

Culture as a Strategic Resource for Moroccan Soft Power in Africa



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ABSTRACT : Morocco is capitalizing on its strategic assets to advance South-South cooperation, promote sustainable prosperity, and create an enabling environment for the implementation of cultural diplomacy in the Maghreb and the broader African region. This is accomplished through a synthesis of cultural, religious, and economic diplomacy. The article illustrates how Morocco's cultural capital, derived from its rich history and traditions, has become a tool for enhancing the country's global image.

KEYWORDS: Morocco, Africa, Diplomacy, Cultural Influence, Attraction, Communication

The Kingdom of Morocco has long been a prominent player on the continent. Its strategic location, rich history, and diverse cultural heritage have made it a hub for cultural influence, attraction, and communication. Morocco is employing cultural policy and public diplomacy measures with the objective of enhancing its regional and international soft power position (Wüst, A. & Nicolai, K. 2022). This is achieved by the commercialization of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as by the investment of significant resources in cultural infrastructure.

The article falls within the framework of research in the field of cultural studies and presents an analysis of Morocco's methods for evaluating the impact of cultural diplomacy. The aim of this study is to identify the various aspects of Moroccan cultural diplomacy and to assess its impact on diplomatic practices. Morocco is expanding its diplomatic presence in Africa, and the cultural factor plays a crucial role in strengthening international relations as a means of dialogue and understanding between nations.

Culture is regarded as a strategic resource, held in equal esteem with other public resources, and therefore requires the same prudent management of power. As Joseph Nye has observed, "Power in international politics is like the weather. Everyone talks about it, but few understand it. (...) Power, like love, is easier to experience than to define or measure. Power is the ability to achieve one's purposes or goals. The dictionary tells us that it is the ability to do things and to control others. Robert Dahl, a leading political scientist, defines power as the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not do (Nye 1990, p. 177).

Every nation aims to enhance its international standing for political, economic, social, cultural, security, and other reasons. Image enhancement involves respecting international and external audiences and communicating as many positive messages as possible (Abouzzohour et al. 2019). A favorable international reputation facilitates diplomacy and strategic partnerships.

In academia, Joseph Nye's definition of soft power is widely accepted. In his 1990 essay, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Nye defines soft power as the ability to persuade others through non-coercive means, such as cultural values and diplomatic solutions (Nye 1990). Soft power resources are the assets that produce attraction, which often leads to acquiescence. The effectiveness of seduction exceeds that of coercion.

The values of democracy, human rights, and equal opportunity are highly regarded. Therefore, power is not solely determined by military might and economic strength. This concept has proven to be effective in today's global information age, and has become a dominant form of influence. Soft power in international politics can complement hard power to create a balanced approach known as "smart power." This term was coined by Hillary Clinton during her tenure as Secretary of State (Nye 2021, p. 10).

Scholars who share Nye's perspective have shown that image can be more influential than military or economic power. Cultural diplomacy is an important soft power tool for nation branding. During King Mohammed VI's first conference of ambassadors, the monarch emphasized the importance of cultural diplomacy, which involves diplomatic interactions between different cultures and has a long history going back centuries.

Cultural diplomacy can be conducted by 'informal ambassadors' or 'cultural diplomats.' According to Tipper Navracsics, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, culture plays a crucial role in building long-term relationships with countries worldwide. Navracsics believes that culture is the hidden jewel of foreign policy because it fosters understanding

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between people. The European Union's new strategy aims to make culture a priority in its international relations, recognizing its importance in strengthening the Union's global influence.

Cultural diplomacy is a relatively new concept, although states have long engaged in cultural exchange in various forms. According to Milton Cummings, cultural diplomacy involves the exchange of ideas, information, art, language, and other cultural aspects among nations and their peoples in order to promote mutual communication and dialogue (Cummings 2003). Cultural diplomacy is used to build alliances, promote economic growth, and foster security and peace. It involves sharing concepts, knowledge, beliefs, values, traditions, and other aspects of culture to promote understanding among people.

Culture is a critical factor in international diplomacy, whether practiced by states and governmental actors or through private initiatives. Cultural diplomacy is considered a component of public diplomacy and encompasses a range of activities conducted within the context of a particular foreign policy. Pierre Renouvin was a pioneering historian who studied the influence of culture on a state's international relations. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, in collaboration with Pierre Renouvin, advocated the transformation of traditional diplomatic history into the history of international relations. Since the seminal work of Renouvin and Duroselle in 1964, the history of international relations has evolved considerably.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducts cultural diplomacy through its intermediaries within a diplomatic network. The term "external cultural action" refers to any cultural or educational work coordinated by the State in support of its foreign policy and carried out by public or private actors. It also includes actions carried out with many partners. Alain Dubosclar (2002, p. 25) argues that the power of governments no longer depends solely on objective factors such as military, economic or strategic power. According to Dubosclar, culture, ideas, and values are the primary factors that influence state behavior.

When discussing cultural diplomacy in Africa, it is worth mentioning Morocco's strategic relations with African countries. The Moroccan government has a long tradition of foreign policy in Africa, strengthened by relations with countries such as Ethiopia, Angola, South Africa and Nigeria. Moroccan direct investment in Africa is focused on products and services, with particular emphasis on African markets. Morocco is considered a major investment destination in Africa, second only to South Africa. Its historical and cultural ties in the region have helped it to re-establish its geopolitical presence and strengthen its territorial integrity.

Morocco wants to strengthen its role as a mediator and development actor, expand South-South cooperation and address regional issues. The monarch's message to the first conference of his ambassadors in August 2013 gave a new impetus to Moroccan diplomacy (link below). Moroccan diplomacy is being revitalized with a new focus on prioritizing African diplomacy. The reform of diplomatic action has dedicated a part to this effort, emphasizing the promotion of cultural diplomacy. Morocco stands out as the only Maghreb country with centuries-old relations with African countries. It maintains contacts with the governments of many African states through various agreements and annual visits by the King; between 2000 and 2013, the King visited more than eleven African countries.

After his accession to the throne, Mohammed VI prioritized cultural diplomacy in Morocco's foreign policy. He emphasized the importance of promoting cultural initiatives abroad. In his speech at the 2013 Ambassadors' Conference, the King stressed the need to create "Les Maisons du Maroc" and Moroccan Cultural Centers (MCCs) abroad, promote artistic activities, organize fairs and exhibitions, and showcase Morocco's civilizational heritage. These efforts are aimed at strengthening Morocco's cultural diplomacy.

The Kingdom of Morocco uses cultural diplomacy to promote stability, unity and openness. This involves a professional and unconventional approach to the dissemination of Moroccan culture abroad. To understand Morocco's cultural relations in Africa, it is necessary to define the parameters of cultural diplomacy. This broad concept encompasses both internal and external diplomatic and cultural meanings.

Morocco uses a number of resources from its African environment and culture to increase its influence. The country's cultural diplomacy initiatives are implemented within a traditional framework and involve actors in the scientific, educational, spiritual, religious, artistic and creative fields. Morocco's cultural engagement in Africa is an essential part of its diplomatic strategy.

Morocco's cultural diversity goes hand in hand with its tolerant Islamic practice, making religious diplomacy a crucial aspect of its cultural diplomacy. Unlike some European countries, such as France, whose secular vision leads them to prioritize cultural diplomacy over the religious component of their foreign policy, Morocco considers moderate Islam a dynamic element of its soft power strategy. Moroccan policymakers have historically attached great importance to Morocco's relations with its African neighbors. The solid Moroccan-African ties help to understand the African ambitions of Moroccan diplomacy. This explains the special ties between Morocco and the African region in the past, in which culture, especially religion, played an enormous role.

An analysis of the cultural aspects of Moroccan-African relations in terms of their soft power potential shows that culture has played an increasingly important role. However, there is still room for improvement in order to fully utilize its soft power capabilities in cultural policy practices. Moroccan culture has been shaped by Arab, Muslim, Jewish and European customs. Cultural relations with African countries are influenced by both internal and external factors. Morocco is actively working to expand its partnerships across Africa. To benefit from future agreements, African countries and Morocco should improve their cultural policies.

Morocco's cultural heritage should be promoted for the benefit of both Morocco and Africa. The country is proud of its unique architecture, music, art, cuisine and costumes, which attract travelers from around the world. Showcasing Morocco's cultural

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heritage can also help boost the country's economy by creating jobs in the tourism sector.

The development of Moroccan culture has a positive impact on the broader African cultural landscape. Morocco has a culturally diverse heritage that must be preserved for future generations. The Kingdom's culture has a rich history dating back to the Berbers, who were the original settlers of the region. The Berber influence is still evident in the nation's language and art. In addition, the introduction of Islam has had a significant impact on Moroccan society, bringing with it Arab culture. In short, Moroccan culture is a blend of Arab, Amazigh and Andalusian cultures with African, Hebrew and Mediterranean influences that have coexisted for centuries.

Moroccan architecture, religious customs, and way of life have been influenced by various cultures, including Spanish and French civilizations, due to Morocco's strategic location on the Mediterranean Sea. This combination has given Moroccan culture a unique identity. The fusion of these cultures has also had a significant impact on the cultural landscape of Africa. Moroccan traders and travelers interacted with other African communities, particularly those in West Africa, exchanging ideas, music, and traditions that enriched African culture. Efforts to promote Morocco's cultural heritage should continue despite the economic, political, and social challenges facing the country. Africa's cultural diversity is crucial to Morocco's identity, economic development, and global recognition (Gilboa 2008, p. 56).

Morocco has become a popular destination for thousands of African migrants, leading to a shift in Moroccan literature towards African themes. Over the past decade, the country's multilingual cultural production has increasingly portrayed the complex social and cultural aspects of this migratory transformation. This is evident in the sub-Saharan African turn in Moroccan literature, as reported by MERIP (El Ghabli 2021).

When considering cultural policies, it is important to recognize the involvement of Moroccan universities, which prioritize cooperation with Africa. These institutions receive a significant number of international students each year, making them a key player in Moroccan cultural diplomacy. The projection of a nation's educational institutions, the production of its intangible human capital, and its knowledge are used to measure its influence (Busson 2012).

The Institute of African Studies is an institution of higher learning dedicated to the study of Africa. Its creation reaffirms Morocco's commitment to the African continent, as envisioned by the late King Hassan II. The Institute serves as a scientific bridge between Morocco and Africa and as a means for the Moroccan university to exert its influence. In the 2000s, the Institute experienced increased activity and recognition among Moroccan academic research institutes. During this period, Morocco implemented King Mohammed VI's new Africa policy, which prioritized the restoration of the role of universities in interdisciplinary scientific research.

Moroccan cultural diplomacy in sub-Saharan Africa is primarily focused on the areas of education and training. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the number of African students pursuing higher education in Moroccan institutions. This is largely due to the implementation of scientific and research cooperation agreements. Currently, thousands of African students are enrolled in various institutions, with approximately half of them enrolled in public institutions. On an annual basis, over 60% of the newly enrolled international students originate from Africa. African students frequently pursue master's degree programs at select higher education institutions, including faculties of medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, science, technology, engineering, business, management, and translation (Lahrech 2008).

Morocco's scientific cooperation with the African Regional Center for Technology (ARCT), the African Regional Center for Space Science and Technology Education (ARCSSTE) and the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) strategically supports its influence in the region and strengthens Morocco's relations with Africa. According to the CNRS website, Morocco hosted nearly 700 scientific cooperation missions in 2012, making it the most popular African destination. Private universities in Morocco have implemented an internationalization plan for Africa. The International University of Rabat and the Ministry of Higher Education signed a cooperation agreement to promote academic exchanges and offer scholarships to African students. This partnership allows for the development of online training platforms, training seminars and other distance learning activities.

The Moroccan university has introduced a new approach to African studies and the future of Africa. In addition, the Kingdom of Morocco has begun to accept trainees from African countries for professional internships, with the possibility of funding previously reserved for students. This is in line with Morocco's commitment to training and developing the skills of African human resources in order to promote cultural diplomacy. The African Academy of Energy (ACAFE) was established to enhance the skills and competencies of African operators in the refining industry through capacity development.

The Rabat Africa Festival is an annual event organized by the Orient-Occident Foundation (FOO) to celebrate cultural exchange between the African and Moroccan populations. The event showcases African talent through various cultural expressions, including film screenings, seminars, readings, and art exhibitions. The embroidery and couture workshop "Migrants du Monde", created in 2010 at the Orient-Occident Foundation, provides a community platform for Moroccan women and refugees, with dance, song, physical expression and music. Morocco has invested heavily in organizing celebrations of important anniversaries, serving as a window for the African continent to the rest of the world. This is a source of pride for all Moroccans, as well as for other African nations.

The King's focus on education, training, culture, mobility and migration is evident in his actions, whether in Morocco, Africa or with the European Union. This was underlined in his speech at the 6th EU-AU Summit, demonstrating the Sovereign's

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interest in cultural issues. In 2014, Rabat was declared the City of Lights and Cultural Capital of Morocco by the Sovereign, thanks to his progressive royal vision. Over the past two decades, many cultural festivals have been established in cities throughout Morocco. This proliferation coincides with the reign of Mohammed VI and the democratization of Moroccan politics and society.

The festivals showcase a variety of Moroccan and international artists and cultural products, including music, film, and theater. Among other prestigious festivals, Morocco hosts the Marrakech International Film Festival and the Mawazine Music Festival in Rabat. In addition, the country holds annual post-independence celebrations, such as the National Festival of Popular Arts in Marrakech, which showcase regional crafts and arts. These events promote international relations and foster a sense of national identity and cohesion. Over the past two decades, there has been a significant increase in cultural festivals in urban areas with a modern, secular, and global focus.

In 2017, Morocco rejoined the African Union after an absence of more than 30 years. The state-led discourse accompanying this event presents Morocco as an integral part of a culturally and economically dynamic continent. King Mohammed VI, a respected patron of the arts, has played an important role in this process by emphasizing the importance of culture in Moroccan public life (Boum 2012, pp. 22-25). In recent years, the Moroccan government has made significant efforts to promote the country as a global leader in cultural awareness and diversity. The emphasis on culture has primarily taken on an urban character, especially in large cities. For Buhmann (2016, p. 17), several crucial factors contribute to this trend.

Morocco has a historically integrated urban network that includes several cities, each with a distinct identity and function. Casablanca serves as a modern economic metropolis, Rabat as the seat of administrative and political power, Fez as the spiritual capital, Tangier as the gateway to the Mediterranean, Marrakech as a popular global tourist destination with an exotic heritage, and Agadir as a modern seaside resort and the capital of Amazigh culture.

Since the French protectorate, Morocco's international tourism industry has focused on urban areas. In recent years, Morocco's economic development has become increasingly concentrated in urban areas. This is evidenced by the construction of flagship infrastructure projects in Rabat and Casablanca. The Marrakech International Film Festival (MIFF) was created in late 2001 by order of King Mohammed VI to bring international cinema to Morocco and to enhance Marrakech's cultural and tourist appeal. MIFF competes with traditional heavyweight festivals in the Global North, such as Cannes, Venice and Berlin.

The festival has also cultivated its reputation around Marrakech and state-sponsored discourses of cultural diversity and dialogue. It aims to enhance Marrakech's reputation as a glamorous destination, especially for Western tourists. It is often perceived as a parallel to European festivals. Exploring the tensions between the national and the urban, Nick Dines (2021) noted that festivals and the urban scale serve as vehicles for cultural diplomacy.

The Mawazine International Music Festival (MIFF) aims to promote cultural exchange between nations and celebrate Morocco's universal outlook. Originally conceived as a world music festival with a limited audience, it was later rebranded as a globally recognized music event for the general public. The scope of the organization has since broadened to include musicians from both local and global contexts. The organizers offer a diverse range of music to Moroccan and international audiences, including Africans. Mawazine has received positive coverage in the international press for its hybridity, free concert admission, and urban revitalization initiatives.

In essence, Moroccan cultural diplomacy is inextricably linked to democratization, intercultural dialogue, and freedom of expression. It serves as a conduit between Morocco, Africa, and the Western context. Culture is no longer a hidden asset; it has become a visible one. The collective efforts of the various actors within the Kingdom of Morocco have been instrumental in achieving this outcome.

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