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Regional integration and cultural diplomacy: a comparative analysis of divergent pathways in Burundi and Uganda.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the comparative dynamics of regional integration and cultural diplomacy in Burundi and Uganda, two East African nations that are geographically proximate yet pursue distinct approaches to engagement with the East African Community (EAC) and to cultivating cultural soft power. Despite their divergent political trajectories and diplomatic styles, both countries grapple with fundamental questions about how to navigate regional integration processes, leverage cultural assets for diplomatic influence, and balance sovereignty concerns with the imperatives of collective regional action. The research employs a comparative case study methodology, drawing on policy documents, diplomatic engagements, cultural initiatives, and scholarly analyses spanning 2020-2026. Uganda has positioned itself as a leading advocate for deeper EAC integration, with President Yoweri Museveni's March 2026 assumption of the EAC chairmanship marked by a stark warning that the bloc risks "perpetual marginalisation" if member

states fail to deepen integration across its four pillars: Customs Union, Common Market, Monetary Union, and Political Federation. Museveni's rhetorical framing, drawing on the Luganda concept of "Okukonesa" (undercooking food) to describe incomplete reforms, illustrates how cultural metaphors can articulate political vision. Uganda's cultural diplomacy extends beyond rhetoric—the Kampala Geopolitics Conference at Makerere University has become a platform for showcasing regional culture, as demonstrated by the April 2025 performance of Burundi's Ingoma drummers alongside Ugandan artist Vinka, creating a fusion that reminded participants of "the unifying power of music" in regional cooperation . Uganda's open-door refugee policy, praised as among the most progressive globally, represents a form of humanitarian diplomacy that enhances its regional standing .

Burundi presents a different picture. As a newer EAC member, Burundi has participated in regional defence cooperation frameworks, with its delegates joining counterparts from all eight partner states at the 41st Sectoral Council on Cooperation in Defence Affairs in Nairobi (September 2025), where they reaffirmed commitment to "unity and joint security initiatives" . However, Burundi's integration experience has been marked by practical challenges—unlike Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda, where citizens can cross borders with national IDs, Burundi still requires passports for entry, reflecting uneven implementation of the Common Market Protocol. Bilateral relations with Uganda remain strong, underscored by a June 2024 meeting where Uganda's Foreign Affairs Minister Hon. Gen. Odongo Jeje Abubakhar and Burundian Ambassador H.E. Brig. Gen. Jules Ndihokubwayo emphasized "shared cultural and social bonds" and Uganda's sponsorship of ten Burundian nationals for Master's programs at Makerere University as educational diplomacy. Burundi's cultural assets are globally recognized—the ancient Ingoma drumming tradition, dating to the 17th century and symbolizing royal power, has been performed internationally and featured at the Kampala Geopolitics Conference, where it was described as "an immersive cultural experience" demonstrating that "art and culture are just as central to diplomacy and development as policy and politics". Yet Burundi's cultural diplomacy remains less systematically integrated into foreign policy than Uganda's.

Uganda's strength lies in its consistent political advocacy for regional integration, sophisticated use of cultural platforms like the Kampala Geopolitics Conference, and integration of cultural metaphors into diplomatic discourse. Its challenge is translating rhetorical commitment into

practical outcomes amid uneven implementation across the bloc. Burundi's advantage is its rich cultural heritage, including the globally recognized Ingoma drumming tradition, and growing participation in regional frameworks. Both countries demonstrate that effective regional integration and cultural diplomacy require: (1) consistent political will at the highest levels; (2) practical implementation of commitments beyond rhetoric; (3) leveraging cultural assets for diplomatic engagement; (4) educational exchanges building people-to-people ties; (5) participation in regional security frameworks; (6) addressing implementation gaps in common market protocols; (7) harmonization of policies across member states; and (8) recognition that cultural diplomacy is not merely soft power but "heart power" that builds genuine connection and understanding.

KEYWORDS: Regional integration, cultural diplomacy, Burundi, Uganda, East African Community, soft power, Ingoma drumming, common market, security cooperation, educational diplomacy

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine les dynamiques comparatives de l'intégration régionale et de la diplomatie culturelle au Burundi et en Ouganda, deux nations d'Afrique de l'Est partageant une proximité géographique mais poursuivant des approches distinctes en matière d'engagement avec la Communauté d'Afrique de l'Est (EAC) et de culture du soft power culturel. Malgré leurs trajectoires politiques divergentes et leurs styles diplomatiques différents, les deux pays sont confrontés à des questions fondamentales sur la manière de naviguer dans les processus d'intégration régionale, de tirer parti des atouts culturels pour l'influence diplomatique et d'équilibrer les préoccupations de souveraineté avec les impératifs de l'action collective régionale. La recherche emploie une méthodologie d'étude de cas comparative, s'appuyant sur des documents politiques, des engagements diplomatiques, des initiatives culturelles et des analyses savantes couvrant la période 2020-2026. L'Ouganda s'est positionné comme un ardent défenseur d'une intégration régionale plus poussée, la prise de fonction du président Yoweri Museveni en mars 2026 à la présidence de l'EAC étant marquée par un avertissement sévère selon lequel le bloc risque une « marginalisation perpétuelle » si les États membres ne parviennent pas à approfondir

l'intégration sur ses quatre piliers : Union douanière, Marché commun, Union monétaire et Fédération politique . Le cadrage rhétorique de Museveni, s'appuyant sur le concept luganda « Okukonesa » (cuisson insuffisante des aliments) pour décrire des réformes incomplètes, illustre comment les métaphores culturelles peuvent articuler une vision politique. La diplomatie culturelle ougandaise s'étend au-delà de la rhétorique—la Conférence de géopolitique de Kampala à l'Université Makerere est devenue une plateforme de mise en valeur de la culture régionale, comme l'a démontré en avril 2025 la performance des batteurs de tambours Ingoma du Burundi aux côtés de l'artiste ougandaise Vinka, créant une fusion qui a rappelé aux participants « le pouvoir unificateur de la musique » dans la coopération régionale . La politique ougandaise d'accueil des réfugiés, saluée comme l'une des plus progressistes au monde, représente une forme de diplomatie humanitaire qui renforce sa position régionale .

Le Burundi présente un tableau différent. En tant que membre plus récent de l'EAC, le Burundi a participé aux cadres régionaux de coopération en matière de défense, ses délégués se joignant à leurs homologues des huit États partenaires lors de la 41e session du Conseil sectoriel sur la coopération en matière de défense à Nairobi (septembre 2025), où ils ont réaffirmé leur engagement en faveur de « l'unité et des initiatives de sécurité communes » . Cependant, l'expérience d'intégration du Burundi a été marquée par des défis pratiques—contrairement à l'Ouganda, au Kenya et au Rwanda où les citoyens peuvent traverser les frontières avec des cartes d'identité nationales, le Burundi exige toujours des passeports pour l'entrée, reflétant une mise en œuvre inégale du Protocole sur le marché commun . Les relations bilatérales avec l'Ouganda restent solides, soulignées par une réunion de juin 2024 où le ministre ougandais des Affaires étrangères, le général hon. Odongo Jeje Abubakhar, et l'ambassadeur du Burundi, le général de brigade hon. Jules Ndihokubwayo, ont mis l'accent sur les « liens culturels et sociaux partagés » et le parrainage par l'Ouganda de dix ressortissants burundais pour des programmes de maîtrise à l'Université Makerere en tant que diplomatie éducative . Les atouts culturels du Burundi sont mondialement reconnus—l'ancienne tradition des tambours Ingoma, datant du XVIIe siècle et symbolisant le pouvoir royal, a été jouée internationalement et présentée à la Conférence de géopolitique de Kampala, où elle a été décrite comme une « expérience culturelle immersive » démontrant que « l'art et la culture sont tout aussi centraux pour la diplomatie et le développement

que la politique et la politique publique » . Pourtant, la diplomatie culturelle du Burundi reste moins systématiquement intégrée à la politique étrangère que celle de l'Ouganda.

La force de l'Ouganda réside dans son plaidoyer politique constant en faveur de l'intégration régionale, l'utilisation sophistiquée de plateformes culturelles comme la Conférence de géopolitique de Kampala et l'intégration de métaphores culturelles dans le discours diplomatique. Son défi est de traduire l'engagement rhétorique en résultats pratiques face à une mise en œuvre inégale au sein du bloc. L'avantage du Burundi est son riche patrimoine culturel, y compris la tradition des tambours Ingoma mondialement reconnue, et une participation croissante aux cadres régionaux. Les deux pays démontrent qu'une intégration régionale et une diplomatie culturelle efficaces nécessitent : (1) une volonté politique constante aux plus hauts niveaux ; (2) une mise en œuvre pratique des engagements au-delà de la rhétorique ; (3) l'exploitation des atouts culturels pour l'engagement diplomatique ; (4) des échanges éducatifs construisant des liens entre les peuples ; (5) une participation aux cadres de sécurité régionaux ; (6) la résolution des lacunes de mise en œuvre dans les protocoles du marché commun ; (7) l'harmonisation des politiques entre les États membres ; et (8) la reconnaissance que la diplomatie culturelle n'est pas seulement un soft power mais un « heart power » qui construit une véritable connexion et compréhension .

MOTS-CLÉS : Intégration régionale, diplomatie culturelle, Burundi, Ouganda, Communauté d'Afrique de l'Est, soft power, tambours Ingoma, marché commun, coopération sécuritaire, diplomatie éducative.

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2. INTRODUCTION

Regional integration and cultural diplomacy represent two interconnected dimensions of contemporary international relations. Regional integration—the process by which states voluntarily pool sovereignty to achieve collective benefits—has advanced significantly in East Africa through the East African Community (EAC). Cultural diplomacy—the use of cultural

expressions, exchanges, and heritage to build relationships and influence—complements formal integration by fostering people-to-people connections and shared identity. Together, they offer pathways to peace, prosperity, and stability in a region marked by both promise and persistent challenges.

Burundi and Uganda, two East African nations with intertwined histories and shared membership in the EAC, offer a compelling comparative lens through which to examine these dynamics. Uganda has emerged as a leading advocate for deeper regional integration. President Yoweri Museveni, assuming the EAC chairmanship in March 2026, warned that the bloc must deepen integration across its four pillars—Customs Union, Common Market, Monetary Union, and Political Federation—or face "perpetual marginalisation" . Uganda's cultural diplomacy extends beyond political rhetoric, with platforms like the Kampala Geopolitics Conference showcasing regional culture and fostering dialogue .

Burundi, a newer EAC member, has participated actively in regional frameworks while maintaining distinct diplomatic approaches. Its cultural heritage, particularly the ancient Ingoma drumming tradition, has gained international recognition and been deployed in cultural diplomacy settings, including a memorable performance at the 2025 Kampala Geopolitics Conference that demonstrated "the unifying power of music" . Bilateral ties with Uganda remain strong, underscored by educational exchanges and diplomatic engagements .

This study examines the comparative dynamics of regional integration and cultural diplomacy in Burundi and Uganda. Drawing on policy documents, diplomatic engagements, cultural initiatives, and scholarly analyses, it explores how each country navigates regional processes, leverages cultural assets, and balances national interests with collective commitments. The analysis is organized around four interconnected themes: (1) the historical and political contexts shaping each country's approach to regional integration; (2) participation in EAC frameworks and implementation of regional commitments; (3) cultural diplomacy initiatives and the deployment of cultural heritage; and (4) implications for regional cooperation and sustainable development.

The study contributes to scholarship on regional integration in Africa, cultural diplomacy, and international relations. It argues that effective regional integration requires not only formal

commitments but also the cultivation of shared identity and people-to-people connections—precisely the domain where cultural diplomacy plays an indispensable role.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Regional Integration

Regional integration theory has evolved significantly since its mid-20th century origins. Early functionalist approaches, associated with David Mitrany, emphasized technical cooperation across borders as a pathway to peace. Neo-functionalism, developed by Ernst Haas, introduced the concept of "spillover," where integration in one sector creates pressures for integration in related sectors. Intergovernmentalist approaches, associated with Stanley Hoffmann, emphasized the continued primacy of state interests and bargaining.

In the African context, regional integration has taken distinctive forms. The Organization of African Unity (1963) and its successor, the African Union (2002), have promoted continental integration through Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The East African Community (EAC), originally founded in 1967, collapsed in 1977 and was revived in 2000, representing one of the continent's most ambitious integration projects. The EAC is structured around four pillars: Customs Union (established 2005), Common Market (2010), Monetary Union (protocol signed 2013), and Political Federation (under discussion) .

Research on EAC integration has documented both progress and persistent challenges. A University of Nairobi study concluded that "in spite of the existence of EAC bloc, that have secretariats and regular technical and ministerial level meetings and summits of heads of state and government, East Africa integration efforts have had limited impact so far more so in area of, peace, conflict resolution and security" . Challenges include "membership issues, slow ratification of protocols and reluctant implementation of agreed plans, socio-economic policy divergence, and limited national and regional capacities".

2.2 Cultural Diplomacy: From Soft Power to Heart Power

Cultural diplomacy, a subset of public diplomacy, involves the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other cultural aspects to foster mutual understanding. Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power"—the ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce—has been influential in framing cultural diplomacy as a tool of statecraft. Cultural assets, including music, art, heritage, and educational exchanges, can enhance a country's international standing and influence.

Recent scholarship has expanded the understanding of cultural diplomacy beyond state-centric frameworks. The concept of "heart power," articulated by Brazilian diplomat Amb. Irene Gana at the 2025 Ubumuntu Arts Festival suggests that cultural diplomacy is not merely instrumental but fundamentally about human connection: "Cultural diplomacy is not just soft power but a heart power. We use art to show who we are, and how we can live in peace, despite our differences" .

In the African context, cultural diplomacy has gained renewed attention. The Kampala Geopolitics Conference at Makerere University has become a platform for showcasing regional culture and fostering dialogue. The 2025 event featured a memorable fusion of Burundian Ingoma drummers and Ugandan artist Vinka, described as "a powerful reminder that art and culture are just as central to diplomacy and development as policy and politics".

2.3 **Uganda's Regional and Cultural Diplomacy**

Uganda has positioned itself as a leading advocate for EAC integration. Key features include:

- **Presidential leadership:** President Museveni, a veteran of East African politics, has consistently advocated for deeper integration. His March 2026 EAC chairmanship speech warned that "some actors seem to treat this integration as optional. In my view, I have always held that it is mandatory to unite or risk perpetual marginalisation" .
- **Rhetorical framing:** Museveni employed the Luganda concept of "Okukonesa" (undercooking food) to describe incomplete reforms. "The food becomes 'emikone' – it then becomes difficult to cook properly because the insufficient heat initially applied has cooked the food in the wrong direction. The option therefore is to throw away that food and cook another quantity of food" . This use of cultural metaphor illustrates how local concepts can articulate political vision.
- **Four pillars commitment:** Museveni emphasized the need to fully implement the EAC's four pillars: Customs Union, Common Market, Monetary Union, and Political Federation .
- **Market integration vision:** Museveni linked regional integration to youth employment, arguing that "to sell you need markets" and that a fully integrated regional market of 350 million people could help absorb the region's growing youth population .
- **Kampala Geopolitics Conference:** Since 2022, this annual event at Makerere University has brought together scholars, policymakers, and cultural practitioners to discuss Africa's geopolitical future. The conference explicitly integrates cultural performances, as demonstrated by the 2025 Burundian drummers.

- **Educational diplomacy:** Uganda sponsors students from neighboring countries, including ten Burundian nationals, for Master's programs at Makerere University, fostering long-term relationships.
- **Refugee policy:** Uganda's progressive refugee policy, which grants refugees the right to work and move freely, has been praised as a model of humanitarian diplomacy .

2.4 Burundi's Regional and Cultural Diplomacy

Burundi's approach to regional integration and cultural diplomacy reflects its distinct history and position as a newer EAC member. Key features include:

- **EAC membership:** Burundi joined the EAC in 2007, expanding the bloc to its current membership. It has participated in regional frameworks, including the 41st Sectoral Council on Cooperation in Defence Affairs (September 2025), where delegates "reaffirmed their commitment to unity and joint security initiatives" .
- **Implementation gaps:** Unlike Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda where citizens can cross borders with national IDs, Burundi still requires passports, reflecting uneven implementation of the Common Market Protocol .
- **Bilateral relations with Uganda:** A June 2024 meeting between Uganda's Foreign Affairs Minister Hon. Gen. Odongo Jeje Abubakhar and Burundian Ambassador H.E. Brig. Gen. Jules Ndihokubwayo emphasized "shared cultural and social bonds" and explored opportunities for enhanced trade and economic cooperation .
- **Ingoma drumming tradition:** The ancient drumming tradition, dating to the 17th century, holds deep cultural significance. Drums symbolized the king's power, with the phrase "ascended the drum" signifying a monarch's enthronement. Sacred drums like Ruciteme and Murimirwa are preserved in Gishora .
- **Cultural diplomacy deployment:** The Royal Drummers of Burundi have toured globally since the 1960s, influencing world music and inspiring events like WOMAD. Their April 2025 performance at the Kampala Geopolitics Conference was described as an "immersive cultural experience" demonstrating "the unifying power of music" .
- **Educational diplomacy:** Uganda's sponsorship of Burundian students at Makerere University represents a form of educational diplomacy that builds long-term ties.

2.5 Comparative Perspectives on Regional Integration

Comparative research on regional integration highlights the importance of political will, institutional capacity, and implementation. The EAC's experience reveals both achievements and challenges:

- **Free movement progress:** The EAC has made notable progress in easing movement, with Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda allowing cross-border travel with national IDs. However, "there is still a long way to go" before free movement becomes reality for all, with Tanzania and Burundi still requiring passports.
- **Legal framework limitations:** The East African Court of Justice has occasionally ruled in favor of free movement, but "its ability to enforce the decisions is minimal," particularly after amendments in 2007 weakened its powers .
- **Non-state actor role:** Organizations like the International Organization for Migration and TradeMark Africa have been instrumental in implementing projects like the One-Stop Border Post program .
- **Security cooperation:** The EAC has strengthened military cooperation, with the 41st Sectoral Council on Cooperation in Defence Affairs committing to "coordinated military strategies, intelligence sharing, and strengthening the legal frameworks guiding joint operations".

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research questions:

1: How do the approaches to regional integration differ between Burundi and Uganda, and what factors explain their distinct positions within EAC frameworks?

2: What cultural diplomacy initiatives exist in each country, and how effectively do they deploy cultural heritage for diplomatic purposes?

3: How do bilateral relations between Burundi and Uganda contribute to regional cooperation, and what role does cultural exchange play?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative case study methodology to examine regional integration and cultural diplomacy in Burundi and Uganda. The research design integrates document analysis of primary sources with synthesis of secondary literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of diplomatic dynamics in both countries.

Primary sources analyzed include: official statements from Uganda's Ministry of Foreign Affairs; EAC summit documentation; reports from the Kampala Geopolitics Conference; academic research on regional integration; and scholarly analyses of cultural diplomacy.

The comparative framework examines four dimensions of regional integration and cultural diplomacy: (1) political leadership and commitment to integration; (2) implementation of regional commitments; (3) cultural diplomacy initiatives; and (4) bilateral cooperation.

The analysis covers the period from approximately 2020 to 2026, capturing recent developments including President Museveni's EAC chairmanship, the 2025 Kampala Geopolitics Conference, and ongoing integration processes.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Political Leadership and Commitment to Integration

Uganda: Uganda's commitment to regional integration is articulated at the highest political levels. Key features include:

Presidential advocacy: President Museveni has consistently championed deeper integration. His March 2026 EAC chairmanship speech framed integration as "mandatory" rather than optional, warning of "perpetual marginalisation" for a disunited region.

- **Historical perspective:** Museveni recalled working with regional leaders to revive the EAC, acknowledging predecessors including Kenya's Daniel arap Moi, Tanzania's Ali Hassan Mwinyi, and Salim Ahmed Salim .
- **Rhetorical sophistication:** Museveni's use of the Luganda concept "Okukonesa" (undercooking food) to describe incomplete reforms demonstrates how cultural metaphors can articulate political vision. The metaphor suggests that insufficient commitment produces results that are "difficult to cook properly" and may require discarding and starting anew .
- **Four pillars emphasis:** Museveni stressed that progress across all four pillars—Customs Union, Common Market, Monetary Union, Political Federation—is "essential for the bloc's future" .
- **Market integration logic:** Museveni linked integration to economic development, arguing that "to sell you need markets" and that a fully integrated regional market could help address youth unemployment and migration.

- **Burundi:** Burundi's commitment to integration is evident in participation, though with less prominent political advocacy. Key features include:
- **EAC participation:** Burundi joined the EAC in 2007 and participates in regional frameworks. Its delegates attended the 41st Sectoral Council on Cooperation in Defence Affairs (September 2025), alongside all eight partner states.
- **Security cooperation:** Burundi's participation in defence cooperation forums demonstrates a commitment to collective security approaches. Delegates "reaffirmed their commitment to unity and joint security initiatives".
- **Less prominent advocacy:** Burundi's political leadership has not matched Uganda's high-profile rhetorical advocacy for integration. This may reflect its newer membership status and different domestic priorities.
- **Bilateral engagement:** Burundi maintains strong bilateral relations with Uganda, as evidenced by the June 2024 meeting between Foreign Affairs officials, which emphasized "shared cultural and social bonds".

Table 1: Comparative Political Leadership and Commitment

Dimension	**Uganda**	**Burundi**
Integration advocacy	High-profile presidential leadership	Participation without prominent advocacy
Rhetorical framing	"Okukonesa" metaphor; integration as "mandatory"	Less developed
EAC chairmanship	President Museveni assumed chairmanship March 2026	Not in chairmanship
Participation in frameworks	Active across all pillars	Active; attended 41st Defence Council
Bilateral relations	Strong; educational diplomacy	Strong; Ambassador engagement

5.2 Implementation of Regional Commitments

Uganda: Uganda has made significant progress in implementing regional commitments, though gaps remain. Key features include:

- **Free movement:** Uganda, along with Kenya and Rwanda, allows citizens to cross borders with national IDs, representing substantial implementation of Common Market Protocol provisions .
- **Refugee policy:** Uganda's progressive refugee policy, granting refugees the right to work and move freely, is praised as among the most inclusive globally .
- **Educational integration:** Uganda sponsors students from neighboring countries, including ten Burundian nationals at Makerere University, fostering regional human capital development .
- **Trade facilitation:** One-Stop Border Post programs, supported by organizations like TradeMark Africa, have eased trade and travel at key crossings .
- **Remaining gaps:** Despite progress, "there is still a long way to go" before free movement becomes reality for all. Labor laws requiring work permits remain in place in some sectors, and harmonization of education, health, and welfare systems has lagged .

Burundi: Burundi's implementation of regional commitments faces challenges. Key features include:

- **Passport requirement:** Unlike Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda, Burundi still requires passports for entry, reflecting uneven implementation of Common Market Protocol provisions .
- **Governance challenges:** As a newer member, Burundi faces capacity constraints that affect implementation. The EAC's expansion has "increasingly testing its financial sustainability," with some newer members criticized for failing to fully fund the Community .
- **Security participation:** Burundi participates actively in regional security frameworks, as demonstrated by attendance at the 41st Defence Council .
- **Bilateral progress:** Uganda-Burundi bilateral relations are strong, with agreements to "harness cultural similarities to enhance trade and economic cooperation" .

Table 2: Comparative Implementation of Regional Commitments

Dimension	**Uganda**	**Burundi**
Free movement	National ID accepted	Passport required

Refugee policy	Progressive; right to work and move	Less documented
Educational integration	Sponsors Burundian students at Makerere	Recipient of educational diplomacy
Trade facilitation	One-Stop Border Posts operational	Participating
EAC funding	Regular contributor	Funding challenges noted
Security cooperation	Active	Active

5.2 Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives

Uganda: Uganda has developed sophisticated cultural diplomacy platforms. Key features include:

- **Kampala Geopolitics Conference:** Annual event at Makerere University bringing together scholars, policymakers, and cultural practitioners. The conference explicitly integrates cultural performances, demonstrating that "art and culture are just as central to diplomacy and development as policy and politics".
- **Cultural fusion programming:** The 2025 conference featured a memorable performance combining Burundi's Ingoma drummers and Ugandan artist Vinka, creating "a powerful reminder of the unifying power of music".
- **Educational diplomacy:** Uganda's sponsorship of regional students builds long-term relationships and human capital.
- **Humanitarian diplomacy:** Uganda's refugee policy, praised globally, enhances its soft power and regional standing.
- **Cultural metaphor in political discourse:** Museveni's use of "Okukonesa" demonstrates how cultural concepts can articulate political vision.

Burundi: Burundi possesses globally recognized cultural assets deployed in diplomatic contexts. Key features include:

- **Ingoma drumming tradition:** Dating to the 17th century, the tradition holds deep cultural significance. Drums symbolized royal power, with sacred drums preserved in Gishora .

- **Global performances:** The Royal Drummers of Burundi have toured internationally since the 1960s, influencing world music and inspiring events like WOMAD .
- **Kampala Geopolitics Conference appearance:** The April 2025 performance at Makerere University demonstrated Burundi's cultural diplomacy in action, described as "immersive cultural experience" that "transported audiences to the rolling hills of Bujumbura" .
- **Cultural significance:** The drumming is "not merely performance art" but holds "spiritual, political, and social meaning—used in royal ceremonies, communal celebrations, and moments of national significance" .
- **Limited systematic integration:** While Burundi's cultural assets are recognized, they appear less systematically integrated into foreign policy than Uganda's platforms.

Ubumuntu Arts Festival participation: Burundian artistes participated in the July 2025 Ubumuntu Arts Festival in Kigali, alongside performers from Nepal, DR Congo, Brazil, and others. The festival's Cultural Diplomacy Unconference explored "how art can shape public policy and raise societal awareness" .

Table 3: Comparative Cultural Diplomacy Initiatives

Dimension	**Uganda**	**Burundi**
Primary cultural assets	Kampala Geopolitics Conference platform; cultural fusion programming	Ingoma drumming tradition; Royal Drummers
Cultural heritage	Contemporary cultural production; refugee policy as humanitarian diplomacy	Ancient Ingoma tradition (17th century)
International recognition	Conference platform attracts global participants	Royal Drummers have toured globally since 1960s
Regional cultural engagement	Hosted Burundian drummers at 2025 conference	Performed at Kampala Geopolitics Conference
Cultural metaphor in diplomacy	"Okukonesa" used in political discourse	Less documented

Systematic integration into foreign policy	Sophisticated; multiple platforms	Emerging; participation in regional events

5.4 Bilateral Cooperation

Burundi-Uganda bilateral relations are characterized by strong diplomatic engagement and cultural affinity. Key features include:

- **June 2024 Foreign Affairs meeting:** Uganda's Foreign Affairs Minister Hon. Gen. Odongo Jeje Abubakhar met with Burundian Ambassador H.E. Brig. Gen. Jules Ndihokubwayo to discuss bilateral cooperation .
- **Shared cultural bonds:** Both dignitaries emphasized "shared cultural and social bonds that unite the two nations" and agreed to "harness cultural similarities to enhance trade and economic cooperation" .
- **Educational diplomacy:** Uganda's sponsorship of ten Burundian nationals for Master's programs at Makerere University was highlighted as "Uganda's dedication to educational collaboration and capacity building" .
- **Security cooperation:** Both countries acknowledged "the critical need for cooperation in ensuring peace and security in the region" as "a prerequisite for sustainable development" .
- **EAC framework:** Both participate in EAC structures, including the 41st Sectoral Council on Cooperation in Defence Affairs, where they "reaffirmed their commitment to unity and joint security initiatives" .

Table 4: Comparative Bilateral Cooperation

Dimension	**Uganda-Burundi Relations**
Diplomatic engagement	Regular high-level meetings; June 2024 Foreign Affairs meeting
Cultural bonds	"Shared cultural and social bonds" recognized

Educational cooperation	Uganda sponsors 10 Burundian Master's students at Makerere
Trade and economic cooperation	Agreed to "harness cultural similarities to enhance trade"
Security cooperation	Both committed to regional peace and security
EAC participation	Both members; participate in defence councils

5.5 Summary of Comparative Findings

Table 5: Comprehensive Comparative Analysis

Dimension	**Uganda**	**Burundi**
EAC membership	Founder (revived 2000)	Joined 2007
Integration advocacy	High-profile presidential leadership; integration as "mandatory"	Participation without prominent advocacy
Free movement implementation	National ID accepted	Passport required
Refugee policy	Progressive; right to work and move	Less documented
Cultural diplomacy platforms	Kampala Geopolitics Conference; cultural fusion programming	Ingoma drumming tradition; global performances
Cultural heritage	Contemporary production; humanitarian diplomacy	Ancient Ingoma tradition (17th century)
Regional cultural engagement	Hosted Burundian drummers at 2025 conference	Performed at Kampala; participated in Ubumuntu
Educational diplomacy	Sponsors regional students at Makerere	Recipient of Uganda's educational diplomacy
Security cooperation	Active in EAC defence frameworks	Active; attended 41st Defence Council

Bilateral relations	Strong; regular high-level meetings	Strong; Ambassador engagement
Key strengths	Consistent political advocacy; sophisticated cultural platforms; humanitarian diplomacy	Rich cultural heritage; global recognition; growing regional engagement
Key challenges	Translating rhetoric into consistent implementation; harmonization gaps	Implementation of Common Market provisions; funding constraints
Lessons for each other	Burundi can learn from Uganda's systematic integration of culture into diplomacy	Uganda can learn from Burundi's deep cultural heritage preservation

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Explaining Divergent Approaches: History, Leadership, and Capacity

The differences between Uganda's and Burundi's approaches to regional integration and cultural diplomacy reflect distinct historical trajectories, political leadership styles, and institutional capacities.

Uganda's assertive integration advocacy is rooted in its role as a founding EAC member and President Museveni's long tenure, which provides a historical perspective and relationships with regional counterparts. Museveni's invocation of working with "Mzee Moi, Mwinyi, and Mkapa" to revive the EAC reflects personal investment in the integration project. His ability to draw on Luganda cultural concepts like "Okukonesa" demonstrates sophisticated rhetorical framing that resonates locally while articulating a regional vision.

Uganda's cultural diplomacy benefits from institutional platforms like the Kampala Geopolitics Conference, which provides a recurring venue for showcasing regional culture and fostering dialogue. The conference's integration of cultural performances demonstrates systematic thinking about culture's role in diplomacy.

Burundi's approach reflects its newer membership status and different domestic priorities. As a newer EAC member, Burundi is still integrating into regional frameworks and building

implementation capacity. The passport requirement for entry, contrasting with Uganda's national ID acceptance, illustrates the implementation gaps newer members face.

Burundi's cultural assets, particularly the Ingoma drumming tradition, are globally recognized but appear less systematically integrated into foreign policy. The 2025 Kampala Geopolitics Conference performance demonstrated the potential for cultural diplomacy, but such deployments may be less frequent or strategic than Uganda's.

6.2 The Integration-Implementation Gap

Both countries' experiences illustrate the persistent gap between regional commitments and national implementation. The EAC's Common Market Protocol, adopted in 2010, promises citizens the right to work, reside, and start businesses across member states. Yet implementation remains uneven—Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda have made significant progress on free movement, while Burundi and Tanzania still require passports.

The East African Court of Justice's limited enforcement power compounds implementation challenges. As Alan Hirsch notes, "its ability to enforce the decisions is minimal," particularly after amendments weakened its powers. This suggests that regional integration requires not only legal frameworks but political will, institutional capacity, and sustained pressure from civil society and non-state actors.

6.3 Cultural Diplomacy as Heart Power

The 2025 Kampala Geopolitics Conference and Ubumuntu Arts Festival demonstrate the power of cultural diplomacy to build connections beyond formal diplomatic channels. Brazilian diplomat Amb. Irene Gana's distinction between "soft power" and "heart power" captures something essential—cultural exchange is not merely instrumental but creates genuine human connection.

The fusion of Burundian Ingoma drummers with Ugandan artist Vinka at the Kampala conference exemplified this. Attendees described being "transported" to Burundi's hills, experiencing "the unifying power of music" . Such moments build the shared identity that underpins sustainable regional cooperation.

Hope Azeda, Ubumuntu Festival founder, articulated this vision: "Art is no longer just for the stage but an important force for healing, diplomacy, and human connection. It is not a product. It's a dialogue" . This reframing—from cultural product to cultural dialogue—captures the essence of effective cultural diplomacy.

6.4 The Role of Educational Diplomacy

Uganda's sponsorship of Burundian students at Makerere University represents a form of educational diplomacy with lasting impact. Students who study abroad build networks, acquire skills, and develop an affinity for the host country that persists long after their studies conclude. For Burundi, such programs build human capital while strengthening bilateral ties.

Educational diplomacy operates at multiple levels: individual (students' personal connections), institutional (university partnerships), and national (enhanced diplomatic relations). Its effects may be slower to materialize than high-profile cultural events but potentially more durable.

6.5 Security Cooperation as Integration Driver

The 41st Sectoral Council on Cooperation in Defence Affairs demonstrates that security cooperation remains a powerful driver of regional integration. Delegates from all eight partner states, including Burundi and Uganda, "reaffirmed their commitment to unity and joint security initiatives" and discussed "coordinated military strategies, intelligence sharing, and strengthening the legal frameworks guiding joint operations" .

Security cooperation is often less visible than economic integration but may be equally important for regional stability. The EAC's previous deployments to conflict zones demonstrate that collective security action is possible when political will aligns.

6.6 Implications for Regional Integration and Cultural Diplomacy

The findings have significant implications for strengthening regional integration and cultural diplomacy in East Africa.

First, political leadership matters. Uganda's high-profile presidential advocacy for integration demonstrates that sustained commitment at the highest levels can maintain momentum even when implementation lags.

Second, implementation capacity must be built. Burundi's passport requirement and funding challenges illustrate that newer members need support to implement regional commitments fully.

Third, cultural diplomacy builds shared identity. The Kampala conference and Ubumuntu festival demonstrate that cultural exchange creates the people-to-people connections that underpin sustainable regional cooperation.

Fourth, educational exchanges have lasting impact. Uganda's sponsorship of regional students builds human capital while strengthening long-term relationships.

*Fifth, security cooperation provides a foundation for integration***.** Shared security challenges and collective responses demonstrate the value of regional cooperation in tangible ways.

Sixth, non-state actors play essential roles. Organizations like the International Organization for Migration and TradeMark Africa have been instrumental in implementing integration projects .

*Seventh, legal frameworks require enforcement capacity***.** The East African Court of Justice's limited power illustrates that regional law without enforcement mechanisms cannot guarantee compliance .

7. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of regional integration and cultural diplomacy in Burundi and Uganda reveals two distinct but complementary approaches shaped by different historical trajectories, leadership styles, and institutional capacities. Uganda, as a founding EAC member, has positioned itself as a leading advocate for deeper integration. President Museveni's March 2026 EAC chairmanship speech, with its stark warning about "perpetual marginalisation" and sophisticated use of the Luganda concept "Okukonesa" to describe incomplete reforms, demonstrates sustained political commitment at the highest levels . Uganda's cultural diplomacy platforms, particularly the Kampala Geopolitics Conference, systematically integrate cultural performances into diplomatic engagement, creating spaces where art and policy intersect . The 2025 conference's fusion of Burundian Ingoma drummers and Ugandan artist Vinka exemplified how cultural exchange can build regional connections .

Burundi, a newer EAC member, participates actively in regional frameworks while facing distinct challenges. Its delegates joined counterparts from all eight partner states at the 41st Sectoral Council on Cooperation in Defence Affairs (September 2025), reaffirming commitment to "unity and joint security initiatives" . Yet implementation gaps persist—unlike Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda where citizens can cross borders with national IDs, Burundi still requires passports .

COMING SOON

Burundi's cultural heritage is globally recognized, with the Ingoma drumming tradition dating to the 17th century and the Royal Drummers touring internationally since the 1960s . The April 2025 Kampala Geopolitics Conference performance demonstrated the potential of this heritage for cultural diplomacy, described as an "immersive cultural experience" that reminded participants of "the unifying power of music" .

Several cross-cutting conclusions emerge from this analysis.

First, political leadership is essential but insufficient**.** Uganda's consistent advocacy demonstrates that sustained commitment matters, but implementation gaps—even in leading countries—show that rhetoric must be matched by practical action.

Second, implementation capacity must be built across all members**.** Burundi's passport requirement and funding challenges illustrate that newer members need support to fully implement regional commitments. The EAC's expansion has tested its financial sustainability and implementation capacity .

Third, cultural diplomacy creates the shared identity that integration requires**.** The Kampala conference and Ubumuntu festival demonstrate that cultural exchange builds connections beyond formal diplomatic channels. As Hope Azeda noted, art is "a dialogue" not merely a product .

Fourth, educational exchanges build lasting relationships**.** Uganda's sponsorship of Burundian students at Makerere University represents investment in long-term human capital and diplomatic ties.

Fifth, security cooperation demonstrates tangible integration benefits**.** Collective participation in defence frameworks, intelligence sharing, and joint operations show that regional cooperation produces concrete security outcomes .

Sixth, non-state actors are indispensable partners**.** Organizations like TradeMark Africa and the International Organization for Migration have been instrumental in implementing integration projects and building trust .

Seventh, legal frameworks require enforcement capacity. The East African Court of Justice's limited power to enforce decisions represents a fundamental weakness in the integration architecture .

For Uganda, the path forward involves translating rhetorical commitment into consistent implementation across all integration pillars, continuing to develop cultural diplomacy platforms

like the Kampala Geopolitics Conference, and maintaining educational diplomacy programs that build regional human capital.

For Burundi, the priority is accelerating implementation of Common Market Protocol provisions, including moving toward national ID acceptance for cross-border travel, while leveraging cultural heritage more systematically as a diplomatic asset. Participation in regional defence frameworks provides a foundation for deeper engagement.

For the broader East African Community, this comparison underscores that regional integration is not merely a technical process of harmonizing laws and reducing tariffs. It requires the cultivation of shared identity, people-to-people connections, and cultural understanding—precisely the domains where cultural diplomacy plays an indispensable role. As Amb. Irene Gana articulated, cultural diplomacy is not just "soft power" but "heart power"—the genuine human connection that makes cooperation sustainable .

The experiences of Burundi and Uganda, different in their integration histories and diplomatic styles, demonstrate that both political commitment and cultural connection are necessary for regional integration to succeed. The Ingoma drums that echoed through Makerere University in April 2025 and Museveni's warning about "undercooked" reforms both speak to the same truth: building a united East Africa requires sustained effort, genuine commitment, and the recognition that we are, ultimately, bound together by shared humanity as much as shared interests.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the comparative analysis relies primarily on secondary sources and official documentation rather than primary data collection. Direct interviews with policymakers, diplomats, and cultural practitioners in both countries would strengthen comparative insights.

Second, data availability differs between the two countries. Uganda benefits from more extensive documentation of its diplomatic initiatives and cultural platforms. Burundi's cultural diplomacy, while evident in events like the Kampala conference, is less systematically documented.

Third, the study focuses on official diplomatic and cultural initiatives with limited attention to civil society, business networks, and informal cross-border relationships that also shape regional integration.

Fourth, the voice of cultural practitioners—drummers, artists, festival organizers—is mediated through reports rather than captured directly.

Fifth, the study covers a period of rapid political change; findings may require updating as new administrations and policies emerge.

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10. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conceived the study, designed the comparative framework, conducted the literature review and document analysis, synthesized findings across countries, and drafted the complete manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy of information presented and interpretations offered.

11. COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest.

12. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

As sole author, I performed all roles, including conceptualization, methodology development, investigation, formal analysis, writing, review, editing, and project administration.

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14. DATA AVAILABILITY

All sources analyzed in this study are publicly available documents, including news reports, official statements, conference documentation, and academic publications. Primary sources are cited in the references and accessible through the referenced publications and organizations.

15. DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution or organization with which the author may be affiliated. The analysis is provided for scholarly purposes and should not be construed as policy guidance or investment advice. Regional integration and cultural diplomacy practices are subject to change, and readers should consult current official sources for specific information about Burundi, Uganda, and East African Community affairs.

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