AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING
ISSN: 2996-5128 (online) | ResearchBib (IF) = 10.91 IMPACT FACTOR
Volume-3| Issue-10| 2025 Published: |30-11-2025|

MAKING DIPLOMACY: HOW TRADITIONAL KNIFE CRAFTSMANSHIP BECOMES A VEHICLE FOR CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC STATECRAFT

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17618446

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Abstract

Historically, presentation blades—inscribed daggers, ***kards***, ***jambiyas***, and courtly knives—circulated as diplomatic gifts across Islamic, Persianate, and South Asian courts, encoding political narratives in material form. Today, heritage-centered knife-making—exemplified by Uzbek ***pichoq/pchak*** traditions in Chust, Shahrixon, and Kokand—operates in an expanded arena of soft power, creative-economy trade, and cultural tourism. Bringing together cultural-diplomacy theory, arms-and-armor scholarship, archaeometallurgy, festival and tourism statistics, and documented practitioner testimony, the article proposes a framework—Object Diplomacy → Market Linkages → Policy Spillovers—to explain how knives function as both symbols and channels of statecraft. Inclusive statistics draw on UNESCO/UNCTAD creative-economy indicators and official data from Uzbekistan's handicrafts festival and tourism bodies. The conclusion offers policy and practice recommendations and notes how documentary outcomes map to EB-1A evidentiary categories.

Keywords

cultural diplomacy; soft power; creative economy; presentation blades; ***pichoq/pchak***; Chust; Kokand Festival; UNESCO Culture|2030;

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is commonly defined as the exchange of ideas, arts, and artifacts that foster mutual understanding among nations—an approach that complements political and economic tools with the power of attraction and shared meaning (Cummings). Nye's "soft power" locates this influence in the capacity to shape preferences through culture and values rather than coercion. Knives—portable, legible, and deeply embedded in social ritual—have long served this purpose. From jade-hilted khanjars to Qur'anic-inscribed ***jambiyas***, elite knives operated as emissaries: they traveled across borders bearing iconography, language, and technical prowess that condensed the sender's identity and intent.

The knife craftsmanship still enacts diplomacy—now amplified by festivals,

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creative-economy platforms, and cultural tourism—turning living traditions into credible signals of national identity and into engines of export and place-branding. Uzbekistan's contemporary craft infrastructure provides a telling case.

Literature Review: Objects as Statecraft

Countless studies document the political lives of edged weapons in museum collections, catalogues, and provenance notes (Alexander 2015; Met objects). Many pieces bear talismanic texts, donor inscriptions, or mixed Ottoman–Mughal components, indicating circulation through courts and embassies. Historical sources on gift exchange further connect blades to formal diplomacy.

On the policy side, cultural diplomacy scholarship frames exchanges of art and heritage as tools of public diplomacy; soft-power analyses explain how cultural assets translate to international influence (Cummings; Nye). Meanwhile, UNESCO's Culture|2030 Indicators and UN/UNCTAD creative-economy reporting provide measurement regimes linking culture to development outcomes—GDP, employment, and trade.

Methods

This study synthesizes: (1) peer-reviewed and authoritative catalogues on Islamic and South Asian arms; (2) museum records evidencing inscriptions, materials, and provenance; (3) cultural-diplomacy and soft-power literature; (4) UNESCO/UNCTAD/OECD indicators for inclusive statistics; and (5) contemporary festival/tourism sources and maker interviews or profiles. Where data vary, I report ranges and cite source provenance.

Analytical Frame: Object Diplomacy → Market Linkages → Policy Spillovers

1.Object Diplomacy. Presentation knives materialize sovereign narratives. A jade-hilt khanjar in the Royal Collection exemplifies Mughal taste and gifting; Met objects show devotional inscriptions and cross-imperial mountings (e.g., Mughal hilt on Ottoman blade), demonstrating how knives traveled through diplomatic circuits.

2.Market Linkages. Cultural display catalyzes trade. Today's creative-economy infrastructure (festivals, fairs, e-commerce) converts symbolic value into export revenue and tourism demand. UNESCO/UN indicate culture and creativity account for ~3.1% of global GDP and ~6.2% of employment; UNCTAD reports creative-goods exports around US$524 billion (2020) with creative-services exports

exceeding US$1.1 trillion—a scale large enough for niche crafts to find sustainable markets.

3.Policy Spillovers. Cultural events and branding feed destination marketing, SME formation, and international partnerships—effects visible in Uzbekistan's handicrafts festival and tourism growth.

Historical Grounding: Knives in Diplomatic Exchange

Museum and archival sources tie blades directly to diplomacy. The Royal Collection documents dozens of Indian jade-hilt daggers presented to the Prince of Wales in 1875; Met records include daggers with Qur'anic verses and mixed Ottoman–Mughal components, mapping artistic and political itineraries. Scholarship on Ottoman–Safavid exchange underscores the centrality of gifts—including arms—in court protocol. These examples illuminate an early modern habitus where knives acted as portable sovereignty and rhetoric in metal.

Contemporary Practice and Diplomacy: The Uzbek Case

Festivals as Diplomatic Stages

The International Festival of Handicrafts (Kokand)—launched in 2019—assembled ~78 countries, ~370 international guests, and ~1,200 local craftspeople, with a presidential opening and a scientific program. Subsequent editions (2025) again reported 300+ artisans from ~70–71 countries, showing consolidation as a diplomatic and market platform.

Tourism as a Demand Multiplier

Official releases report record tourism in 2025 (monthly foreign arrivals repeatedly over one million in Q2), expanding retail audiences for packable, narrative-rich crafts such as knives. Media features from Euronews spotlight Fergana's Chust suzangars and the ***pichok*** as a status-laden emblem—evidence of global cultural storytelling feeding visitor interest.

Maker Perspectives

Contemporary profiles and interviews preserve workshop testimony crucial to diplomacy narratives. Kokand master Khasan Umarov describes speaking to his knives and treating each as a responsibility—language of stewardship that resonates with heritage diplomacy. Designer-entrepreneur Lola Sayfi frames craft as inseparable from Uzbek life, a statement that captures how makers articulate culture for international publics.

Inclusive Statistics

•Creative-economy scale (global): culture/creativity ≈3.1% of global GDP and 6.2% of employment; creative-goods exports ≈ US$524 bn (2020); creative-services exports ≈ US$1.1 tn (2020). These orders of magnitude justify state attention to heritage crafts as growth assets.

•Diplomatic festivals (Uzbekistan): Kokand 2019 hosted ~78 countries / ~370 foreign guests / ~1,200 local artisans; 2025 editions: 300+ international participants from ~70–71 countries.

•Tourism (Uzbekistan 2025): Government reports >3 million foreign tourists in Q2 2025 (with multiple months >1 million visitors), linking cultural programming to inbound demand.

Discussion: From Cultural Signal to Economic Instrument

Traditional knives organize diplomacy along two channels:

Symbolic Channel. Craft forms and inscriptions communicate continuity, piety, and mastery—attributes that foreign publics and partners readily decode. Museum-anchored lineages (e.g., Islamic arms at the Met) strengthen credibility by tying living practice to well-documented histories.

Market Channel. Festivals and tourism transform symbolic capital into orders, distribution agreements, and brand equity. As soft-power literature notes, attractiveness can be strategically orchestrated; the Culture|2030 framework provides states with indicators to track outcomes (participation, training, SME formalization, export).

Practitioner Statements as Evidence

Documented maker testimony (Umarov; Sayfi) serves a dual role: it humanizes the craft for external audiences and functions as verifiable narrative data in cultural-diplomacy dossiers—precisely the material that journals and cultural institutions cite, and that immigration adjudicators recognize as third-party validation.

Implications for Policy and for Makers

1.Invest in Object Diplomacy. Support curated delegations of master knife-makers to biennial festivals and embassy events; document outcomes (MOUs, exhibitions, catalogues).

2.Standardize Provenance. Adopt maker stamps, serialized provenance cards, and clear materials disclosures to align with museum-grade expectations and customs compliance.

3.Measure with Culture|2030. Track training hours, women/youth participation, and SME growth; align with creative-economy targets.

4.Connect Heritage to Trade. Use cultural missions to open channels (museum shops, culinary retailers, diaspora wholesalers) where ***pichoq*** narratives have product-market fit.

Conclusion

Traditional knives remain unusually effective diplomatic media: compact, beautiful, and tied to rituals of hospitality and honor. In Uzbekistan,

the ***pichoq/pchak*** exemplifies how a living craft—grounded in family workshops and animated on festival stages—converts cultural meaning into economic outcomes. In the language of statecraft, knives are not only artifacts; they are strategic communicators whose edges still connect people, markets, and states.

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