

Shared Cultural Identity and Trust Formation in Cross-Border Pastoralist Communities: A Case of the Ateker Cultural Festival

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border pastoralist communities in East Africa continue to experience weak intergroup trust, which undermines social cohesion and contributes to persistent insecurity and resource-based conflicts. Despite increasing application of cultural diplomacy as a peacebuilding strategy, limited empirical evidence exists on how shared cultural identity influences trust formation in such contexts. This study examined the relationship between shared cultural identity and trust among cross-border pastoralist communities in the Ateker cluster spanning Kenya, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, with particular focus on the Ateker Cultural Festival as a platform for cultural diplomacy and human security enhancement. A mixed-methods design was employed, involving 222 respondents drawn from festival participants and stakeholders. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and Key Informant Interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis, while qualitative data were thematically analyzed to complement and contextualize quantitative findings. Results indicate that participation in the Ateker Cultural Festival significantly enhances trust between cross-border communities. A positive and statistically significant relationship was established between shared cultural identity and trust formation ($r = 0.416$, $p < 0.05$), with shared identity accounting for 17.3% of the variation in trust-related human security outcomes. Qualitative findings corroborate these results, showing that cultural rituals, shared performances, and intercommunity interactions reduce stereotypes and improve perceptions among neighboring groups, although residual historical suspicions persist. The study concludes that shared cultural identity is a significant determinant of trust formation in cross-border pastoralist contexts and contributes to improved social cohesion and human security. It recommends institutionalization of cultural festivals within regional peacebuilding frameworks as sustainable mechanisms for enhancing trust and cross-border cooperation.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, shared identity, trust, human security, Ateker Cultural Festival, cross-border pastoralists.

INTRODUCTION

Pastoralist regions in East Africa are widely recognized as some of the most dynamic yet fragile socio-ecological systems, where livelihoods, mobility, and security are closely interconnected. In these regions, communities depend heavily on livestock production and seasonal migration in search of pasture and water, a livelihood system that is increasingly constrained by climate variability, environmental degradation, and growing competition over scarce natural resources. These pressures have contributed to persistent cross-border tensions, particularly in the borderlands shared by Kenya, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, where insecurity continues to undermine development, governance, and human security.

Within this broader regional context, the Ateker cluster communities comprising the Turkana, Toposa, and Nyangatom occupy a unique socio-cultural and geopolitical space characterized by both strong cultural affinities and recurring intergroup conflicts. Despite sharing linguistic roots, historical ties, and cultural practices, relations among these communities have often been shaped by cycles of cattle raiding, retaliation, and mistrust. This situation presents a paradox in which cultural similarity coexists with weak trust and limited cooperation, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of shared identity in promoting peaceful coexistence.

State-led peacebuilding and security interventions in these borderlands have had limited success in fully addressing the structural and relational drivers of conflict. Weak institutional presence, porous borders, and the informal nature of pastoral governance systems have further complicated efforts to build sustainable peace. As a result, alternative and complementary approaches to peacebuilding have gained increasing attention, particularly those rooted in cultural diplomacy and community-based engagement.

Among these approaches, cultural festivals have emerged as significant platforms for fostering dialogue, interaction, and reconciliation among historically divided communities. The Ateker Cultural Festival, in particular, brings together cross-border pastoralist communities to celebrate shared heritage, perform cultural rituals, and engage in structured and informal exchanges aimed at strengthening social relations. Such festivals are increasingly being viewed not only as cultural celebrations but also as strategic instruments for building trust, enhancing social capital, and promoting social cohesion in conflict-prone regions.

Existing scholarship suggests that shared cultural identity and sustained interpersonal interaction can play a critical role in shaping trust and cooperation among groups. However, there remains limited empirical evidence on how such processes operate in cross-border pastoralist contexts, particularly in relation to measurable trust outcomes. Much of the available literature focuses on formal peace agreements and state-centric interventions, with insufficient attention given to culturally grounded, community-driven mechanisms such as festivals and their impact on intergroup trust formation.

Against this background, this study examines how shared cultural identity fostered through the Ateker Cultural Festival contributes to trust formation among cross-border pastoralist communities in the Kenya–South Sudan–Ethiopia borderlands. The study specifically focuses on the role of cultural interaction in strengthening trust as a foundation for social cohesion and improved human security in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural festivals have been widely recognized as important platforms for fostering shared identity, social cohesion, and collective belonging. Globally, studies such as Yamaguchi (2018) on Japan's *Matsuri* festivals demonstrate that ritual participation enhances emotional synchrony and strengthens social bonds across age and socioeconomic divides. Similarly, Silva (2019) shows that Brazil's Carnival temporarily reduces class distinctions and reinforces national identity through collective cultural expression. However, these studies are largely situated within stable socio-political environments where strong state institutions support cohesion, limiting their applicability to fragile border contexts characterized by insecurity and weak governance structures.

Western scholarship further supports the role of festivals in promoting social cohesion. Thomas (2020) observes that multicultural festivals in the United Kingdom enhance intergroup understanding and reduce prejudice among immigrant communities. In the United States, Smith (2018) finds that community festivals strengthen neighborhood trust and promote social interaction across diverse populations. Despite these contributions, much of this literature assumes institutional stability and rarely examines whether trust generated through festivals is sustained beyond symbolic interaction. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported perceptions introduces limitations related to social desirability bias, raising questions about the durability of trust formation.

African and Global South scholarship provides a more context-sensitive understanding of cultural festivals in resource-constrained settings. Moyo (2019) demonstrates that festivals in Zimbabwe play a critical role in preserving heritage and reinforcing intergenerational identity transmission. Similarly, Oliveira (2021), though based in rural Brazil, shows that festivals strengthen solidarity in resource-scarce environments. However, these studies primarily focus on intra-community cohesion rather than inter-community or cross-border trust formation, which is central to pastoralist borderland dynamics in East Africa.

In the East African pastoral context, identity formation is complex and often contradictory. While communities such as the Turkana, Toposa, Nyangatom, and Jie share linguistic, cultural, and historical ties, these connections coexist with cycles of mistrust and violence linked to resource competition and historical grievances. Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson (2016) describe pastoral identity as “transboundary and fluid,” highlighting that cultural similarity does not automatically translate into peaceful coexistence. Similarly, Ndiritu, Muthanga and

Makanju (2025) note that pastoralist communities in Kenya and the wider Horn of Africa continue to experience recurrent insecurity despite shared cultural affiliations.

Cultural diplomacy literature introduces an additional dimension by emphasizing the role of cultural exchange in shaping perceptions and fostering peace. According to UNESCO (2022), cultural diplomacy enhances mutual understanding and supports peaceful relations through cultural exchange. However, most of this literature is state-centric and focuses on formal diplomatic institutions. Studies such as Leight et al. (2021) highlight how states use cultural performance to project soft power and influence international relations, but these frameworks rarely capture grassroots, community-led cultural diplomacy processes. In contrast, initiatives such as the Ateker Cultural Festival represent bottom-up cultural diplomacy driven by elders, youth, and community institutions rather than formal state actors.

In the Kenyan context, cultural diplomacy initiatives have been explored in relation to national cohesion and peacebuilding. Kamweti (2021) observes that arts and cultural programs contribute to cohesion, though challenges remain in inclusivity and institutional integration. Ongere (2022) further highlights coordination challenges in cultural diplomacy initiatives such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where weak representation structures limited effectiveness. These findings suggest that institutional frameworks alone are insufficient, and that community-led cultural initiatives may offer more contextually grounded mechanisms for trust-building and cohesion.

Despite the growing body of literature, there is a clear absence of empirical studies focusing specifically on the Ateker Cultural Festival and its role in shaping shared identity and trust among cross-border pastoralist communities. Existing references to the festival are largely found in media reports such as Daily Express (2024), which lack methodological rigor and empirical validation. Moreover, no peer-reviewed study has systematically examined how the festival contributes to trust formation, identity reconstruction, or human security outcomes in the Kenya–South Sudan–Ethiopia borderlands.

This gap is significant because cultural festivals in border regions may contribute not only to social cohesion but also to human security outcomes, including reduced fear of violence, improved interpersonal trust, and enhanced cooperation. However, existing studies do not systematically examine these linkages, particularly within multi-sovereign pastoralist settings where cultural unity coexists with political fragmentation. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how culturally embedded practices can contribute to peacebuilding and human security in fragile borderlands.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored on Liberal Theory and Constructivism Theory to explain how cultural festivals influenced shared identity and trust formation among cross-border communities, thereby enhancing human security in Kenya’s northern borderlands.

Liberal Theory

The liberal theory, whose intellectual foundations were developed by classical thinkers such as Immanuel Kant (1795), Jeremy Bentham (1789), and later expanded by modern scholars including Keohane (1984; 2017), was used in this study to explain how cooperation, interdependence, and institutional interaction contribute to trust formation among communities.

Liberal theory holds that peace and cooperation are more likely to emerge in contexts where actors engage in repeated interaction, shared norms, and institutionalized forms of collaboration. Kant (1795) in his “perpetual peace” argument emphasized that republican governance, trade relations, and interdependence reduce conflict by increasing the costs of hostility and encouraging peaceful coexistence. Similarly, Keohane (2017) argued that institutions and repeated interactions foster mutual expectations of cooperation, thereby strengthening trust among actors.

In the context of this study, liberal theory was relevant in explaining how the Ateker Cultural Festival functions as a cooperative platform that facilitates dialogue, interaction, and repeated social contact among cross-border communities, thereby strengthening trust and reducing hostility.

However, liberal theory has been critiqued for its strong focus on formal institutions and rational cooperation, often underestimating the role of identity, culture, and historical grievances in shaping trust and conflict dynamics. It assumes that cooperation naturally produces peace, yet in many frontier and pastoralist contexts, including the Ateker borderlands, historical mistrust may persist despite repeated interaction. This limitation necessitated the inclusion of constructivist theory.

Constructivism Theory

Constructivism, as advanced by Nicholas Onuf (1989) and further developed by Alexander Wendt (1992; 2010), was used in this study to explain how shared identities, social norms, and meanings shape trust formation and security outcomes among cross-border communities.

Constructivism holds that the structures of international and social relations are socially constructed rather than purely material. Wendt (1992) famously argued that “anarchy is what states make of it,” emphasizing that identities and shared understandings determine whether actors perceive each other as threats or partners. Onuf (1989) similarly emphasized that social reality is produced through rule-governed interaction, meaning that repeated cultural and social engagement can reshape identities and expectations.

In this study, constructivism provided a strong explanatory lens for understanding how the Ateker Cultural Festival contributed to the formation of a shared identity among communities such as the Turkana, Toposa, Nyangatom, and Jie. Through rituals, performances, and dialogue, the festival created shared meanings that reduced historical mistrust and strengthened cross-border trust.

Constructivism was particularly appropriate because it directly explains how cultural interaction transforms identities, which is central to Objective 1 of this study.

Despite its strengths, constructivism has been criticized for being methodologically abstract and difficult to operationalize empirically. It also places less emphasis on material constraints such as insecurity, poverty, and competition over resources, which are highly significant in pastoralist border regions. Additionally, critics argue that constructivist explanations may overemphasize discourse and identity while underplaying structural violence and economic drivers of conflict.

However, in this study, constructivism was preferred because it provides a stronger explanation of how cultural festivals generate shared identity and trust in socially fragmented and historically conflict-prone border settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design in which qualitative inquiry preceded quantitative analysis. The qualitative phase involved Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to generate context-specific insights on cultural diplomacy and human security within the Ateker Cultural Festival in cross-border pastoralist settings. Emergent qualitative findings informed the development of a structured survey instrument for the quantitative phase. The subsequent quantitative component was used to test and validate identified constructs and relationships. Data integration occurred at the interpretation stage through triangulation, enabling convergence of findings and strengthening inferential robustness. The study area comprised Kibish and adjacent borderland locations including Natapar and Koyasa along the Kenya–South Sudan–Ethiopia frontier, selected for their exposure to recurrent resource-based conflicts and their active engagement in cultural diplomacy initiatives under the Ateker Cultural Festival framework.

The target population included youths, community members, elders, religious leaders, security personnel, civil society actors, festival organizers, and members of Subcounty Security and Intelligence Committees. A sample of 300 respondents was derived from a population of 1,200 using Yamane’s (1967) formula at a 5% margin of error, ensuring statistical adequacy and representativeness. Stratified random sampling was applied to youths and community members, while purposive sampling was used for key informants based on their experiential knowledge of cultural diplomacy and peacebuilding processes. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, KIIs, FGDs, and document analysis covering relevant materials from 2015–2025. Instrument validity was established through expert review, while reliability was confirmed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from 0.824 to 0.861. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 25 through

descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlation and regression analysis, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. Ethical compliance was ensured through approval from NACOSTI and institutional review processes, with strict adherence to informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the Kenyan Data Protection Act (2019).

RESPONSE RATE

The study registered an average response rate of 83.4% with 88.8% for the questionnaire responses and 78.0% for the Key Interview responses. The average rate was 83.4% was considered very adequate. The response rate is statistically acceptable and supports findings by Arora, (2003), stated that a questionnaire-based study that produces above 65% response, is rated as a well participated study. The high response rate strengthens reliability of the study and the instruments used. However, while the study was well participated in and no questionnaire was discarded, the non-responses were due to unavailability of the respondents at the time of data collection. Response rate strengthens reliability.

Table 4.1: response rate

Category	Sampled	Responded	Did not Respond	Response Rate
Questionnaires	250	222	28	88.8
Interviews	50	39	11	78.0
Total	300	261	39	83.4

Source: Field Study (2026)

Category Of the Respondents

Table 4.2: Category of the Respondents

Category	Sampled	Responded	Did not Respond	Response Rate
Youths	100	89	11	89.0
Community members	150	133	17	88.6
Community Leaders/ Elders	15	13	2	86.6
Religious Elders	6	5	1	83.3
Sub-county Security and Intelligence Committee	5	5	0	100.0
Security Personnel	15	11	4	73.3
Festival Organizers	6	4	2	66.6
Civil Society Representatives	6	4	2	66.6
Total	300	261	39	87.0

Source: Field Study (2026)

The highest response came from the Sub- County Security and Intelligence Committee members who registered 100% response rate. The youths registered the second highest response rate at 89.0%, followed by community members including women respondents at 88.6% followed by Community Leaders/ Elders and Religious Elders who registered 86.6% and 83.3% respectively. The lowest response was registered by festival organizers and the civil society representatives who registered 66.6% response rate respectively. However, the findings indicated that all the stakeholders that are critical in community reconciliation were included in the study. This empathized the findings by Akinwale and Olayemi (2021) that while community peace initiatives can solve 78% of community disputes, they need to be as inclusive as possible in order to be effective.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic profile of respondents is essential in contextualizing interpretations of cultural diplomacy and human security perceptions within the Ateker Cultural Festival. Variations in gender, age, education, nationality, and ethnic affiliation influence participation patterns and perspectives on peacebuilding initiatives. Given the multi-stakeholder nature of the festival, demographic diversity provides a critical analytical lens for understanding differential engagement in cultural diplomacy processes.

Table 4.3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 222)

Description	N (%)
Gender of the Respondents	
Female	74(33.0)
Male	148(67.0)
Others	0(0.0)
Total	222(100.0)
Age of the Respondents	
18-25 Years	61 (27.5)
26-35	56(25.2)
36-45	35(15.8)
46-55	56(25.2)
56 and above	14(6.3)
Total	222(100.0)
Education Level	
No formal education	108 (58.1)
Primary	56(25.2)
Secondary	31(13.9)
College	21(9.5)
Others	6(2.8)
Total	222(100.0)

Source: Field Study (2026)

The results indicate a male-dominated sample (67.0%), reflecting the patriarchal structure of leadership and conflict mediation systems within Ateker pastoralist communities, where men are more frequently engaged in formal cultural leadership and decision-making processes. The age distribution shows relatively balanced representation across active working-age groups, with the highest concentration in the 18–25 and 26–35/46–55 categories, indicating strong participation from both youth and mature community actors in cultural and peacebuilding processes. The presence of a youthful cohort is consistent with broader demographic trends in East African pastoralist regions.

In terms of education, the majority of respondents (58.1%) had no formal education, while only a small proportion (9.5%) had attained post-secondary education. This reflects persistent structural inequalities in access to education in borderland pastoralist regions, where geographic isolation, mobility patterns, and historical marginalization constrain educational attainment. These educational characteristics are significant in interpreting how cultural diplomacy messages are understood, transmitted, and operationalized at the community level.

Table 4.4: Country of Origin and Ethnic Composition (N = 222)

Country of Origin	
Kenya	112(50.5)
South Sudan	44(19.8)
Ethiopia	66(29.7)
Total	222(100.0)
Community Ethnic Group	
Turkana	111(50.0)
Nyangatom	74(33.3)
Toposa	37(16.7)
Total	222(100.0)

Source: Field Study (2026)

The findings show a predominantly Kenyan-based respondent population (50.5%), followed by Ethiopia (29.7%) and South Sudan (19.8%), reflecting the cross-border nature of the Ateker cultural system. Ethnically, the sample was dominated by the Turkana community (50.0%), followed by Nyangatom (33.3%) and Toposa (16.7%), consistent with the geographical concentration of field data collection within the Kenyan borderland corridor. This distribution appropriately captures the transboundary character of the Ateker Cultural Festival and its role in fostering cross-border cultural diplomacy.

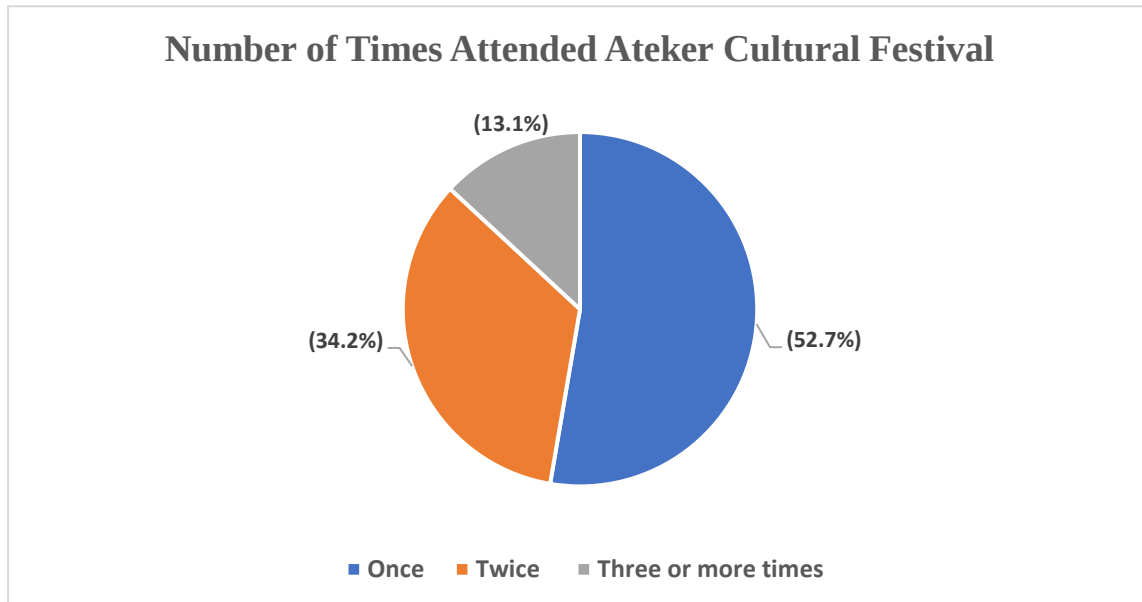


Figure 4.1: Attendance at Ateker Cultural Festival

Source: Field Study (2026)

The findings indicate low repeat participation in the Ateker Cultural Festival, with only a small proportion of respondents (13.1%) reporting attendance more than once. This suggests limited sustained engagement in the festival despite its potential role in promoting cultural diplomacy and peacebuilding. The low recurrence may be attributed to logistical constraints, limited inclusivity of certain groups (particularly youth and women), and perceptions that cultural events are primarily oriented toward traditional or elder leadership structures. These factors potentially constrain the full realization of the festival's integrative peacebuilding objectives.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The first objective was to establish how Ateker Cultural Festival fosters a shared identity and trust among cross-border communities for enhanced human security and the response were as presented in this section.

Table 4.5: Shared Identity and Trust

Shared Identity and Trust	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Before participating in the Ateker Cultural Festival, I trusted members of neighboring Ateker communities.	222	2.32	1.076
After participating in the Ateker Cultural Festival, my trust in neighbouring Ateker communities has increased.	222	4.61	.648
The festival strengthens a shared Ateker identity across national borders.	222	3.41	1.001
Cultural rituals and performances during the festival promote unity among Ateker communities.	222	4.42	.933
Negative stereotypes between Ateker communities have reduced since the festival.	222	3.48	1.001

Source: Field Study (2026)

The results indicated that before participating in the Ateker cultural festival, the participants had trust deficit against members of neighboring Ateker communities (Mean=2.32; Std. Deviation=1.076) and that after participating in the Ateker Cultural Festival, their trust of neighboring Ateker communities had increased (Mean=4.61; Std. Deviation=.648). This confirms that the Ateker cultural festivals were effective tools for trust building among border communities further supporting Oliveira's (2021) that cultural festive strengthened community solidarity and shared values especially in resource-scarce settings where communities fight over scarce resources. However, there was an average feeling that although the festivals strengthen a shared Ateker identity across national borders (Mean=3.41; Std. Deviation=1.001), existing suspicion among the Ateker communities is still prevalent due to historical events hence confirming the findings by Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson (2016) that while cultural similarity is theorized to foster cohesion, empirical studies of pastoralists show that shared identity is insufficient to mitigate violence.

Additionally, findings established that the cultural rituals and performances during the festival promote unity among Ateker communities (Mean=4.42; Std. Deviation=.933) highlighting that negative stereotype between Ateker communities had reduced since the festival (Mean=2.16; Std. Deviation=1.138). These findings further emphasized the importance of cultural events in conflict resolutions through its effect in changing the negative stereotypes that communities hold against each other.

Table 4.6 Effect of Shared Identity and Trust on Human Security

Correlation Results				Human Security			
Shared Identity		Pearson Correlation		.416**		1	
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000			
		N		222		222	
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square		Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.416 ^a	.173	.169		.80875		
ANOVA ^a							
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square		F	Sig.
1	Regression	30.082	1	30.082		45.991	.000 ^b
	Residual	143.897	220	.654			
	Total	173.979	221				
a. Dependent Variable: Human Security							
b. Predictors: (Constant), Shared Identity							
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	.982	.433			2.264	.025
	Shared Identity	.721	.106	.416		6.782	.000

Source: Field Study (2026)

The outcomes of the correlation analysis revealed a low positive association between shared identity and enhancement of Human Security along Kenya's Northern Borderlands ($r=.416$); shared identity also indicated a significant relationship with the enhancement of Human Security along Kenya's Northern Borderlands ($\text{Sig}=.000<.05$).

The coefficient determination (R Squared) of .173 indicates that shared identity account for 17.3% of variations in the enhancement of Human Security along Kenya's Northern Borderlands. The remaining 82.7% is attributed to other factors other than shared identity. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test was also used in the study to determine the statistical significance of the regression model. The results of the ANOVA test show a p-value of less than 0.05 ($\text{Sig}=.000<.05$), indicating that the model above is statistically significant in explaining the relationship between shared identity and the enhancement of Human Security along Kenya's Northern

Borderlands. Additionally, the model was statistically fit to test the link shared identity and variations in the enhancement of Human Security along Kenya's Northern Borderlands County ($F=45.991$; 1, 220).

Based on the coefficients in Table 4.xxx above, the regression equation that is produced is:

$$Y = 0.82 + .721X_1$$

The following is an interpretation of the equation above:

A change of 0.82 in shared identity will result into a unit change in the enhancement of Human Security along Kenya's Northern Borderlands. Regression model ($\beta=.721$) is also statistically significant ($\text{sig}=.000<.05$), according to the results. Additionally, the results demonstrate the statistical significance of shared identity ($\text{Sig}=.000<.05$).

Therefore, the results indicate that shared identity significantly affects the enhancement of Human Security along Kenya's Northern Borderlands. Additionally, shared identity accounts for 17.3% of variations in the enhancement of Human Security along Kenya's Northern Borderlands. These stresses the findings from descriptive findings that showed that before participating in the Ateker cultural festival, the participants had trust deficit against members of neighboring Ateker communities and that after their participation in the Ateker Cultural Festival, their trust of neighboring Ateker communities had increased. Noticeably, the cultural rituals and performances during the festival continue to promote unity among Ateker communities. Additionally, the cultural festivals have been able to reduce the negative stereotypes between Ateker communities along the three countries borders. However, while the cultural festivals are very popular with the Ateker communities, the festival are yet to achieve or strengthen shared Ateker identity across national borders.

Responses from the interviews that targeted Community Leaders/ Elders, Religious Elders, Subcounty Security and Intelligence Committee members, Security Personnel, Festival Organizers and Civil Society Representatives had sought to establish how the Ateker Cultural Festival influence shared identity and trust among cross-border Ateker communities. The results indicated that most of the respondents felt that the cultural festivals that bring together the three communities of the Turkana, Toposa and Nyangatom is conducted through local language highlighting the Ateker communities shared linguistic, historical, and cultural connections that transcend modern national boundaries. Most of the respondents felt that celebrating these shared traditions through cultural festivals strengthens collective identity and fosters a sense of unity among communities. Many of the interviewees felt that the shared linguistic, historical, and cultural connections do not only promote trust but also strengthens togetherness. Majority of respondents believe the such cultural festivals strengthens a collective cultural identity among Ateker communities.

"The festival brings people together and helps them embrace one another, reducing conflict and promoting peaceful coexistence" Key Informant 001

"Such cultural festivals create a platform where communities interact freely and resolve misunderstandings through dialogue." Key Informant 002

"The Ateker Cultural Festival strengthens cooperation by reminding us that we share the same culture and history" Key Informant 003

"The Turkana, Toposa and Nyangatom have shared linguistic, historical, and cultural connections" Key Informant 004

Responses from the FGDs also highlighted the significance importance of such festivals in uniting the three communities along the border with South Sudan and Ethiopia. The findings of the discussion highlight the importance of the festivals in bringing the communities together to share their origin and learn where they came from. The findings indicate the festivals have been able to reduce suspicions among the and build trust among neighboring Ateker communities has increased. Participants in the FGDs shared the slaughtering of animals among other cultural rituals and performances during the festival promoted unity and commitment to peace

among the Ateker communities. The participants support findings from both interviews and questionnaires emphasized that the celebration of shared traditions reinforces unity among the Ateker communities.

“The festivals bring the Ateker community together where they share common values which promotes peace and cohesion.” FGD Participant 001

“The festivals remind communities of their common origins and that they belong to the same community” FGD Participant 002

“Although we dint fully trust our neighbors but at least following a number of the community festival at least trust is slowly building” FGD Participant 003

The findings of the study highlights the importance of cultural festivals in promoting shared identity and trust among the three communities living across the borders, thereby supporting earlier studies by Oliveira’s (2021) in that pointed out that community festivals have been used in Brazil to strengthen community solidarity and shared values especially in resource-scarce settings where communities fight over the available resources and the situations are worsen by deep traditional practices that lays emphasis on traditional economies such as livestock.

Another study by Ongere (2022) highlighted the importance of cultural festivals as a cultural diplomacy approach in promoting shared identity and trust, despite pointing to such initiative short coming in relations to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where poor coordination undermined cultural representation. The significance of cultural festival explains the deep cultural practices that are shared between the communities there by making it easier to the cultural festivals too bring the communities together. The findings support Constructivism theory that posits those social structures influence actors’ interests, identities, and behavior. Social activities such as cultural festive are some of the community structures that promote shared identity and trust that is critical in human security.

CONCLUSION

The study establishes that the Ateker Cultural Festival functions as a significant mechanism for strengthening shared identity and fostering trust among cross-border Ateker communities. Participation in the festival contributes to the reconfiguration of historically strained intercommunity relations by promoting social interaction, cultural reaffirmation, and symbolic unity. While a transnational Ateker identity is evident, its consolidation remains uneven due to enduring historical grievances and contextual socio-political constraints. Nonetheless, cultural practices embedded in festival activities play a critical role in reducing stereotypes and enhancing social cohesion across the borderlands.

The results further indicate that shared identity is a statistically significant predictor of human security outcomes, confirming its relevance in explaining variations in perceived safety and community stability. However, its moderate explanatory power suggests that cultural diplomacy operates as a complementary rather than standalone determinant of human security. Overall, the study demonstrates that culturally embedded diplomacy, as expressed through the Ateker Cultural Festival, constitutes a viable soft-power mechanism for peacebuilding, though its effectiveness depends on broader structural inclusivity and sustained cross-border engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are advanced to enhance the role of cultural diplomacy in strengthening human security within cross-border pastoralist contexts.

First, there is a need for enhanced institutional support for the Ateker Cultural Festival through formal recognition and integration into cross-border peacebuilding frameworks. Governments and relevant peacebuilding agencies in Kenya, South Sudan, and Ethiopia should institutionalize the festival as a recurring cultural diplomacy platform to sustain trust-building and reinforce shared identity among Ateker communities.

Second, deliberate efforts should be made to improve inclusivity in festival participation, particularly among

youth, women, and civil society actors. This can be achieved through targeted outreach, reduced logistical barriers, and structured involvement in festival planning and implementation. Strengthening inclusivity will deepen the legitimacy and effectiveness of cultural diplomacy in fostering long-term social cohesion.

Third, cross-border coordination mechanisms should be strengthened to enhance mobility, communication, and joint organization of cultural events. Establishing structured intergovernmental and community-based coordination platforms would improve consistency in festival participation and expand its peacebuilding impact across the borderlands.

Finally, complementary peacebuilding strategies should be integrated alongside cultural diplomacy initiatives to address structural drivers of insecurity. While the festival contributes significantly to trust and shared identity, broader socio-economic and governance interventions are necessary to consolidate human security outcomes in the region.

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