foreign relations, enabling the nation to project its identity, foster international understanding, and enhance global partnerships. Nigerian cultural institutions, including museums, arts councils, performance troupes, and heritage organisations, play a central role in promoting the nation's arts, literature, music, and festivals beyond its borders. Through international exhibitions, cultural exchanges, diaspora engagement, and collaborative initiatives, Nigeria leverages its rich cultural diversity to shape perceptions, counter stereotypes, and strengthen soft power. Despite these efforts, challenges such as insufficient funding, policy fragmentation, infrastructural limitations, low digital capacity, and limited global visibility constrain the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy. Opportunities for improvement lie in digital innovation, enhanced government support, investment in creative industries, international partnerships, and strengthened cultural education. Harnessing these pathways can enable Nigeria to maximise the strategic value of its culture in foreign policy, increase global cultural influence, and reinforce national identity. This study highlights the multifaceted role of cultural diplomacy and the imperative for cohesive, well-resourced, and innovative approaches to advance Nigeria's presence on the global stage.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power; Nigerian Cultural Institutions; International Relations; Heritage Promotion

* Correspondence: oluchi***@unn.edu.ng (available on request)

^{1,3} Department of English and Literary Studies University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

² School of Midwifery Alex Ekwueme Federal Teaching Hospital, Abakaliki, Ebonyi, Nigeria



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Background

Cultural diplomacy has become an increasingly important component of international relations, serving as a strategic avenue through which states communicate values, build trust, and strengthen long-term partnerships outside the confines of formal political negotiation. In the twenty-first century, where global influence is shaped not only by military or economic power but also by the ability to attract and inspire, cultural resources function as essential tools of soft power (Nye, 2004). Through arts, heritage, language, and shared cultural experiences, nations are able to foster mutual understanding and reshape international perceptions in more constructive ways (Mark, 2010).

Nigeria's cultural landscape offers a powerful foundation for such engagement. The country's remarkable diversity, expressed through more than 250 ethnic groups with distinct artistic traditions, musical forms, oral literature, cosmologies, and performing arts, makes it one of the most culturally dynamic societies in Africa (Falola, 2021). Nigeria's contemporary cultural sectors, most notably Nollywood, Afrobeats, visual arts, and literature, have gained significant international recognition and now contribute meaningfully to the country's global visibility (Krings & Okome, 2013). Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, sustained by diaspora communities in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, further extend the country's cultural reach across borders (Adegbija, 2004).

Cultural institutions are instrumental in translating these cultural assets into diplomatic influence. Organisations such as the National Council for Arts and Culture, the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, and various state and private cultural foundations provide the structures through which Nigeria's cultural identity is preserved and presented internationally. Their activities, ranging from international festivals and bilateral cultural exchange programmes to exhibitions, conferences, and educational collaborations, form key pathways through which Nigeria engages global audiences (Obadare & Willems, 2014).

The strategic relevance of cultural diplomacy lies in its ability to deepen political dialogue, counter negative stereotypes, and strengthen Nigeria's global image. By deploying cultural expression as an instrument of soft power, Nigeria reinforces its leadership on the African continent while cultivating more positive international relationships. As global competition for cultural influence expands, cultural diplomacy offers Nigeria the opportunity to articulate national interests, promote intercultural understanding, and project a coherent and attractive national identity.

This introduction provides the foundation for exploring Nigeria's cultural diplomacy as a significant aspect of foreign policy, grounded in rich cultural heritage and integral to the country's international engagement.

Conceptual and Theoretical Background

The study of cultural diplomacy requires a clear understanding of the concepts that shape its practice and the theories that inform its strategic value in international relations. Cultural diplomacy is widely viewed as the intentional projection of a nation's cultural heritage, creative expressions, values, languages, and intellectual achievements to foreign publics in order to foster mutual understanding and strengthen international cooperation. Arndt (2005) explains that cultural diplomacy represents one of the earliest instruments of foreign engagement because it relies on the natural appeal of culture rather than the coercive or transactional elements associated with political and economic diplomacy. Through the sharing of cultural resources, states develop pathways for long-term relationships, influence perceptions, and promote a more favorable external image.

Soft power is an essential concept for understanding why cultural diplomacy remains influential in global politics. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the capacity of a country to obtain desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion. Cultural appeal is central to this form of power because it shapes the way foreign audiences interpret national identity. Countries with strong cultural visibility and positive cultural narratives often gain greater legitimacy and trust within the international community. Nigerian music, Nollywood film productions, visual arts, festivals, and linguistic heritage have increasingly served as sources of soft power, demonstrating the ways in which cultural expression can contribute to the enhancement of national prestige and foreign policy objectives.

Cultural exchange also plays a significant role in this conceptual framework. It involves the reciprocal movement of ideas, artistic works, intellectual traditions, and educational initiatives across national borders. According to Mark (2008), cultural exchange facilitates interpersonal and intercultural dialogue by creating sustained interaction between communities. These exchanges often extend beyond formal diplomatic channels and reach civil society, educational institutions, artists, academics, and youth networks. As a result, cultural exchange promotes a deeper

understanding of shared values and reduces the likelihood of cultural misinterpretation or hostility. In the Nigerian context, cultural exchange programs in dance, literature, visual arts, language education, and museum exhibitions have helped diversify the country's diplomatic engagements and strengthen cultural visibility abroad.

Public diplomacy provides another important framework because it highlights the broader communication strategies through which states engage foreign publics. Gilboa (2008) argues that modern public diplomacy relies on sustained communication, relationship building, and cultural engagement to enhance a nation's global standing. Cultural diplomacy often functions as the cultural arm of public diplomacy by presenting heritage, traditions, and creative innovation as tools for diplomatic communication. Museums, cultural centers, performing arts councils, and film agencies become key actors in this process by curating narratives that showcase the complexity and richness of national identity.

Identity construction theory further strengthens the theoretical foundation of this study. Wendt (1999) suggests that identity is not predetermined but continuously formed through social interaction and representation. When states present their culture on the global stage, they articulate specific narratives about who they are, what values they embody, and how they wish to be perceived. These narratives influence how other nations construct their understanding of a country's character and intentions. Nigerian cultural institutions are therefore not only custodians of heritage but active participants in the construction of a global Nigerian identity. Through the presentation of cultural symbols, historical narratives, and artistic practices, these institutions contribute to shaping international perceptions of Nigeria as a culturally diverse, intellectually vibrant, and historically significant nation.

Taken together, these conceptual and theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the strategic importance of cultural diplomacy. By integrating cultural diplomacy, soft power theory, cultural exchange, public diplomacy, and identity construction theory, it becomes clear that cultural institutions are essential instruments for advancing foreign policy interests. Their work extends beyond cultural preservation and reaches into the sphere of international relations where culture becomes both a diplomatic language and a strategic asset.

Historical Evolution of Nigerian Cultural Diplomacy

The evolution of Nigerian cultural diplomacy reflects broader historical changes in the country's political, social, and international engagements. Although formal cultural diplomacy became more structured after independence in 1960, its foundations can be traced to the late colonial period when Nigerian artistic works began appearing in international exhibitions and academic collections. During this period, European anthropologists, art historians, and museum curators developed a growing interest in Nigerian cultural expressions, particularly art from regions such as Benin, Ife, Nok, and Igbo Ukwu. According to Oguibe (1999), colonial exhibitions often presented African art through the lens of ethnographic curiosity rather than as autonomous aesthetic achievements, yet they inadvertently introduced Nigerian cultural heritage to global audiences. These early displays laid the groundwork for later diplomatic uses of culture, even though colonial authorities did not frame them as instruments of Nigerian self representation.

Following independence, Nigeria began to articulate its own cultural identity in international forums. Cultural diplomacy became intertwined with the country's foreign policy objectives, especially during the early post independence period when the government sought to assert Nigeria's leadership within Africa and the wider Global South. One of the most significant cultural interventions of this period was the First World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar in 1966, during which Nigerian artists, writers, and performers played a prominent role. As Falola (2003) explains, Nigeria's participation in continental artistic movements reflected a commitment to Pan African solidarity and the promotion of a unified African cultural renaissance. This commitment became even more apparent during the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, widely known as FESTAC 77, which Nigeria hosted in Lagos. FESTAC was one of the largest cultural gatherings in African history, and it positioned Nigeria as a central hub for artistic and intellectual exchange across Africa and the diaspora.

Throughout the military and civilian transitions that characterized Nigeria's political landscape from the 1970s to the 1990s, cultural diplomacy experienced cycles of expansion and decline. Irele (2011) notes that political instability often limited the government's capacity to sustain long term cultural initiatives, yet Nigerian culture remained highly visible internationally through the independent activities of artists, scholars, writers, musicians, and theatre practitioners. The popularity of Nigerian literature, particularly through figures such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, enhanced Nigeria's cultural prestige during periods when official diplomatic activity was constrained by

domestic political challenges. Nigerian music, especially the global influence of Afrobeat pioneered by Fela Kuti, also expanded cultural visibility by presenting Nigeria as a creative and politically conscious society.

Significant restructuring of cultural diplomacy occurred during the return to civilian governance in 1999. The establishment of more formal institutions for cultural promotion, such as the National Council for Arts and Culture and the Nigerian Cultural Centres abroad, signaled renewed governmental interest in using culture as a diplomatic resource. As Adesokan (2011) observes, Nigerian cultural production entered a period of increased globalization during the early twenty first century, aided by the rapid expansion of the film industry known as Nollywood, as well as the growing international recognition of Nigerian music, fashion, and visual arts. This global cultural presence strengthened Nigeria's soft power and contributed to the rebranding of the country's international image, often in contrast to negative perceptions linked to political instability or economic challenges.

Contemporary Nigerian cultural diplomacy increasingly reflects a blended model in which state institutions, private cultural organizations, diasporic communities, and creative industries work together to shape Nigeria's global presence. International festivals, touring exhibitions, bilateral cultural agreements, and artistic collaborations have become essential channels for projecting national identity. The rise of digital platforms has further expanded the reach of Nigerian cultural content, making it possible for cultural diplomacy to operate beyond traditional diplomatic infrastructures. This evolution demonstrates that cultural diplomacy in Nigeria has grown from scattered exhibitions in the colonial era to a multifaceted and globally recognized enterprise that influences how Nigeria is perceived and engaged with around the world.

Nigerian Cultural Institutions and International Engagement

Nigerian cultural institutions play a central role in shaping the country's international cultural relations and in promoting national identity on the global stage. These institutions serve as custodians of artistic heritage, facilitators of cultural exchange, and instruments of soft power within the framework of foreign policy. Their contributions reveal how culture operates as a diplomatic asset in contemporary international affairs. Through exhibitions, performance tours, capacity building programs, festival participation, and collaborations with foreign governments and global cultural organisations, Nigerian cultural institutions project the richness of national heritage while fostering constructive international dialogue.

A key institution in this regard is the National Council for Arts and Culture. It serves as the governmental body responsible for the development, promotion, and internationalisation of Nigerian arts and cultural expressions. Its international engagements include participation in cultural festivals such as the African Union Cultural Weeks, the International Arts and Crafts Expo, and bilateral cultural showcases. As Adejumobi (2015) explains, the council's work contributes to cultural diplomacy by promoting mutual understanding and strengthening Nigeria's visibility through traditional arts, crafts, and performances. These engagements support the broader goal of presenting Nigerian culture as dynamic, diverse, and globally relevant.

The National Troupe of Nigeria also plays a significant role in cultural diplomacy through performances that highlight the country's theatrical, musical, and dance traditions. Its international tours have showcased Nigerian cultural narratives across Africa, Europe, Asia, and North America. According to Jelili (2012), performance art functions as an important communicative medium that conveys cultural values across borders and contributes to positive international engagement. The troupe's participation in festivals such as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the Carthage Theatre Days, and the Pan African Theatre Festival illustrates how Nigerian dramatic and performative arts contribute to cultural understanding while strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations.

Another significant institution is the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization. The centre was established after the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture to preserve the materials and intellectual legacy of the event. It has since evolved into a platform for international cultural research, exhibitions, conferences, and academic exchange. Afigbo (2001) notes that institutions focused on African cultural history play an essential role in connecting the continent to its diaspora and in fostering global knowledge of African heritage. Through collaborations with universities, museums, and cultural agencies across Africa, Europe, and the Americas, the centre advances research on African civilisation while contributing to Nigeria's intellectual presence within the global community.

The National Commission for Museums and Monuments contributes to cultural diplomacy through the preservation of heritage materials and participation in international museum networks. Through its collaboration with global

institutions such as UNESCO, the British Museum, and the International Council of Museums, the commission reinforces Nigeria's involvement in international heritage governance. Its participation in global repatriation dialogues is particularly significant. As Enwezor (2008) observes, discussions on restitution and heritage ownership highlight the political and cultural significance of museum engagement in international relations. Through joint exhibitions, shared research programs, and training partnerships with foreign museums, the commission promotes Nigerian heritage while strengthening cultural cooperation and global awareness of Nigeria's historical contributions.

Taken together, these institutions illustrate the multifaceted character of Nigerian cultural diplomacy. Their activities extend beyond exhibitions and performances to include scholarship, training, policy development, and multilateral collaboration. These engagements support Nigeria's foreign policy by promoting cultural diversity, improving international visibility, and contributing to the nation's soft power. Their work affirms the role of culture as a strategic resource in global affairs and positions Nigerian cultural heritage as a unifying influence in international dialogue.

Cultural Diplomacy Through Arts, Film, and Literature

Nigeria's creative industries have become powerful instruments of cultural diplomacy, contributing significantly to the country's international image and influence. Through film, literature, music, and contemporary visual arts, the country projects narratives that articulate its cultural identity, social values, and historical experiences. These artistic expressions circulate widely across global platforms, enabling Nigeria to participate meaningfully in transnational cultural exchanges and to strengthen its soft power in an increasingly interconnected world. The influence of these cultural forms demonstrates how creative sectors operate as strategic channels through which nations cultivate understanding, foster cultural appreciation, and engage with diverse international audiences.

The Nigerian film industry, widely known as Nollywood, stands at the forefront of the nation's cultural diplomacy. With a high volume of annual film production and a global distribution network spanning Africa, Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, Nollywood has become a central vehicle for communicating Nigerian social encounters, family structures, moral questions, and urban realities. As Haynes (2011) observes, Nollywood's narratives provide international audiences with direct encounters with Nigerian society, thereby challenging stereotypes and broadening perspectives. The industry's popularity across the African continent has contributed to what Nwogu (2019) describes as a continental cultural sphere in which Nigerian film and media strongly shape regional identity. Through film festivals, diaspora film screenings, and collaborations with international streaming platforms, Nollywood enhances Nigeria's visibility and strengthens its reputation as a creative powerhouse.

Contemporary Nigerian visual arts also play an important role in cultural diplomacy. Artists such as Ben Enwonwu, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and more recently, Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Yinka Shonibare have gained recognition in major global art circuits. Their works address themes related to colonial history, identity, migration, and cultural memory. According to Oguibe (2004), the international prominence of Nigerian artists demonstrates the capacity of visual art to articulate complex cultural narratives and to stimulate cross cultural dialogue. Exhibitions in global institutions such as the Tate Modern, the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, and the Venice Biennale have broadened awareness of Nigerian artistic innovation. These engagements contribute to Nigeria's cultural diplomacy by reinforcing its intellectual and creative contributions to global art history.

Traditional and contemporary music also serve as influential cultural diplomatic tools. Nigerian musical traditions, including Yoruba talking drum ensembles, Igbo choral styles, and Hausa praise singing, remain important cultural signifiers that feature in cultural festivals and heritage events around the world. At the same time, contemporary Nigerian popular music, including Afrobeats, has achieved wide international appeal. Scholars such as Collins (2015) note that the global spread of African popular music has reshaped perceptions of African cultural creativity and strengthened African influence in global youth cultures. Nigerian artists such as Fela Kuti, Burna Boy, and Tiwa Savage have contributed significantly to this development by blending traditional elements with global musical idioms. Their international tours, collaborations, and award recognitions promote Nigerian culture as dynamic, adaptable, and globally relevant.

Nigerian literature has also played a foundational role in positioning the country within global intellectual discourses. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Buchi Emecheta laid the groundwork for international engagement through works that explore colonial history, cultural identity, and political experience. More recent authors such as Chimamanda Adichie, Helon Habila, and Chigozie Obioma continue this tradition by addressing contemporary questions related to migration, gender, conflict, and national identity. According to Gikandi (2003), African literature

functions as an important medium through which nations narrate their histories and assert their cultural presence in global debates. Nigerian literature contributes to cultural diplomacy by fostering intellectual exchange, facilitating academic collaboration, and enabling global readers to engage critically with Nigerian social and cultural realities.

Together, Nigerian film, literature, music, and visual art form a multidimensional cultural portfolio that enhances the country's soft power. These creative expressions foster cross cultural encounters, promote mutual understanding, and strengthen Nigeria's reputation as a centre of artistic innovation. Through international exhibitions, film festivals, literary events, and collaborative artistic projects, Nigeria leverages its cultural assets to build productive international relationships and to project an image of creativity, resilience, and cultural richness.

Cultural Festivals as Diplomatic Platforms

Cultural festivals constitute a central mechanism through which Nigeria engages in cultural diplomacy and projects its national identity internationally. These festivals operate as strategic instruments for fostering intercultural understanding, attracting international audiences, and promoting cultural tourism. Beyond entertainment, they serve as forums for political, economic, and social engagement, enabling Nigeria to establish and strengthen bilateral and multilateral relationships through shared cultural experiences. The intersection of culture, diplomacy, and tourism in festival settings demonstrates the multidimensional role of these events in national and global engagement.

The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, commonly referred to as FESTAC 77, remains one of the most emblematic examples of Nigeria's use of cultural festivals in diplomacy. Held in Lagos in 1977, FESTAC brought together over seventeen thousand artists, intellectuals, and performers from across Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Americas. According to Akinwale (2003), the festival functioned not only as a celebration of African heritage but also as a strategic diplomatic tool, fostering Pan African solidarity, enhancing Nigeria's continental leadership, and projecting an image of cultural sophistication. The festival's legacy endures in contemporary cultural engagements, providing a model for using large-scale festivals as platforms for dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding.

In addition to FESTAC, national carnivals such as the Abuja Carnival and the Lagos Carnival operate as recurring cultural diplomacy initiatives. These events attract international tourists, performers, and cultural practitioners, highlighting Nigeria's music, dance, fashion, and visual arts. As Okechukwu (2014) notes, participation in such festivals facilitates intercultural exchange by enabling foreign visitors to experience Nigerian culture firsthand, while simultaneously promoting Nigerian creativity and entrepreneurship. These carnivals also provide opportunities for government agencies and private organizations to collaborate with foreign cultural institutions, reinforcing diplomatic networks and encouraging long-term partnerships.

Diaspora events play an equally significant role in extending Nigeria's cultural diplomacy beyond national borders. Nigerian diaspora communities organize festivals, exhibitions, and concerts in Europe, North America, and Asia, promoting Nigerian heritage, language, and artistic traditions. According to Adepoju (2010), these events serve as unofficial diplomatic platforms, enhancing Nigeria's global visibility while strengthening cultural ties with expatriate communities. Diaspora-led festivals often complement state-led cultural initiatives, providing a more grassroots approach to diplomacy that emphasizes people-to-people connections.

Cultural festivals also stimulate cultural tourism, which carries both economic and diplomatic significance. By attracting foreign visitors, these festivals generate revenue, showcase national landmarks, and create opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. According to Richards (2007), cultural tourism enhances the perception of host nations as vibrant and attractive destinations, while festivals themselves serve as channels through which national identity, history, and creativity are communicated to international audiences. In the Nigerian context, the integration of local heritage, contemporary performance, and international collaboration in festival settings underscores the strategic value of these events in advancing cultural diplomacy objectives.

Nigeria's Cultural Presence in Multilateral and Bilateral Relations

Nigeria's engagement in global cultural diplomacy is mediated through its active participation in international organizations, adherence to cultural heritage conventions, and negotiation of bilateral cultural agreements. These engagements allow Nigeria to project its rich cultural heritage, strengthen its international visibility, and establish cooperative frameworks that facilitate cross-cultural exchange. Through these platforms, Nigeria protects its cultural assets, promotes its artistic and intellectual diversity, and participates in global decision-making on cultural policies (UNESCO, n.d.; Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy [FMACCE], n.d.; Adepaju, 2010).

The formal mechanism for Nigeria's cultural diplomacy is primarily handled by the International Cultural Relations Department within the Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture, Tourism and Creative Economy. This Department is responsible for managing Nigeria's cultural interactions with other countries and with multilateral organizations such as UNESCO, the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The Department coordinates Nigeria's participation in international cultural forums, oversees cultural cooperation agreements, and facilitates the deployment of cultural missions abroad (FMACCE, n.d.). These mechanisms allow Nigeria to engage systematically in international cultural networks, thereby integrating its domestic cultural policy with broader global frameworks.

Nigeria's membership in UNESCO since 1960 exemplifies its commitment to multilateral cultural diplomacy. Through UNESCO, Nigeria participates in conventions focused on the protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and contributes to global discussions on safeguarding traditional knowledge, promoting creative industries, and implementing international cultural policy standards (UNESCO, n.d.). The country has ratified key conventions, including the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, demonstrating its commitment to international norms for heritage protection (UNESCO, n.d.).

The Institute for African Culture and International Understanding (IACIU), located in Nigeria, further reinforces the country's multilateral cultural presence. Established as a Category 2 UNESCO institute, IACIU engages in research, capacity-building, and cross-cultural programs aimed at promoting African heritage and facilitating intercultural dialogue. The institute has organized seminars, workshops, and collaborative research projects with institutions across Africa, Europe, and North America, providing platforms for scholarly exchange and the global promotion of Nigerian culture (IACIU, n.d.; UNESCO, n.d.). This institutional framework ensures that Nigeria is not merely a participant in global cultural discussions but also a proactive contributor shaping cultural narratives.

Bilateral cultural agreements also form a critical component of Nigeria's cultural diplomacy. The International Cultural Relations Department manages memoranda of understanding and cooperation agreements with numerous countries, often focusing on areas such as arts, music, literature, heritage management, and educational exchanges (FMACCE, n.d.). These agreements facilitate opportunities for Nigerian artists, academics, and cultural practitioners to participate in international residencies, exhibitions, and collaborative projects. For instance, Nigeria has signed cultural cooperation agreements with countries such as France, Germany, China, and the United States, enabling exchanges in film, music, visual arts, and heritage conservation (Adepaju, 2010). Such agreements not only enhance Nigeria's cultural reach but also provide diplomatic benefits by fostering mutual understanding and reinforcing political goodwill.

In addition to formal agreements, Nigeria actively participates in regional cultural initiatives under ECOWAS and the African Union. Through ECOWAS, Nigeria engages in collaborative efforts to preserve West African heritage, promote intercultural learning, and support regional festivals that have transnational significance. These programs allow Nigeria to advance regional integration while simultaneously showcasing its cultural leadership within West Africa (Adepaju, 2010). At the continental level, Nigeria contributes to the African Union's efforts in standardizing cultural policies, safeguarding heritage sites, and promoting African creative industries globally. These engagements illustrate the multidimensional role that Nigerian cultural institutions play in advancing the country's soft power on both regional and global stages.

The initiatives in 2014 demonstrated Nigeria's emerging strategic orientation toward cultural diplomacy. During this period, the federal government, working with UNESCO and key domestic cultural institutions, intensified efforts to review and update the national cultural policy to reflect global standards and address contemporary cultural challenges (FMAC, 2014). These developments aimed to expand cultural exchange opportunities, strengthen the

international visibility of Nigerian creative industries, and position culture as a meaningful component of foreign policy. Through these initiatives, Nigeria sought to enhance its role in international cultural dialogue, deepen bilateral and multilateral cultural cooperation, and leverage its diverse cultural heritage to improve global engagement and influence.

Through multilateral participation, bilateral agreements, and dedicated policy initiatives, Nigeria maintains a structured and strategic presence in international cultural diplomacy. These mechanisms collectively allow the country to project its cultural wealth, engage in cross-cultural dialogue, support the development of its creative industries, and strengthen its diplomatic relations. By harnessing culture as a tool of soft power, Nigeria demonstrates the capacity of cultural institutions to complement traditional diplomacy, enhance national branding, and contribute meaningfully to international cooperation (UNESCO, n.d.; FMACCE, n.d.; Adepaju, 2010).

The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in National Image Building

Cultural diplomacy plays a vital role in shaping how Nigeria is perceived internationally. In a global environment where national reputation can influence foreign policy outcomes, economic opportunities, and international cooperation, the promotion of culture becomes an instrument through which a nation can reframe its image and project values, identity, and aspirations to the world. By presenting its artistic, intellectual, and cultural heritage, Nigeria leverages cultural diplomacy to counter negative stereotypes — such as those associated with political instability, economic hardship, or insecurity — and to cultivate a more nuanced, positive global image.

One of the core functions of cultural diplomacy in image building lies in soft power projection. As studies show, cultural diplomacy forms a central pillar of soft power and nation branding because it allows a state to influence foreign publics through attraction rather than coercion (Abubakar & Garba, 2023). Through cultural export — including music, film, literature, festivals, and other forms of creative expression — Nigeria communicates shared values, social narratives, and historical consciousness, thereby building goodwill and redefining external perceptions (Liadi, 2024).

Nollywood, Nigerian music, literature, and other cultural expressions exemplify how culture becomes a diplomatic language. The global spread of Nigerian films, music and literature introduces foreign audiences to Nigerian values, social realities, creativity, and resilience. This exposure can foster empathy, admiration, and respect, helping to dismantle previously held negative or monolithic views about Nigeria. Cultural diplomacy mediated by creative industries therefore strengthens national branding and builds soft power in international affairs (Liadi, 2024; ModernGhana, 2018).

Cultural diplomacy also contributes to identity reconstruction at the global level. By actively curating and exporting cultural heritage, Nigeria asserts an identity rooted in pluralism, creativity, and historical depth. This assertion helps challenge reductive or external narratives about the country, offering instead a self-defined representation of Nigerian culture. The projection of such identity serves diplomatic ends, as it creates a sense of familiarity and shared values with foreign publics, which can support cooperation, trade, and mutual understanding (Abubakar & Garba, 2023).

Moreover, cultural diplomacy can function as a bridge between domestic cultural pride and international recognition. When culture is presented abroad through organized diplomacy, festivals, arts outreach, or media, it validates internal cultural practices and gives them global visibility. This process reinforces national pride, strengthens cultural confidence at home, and affirms to citizens that their heritage has global resonance. In doing this, culture becomes a source of internal cohesion as well as external representation (Salifu, Ade-Ibijola & Opeyoluwa, 2023).

In addition, cultural diplomacy supports long-term diplomatic relationships by establishing soft infrastructure for engagement. When Nigeria engages foreign publics through culture, it builds non-transactional relationships grounded in shared human experiences — art, music, stories, heritage. These relationships often outlast political cycles and budgetary fluctuations. They provide a stable platform for dialogue, collaboration, and mutual respect across nations. For emerging economies like Nigeria, cultural diplomacy can therefore complement traditional diplomacy and contribute to sustainable international partnerships (Mbira, 2024).

Challenges Facing Nigerian Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy in Nigeria faces a range of structural, institutional, economic, and social obstacles that undermine the capacity of cultural institutions and initiatives to project Nigerian culture effectively on the global stage.

A primary challenge is inadequate and inconsistent funding. Many cultural institutions depend heavily on government allocations, which frequently prove insufficient to support preservation, exhibition, outreach, or international engagement. As noted by the national heritage authority, poor funding and inadequate infrastructure remain major constraints for museum development across the country (Leadership, 2023). Frequent budget shortfalls hamper maintenance of facilities, conservation of artifacts, and the ability to mount well-prepared exhibitions or support cultural exchange programs (The Guardian Nigeria, 2018; Professions.ng, 2022). This lack of financial support affects not only institutions but also individual artists, curators, and cultural practitioners who often struggle to secure grants or sponsorships (Disciplines.ng, 2023; Professions.ng, 2022).

Weak or inconsistent policy implementation and coordination among relevant agencies constitute another major impediment. Effective cultural diplomacy requires coherent national cultural policy, clear institutional responsibilities, and collaboration among various stakeholders including cultural ministries, heritage agencies, diplomatic missions, arts councils, and civil society. However, analyses of Nigeria's cultural sector highlight fragmentation in policy frameworks, conflicting priorities, and institutional overlap that hinder sustained cultural diplomacy efforts (Okafor, 2023). This institutional disjointedness leads to duplication of efforts, inefficiencies, and lost opportunities for coordinated international outreach.

Infrastructure deficits pose additional obstacles. Many cultural centres, museums, galleries, and performance venues suffer from poor or outdated facilities. Some museums reportedly lack basic amenities such as reliable electricity, security systems, climate-controlled storage for artifacts, proper galleries for display, and visitor amenities including access roads or water supply (Leadership, 2023; The Guardian Nigeria, 2021). These deficiencies undermine the capacity of institutions to preserve cultural heritage and to host exhibitions or international events that meet global standards. Inadequate infrastructure can discourage both local and international visitors, reducing the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy as a tool for soft power projection.

Preservation of cultural resources faces further challenges from environmental pressures, neglect, and limited conservation capacity. Without adequate conservation facilities, storage conditions, and trained curators or conservators, many artifacts risk deterioration, loss, or damage (Professions.ng, 2022). This weak preservation capacity reduces the cultural capital that cultural diplomacy depends on, because without well-maintained and properly documented heritage assets, the ability to showcase authentic cultural heritage internationally is compromised.

Low global visibility and limited digital capacity further restrict Nigeria's cultural diplomacy reach. In an age where cultural exchange and diplomacy increasingly rely on digital platforms, online exhibitions, virtual collaborations, and digital marketing, many Nigerian cultural institutions remain under-resourced to take advantage of these opportunities. The limited adoption of digital technologies, insufficient online presence, and weak international marketing reduce the accessibility of Nigerian cultural outputs to global audiences. This disadvantage constrains Nigeria's ability to compete in the global cultural market and to influence international perceptions through culture.

Political instability, governance challenges and broader socio-economic problems also weaken the foundation for sustained cultural diplomacy. Economic hardship, shifting political priorities, corruption, and bureaucratic inertia divert attention and resources away from cultural initiatives (The Guardian Nigeria, 2018; Disciplines.ng, 2023). When culture is not seen as a strategic sector, long-term planning becomes difficult, and cultural diplomacy initiatives often suffer from neglect, interruption, or abandonment.

Finally, low public awareness and societal attitudes sometimes impede the development and support of cultural diplomacy. In some contexts, cultural institutions such as museums are undervalued or stigmatized. Reports indicate that many citizens view museums as irrelevant, haunted by outdated notions such as "places where idols are kept," which discourages public engagement, visitation, and community support (Leadership, 2023). Such social apathy reduces domestic support for cultural diplomacy, undermines audience building, and erodes the sense of ownership among citizens over their cultural heritage.

In the face of these challenges, attempts at cultural diplomacy remain fragile and uneven. Without comprehensive measures — including increased, sustained funding; policy reforms for coordination and institutional strengthening; investment in infrastructure and preservation; capacity building for digital engagement; and public education — Nigeria's cultural diplomacy will struggle to realize its full potential as an instrument of soft power, national branding, and international cooperation.

Opportunities for Strengthening Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy in Nigeria stands at a promising threshold because of multiple emerging pathways that can enhance its reach, effectiveness, and global impact. By leveraging digital technologies, strengthening global cultural collaborations, engaging the diaspora, improving cultural education, securing government commitment, and investing in creative industries, Nigeria can significantly expand the scope and influence of its cultural diplomacy.

Digital diplomacy offers perhaps the most immediate opportunity for expansion. Digital platforms and online media have become powerful tools for cultural exchange, enabling countries to reach global audiences regardless of geographic distance. The use of virtual exhibitions, online performances, digital storytelling, and social media can democratize access to Nigerian cultural heritage and creative output (UNESCO, 2022). For example, the recent effort by UNESCO in partnership with the national ministry to strengthen creative industries in Nigeria's digital environment aims to help the country align its cultural sectors with global digital norms and to support youth employment and creative entrepreneurship (UNESCO, 2024). Through such initiatives, younger generations and diaspora communities can engage with Nigerian culture via online platforms, thereby broadening the base of cultural diplomacy beyond formal diplomatic channels.

Global cultural collaborations constitute another promising path. Partnerships between Nigerian cultural institutions — including museums, arts councils, creative industry bodies — and foreign cultural organisations, international festivals, academic networks, or global creative platforms can facilitate exchange of ideas, co-productions, and joint exhibitions. As argued by scholars of cultural diplomacy, such collaborations promote knowledge sharing, increase professional mobility for artists and cultural practitioners, and reinforce inter-cultural understanding (Tamunomiegbam, Amugo & Bariledum, 2023). In this manner, Nigerian culture becomes part of global cultural flows rather than isolated national production, facilitating both visibility and influence on international cultural discourse.

Diaspora engagement is another strategic opportunity for cultural diplomacy. Nigeria has a large and active diaspora around the world, many of whom remain connected to their cultural roots. By creating platforms for diaspora-led festivals, cultural content creation, language and heritage education, and transnational cultural networks, Nigeria can leverage diaspora communities as informal cultural ambassadors. These communities can help export Nigerian culture abroad, foster cross-cultural dialogue, and build bridges between Nigeria and their countries of residence. Diaspora engagement thus extends Nigeria's cultural diplomacy beyond official institutions and formal cultural exchanges, embedding cultural influence in everyday transnational social networks.

Enhancement of cultural education at home and abroad can also strengthen cultural diplomacy. By integrating cultural studies, heritage education, creative arts, and cultural history into formal curricula and public education, Nigeria can cultivate a generation that is more culturally literate and globally oriented. Additionally, supporting exchange programs, residencies, scholarships for foreign and domestic students, and international academic collaborations can facilitate cross-cultural understanding and produce graduates who are equipped to engage in intercultural diplomacy and global creative industries.

Increased government commitment and strategic investment in the creative industries are essential for sustainable growth of cultural diplomacy. Policy frameworks that support cultural entrepreneurship, provide grants or incentives for artists and cultural institutions, and establish partnerships with private sector stakeholders can create a more robust infrastructure for cultural production and diplomacy. Such support can help transform cultural diplomacy from ad-hoc festival or exchange events into a continuous, institutionalized, and professionally managed sector (Disciplines, 2023).

Finally, investment in creative industries — including film, music, fashion, crafts, design, digital arts — offers a long-term opportunity to brand Nigeria as a global creative hub. As global demand for African cultural products and creative content increases, Nigeria has the potential to position itself as a leading source of African creativity and cultural export. By combining heritage preservation with contemporary creativity and global market access, Nigerian

cultural diplomacy can help build economic value, create jobs, and enhance national prestige while sharing culture globally (P.M. Express, 2023).

Conclusion

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a vital instrument in Nigeria's foreign relations, offering a pathway to project national identity, foster mutual understanding, and strengthen international partnerships. Throughout the examination of Nigeria's cultural institutions, arts, festivals, diaspora engagement, and global collaborations, it is evident that culture serves as both a bridge and a platform for dialogue with the wider world. By showcasing artistic achievements, heritage, literature, music, and performance, Nigeria communicates its values, diversity, and creativity to global audiences, simultaneously challenging stereotypes and promoting a positive image of the nation.

While challenges such as inadequate funding, policy fragmentation, infrastructural deficits, limited global visibility, and low digital engagement continue to constrain the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy, opportunities exist to overcome these limitations. Strategic investments in creative industries, enhancement of cultural education, diaspora involvement, digital diplomacy, and coordinated institutional frameworks can strengthen Nigeria's capacity to leverage culture as a tool of soft power.

Ultimately, the sustainability and impact of Nigeria's cultural diplomacy depend on the nation's commitment to building resilient cultural institutions and embedding culture into the broader framework of foreign policy. By doing so, Nigeria can ensure that its rich heritage and contemporary cultural expressions continue to serve as instruments of international influence, national pride, and global dialogue for generations to come.

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