



## NIGERIA'S AFRICAN DIPLOMACY (1960–2000): HISTORICAL PARALLELS WITH THE MING TRIBUTARY SYSTEM

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### Abstract

*Africa's post-independence diplomacy has long been interpreted through Western theoretical frameworks, often neglecting indigenous and non-Western traditions that provide alternative perspectives on regional leadership and cooperation. Nigeria's Afrocentric diplomacy between 1960 and 2000 positioned the country as a moral leader and advocate for Pan-African unity, peacekeeping, and decolonisation. In comparison, the Ming tributary system (1368–1644) in East Asia represented a hierarchical diplomatic model where surrounding states acknowledged China's symbolic authority through ritualised tribute and, in return, received political recognition, trade privileges, and legitimacy. This review explores the structural and normative parallels between these two systems, showing how both relied on moral authority, reciprocal exchanges, and shared norms to maintain regional stability without coercive dominance. Drawing on a qualitative narrative and comparative historical analysis of scholarly literature and policy documents, the study identifies three main similarities: leadership rooted in moral legitimacy, reciprocal diplomatic exchanges that reinforced cooperation, and an identity-based order founded on cultural or ideological values. Differences arise primarily from historical context, colonial legacies, and modern sovereignty norms. The review concludes that non-Western diplomatic traditions, such as the Ming system, offer valuable insights for understanding Africa's evolving diplomacy. It recommends that African institutions like the African Union and ECOWAS strengthen regional identity, moral leadership, and reciprocity while promoting comparative research that integrates African and Asian diplomatic experiences into contemporary international relations theory.*

**Keywords:** *Afrocentric diplomacy; Ming tributary system; regional leadership; Constructivist International Relations; normative power; reciprocity in diplomacy; Pan-Africanism.*

### Introduction

Since gaining independence on 1st October 1960, Nigeria emerged as a newly sovereign state intent on projecting itself as a continental leader in Africa's post-colonial era (Ebegbulem, 2019; "Nigeria - Foreign Relations," 2024). From the outset, Nigeria's foreign policy placed the African continent front and centre, committing to anti-colonial struggles, Pan-African solidarity and regional stability (Icheke, 2021; "The Historical Basis of Nigeria's Foreign Policy," 2023). The liberalisation of decolonised Africa in the 1960s allowed Nigeria, the continent's most populous country and rapidly growing economy, to pursue a foreign policy anchored in Afrocentrism namely, declaring Africa the "centrepiece" of its external relations (AfroNomicsLaw, 2021). In parallel, the historic model of the Ming tributary system as practised by the Ming dynasty of China (1368–1644) and its neighbours provides a paradigmatic example of how hierarchical norms, symbolic exchange and moral leadership shaped a regional diplomacy based on ritual and reciprocity (Andornino, 2006; Britannica, 2024). This narrative review brings together these two diplomatic traditions, Nigeria's African-centred diplomacy (1960–2000) and the Ming tributary model to investigate how regional leadership, normative frameworks and symbolic hierarchies operate across time and space. The purpose of this review is to set the stage for a comparative inquiry that bridges African foreign



policy and East Asian diplomatic models, and thereby to identify a research gap. Despite the rich scholarship on African diplomacy, there remains limited comparative analysis between African regional actors such as Nigeria and historical East Asian systems like the Ming tributary order. Previous work on Nigeria's diplomacy emphasises its Afro-centric orientation and regional activism in West Africa (Icheke, 2021; AfroNomicsLaw, 2021). Likewise, scholarship on the Ming tributary system examines its structure, function and cultural underpinnings in East Asia (Andornino, 2006; StudySmarter, 2023). Yet, the interface between an African post-colonial actor and a pre-modern Asian diplomatic architecture remains under-explored. This gap matters because it offers an opportunity to enrich our understanding of non-Western diplomatic models, challenge Eurocentric assumptions in international relations, and widen the historiographical lens of regional leadership beyond Africa to include analogous systems elsewhere. To clarify key concepts: "African-centric diplomacy" here refers to Nigeria's foreign policy orientation that placed Africa – its unity, development and moral responsibility at the heart of its external relations (Icheke, 2021). The Ming tributary system is defined as a diplomatic network organised by the Ming dynasty in which neighbouring states acknowledged the imperial centre through ritual tribute and in turn received protection, recognition and trade access (StudySmarter, 2023; Britannica, 2024). Within this system hierarchy, legitimacy and symbolic deference were central to regional stability. These definitions are critical because they anchor the subsequent comparative analysis of how norms, leadership roles and regional order were constructed in different historical and cultural contexts. The rationale for selecting this topic is compelling. First, Nigeria's ambition to act as a regional leader in Africa is well documented: as early as the 1960s Nigeria adopted an Africa-first foreign policy thrust, and by the 1970s it was actively involved in regional peacekeeping and economic cooperation initiatives (Ebegbulem, 2019; Icheke, 2021). Second, the Ming tributary model demonstrates that diplomacy need not be purely coercive or colonial: rather it can function through norms, ritual recognition and symbolic leadership (Andornino, 2006; StudySmarter, 2023). By juxtaposing these two cases, the study invites a deeper reflection on how leadership, legitimacy and regional order are constructed beyond the Western model of power politics. Third, in a globalised world where regional blocs such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) seek to anchor regional diplomacy, understanding precedent-models even historic ones enriches the conceptual toolkit for policymakers and scholars of international relations.

Accordingly, this review poses the central research question: How did Nigeria's African-centric diplomacy from 1960–2000 reflect the leadership, norms, and symbolic hierarchy of the Ming tributary system? The specific objectives are to: (a) trace Nigeria's diplomatic evolution in the period 1960–2000, highlighting its normative commitments and leadership posture; (b) map the key features of the Ming tributary system in terms of hierarchy, reciprocity and legitimacy; (c) conduct a comparative analysis of the two cases to reveal structural parallels and divergences; and (d) draw implications for African regionalism and broader international relations theory. In sum, by exploring both Nigeria's proactive regional diplomacy and the Ming tributary diplomatic model, this review aims to contribute to our intellectual understanding of how moral leadership, symbolic exchange and normative hierarchies operate in regional diplomacy. Practically, it offers insights for African foreign-policy-makers and international relations scholars seeking alternatives to dominant Western paradigms of diplomacy and regional order.

## **2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Constructivist International Relations Theory**

Constructivism provides an appropriate analytical lens for this review because it emphasises that state behaviour is shaped not only by material power, but by shared norms, identities, and socially constructed meanings. Wendt (1999) argues that state identities and interests are not fixed; rather, they are formed through social interaction within the international system. Similarly, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) demonstrate that international norms influence state behaviour by creating expectations regarding appropriate conduct. Applying this to Nigeria, its foreign policy since 1960 reflected a self-constructed identity as a regional guardian, mediator, and promoter of



African solidarity, an identity that shaped its behaviour beyond material interests. Adebajo (2010) reinforces this interpretation by asserting that Nigeria's diplomatic actions have historically been driven by a normative aspiration to act as Africa's "moral conscience" rather than a hegemonic power. Therefore, Constructivism is suitable for understanding how Nigeria's Afrocentric diplomacy emerged from an identity-based commitment to Pan-African unity and regional leadership rather than from pursuit of power alone.

## **2.2 The Ming Tributary System as a Diplomatic Model**

The Ming tributary system provides a historical framework through which to understand a non-Western diplomatic order based on legitimacy, ritual, and hierarchy. Fairbank (1968) describes the tributary system as a hierarchical diplomatic structure in which neighbouring states acknowledged the symbolic authority of China through ritual submission in exchange for political recognition and regulated trade. Kang (2005) argues that the East Asian order under the Ming dynasty was one of stable hierarchy, where states accepted China's central role due to shared Confucian norms and belief in its moral authority. Zhang (2009) further expands that the tributary framework institutionalised regional order through ritualised diplomacy, cultural affinity, and reciprocal obligations rather than coercive expansion. Unlike Western imperialism, the tributary model relied on soft power, cultural legitimacy, and moral persuasion to maintain regional stability. This model demonstrates that non-coercive leadership rooted in values and shared norms can produce long-term diplomatic cohesion, offering a relevant comparative framework for analysing Nigeria's style of African-centred diplomacy.

## **2.3 Conceptual Bridge**

The conceptual bridge between Constructivism and the Ming tributary system enables a comparative understanding of Nigeria's diplomacy. Both Nigeria's African-centric foreign policy and the tributary system demonstrate leadership grounded in moral authority and shared norms rather than military domination. As Fairbank (1968) and Kang (2005) note, the tributary system relied on recognition of legitimacy and symbolic hierarchy. Similarly, Adebajo (2010) and Ogunnubi and Isike (2015) describe Nigeria's role as Africa's "Big Brother" rooted in expectations of responsibility, solidarity, and normative leadership. In constructivist terms, both systems show that identity-driven diplomacy can generate regional order and compliance. Thus, combining Constructivism with the tributary model provides a strong analytical foundation for assessing how Nigeria's diplomacy from 1960–2000 mirrored tributary-style leadership through norms, legitimacy, and moral authority.

## **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative historical research design to analyse Nigeria's African-centric diplomacy (1960–2000) alongside the Ming tributary system (1368–1644), as this approach supports the systematic examination of political norms, leadership practices, and regional order across different historical contexts (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Tosh, 2015). Given that this review is conceptually grounded in Constructivist International Relations theory, which asserts that state identities and norms shape behaviour (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Wendt, 1999), a qualitative design enables an interpretive understanding of how diplomatic identities and legitimacy were constructed in each case. The study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from reputable scholarly sources to ensure academic rigour, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government foreign policy documents, African Union and ECOWAS records on Nigeria's regional engagements, as well as leading historical texts on the Ming tributary system (Fairbank, 1968; Kang, 2005; Zhang, 2009; Adebajo, 2010; Ogunnubi & Isike, 2015). These sources were selected to provide triangulated and evidence-based insight into both diplomatic systems. Data



analysis utilised a thematic and interpretive analytical approach, which Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as suitable for identifying recurring patterns across qualitative datasets. Accordingly, extracted literature was coded into themes such as leadership and legitimacy, norms and identity, reciprocity and symbolic authority, and regional order, allowing for comparison of the underlying diplomatic logic of both systems. The interpretive lens enabled a context-sensitive synthesis of how moral authority, normative influence, and symbolic hierarchy shaped regional diplomacy in each case. This methodology ensures that the findings are historically grounded, theoretically informed, and analytically robust.

#### **4. Historical Context: Nigeria's African Diplomacy 1960–2000**

##### **4.1 The Post-Independence Vision (1960–1975)**

From the moment Nigeria attained independence on 1st October 1960, the foreign policy posture of the new state was explicitly anchored in Africa-centred principles. Scholars note that Nigeria declared Africa as the “centrepiece” of its external relations, signalling a diplomatic identity committed to African unity and decolonisation (Foluke, 2019; Mbura, 2020). Specifically, this “Africa as the centrepiece” doctrine meant that Nigeria saw itself not as pursuing narrow self-interest but as part of the continent’s collective emancipation. Foluke (2019) shows that Nigeria’s moral and financial contributions to the liberation struggles in southern Africa increased dramatically during this period. Nigeria’s role in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 further manifests this commitment (Haruna, 2022). In practical terms, Nigeria’s early Pan-African engagement included participation in UN Peacekeeping in the Congo and financial support to African liberation movements at a time when its GDP per capita hovered around US\$140 in the early 1960s (World Bank, 2023). This normative commitment, however, co-existed with realpolitik considerations: scholars argue that Nigeria’s emergent oil income beginning mid-1970s enhanced its readiness to act regionally (Foluke, 2019). Thus, the post-independence era established a normative foundation of Afro-centric diplomacy, moving beyond the typical post-colonial strategy of alignment with former colonial powers (Eshiet, 2018).

##### **4.2 Leadership and Normative Engagement (1975–1990)**

Between 1975 and 1990, Nigeria consolidated its leadership in West Africa and on the continent through both normative and institutional engagement. Nigeria, as a founding member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, assumed a central role in the regional architecture (Omo-Ogbebor, 2017). Nigeria’s contributions to peace-keeping and mediation: for example in Liberia and Sierra Leone via ECOMOG reflect its functional leadership role (Modern Diplomacy, 2021). Concurrently, Nigeria embraced economic diplomacy: it hosted the development of the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa (1980–2000) under the aegis of the OAU, thereby elevating Africa’s self-reliance agenda (Wikipedia, 2024). Nigeria’s normative engagement also extended to the anti-apartheid movement, where it provided funding and diplomatic support to sanctions against the white-minority regime of South Africa (Haruna, 2022). According to Mbura (2020), Nigeria’s defence and foreign-aid expenditure peaked at about 1.5% of GDP in early 1980s, underscoring commitment beyond rhetoric. While Nigeria’s leadership was recognised regionally, it was not without critique: some authors argue that Nigeria’s dominant posture invited resistance from smaller neighbours who perceived a hegemonic agenda (Modern Diplomacy, 2021). Nevertheless, this period shows the transformation of Nigeria’s Afro-centric doctrine into operational leadership in norms, economy and regional diplomacy.





### **4.3 Transition and Challenges (1990–2000)**

The decade from 1990 to 2000 represents a transitional era for Nigeria's diplomacy marked by diplomatic setbacks during military rule and a late-1990s restoration of credibility. Under successive military regimes, including those led by Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, Nigeria's foreign policy priorities came under strain as authoritarian domestic governance eroded its moral legitimacy abroad (Osho, 2025; Eshiet, 2018). For instance, human rights concerns and economic decline undermined Nigeria's image as Africa's moral leader. Nonetheless, the late 1990s saw a return to institutionalised diplomacy with Nigeria's 1999 transition to democracy; Nigeria re-engaged in peace-keeping, debt relief negotiations and African Union formation processes (Eshiet, 2018; Haruna, 2022). This period of renewal allowed Nigeria to reaffirm its regional leadership role though it did so in a changed global environment marked by neoliberalism and regional integration pressures. The literature thus suggests a narrative of initial normative ambition, institutional leadership, domestic crisis, and resurgence capturing the complex evolution of Nigerian diplomacy over forty years.

## **5. The Ming Tributary System: Key Features and Functions**

### **5.1 Hierarchical Legitimacy and Symbolic Leadership**

The Ming tributary system was fundamentally anchored on hierarchical legitimacy, where China positioned itself as the central authority in East Asian diplomacy. Fairbank (1968) explains that the tributary system operated as a hierarchical diplomatic order in which neighbouring states acknowledged the superior status of the Chinese emperor through ritual submission in exchange for political recognition. This legitimacy was rooted in Confucian ideology, which emphasised moral leadership, hierarchy, and order in international relations. Kang (2005) argues that East Asian states accepted this hierarchy not because of Chinese coercion, but based on shared cultural values and recognition of China's moral authority. This viewpoint challenges earlier interpretations that portrayed the tributary system as a tool of domination, by showing that legitimacy was constructed through cultural norms rather than military force. Zhang (2009) adds that symbolic leadership was maintained through rituals such as the kowtow, imperial investiture, and diplomatic ceremonies, which reinforced China's status as the moral centre of the regional order. These perspectives demonstrate that the Ming system provides a non-Western example where symbolic legitimacy, rather than direct coercion, shaped regional leadership.

### **5.2 Reciprocity and the Exchange of Tribute**

A central feature of the tributary system was reciprocity, defined as the mutual exchange of tribute for political legitimacy, security, and economic benefits. Fairbank (1968) states that tributary missions involved the presentation of local products to the Ming court, for which the emperor responded with lavish gifts that often exceeded the value of the tribute offered. Kang (2005) notes that this reciprocal exchange established a mutually beneficial relationship where subordinate states gained access to trade networks, diplomatic protection, and recognition of their rulers by the Chinese emperor. Zhang (2009) supports this interpretation by arguing that the tributary system functioned as a regulated trade and diplomatic framework that promoted stable commercial interaction across East Asia. The reciprocal nature of tribute relations is important because it demonstrates that the system was not solely exploitative; rather, it provided material and political benefits for all participants. This challenges Western assumptions that hierarchical systems result in exploitation, highlighting instead that the Ming structure was based on negotiated reciprocity and shared gains.



### **5.3 Maintenance of Regional Stability through Norms and Rituals**

Norms and rituals played a crucial role in maintaining regional stability in the tributary system. Fairbank (1968) emphasises that the tributary system was sustained through a formalised set of rituals, diplomatic protocols, and moral expectations that regulated interactions between China and tributary states. Kang (2005) explains that these rituals such as tribute missions, ceremonial receptions, and imperial edicts reinforced a shared normative order based on Confucian values of respect, hierarchy, and harmony. Zhang (2009) further notes that ritual diplomacy functioned as a conflict-prevention mechanism because it established accepted behavioural norms and reduced the likelihood of interstate rivalry. Unlike the European balance-of-power system, which often relied on military force, the Ming model emphasised cultural diplomacy, moral persuasion, and ritual compliance as tools of regional governance. The literature clearly shows that norms and rituals provided a soft structural framework that reduced conflict and created a predictable diplomatic environment in East Asia for centuries.

### **5.4 Influence without Direct Colonisation**

A defining characteristic of the Ming tributary system was that it enabled China to exert regional influence without direct colonisation or territorial expansion. Fairbank (1968) shows that China did not seek to annex tributary states, but rather maintained a sphere of influence through cultural prestige, diplomatic recognition, and moral authority. Kang (2005) argues that this system represented a form of “soft hegemony,” where China led through example, cultural power, and political legitimacy rather than imperial conquest. Zhang (2009) adds that tributary states retained significant autonomy in their internal affairs, while still benefiting from association with the Chinese empire. This non-imperial form of influence contrasts sharply with Western colonial models, which relied on direct control, economic extraction, and political domination. The Ming model demonstrates that a regional power can lead through soft power, shared norms, and symbolic authority making it a valuable comparative framework for studying non-Western diplomacy.

## **6. Discussion (Comparative Analysis: Nigeria’s Diplomacy and the Ming Tributary System)**

### **6.1 Leadership through Norms and Moral Authority**

Fairbank (1968) argues that the Ming tributary system was fundamentally grounded in moral authority, where China positioned itself as the symbolic centre of regional order through cultural prestige and Confucian values rather than coercive domination. This form of leadership reflects what scholars now refer to as normative hegemony, where influence is exercised through values, legitimacy, and example rather than physical force. Similarly, Adebajo (2010) asserts that Nigeria cultivated a “Big Brother” role in Africa by projecting itself as a moral leader committed to decolonisation, peace, and Pan-African unity. This Afrocentric leadership model emphasised moral responsibility, solidarity, and regional uplift, rather than hegemonic control. Ogunnubi and Isike (2015) reinforce this view, noting that Nigeria’s influence within West Africa was derived largely from its reputation, economic strength, and peacekeeping contributions, which earned it normative legitimacy. These perspectives demonstrate a parallel: both the Ming dynasty and Nigeria used moral authority as a leadership tool, relying on shared values and identity to foster regional order. However, while the Ming system relied on deeply embedded Confucian ideology to legitimise hierarchy, Nigeria’s legitimacy emerged from anti-colonial solidarity and a self-constructed identity as Africa’s protector.



## 6.2 Diplomatic Reciprocity and Symbolic Exchanges

Fairbank (1968) explains that reciprocity was a core pillar of the tributary system, where subordinate states offered tribute in exchange for political recognition, trade privileges, and symbolic affirmation from the Chinese emperor. This created a mutually beneficial diplomatic arrangement that stabilised China's regional relationships. Kang (2005) adds that the lavish return gifts from the Ming court often exceeded the value of tribute received, demonstrating that reciprocity was intended to reinforce loyalty and cooperation rather than extract resources. A similar pattern of reciprocal diplomacy is visible in Nigeria's African policy. Adebajo (2010) notes that Nigeria provided significant financial support to liberation movements and deployed peacekeeping troops across Africa, particularly through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which contributed over 70% of troops in Liberia and Sierra Leone operations in the 1990s. In return, Nigeria received symbolic recognition as Africa's regional leader. Ogunnubi and Isike (2015) confirm that Nigeria's economic assistance, mediation interventions, and peacekeeping roles strengthened its diplomatic standing and secured regional support for its leadership. Thus, reciprocity in both cases was not purely material; it was symbolic and legitimacy-enhancing. The Ming's tribute-gift mechanism and Nigeria's assistance-recognition dynamic both illustrate that reciprocal exchange is a powerful diplomatic currency for sustaining regional leadership.

## 6.3 Constructivist Insights: Identity and Regional Order

Wendt (1999) argues that state identities shape interests and behaviour, meaning that foreign policy is socially constructed rather than materially predetermined. Applying this lens reveals a deeper connection between the Ming tributary order and Nigeria's diplomacy. Zhang (2009) explains that Confucian norms such as hierarchy, harmony, and respect were central to sustaining the tributary system, producing a shared regional identity that accepted China's central role. In parallel, Adebajo (2010) demonstrates that Nigeria's diplomacy was built on a collective African identity rooted in Pan-Africanism, anti-colonial struggle, and solidarity. The idea of Africa as a "family of states" forged through shared historical trauma fostered a regional identity that legitimised Nigeria's leadership. This identity-based diplomacy mirrors the Confucian cultural foundations of the Ming system, suggesting that regional order can emerge from shared norms and identity rather than coercion. Ogunnubi and Isike (2015) further contend that Nigeria's leadership was sustained because African states recognised and internalised Nigeria's role as a guardian of regional stability. Thus, both systems demonstrate how Constructivist variables, identity, norms, and shared values shape regional order and obedience to leadership.

## 6.4 Divergences

Despite strong parallels, notable divergences exist due to historical context, power dynamics, and system structures. Fairbank (1968) describes the Ming tributary system as operating in a largely stable, Sino-centric environment where China possessed uncontested cultural and political dominance. In contrast, Nigeria's leadership emerged in a fragmented post-colonial system marked by sovereignty sensitivities and competing national interests. Ogunnubi and Isike (2015) note that Nigeria's leadership was often resisted by smaller West African states that feared domination, demonstrating that post-colonial regional systems are more contested than Confucian-based hierarchical orders. Additionally, Kang (2005) argues that the tributary system endured because China maintained economic, cultural, and military superiority over centuries, whereas Nigeria's influence fluctuated due to domestic instability, military rule, and economic decline particularly during the 1980s and 1990s oil shocks. Adebajo (2010) highlights that Nigeria's moral authority weakened under military regimes, reducing its diplomatic legitimacy, whereas the Ming system



retained continuity because legitimacy was embedded in cultural worldviews, not governance performance. Finally, the modern international system is grounded in principles of sovereign equality, unlike the hierarchical worldview that structured the tributary order. Consequently, while the tributary and Afrocentric models share normative similarities, their effectiveness and continuity differ due to historical, systemic, and ideological constraints.

### **Implications for African Diplomacy and International Relations Theory**

Fairbank (1968) shows that the Ming tributary system demonstrates the possibility of sustaining regional order through culturally embedded norms rather than coercive dominance, and this offers valuable lessons for African diplomacy today. Adebajo (2010) argues that Africa's contemporary regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS continue to struggle with fragmented identities, weak enforcement of norms, and inconsistent regional leadership. This review implies that African regionalism could strengthen its effectiveness by cultivating shared diplomatic norms and a collective identity that reinforces unity and legitimacy, similar to the cultural foundations underpinning the tributary system. Ogunnubi and Isike (2015) maintain that Africa's regional organisations must rely on moral leadership, dialogue, and shared values to ensure stability, rather than coercive pressure or external intervention, demonstrating that norm-based regionalism remains a viable pathway for African diplomacy. Wendt (1999) asserts that Constructivism explains how shared ideas, norms, and identities shape state behaviour, and the findings of this review deepen this theoretical lens by highlighting the success of non-Western systems of order. Kang (2005) reinforces that the tributary system exemplifies a non-European model for understanding international relations, proving that peaceful hierarchical orders can emerge from shared values rather than material power alone. This comparison contributes to Constructivist scholarship by illustrating how identity-driven diplomacy both in Ming China and Afrocentric Nigeria can foster cooperation, legitimacy, and regional stability. Zhang (2009) adds that recognising the legitimacy of non-Western models challenges Eurocentric assumptions in international relations theory, suggesting that scholars must reassess global diplomatic history beyond the Westphalian framework. Adebajo (2010) argues that African policymakers tend to frame diplomacy using Western blueprints, yet this paper shows that successful regional leadership can emerge from culturally relevant models rooted in indigenous values and norms. Fairbank (1968) and Kang (2005) collectively demonstrate that non-Western diplomatic systems offer credible alternatives to Western theories, and this review underscores the need to rethink African diplomacy through lenses that reflect African historical experience rather than imported models. This has major implications for African international relations scholarship, as it encourages the development of Afrocentric and historically grounded frameworks. Ultimately, this review demonstrates that re-examining non-Western diplomatic traditions can empower Africa to craft more authentic, identity-driven regional strategies that strengthen unity, legitimacy, and global relevance.

### **Conclusion**

This review has highlighted that both the Ming tributary system and Nigeria's Afrocentric diplomacy demonstrate how regional leadership can be built on shared values, moral authority, and reciprocal cooperation rather than force. Each system relied on legitimacy earned through identity and common norms. The Ming model was rooted in Confucian principles that reinforced China's symbolic leadership, while Nigeria positioned itself as a champion of African unity and independence, shaping its regional role through Pan-African ideals. Although arising from different historical and political contexts, both models show that influence can be maintained through respect, cultural authority, and mutually beneficial relationships. The key distinction lies in the environments in which they operated. The Ming tributary order existed within a culturally cohesive regional system that accepted hierarchy, whereas Nigeria's leadership emerged in a post-colonial setting marked by diverse identities, state sovereignty, and political sensitivities. This difference





affected the consistency and resilience of each model. Nonetheless, both offer meaningful insights for rethinking African diplomacy beyond Western-centric frameworks. This review strengthens understanding of Africa's diplomatic identity by showing that successful regional leadership can be rooted in shared values and non-coercive influence. It also underscores the value of historical analogies in enriching modern diplomatic thinking, provided they are applied critically. Future research should continue exploring comparative studies between African and other non-Western diplomatic traditions to broaden international relations scholarship and elevate African perspectives in global diplomatic discourse. Taken together, these insights affirm the author's position that non-Western diplomatic models, such as Nigeria's Afrocentric diplomacy and the Ming tributary system, reveal the continued relevance of norm-based leadership in sustaining regional order. This 'paper therefore maintains that moral legitimacy and shared identity remain vital instruments of influence for African diplomacy, offering credible alternatives to coercive or purely material power. In this regard, the study's position reinforces Constructivist interpretations of regional order and calls for greater integration of indigenous and comparative frameworks in African foreign policy thinking.

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