

# Cultural Diplomacy and Peacebuilding: Evaluating the Impact of Cultural Exchange Initiatives in Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa

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## Abstract

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as an important yet underexplored instrument for promoting peace and mutual understanding across African societies affected by recurrent conflict and identity-based tensions. This paper evaluated the impact of cultural exchange and arts-based initiatives in strengthening peacebuilding processes in Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa. It was a comparative study drawn on documented case studies, policy reports, and existing scholarly research to explore how culture and creative expression have contributed to reconciliation, dialogue, and social cohesion in post-conflict and divided communities. The paper adopted a comparative approach using secondary source of data, guided by Soft Power Theory and Peacebuilding Theory, to assess how cultural activities from film and music to heritage preservation serve as non-coercive tools for regional stability and conflict prevention. Findings highlight that, while cultural diplomacy fosters cross-cultural understanding and provides an inclusive platform for peace dialogue, its potential remains constrained by weak institutional frameworks, limited funding, and lack of strategic coordination among African states. The paper concluded that embedding cultural diplomacy within national and regional peacebuilding agendas is essential to consolidate sustainable peace on the continent. And therefore recommended among others that ministries of culture, foreign affairs, and interior should collaborate to integrate cultural initiatives into national peace and security policies.

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## **Introduction**

Africa's contemporary peace and security terrain continues to be shaped by multiple conflicts arising from ethnic fragmentation, religious intolerance, resource struggles, and political instability. These conflicts have often been addressed through conventional peacebuilding mechanisms such as political dialogue, security intervention, and humanitarian assistance. However, such approaches rarely address the deeper socio-cultural dimensions of conflict—issues of identity, belonging, and social cohesion that persist long after formal peace agreements are signed.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners that culture can play a transformative role in peacebuilding. Cultural diplomacy is defined as the use of cultural resources and exchange to promote mutual understanding and cooperation provides a platform for engagement that transcends political and ideological divides (Cummings, 2015; Mark, 2010). Within the African context, where art, music, and oral traditions have historically mediated social relations, cultural diplomacy offers a contextually relevant and inclusive means of rebuilding trust and promoting reconciliation.

Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa provide useful comparative cases for examining this relationship. Nigeria's creative industries, particularly Nollywood and contemporary music, have become instruments of regional soft power and inter-ethnic engagement. Mali's rich musical heritage and cultural festivals, despite ongoing insecurity, continue to serve as a medium for dialogue and social healing. South Africa's post-apartheid nation-building efforts demonstrate how cultural initiatives grounded in the Ubuntu philosophy have facilitated reconciliation and national cohesion. Examining these cases together allows for a nuanced understanding of how cultural diplomacy can be leveraged in African peacebuilding strategies.

At the policy level, frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and UNESCO's Culture for Peace Programme emphasize culture as a driver of development and peace. Yet, in practice, cultural diplomacy remains marginal in most national security and peacebuilding strategies. This paper therefore contributed to filling this gap by evaluating the actual impact of selected cultural exchange initiatives in Africa and identifying lessons that can inform future peace-oriented cultural policy.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Although numerous cultural exchange initiatives have emerged across Africa, there is limited systematic assessment of their effectiveness in fostering sustainable peace. Many programs operate independently, lack coherent evaluation frameworks, and depend heavily on donor funding, which often shifts priorities. As a result, their contributions to reconciliation, social cohesion, and regional stability remain poorly documented.

Furthermore, cultural diplomacy in Africa has often been treated as a peripheral activity used for image promotion rather than as an integral component of peacebuilding policy. This neglect undermines its potential to address the psychological and social dimensions of conflict, such as mistrust and exclusion. The absence of coordinated institutional support and policy frameworks across Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa constrains the long-term impact of cultural diplomacy initiatives.

### **Objectives of the Paper**

The aim of this paper was to evaluate the impact of cultural exchange initiatives as tools of cultural diplomacy in advancing peacebuilding in Africa, focusing on Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa.

The specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine how cultural diplomacy initiatives function as instruments of peacebuilding in selected African contexts.
- ii. Assess the impact of arts, music, film, and heritage programs on reconciliation and social cohesion.
- iii. Identify challenges and policy gaps that limit the integration of cultural diplomacy into Africa's peacebuilding frameworks.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review in this paper was done in line with the aim and objectives under conceptual review, empirical review and theoretical framework as follows:

### **Conceptual Review**

The key concepts in this paper are reviewed below;

## **Cultural Diplomacy and Peacebuilding**

Cultural diplomacy refers to the intentional use of cultural resources, creative expression, and exchange to advance mutual understanding, cooperation, and goodwill among nations or communities. It is grounded in the idea that culture can serve as a non-coercive means of influence, what Joseph Nye (2004) describes as soft power. In contemporary international relations, cultural diplomacy complements political and economic diplomacy by emphasizing attraction, dialogue, and respect for diversity (Bound et al., 2022).

Peacebuilding, on the other hand, involves activities that address the structural and relational causes of conflict in order to establish sustainable peace. Lederach's (1997) framework of conflict transformation underscores the importance of social relationships, cultural values, and community participation in rebuilding societies after violence. The integration of cultural initiatives into peacebuilding processes recognizes that artistic and heritage practices can restore identity, foster empathy, and enable inclusive dialogue (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

In the African context, culture has historically been central to social regulation and reconciliation. Oral storytelling, music, and festivals have long mediated disputes and reinforced communal harmony (Adebanwi, 2020). Cultural diplomacy thus aligns with indigenous mechanisms of peace, providing contextually relevant tools for conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery. The African Union (AU, 2020) identifies culture as a strategic pillar for achieving the aspirations of Agenda 2063, noting that cultural cooperation enhances regional integration and people-to-people solidarity.

### **Cultural Diplomacy as a Peacebuilding Instrument in Africa**

Research increasingly highlights how arts-based and heritage initiatives contribute to peacebuilding across Africa. Nigeria's creative industry, particularly Nollywood and Afrobeat music, has emerged as a continental medium for reshaping social narratives and promoting inter-ethnic understanding (Okome, 2019; Omoniyi, 2021). Through film and music, Nigerian artists often address corruption, extremism, and identity conflict, subtly influencing public attitudes toward coexistence. UNESCO's Culture for Peace in Nigeria report (2021) notes that community theatre and youth arts festivals have served as local platforms for dialogue and reintegration of displaced persons in the country's Middle Belt and Northeast regions.

In Mali, despite years of insecurity and violent extremism, cultural festivals such as Festival sur le Niger and Festival au Désert have continued to foster inter-communal reconciliation and preserve shared heritage (Charry, 2018; Keita, 2022). These events unite diverse ethnic groups, attract international solidarity, and demonstrate how music diplomacy can counter isolation and radicalization. A 2020 World Bank cultural resilience assessment found that Mali's arts sector contributes to civic participation and post-crisis healing (World Bank, 2020).

South Africa's post-apartheid experience further illustrates culture's peacebuilding capacity. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission integrated performances, storytelling, and memorial art to process trauma and promote national unity (Noble, 2019). The concept of Ubuntu—the belief in shared humanity—has guided numerous community-based art projects that bridge racial and generational divides (Hagg & Combrinck, 2020). The South African Department of Sports, Arts and Culture (2022) emphasizes that creative sectors continue to serve as dialogue spaces against xenophobia and inequality.

Collectively, these cases show that cultural diplomacy, when aligned with local traditions and inclusive participation, strengthens social cohesion and builds trust in divided societies. However, their success depends on sustained investment and institutional coordination factors still weak across much of the continent.

### **Impact of Cultural Exchange and Soft Power on Reconciliation and Social Cohesion**

Soft power operates through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. For African states, cultural diplomacy enhances regional influence and redefines narratives of identity and modernity (Bound et al., 2022). Nigeria's film and music exports, for example, have cultivated a pan-African popular culture that promotes shared values and collective pride (Adesokan, 2019). Similarly, Mali's musicians such as Salif Keita and Tinariwen use lyrics to advocate peace and tolerance, turning cultural visibility into diplomatic capital (Keita, 2022).

At the societal level, cultural exchanges improve interpersonal and inter-communal relations by promoting empathy and dialogue (UNESCO, 2023). Studies in post-conflict settings show that participation in arts programs reduces stereotypes and facilitates trauma healing (Boudreaux, 2020). In South Africa, arts-for-reconciliation projects have been found to enhance civic engagement and youth empowerment (Hagg & Combrinck, 2020). The AU's Plan of Action on Cultural and Creative Industries (2021) further underscores that cross-border cultural exchanges contribute to peace by humanizing “the other” and reinforcing continental solidarity.

Despite these achievements, cultural diplomacy's peace impacts often remain anecdotal due to inadequate monitoring and evaluation. Many initiatives lack indicators linking cultural participation to peace outcomes (De Tarragon & Kabanda, 2022). Consequently, the full extent of culture's contribution to social cohesion is not systematically documented, hindering policy uptake.

### **Challenges and Policy Gaps in Institutionalising Cultural Diplomacy**

Several structural and operational challenges limit the integration of cultural diplomacy into African peacebuilding frameworks. Firstly, policy fragmentation persists: ministries of culture, foreign affairs, and peacebuilding often operate in isolation, creating overlapping mandates (AU, 2020). Secondly, funding constraints and dependence on international donors result in short-term programming that lacks sustainability (World Bank, 2020). Third, security risks especially in Mali and parts of Nigeria restrict the mobility of artists and audiences, undermining continuity.

Another challenge is weak documentation and evaluation. Many initiatives emphasize cultural visibility rather than measurable peace outcomes, leading to under-appreciation of their diplomatic significance (De Tarragon & Kabanda, 2022). Additionally, limited regional coordination means that lessons from successful programs are not widely shared across ECOWAS or SADC states.

Policy analysts recommend embedding cultural diplomacy within national peace and development strategies, establishing inter-ministerial committees, and developing indicators for cultural peacebuilding (UNESCO, 2023). Strengthening regional cultural networks and supporting creative industries through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) could also enhance the visibility and economic viability of peace-oriented cultural programs (AU, 2021).

### **Empirical Reviews**

Existing studies affirm the positive link between culture and peace, yet comparative empirical analyses across multiple African contexts remain scarce. Meanwhile, the following are some of the empirical studies:

Okome (2019) examined the contribution of Nigeria's film industry to peacebuilding and social integration in post-military Nigeria. The research was carried out in Lagos, Enugu, and Abuja, where Nollywood's major studios and distribution networks operate. Guided by Soft Power

Theory, the study adopted a qualitative exploratory design involving a purposive sample of 25 filmmakers, critics, and cultural policy officers. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and content analysis of 20 feature films that address ethnic reconciliation, corruption, and gender equality. The results revealed that film narratives actively shape perceptions of unity and tolerance by reconstructing post-colonial identity and promoting empathy among diverse audiences. Okome concluded that Nollywood's cultural appeal functions as a diplomatic bridge, though its peace potential remains underutilized due to the absence of supportive state policies. The present study extended this conversation by comparing Nigeria's creative diplomacy with similar experiences in Mali and South Africa, offering a regional rather than national perspective.

Keita (2022) investigated how Malian musicians employ performance as a vehicle for reconciliation in post-conflict communities. Conducted in Ségou and Bamako, the research drew upon Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory and used a case-study approach. The sample included 40 participants—festival organizers, artists, and local community leaders—selected through snowball sampling. Data were collected through focus-group discussions, observation of live performances, and policy document review. The study found that collaborative music events reinforced communal trust and countered extremist propaganda by valorizing shared heritage. Keita concluded that cultural events succeed where political dialogue stalls, serving as neutral platforms for healing. However, inadequate protection for artists and minimal government investment restricted scalability. The present comparative analysis builds on Keita's insights by situating Mali's music diplomacy within a continental framework that links creative expression to soft-power dynamics across Africa.

Hagg and Combrinck (2020) explored the role of artistic collaboration in post-apartheid reconciliation. Their study focused on Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban, cities central to South Africa's cultural economy. Using Social Reconstruction Theory, the researchers adopted a mixed-methods design that combined quantitative surveys of 250 arts participants with qualitative interviews with 30 cultural practitioners and policymakers. Data were obtained through questionnaires, archival analysis, and participant observation in community arts programs. Findings demonstrated that arts-based initiatives—particularly theatre and visual storytelling—enhanced dialogue across racial lines and cultivated civic empathy. They concluded that sustained government sponsorship and inclusion of marginalized artists were vital for consolidating peace dividends. The current study complements this by extending the analysis

beyond national boundaries to evaluate how cultural diplomacy, when regionally coordinated, reinforces African solidarity and shared post-conflict recovery.

De Tarragon and Kabanda (2022) undertook a continent-wide assessment of cultural diplomacy metrics across twelve African states. Anchored in Governance and Development Evaluation Theory, their comparative policy analysis employed secondary data drawn from UNESCO, AU, and World Bank archives, supplemented by expert interviews with 18 cultural program evaluators chosen through expert purposive sampling. Data collection relied on document review and virtual consultations. Their results showed that, despite widespread recognition of culture's peace potential, fewer than one-third of African countries maintained standardized evaluation frameworks linking cultural activity to conflict-reduction outcomes. The researchers concluded that the absence of quantifiable indicators weakens advocacy for cultural diplomacy in peace policy. This gap directly informs the present study's methodological focus on cross-case synthesis, which demonstrates how Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa can operationalize measurable indicators for cultural peacebuilding.

Mkhize (2022) analyzed South Africa's post-1994 diplomatic practice through the lens of cultural identity and Ubuntu philosophy. The study concentrated on Pretoria and Johannesburg, incorporating Soft Power Theory and the Ubuntu Ethical Framework. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the author conducted in-depth interviews with 22 officials from the Department of International Relations and Cooperation and artists engaged in cross-border programs, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and analysis of foreign-policy documents. Findings revealed that Ubuntu-oriented cultural diplomacy enhances trust among African nations and repositions South Africa as a moral rather than coercive power. Mkhize concluded that the strategic deployment of culture sustains peaceful regional relationships but cautioned that socioeconomic inequalities limit inclusivity. The current research fills the identified gap by offering a three-country comparative perspective, showing how similar value-based cultural approaches manifest differently across regional contexts.

In summary, these five empirical studies collectively demonstrate that cultural production whether through film, music, or community art has tangible peacebuilding effects. Yet, most focus on single-country contexts or specific cultural sectors. None undertake a comparative evaluation across multiple African nations or analyze how policy frameworks mediate cultural diplomacy outcomes. The present investigation addressed this void by systematically comparing

Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa, thereby extending the empirical foundation of African peace and cultural diplomacy scholarship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper was guided in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Soft Power Theory and Peacebuilding Theory. Because, they explain how cultural diplomacy functions as a non-coercive means of influence and how it contributes to conflict transformation and social reconciliation.

#### **Soft Power Theory**

The concept of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004), refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. The theory assumed that culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy constitute key sources of soft power. For African states, soft power provides an alternative diplomatic approach that emphasizes cultural identity, creativity, and shared values over military or economic dominance.

In the context of this paper, soft power theory helps explain how cultural diplomacy initiatives in Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa use artistic expression, heritage, and cultural exchange to enhance mutual understanding and promote peace. Nigeria's global film and music industries, for instance, project a positive image of African resilience and creativity, building goodwill across borders (Adesokan, 2019; Bound et al., 2022). Similarly, Mali's international music festivals and South Africa's Ubuntu-based reconciliation initiatives function as instruments of attraction that reinforce national and continental identity.

Soft power also provides a framework for understanding how cultural diplomacy contributes indirectly to peacebuilding by shaping public perception and fostering empathy. By presenting alternative narratives of identity, art and cultural exchange challenge stereotypes and reduce prejudice, key elements in conflict transformation.

However, Nye's framework has been critiqued for its state-centric bias, as many African cultural diplomacy activities are driven by civil society, artists, or regional organizations rather than state institutions (Chitty, 2017). Recognizing this limitation, this paper adopts an expanded understanding of soft power that includes non-state cultural actors who influence social relations and peace outcomes through creative and symbolic expression.

## **Peacebuilding Theory**

Peacebuilding theory advanced by Johan Galtung (1969) emphasizes the processes and structures required to address the root causes of conflict and establish sustainable peace. Johan Galtung (1969) distinguished between negative peace, the absence of direct violence and positive peace, which involves justice, inclusion, and social harmony. Building on Galtung's work, John Paul Lederach (1997, 2005) developed a relational model of peacebuilding that highlights the importance of trust, empathy, and cultural understanding in transforming conflict.

Cultural diplomacy aligns closely with Lederach's framework of conflict transformation, as it seeks to rebuild relationships and reshape perceptions through dialogue and mutual respect. Arts-based initiatives, community theatre, music, and heritage projects can function as practical expressions of reconciliation by allowing individuals to share experiences and restore collective memory (Paffenholz & Spurk, 2019; Boudreaux, 2020).

Applying peacebuilding theory to the cases of Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa provides analytical insight into how cultural diplomacy operates beyond formal negotiations. In Nigeria, local artists engage communities in peace dialogues; in Mali, musicians use performance to advocate for unity amid insecurity; and in South Africa, public art commemorates shared suffering and promotes healing. These initiatives reflect Lederach's notion that sustainable peace depends on social relationships as much as institutional reform.

By integrating soft power and peacebuilding theories, the study situates cultural diplomacy within a broader understanding of how culture shapes peace processes. The two frameworks complement each other, soft power explains the mechanism of attraction and influence, while peacebuilding theory elucidates the social and relational outcomes of that influence.

## **Methodology**

This paper adopted a comparative research design, focusing on Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa. The comparative approach allows for identifying similarities and contextual differences in how cultural diplomacy initiatives contribute to peacebuilding across distinct political, cultural, and historical settings. The paper relied primarily on secondary data, including academic journal articles, policy documents and reports from the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, SADC, UNESCO, and national cultural ministries, Case-specific reports and Media content, NGO reports, and program documentation from cultural festivals and peacebuilding organizations.

## **Discussions and Comparative Analysis**

Cultural diplomacy in Africa has evolved from a peripheral, symbolic activity into a tangible peacebuilding mechanism. Across Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa, culture-based initiatives have demonstrated potential for transforming social relationships, addressing trauma, and strengthening regional solidarity. While the contexts differ politically and historically, all three countries use cultural expression as a means of reconstructing collective identity and promoting reconciliation.

### **Nigeria: Cultural Production, Creative Industries, and National Cohesion**

Nigeria's experience as reviewed in the paper illustrates how cultural diplomacy extends beyond foreign relations into internal peacebuilding. The Nigerian creative economy especially film (Nollywood), music, and literary arts has emerged as one of the largest in Africa, shaping both domestic and continental narratives. This is inline with the submission of UNESCO (2021), who opined that Nollywood produces over 2,500 films annually, providing not only economic opportunities but also platforms for social commentary on unity, corruption, and gender inclusion.

The paper also revealed that Nollywood films such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *October 1* dramatize inter-ethnic conflict and reconciliation, helping audiences engage with collective memory as argued by Okome (2019). Similarly, contemporary Afrobeats artists like Burna Boy and Davido use music to advocate for pan-African unity and civic responsibility. The popularity of these cultural exports has amplified Nigeria's soft power across the continent and diaspora, generating shared cultural reference points that bridge ethnic and national divides (Adesokan, 2019).

At the local level, the paper revealed that community theatre and cultural festivals such as the Jos Peace Festival and the National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) function as dialogue spaces for communities affected by conflict in the Middle Belt and Northeast. For instance, a 2021 UNESCO evaluation found that participatory arts programs in Plateau and Borno States enhanced youth resilience against violent extremism and strengthened social trust among displaced populations.

Despite these successes, Nigeria's cultural diplomacy suffers from weak policy coordination. The Ministry of Information and Culture's initiatives often overlap with those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, resulting in fragmented implementation as identified by Adebajo (2020).

However, sustained institutional support and peace-focused funding mechanisms remain critical to maximizing the sector's peacebuilding potential.

### **Mali: Music Diplomacy and Cultural Resilience Amid Insecurity**

This paper also revealed that Mali's case demonstrates how culture endures as a peace resource even under severe insecurity. Since the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and the expansion of extremist violence, Malian musicians and artists have used cultural expression to counter radicalization and restore communal harmony. Music festivals such as the Festival sur le Niger in Ségou and the Festival au Désert (temporarily relocated due to insecurity) exemplify Mali's tradition of music diplomacy. These festivals unite Tuareg, Songhai, Fulani, and Bambara communities through shared performance, emphasizing peace and tolerance as submitted by Keita (2022). International partners including UNESCO and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture have supported these events as models of cultural resilience.

Moreover, renowned artists like Salif Keita and Fatoumata Diawara have become peace ambassadors, composing songs that reject ethnic division and call for dialogue. Such performances, broadcast globally, not only preserve Mali's cultural heritage but also challenge extremist narratives that stigmatize music and artistic expression as revealed by Charry (2018). Beyond music, Mali's heritage restoration projects contribute to rebuilding post-conflict identity. The reconstruction of Timbuktu's mausoleums destroyed by extremists in 2012 was coordinated by UNESCO and local masons as a symbolic act of unity and cultural continuity according to UNESCO (2023). This initiative demonstrated that heritage preservation itself can be a peacebuilding activity by reaffirming community ownership and collective memory

However, chronic insecurity and limited national funding continue to threaten these gains. The decentralization of cultural management and protection of artists' mobility are key priorities for sustaining Mali's cultural diplomacy.

### **South Africa: Ubuntu Philosophy and Arts for Reconciliation**

The paper further revealed that South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy remains one of the most influential examples of how culture facilitates national healing. The principle of Ubuntu, emphasizing shared humanity and mutual care, has guided the nation's reconciliation efforts and cultural diplomacy. For instance, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process (1996–2003), storytelling, theatre, and public art were used as mechanisms for truth-telling and collective mourning as unveiled by Noble (2019).

Furthermore, the paper revealed that community art projects in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban continue to address issues such as xenophobia and gender-based violence through mural painting and performance art as postulated by Hagg and Combrinck (2020). The Ubuntu Arts and Culture Festival as launched in 2018 also serves both domestic and regional audiences, fostering cultural exchange across the Southern African Development Community (SADC). On the whole, South Africa's cultural institutions, including the Market Theatre Foundation and Nelson Mandela Museum, have been instrumental in projecting national values of tolerance and justice internationally. These cultural exports contribute to South Africa's reputation as a peace broker in African diplomacy as well.

Nonetheless, inequality and uneven access to cultural funding remain major challenges. Critics argue that government investment in elite cultural programs often overshadows grassroots peacebuilding initiatives. Strengthening community-based cultural networks would ensure broader participation and continuity.

Arising from the above, the comparative analysis of the three cases reveals both convergence and divergence in how cultural diplomacy supports peacebuilding in Africa. All the three countries utilize arts and cultural expression as platforms for dialogue and vehicles of identity reconstruction. Music, film, and performance serve as accessible languages that transcend ethnic and linguistic barriers. The emphasis on inclusion and emotional connection reflects the essence of peacebuilding theory.

Nigeria's cultural diplomacy is largely market-driven, propelled by private creative industries; Mali's is heritage-centered, emphasizing cultural preservation amid conflict; while South Africa's approach is policy-based, integrated into national reconciliation and regional diplomacy. These differences illustrate the flexibility of soft power as a framework adaptable to diverse sociopolitical contexts. Despite their progress, all three countries face funding constraints, policy fragmentation, and limited evaluation frameworks (AU, 2021; De Tarragon & Kabanda, 2022). Additionally, insecurity in Mali and parts of Nigeria undermines cultural continuity, while socio-economic inequality in South Africa hampers inclusivity.

Collectively, the three cases affirm that cultural diplomacy can reinforce regional solidarity under the African Union's Agenda 2063 and ECOWAS/SADC peacebuilding mandates. Cultural cooperation across borders through film co-productions, regional festivals, and shared heritage programs enhances Africa's global image and fosters internal cohesion.

## **Conclusions**

The comparative analysis of Nigeria, Mali, and South Africa demonstrates that cultural diplomacy is an underutilized yet powerful tool for peacebuilding in Africa. Across these three contexts, culture expressed through film, music, art, and heritage serves not merely as a form of creative expression but as a mechanism for reconciliation, social cohesion, and national reimagination. Cultural initiatives provide platforms for inclusive dialogue, humanize “the other,” and reframe narratives of conflict and identity.

In Nigeria, the creative industry especially Nollywood and Afrobeats illustrates how popular culture can bridge ethnic divides and project regional soft power. In Mali, music diplomacy and heritage preservation sustain unity amid insecurity, proving that even in fragile contexts, culture remains a resilient force for peace. South Africa’s post-apartheid experience further exemplifies the use of culture as moral and political capital in reconciling a divided nation under the Ubuntu philosophy.

Despite these achievements, the institutionalization of cultural diplomacy across Africa remains weak. Most initiatives rely on external donors, lack national coordination, and are inadequately evaluated. The fragmentation among cultural, foreign affairs, and peace ministries hampers sustainability and cross-sector collaboration. Furthermore, the absence of monitoring frameworks limits policymakers’ ability to measure how culture concretely contributes to peace and social cohesion. In all, embedding cultural diplomacy within formal peace and development frameworks is essential. Culture must be recognized not as an ornamental or symbolic aspect of diplomacy but as a strategic and measurable instrument for peace. African governments, regional organizations, and civil society should therefore view artists, storytellers, and heritage custodians as partners in nation-building and conflict prevention.

## **Recommendations**

Arising from the above, the following recommendations were suggested:

- i. Ministries of culture, foreign affairs, and interior should collaborate to integrate cultural initiatives into national peace and security policies. This can be achieved through inter-ministerial committees and cross-sectoral policy design. And governments at all levels and regional bodies (ECOWAS, AU, and SADC) should allocate stable budgetary resources to cultural diplomacy programs. Reliance on donor funding undermines continuity and local ownership.

- ii. Establish measurable indicators such as participation rates, community cohesion metrics, and attitudinal change surveys to assess cultural programs' peace impacts. This evidence base will improve policy uptake and funding justification.
- iii. Encourage transnational collaboration through joint festivals, film co-productions, and artist exchange programs within the African Union's Agenda 2063 framework. Such initiatives reinforce regional solidarity and shared identity.

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