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KARATE AS A TOOL OF SOFT POWER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY FOR PEOPLE WITH ALBINISM IN TANZANIA

Abstract

This article explores the role of non-governmental organisations and sports institutions in advancing social inclusion and cultural diplomacy, using Tanzania as a case study. It particularly examines karate as a tool for the integration of people with albinism – a group facing social exclusion and violence. Through an analysis of organisations such as the Japan Karate Association Tanzania and the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation, the article highlights how sport can foster social transformation while also contributing to Tanzania's international image-building efforts. The research is grounded in autoethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2025, combined with organisational documentation. It demonstrates how local sports initiatives intersect with global soft power strategies and contribute to broader narratives of social justice and human dignity.

Keywords: karate, albinism, soft power, cultural diplomacy, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Tanzania, a country rich in cultural and ethnic diversity, faces social challenges such as discrimination and stigmatisation of people with albinism. In Tanzania, individuals with albinism confront a range of social, cultural and economic difficulties that significantly affect their lives and access to development opportunities. In certain regions of Tanzania, traditional beliefs and superstitions remain deeply embedded in local communities,

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often leading to the isolation of people with albinism and limiting their access to education, healthcare and employment. An additional challenge lies in the stigmatisation present in certain communities, stemming from harmful cultural beliefs that undermine the dignity and, most importantly, the safety of these individuals.

These inequalities are also evident at the institutional level. Although the government has made attempts to address these issues in certain areas, significant gaps remain in efforts to eliminate discriminatory practices, promote social inclusion and disseminate knowledge about albinism. These barriers highlight the necessity of grassroots and organisational initiatives aimed at empowering people with albinism and challenging entrenched narratives and stereotypes.

In this context, attention should be given to the activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation (NHYDO) and Japan Karate Association Tanzania (JKA Tanzania), which implement programmes that strengthen the social competencies of individuals from marginalised groups through sports, education and cultural tools. These practices go beyond technical skills such as self-defence, also reinforcing social bonds and fostering a sense of community belonging. Such initiatives can be interpreted as a form of grassroots cultural diplomacy aimed at removing institutional barriers and promoting an inclusive discourse about Tanzanian society on the international stage.

The aim of this article is to analyse the following issues:

1. How do non-governmental organisations and sports institutions utilise tools of soft power to support social inclusion in Tanzania?
2. In what way does karate, as an expression of soft power and cultural heritage, influence the process of social integration for people with albinism in Tanzania?
3. How do initiatives by organisations such as the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation contribute to promoting Tanzania through narratives rooted in soft power and culture on the international stage?

The reflections presented in this article focus on an analysis of the local and global application of karate as a tool of soft power in processes of social integration and in shaping a positive image of Tanzania. The starting point involves questions regarding how sports practices and the activities of non-governmental organisations contribute to the inclusion of people

with albinism and the promotion of Tanzanian cultural values on the international stage.

The main thesis of the article posits that initiatives led by entities such as the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation and JKA Tanzania – especially in cooperation with international partners like Japan – constitute an effective instrument of cultural diplomacy. These initiatives not only support local integration efforts, but also engage in a global discourse grounded in intercultural dialogue and collaboration, as well as the positive redefinition of Tanzania's social identity.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES AND RESEARCHER POSITIONING

This article is based on a qualitative approach, employing a case study method focused on two key organisations: the Japan Karate Association Tanzania (JKA Tanzania) and the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation (NHYDO).

This study is based on a qualitative case study approach, combining autoethnographic fieldwork with organisational documentation and informal interviews. The author's role as founder of the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation (NHYDO) provided privileged access to internal processes, community initiatives and long-term developments. However, this position did not compromise research objectivity. The author's involvement was primarily logistical and managerial; she did not conduct karate instruction herself nor maintain emotionally close relationships with individual participants. Instruction and mentorship were carried out by Tanzanian instructors, while the author operated within the administrative and strategic framework of the organisation.

Importantly, this article was written four years after the author's departure from Tanzania, allowing for reflective distance and critical analysis. The data presented here stem from sustained engagement between 2018 and 2022, including participant observation, informal conversations, visual documentation (photos, videos) and internal organisational materials. No formal interview transcripts were produced; instead, insights were drawn from field notes, spontaneous exchanges and audiovisual records collected during seminars, training sessions and community events.

Due to the fluid nature of participation in karate programmes – marked by rotation, drop-out and re-engagement – it is not possible to

provide a fixed number of participants. However, over the course of seven years, the author interacted with an estimated 60 to 100 individuals across various roles, including students, instructors, NGO staff and community partners. Selection was based on sustained involvement in karate-related activities and availability during fieldwork periods. Triangulation was achieved through cross-referencing field notes with visual materials, organisational records and repeated observations over time. This layered approach allowed for the emergence of grounded insights into the role of karate as a tool of soft power and cultural diplomacy in Tanzania.

The methodology integrates a socio-cultural perspective, emphasising values, relationships and symbolism that shape karate as a medium for inclusive diplomacy and social transformation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundations of the soft power concept emerged in discourse primarily through the work of American political scientist Joseph Nye (2005), who is regarded as a key figure in the development of this theory. Earlier reflections by Zbigniew Brzeziński (1999), who compared grand strategy to a game of chess, formed part of a broader context of deliberations on non-military sources of influence in international relations. Although their approaches developed independently, one can discern a parallel in their emphasis on the significance of culture and ideas in shaping global strategy.² Nye observed that international relations unfold simultaneously on three “chessboards”: military power, economic strength and soft power. On the top board, issues related to military force and inter-state defence relations are played out. The middle board represents economic power, the distribution of which is multipolar – driven by competition among equally powerful economic actors. The bottom board refers to transnational issues, forming social and economic networks that operate across various countries, where power is dispersed between state and non-state actors. This level encompasses global challenges such

² In his book *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), Brzeziński described global politics as a game played on a grand chessboard, where the United States must skilfully manage its dominance. Nye, in turn, expanded on this metaphor by speaking of three chessboards: the military, the economic and the soft one – cultural and political. See: Brzeziński (1999).

as terrorism, climate change, infectious diseases and cross-border crime (Nye, 2005). While Nye's model of soft power provides a foundational lens for understanding non-coercive influence, its application in the Tanzanian context – particularly through grassroots sports diplomacy – reveals tensions between formal state narratives and informal cultural agents. In practice, much of Tanzania's soft power is exercised not by government institutions but by civil society actors, NGOs and local sports organisations whose efforts often remain invisible in mainstream diplomatic discourse. This duality merits deeper exploration, as it challenges the state-centric assumptions embedded in Nye's framework and calls for a more inclusive understanding of how soft power operates in postcolonial and Global South settings.

In traditional terms, power was defined as the ability to force others to act against their will – a notion corresponding to so-called “hard power” (Nye, 1990). However, Nye, in analysing the complexity of contemporary forms of power, identifies the phenomenon of the “paradox of plenty”, which challenges the assumption that possessing vast resources (military, economic or informational) automatically translates into political effectiveness. From this perspective, even highly capable states may fail to achieve intended goals, as the abundance of resources can lead to strategic missteps, a lack of flexibility or a disregard for the soft dimensions of influence (Nye, 2005).³

In the global arena, achieving effective outcomes – particularly in the transnational sphere – requires the use of soft power and strategies grounded in cooperation, cultural appeal and the ability to build consensus. Nye defines soft power as the capacity to influence others not through coercion but through shared values and persuasive social narratives (Nye, 2005, pp. 11–12). Its essence lies in “attractive power” – the ability to inspire and attract rather than to impose.

³ In political science literature, this paradox is often associated with the “resource curse” – a situation in which countries rich in natural resources experience stagnation, corruption, conflict or authoritarianism instead of development and prosperity. For example, Nigeria, despite its vast oil reserves, continues to struggle with systemic corruption, social inequality and political instability. Similarly, the Democratic Republic of Congo, endowed with abundant deposits of diamonds and strategic minerals, remains mired in armed conflict and extreme poverty. See: Ross (2013); Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian (2013); Matti (2010).

The central challenge, therefore, is to adapt political strategies to changing circumstances and incorporate non-military instruments of influence within a comprehensive approach to governance (Nye, 2005). Universal values such as democracy, human rights and individual freedom play a crucial role here, as they enhance a country's image and strengthen its credibility (Nye, 2005).

In traditional terms, cultural diplomacy was regarded as a strategic instrument used by states to influence the opinions, values and behaviours of other countries and their societies – all without coercion, and thus in pursuit of political objectives on the international stage. Within this perspective, cultural diplomacy was confined to processes in which formal diplomats, acting in service of and on behalf of their governments, utilised cultural resources. Their primary aim was to promote foreign policy goals or support national interests. In other words, in this conventional approach, culture was treated as a tool for achieving the geopolitical aims of states (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021). In recent years, a significant transformation has taken place, leading to an “expanded and more self-reflective definition” of cultural diplomacy, which now prevails. This updated definition views cultural diplomacy as a “policy domain” in its own right, promoting a broader range of objectives that go beyond mere national interests. It encompasses the promotion of quality of life, artistic development, capacity building, economic growth and social cohesion. In this expanded perspective, cultural diplomacy engages citizens and civil society actors as both producers and consumers of cultural activities that transcend borders. It makes use of the exchange of cultural goods and services, collaborative projects and networks involving museums, cultural foundations, ministries, artists and curators across different countries and continents – all with the aim of fostering stronger international relationships and enhancing overall societal and political impact (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Isar et al. (2021) emphasise that cultural diplomacy has been – and continues to be – an often-overlooked aspect of public diplomacy. They suggest its scope is even broader, encompassing actions aimed at shaping the perception and understanding of a country among foreign publics, not solely among governments. In this context, Nye notes that public diplomacy serves as a platform through which states communicate their values and policies to foreign audiences. According to Joseph Nye, public diplomacy delivers results only when it relies on two-way communication, authentic relationships and the ability to listen (Nye, 2005). Skilfully practised,

public diplomacy can activate soft power resources through educational exchange programmes, media initiatives, cultural and sporting activities (Nye, 2005). The key, however, lies in collaboration – enabling states to effectively influence international public opinion.

Soft power rests not only on the promotion of one's own values, but also on the ability to foster dialogue and mutual understanding. In this context, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are playing an increasingly important role. Through their educational, cultural and social initiatives, they act as informal agents of cultural diplomacy. Grassroots activities – focused on developing local competencies, strengthening communal identity and advancing the value of dialogue – contribute to shaping a country's international image in a more inclusive way than formal political institutions (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

Operating outside of state structures, these organisations perform a threefold function:

1. They connect local narratives, heritage and voices with the global communication space.
2. They shape new forms of dialogue and communication, grounded in empathy, collaboration and shared social goals.
3. They serve as advocates for groups previously excluded from conventional diplomacy – so-called “marginalised communities” (Grincheva, 2023).

Moreover, as flexible and deeply rooted local actors, NGOs are particularly well positioned to leverage digital tools for promoting values and building global partnerships (Grincheva, 2023; Zia, 2024). Alvin Toffler (1980), in his “Third Wave” theory, foresaw a shift in influence from traditional institutional structures towards decentralised networks of communication and exchange – a dynamic that today increasingly shapes socio-cultural interactions. In this light, modern technologies – especially those enabling seamless information flow and fostering intercultural interaction – further amplify the significance of cultural diplomacy as a soft power instrument in international relations.

This phenomenon aligns with the rise of transnational actors, among which non-governmental organisations hold a prominent position. Within this context, the concept of sports diplomacy has emerged as a dynamic form of cultural diplomacy, wherein non-state actors – including federations, clubs and grassroots movements – actively shape a country's international image. As UNITAR (2025) notes, sports diplomacy enables the

engagement of foreign public opinion through shared values and social experiences, often more effectively than traditional diplomatic channels. Furthermore, UNESCO (2024) emphasises the transformative potential of sport as a catalyst for social inclusion, intercultural dialogue and community resilience – reinforcing its role not merely as entertainment, but as a strategic medium for soft power and cultural exchange. A compelling example of this practice is the role of karate in Tanzania, promoted by organisations such as JKA Tanzania and NHYDO. These entities view karate not merely as a sport, but as a platform for cultural exchange, community building and human rights advocacy. NHYDO supports children with albinism and disabilities, using karate as a tool for integration and social empowerment. Meanwhile, JKA Tanzania fosters international ties through collaboration with Japanese instructors, reinforcing cultural diplomacy via martial arts. Sport – particularly in its grassroots and intercultural dimension – thus emerges as a strategic soft power resource, allowing states to enhance their international image while promoting inclusive and ethical values.

The Tanzanian example demonstrates how local sports initiatives can be embedded within broader diplomatic narratives, making sport an effective medium that bridges diverse social and cultural spheres.

KARATE IN TANZANIA IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICAN AND GLOBAL MARTIAL ARTS DEVELOPMENT

In a broader view of sport as a tool of soft power, karate emerges as a particularly significant case, combining physical discipline, symbolic ritual and cultural transmission. Contemporary research indicates that karate functions not only as a sport discipline, but also as a social and communicative practice with a distinct cultural dimension (Piepiora et al., 2024). Karate simultaneously serves as a competitive sport, martial art and self-defence system – depending on the training model. Within the realm of physical culture, it appears across various domains such as physical education, recreation, rehabilitation, tourism and elite sport, each emphasising different aspects of the practice (Piepiora et al., 2024). Importantly, the practice fosters interpersonal skills such as discipline, cooperation and resilience. Research by Zhu, Li and Jankowicz-Pytel (2020) shows that ritualised language, gestures and training structures – such as Japanese commands and

bowing protocols – serve as tools of cultural translation, enabling participants to engage with a value system regardless of their ethnic or linguistic background.

Although karate remains a niche discipline in Tanzania compared to mainstream sports such as football or athletics, its development has accelerated significantly thanks to the efforts of institutions like JKA Tanzania. Karate in Tanzania is a dynamically growing sport, despite limitations in the availability of comprehensive national data. Current estimates suggest that the number of karate practitioners exceeds 50,000, encompassing various styles and schools (Japan Karate Association/WF-Tanzania, 2025). This growing interest has also translated into organisational development, particularly within the structures of the Japan Karate Association (JKA – Tanzania). The organisation, affiliated with the prestigious Japan Karate Association (JKA), plays a vital role in the institutionalisation of karate in the country. Since the establishment of JKA/WF-Tanzania in 2007, there has been a steady increase in the number of qualified instructors. By 2025, impressive results have been achieved: two instructors have attained the *5th Dan* rank, four the *4th Dan*, over ten the *3rd Dan*, more than twenty the *2nd Dan* and over forty the *1st Dan*. This reflects a rising level of technical competence and the professionalisation of karate in Tanzania (Japan Karate Association/WF-Tanzania, 2025). The document also shows that at least 16 international seminars have been organised in Tanzania, featuring renowned instructors from Japan, Germany and various African countries. Attendance at these events often exceeded 300 participants. Tanzania has also marked its presence on the international stage by participating in prestigious seminars in Japan, Thailand, Uganda, Kenya and South Africa, some of which hosted up to 3,000 attendees. The network of karate clubs is expanding as well; currently, over 20 clubs are registered under JKA, and the total number of clubs across all styles exceeds 200. This growth aligns with a trend observed since 2010, characterised by intensified training, events and seminars (Japan Karate Association/WF-Tanzania, 2025).

The activities of JKA Tanzania include conducting regular training sessions, organising certification exams and developing international connections that strengthen the discipline's position on the global stage. Thanks to recognition from local authorities and international institutions, Tanzania has gained status as a key martial arts hub in the East and Central African region. At the regional level, JKA Tanzania has become an influential actor through the organisation of seminars, Dan-grade examinations

and competitions that attract participants from neighbouring countries such as Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda. The annual *Gasshuku* events, featuring Japanese instructors and Dan-ranked masters, serve not only as demonstrations of technical excellence, but also as platforms for cultural exchange and institutional networking. These efforts contribute to Tanzania's growing visibility as a serious player on the African martial arts scene.

On the international stage, Tanzanian karate practitioners affiliated with JKA Tanzania have participated in tournaments and training sessions not only regionally, but also globally – particularly in East Asia. Their presence and achievements abroad reflect the growing professionalism and competitiveness of Tanzanian martial arts. Moreover, collaboration with Japanese instructors and international federations represents a strategic form of soft power, in which sport becomes a tool for building partnerships, expressing national identity and conducting diplomacy outside formal political mechanisms. This position is further enriched by the symbolic significance of the Black Samurai archetype, present in Tanzanian karate culture. Inspired by the historical figure *Yasuke* – an African samurai who served under Oda Nobunaga in 16th-century Japan – the image of the Black Samurai has become a powerful symbol of honour, discipline and Afro-Japanese solidarity. It functions not only as a cultural icon, but also as a narrative of empowerment that bridges continents and redefines representation in martial arts (Stanislaus, 2021; Perotti, 2021). In Tanzania, this symbolism holds particular meaning for karate practitioners from marginalised groups, including individuals with albinism, who find in the samurai ethos a reflection of their own path toward dignity and mastery. The image of the Black Samurai has evolved beyond a cultural icon into a recognisable brand with its own logo, featured on training apparel, sports accessories and promotional materials. Its visibility has extended far beyond Tanzania's borders – karate practitioners from other African countries view the Black Samurai symbol as a mark of belonging and pride in being Black martial artists (Author's own research 2018–2025). Importantly, this symbol has been consciously defined and respectfully embraced by Japanese *senseis*, as evidenced by their wearing of T-shirts bearing its image – gifts from JKA Tanzania as gestures of friendship (Author's unpublished field materials 2017–2025). Additionally, the brand has gained a media presence through the launch of a YouTube channel, serving not only to promote karate, but also to build narratives rooted in identity, culture and the strengthening of Afro-Japanese ties (Black Samurai TV, 2025).

KARATE AS INCLUSIVE SOFT POWER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE TANZANIAN CONTEXT

Sociological analyses (Fallah et al., 2020), based on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, reveal that an individual's engagement in karate depends on their cultural experience, social relationships and the symbolic meaning they attribute to the martial art. Values, norms and lifestyle shaped by family and environment influence one's sporting preferences. Social relations – such as contact with karate practitioners, membership in clubs or affiliation with sports groups – also affect the decision to pursue this discipline. Karate functions not only as a physical discipline, but also as a practice deeply rooted in symbolic meaning; it may represent strength, prestige, discipline or an alternative lifestyle, aligning with broader social fields in which cultural and social awareness shape the individual's mental structures. Consequently, the choice to practice karate is not merely a matter of personal preference, but reflects one's social and relational position and embeddedness within a specific system of values and meanings. This is particularly evident among young people and in culturally diverse environments. From this perspective, karate serves as a vehicle for non-coercive influence and intercultural engagement, where ethical values and global organisational networks (e.g. JKA, WKF – World Karate Federation) jointly support intercultural dialogue, promote inclusivity and enhance the international image of the state.

The Tanzanian context – in which karate is practised and adapted by non-governmental organisations such as NHYDO and federations like JKA Tanzania – clearly demonstrates the utility of karate in processes of social integration and cultural influence. Karate initiatives in Tanzania have had a profound impact, particularly in empowering individuals with albinism and supporting their social inclusion. One of the most significant examples of karate functioning as a form of soft power in Tanzania is the grassroots mission and activities of JKA Tanzania. Beyond its formal status as a nationally recognised organisation affiliated with JKA Japan, the association was founded with the intention of creating a pathway for young people – often experiencing marginalisation – towards personal development, a sense of belonging and, in the longer term, international engagement. Many of these participants come from challenging backgrounds: homelessness, loss of family, unemployment or life on the streets. For them, karate became

more than a sport – it provided structure, discipline and a renewed sense of purpose (Author's own research 2018–2025; Perotti, 2021). From its inception, JKA Tanzania has aimed not only to establish a professional martial arts institution, but also to build an open space for youth seeking direction and identity. Through inclusive training programmes and mentorship, the organisation has enabled dozens of participants to rebuild their lives and achieve lasting progress – some have earned *Dan-level* black belts, now teach the next generation and actively contribute to the association's development.

An analysis of JKA Tanzania's activities reveals how martial arts, rooted in ethical values, can serve as a pathway for shaping social awareness and fostering intercultural exchange. As young practitioners transition from marginalisation to recognised roles within the global martial arts community, karate functions not only as a sport, but also as a means of strengthening dignity, social recognition and intercultural dialogue. Particularly evident in JKA Tanzania's collaboration with NGOs supporting individuals with albinism, martial arts emerge as a tool for social empowerment and cross-cultural engagement. One of the most significant initiatives reflecting this civic ethos was the self-defence seminar held in Lamadi in 2017, organised by the Kiabakari Foundation and supported by Polish Aid under the development programme *Salama Zaidi Lamadi*. Within this framework, JKA Tanzania conducted a self-defence course focused on children with albinism – a population especially vulnerable to discrimination and violence. The seminar provided structured physical training, psychological support and empowerment through discipline, creating a safe space where identity could be reclaimed through martial arts (Author's field research 2017–2025; Kiabakari Foundation, 2017).

Another stage of JKA Tanzania's engagement involved collaboration with the organisation Under the Same Sun, which since 2010 has supported children with albinism through education, vocational training and health-care (UTSS). This initiative aligns with the broader efforts of Under the Same Sun, which has assisted over 437 students with albinism in Tanzania, providing access to schooling, professional development and medical care. UTSS's approach focuses on visibility, dignity and long-term integration, helping graduates become lawyers, teachers and human rights advocates (UTSS). As part of the *Summer Camp* project implemented in 2023, JKA Tanzania conducted karate sessions – this time through its non-governmental partner, NHYDO, which operates under the umbrella of JKA Tanzania (Author's

unpublished field materials 2017–2025; UTSS). These activities complement the work of NHYDO, which integrates karate into youth development programmes for disadvantaged communities across the country.

The Lamadi seminar and the UTSS model converge in their use of karate as both a pedagogical and symbolic tool. As documented in the film *Black Samurai* by Luigi Maria Perotti and confirmed through field research conducted by the author between 2021 and 2025, many children demonstrated exceptional skills and enthusiasm for martial arts. This inspired JKA Tanzania Sensei to expand free karate classes for youth with albinism at his main dojo in Dar es Salaam – held three times a week and met with strong interest. These sessions have become a pillar of social empowerment, enabling participants to gain physical strength, self-confidence and new social visibility. Some have advanced to the role of instructors, representing Tanzania abroad (Japan Karate Association/WF-Tanzania, 2025; Perotti, 2021). A particularly poignant case is the testimony of one participant with albinism, recorded by the author during fieldwork in May 2025. For this student, karate is not only a source of confidence – it is a pathway to professionalisation. Faced with limited career prospects due to social exclusion, obtaining an instructor certificate would mean economic independence and vocational purpose. More importantly, the interviewee mentioned views his future role as symbolic – one that inspires other young people with albinism through his own example. “If I become an instructor, other albinos will see themselves in me,” he explained during the interview (Author’s field research 2018–2025).

The karate movement in Tanzania – particularly through the activities of JKA Tanzania – has not only transformed the lives of local communities, but also gained international visibility through strategic partnerships, digital presence and prestigious events. One such initiative is the *Karate@Home* platform, founded by Sensei Martin Buchstaller during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which enabled Tanzanian karate practitioners to participate in global online training sessions. This virtual dojo became a space where practitioners from Dar es Salaam and other regions could collaborate with international instructors, share progress and gain recognition within the global karate community. The international recognition of this platform significantly contributed to increased awareness of the work carried out by the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation, operating under JKA Tanzania. NHYDO received strong international support – both material, in the form of training equipment donated by karate practitioners

and clubs from around the world, and personal, through visits from instructors who travelled to Tanzania to conduct sessions for local students (New Heroes Youth Development Organisation. (n.d.)).

The visibility of Tanzanian karate was further enhanced during the 15th anniversary Gasshuku, held in Dar es Salaam in October 2022. The event brought together over 100 karate practitioners from 21 countries, including Japan, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa. Under the guidance of Shihan Tatsuya Naka and Shihan Koichiro Okuma from Japan, the seminar featured advanced training in kata, kumite and budo philosophy. A particularly moving moment was the demonstration by Tanzanian karateka with albinism, whose performances in kata and self-defence techniques were met with admiration and deep emotional resonance. Their participation not only showcased high technical proficiency, but also symbolised resilience and inclusivity, drawing attention to the broader social mission of JKA Tanzania. These events affirm that karate can serve as a cultural bridge, redefining Tanzania's image on the international stage. Through participation in tournaments, seminars and digital platforms, Tanzanian karate practitioners demonstrate the country's commitment to intercultural dialogue, ethical leadership and inclusive representation. Organisations such as the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation play a crucial role in facilitating these exchanges – securing equipment, coordinating travel and promoting Tanzanian karate abroad (Japan Karate Association/WF-Tanzania, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By analysing the role of karate in Tanzania as a tool of soft power, this article clearly demonstrates that in this context, karate functions as a form of influence exercised without coercion – through image-building, value transmission and relationship cultivation. The initiatives undertaken by JKA Tanzania and NHYDO, particularly within international training spaces and transnational sporting events, contribute to shaping a positive image of Tanzania as an open, inclusive and culturally engaged nation. Using sport as a medium of social and cultural expression, Tanzania actively participates in global exchanges of ideas and values, where martial arts become not only a vehicle for local development, but also a means of strengthening social bonds grounded in mutual respect, empathy and solidarity.

In addressing the previously formulated research questions concerning the impact of karate on the social integration of individuals with albinism in Tanzania, the case study reveals that this discipline plays a vital role not only as a physical activity, but, more importantly, as a mechanism supporting inclusion. By combining educational and cultural values, karate fosters spaces in which pro-integration efforts are carried out by non-governmental organisations such as the New Heroes Youth Development Organisation (NHYDO) and JKA Tanzania. The analysis of their practices demonstrates the effectiveness of grassroots cultural diplomacy initiatives aimed at overcoming social and institutional barriers through sport, intercultural education and ethical approaches to development. Participation in training and educational programmes enables individuals with albinism not only to break through stigmatisation, but also to actively co-create the local environment as instructors and mentors.

In this context, and in response to the second research question regarding mechanisms that support the construction of Tanzania's positive image through karate, the involvement of individuals with albinism in international sporting events – such as the anniversary *Gasshuku* – is essential. These activities allow them to showcase their skills to a global audience and foster transnational partnerships with instructors from other countries. An additional component reinforcing Tanzania's image is its digital presence, particularly through the *Karate@Home* platform, which promotes the work of Tanzanian karate practitioners. This platform serves both as a space for universal narratives and symbolic storytelling – exemplified by the figure of the Black Samurai, representing transcultural values of strength, dignity and Afro-Japanese solidarity. From this perspective, the answer to the next research question – concerning mechanisms that support Tanzania's positive image through karate – highlights the significance of individuals with albinism participating in international events such as the *Gasshuku*. These opportunities not only allow for skill demonstration, but also encourage transnational partnerships. Tanzania's digital presence, including the *Karate@Home* platform, further amplifies this visibility, offering a space for both universal and symbolic narratives, such as the Black Samurai figure, which embodies transcultural values of empowerment and solidarity.

The final research question, focused on the role of NGOs and sports institutions in processes of inclusion and cultural diplomacy, finds its answer in the practices of NHYDO and JKA Tanzania. These organisations act

as active mediators of social transformation, serving as inclusive training spaces that provide access to resources, support professional development and represent Tanzania within the realm of soft diplomacy.

These conclusions lead to important recommendations and perspectives for future development. In particular, deepening transnational co-operation with educational institutions and diplomatic missions from Japan, Europe and Africa could significantly expand the reach and sustainability of ongoing projects. Such initiatives may encourage both local decision-makers and international actors to integrate karate programmes into national education, sports and health policies, enabling effective implementation and broader accessibility for diverse beneficiary groups.

In a broader perspective, the analysis clearly demonstrates that the role of karate as a tool of soft power and cultural diplomacy is gaining increasing significance – especially in the context of African countries actively striving to redefine their position within global power structures. Practices carried out by non-governmental organisations such as NHYDO exemplify how local social actors can effectively counter dominant narratives rooted in coercive force (hard power), offering alternative models of cooperation, representation and national image-building. In the Tanzanian context, karate emerges as a means of constructing intercultural bridges and consciously shaping the country's image as an active, open and equal partner in global collaboration.

Further research into the use of soft power in the African context could greatly contribute to understanding the potential of sport, culture and education as strategies for enhancing the international presence of regional states. Moreover, such studies would help address questions concerning the possibility of building relationships based not only on dependency and development aid, but also on partnership, dialogue and joint action rooted in shared responsibility. This kind of paradigm shift could be crucial for the future of relations between Africa and the rest of the world.

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