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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Still Searching for a Moroccan Cultural Diplomacy

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| ABSTRACT

The ambiguities that surround the concept of cultural diplomacy have led scholars to approach it in different ways. These discrepancies largely concern both the objectives attributed to cultural diplomacy and the actors involved in its practice. Gienow-Hecht (2010) identifies three schools of thought: one that associates cultural diplomacy with political objectives; another that views the practice as functioning outside the realm of the state and a third that emphasizes the heterogeneity of the structure involved in cultural diplomacy, including both public and private actors. To resolve these ambiguities, the authors suggest that cultural diplomacy should rather be defined in terms of concept and structure. In other words, time and location shape both the meaning of cultural diplomacy and the actors responsible for its implementation. This paper reviews two sections of the introduction of *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*: the first, "What Are We Searching For? Culture, Diplomacy, Agents and the State", authored by Gienow-Hecht (2010), and the second, "The Model of Cultural Diplomacy: Power, Distance and the Promise of Civil Society" co-authored by Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010). This paper further applies the proposed model of cultural diplomacy to the Moroccan context. The analysis revealed the practical applicability of the model in addressing Moroccan cultural diplomacy. It suggests that it may help overcome some of the challenges currently affecting this field particularly the multiplicity of the actors involved in the practice. This paper argues that the institutionalization of Moroccan cultural diplomacy through the creation of a federating institution would clarify the actors involved in the practice and better define their roles. Such an initiative would bring relevant stakeholders together to determine the objectives attributed to Moroccan cultural diplomacy.

| KEYWORDS

Moroccan cultural diplomacy, Model, Concept, Structure, Institutionalization

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**1. Introduction:**

Cultural diplomacy, the use of culture as a tool of achieving foreign policy objectives has attracted little scholarly attention particularly in Morocco. On the international scale, debates surrounding the practice largely revolve around establishing a standard definition of the concept. As a result, definitions fluctuate between conceptual and structural lines. On the one hand, cultural diplomacy is considered an exclusively state-driven practice which objectives are primarily political. On the other hand, it is seen as operating beyond the realm of the state, thereby involving non-state actors. A third school of thought considers cultural diplomacy to function outside the sphere of politics (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010).

This paper reviews two introductory sections of *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010), the first section, titled "What Are We Searching For? Culture, Diplomacy, Agents and the State", authored by Gienow-Hecht (2010), and the second, "The Model of Cultural Diplomacy: Power, Distance and the Promise of Civil Society" co-authored by Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010).

More specifically, this paper examines the second section because it offers a practical framework for approaching cultural diplomacy across different national contexts. It suggests that each country has its own story to tell to the world depending on its history, culture and their colonial and postcolonial realities. This paper further argues that such narratives also depend on the importance nation-states attribute to cultural diplomacy in their foreign policies as well as the institutional and financial resources they allocate to cultural action abroad. Therefore, this study adopts the model of cultural diplomacy introduced by Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) and applies it to the Moroccan context. It aims to answer the following research question:

- To what extent can Gienow-Hecht and Donfried's (2010) model for defining cultural diplomacy be applied to the Moroccan context? What limitations and prospects would prevent or facilitate the implementation of the said framework?

## **2. Cultural diplomacy: Unresolved Issues**

Simplistically defined, cultural diplomacy, the combination of culture and diplomacy refers to the deployment of a country's cultural resources in order to strengthen relationships, minimize misunderstanding and promote national interests. This definition reveals an underlying ambiguity that has put cultural diplomacy at the margins of scholarly research. The second part of the definition raises this confusion as the goals of cultural diplomacy are, to this day, not clear; should the practice simply raise understanding or rapprochement, or does it go further to promote political and economic agendas. Looking at it from a management and strategy theory perspectives, a diplomatic practice necessarily involves a strategy that in turn should encompass short, medium and long-term objectives that are only achieved through careful planning and implementation. In the case of cultural diplomacy, achieving rapprochement and mutual understanding are considered by theorists long term objectives that cannot be achieved immediately. By contrast, the pursuit of foreign policy objectives is often seen as short-to-medium term objectives, typically requiring three to five years to be attained.

When discussion on the definition of cultural diplomacy is evoked, the American and the Soviet experiences during the Cold War are often central references. However, the consideration of these countries' experiences as the only reference points overlooks *cultural diplomacies* around the world. Therefore, a holistic approach to cultural diplomacy is therefore needed to enrich our understanding of how other countries have used their culture as a tool to achieve diverse and context-specific objectives. Accordingly, Gienow-Hecht (2010) stresses the necessity of establishing a teleological approach to the concept of cultural diplomacy, that is, examining it beyond the parameters of the Cold War and considering it not for the causes it was raised for, but the purposes it serves and the actors involved in it. The author suggests that approaching cultural diplomacy within different historical and temporal contexts significantly reshapes its interpretation.

Speaking of the unrevealed objectives of cultural diplomacy, Gienow-Hecht (2010) differentiates between three main schools of thought that put its objectives (*cultural diplomacy*) at both ends of a single spectrum. Fayet (as cited in Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010) equates cultural diplomacy with cultural propaganda. This perspective is situated within American and Soviet cultural diplomacies during the Cold War, at times when the USSR deployed its cultural resources through the organization of tours by Soviet artists, scholars and exhibitions outside Russia, while welcoming foreign journalists and representatives of international humanitarian organizations. The United States of America, on its end, instrumentalized its already established cultural presence and resonance worldwide. The US Information Agency (USIA), a huge gathering of intellectuals (the Congress for Cultural Freedom), as well as intimate artists' and writers' exchanges and music programs on Radio Europe made the implementation of the American thought in Europe possible which aimed to turn Europeans away from communism and socialism and introduce Western culture to the Soviet citizens and artists (Schneider, 2004). Other scholars namely Magnúsdóttir and Vaughan share the same view: cultural diplomacy is a state matter that should involve limited private participation (Gienow-Hecht, 2010).

On another level, Dueck and Macher (as cited in Gienow-Hecht, 2010) refer to cultural diplomacy as an instrument to work at the exclusion of politics. From this perspective, cultural diplomacy should serve as a means to establish ties with countries that have hostile relations. In the same line of thought, Macher's study (as cited in Gienow-Hecht, 2010) found that while some scholars equate cultural diplomacy with propaganda, its origins are neither propagandistic nor new; it represents a means to establish ties between countries who are politically unpalatable to one another (p. 10).

The third school defines cultural diplomacy to function beyond the realm of the state. Okabe, Makita, and Kawamura (as cited in Gienow-Hecht, 2010) state that CD's structure can be extremely heterogenous, i.e., combining both government and non-government actors. To them, cultural diplomacy should serve to achieve two main objectives; the promotion abroad of "national culture" and interactive international cultural exchange. Frieberg (as cited in Gienow-Hecht, 2010) follows a similar line of thought; she states that cultural diplomacy entails diplomatic activities by non-state actors who, in the name of a nation, people, or larger ethical question, attempt to accomplish a change in foreign relations (p. 10). Ota is said to take the most extreme approach as he dismisses the role of the state and argues that cultural diplomacy can be practiced by whoever that identifies with that country.

The unclear structure of cultural diplomacy has attracted discussions in this regard. Cultural diplomacy has been practiced for centuries by a variety of actors. This is to say, that, historically, practically, no set of actors of cultural diplomacy actually

constituted its standard structure. Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) discuss how prior to World War I, cultural diplomacy remained an unofficial form of diplomacy with the absence of formal institutions that can be associated with the practice namely the GOETHE Institute of Germany, Alliance Française (that was a formally non-governmental institution), among others. Cultural proliferation in Europe then relied much on private initiatives, NGOs and interest groups.

This discussion raises two main issues regarding the structure of cultural diplomacy; can the state do much without non-state actors? Most of the time, the state funds and encourages cultural diplomacy, but its actual agents are cultural practitioners such as artists, musicians, painters, and chefs without whom cultural content cannot be transmitted to foreign audiences. Second, if state and non-state actors are both agents of cultural diplomacy, to what extent are their respective interests aligned? In this regard, Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) argue that the moment non-state actors enter (their interests, desires, lines of policy), the very notion of state interests becomes blurred. This is to say that the plurality of the actors involved in cultural diplomacy implies a certain degree of divergence of interests among these actors.

On another level, what is to be achieved by cultural diplomacy is not universally agreed upon. The edited volume by Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) highlights the diversity of experiences in the practice of cultural diplomacy. These range from initiatives aimed at establishing relations between countries with little or no prior political or cultural ties, to cases where nations have instrumentalized culture for explicitly diplomatic and political objectives. This discussion has even pushed historians to question the agency of cultural diplomacy and therefore whether or not it could be considered a form of diplomacy. Aguilar (as cited in Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010) states in this regard that as long as cultural diplomacy constitutes a policy that is designed to encourage public opinion in order to influence a foreign government and its attitudes towards the sender country, it should be considered a diplomatic practice (p. 14). Canadian cultural diplomacy, for instance, focused on countering the European perception of the country as an extension of the USA. Similarly, Australia has instrumentalized cultural diplomacy in order to reject the image of the farthest outpost of Anglo-Saxon civilization and instead emphasize its distinctiveness and develop friendly ties with Oceanic and Asian countries. Likewise, Chinese-Japanese relations have improved thanks to Chinese cultural diplomacy which aimed at fostering relations with non-communist countries.

By contrast, the United States' and the Soviet Union's instrumentalization of cultural diplomacy in the Cold war demonstrate how culture served political purposes. Both countries' policymakers understood that in order to win the hearts and minds and to persuade Europeans with their ideologies, they had to appeal to their cultural identities rather than their political ones. Therefore, psychological warfare and cultural infiltration characterized the American and Russian cultural diplomacies (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010).

Lastly, our discussion turns to the means through which modern nations-states such as Japan, Germany and Italy conduct their cultural diplomacy. Initially, ambiguity also arises around the term 'culture'. Mark (2009) mentions in this regard that there is no consensus on what the term 'cultural' entails. Traditionally, he explains, the cultural component of cultural diplomacy referred to high culture including visual arts, literature, theatre, ballet, music and other forms associated primarily with elite audiences. He further argues that in recent years, this assumption has changed as cultural diplomacy now frequently incorporates popular culture and cultural activities that attract mass audiences. This indicates that there is no agreement on which aspects of national cultures need to be showcased. Therefore, modern nation-states tend to instrumentalize the most influential elements of their culture as part of their strategic positioning.

Therefore, finding a universally agreed-upon definition of cultural diplomacy seems almost impossible. In addition to the ambiguities discussed in this section, literature has long tried to solve these semantic and practical inconsistencies by comparing cultural diplomacy to other similar practices namely cultural relations. Differences between these concepts are generally identified in terms of agency, mutuality, intentions, and objectives. Cultural relations, for instance, are often described as mutual and apolitical in nature, whereas cultural diplomacy is more commonly associated with unilateral action, political agendas, and strategic interests (Rivera, 2015). The difficulty in establishing clear distinctions between these concepts becomes even more pronounced when the state enters the equation as the involvement of non-governmental actors is often perceived as lending greater credibility and authenticity to such practices.

### 3. Unresolved Issues: Paths Toward Resolution

Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) argue that cultural diplomacy cannot be approached through a single universal framework, as its meanings and objectives vary according to historical and geopolitical contexts. In other words, they are convinced that defining cultural diplomacy requires close attention to *when* and *where* it is practiced.

Building on this argument, we contend that some countries will naturally assign cultural diplomacy to non-state actors, particularly because such actors often provide the resources and infrastructure through which cultural activities are organized. In other contexts, cultural diplomacy may rely on partnerships between public and private actors, while in certain cases it may remain primarily a state mission, regardless of whether the state possesses the financial or institutional capacity to sustain it. Ultimately, these varying interpretations may all be valid, as the definition of cultural diplomacy shifts according to context.

Following the same line of thought, Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) argue that considering time and location in defining cultural diplomacy requires taking into account two variables: concept and structure. The authors suggest that changing the context in which cultural diplomacy is practiced inevitably alters the concept itself. Therefore, a more accurate analysis of the practice can only be achieved within the specific context in which it occurs. The conceptual framework, in this regard, examines the motivations underlying the implementation of a cultural diplomacy strategy. In other words, it addresses questions such as what do nations, rulers, and governments seek to achieve by familiarizing others with their culture, and what is the content of their programs? Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) argue that the motivations behind implementing cultural diplomacy vary from one country to another and the practice itself may take different forms.

The structural approach examines the organization of cultural diplomacy, namely the responsible agents involved, their relationship to state interests, whether they share a common purpose, and how they coordinate to achieve the desired outcomes. It also considers the homogeneity or heterogeneity of these actors as a means of addressing and potentially reconciling their divergent interests.

#### **4. Implications on Moroccan Cultural Diplomacy:**

Gienow-Hecht and Donfried's (2010) approach to looking at cultural diplomacy in terms of time and location is applicable to the Moroccan context. Boutabssil's (2021) study on the evaluation tools used by the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to measure the impact of Moroccan cultural diplomacy found that the latter is implemented through an adaptive strategy shaped by "timing and context". Boutabssil (2021) further argues that Morocco's cultural diplomacy strategy is characterized by adaptability, as it is primarily shaped by international developments. Consequently, the objectives of Moroccan cultural diplomacy tend to evolve in response to changing global contexts. Therefore, while Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) emphasize that cultural diplomacy narratives shift across different geographic contexts, the Moroccan case suggests that similar shifts can also occur within the same national framework over time, as political priorities and intended audiences evolve.

The conceptual and structural approach to defining Moroccan cultural diplomacy, however, poses one main obstacle: the multiplicity of actors involved in the practice. Sommerfeldt and Buhmann (2019) argue that the plurality of soft power actors obstructs the establishment of shared tools for impact evaluation. This fragmentation also limits the potential for developing a coherent and unified cultural diplomacy strategy.

This multiplicity is also reflected in the Moroccan context. The Royal Institute for Strategic Studies (IRES, 2015) reports that more than eighteen actors are involved in Moroccan cultural diplomacy, not including Moroccan cultural centers abroad and embassies. The report further argues that cultural diplomacy has become nearly everyone's responsibility. It adds that the way through which we approach this multiplicity and the level of synergy between these actors can either constitute an obstacle or an asset (IRES, 2015, [Author's translation]). Similarly, in its evaluation of cultural programs organized by the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad, the Court of Auditors identified several shortcomings in cultural diplomacy particularly insufficient coordination between local actors and across sectors (Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad [CCME], 2018).

In the same line of thought, Boutabssil (2026) emphasizes that the presence of institutions involved in cultural diplomacy constitutes a significant asset. First, it facilitates the establishment of partnerships, as these institutions are specifically designed to create such opportunities. Second, it contributes to Morocco's international nation-branding by positioning the country as a modern state that values its national heritage and develops paradiplomatic strategies to promote this heritage internationally. However, it is equally important to note that institutionalization remains incomplete in the absence of a coordinating entity (Boutabssil, 2021; IRES, 2015). Therefore, defining Moroccan cultural diplomacy in structural terms depends on the existence of institutional coordination among the actors involved in its practice.

Deficiencies at the structural level have repercussions on the conceptual approach to defining cultural diplomacy. The plurality of actors involved in Moroccan cultural diplomacy implies that each stakeholder develops its own action plans, even though these entities often remain interdependent in practice through funding mechanisms and occasional collaboration and coordination. Nevertheless, each institution operates within its specific domain of expertise and shapes its interventions in accordance with its organizational objectives and sectoral competencies. It should, however, be emphasized that His Majesty King Mohammed VI has outlined the general orientations of Moroccan cultural diplomacy. At the Conference of Ambassadors in 2013, His Majesty associated Moroccan cultural diplomacy with the promotion of Moroccan cultural heritage at the international level, alongside the country's authentic, rich, plural, and unified identity (Maghreb Arab Press, 2013). These guidelines constitute the framework that Moroccan stakeholders in both the public and private sectors are expected to follow in developing a unified cultural diplomacy strategy. The Royal Institute for Strategic Studies further emphasizes that, alongside the development of a unified doctrine among all stakeholders, impact evaluation strategies are equally crucial to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of strategies implemented abroad (IRES, 2015).

The absence of a unified strategy in pluralistic contexts is an understandable issue in academia. Pluralistic organizing tensions are typical in the public sector and not-for-profit organizations which develop different bureaucratic organizing practices and processes to cater to the interests of autonomous knowledge workers and cope with their administrative pressures (Jarzabkowski and Fenton, 2006, p. 3). Therefore, what is lacking is a practical, scientific and theoretical foundation that justifies the legitimacy of the federating entity whose mission would be to coordinate all cultural diplomacy actors while preserving their institutional autonomy. What the suggested framework should also tackle is:

- Strategizing possibilities that account for the long-term nature of cultural diplomacy without overlooking the adaptive nature of the current approach;
- Elaborating impact evaluation strategies aligned with effective governance and strategic planning standards.

These procedures also contribute to the development of a results-based strategy that reinforces both the long-term vision and the adaptive dimensions of Moroccan cultural diplomacy. It is within such a framework that the conceptual and structural approach proposed by Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) can operate most effectively.

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, this paper contends that the conceptual and structural framework proposed by Gienow-Hecht and Donfried (2010) is applicable to the Moroccan context. However, its effectiveness remains contingent upon the establishment of a federating organism responsible for unifying the visions and strategies of Moroccan cultural diplomacy stakeholders. While this paper acknowledges and values the efforts invested in promoting Moroccan culture abroad, it argues that stronger coordination mechanisms are essential for enhancing the overall effectiveness and strategic coherence of Moroccan cultural diplomacy.

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