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THE RELEVANCE OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN BUILDING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF NIGERIA – NIGER TIES

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy is an important tool for building relationships between nations, and Nigeria and Niger are prime examples of how this can be done. Both countries have a long history of cultural exchange, with shared traditions of music, literature, trade and art. Through cultural exchanges, such as festivals, concerts, and exhibitions, the people of both countries have been able to foster mutual understanding and respect. This has helped to strengthen ties between the two nations, and has also led to increased cooperation in other areas, such as trade and other economic development, and has helped to create a more peaceful and stable environment in the region. Cultural exchanges between the two countries have not only helped to foster positive relations, but have also brought tangible benefits to the people of both nations. The paper therefore, explores the cultural ties between Nigeria and Niger Republic, focusing on the period preceding the recent military coup in Niger by using historical approach of data analysis. By examining the historical, social and economic dimensions of their relationship, the paper provides insight into the nature and significance of cultural interactions between these neighboring nations. The study emphasizes the importance of cultural diplomacy in fostering regional integration, promoting peaceful co-existence and fostering socio-economic development between the two Nations.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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Introduction

Nigeria and Niger Republic, two neighboring countries in West Africa, share a long history of cultural exchange, dating back to the pre-colonial era. In recent years, cultural diplomacy has played an important role in strengthening the ties between the two countries. This has been facilitated by several factors, including, the growth of trade and tourism, the promotion of exchange programs, historical, social and other economic influences. These developments have led to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the cultures of both countries, and have helped to foster cooperation and mutual respect. Understanding the depth and complexity of these connections is crucial for fostering regional integration, promoting peaceful coexistence and driving socio-economic development in the West African sub-region.

Throughout history, Nigeria and Niger Republic have been linked by shared trade networks, migration patterns and cultural practices. These ties have facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas and people contributing to the development of a unique cultural landscape in the region. By exploring the historical context of their relations, we can gain insights into the forces that have shaped their cultural interactions over time.

Socially and culturally, Nigeria and Niger Republic are home to numerous ethnic groups with shared heritage, linguistic affinities and religious practices. These commonalities have played a vital role in bridging the cultural divide and promoting a sense of unity between the two nations. Furthermore, the economic aspects of cultural relations cannot be overlooked. Trade, tourism and investment have served as catalysts for cultural exchange and cooperation between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Economic collaborations have not only facilitated the flow of goods and services but have also contributed to a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's cultural heritage.

Cultural diplomacy has played a significant role in strengthening the ties between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Diplomatic efforts focused on promoting cultural understanding and cooperation have paved the way for joint projects, cultural exchanges and educational programs. These initiatives have not only celebrated the richness of their shared culture but have also fostered goodwill and deepened the bond between the two nations. However, the dynamics of cultural relations have not been without challenges. Border disputes, security concerns and political dynamics have occasionally strained the cultural ties between Nigeria and Niger

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Prof. S. T. Addo [GHANA]

Republic. Understanding these challenges is crucial for addressing them effectively and nurturing a more robust and resilient cultural relationship. This paper explores how cultural diplomacy has played a role in promoting mutual understanding and cooperation between Nigeria and Niger, and discusses the potential benefits and challenges of this relationship before the recent military coup. The paper contributed to the deeper understanding of the dynamics and complexities of these relations and highlights the role of cultural diplomacy in fostering regional integration, peaceful coexistence and socio-economic development in West Africa.

Conceptual Clarification

Central to this intellectual discourse are two key concepts to be conceptualized for better understanding. These are cultural diplomacy and diplomatic relations.

Cultural Diplomacy as a Concept

Peradventure, the concept 'cultural diplomacy' could be best understood if the word 'culture' first be defined. One has to admit from the onset that the term culture has several connotations offered by different scholars. According to a renown anthropologist E.B. Taylor (1871), 'culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. This definition emphasizes on the shared beliefs and practices of a society. Similarly, in the words of Clifford Geertz, (1973), a renowned sociologist, 'culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life'. According to Geertz, culture is not just about observable behaviors, but also about the underlying meanings and interpretations that people attach to those behaviors. This conception has had a profound influence on anthropological and sociological thinking about culture.

From the other hand, the term diplomacy received a host of interpretations and meanings by different scholars, especially by diplomatic historians, political scientist and scholars of international relations. Firstly, from the School of Realism, represented by the diplomat and political scientist, Hans Morgenthau, (1948), who defined diplomacy as 'the art and practice of conducting negotiations between nations, emphasizing the importance of power and self-interest in

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Prof. S. T. Addo [GHANA]

international relations'. However, from the School of Constructivism, represented by Alexander Wendt, who defined diplomacy as 'the process of constructing a shared social reality through communication'.

Extracting from the above, cultural diplomacy is a specific type of diplomacy that focuses on the exchange of culture and ideas between states. It involves the use of culture, art, music, sports, economy and other forms of expression to build relationships and foster understanding between peoples. Cultural diplomacy is often considered a 'soft power' tool, as it does not rely on coercion or force, but rather on the persuasive power of culture and ideas.

In addition, the term 'diplomatic relations' as argued by Joseph Nye, (2004), 'are formalized relationships between states that are intended to facilitate peaceful interaction and communication', in this definition, Nye emphasizes the importance of diplomacy in maintaining peace and stability between states.

The Historical Context of Nigeria's Cultural Relations with Niger Republic

The historical context of Nigeria's cultural relations with Niger Republic before the recent military coup is crucial to understanding the depth and evolution of their interactions. Several factors including trade networks, migration patterns and colonial influences have shaped the cultural ties between these neighboring nations in West Africa.

Trade networks have long been a significant aspect of the historical relationship between Nigeria and Niger Republic. The trans-Saharan trade routes played a vital role in connecting the regions and facilitating the exchange of goods and ideas. According to Falola, (2001), these trade routes were instrumental in fostering cultural diffusion and establishing social and economic connections. The extensive trade in goods such as salt, gold, textile and slaves contributed to the emergence of shared cultural practices and a sense of interconnectedness between the people of Nigeria and Niger Republic.

Migration patterns have also influenced the cultural landscape of the region. The movement of people across borders has resulted in the blending of ethnic group and sharing of cultural traditions. For instance, the Hausa ethnic group present in both Nigeria and Niger has been a key player in facilitating cultural exchanges between the two nations. As noted by anthropologist Paul Stoller,)1997) the Hausa people have a long history of migration and have served as cultural intermediaries in the region .Their linguistic and cultural similarities have

contributed to a sense of shared identity and fostered cultural cooperation between Nigeria and Niger Republic.

Colonial influences have left a lasting imprint on the cultural relations between Nigeria and Niger. Both countries were colonized by European powers with Nigeria falling under British rule and Niger under French control. The colonial period significantly impacted the socio-cultural dynamics of the region. Western education, institutions and languages introduced during this time have influenced the cultural practices and social structures of both nations. One of the renowned historians, Catherine Boone, (2003), argues that colonial rule established administrative boundaries that later became national borders, shaping the political and cultural landscapes of Nigeria and Niger.

Social and Cultural Interactions between Nigeria and Niger Republic

Social and cultural interactions have played a significant role in shaping Nigeria's relations with Niger. Shared ethnic groups, linguistic affinities and religious practices have fostered a sense of unity and facilitated cultural exchanges between the two nations.

Ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Arawa, Gubawa and Zarma are present in both in Nigeria and Niger Republic, forming a common thread of cultural heritage. The Hausa in particular have been instrumental in connecting the two countries culturally. Paul Lovejoy (1980), highlights the historical significance of the Hausa people as mediators of cultural exchange in West Africa. Their language, (Hausa), is widely spoken both in Nigeria and Niger, serving as a means of communication and cultural expression.

Religion has also played a pivotal role in social and cultural interactions between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Islam, practiced by a significant portion of the population in both countries has provided a common religious foundation. The influence of Islam has not only shaped social norms but has also fostered connections through religious pilgrimage and education. Islamic scholars and institutions have facilitated the spread of knowledge and cultural exchange between Nigeria and Niger (Falola, 2003) .

Cultural festivals, music, art and literature have been vital in bridging the cultural divide and promoting a sense of unity between the two nations. Traditional festivals such as the Durbar festival celebrated in states like Kano and Kastina in Nigeria showcase vibrant displays of cultural heritage including traditional attire,

music and dance. These festivals attract participants and spectators from both Nigeria and Niger Republic, fostering cross border cultural interactions (Salawu, 2011).

Music, particularly genres like Hausa music has transcended borders and served as a means of cultural exchange between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Musician Ali Farke Toure, and Mamman Gawo, originally from Niger collaborated with Nigerian artists, showcasing the fusion of musical traditions from both countries and promoting cultural understanding (Stobart, 2008) . Mamman Gawo's collection is no doubt one of the best songs that is historical in nature by describing both Nigeria and Niger countries with one origin.

Literature has also been a medium for cultural exchange. Nigerian and Nigerien authors have explored shared themes and experiences, providing insights into the cultural landscape of both countries. Novelist and playwright Wole Soyinka for example has addressed cultural and political issues that resonate with readers in both Nigeria and Niger (Soyinka, 1986).These social and cultural interactions have contributed to a sense of mutual understanding and cultural appreciation between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Shared ethnic groups, linguistic affinities, religious practices and expressions of cultural heritage through festivals, music art and literature have fostered a deeper connection and laid the groundwork for ongoing cultural cooperation.

The Economic Aspects of Nigeria's Cultural Relations with Niger Republic

Trade, tourism and investment have been key drivers of economic interactions between the two countries. Trade between Nigeria and Niger Republic has been historically significant, contributing to economic integration and cultural exchange. The trans-Saharan trade routes, mentioned earlier, facilitated the exchange of goods such as salt, gold; textile and livestock (Falola, 2003) .These trade networks created economic interdependencies and fostered cultural connections between the people of both nations.

Moreover, modern-day trade relations have continued to flourish between Nigeria and Niger. Nigeria is a major trading partner for Niger Republic, providing access to a larger market and diverse consumer base. Trade in agricultural products, petroleum and manufactured goods have been prominent. For instance, Nigerian companies have invested in Niger Republic's agricultural sector, contributing to economic growth and cross-border cooperation (World Bank, 2019) .

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Prof. S. T. Addo [GHANA]

Tourism has also played a role in the economic aspects of cultural relations. Both Nigeria and Niger Republic boast diverse cultural and natural attractions that attract visitors from within and outside the region. Nigerian tourists for example visit Niger Republic to explore historical sites, experience cultural festivals and engage in cross-cultural interactions. This tourism flow contributes to economic growth and cultural exchange between the two nations (Nwankwo, 2010) .

Investment and economic collaborations have further deepened the economic ties between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Nigerian businesses have invested in various sectors of Nigerien economy, including telecommunications, banking and construction. These investments create employment opportunities and foster economic development of Niger Republic, while also promoting cultural understanding through business interactions (UNO, 2018) .The economic aspects of Nigeria's cultural relations with Niger Republic have played a significant role in fostering cooperation, facilitating trade and promoting mutual development.

Cultural Diplomacy and Cooperation

Through various initiatives, including educational exchanges, cultural festivals and collaborative projects, both nations have sought to deepen cultural ties and build lasting partnerships. Educational exchanges have been instrumental in promoting cultural diplomacy between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Scholarships and student exchange programs have allowed individuals from both countries to study abroad, fostering cultural understanding and building personal connections. These educational exchanges have contributed to the transfer of knowledge, the promotion of cultural values and the development of human resources in various fields (Ogundiran, 2013).

Cultural festivals and events have provided platforms for cultural exchange and cooperation. The biennial Niger National Cultural Week and the Nigerian Festival of Arts and Culture [FESTAC] and Argungu Fishing and Cultural Festival are examples of such events that have showcased the rich cultural heritage of both nations. These festivals have facilitated interactions between artists, performers and cultural practitioners from Nigeria and Niger Republic, fostering dialogue, appreciation and cross-cultural learning (Foluwagbemi, 2018) .

Collaborative projects in the fields of arts, music and literature have also contributed to cultural cooperation between the two countries. Joint artistic productions such as theater performances and musical collaborations have

promoted cultural fusion and showcased the shared artistic expressions of both nations. The works of Nigerian and Nigerien authors, poets and playwrights have explored common themes and experiences, providing insights into the cultural landscapes of both countries (Adisa, 2010) .

Furthermore, cultural institutions and organizations have played a pivotal role in fostering cultural diplomacy and cooperation. The Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments and the Nigerien National Museum has collaborated on exhibitions research projects and cultural preservation efforts. These collaborations have facilitated the sharing of cultural artifacts, historical knowledge and conservation techniques, strengthening cultural ties between Nigeria and Niger Republic (Oyewo, 2012).

Cultural diplomacy and cooperation have not been limited to government-led initiatives. Civil society organizations, academic institutions and grassroots movements have also contributed to cultural exchange and cooperation between Nigeria and Niger Republic. These initiatives have focused on issues such as cultural heritage preservation, intercultural dialogue and community development, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and common goals (Adeyimi, 2013).

Cultural diplomacy and cooperation have played a crucial role in enhancing the relations between Nigeria and Niger Republic. Educational exchanges, cultural festivals, collaborative projects and the efforts of cultural institutions and organizations have promoted mutual understanding, appreciation for cultural diversity and the building of lasting partnership between the two nations.

Challenges and Opportunities of the Cultural Relations between Nigeria and Niger Republic

The cultural relations between Nigeria and Niger Republic present both challenges and opportunities. These factors shape the dynamics of cooperation, cultural exchange and mutual understanding between the two nations.

Challenges;

1. Border Disputes and Security Concerns; The presence of border disputes and security challenges along the Nigeria-Niger border poses obstacles to cultural interactions and economic cooperation. Instances of smuggling, illegal migration and cross-border conflicts can disrupt cultural exchanges and hinder the smooth flow of people and goods (Olaniyan, 2016).

2. Infrastructure and Connectivity; Limited infrastructure and transportation networks between Nigeria and Niger Republic can impede cultural exchanges and hinder economic cooperation. Inadequate road networks and transportation systems may restrict the movement of people, goods and cultural artifacts, limiting the potential for collaboration and cultural interactions.
3. Socio-economic Disparities; Socio-economic disparities between Nigeria and Niger Republic can pose challenges to cultural cooperation. Significant differences in income levels education and access to resources can create barriers to understanding and collaboration, hindering the development of cultural initiatives that benefit both nations.

Opportunities;

1. Shared Cultural Heritage**: The** presence of shared cultural heritage provides a foundation for collaboration and cultural exchange. Ethnic groups, languages and religious practices common to both nations create opportunities for mutual understanding, appreciation and the preservation of cultural traditions (Lovejoy, 1980).
2. Economic Cooperation: Enhanced economic cooperation between Nigeria and Niger Republic can provide a platform for cultural exchange. Trade, investment and tourism can serve as catalysts for cultural interactions and the promotion of cultural diplomacy, leading to a deeper understanding of each other's cultural values.
3. Educational Exchanges: Educational exchanges, scholarships and joint academic programs can foster cultural understanding and build long-lasting relationships. By providing opportunities for students and scholars to study and collaborate across borders, educational institutions can contribute to the enhancement of cultural ties and the exchange of knowledge (Ogundiran, 2013) .
4. Cultural Institutions and Organizations: Cultural institutions and organizations play a crucial role in fostering cooperation and cultural exchange. Collaborative projects, exhibitions and cultural preservation efforts can facilitate the sharing of cultural artifacts, historical knowledge and artistic expressions, promoting mutual understanding and appreciation (Oyewo, 2012).

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Prof. S. T. Addo [GHANA]

5. Regional Integration: Nigeria and Niger Republic's participation in regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] creates opportunities for cultural cooperation and integration. Harmonization of cultural policies, joint initiatives and regional cultural festivals can strengthen cultural ties and enhance cross-border interactions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, prior to the recent military coup in Niger Republic, Nigeria's cultural relations with its neighboring country were marked by various initiatives aimed at fostering cooperation, promoting cultural exchange and strengthening mutual understanding. These efforts were driven by shared cultural heritage, economic cooperation, educational exchanges and the involvement of cultural institutions and organizations. It is crucial for both Nigeria and Niger Republic to remain engaged in dialogue, promote peace and work towards strengthening cultural ties regardless of political changes. By recognizing the value of cultural diplomacy and cooperation, both nations can continue to foster mutual understanding, appreciation and the shared enrichment of their cultural landscapes.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, here are some recommendations for actions that both Nigeria and Niger can take to strengthen their cultural diplomacy:

i. Nigeria and Niger could establish more cultural exchange programs, such as art exhibitions, musical performances, and festivals
ii. They could collaborate on cultural initiatives that celebrate shared histories and traditions
iii. They could increase cooperation on cultural preservation projects, such as the preservation of traditional architecture or indigenous languages
iv. They could establish joint initiatives to promote cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect
v. Both countries could create dedicated cultural diplomacy departments within their foreign ministries
vi. They could establish joint cultural centers in major cities, where people can learn about the cultures of both countries

vii. They could increases funding for cultural exchange programs, such as scholarships for students and artists

viii. They could collaborate on cultural projects with other countries in the region, such as Ghana, Togo, and Benin

The above are some practical and achievable recommendations that could make a real difference in the cultural diplomacy between Nigeria and Niger. It is equally important to note that cultural diplomacy takes time and effort, and both countries need to be committed to the process.

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