



# GASTRONOMY AS A SOFT POWER TOOL: TURKISH GASTRODIPLOMACY ACTIVITIES IN AFRICA

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## Abstract

The ancients said, “The way to the heart is through the stomach.” Gastronomy, closely related to concepts such as public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and soft power, plays an important role in Turkish foreign policy as a means to have an influence over hearts and minds. In addition, gastrodiplomacy activities also contribute to the country’s promotion, country image, and nation branding. This article examines the concept of soft power, gastronomy as an outlet for cultural expression, and Türkiye’s gastrodiplomacy in Africa. Soft power is a strategic approach that enables countries to gain influence in international relations through tools such as culture, diplomacy, and economy. While gastronomy plays an important role in the construction of national identity and belonging, it also provides a platform that strengthens intercultural dialogue and understanding. In this context, gastrodiplomacy is a diplomatic tool that aims to create a positive image in the international arena by introducing the cuisines of countries. The study emphasizes the importance of Turkish cuisine as one of Türkiye’s soft power strategies towards Africa that it relies on in this process. At the same time, the cultural diplomacy and gastronomy projects of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) in Africa focus on the roles of these institutions in developing Türkiye’s relations with Africa. This article examines the impact of Türkiye’s gastrodiplomacy activities in Africa on African people and its contribution to Türkiye’s image in the region, while also discussing cultural barriers and criticisms of these strategies for culinary diplomacy.

## Keywords

*Gastrodiplomacy, Gastronomy, Soft Power, Turkish Cuisine, Türkiye-Africa Relations*

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## 1. Introduction

Soft power is a concept in the literature of international relations that refers to the capacity of states to influence other states through non-coercive means. This concept, introduced by Joseph Nye (2004), includes elements such as cultural values, diplomacy, and economic cooperation. Soft power plays an important role in the construction of national identities and images, especially through cultural expression tools. In this context, gastronomy stands out as a means of introducing a country's cultural heritage to the world, and international relations established through gastronomy are called *gastrodiplomacy*. Gastrodiplomacy refers to the use of culinary cultures by states to spread their cultural influences and create a positive image in the international arena (Rockower, 2012).

When Türkiye's diplomatic strategies towards Africa are examined, it is seen that these strategies are supported by soft power tools. In recent years, Türkiye has used different soft power elements to develop its relations with African countries and has especially popularized cultural diplomacy through gastronomy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2020-2021). Turkish cuisine has great potential in the international arena with its richness and diversity, and this potential creates a significant impact both in the construction of cultural identity and in the perception of Türkiye in Africa. The gastronomy events organized by Türkiye in Africa through institutions such as TİKA and Yunus Emre Institute contribute to the strengthening of both cultural and economic relations by introducing Turkish cuisine.

The events, festivals, and promotions organized to introduce Turkish cuisine in Africa have increased the cultural interaction and dialogue in these countries, and gastronomic interaction has deepened with the spread of Turkish restaurants. In this context, TİKA's gastronomy projects in Africa and the cooking courses organized by the Yunus Emre Institute can be considered as concrete examples of Türkiye's soft power policies. The role of gastrodiplomacy activities in Türkiye's commercial and diplomatic relations with African countries is one of the main areas of examination in this study. In addition, the contributions of these activities to Türkiye's image in Africa and the cultural obstacles and criticisms encountered are also the focal points of this article.

In this study, the qualitative research method was used to examine Türkiye's gastrodiplomacy activities in Africa. The research was conducted through both secondary source scanning and case studies. First, a literature review is provided on Türkiye's soft power strategies and gastrodiplomacy activities in Africa, and academic articles, reports, books, and documents published by official institutions were analyzed. In addition, the gastronomy activities implemented by TİKA and the Yunus Emre Institute in Africa were evaluated in detail using the case study method. The Turkish food festivals held in Africa, the spread of Turkish restaurants, and various training programs will be the focal points of these analyses.

The main purpose of this study is to examine Türkiye's gastrodiplomacy activities in Africa as a soft power tool and analyze the role of gastronomy in cultural diplomacy and international relations. The study aims to evaluate how Turkish

cuisine creates a cultural interaction in Africa and its impact on strengthening Türkiye's image on this continent. In this context, the research questions are the following: How do Türkiye's gastronomy-focused diplomatic activities in Africa shape the development of cultural identity in this region? How do these activities have an impact on Türkiye's soft power strategies?

In this context, the study aims to contribute to the limited number of academic studies on the global promotion of Turkish cuisine and diplomatic relations with Africa. Studies on the effects of Turkish gastrodiploacy in Africa are limited in the literature, and generally focus on Türkiye's soft power policies or trade relations. However, the comprehensive analysis on the impact of Türkiye's gastronomy as a soft power element in Africa is limited. This literature gap requires an in-depth examination of Türkiye's cultural activities in Africa and the effects it creates through gastronomy. This study is intended to fill this gap in the literature by generating empirical data on the effects of Turkish gastrodiploacy activities on both the construction of cultural identity and Türkiye's international image in Africa. In particular, TİKA's and the Yunus Emre Institute's gastronomy-based cultural diplomacy studies in Africa will be analyzed to determine and evaluate how they contribute to Türkiye's image in Africa and what difficulties are encountered in this process.

## **2. The Concepts of Gastronomy, Gastrodiploacy, and Soft Power**

Today, the cuisines of different cultures have become more accessible with globalization and the spread of the internet. Gastronomy as a means of cultural expression plays an important role in transferring the identities and values of nations to other communities. According to Avcıkurt and Sarioğlu (2019), the phenomenon of gastronomy is an interdisciplinary field closely related to many scientific fields such as production, consumption, distribution, conflict, ethics, media, environment, labor, and globalization, as well as culture, history, psychology, anthropology, religion, society and geography (Avcıkurt and Sarioğlu; 2019). In addition, the phenomenon of gastronomy can bring together people from different age groups, cultures, religions, and social backgrounds (Avcıkurt and Sarioğlu, 2019). In this context, soft power can be defined as the strategy of nations to expand their influence through cultural, ideological, and diplomatic means instead of military or economic coercion (Nye, 2004). Soft power has become an effective tool in international relations, especially in recent years, and gastronomy is among these power elements. Gastronomy is a powerful tool for nations to share their cultural heritage and establish ties with foreign nations. For example, cultural elements introduced through a country's cuisine can create positive perceptions in other countries and strengthen diplomatic relations (Rockower, 2012).

In this context, *gastrodiploacy* means the use of gastronomy as a tool in international relations. Gastrodiploacy is used as part of soft power strategies in the international arena by introducing a country's cultural assets through its food and beverage culture (Rockower, 2012). According to Kul (2019), states try to achieve two goals through culinary diplomacy and cooking: to encourage the strengthen-

ing of nations' images and to improve their prestige and standing on the world stage. Thus, the use of gastronomy as soft power is the effort of countries to make their own lifestyles attractive through diplomacy. In addition, the popularity of food and culinary culture contributes positively to a country's image (Kul, 2019).

The term gastrodiploMACy first appeared in 2002 in an article in *The Economist* titled "Food as an Ambassador", which described Thailand's public diplomacy campaign to promote food and culinary arts to the world (Zhang, 2015, p. 569). In addition, while Asian countries such as Malaysia, Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka are known to be pioneers in this regard, Türkiye has also been placing increasing importance on gastrodiploMACy in recent years. Türkiye's implementation of this strategy on the African continent aims to strengthen its diplomatic and commercial relations with African countries. In this process, Türkiye has diversified its soft power tools in Africa by deepening its cultural and economic ties through gastronomy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, 2021).

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### **3. Turkish Cuisine and Cultural Diplomacy**

Turkish cuisine has a rich history dating back centuries with its cultural richness and geographical diversity, comprising an important aspect of cultural identity. Turkish cuisine is not only a gastronomic heritage, but also one of Türkiye's soft power tools that is of great importance in the international arena. The promotion of Turkish cuisine globally is an important part of Türkiye's cultural diplomacy activities and efforts to build a positive image on the international stage. Thus, the promotion of food culture is one of the tools that enable Turkish society to transfer its values and cultural richness to other people. These promotional activities are carried out through various international events, festivals, and Turkish restaurants. Thus, Türkiye's cultural heritage is promoted worldwide through gastronomy and a positive impact is created in international relations (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021).

Additionally, the role of gastronomy in the construction of cultural identity should not be ignored. A country's cuisine reflects not only the food habits of that society, but also its history, traditions, and social structure. Turkish cuisine, like the cuisine of all countries, plays an important role in the process of creating cultural identity and belonging. In this context, Turkish cuisine reinforces the identity of the society not only with its flavors but also with the cultural and historical meaning that food carries. At the same time, the international promotion activities of Turkish

cuisine are an effective tool in reflecting the cultural identity to the outside world. Traditional dishes symbolize Türkiye's cultural richness and contribute to Türkiye's soft power policies (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021). In this context, there is also a Turkish diaspora that should not be forgotten because food stands out as a powerful tool for preserving cultural heritage and identity for these communities. One of the most well-known examples of this is the Turkish community living in Germany and its contribution of Turkish cultural heritage and identity associated with the "döner kebab".

#### **4. Turkish Gastrodiploamacy Activities in Africa**

Türkiye's gastrodiploamacy activities in Africa have been an important tool in strengthening cultural ties with various events and projects that include the promotion of Turkish cuisine. In this context, Turkish food festivals and promotional events are organized in African countries to promote Turkish cuisine's rich diversity and cultural heritage. The spread of Turkish restaurants in Africa is also an important element contributing to this process. Turkish restaurants, especially those opened in capitals and big cities, have both introduced the local people to Turkish cuisine and allowed Turkish food to take root in Africa as a part of Turkish culture. Such events and restaurants are among the soft power elements that strengthen Türkiye's cultural presence in Africa and nourish diplomatic relations (TİKA, 2024; Yunus Emre Institute, 2023). For example, as Dursun (2022) states, there are approximately twenty high-quality Turkish restaurants in South Africa and there is great interest in these restaurants. One of the biggest reasons for this is that approximately 10 million Muslims live here. Another reason is that Turkish TV series and movies are very popular, and people are curious about Turkish culture. This situation makes a great contribution to Türkiye in terms of gastronomy promotion (Dursun, 2022). This example illustrates how TV series and the film sector are other factors that contribute to soft power. Thus, we understand that soft power elements are interrelated and codependent. Dursun (2022) shares his own experience in his article, stating that he realized once again how important gastronomy promotion is for restaurant experiences when he visited South Africa. This is the case because hundreds of Turkish chefs work in these restaurants and hundreds of Turkish products are introduced into the market by chefs. He has also stated several times that this situation significantly contributes to Türkiye in terms of socio-economic aspects. When the influence of digital and social media and the power of Turkish movies come together, Türkiye's gastronomy promotion also accelerates. He argues that because of the rich culture of Turkish cuisine, there is such a great demand for Turkish restaurants that it is almost impossible to find tables without reservations (Dursun, 2022).

Another example is the Turkish chef Sait Akdivit, who is greatly appreciated for the traditional dishes he made in Nigeria. In 2017, this Turkish chef was brought to a restaurant in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, and over time he became admired by Nigerians for the delicious traditional Turkish dishes he prepared (Bashal, 2021). Akdivit stated that he offered various flavors of Turkish cuisine to Nigerians with

the Turkish dishes, desserts, coffee, tea and Turkish delights that he prepared in the restaurants he worked. Akdivit attracted people's attention with the Turkish dishes he made such as Adana kebab, İskender, Pide varieties, Kuru Fasulye, Mercimek Çorbasi and Lahmacun. He also taught Turkish dishes and culture to the local chefs who were with him.

Akdivit stated that when he first came to Nigeria and started to offer Turkish dishes to Nigerians, few people preferred these dishes at first due to the difference in taste. However, he emphasized that he managed to attract the attention of Nigerians over time with the food he made. One of the biggest reasons for this is that Nigerians love to try different things, especially meat. That is why they prefer the Adana Kebab, Döner, and İskender meat-based dishes that the chef makes. However, Akdivit emphasizes that he has difficulty finding Turkish products in Nigeria as 90 percents of the ingredients he uses in his meals are from Türkiye. Akdivit has opened four restaurants and 130 Nigerians work in these restaurants. He also trains many of the staff members to become chefs.

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) play key roles in Türkiye's gastrodiploamacy activities in Africa. TİKA is responsible for various gastronomy projects in Africa, enabling local people to experience Turkish cuisine and build cultural bridges between local and Turkish cuisine. For example, within the scope of the projects supported by TİKA, foods such as Baklava and Kebab, which are important elements of Turkish cuisine, are introduced through workshops and festivals. These projects also strengthen economic and diplomatic relations between Türkiye and African countries (TİKA, 2021). For instance, the International Vocational and Technical Education Project, which has been carried out by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency and the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce since 2012, has graduated its 59th class of trainees (TİKA, 2019). Individuals from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Haiti, Mali, and Niger were provided with classes focusing on culinary arts and preparing halal food in an intensive four-week training program. The goal of the courses was for the trainees to develop their professional skills and understand the importance of hygiene in commercial kitchens and in their personal lives. Türkiye's leading chefs participated in the training with demo menus that they created and prepared with the



^ Figure 1: Turkish Chef Sait Akdivit in Nigeria. Source: Bashal (2021)





Figure 2: Türkiye Continues to Share Its Gastronomy Experiences with Africa. Source: TİKA (2019)

trainees. The trainees also had the opportunity to visit hotels, dormitories, and food production facilities in the program to learn about Türkiye's experiences in the field of culinary arts and gastronomy during on site experiential learning (TİKA, 2019).

Humanitarian aid is also included in the gastronomy projects. For example, food packages containing basic necessities were delivered to 500 families in need during the *Access to Safe Food in Lesotho* initiative organized by TİKA on the occasion of Ramadan (Africa Newsroom, 2024). In addition, at the opening ceremony of this program organized with the Lesotho National Assembly Member Bolala Khesa, a member of parliament expressed his feelings as follows: "This aid provided by the generous Turkish nation has an important meaning for the people of Lesotho. We are grateful to Türkiye and TİKA for their assistance" (Africa Newsroom, 2024).

The Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) also believes in the importance to gastronomy in Turkish culture, contributing to cultural diplomacy activities by organizing Turkish cooking courses in Africa. These courses organized by YEE teach African students who want to learn the subtleties of Turkish culinary traditions and dishes, while also increasing intercultural interaction (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2022). For example, YEE organized a Turkish cuisine promotion event in Johannesburg, South Africa in



Figure 3: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) Shares Meals during Ramadan in Lesotho, Southern Africa. Source: Africa Newsroom (2024)

2022. The event was held at the Rosebank Capsicum Culinary Studio, where traditional Turkish cuisine was presented to hundreds of South Africans. In her speech at the event, the Turkish Ambassador to Pretoria, Ayşegül Kandaş, explained the rich diversity and origins of Turkish cuisine to South Africans and emphasized the importance of gastronomic diplomacy in terms of Türkiye-South Africa relations. Turkish dishes such as Ayran Aşı Soup, Hünkarbeğendi, Kısır, and Lokma were introduced to the participants at the event, and Turkish Coffee, Dolma, and Baklava were also served (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2022).

In another South African event held in 2023, the Johannesburg Yunus Emre Institute met the increasing demand for the richness of Turkish cuisine in South Africa by organizing gastronomy events (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2023). The Johannesburg Yunus Emre Institute Coordinator, Abdulaziz Yigit, mentioned that South Africans who show interest in Türkiye's cultural heritage are also fascinated by Turkish cuisine. In Turkish cuisine courses, Turkish culinary culture and dishes are introduced for four weeks. The trainees not only get to know the richness of Turkish cuisine closely but they also have the opportunity to taste Turkish dishes. The courses bring Turkish culture and teach the trainees Turkish words from the ingredients used in the dishes. Participants also get hands on practice with cooking equipment used in the kitchen (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2023).

It was reported that, for example, 81-year-old Cynthia Gatter stated that she attended the institute's Turkish courses, registering as soon as she learned that Turkish cuisine courses would be held. She stated that after learning the recipe for Mercimek Çorbası (Lentil Soup) in the course, she prepared this soup for her daughter as soon as she got home. Gatter also stated that she admires Turkish culture and was impressed by the hospitality of the Turkish people, emphasizing that she loves the Turkish language because the grammar rules contribute to Turkish being unique among world languages. Another trainee, Rehana Farista, stated that Turkish cuisine is very rich both in terms of the preparation of the dishes and the taste it leaves on the palate. She expressed this by stating, "No dessert can be as delicious as the desserts in Turkish cuisine." Another trainee, Ziyaad Dockrat, stated that he wanted to attend the course to get to know Turkish culture better, mentioning his interest in Turkish



Figure 4: Promotion of Turkish Cuisine in South Africa. Source: Yunus Emre Enstitüsü (2022)



culture and his dream of visiting Istanbul. This illustrates that elements of soft power are interconnected, creating a positive effect between all of the elements (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2023).

Another activity of the Yunus Emre Institute is the organization of a culinary workshop for Senegalese bakers during gastrodiploamacy activities carried out by the Dakar Yunus Emre Institute in Senegal. In this culinary workshop, employees of Mburu Bakery in Dakar prepared the menu with local wheat and ingredients specific to Africa, learning to make Simit. The Dakar Yunus Emre Institute Deputy Coordinator Efe stated that they were happy to introduce Simit, which has an important place in Turkish cuisine and culture for the Senegalese people. Efe emphasized that they held the workshop in the Mburu Bakery, which primarily employs female staff. Simit offer a very different taste for Senegalese people, but there was great interest in tasting this food during the workshop. Simit will be included in the menu and sold at the Mburu Bakery (YEE, 2023).

Following this workshop, a Turkish cuisine event was held on May 7, 2023 at the Mburu bakery in Dakar, and ambassadors from various countries attended. At the gathering, information about Turkish breakfast culture and Simit was provided by the Turkish Ambassador to Dakar, Nur Sağman, and the Deputy Coordinator of the Dakar Yunus Emre Institute, Halil İbrahim Efe. Simit went on sale on May 8, 2023 in the Mburu bakery (YEE, 2023).

A final example is the Yunus Emre Institute's promotion of Turkish cuisine in Zanzibar on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Republic. A Zanzibar YEE

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▲ Figure 5: Senegalese Bakers Making Simit. Source: YEE (2023)



▲ *Figure 6: The Promotion of Turkish Cuisine in Zanzibar. Source: AA (2023)*

Representative, Arif Edip Aksoy, stated that culinary culture has a very important place in Türkiye's cultural heritage. Steps to be followed in preparing and cooking dishes were shared with the trainees throughout the workshop. Additionally, trainee Safa Masoud Ali expressed his admiration for the richness of Turkish cuisine, while Zanzibari trainees who experienced the flavors of Turkish cuisine for the first time expressed their desire for the workshop to be held again (TRT Haber, 2023).

### **5. The Impact of Turkish Gastrodiploacy in Africa**

Turkish gastrodiploacy activities in Africa contribute positively to Türkiye's image in the region and play an important role in cultural interaction. Food, as a powerful tool reflecting a country's cultural identity, has been effective in shaping perceptions of Türkiye among the people in Africa. Turkish culinary events and gastronomy projects have contributed to Türkiye being identified as a modern and hospitable country, creating a positive impression in the eyes of the public. In addition, these events have reinforced Türkiye's presence in Africa both as a diplomatic and cultural actor (TİKA, 2024; Yunus Emre Institute, 2023).

In terms of economic and diplomatic relations, Turkish cuisine has helped strengthen commercial ties in Africa. In particular, the opening of Turkish restaurants and the introduction of Turkish products to the African market have contributed to bilateral commercial relations and accelerated the presence of Turkish companies on the continent. In addition, Türkiye's diplomatic activities through gastronomy have increased dialogue between the two countries and allowed diplomatic relations to progress more easily (TİKA, 2021). However, along with the positive results, there are difficulties encountered in this process. For example, according to Dursun (2022), South Africa is a country for many different people from all over the world and Turkish cuisine appeals to more general groups of people because it does not contain intense spices like Arab or Indian cuisine. In addition, Turkish cuisine has a very wide range of tastes from many countries and cultures because Türkiye historically ruled over a very wide geographic region (Dursun, 2022). Although no negative results were found about Turkish cuisine specifically in Africa, there may

be situations where Turkish gastrodiploamacy may encounter difficulties in adapting to local tastes and cultural sensitivities.

## 6. Conclusion

Türkiye's gastrodiploamacy activities in Africa constitute a remarkable example in terms of the use of soft power tools. The role of gastronomy in the construction of cultural identity and the potential to develop dialogue between countries constitute an important bridge in Türkiye's relations with the African continent. The richness and diversity of Turkish cuisine not only promotes Türkiye's cultural heritage but also contributes to the establishment of a strong cultural bond with African societies. Gastronomy-based projects carried out by institutions such as TİKA and the Yunus Emre Institute are effective in strengthening both cultural and economic relations. These activities positively affect Türkiye's image on the continent and reinforce Türkiye's soft power in Africa with the widespread interest in Turkish cuisine. The increase of Turkish restaurants, food projects, and events such as food festivals in Africa illustrates this cultural diplomacy in action. However, it is also possible that difficulties such as cultural differences and adaptation to local tastes should not be ignored.

As a result, Türkiye's gastrodiploamacy activities in Africa have the potential to not only increase cultural interaction but also deepen trade and diplomatic relations. In the future, making these strategies more sustainable and integrated with local communities could help Türkiye achieve stronger results in its relations with Africa. The access of Turkish cuisine to a wider audience on the continent will play an important role not only in the construction of cultural identity but also in the creation of economic opportunities. In this context, Türkiye's diversification of its gastrodiploamacy activities and its development of sustainable projects that integrate more with local tastes and cultures will increase the success of its soft power strategies. ✨

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