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INTANGIBLE HERITAGE AS GEOPOLITICAL CAPITAL: CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN THE ALGERIA–MOROCCO RIVALRY

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Abstract

Cultural practices such as cuisine, dress, and music have traditionally been treated as domains of social identity rather than instruments of international politics. Yet in an era of intensified status competition and symbolic governance, culture increasingly operates as a strategic resource within geopolitical rivalries. Despite growing attention to soft power and cultural diplomacy, International Relations scholarship lacks a systematic framework for analysing intangible cultural heritage as a site of interstate contestation, particularly in post-colonial contexts where recognition and legitimacy remain unevenly distributed. This article develops an integrated theoretical and empirical analysis of heritage-based rivalry by examining the struggle between Algeria and Morocco over the international recognition of shared cultural forms, including couscous, caftan traditions, and raï music. The paper aims to conceptualise intangible heritage as geopolitical capital a form of symbolic power mobilised through international institutions to secure narrative authority, regional leadership, and symbolic hegemony. Here we show that heritage disputes are not peripheral cultural disagreements but structured struggles over recognition, mediated by global governance regimes such as UNESCO. These regimes translate cultural claims into hierarchies of legitimacy that advantage certain state narratives while marginalising others. The article demonstrates that intangible heritage functions as an active terrain of geopolitical competition, where symbolic recognition shapes interstate power relations independently of material capabilities. By repositioning heritage within core debates on power, status, and post-colonial order, this study advances a novel analytical lens for understanding cultural geopolitics and opens new pathways for research on symbolic rivalry in the Global South.

Keywords

Cultural Geopolitics, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Symbolic Power, Heritage Diplomacy, Post-colonial Statehood, UNESCO.

Resumo

Práticas culturais como a gastronomia, o vestuário e a música têm sido tradicionalmente tratadas como domínios da identidade social, em vez de instrumentos da política internacional. No entanto, numa era de competição intensificada pelo estatuto e de governação simbólica, a cultura funciona cada vez mais como um recurso estratégico no âmbito das rivalidades geopolíticas. Apesar da crescente atenção dedicada ao poder suave e à diplomacia cultural, os estudos em Relações Internacionais carecem de um quadro sistemático para analisar o património cultural imaterial como um campo de disputa entre Estados, particularmente em contextos pós-coloniais onde o reconhecimento e a legitimidade continuam a estar distribuídos de forma desigual. Este artigo desenvolve uma análise teórica e empírica integrada da rivalidade baseada no património, examinando a disputa entre a Argélia e Marrocos pelo reconhecimento internacional de formas culturais partilhadas, incluindo o cuscuz, as tradições do caftan e a música raï. O artigo visa conceptualizar o património imaterial como capital geopolítico — uma forma de poder simbólico mobilizado através de instituições internacionais para garantir autoridade narrativa, liderança regional e hegemonia simbólica. Aqui, demonstramos que as disputas sobre o património não são desacordos culturais periféricos, mas sim lutas estruturadas pelo reconhecimento, mediadas por regimes de governação global, como a UNESCO. Estes regimes traduzem reivindicações culturais em hierarquias de legitimidade que favorecem certas narrativas estatais, marginalizando outras. O artigo demonstra que o património imaterial funciona como um terreno ativo de competição geopolítica, onde o reconhecimento simbólico molda as relações de poder entre Estados, independentemente das capacidades materiais. Ao reposicionar o património no seio de debates centrais sobre poder, estatuto e ordem pós-colonial, este estudo propõe uma nova perspetiva analítica para compreender a geopolítica cultural e abre novos caminhos para a investigação sobre a rivalidade simbólica no Sul Global.

Palavras-Chave

Geopolítica Cultural, Património Cultural Imaterial, Poder Simbólico, Diplomacia do Património, Estado Pós-colonial, UNESCO.

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INTANGIBLE HERITAGE AS GEOPOLITICAL CAPITAL: CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN THE ALGERIA–MOROCCO RIVALRY

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Introduction

In contemporary international politics, struggles over power increasingly unfold beyond conventional military and economic domains, extending into symbolic, cultural, and epistemic arenas. While International Relations (IR) scholarship has long acknowledged the relevance of soft power, status competition, and identity politics, it has yet to develop a systematic account of how intangible cultural heritage functions as a site of interstate contestation (Nye, 2004; Chay, 1990; Wendt, 1994; Wohlforth, 2014; Renshon, 2017). Cultural practices such as cuisine, dress, and music are often treated as peripheral to "hard" geopolitics or relegated to the domains of anthropology and cultural studies. This article challenges that division by arguing that intangible heritage has become a form of geopolitical capital a strategically mobilised resource through which states seek international recognition, symbolic authority, and narrative dominance within global institutional frameworks.

The central claim of this article is that contests over intangible heritage are not merely cultural disputes but structured struggles over symbolic hegemony embedded in broader geopolitical rivalries. Intangible heritage becomes geopolitically consequential when it is institutionalised, adjudicated, and internationally validated, most notably through regimes such as UNESCO thereby transforming cultural claims into sources of diplomatic leverage, reputational hierarchy, and status differentiation (Jonathan, 2017). Unlike soft power, which emphasises attraction and persuasion, geopolitical capital refers here to the capacity of symbolic recognition to alter interstate power relations, particularly in contexts where material asymmetries are constrained and legitimacy becomes a key currency of competition.

The rivalry between Algeria and Morocco offers a theoretically strategic case through which to examine this phenomenon (Boukhars, 2019; Fernández-Molina, Feliu , & Hernando de Larramendi, 2019; Thieux, 2018). As neighbouring states with shared cultural repertoires, overlapping historical narratives, and unresolved geopolitical tensions, Algeria and Morocco have increasingly projected their competition into the symbolic domain. Disputes over the ownership and representation of couscous, caftan traditions, and raï music are not isolated cultural quarrels but extensions of a deeper struggle over regional leadership, historical legitimacy, and international recognition. These contests unfold within transnational arenas, heritage conventions, diplomatic forums, and global media, where cultural narratives are formalised, authorised, and

converted into symbolic advantage. The case is neither exceptional nor merely illustrative: it reveals how post-colonial states engage in status competition under conditions of constrained material power, a dynamic with relevance far beyond the Maghreb.

Existing scholarship provides important but incomplete tools for analysing this process. Constructivist and post-structural approaches have highlighted the role of identity, discourse, and recognition in world politics, while post-colonial studies have exposed the enduring hierarchies embedded in global knowledge and cultural regimes. However, these literatures rarely converge on a sustained analysis of how heritage governance functions as a geopolitical mechanism. Heritage studies, for their part, often prioritise questions of authenticity, preservation, and cultural rights, paying insufficient attention to interstate rivalry and power asymmetries (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). As a result, the politicisation of intangible heritage remains undertheorised within IR, despite its growing salience in diplomatic conflict and symbolic competition.

This article intervenes in this gap by conceptualising intangible heritage as a form of geopolitical capital produced through the interaction of three elements: state strategy, international institutional mediation, and post-colonial struggles over recognition. It argues that heritage claims become geopolitically effective not simply through assertion, but through their successful translation into internationally legible narratives that resonate with dominant norms of authenticity, universality, and civilisation. In this sense, institutions such as UNESCO do not merely arbitrate cultural disputes; they structure the symbolic economy within which recognition is granted, contested, and hierarchically distributed. Heritage regimes thus function as arenas of power rather than neutral custodians of cultural diversity (Debarbieux, Bortolotto, Munz, & Raziano, 2023).

The article addresses the following research questions: Under what conditions does intangible cultural heritage become a source of geopolitical capital in interstate rivalry? How do states strategically mobilise heritage narratives to secure symbolic hegemony within international institutions? And how do post-colonial power asymmetries shape the outcomes of these symbolic struggles? By answering these questions, the article advances a relational understanding of culture and power that moves beyond descriptive accounts of cultural diplomacy and situates heritage conflicts within the core concerns of International Relations theory.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach combining discourse analysis of official statements, heritage nomination files, and diplomatic narratives with contextual analysis of institutional practices surrounding heritage recognition. The focus is not on adjudicating cultural "authenticity" but on analysing how claims are framed, authorised, and politicised within global governance structures.

By foregrounding intangible heritage as a site of geopolitical contestation, this article contributes to broader debates on symbolic power, status competition, and post-colonial order in international politics. It demonstrates that cultural practices, far from being residual or apolitical, constitute a critical terrain through which states negotiate legitimacy, hierarchy, and influence in the contemporary international system.

Theoretical Framework: Intangible Heritage as Geopolitical Capital

The study of culture in international politics has often been marginal, treated either as a soft power instrument or as an anthropological curiosity, leaving the strategic implications of intangible heritage under-theorized (Lapid, 1996). This framework asserts that intangible cultural heritage constitutes a form of geopolitical capital, a relational and hierarchical resource through which states accrue symbolic authority, recognition, and status in the international arena. Unlike soft power, which relies on attraction, or conventional cultural diplomacy, which presumes the neutral circulation of cultural artifacts, geopolitical capital is produced, contested, and operationalized through structured interactions among historical legacies, institutional mediation, and state-society agency, producing observable hierarchies of legitimacy and authority (Cull, 2008). In the Maghreb, this framework enables an understanding of how Algeria and Morocco convert shared cultural repertoires into instruments of regional influence while negotiating post-colonial inequalities in recognition and power.

This distinction should not be read as a matter of degree but of kind. Soft power, in Nye's formulation, denotes an actor's capacity to secure preferred outcomes through attraction, persuasion, or identification rather than coercion or inducement (Nye, 2004); it describes a mode of influence available in principle to any actor possessing appealing attributes. Geopolitical capital, by contrast, denotes the strategically accumulated value that a cultural asset acquires once its recognition can be mobilised within interstate competition to yield symbolic recognition, status, legitimacy, or diplomatic leverage. Geopolitical capital thus presupposes attraction but is not reducible to it: it is the convertibility of recognition into rivalry-specific advantage that distinguishes the two concepts.

Cultural recognition does not automatically constitute geopolitical capital. It acquires this character only once recognition is institutionalised or politically articulated, tied to claims of authenticity, heritage, or identity, acknowledged beyond the domestic sphere, and actively mobilised within an interstate competitive setting. Absent these conditions, international appreciation of a cultural practice remains an instance of attraction, however consequential domestically. It is this conjunction recognition combined with strategic mobilisation within rivalry, that converts cultural attractiveness into a resource capable of generating symbolic, status, and geopolitical advantage, as the cases below demonstrate.

Post-colonial theory provides the structural lens for interpreting these dynamics, emphasizing that colonial legacies continue to shape the circulation, legitimacy, and authority of cultural practices. Following (Quijano, 2000)'s articulation of the coloniality of power and knowledge, French colonial administration created enduring epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain narratives while marginalizing others. In Algeria, settler colonial centralization produced a bureaucratized cultural apparatus capable of monopolizing narrative authority, whereas Morocco's protectorate experience maintained a degree of elite-mediated pluralism (Burke III, 2014), enabling hybridized claims. These asymmetries illustrate that heritage is simultaneously a resource and a field of structured inequality: the capacity to translate cultural claims into internationally legible authority is neither uniform nor incidental but conditioned by the sedimented effects of colonial power.

Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital operationalizes these insights, demonstrating how recognition, legitimacy, and authority are accumulated and deployed within social and political fields (Swartz , 1997). When transposed to international politics, intangible heritage becomes symbolic capital when institutional validation such as UNESCO inscription, festival recognition, or formal diplomatic acknowledgment translates into geopolitical advantage. UNESCO recognition of couscous, raï music, or caftan traditions conveys not only cultural authenticity but also historical primacy, regional leadership, and moral authority, establishing hierarchical differentiation among competing states. Such mechanisms make the possession and projection of heritage materially consequential for interstate competition, linking cultural valuation to status, leverage, and legitimacy.

The framework further integrates Gramscian understandings of hegemony and narrative control, illustrating that power operates not solely through coercion but by structuring norms, consent, and symbolic hierarchies (Cox, 1983; Femia, 2009). States actively shape the discursive field by selecting, codifying, and promoting particular practices as authentic, thereby asserting moral and historical authority (Foucault, 1991). Yet hybrid identities produced through diasporic circulation, youth innovation, and transnational engagement complicate this picture, creating contested spaces in which state narratives are negotiated, resisted, or reinterpreted (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990). Heritage thus functions as both an instrument of hegemony and a site of sociopolitical contestation, exemplifying the interplay of structure and agency in the construction of symbolic power.

To operationalize this relational framework, three interconnected dimensions are analytically emphasized. First, institutional mediation converts domestic cultural practice into internationally recognized authority, measurable through nomination outcomes, inscription success, awards, and formal acknowledgment in transnational forums. Second, state strategic deployment captures how governments mobilize heritage to assert authenticity, primacy, and moral authority, observable in official discourse, festival programming, diplomatic engagements, and media campaigns. Third, hybrid reception and contestation reveals how diasporic networks, youth participation, and digital platforms mediate and negotiate state narratives, demonstrating that symbolic authority emerges through interaction rather than unilateral decree. These dimensions collectively specify the causal pathways by which intangible heritage is transformed into geopolitical capital, clarifying the mechanisms linking cultural practice to interstate influence, regional legitimacy, and the structuring of post-colonial hierarchies.

This theoretical integration extends the conceptual and analytical repertoire of international relations in three ways. By distinguishing geopolitical capital from conventional soft power, it foregrounds hierarchical, institutionally mediated recognition as a central axis of cultural influence. By explicating the mechanisms through which heritage is mobilized, contested, and validated, it situates culture at the heart of strategic competition rather than treating it as peripheral ornamentation. Finally, by embedding post-colonial structural analysis, symbolic capital, and Gramscian insights on hegemony within a multi-level actor framework, the model captures the relational, contested, and historically grounded nature of heritage disputes, offering a transferable lens for understanding symbolic contests in other post-colonial regions beyond the Maghreb.

Historical and Political Context: Algeria–Morocco Heritage Rivalry

The geopolitical contestation over intangible cultural heritage between Algeria and Morocco can only be understood when situated within a historically layered configuration of colonial epistemic hierarchies, post-independence state-building trajectories, and international institutional mediation that together structure the unequal production and circulation of symbolic authority in the Maghreb (Patricia, 1995; Ageron, 1991; Bennoune, 1988; Ruedy, 2005; Hoisington, 1995; Wyrtzen, 2015). Although the two states draw upon largely overlapping cultural repertoires ranging from shared culinary practices and dress traditions to musical forms rooted in common social histories their capacity to mobilize these repertoires as geopolitical capital has been profoundly shaped by divergent colonial experiences. French colonial rule in Algeria, characterized by settler colonialism, administrative centralization, and epistemic assimilation, produced a highly bureaucratized cultural field in which legitimacy was tightly coupled to state authority, linguistic standardization, and legal codification (Ruedy, 2005; Aissaoui & Eldridge, 2017). By contrast, Morocco's protectorate regime preserved a degree of institutional pluralism by maintaining the monarchy as an intermediary between colonial power and local society, allowing cultural authority to remain distributed across royal patronage, regional elites, and religious institutions (Munson, 1993; Hammoudi, 1997). These contrasting colonial configurations generated enduring asymmetries in post-colonial cultural governance, with Algeria inheriting a centralized apparatus capable of monopolizing narrative production yet constrained in flexibility, and Morocco retaining a hybrid system able to articulate multi-layered and adaptive cultural claims across domestic and international arenas.

In the post-independence period, these structural legacies were further entrenched through divergent state-building strategies that instrumentalized culture as a means of consolidating sovereignty and legitimacy (Pasler, 2022). Algeria's revolutionary regime pursued an assertive project of Arabisation and national homogenization, deploying culture as a corrective to colonial epistemic domination while simultaneously centralizing control over historical narration and heritage policy. This strategy enabled the state to assert authoritative claims over selected cultural forms such as raï music or couscous but also subjected these claims to bureaucratic mediation and political prioritization, limiting their responsiveness to transnational cultural dynamics. Morocco, by contrast, adopted a strategy of managed pluralism in which Arab, Amazigh, and Andalusian references were selectively mobilized to construct a flexible national narrative compatible with both domestic cohesion and external recognition (Mkinsi, 2025). The monarchy's central role in this process endowed Moroccan cultural diplomacy with a capacity for symbolic brokerage, allowing heritage to circulate through elite networks, international festivals, and global cultural markets with fewer institutional bottlenecks (Wüst & Nicolai, 2022). As a result, while Algeria's approach tends to produce concentrated and internally coherent claims of cultural ownership, Morocco's strategy facilitates broader transnational resonance and visibility, even when historical provenance remains contested.

International institutions most notably UNESCO constitute a critical mediating arena in which these asymmetries are converted into differentiated geopolitical outcomes (Ortiz & Jiménez de Madariaga, 2022). Far from operating as neutral mechanisms of cultural preservation, such institutions function as sites of symbolic arbitration where domestic

cultural practices are transformed into internationally legible markers of authority and legitimacy (Lenzerini, 2011). Successful inscription on UNESCO heritage lists confers more than recognition; it establishes hierarchies of authenticity and historical primacy that can be leveraged in diplomatic discourse and regional competition (Eichler, 2021). Algeria and Morocco thus engage in strategic nomination practices, lobbying efforts, and cultural diplomacy campaigns aimed at securing institutional validation that extends their cultural claims beyond national borders. The effectiveness of these strategies varies according to institutional capacity, narrative coherence, and the ability to align domestic representations with UNESCO's epistemic frameworks, thereby rendering heritage recognition an observable and operationalizable dimension of geopolitical capital (Meissner, 2025).

Within the broader geopolitical context of the Maghreb marked by enduring rivalry over regional leadership, unresolved border disputes, and competing claims to post-colonial legitimacy intangible heritage emerges as a low-cost yet high-visibility instrument of power projection. Culinary practices, dress traditions, and musical forms become arenas in which states seek to naturalize national narratives, marginalize rival claims, and structure international perceptions of authenticity and continuity (Lengel, Mechehoud , & Victoria A., 2022). Heritage disputes are therefore not ancillary cultural disagreements but integral components of symbolic competition, intersecting with material power and diplomatic positioning. Taken together, these historical, institutional, and political dynamics establish the structural preconditions through which intangible heritage is transformed into geopolitical capital, providing the necessary analytical bridge between the theoretical framework outlined earlier and the empirical case studies that follow. The Algeria–Morocco heritage rivalry thus appears not as an episodic conflict over symbols, but as a historically sedimented struggle over authority, recognition, and the power to define the cultural grammar of the Maghreb.

Competing Pathways to Geopolitical Capital

The contestation over intangible cultural heritage between Algeria and Morocco reveals with particular clarity how culture operates as a form of geopolitical capital within post-colonial rivalries (Iriye, 1979; Mazarr, 1996). Far from constituting a marginal or symbolic domain, heritage functions as a structured field through which states seek to consolidate legitimacy, assert historical authority, and position themselves within regional and international hierarchies of recognition (Smith, 2006). By examining three emblematic domains couscous, caftan, and raï music this section operationalizes the theoretical framework developed earlier, demonstrating how heritage is mobilized through institutional channels, mediated by transnational networks, and negotiated by a multiplicity of actors whose interventions shape the production of symbolic power.

Couscous, a culinary practice shared across North Africa, exemplifies how ostensibly common cultural forms become strategic instruments of geopolitical differentiation (Durmelat, 2017). The 2020 inscription of couscous on UNESCO's representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity achieved through a joint nomination by Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia (UNESCO, 2020), was nonetheless framed domestically in Algeria through a state-centered narrative emphasizing rural traditions, communal practices, and national continuity (Le Monde, 2020). This approach reflects a

broader strategy in which centralized bureaucratic authority is deployed to convert cultural practices into internationally sanctioned legitimacy. This process was carried out through official heritage and cultural administration channels responsible for compiling the nomination file, articulating couscous's significance in state-sanctioned terms of rural tradition and national continuity, and representing the claim before UNESCO's evaluating bodies (El Moudjahid, 2020). Civil-society, private-sector, or diasporic actors are notably absent from this account, reinforcing the reading of couscous internationalisation as a near-exclusively state-directed undertaking, in contrast to the more diffuse trajectories examined below. Morocco, by contrast, has pursued a more distributed strategy, promoting regional variations of couscous through royal patronage, international culinary festivals, and tourism-oriented cultural diplomacy (Dines, 2021). The divergence between these approaches underscores how institutional configurations condition the effectiveness of heritage claims: Algeria's centralized nomination process yields strong domestic legitimization but limited flexibility in transnational cultural markets, whereas Morocco's hybridized deployment of state, monarchical, and private actors enhances international visibility and narrative adaptability. In this context, geopolitical capital emerges not simply from recognition itself, but from the capacity to translate recognition into sustained symbolic authority across multiple arenas.

The caftan further illustrates how heritage operates simultaneously as symbolic capital and diplomatic currency. Morocco has positioned the caftan as a globalized cultural brand, embedding it within international fashion circuits, high-profile exhibitions, and UNESCO-oriented heritage dossiers (Jansen, 2016). This strategy aligns with a broader mode of governance in which cultural production is closely integrated into elite networks and diplomatic projection (Africa Intelligence, 2026). This internationalization has been carried less by formal diplomatic directive than by a loosely coordinated constellation of designers, fashion houses, museum exhibitions, and international media coverage that circulate the caftan as a recognisable aesthetic object in its own right (Jansen, 2016; Kozlowski, 2025). These actors operate with considerable autonomy from ministerial oversight, even as their activity is subsequently acknowledged, and at points discreetly supported, by state-adjacent influence campaigns directed at heritage-recognition bodies (Africa Intelligence, 2026), indicating that the state benefits from, rather than originates, much of this circulation. Algeria, by contrast, emphasizes the caftan's regional diversity and artisanal specificity, incorporating it into a pluralized national narrative that foregrounds internal heterogeneity. The comparative outcome of these strategies highlights the role of actor heterogeneity in shaping geopolitical capital. Morocco's multi-level engagement linking state institutions, royal networks, designers, and international markets generates high transnational resonance (Kozlowski, 2025), while Algeria's more centralized approach secures domestic symbolic coherence but struggles to achieve comparable international traction. The caftan thus demonstrates that heritage claims are not evaluated solely on historical grounds, but are conditioned by the institutional and social architectures through which they are promoted (Delmas, 2025).

Raï music introduces a different modality of heritage-based power, one in which youth culture, diaspora networks, and digital platforms play a decisive role (Schade-Poulsen, 1999; Swedenburg, 2015). Originating in Algeria's Oran region, raï has been framed by Algerian authorities as a national cultural export, yet its global circulation has been shaped predominantly by non-state actors operating in hybrid transnational spaces

(Langlois, Music and politics in North Africa, 2009; Jones, 2013). Diasporic musicians, online platforms, and informal cultural circuits have transformed raï into a fluid and adaptive form of symbolic capital, often beyond the direct control of state institutions (Suzanne, 2007). Morocco's engagement with raï, through festivals, artistic collaborations, and digital dissemination reflects an effort to integrate elements of this heritage into a Moroccan-centered narrative of cultural openness and hybridity (Bentahilaa & Davies, 2002). Raï's trajectory cannot be attributed to any single level of agency: it combines Algerian state framing of the genre as national patrimony, diasporic production and circulation concentrated in France and other host countries, digital platforms operating largely outside either state's cultural institutions, and transnational festival and collaboration circuits that further diffuse authorship across Algerian, Moroccan, and diasporic actors alike (Langlois, 2009; Suzanne, 2007). No single one of these levels' alone accounts for raï's international profile, distinguishing it from the more centrally anchored trajectory of couscous and the state-adjacent but non-state-originated circulation of the caftan. Unlike couscous or caftan, raï demonstrates that geopolitical capital can be generated through socially negotiated and digitally mediated processes, where symbolic authority is contingent, contested, and subject to rapid reconfiguration. This case challenges state-centric assumptions by showing that cultural power may be amplified or undermined by actors whose practices escape formal institutional regulation.

Taken together, these cases reveal several underlying mechanisms through which intangible heritage is transformed into geopolitical capital. International institutions such as UNESCO and global cultural markets act as mediators that convert domestic practices into recognized authority, yet they do so unevenly, privileging certain modes of representation and institutional capacity (Wiktor-Mach, 2019; Bendix, Eggert, & Peselmann, 2012). Actor heterogeneity proves decisive, as states, elites, civil society, and diasporic communities participate differentially in shaping which narratives gain legitimacy. Finally, the nature of the cultural form itself conditions its strategic impact: culinary practices are highly codified and institutionally regulated (Chapple-Sokol , 2013; Demirağ, Turgut, & Ongun, 2025), dress benefits from visual diplomacy and elite endorsement (Dubé-Senécal & Goubau, 2023), while music thrives in hybridized and digitally mediated spaces (Shannon, 2024). These dynamics confirm that intangible heritage constitutes a contested terrain of post-colonial power, where historical legacies, policy strategies, and multi-level social engagement intersect to produce observable shifts in symbolic hierarchy and geopolitical positioning within the Maghreb. Across the three cases, these mechanisms crystallise into distinct pathways to geopolitical capital: couscous's international recognition has proceeded through predominantly centralised, state-led inscription; the caftans through diffuse yet publicly visible non-state agency that the state subsequently endorses; and raï's through the sustained interaction of state, market, diasporic, and digital actors across multiple levels at once.

From Cultural Narratives to Geopolitical Capital

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage in the Maghreb functions not as a residual domain of identity politics but as a structured and strategically mobilized form of geopolitical capital through which Algeria and Morocco seek to

accumulate symbolic authority, consolidate domestic legitimacy, and recalibrate their relative standing within regional and international hierarchies (Gutron & Skounti, 2018). The cases of couscous, caftan, and raï music reveal that heritage becomes geopolitically operative only when embedded within institutional circuits of recognition, discursive regimes of narrative control, and multi-level actor constellations that mediate its circulation and valuation (Hamri, 2025; Yelles, 2000). International recognition mechanisms, most notably UNESCO do not merely validate pre-existing cultural practices; they actively convert localized social forms into transnational markers of authority, thereby producing a hierarchy of legitimacy that can be strategically appropriated by states. In this regard, Algeria's predominantly centralized and bureaucratic approach to heritage nomination privileges internal cohesion and sovereign authorship over culture, reinforcing a domestically anchored legitimacy that aligns with its post-revolutionary state narrative, while Morocco's more hybridized configuration combining state institutions, monarchical symbolism, elite networks, and market-oriented cultural diplomacy enhances external visibility and diplomatic reach, particularly in arenas where symbolic capital is accumulated through circulation rather than inscription alone (Jebari, 2024).

Crucially, heritage-derived geopolitical capital is not generated solely through formal institutional success but through the capacity to impose and stabilize authoritative narratives about origin, authenticity, and ownership (Van de Port & Meyer, 2018). Narrative control operates as a mechanism of power insofar as it structures recognition asymmetrically, enabling some actors to define the cultural field (Bourdieu, 1993) while relegating others to derivative or secondary positions (Bendix R. , 1997). Algeria's framing of raï as an indigenous cultural export rooted in specific social histories exemplifies an inward-facing consolidation strategy that prioritizes narrative sovereignty and national coherence (Boukrouh & Kessab, 2010; Langlois, 2017), whereas Morocco's transnational branding of the caftan illustrates a more outward-oriented logic in which heritage is leveraged as a vehicle for regional soft dominance and global cultural insertion. Yet these strategies remain inherently unstable, as symbolic authority is increasingly co-produced by non-state actors diasporic communities, youth cultures, digital platforms, and transnational networks whose practices hybridize, reinterpret, and sometimes subvert official narratives. Raï music, in particular, demonstrates that cultural power in the contemporary Maghreb cannot be monopolized by state institutions (Cremades, Lorenzo, & Ruxand, 2015); instead, it emerges through contested and negotiated processes in which digital circulation, audience reception, and cross-border collaboration generate alternative forms of legitimacy that may reinforce or undermine official claims (Llamas, 2002).

Comparative analysis across heritage types further reveals that geopolitical capital is neither uniform nor universally transferable (Ashworth, Graham , & Tunbridge, 2007). Culinary heritage such as couscous derives its political efficacy primarily from codification, ritualization, and institutional endorsement, rendering it highly dependent on formal recognition regimes and state-led inscription strategies. Dress traditions like the caftan, by contrast, benefit from visual immediacy, market circulation, and elite mediation, allowing them to accrue symbolic value through fashion diplomacy and global cultural economies rather than through institutional certification alone. Musical heritage such as raï operates within an even more fluid terrain, where authority is generated

through affective resonance, youth identification, and diasporic diffusion, making it less susceptible to direct state control and more vulnerable to reinterpretation (Davies & Bentahila, 2006). These variations underscore that heritage becomes geopolitically consequential only when its intrinsic properties align with the institutional and social infrastructures that enable recognition, circulation, and narrative stabilization.

Theoretically, this analysis advances scholarship beyond conventional soft power frameworks by conceptualizing cultural influence as a measurable, contested, and institutionally mediated form of capital rather than as a diffuse resource of attraction. By foregrounding post-colonial epistemic hierarchies, the study demonstrates how contemporary heritage disputes are embedded in longer historical struggles over knowledge production, recognition, and authority, revealing continuity rather than rupture between colonial classifications and present-day cultural geopolitics (Wyrtzen, 2017). Moreover, by integrating state actors with civil society, diasporic communities, and digitally networked youth, the analysis challenges state-centric models of cultural power and shows that symbolic authority in the Maghreb is assembled through multi-level interactions rather than imposed unilaterally. At the regional level, the Algeria–Morocco rivalry thus extends beyond territorial or diplomatic confrontation into a persistent, low-intensity struggle over symbolic legitimacy, where heritage functions as both a resource and a battleground (Liu, Chen, & Chen, 2025). International institutions such as UNESCO emerge not as neutral arbiters but as structuring environments that privilege certain narratives and strategies over others (Liuzza, 2021), thereby shaping the distribution of symbolic capital across the region (Harrison, 2013). Across the cases examined, the geopolitical significance of intangible heritage derives not simply from cultural attractiveness or international visibility, but from the ways in which cultural recognition is mobilised, institutionalised, and converted into symbolic, status, and geopolitical advantage within the Algeria–Morocco rivalry: visibility creates the opportunity for such advantage, but recognition acquires geopolitical value only once it is claimed, narrated, and defended by interested parties.

At the same time, this analysis remains subject to important limitations. The absence of systematic quantitative indicators constrains the ability to fully measure variations in visibility, reception, and impact, while the contemporary temporal focus may obscure longer-term shifts in cultural geopolitics. Additionally, although the Algeria–Morocco case provides a particularly dense illustration of post-colonial symbolic rivalry, its specific institutional and historical configurations may limit direct generalization (Young, 2012). Nonetheless, the mechanisms identified recognition, narrative authority, and actor-mediated hybridization constitute a transferable analytical framework capable of illuminating cultural competition in other post-colonial settings. Taken together, the findings establish intangible heritage as a multidimensional and contingent form of geopolitical capital, whose effectiveness depends not on cultural authenticity alone but on the capacity to navigate institutional regimes, mobilize heterogeneous actors, and stabilize authoritative narratives within an increasingly fragmented symbolic order (Eichler, 2021).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage in the Maghreb operates as a central instrument of geopolitical strategy, functioning as a form of geopolitical capital that is relational, contested, and deeply embedded in historical and institutional structures. By examining couscous, caftan, and raï music, the analysis shows that heritage is mobilized strategically to consolidate domestic legitimacy, assert regional influence, and secure symbolic recognition within international institutions. These dynamics reveal that cultural authority is neither spontaneous nor neutral but emerges from complex interactions among colonial legacies, state policies, and multi-level actor engagement, including civil society, diasporic networks, and youth-mediated digital platforms, all of which amplify, negotiate, or challenge official narratives.

The findings clarify the mechanisms through which intangible heritage translates into geopolitical influence. First, institutional recognition, exemplified by UNESCO nominations and festival endorsements, converts domestic cultural practices into internationally legible authority, providing measurable leverage in diplomatic and symbolic arenas. Second, narrative control enables states to assert primacy over historical and cultural discourses, consolidating internal cohesion while projecting legitimacy across borders. Third, actor-mediated hybridization demonstrates that symbolic authority is co-produced and contingent: diasporic communities, digital actors, and youth networks can reinforce, reinterpret, or contest state-led claims, highlighting the negotiated nature of cultural power.

Comparative analysis across heritage types underscores the differentiated operationalization of geopolitical capital. Culinary heritage, such as couscous, is highly codified and institutionalized, yielding concentrated domestic legitimacy but variable transnational impact; dress, exemplified by the caftan, benefits from hybridized actor engagement and visual diplomacy, achieving wider international visibility; musical heritage, as illustrated by raï, thrives in digital and diasporic spaces, where youth-mediated hybridization amplifies influence independently of formal institutional endorsement. These patterns reveal that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy is inherently contingent upon the interplay between the intrinsic properties of heritage forms, the structures of institutional mediation, and the agency of multiple social actors.

Ultimately, the study establishes that Algeria–Morocco heritage disputes are not peripheral cultural disagreements but central arenas of symbolic competition, where historical legacies, state strategies, and multi-level social mediation intersect to produce measurable shifts in regional influence and recognition. By framing intangible heritage as a contested and operationalizable form of geopolitical capital, the research provides a theoretically robust lens for understanding post-colonial power dynamics, the negotiation of identity, and the ways in which culture functions as both a domestic and transnational instrument of strategic authority.

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