

---

**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Cultural Diplomacy as Soft Power: Moroccan Cultural Assets and the Construction of International Nation-Branding**

**Fatima Zahraa BOUTABSSIL**

*Assistant Professor, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Department of English Studies, Beni Mellal, Morocco*

**Corresponding Author:** Fatima Zahraa BOUTABSSIL, E-mail: [boutabssil.usms@gmail.com](mailto:boutabssil.usms@gmail.com)

---

**| ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to highlight the role of culture being a central asset in the management of international relations. Part of it takes the form of a systematic review that scrutinizes the relevant literature pertaining to examining the often unrevealed and overlooked potential of culture in reconciling relations within states and societies. It also highlights how this potential is activated through the practice of cultural diplomacy. This analysis is framed under Nye's (2004) concept of smart power that stresses the combination of soft and hard power practices in contemporary diplomatic trends. This paper adds that the effect of cultural diplomacy on the international level should start from a local awareness of the importance of culture. The established theoretical background serves then as a basis for understanding some of the assets of Moroccan cultural diplomacy and their contribution to the country's international nation-branding.

**| KEYWORDS**

Cultreligious diplomacy, Morocco, nation-branding, soft power

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 01 March 2026

**PUBLISHED:** 25 March 2026

**DOI:** 10.32996/ijcrs.2026.6.2.3

---

### **1. Introduction:**

World politics works on the principle of exerting influence in order to generate tangible outcomes. Hard power, in the form of threats and payments, for instance, are taken to be patterns of influence (Nye, 2004). Nevertheless, in contemporary diplomatic practices, the meaning of influence has expanded into multiple dimensions. This paper highlights the potential of culture in exerting influence but on the basis of attraction. Nye (2004) argues that attraction leads to acquiescence which matches the very spirit of cultural diplomacy. The present review gathers insights from the existing literature on the matter in order to provide a complete picture of the potential of culture within a smart power perspective. We also stress the dialectical role relationship between the domestic and international objectives of cultural diplomacy. This will lead us to scrutinize Morocco's case through analyzing some of the assets the country uses in building its brand internationally. In this context, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

- In what ways does culture, as practiced through cultural diplomacy, contribute to the exercise of soft power globally? and what assets does Morocco use in order to build its brand internationally?

### **2. Culture:**

To fully unlock the potential of cultural diplomacy, it is first crucial to define the concept of culture as being a part of contemporary diplomatic practices. Culture is the subject of study of cultural studies, sociology and anthropology. These fields complement each other to provide a synergistic definition of culture.

**Copyright:** © 2026 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

In anthropology, Tylor (1871, as cited in Brown et al., 2020) defines culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs and many other capabilities and habits acquired by a person as a member of society. Similarly, Zimmerman (2017) identifies culture as the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and art. She goes on by saying that culture can be the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization (APA, 2017).

Culture then can be a codified system of learnt behaviors and knowledge that regulates our existence in a specific social context. Those practices are not made haphazardly; however, they are transmitted from one generation to another and are socially and culturally constructed.

In this context, Harris (1975, as cited in Birukou, et al., n.d.,) defines culture as the total socially acquired life-way or life-style of a group of people. It consists of the patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are characteristic of the members of a particular society or segment of a society (defining culture).

From the previous definitions, we can conclude that culture is a number of learnt and shared behaviors that are constructed in a particular social and cultural context and are agreed upon by members of that society.

As a matter of fact, Tischler (2011, as cited in Pratama, 2019) defines culture as all that human beings learn to do, to use, to produce and to believe as they grow to maturity and live out their lives in the social groups to which they belong. This suggests that culture is how we make sense of the world. In other words, culture is meaning. It is through culture that we understand the codes of behaviors of members of societies. In this context, Sewell (1999) defines culture as an institutional sphere devoted to the making of meaning (p. 41). He adds that culture is the sphere devoted specifically to the production, circulation and use of meaning (APA, 1999).

Culture then can be defined as the construction of a shared and common understanding of a particular society modes' of life that hold meaning that at the same time help us interpret and make sense of the culture of that society. Those meanings are produced by men and make men. Culture, then, is a sum of beliefs, values, traditions, policies, procedures that affect the behaviors of its people and helps make meaning of other people's behaviors.

In the sociological context, culture is referred to as the intricate threads that bind individuals together. According to the Sociology Institute (2022), culture is what shapes our behaviors, values and identities, influencing how we interact with each other (para. 1). When culture is defined in sociology, two key categories are encountered; material and nonmaterial culture. This distinction and combination is important in our discussion since the essence of cultural diplomacy is based on the promotion of what makes a country culturally distinct. Material culture refers to the physical objects and artifacts that people create and use in their daily lives namely clothing, food, architecture and eating habits...etc. Non-material culture encompasses the intangible aspects of culture. It includes ideas, beliefs, values, norms, customs, language, and symbols that shape how people interact with each other and the world (Sociology Institute, 2022). The two aspects of culture, as defined above, intersect together as the nonmaterial (intangible) gives meaning to the material (tangible) and they are both mutually reinforcing.

In cultural studies, Williams (1983, as cited in Huck, n.d.) refers to culture as ordinary. He explains that culture is what describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity...culture is music, literature, painting, sculpture, theatre and film (p. 1). Huck (n.d.,) refers to these aspects as 'high culture'. However, patterns such as modes of everyday life rooted in how individuals or groups handle their social and material existence also represent other aspects of culture, to which Huck (n.d.,) refers to as popular culture. This latter is represented in forms of popular music, publishing, design...etc. Therefore, cultural studies also offer this duality of perspectives in dealing with the concept of culture; a point of view that is very consistent with the idea of cultural promotion in the context of cultural diplomacy. Cultural studies, then, glorify both of the aspects of culture emphasizing that what people do and what that means to them is as ordinary as high culture.

Therefore, anthropology emphasizes the meaning of everyday life as being what culture is. Sociology stresses the material and non-material culture. Cultural studies differentiate between high and low culture and suggest that both are equally significant in the definition of culture. The conceptualizations of all three fields are equally consistent with the aim of this study.

### **3. Harmonizing relations through culture:**

The challenge today is trying to find unity in diversity in a world which has an unbounded wealth of cultures. People from different cultures are bound to meet, interact and find a common background to renegotiate their existence. In this context, LeBaron (2003) identifies culture as an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution (para.1). Cultures are like underground rivers that run through our lives and relationships, giving us messages that shape our perceptions, attributions, judgments and ideas of self and other (APA, 2003, para. 1). Later in her article, she goes on to say that cultures are embedded in every conflict because conflicts arise in human relationships (APA, 2003).

Bound et.al (2007) indicate that culture can be the engine that softens relationships at times of political conflicts that potentially arise as a result of miscommunication and cultural misunderstandings. In this context, Bound et. al (2007) state that there is a long and intimate relationship between culture and politics. Culture can oil the cogs of the political machine in a number of ways, but is only effective when employed sensitively (p. 52). They go on to say that culture can keep doors open at difficult times, and it can help to renegotiate relationships for changing times...getting the relationship right between politics and culture can deliver real results; getting it wrong and the relationships can be soured for a generation (APA, p. 53).

Furthermore, Bound et. al (2007) add that there is a long tradition of culture providing a safe and convivial setting for building bilateral relations or making political statements. Cultural experiences allow individuals to engage intellectually and emotionally and can provide personal connections that can outlive or override immediate political disagreements (Bound, et.al, 2007, p. 53).

Similarly, according to a press release by the European Commission, culture plays an important role in strengthening international relations. It then highlights how cultural cooperation counters stereotypes and prejudices by nurturing dialogue, open-mindedness and mutual respect (European Commission, 2016).

Culture is then crucial in conducting international affairs. People from different parts of the world and hence different cultures need to meet, interact, and find a common space for the negotiation of political and social issues. Furthermore, countries have to develop a sense of cultural literacy and fluency as it is a key component in achieving intercultural communication. The debate on the importance and role of culture in building and harmonizing relations is an introductory discussion and an attempt to define the concept of cultural diplomacy which is the aim of the up-coming section.

#### **4. Cultural diplomacy conceptualized:**

Before reviewing the literature prescribed to define the concept of cultural diplomacy, it is first necessary to mention that CD as a concept is not as old as it is as a practice. Even though the concept of cultural diplomacy has just recently been introduced as an independent field of study, as a practice, it started with early human relations.

According to the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (n.d.), cultural diplomacy or diplomacy between cultures has existed as a practice for centuries. Whilst the term has only recently been established, evidence of its practice can be seen throughout history and has existed for centuries. Explorers, travelers, teachers, artists can all be considered as informal ambassadors or early cultural diplomats. In this respect, the definition gives us a hint about the nature of cultural diplomacy as a practice as people who perform any kind of intercultural communication or cultural exchange can be considered as performers of cultural diplomacy. In addition, and according to the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, the practice of cultural diplomacy takes place in fields such as art, sports, literature, music, science, business, economy and beyond (the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, n.d.).

The report also claims that,

"Establishment of regular trade routes enables a frequent exchange of information and cultural gifts between traders and government representatives...such liberate efforts of cultural communication and exchange can be identified as early examples of cultural diplomacy" (APA, 2016).

If we are to define what cultural diplomacy is, we can pin down the two key terms with which it is constituted: culture and diplomacy. Diplomacy is the art of conducting international relations with the purpose of advancing a country's national interests and goals. Culture is the sum of ideas, traditions, values, principles, ideals that constitute the whole heritage of a country with which it makes sense of the world. If we are to combine the two terms, cultural diplomacy could be the diplomatic practices that are founded on the basis of cultural values. That is, diplomacy that takes culture as a principle, or diplomacy that operates in the framework of culture, or that uses culture to achieve its goals.

In this respect, the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (2016) defines CD as a course of actions, which are based on and utilize the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity.

In the same token, Rivera (2015) makes a distinction between diplomacy, public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. He quotes Ben O'Loughlin (n.d, as cited in Rivera, 2015),

Cultural diplomacy is a more specific term insofar as diplomacy is usually associated with states. States 'public diplomacy is states liaising with publics in other states, so cultural diplomacy being states liaising with other states or their peoples through the medium of culture. (p. 9)

It is worth noting that cultural diplomacy is a diplomatic practice that targets other countries governments' and their public audience using culture as mediator. Public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy have the same principle which is that of reaching the mass population through different actors under the supervision of governments. However, cultural diplomacy focuses on culture while public diplomacy can have other means. We can conclude then, that cultural diplomacy is a subset of public diplomacy.

In attempting to define cultural diplomacy, Mark (2009) insists on the cultural aspect of the practice. He states that there is no agreement on what the word 'cultural' means, probably because 'culture' is such a difficult term to define. Traditionally, the 'cultural' part of cultural diplomacy meant 'high culture': visual arts, literature, theatre, dance (ballet and contemporary), and music; cultural expressions that have been the preserve of the intellectual elites" (p. 5). He goes on by saying that "in recent years, this assumption has changed: cultural diplomacy now frequently includes 'popular culture', cultural activities that attract mass audiences" (APA, 2009, p. 5). The word "cultural" in cultural diplomacy could either refer to high culture but then would not reach the mass population as high culture concerns more specifically the elite, or it can refer to popular culture which has more chances to penetrate public audiences.

In the same context, Mark (2009) uses Cumming's definition which states that

"cultural diplomacy is the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding...as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view, or "telling its story" to the rest of the world"  
. (p. 6)

Cultural diplomacy rests then on projecting images of countries to the rest of world, a projection that is based on the exchange of aspects of countries' cultures with the aim of attracting attention and adherents.

In another context, scholars define cultural diplomacy through the actors involved in the practice. In this respect, Mark (2009) states that cultural diplomacy is managed both by diplomats working for a government's foreign ministry and by those working for stand-alone entities with varying degrees of governance and funding links to foreign ministries (p. 4). CD involves the engagement of state and non-states actors namely NGOs, cultural institutions, corporations, and civil society that considerably contribute to the practice of cultural diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy then could be a part of countries' foreign policies that is based on the foundation of trust, understanding and respect of others cultures for the purpose of softening relations among nations. Cultural diplomacy, when well understood and appropriately practiced, delivers greater results. What makes cultural diplomacy different from traditional forms of diplomacy is the audience it reaches, and the means it utilizes to reach them. It is true that its ultimate goal is to advance the national interests of countries; however, it is also crucial to mention that it does that on a basis of trust construction and respect building.

## **5. The concepts of soft power, hard power and smart power:**

We cannot talk about the concept of cultural diplomacy without shedding the light on the concepts of soft power, hard power and their combination, smart power. The concept of soft power cannot be identified without referring to Joseph Nye who first coined the term. Before defining the three concepts, Nye (2004) starts by identifying what power is. He states that power could be the capacity to do things or the ability to get the outcomes one wants or else the capabilities to affect the behavior of others to make those things happen (p.1).

We can conclude then that power could be the ability or the capability of having people submit to what you want or make them do as you like. However, Nye (2004) also suggests that we cannot measure or exert power if we do not study the preferences of people. It is on that basis that the practice of power is framed. According to him, power depends on the context in which it is practiced.

Nye (2004) talks about the changing nature of power, and that will bring us to talk about the shift from classical forms of power or (hard power) towards new tools of power or (soft power). He gives the example of Niccolo Machiavelli who advised the Princess in Italy that it was more important to be feared than to be loved; however, Nye (2004) argues that in today's world, it is better to be both (p. 1). As the world changes, power is also changing. Therefore, politicians and decision makers have to reconsider their foreign policies and revise their political agendas which tend to undervalue or even ignore the "power" of soft power. Nye (2004) suggests two means of power. He says that you can coerce them with threats, you can induce them with payments, or you can attract and co-opt them to have what you want (p. 2). This is how Nye (2004) introduces the concept of soft power which lies in influencing and affecting people to get the desired outcomes.

He defines soft power in opposition to hard power. He states that the latter has gained a form of popularity and familiarity. For him, hard power relies on inducements (carrots) or threats (sticks). However, Nye (2004) asserts the possibility of using means other than military threats or economic sanctions as a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness, want to follow it (p. 5). In this context, he states that a country could get what it wants without using force or threats. Instead, it could achieve the desired goals using an indirect way of power or which Nye calls "the second face of power". Soft power then relies on getting others to want the outcomes that you want (co-opts people rather than coerces them) ...it rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others (Nye, 2004, p. 5).

In the same context, Trunkos (2013) defines hard power as the traditional form of foreign policy tool (p.1). By contrast, she defines soft power as the national resources that can lead to a country's ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes (APA, p. 4).

Trunko's definitions of the two concepts agree with Nye's; hard power relies much on the use of military intervention, coercive diplomacy, whereas soft power rests on the ability to persuade or affect using soft means, generally embodied in a country's resources; namely culture.

It is also important to note in this stage that soft power could be more than just influence. Nye (2004) argues that soft power is not merely the same as influence. After all, influence can also rest on the hard power of threats and payments, and soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument...it is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acquiescence (p. 6). This suggests that soft power is not limited to just influencing or affecting but on attracting. Therefore, Nye (2004) qualifies the term soft power as the "attractive power". He concludes that hard and soft power are related because they are both aspects of the ability to achieve one's purpose by affecting the behavior of others (Nye, 2004, p.7).

He also compares between the two concepts and states that,

The distinction between them is one of a degree, both in the nature of behavior and in the tangibility of resources. Command power is the ability to change what others do and can on coercion or inducement. Co-optive power, the ability to shape what others want and can rest on attractiveness of one's culture and values or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes others fail to express some preferences because they seem too unrealistic (APA, p. 7).

At this stage of analysis, we are compelled to discuss the resources of soft power, and for that, we need to go back to Nye (2004). He identifies three resources of soft power. He says that the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture, political values and foreign policy when it is legitimate and having moral authority (Nye, 2004, p.11). He then states that a country's soft power rests on how its culture embraces values that are universal, shared and appreciated by other people. He says in this context that when a country's culture includes universal values and its policies promote interests that others share, it increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty that it creates (Nye, 2004, p: 11). He adds that narrow and parochial cultures are less likely to produce soft power. Therefore, countries that have universal cultural orientations are more likely to gain benefits overseas by the means of soft power (APA, p.11).

Now what about smart power? Wilson (2008) defines it as the capacity of an actor to combine elements of hard power and soft power in ways that are mutually reinforcing such that the actor's purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently (p. 110).

In this regard, Wilson (2008) states that,

One requires a firm familiarity of the full repertoire or inventory of the instruments of statecraft. Smart power means knowing the strengths limitations of each instrument. What can armies be expected to achieve? What can targeted broadcast do? What can exchange programs do? Furthermore, one needs the capacity to recognize when to use one kind of power rather than another to achieve national purposes, depending on the context. This is related to the wisdom to know how to combine the elements of coercive power with the power to persuade and to inspire emulation (i.e., to combine hard power with soft power. (p. 116)

According to Wilson (2008), the ability to use smart power requires a full knowledge, awareness and scholarship of the instruments of power used in foreign policy. To use smart power means to be aware of the effectiveness of soft power and hard power along with their limitations.

Not only this, in attempting to define smart power, Nye (2011) calls on to consider the use of power in the context in which it is practiced. According to him, the shift from hard to soft or from soft to hard should be contextualized. He states in this regard that a key step for a smart strategy is choosing among power behaviors...and adjusting tactics so that they reinforce, rather than undercut, each other (Nye, 2011, p. 148). He adds in this regard that for this to happen, smart power strategies should be associated with clear objectives, the consideration of the resources available in exerting smart power, and an assessment of the preferences of the target of attempts at influence (APA, 2011, p. 147).

This section has emphasized that world politics has witnessed the emergence of other forms of power. Getting others to do as one wants could no longer be achieved through coercion; using culture as a soft power resource is discussed to be one of the important pillars of modern diplomatic practices. The role of culture thus acquires more legitimacy when considered within a smart power perspective, all within the realm of cultural diplomacy.

## **6. Cultural diplomacy's domestic objectives:**

When the importance of cultural diplomacy is discussed, its objectives on the international scale receive much interest, and its domestic ones tend to be dismissed. Cultural diplomacy, as much as it can contribute to rapprochement between countries' cultures, establish peace, comprehension and understanding, can do much to the local citizens of countries.

Higham (n.d, as cited in Mark, 2009) argues that domestically, national projects of cultural diplomacy can achieve a wide range of domestic objectives namely improving identity awareness, thus contributing to social cohesion and making the country interesting to its people by showcasing what makes it interesting to foreigners.

Practitioners and scholars of cultural diplomacy talk about the "feel-good" effect (Mark, 2009). Cultural diplomacy can have a great influence on people from different countries; it is a short-cut into improving relations between various cultures. When the effects of cultural diplomacy are proved to be efficient overseas, this influences the people of the host country and makes them proud of their culture. In other words, the recognition of a state's culture and its cultural success contribute to a state's sense of itself, its sense of being a distinctive national community (Benedict, 1991, as cited in Mark, 2009). Cultural diplomacy, then, on a domestic level, works on improving a country's perception of itself and boosts its confidence and self-esteem. It helps people change their perceptions on the importance of cultural investment abroad. It allows citizens to widen their views on the added-value of culture in global politics. It also raises citizens' sensibility towards the protection and preservation of culture (Mark, 2009).

Mark (2009) gives the example of Te Maori, an exhibition of Maori artifacts which toured the US and New Zealand and that was supported by the New Zealand government. The program was assigned two sets of objectives. In addition to promoting trade, investment and tourism and increasing Americans' awareness of New Zealand, Te Maori was set to help increase the mana of the Maori people by showing that the Maori culture is a living tradition and by highlighting the central place of the Maori people in New Zealand. The project aimed at revitalizing the cultural ties of the Maori people with the land, thus mitigating cultural fragmentation.

Mark's example illustrates how cultural diplomacy can serve duality of objectives. To our view, the conceptualization of Te Maori emanates from an awareness of the interconnection between national cohesion and international cultural promotion. That is, in other words, if a country intends to advance its national interests abroad, it must first work on its culture. If a nation lacks confidence in itself, if its citizens do not feel that they are connected to each other, how can they work on nation-branding? Similarly, international success boosts in turn the host country's national success and increases the community's "feel-good" effect. There is then a relation of dependency between the domestic and international effectiveness of cultural diplomacy.

## **7. Cultural diplomacy: great contribution to nation-branding**

Much of the literature that discusses nation-branding in relation to public and cultural diplomacy describes the concepts as overlapping. The aim of this paper is not to draw the similarities and differences between the two concepts; rather, we emphasize the existing unrevealed dialectical role relationship between them.

Public diplomacy refers to a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding of its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies (Tush, n.d., as mentioned in Melissen, 2005, p. 11). PD is referred to as the umbrella concept for other soft power diplomatic practices namely cultural diplomacy, as culture is considered one of the tools that public diplomacy stakeholders often use in communicating with foreign audiences.

Nation-branding is defined by Anholt (2013) to be the reputation of countries. He provides, in our view, a definition that fits the scope of our research. To him, nation-branding refers to a product's or corporation's reputation in the minds of the target audience (APA, 2013, p.1). Similarly, the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (n.d.) looks at nation-branding as the process of applying corporate branding techniques to promote countries. Anholt (2013) and the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (n.d.) agree that nations construct a brand in order to build and manage the reputation of a state, boost their economy and enhance their cultural and political influence in the world.

The discussion surrounding the effectiveness of nation-branding does not miss the fact that a nation's values and attitudes should align with whatever image they are building abroad. Nye (n.d., as cited in Nair, n.d.) mentions in this regard that attraction depends on credibility, warning that overt propaganda or hypocrisy can squander soft power by breeding global cynicism (Theoretical Foundations: Nye's Soft Power in Modern Diplomacy section). He argues that the effectiveness of soft power strategies in general rests on a consistency between a nation's professed values and its actions (Nye, n.d., as cited in Nair, n.d.). Similarly, Anholt (n.d., as cited in Nair, n.d.) says in this regard that a nation's reputation should be built through what he called a "multi-pronged approach" blending together elements from economic, political and cultural spheres instead of a glossy campaign alone (Nation-Branding Strategies and Public Diplomacy section). He emphasizes that a nation's image should be rooted and mirrored in reality 'a national brand identity' and promote what it stands for.

Cultural diplomacy can do much to nation-branding. The above-mentioned claims highlight the necessity of developing authenticity and distinctiveness for a more honest branding. This could be achieved through countries' most special asset; their culture. MacDonald (2011) even considers nation-branding to be one of the newest forms of soft power. She states that it draws heavily on a nation's culture to differentiate itself from others (MacDonald, 2011, p. 13). Therefore, brand distinctiveness could be achieved through the means of culture, Dinnie (2008, as cited in MacDonald, 2011) states in this regard,

Culture gives a nation's brand its true essence, and nations use their identity to draw on deep cultural resources to provide the brand with emotional resonance. Nations have always incorporated cultural expressiveness in their brands through organizations such as the Goethe Institute and The British Council, in other words, through cultural diplomacy (p. 16)

Economic success is then linked to cultural success. Nations need to construct a positive and influential image of their brand. Consumers need to see in the image presented to them values that appeal to them, attract them and encourage them in consuming the brand. Cultural diplomacy helps gaining an emotional and a reputational capital that encourages investment and promotes economic interests. A brand can easily be destroyed if the political or cultural factors of the state are not in line with the brand's perception (Dinnie, 2008, as cited in MacDonald, 2011, p.19).

Cultural diplomacy, through its practitioners and actors, provides new ways of doing things. It helps countries become more creative and more remarkable. Governments need to be aware of the role of cultural diplomacy and thus work on cultural content locally that will in turn enrich the country's brand. Cultural diplomacy, hereby, plays not only the role of a facilitator and moderator, but is more about creating bridges for dialogue and discussion.

Cultural diplomacy then, contributes to nation branding by making national identity economically valuable (MacDonald, 2011). That is, nation branding, through cultural diplomacy could help create and incite an affective and emotional response from the consumer. This will help countries project a positive image of them, manage the perceptions others have of them, and thus create a suitable environment where they can market their brand.

## **8. Morocco's Culture and Nation-Branding:**

### *8.1 Institutionalization of Moroccan cultural diplomacy:*

In the context of Morocco, cultural diplomacy is the responsibility of both state and non-state actors. At the state level, Moroccan cultural diplomacy is conducted by more than eighteen entities, ranging from ministerial departments to cultural institutions in addition to Moroccan embassies abroad. His Majesty's speech at the conference of Ambassadors in 2013 emphasized the importance of cultural diplomacy in the country's foreign policy. His Majesty noted that,

Cultural diplomacy should also be encouraged and backed, particularly through the creation of "Houses of Morocco" and cultural centers abroad, as well as the

organization of more artistic activities and exhibitions to promote the genuine Moroccan cultural heritage at the international level, along with its authentic, rich, plural and unified identity. (Maghreb Arab Press, 2013)

Furthermore, the Royal speech highlighted the importance of cooperation and partnerships with the relevant actors in order to expand and multiply Morocco's opportunities for strengthening its cultural diplomacy. Therefore, the institutionalization of Moroccan CD constitutes a strategic asset that serves the country's interests. These institutions facilitate agreements and partnerships particularly with non-state actors, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy within Morocco's foreign policy. Each institutional actor brings their expertise in promoting culture abroad and cultivates connections that Moroccan diplomacy can utilize in a coordinated and systematic manner (IRES, 2015, [Translated by author], p. 81). Recognizing the importance of culture through the creation of institutions that facilitate its promotion internationally contribute to Morocco's reputation and image-building.

### *8.2 Moroccan Cultreligious diplomacy:*

Religion, like culture, history and other normative structures is a form of soft power (Ozturk, 2023). Mandaville & Hamid (n.d., as cited in Ozturk, 2023) refer to religious soft power as a type of power that countries can use towards structures that they can affect geographically first and then in groups (p. 3). Similarly, Henne (2019, as cited in Ozturk, 2023) argues that conventional foreign policy narratives can become incomplete if religion is excluded. Furthermore, Bettiza (2020, as cited in Ozturk, 2023) contends that religious soft power is considered a nation's sacred capital that can be used in foreign policy. According to him, some states can use it more than others thanks to some of their characteristics and their definition of soft power.

Speaking of the sacred, the concept could be approached from various perspectives. In our view, the sacred could refer to something that is holy namely sacred texts or rituals. In cultural terms, the sacred often refers to valued traditions and practices. This paper combines both these definitions in the approach of the "sacred" and applies them to the Moroccan context.

Alongside cultural diplomacy initiatives, Morocco's soft power is fundamentally shaped by its religious diplomacy which promotes a moderate, non-radicalized interpretation of Islam that underscores tolerance, social cohesion, and spiritual authority. In doing so, Morocco's approach is characterized by incorporating cultural values to religious ones in the promotion of its soft power abroad. This paper introduces the concept of cultreligious diplomacy as being a distinctly Moroccan approach in the conduct of soft power.

This new form of soft power is also characterized by the involvement and inclusion of new institutions and therefore new actors which constitutes the pillars of an inclusive and proactive foreign policy. It is inclusive because it mobilizes a diversified range of domestic actors, but also because it incorporates partners from both African and non-African countries. It is proactive insofar as it seeks to build long-term foundations for cooperation and influence, thus acting in an anticipatory manner rather than reactively responding to external developments.

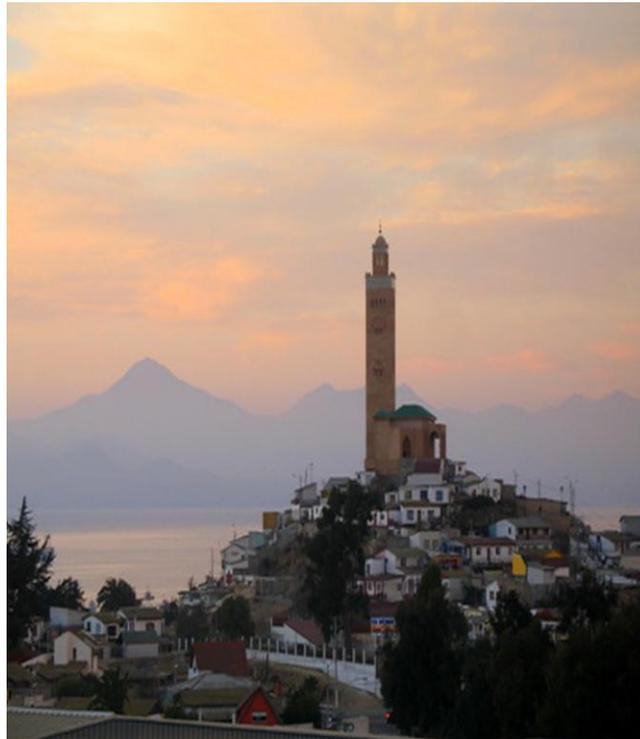
Morocco's cultreligious diplomacy is underpinned by His Majesty's religious authority as *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful). This has conferred the country symbolic and doctrinal legitimacy upon its promotion of a moderate Islamic framework. This is also reinforced by the Monarch's visits to African countries which have covered 27 countries by 2017 (Jeune Afrique, 2016, as cited in Hmimnat, 2018, p.7). In addition, Morocco's cultreligious is promoted through its institutionalization namely through the implementation of the Mohammed VI institute for the training of Imams, Mourchidine and Mourchidates and the Mohammed VI foundation of African Oulema. This is also strengthened by the distribution of the Holy Quran and the launching of training programs of Imams in diverse African countries.

The cultural aspect of Morocco's cultreligious diplomacy is however promoted through Mosque diplomacy. The construction of Moroccan Mosques, emphasizing Moroccan architectural details; ornate minarets, Moroccan zelij, and carved woodwork emphasize the inherent components of the ancestral Moroccan heritage. These decorative features are accentuated with Moroccan symbolic colors, particularly red and green, which are commonly integrated into stained glass, carpets, and other interior elements, reinforcing national identity and aesthetic continuity.

The promotion of Morocco's cultreligious diplomacy is implemented through flagship initiatives, notably the establishment of Moroccan cultural centers abroad, particularly those designed in the form of mosques. A notable example is the Mohammed VI Center for Dialogue of Civilizations in Coquimbo, Chile, inaugurated in 2007. The center is prominently located on a coastal hill, and its minaret is modeled after the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakech, reflecting the richness of Moroccan architectural heritage (see Figures 1–3). The mosque complex houses a cultural center, a library, and a museum, facilitating cross-cultural encounters. Following an agreement signed in August 2017 between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Republic of Chile,

the Center was tasked with promoting Moroccan culture in the host country, organizing cultural and artistic events, offering Arabic language instruction, and disseminating universal values of peace and humanism (Haskouri, 2021).

**Figure 1:** *The Mohammed VI Center for the Dialogue of Civilizations, Coquimbo, Chile*



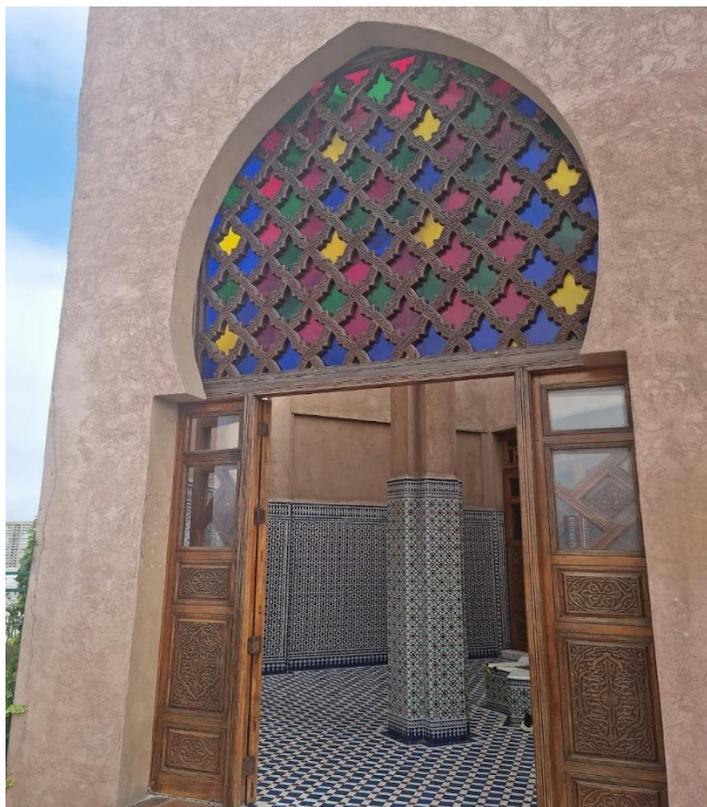
Photograph by Sergio Astorga (2007). Source: Astorga (2007), Flickr. [https://www.flickr.com/photos/sergio\\_astorga/1644447677](https://www.flickr.com/photos/sergio_astorga/1644447677)

**Figure 2:** *The Mohammed VI Center for the Dialogue of Civilizations, Coquimbo, Chile*



Note. Retrieved from Wheree (n.d.), <https://centro-cultural-mohamed-vi.wheree.com/>

**Figure 3:** *The Mohammed VI Center for the Dialogue of Civilizations, Coquimbo, Chile*



Note: Retrieved from Wheree (n.d.), <https://centro-cultural-mohamed-vi.wheree.com/>

Two other centers have been implemented; the Moroccan Cultural Center of Nouakchott, Mauritania in 1987; and Dar Al-Maghrib in Montreal in 2012. The former takes the form of a Mosque. It seeks to promote Morocco's rich culture and history and strengthen its ties with Mauritania through the organization of diverse events ranging from conferences, workshops and competitions in arts, philosophy, and literature (Hatim, 2021). Dar Al-Maghrib in Montreal is part of Morocco's strategy in promoting Moroccan culture and civilizations throughout the world, facilitating the integration of Moroccan diaspora established in Canada and consolidating their ties with their home country. Similar to the other centers, Dar Al-Maghrib organizes a variety of events; Moroccan cultural days, Moroccan films week, festivals, Moroccan culinary art activities, Arabic classes and Moroccan traditional clothing events, .... Etc.

### *8.3 Branding the nation: Football in the service of Moroccan Cultural Diplomacy*

Sports diplomacy can be considered a form of soft power. The practice refers to the use of sports as a medium of communication with foreign audiences. In Morocco's case in particular, it can be understood as a subset of cultural diplomacy as it is through sports that the country was able to promote its cultural identity, values, and heritage internationally.

Morocco's outstanding performance in the recent international football tournaments has contributed to enhancing the country's international visibility and strengthening its soft power. Moroccan football has now become a key instrument of Moroccan cultural diplomacy, thus promoting its brand internationally.

It is worth mentioning that Morocco's participation and success in major sporting events, particularly since the Qatar World Cup of 2022 has also had domestic impacts. In this context, Mark (2009) mentions the feel-good effect as a domestic impact of cultural diplomacy. He argues that, beyond promoting a positive image of a country and its people on the international scale, cultural diplomacy strengthens a nation's appreciation of its culture and identity. Ultimately, he argues, the more a nation feels good about itself the more it is to project a better image internationally. In this regard, the 2022 World Cup of Qatar, for instance,

illustrates this dynamic. As the first competition in which the Moroccan national team was led by coach Walid Regragui, the tournament revived and highlighted several values that are embedded in Moroccan popular culture. "Dirrou Niya" was the expression that gained widespread popularity since the Qatar 2022 World Cup. In Moroccan culture, "niya" refers to faith, sincere and good intentions, and is believed to be the foundation of any successful endeavor. The expression, first introduced by Walid Regragui, and later on adopted by Moroccan players and the Moroccan people, became a symbolic call for optimism, unity and collective belief. Beyond its supporting connotation, "niya" represents a deeper cultural value that is deeply rooted in our ancestral Moroccan culture. 'Dirou Niya' then became a slogan that is used in Moroccans' daily routine, and served as a reminder of the culture of Morocco to Moroccans. This boosted Moroccans' cultural identity and contributed to their national pride. The tournament thus became a vehicle for the expression of nationalism and social cohesion.

"Sir, Sir, Sir" or 'go, go, go forward' was another expression that generated the admiration of the whole world. It is a Moroccan chant that audiences repeated during the games. The repetition of this phrase served as a collective encouragement for the national team. Beyond its supporting connotation, the chant denoted national collectivism and solidarity among Moroccans. These cultural expressions were used in public spaces, stadiums and social media. They illustrate how cultural expressions could both reflect the identity of a country and its people and serve as a vehicle of cultural promotion.

The 2022 FIFA World Cup highlighted another important aspect of Moroccan culture which attracted the attention of global media. This is represented in the Moroccan players' celebration of success with their family members. The Guardian, for instance, associates Morocco's success with maternal support. The article describes how Moroccan players ran over to their family members (mothers) with whom they celebrated their successes. The Guardian also discusses the arrangements made for Moroccan players' family members namely parents for them to attend Morocco's games in Qatar. Walid Regragui mentioned in this regard that "our success is not possible without our parents" (Magee, 2022). The article notes that this was the coach's morale-building strategy to support the national team and boost their performance in the tournament (APA, 2022). Celebration with parents reflects a key aspect of Moroccan culture, and it helped create an ever-lasting international brand image for Morocco.

The 2025 Africa Cup of Nations organized and hosted by Morocco represents two other assets of Moroccan cultural diplomacy. First, the organization of the Cup reflects the country's investment in the sporting sector as vector of promoting its image and reputation worldwide. This also demonstrates the importance the country allocates to cooperation with African countries. Such events not only enhance Morocco's global visibility but also reinforces the country's role as an active partner in the African continent.

In addition to the sporting dimension, the tournament also provided a platform for cultural exchange. Moroccan media particularly 2M TV, facilitated this interaction through the production and broadcasting of cultural culinary programs. Can Kitchen stands out as the flagship program that highlighted both Moroccan and African cuisine in which Chef Moha (Moroccan Chef) hosts African chefs from multiple countries where each episode takes place in a different Moroccan city. This reflects Morocco as a country that celebrates and embraces cultural diversity.

This section highlighted some of the assets of Moroccan cultural diplomacy. The aim is to showcase how Moroccan football laid the ground for Morocco to establish a brand on the international level. This is due to the cultural dimension of Moroccan sports diplomacy, as many cultural values, that are embedded in Moroccan culture, attracted the attention of global media which led them to interpret, analyze and admire their cultural significance. This paragraph illustrated the non-material impacts of Moroccan sports diplomacy (constructing the brand), which is contributing to the achievement of tangible outcomes namely at the political and economic levels.

## 9. Conclusion:

The aim of this paper was to explore the "cultural" in cultural diplomacy, thus highlighting the importance of culture as an asset and a tool of soft power, a concept formerly introduced by Nye (2004). The paper connects the potential of culture to two main goals; the domestic objectives of cultural diplomacy and nation-branding. Drawing on this foundational background, we discussed and analyzed some of the assets of Moroccan cultural diplomacy namely the institutionalization of the practice, cultreligious diplomacy as a distinctly Moroccan approach combining both culture and religion as forms of soft power, and sports diplomacy as tools that construct Morocco's brand on the international level. This paper cherishes the efforts implemented by different Moroccan stakeholders in the conduct of cultural diplomacy.

**Funding:** This study received no external funding.

**Conflicts of interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Publisher's note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

## References

- [1] Anholt, S. (2013). Beyond the Nation Brand: The Role of Image and Identity in International Relations. SURFACE
- [2] Astorga, S. (2007). [Photograph]. Flickr. [https://www.flickr.com/photos/sergio\\_astorga/1644447677](https://www.flickr.com/photos/sergio_astorga/1644447677)
- [3] Birukou, A., Blanzieri, E., Giorgini, P., Giunchigla, F. (2013). A Formal Definition of Culture. In: Sycara, K., Gelfand, M., Abbe, A. (eds) Models for Intercultural Collaboration and Negotiation. Advances in Group Decision and Negotiation, vol 6. Springer, Dordrecht. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-5574-1\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-5574-1_1)
- [4] Bound, K., Briggs, R., Holden, J., & Jones, S. (2007). Cultural diplomacy. Demos. [https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/Cultural\\_diplomacy\\_-\\_web.pdf](https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/Cultural_diplomacy_-_web.pdf)
- [5] Brown, N., McIlwraith., Gonzalez, T.L. (2020). Perspectives: An Open Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. American Anthropological Association.
- [6] Centro Cultural Mohamed VI. (n.d.). *Centro Cultural Mohamed VI*. Wheree. <https://centro-cultural-mohamed-vi.wheree.com/>
- [7] European Commission. (2016, June 8). *A new strategy to put culture at the heart of EU international relations* (Press release IP/16/2074). [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_16\\_2074](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_16_2074)
- [8] Gienow-Hecht, J. C. E., & Donfried, M. C. (Eds.). (2010). Searching for a cultural diplomacy. Berghahn Books.
- [9] Haskouri, K. (2021, September 10). *Mohammed VI cultural center in Chile reopens after restoration*. Morocco World News. <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2021/09/55204/mohammed-vi-cultural-center-in-chile-reopens-after-restoration>
- [10] Hatim, Y. (2021). Moroccan Cultural Center in Nouakchott Builds Bridges With Mauritania. Morocco World News. <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2021/01/62462/moroccan-cultural-center-in-nouakchott-builds-bridges-with-mauritania/>
- [11] Hmimnat, S. (2018). Morocco's Religious "Soft Power" in Africa As a Strategy Supporting Morocco's Expansion in Africa. Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis
- [12] Huck, C. (n., d). What is Culture?
- [13] Institut Royal des Études Stratégiques. (2017). La diplomatie culturelle marocaine : Proposition d'un modèle rénové. [https://www.ires.ma/sites/default/files/docs\\_publications/RAPPORT-DIPLOMATIE-CULTURELLE\\_0.pdf](https://www.ires.ma/sites/default/files/docs_publications/RAPPORT-DIPLOMATIE-CULTURELLE_0.pdf)
- [14] Institute for Cultural Diplomacy. (n.d.). *What is cultural diplomacy?* [https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en\\_what-is-cultural-diplomacy](https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en_what-is-cultural-diplomacy)
- [15] LeBaron, M. (2003, July). Culture and Conflict. *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture-conflict>
- [16] MacDonald, K. (2011). Expression and Emotion: Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding in New Zealand. School of Political Science and International Relations Victoria University of Wellington. [https://openaccess.wgtn.ac.nz/articles/thesis/Expression\\_and\\_Emotion\\_Cultural\\_Diplomacy\\_and\\_Nation\\_Branding\\_in\\_New\\_Zealand/16992646?file=31430653](https://openaccess.wgtn.ac.nz/articles/thesis/Expression_and_Emotion_Cultural_Diplomacy_and_Nation_Branding_in_New_Zealand/16992646?file=31430653)
- [17] Magee, W. (2022, December). Players' mums take centre stage as Morocco make history at World Cup. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/dec/11/morocco-world-cup-players-mothers>
- [18] Maghreb Arab Press. (2013, August 30). *Monarch addresses message to opening session of first conference of ambassadors of HM the King*. <https://www.mapnews.ma/en/activites-royales/monarch-addresses-message-opening-session-first-conference-ambassadors-hm-king>
- [19] Mark, S. (2009). A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy. Netherlands Institute of International Relations. Clingendael.
- [20] Melissen, J. (2005). The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations. Palgrave macmillan
- [21] Nair, A. (n.d.). *Soft power and nation branding: Culture, influence, and global perceptions*. Magenta Advisory. <https://magentaadvisory.org/insights-articles-research/soft-power-and-nation-branding-culture-influence-and-global-perceptions>
- [22] Nye, J. S. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs
- [23] Nye, J. S. (2011). *The Future of Power*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Ozturk, A. E. (2023). Religious Soft Power: Definition(s), Limits and Usage. *Religions* 14: 135. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020135>
- [24] Rivera, T. (2015). Distinguishing Cultural Relations From Cultural Diplomacy: The British Council's Relationship With Her Majesty's Government. Figueroa Press. Los Angeles
- [25] Sociology Institute. (2022, November 20). *Material vs. non-material culture: The tangible and intangible constructs of society*. <https://sociology.institute/introduction-to-sociology/material-non-material-culture-tangible-intangible-society/>
- [26] Pratama, R. (2019). Ethnocentrism and Bias Incidents: Is There a Common Thread? *Culturalistics: Journal of Cultural, Literary and Linguistic Studies* 3 (1).
- [27] Sewell, W. H., Jr. (2005). The concept(s) of culture. In *Logics of history: Social theory and social transformation* (pp. 152–174). University of Chicago Press. [https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2010/SOC978/SOC\\_470\\_Sewell.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2010/SOC978/SOC_470_Sewell.pdf)
- [28] Trunkos, J. (2013). What is soft power capability and how it impact foreign policy? Institute for Cultural Diplomacy. <https://culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/content/pdf/participant-papers/2013-acdusa/What-Is-Soft-Power-Capability-And-How-Does-It-Impact-Foreign-Policy--Judit-Trunkos.pdf>
- [29] Wilson, E. J. III. (2008). *Hard power, soft power, smart power*. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616(1), 110–124. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207312618>
- [30] Zimmerman, K.A. (2017, February, 11). What is culture? World Tennis Guide. <https://wtgseniors.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/definition-kim-ann-zimmermann-what-is-culture/>