Examining the Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Enhancing Global Presence and National Identity: A Case of the Ethnographic Museums of Rwanda (Huye and Nyanza) and Itorero ry'Igihugu

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the impact of the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu on Rwanda's international standing, guided by Soft Power Theory and Cultural Exchange Theory. Specifically, it examines how these institutions act as conduits for cultural diplomacy and project Rwanda's unique narrative both locally and globally. Additionally, the study explores their role in reinforcing Rwanda's cultural identity and assesses their impact on international relations, shaping Rwanda's image abroad and supporting its diplomatic endeavors. The research employed a qualitative case study approach, focusing on qualitative data. The overall target population consisted of museum personnel, government officials, local community members, and visitors. Data were collected from a sample of 60 participants, including museum personnel and visitors (12), government officials in charge of cultural affairs (8), and local community members (40). Snowball and convenience sampling techniques were utilized to ensure representation from key groups involved in Rwanda's cultural and diplomatic sectors. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, participant observations at museum exhibits and Itorero ry'Igihugu ceremonies, and document analysis of museum records and official publications. Data were analyzed using a combination of thematic analysis for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for quantitative data to identify patterns and trends in the findings. Key findings indicate that the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu significantly contribute to cultural diplomacy by fostering a positive national identity and enhancing Rwanda's visibility on the global stage. These institutions serve as platforms for intercultural exchange, reinforcing Rwanda's image as a country rich in culture and history, while also playing a role in nation-building through the preservation of cultural values. In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of cultural institutions in projecting national identity and promoting diplomacy. The findings suggest that Rwanda's international presence can be further enhanced through greater investment in cultural diplomacy programs, particularly in promoting the Itorero ry'Igihugu's values globally. Recommendations include developing strategic partnerships with international cultural organizations and expanding the global reach of Rwanda's museums through digital platforms to attract a wider international audience.

Keywords: *Cultural Diplomacy, Ethnographic Museums of Rwanda, Global Presence, Itorero ry'Igihugu, National Identity*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural diplomacy means the use of a nation's cultural assets, including its traditions, arts, heritage, and values, to promote international understanding, create cooperation, and improve its image on an international basis. Countries use cultural diplomacy to communicate their individual cultural identity to international audiences, develop mutual respect, and facilitate intercultural encounters. This type of diplomacy is important in soft power because it influences global perception and fosters peaceful international relations without using coercion (Bolin, 2019a).

As described by cultural diplomacy scholars, (Rein, 2012) defines cultural diplomacy as "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding." This form of diplomacy aims to build long-lasting relationships and influence opinions abroad by showcasing cultural heritage and values that transcend political and economic differences.

Cultural diplomacy has developed as a powerful instrument for governments seeking to affirm their identity, foster global understanding, and strengthen their presence on the global arena. This study dives into Rwanda's cultural diplomacy activities, focusing on global, continental, regional, national, and local components. Rwanda, with its rich cultural legacy and a history defined by both tragedy and resilience, is a fascinating study (Bolin, 2019a).

On a global scale, Rwanda acknowledges the critical role of cultural diplomacy in creating its international personality and promoting reconciliation, nation-building, and economic growth after the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi. The government acknowledges the importance of maintaining and promoting Rwanda's cultural heritage in order to redefine its national identity on an international level. Notably, the Ethnographic Museums in Huye and

Nyanza serve as repositories of Rwanda's cultural richness, housing artifacts and exhibitions that depict its history, traditions, and values (Jessee, 2017).

At the continental and regional levels, these museums serve as cultural diplomacy platforms, promoting discussion, understanding, and collaboration between Rwanda and the world community. Through exhibitions, educational programs, and events, they help to shape Rwanda's image and stimulate globally engagement (Ishizawa & Karangwa, 2021).

On a national scale, Rwanda's traditional program, Itorero ry'Igihugu, holds significant importance. Spearheaded by the Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement, this program serves as a vehicle for civic education and the promotion of national identity (Byanafashe & Rutayisire, 2016). It embodies Rwanda's cultural identity and fosters solidarity and patriotism among its populace, both domestically and internationally.

This study explores how these cultural assets contribute to Rwanda's cultural diplomacy efforts, examining their role in advancing the country's national identity and values on a global scale. It seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics of Rwandan cultural diplomacy, offering insights for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners in the field of foreign relations.

By examining Rwanda's experience, this study hopes to derive broader insights about the implications of cultural diplomacy for governments facing similar issues in the realm of global diplomacy. Finally, it emphasizes the need of maintaining and developing cultural identities while negotiating the complex issues of international relations and diplomacy

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite Rwanda's growing emphasis on cultural diplomacy, the specific contributions of the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu to the country's global presence and national identity remain underexplored in existing literature. While previous studies on cultural diplomacy, highlight the role of cultural institutions in enhancing a nation's soft power and international influence, they often focus on Western or larger countries, leaving a gap in research regarding how smaller nations like Rwanda use cultural diplomacy as a tool for both international engagement and nation-building. In Rwanda's case, efforts like the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu have been positioned to promote the country's unique narrative and values globally. However, little research has been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives in projecting Rwanda's cultural identity or their impact on international relations and diplomacy.

In the Rwandan context, while there has been a significant focus on political and economic diplomacy in post-genocide recovery (Sundberg, 2016) there remains limited scholarly inquiry into how cultural initiatives like the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu function as conduits for promoting Rwanda's identity and unity both locally and globally. Furthermore, past studies have not sufficiently addressed the challenges and opportunities these initiatives face in their dual role of nation-building and international engagement.

This research seeks to fill this gap by addressing the following questions:

To what extent do the Ethnographic Museums act as platforms for cultural diplomacy, projecting Rwanda's narrative internationally?

How does *Itorero ry'Igihugu* contribute to national identity and unity within Rwanda and among the Rwandan diaspora?

What challenges and opportunities are associated with these cultural diplomacy initiatives?

1.2 Research Objectives

i. Evaluate the impact of cultural diplomacy efforts through the Ethnographic Museums and *Itorero ry'Igihugu* on Rwanda's international relations.
ii. Examine the strategies employed by these institutions to promote Rwanda's cultural identity locally and globally.
iii. Explore the role of *Itorero ry'Igihugu* in fostering national unity and values.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The theoretical framework that connects cultural diplomacy, national identity, and global presence is critical for understanding how nations strategically use culture to shape beliefs, build relationships, and improve their standing in international relations.

2.1.1 Soft Power Theory

Joseph Nye's soft power theory underlines the role of cultural diplomacy in influencing other nations through attraction rather than force (Rein, 2012). Rwanda's cultural diplomacy efforts, such as the revitalization of Itorero, are examples of soft power in action.

2.1.2 Cultural Exchange Theory

This theory emphasizes cultural diplomacy as a means of fostering international cooperation (Shatanawi, 2011). Rwanda's participation in international cultural festivals promotes dialogue and understanding, thereby bolstering its global presence.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Cultural Diplomacy through Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu

Cultural institutions like museums and national heritage programs are known to serve as effective vehicles for cultural diplomacy by allowing nations to share their values and histories on the international stage. For Rwanda, the Ethnographic Museums in Huye and Nyanza play a significant role in showcasing Rwandan heritage and enhancing cultural understanding (Umuhoza, 2021). Similarly, studies by (Thiaw & Ly, 2020) emphasize that museums enable countries to bridge cultural gaps, positioning them as symbols of unity that invite international visitors to experience their unique heritage. Adding to this, (Makuvaza, 2014) argue that museum exhibitions often embody narratives that are both distinctly national and universally accessible, a strategy used effectively by Rwanda in aligning its cultural diplomacy with broader global themes like peacebuilding. Furthermore, (Ndlovu, 2017) highlights that national programs such as Itorero ry'Igihugu go beyond just historical storytelling—they embed current values and unity ideals, thereby acting as diplomatic tools that illustrate Rwanda's progress and collective identity.

2.2.2 The Impact of Cultural Diplomacy on International Relations

Cultural diplomacy has long been recognized as a tool for enhancing soft power and fostering international relations. Beloff (2020) note that Rwanda's cultural initiatives, such as museum exhibitions and cultural exchanges, reinforce its diplomatic engagement by promoting mutual understanding. Studies by (Muscat, 2020 and Umuhoza, 2021) provide additional insights, suggesting that strategic cultural displays foster collaboration and reduce cultural and political misunderstandings between Rwanda and other countries. Another study by (Villanueva, 2018) found that cultural diplomacy, when conducted through public cultural events and exhibitions, has positively influenced Rwanda's relations with East African nations, as it establishes common ground and highlights shared values. The impact of Itorero's performances, which promote Rwandan culture in regional events, as explained by (Kyriakidis, 2019) , also showcases how cultural diplomacy strengthens regional alliances, fostering cooperation beyond traditional diplomatic exchanges.

2.2.3 The Role of Itorero ry'Igihugu in Fostering National Identity and Values and Its Effectiveness in International Relations

The Itorero ry'Igihugu program has been central in promoting Rwandan identity, pride, and unity, reinforcing cultural values both locally and internationally. Research by (Gould, 2018) underscores that Itorero initiatives contribute to building a cohesive national identity by teaching citizens about traditional values, unity, and patriotism. According to the studies by (Chitty, 2017) , programs like Itorero ry'Igihugu cultivate civic responsibility and national pride, which are shared with international audiences, particularly during cultural performances. (Ndoro et al., 2017) highlight that these values are instrumental in building Rwanda's image internationally as a resilient, united country with a rich cultural legacy. Furthermore, research by (Higgins & Douglas, 2020) indicates that such programs contribute to positive international perceptions by portraying Rwanda's societal transformation and unity through cultural diplomacy, thereby fostering diplomatic goodwill.

2.3. Research Gaps

While cultural diplomacy is a well-explored concept, its application in smaller nations like Rwanda remains under-researched. The role of traditional institutions like Itorero ry'Igihugu in enhancing national identity and global presence is also inadequately studied. This research seeks to fill these gaps by examining how Rwanda's cultural institutions shape both its global image and internal unity.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

The framework connecting cultural diplomacy, national identity, and global presence is essential for understanding Rwanda's strategy. The Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu serve as instruments of cultural diplomacy, reinforcing Rwanda's global image while strengthening its post-genocide national identity.
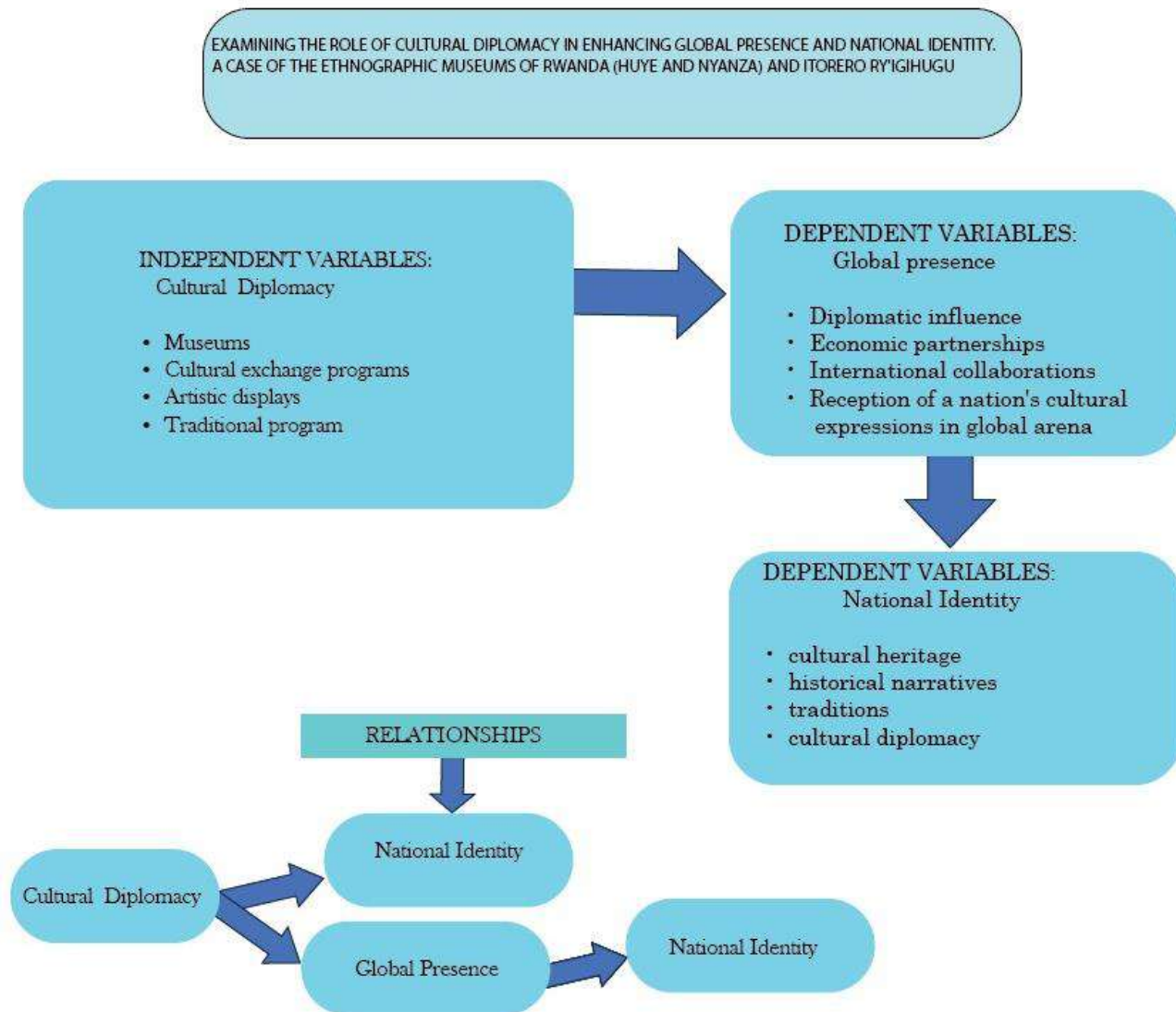
Figure 1
Illustration of Conceptual Framework via Diagram
Source: Niyirora Christian (2024)

2.4.1 Variables

Independent Variable: Cultural Diplomacy—through institutions like the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu.

Dependent Variables: Global Presence (Rwanda's international influence) and National Identity (the shared sense of pride and belonging among Rwandans).

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research employed a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the Ethnographic Museums of Huye and Nyanza and *Itorero ry'Igihugu*. A combination of documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation is used to gather in-depth insights.

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3.2 Data Collection

The study used a variety of data collection methods to provide a thorough analysis of the purpose of cultural institutions in Rwanda's cultural diplomacy. Museum records, government publications, and exhibition catalogs were examined to gain a better understanding of how these institutions document and portray Rwanda's cultural legacy. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with key stakeholders, including museum curators, government officials, and Itorero ry'Igihugu participants, to learn about their perspectives on the role these institutions play in shaping national identity and promoting Rwanda's image abroad. In addition to the findings, participant observation was used, which involved attending cultural events and exhibitions, allowing for firsthand observation of how these institutions work as venues for cultural diplomacy.

3.3 Sampling

The target population includes museum curators, government officials, and representatives from *Itorero ry'Igihugu*. Snowball and convenience sampling techniques are used to select participants, with a sample size of 60 individuals.

Table 1
Sample Size

Targeted Personnel	Sample Size	Percentage Shared
Museum personnel including visitors	12	32.7%
Government officials in charge of cultural affairts	8	10.2%
Local Community	40	57.1%
Total Sample Size	**60**	**100.0%**

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the research based on the responses from 50 participants. The data is analyzed to provide insights into the demographic characteristics of the respondents, followed by a detailed examination of each research objective. The chapter is structured to first outline the response rate and demographic profile of the respondents before delving into the findings related to each specific objective of the study. They covered demographic information, the respondents' age, Gender and occupations. The primary and secondary collected data was purely qualitative data. Its analysis involves examining and interpreting non-numerical data to understand concepts, themes, or patterns related to the role of cultural diplomacy in enhancing global presence and national identity. The study employed thematic analysis strategy of primary and secondary data collected. This data analysis tool is used to detect trends and categorize data into useful themes. Using a comparative analysis process, which is also employed, help to reach conclusions by examining the data's implications for the research questions. This study's data collecting processes used a comprehensive, incorporating more qualitative methodologies to capture a holistic knowledge of the role of cultural diplomacy in Rwanda's Ethnographic Museums and Itorero Ry'Igihugu. Standardized instrument: NVivo is used to address reliability and validity in a systematic manner.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The primary role of the descriptive statistics was to summarize data in a simpler way for easy interpretation and understanding. The statements were made about the set of the data of 50 respondents from the basis in which they were calculated. For instance, despite the sample being drawn from the population and the main objective was to make statement concerning the population, descriptive statistics only made claims for the sample and used it to generalize the whole population

4.2.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic data collected includes information on gender, age, and nationality. This information provides context to the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Table 2

Gender of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	30	60%
Female	18	36%
Anonymous	2	4%

Regarding gender, the Table 2 indicates that 60% of the respondents were male while 36% were female. The 4% of the respondents they don't mention their gender. The inference is that a reasonably balanced response was received since both the male and female respondents were heard from.

Table 3

Age of the Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-25	10	20%
26-35	20	40%
36-45	12	24%
46-55	6	12%
56+	2	4%

Information provided in Table 3, demonstrated that a great proportion of respondents, 20 (40%) were between 26 and 35 years old and 10 (20%) respondents were between 18 and 25 years old. In addition, 12 (24%) respondents were between 36-45 years old. However, 6 (12%) respondents were between 46-55 years old while a small number of respondents 2 (4%) were more than 56 years old.

In this study age of respondents enabled them to expand the understanding of the target audience and allowed the analysis of similarities and differences between the different age ranges and their views and understanding the role of cultural diplomacy in enhancing global presence and national identity with a case of the ethnographic museums of Rwanda (Huye and Nyanza) and Itorero ry'Igihugu. This resulted in a reduced number of respondents in the older age group due to the target group of museum curators, including visitors. Museum initiatives and programs as well as Itorero ry'Igihugu tend to attract populations that are not older.

Table 4

Nationality of the Respondents

Nationality	Frequency	Percentage
Rwandan	38	76%
Other	12	24%

Information provided in Table 4 on the nationality of respondents revealed that 38 (76%) respondents were Rwandan, while 99 (66.8%) were married, 12 (24 0%) respondents have other nationality. This is because the target group of museum curators includes visitors, government officials in charge of cultural affairs, and local communities. Most foreign visitors come for the purpose of relaxing and enjoying themselves, with less concern for international relations matters.

4.3 Presentation of Findings

The study findings on the role of cultural diplomacy in enhancing global presence and national identity with a case of the ethnographic museums of Rwanda (Huye and Nyanza) and Itorero ry'Igihugu were analyzed according to research variables and specific objectives.

The specific objectives were to evaluate the effort of cultural diplomacy through the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu on Rwanda's global presence in the context of international relations and diplomacy , to examine the strategies employed by the Ethnographic Museums of Huye and Nyanza in act as conduits for cultural diplomacy, projecting Rwanda's unique narrative locally and globally and to explore the role of Itorero ry'igihugu in fostering national identity and values and assess its effectiveness in the realm of international relations.

4.3.1 Efforts of Cultural Diplomacy through the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu on Rwanda's Global Presence

To evaluate the effort of cultural diplomacy through the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu on Rwanda's global presence, respondents were asked to list and explain the initiatives conducted by these institutions and their perceived effectiveness.

This table below presents the frequency and percentage of respondents recognizing various initiatives of cultural diplomacy conducted by the Ethnographic Museums of Rwanda and Itorero ry'Igihugu.

Table 5
Initiatives conducted by the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero Ry'Igihugu on Rwanda's global presence

Initiative	Frequency	Percentage
Cultural exhibitions and festivals	30	60%
Educational programs and workshops	20	40%
International cultural exchange programs	15	30%
Heritage preservation and storytelling	25	50%

Discussion and Interpretation: The data indicates that cultural exhibitions and festivals are the most recognized initiatives, with 60% of respondents acknowledging their impact. Educational programs and workshops are also significant, with 40% of respondents noting their importance. These initiatives collectively contribute to enhancing Rwanda's global presence by showcasing its cultural heritage. Information from interview conducted from various respondent like chief guest at Ethnographic museum of Huye recognized various initiatives of cultural diplomacy conducted by the Ethnographic Museums of Rwanda and Itorero ry'Igihugu and said, *"Through cultural exhibitions and festivals, the Ethnographic Museums of Huye have successfully showcased Rwanda's rich heritage to the world, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of Rwandan culture and significantly enhancing the country's global presence."*

The focal person of Itorero ry'Igihugu at Nkumba said; *"Itorero ry'Igihugu plays a crucial role in fostering national unity and pride by educating the youth and the community in Rwanda and aboard about Rwandan values and traditions, which not only fortifies the national identity but also projects a cohesive and resilient image of Rwanda to the international community."* This aligns with Rein (2012) research which showcased the role of cultural diplomacy initiatives conducted by the Ethnographic Museums of Rwanda (Huye and Nyanza) and Itorero Ry'Igihugu in enhancing Rwanda's global presence and national identity

4.3.2 Strategies Employed by the Ethnographic Museums of Huye and Nyanza in Cultural Diplomacy

To examine the strategies employed by the Ethnographic Museums of Huye and Nyanza, respondents shared their experiences and what they found most impactful or memorable.

Table 6
Strategies Employed by the Ethnographic Museums of Huye and Nyanza in Cultural Diplomacy

Impactful Aspect	Frequency	Percentage
Historical artifacts and exhibits	35	70%
Interactive and engaging displays	28	56%
Guided tours and storytelling	30	60%
Cultural performances	25	50%

Discussion and Interpretation: The majority of respondents (70%) found historical artifacts and exhibits to be the most impactful, highlighting the importance of tangible heritage in cultural diplomacy. Outcomes concur with Shitanawi (2011) findings which highlighted that interactive displays and guided tours also play a crucial role in making the museum experience memorable and engaging, thus effectively projecting Rwanda's unique narrative globally. This was also evident in the visitors' book, which was reviewed to gather visitors' views after their visits. In their comments, most acknowledged the effectiveness of the interactive displays, guided tours, and cultural exhibitions in showcasing Rwanda's cultural heritage.

4.3.3 Role of Itorero ry'Igihugu in Fostering National Identity and Values

To explore the role of Itorero ry'Igihugu in fostering national identity, respondents described their understanding of its cultural activities and their effectiveness.

Table 7
Role of Itorero ry'Igihugu in Fostering National Identity and Values

Activity	Frequency	Percentage
National cultural education and training	32	64%
Community engagement and development programs	28	56%
Promotion of Rwandan values and traditions	30	60%
Leadership and civic responsibility and engagement training	20	40%

Discussion and Interpretation: Itorero ry'Igihugu is seen as a pivotal institution in promoting national identity, with 64% of respondents emphasizing its role in cultural education and training. Its community engagement programs and emphasis on Rwandan values contribute significantly to fostering a cohesive national identity. One of the cultural scholars in Rwanda said that *"Itorero ry'Igihugu is more than just a traditional school; it is a powerful tool for nation-building. It instills in our youth the values of patriotism, unity, and responsibility. Through Itorero, we are not just preserving our cultural heritage; we are nurturing a generation that is equipped to lead Rwanda with integrity and a strong sense of national identity"*

Munyemana Alphonse, the participants of Indangamirwa III, highlighted that *"Participating in Itorero ry'Igihugu was a transformative experience. It taught me the true meaning of being Rwandan—respect, resilience, and the spirit of togetherness. Itorero has not only deepened my connection to my culture but has also empowered me to contribute meaningfully to my community and my country."*

An interview with International Cultural Diplomacy Experts who works across cultural institutions, Munyengabe Emmanuel, (who agreed to be mention in the research) stated that *"Itorero ry'Igihugu represents a unique approach to cultural diplomacy. It is remarkable how Rwanda has institutionalized a program that not only fosters national pride but also serves as a model for civic education worldwide. The initiative is a testament to Rwanda's commitment to building a cohesive society grounded in shared values and national identity."*

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The research concludes that cultural diplomacy initiatives through the Ethnographic Museums and Itorero ry'Igihugu are effective in enhancing Rwanda's global presence and fostering a cohesive national identity. These institutions apply a variety of strategies to achieve their goals, significantly impacting Rwanda's image on the international stage.

5.2 Recommendations

To further promote Rwanda's cultural identity globally, it is recommended to enhance cultural exchange programs by increasing both their number and reach. Expanding these international cultural exchanges will provide more opportunities for intercultural dialogue and showcase Rwanda's rich heritage on a global stage. Additionally, there is a need to strengthen educational initiatives within the Ethnographic Museums. By expanding educational programs and workshops, the museums can deepen both local and international understanding of Rwandan heritage, fostering greater appreciation for the country's cultural history. Furthermore, Itorero ry'Igihugu should continue to broaden its community engagement programs, as these efforts play a critical role in fostering a stronger sense of national identity and instilling core values among Rwandans. Such initiatives will help reinforce unity and patriotism, contributing to Rwanda's cultural diplomacy objectives both at home and abroad.

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