

VOICES OF LIBERATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MAHATMA GANDHI AND SAM NUJOMA AS PUBLIC DIPLOMATS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract

This paper explores the public diplomacy legacies of Mahatma Gandhi and Sam Nujoma as early architects of “liberation diplomacy” in the Global South. While traditionally framed within their respective national liberation movements, both leaders effectively engaged international audiences, framing their struggles as moral imperatives that transcended borders. Drawing on public diplomacy theory, soft power, framing analysis, and the concept of liberation diplomacy, the study provides a comparative analysis of Gandhi’s and Nujoma’s strategic communication approaches, institutional engagements, and symbolic repertoires.

Gandhi, operating in the early 20th century under British colonial rule, utilised nonviolence (*satyagraha*), visual symbolism, and global civil society networks to influence opinion in the imperial metropole and beyond. His public diplomacy was grassroots-driven and grounded in ethical resistance. In contrast, Nujoma, working within the post-World War II multilateral system, strategically engaged with institutions such as the United Nations, the Organisation of African Unity, and the Non-Aligned Movement. His approach combined legal argumentation, coalition-building, and international advocacy to secure recognition for SWAPO and Namibia’s right to self-determination.

Despite contextual differences, both figures demonstrate that non-state actors from the Global South can shape global norms, influence international discourse, and build legitimacy without conventional power. Their examples offer enduring lessons for contemporary public diplomacy, particularly in how moral clarity, symbolic communication, and transnational engagement can advance justice in global affairs. This paper contributes to the decolonisation of diplomatic studies by positioning African and Asian leaders as innovators in global public diplomacy.

Keywords: Public diplomacy, Liberation diplomacy, Soft power, Mahatma Gandhi, Sam Nujoma, Global South communication.

Introduction

Public diplomacy, traditionally understood as the practice by which states engage foreign publics to shape favourable international perceptions, has evolved beyond formal statecraft into a multidimensional arena involving non-state actors, liberation movements, and ideologically driven campaigns (Gilboa, 2008; Melissen, 2005; Zaharna, 2010). While once closely associated with Cold War-era superpower competition, the practice has far deeper and more diverse roots, particularly in the Global South. Anti-colonial leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Sam Nujoma emerged not only as political mobilisers but also as master communicators who strategically internationalised their domestic struggles for legitimacy and freedom. This paper explores their roles as early practitioners of “liberation diplomacy,” a concept denoting the transnational projection of resistance narratives through rhetorical, symbolic, and institutional channels by actors outside conventional state structures (Adar, 2011; Nye, 2004; Gregory, 2011).

Gandhi, widely revered as the father of Indian independence, occupies a singular place in the global history of communication, ethics, and nonviolent resistance. Long before India’s external affairs ministry formalised its international communication efforts, Gandhi was already crafting a compelling transnational narrative through his writings in *Indian Opinion*, *Young India*, and *Harijan*, and by participating in international events such as the Round Table Conferences. His communication style combined indigenous idioms with universalist appeals to justice, liberty, and civil disobedience (Brown, 2011; Gandhi, 1948). More than a political tactician, Gandhi was a semiotic innovator—the spinning wheel, salt march, loincloth, and khadi clothing were carefully curated symbols of defiance designed to resonate both within and beyond India (Chakrabarty, 2008; Hofmeyr, 2013). In effect, Gandhi constructed a global moral persona through what Cull (2008) would later define as “listening,” “advocacy,” and “cultural diplomacy.”

In contrast, Sam Nujoma operated within a more institutionalised international system shaped by multilateral diplomacy, post-war human rights conventions, and Cold War geopolitics. As the founding President of SWAPO and later of the Republic of Namibia, Nujoma led a sustained diplomatic campaign to internationalise Namibia’s struggle against apartheid South Africa. Through numerous addresses to the UN General Assembly, participation in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and alliances with solidarity

movements across Africa, Asia, and the socialist bloc, Nujoma positioned SWAPO as a legitimate national liberation movement with moral and legal standing (Nujoma, 2001; Dobell, 2000; Katjavivi, 1988). His approach relied heavily on institutions; however, like Gandhi, he understood the communicative value of narrative, particularly the power of portraying Namibians as victims of settler-colonial injustice and as protagonists in a broader Global South struggle for freedom (Melber, 2003).

Despite differences in historical context, geography, and method, both Gandhi and Nujoma exemplify the use of public diplomacy not as an afterthought to foreign policy but as a primary tool for political struggle. Their rhetorical strategies, symbolic acts, and global engagements reframed local liberation movements as international moral imperatives. Their work challenges the dominant Western narrative that treats public diplomacy as a post-World War II innovation developed by state actors. Instead, as Thussu (2013) and Zaharna (2010) argue, public diplomacy in the Global South has often emerged organically—led by activists, freedom fighters, and civil society networks rather than by bureaucracies.

This comparative study seeks to analyse Gandhi and Nujoma as communicative agents of soft power who shaped global discourse from below. It argues for a reconceptualisation of public diplomacy that includes liberation movements and non-Western actors as foundational contributors. In doing so, it aligns with the growing call to decolonise the field of international relations and public diplomacy, recognising the intellectual, ethical, and strategic innovations of figures from Africa and Asia (Gregory, 2011; Melber, 2020; Katjavivi, 1988).

Objectives of the Study

The overarching objective of this study is to critically examine how Mahatma Gandhi and Sam Nujoma utilised public diplomacy as a strategic tool to internationalise their respective liberation struggles in India and Namibia. By focusing on their use of narrative, symbolic action, and international engagement, the study seeks to:

- Analyse the public diplomacy strategies employed by Gandhi and Nujoma to communicate their causes beyond national borders.
- Compare the symbolic and rhetorical techniques used by each leader to gain international sympathy and legitimacy.

- Evaluate the extent to which their efforts influenced global perceptions and contributed to broader South-South solidarity.
- Contribute to scholarly debates on the historical roots of Global South public diplomacy and its implications for contemporary practice.

Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

- In what ways did Mahatma Gandhi and Sam Nujoma deploy public diplomacy to frame their liberation struggles as global moral issues?
- How did their strategies differ in terms of media engagement, target audiences, and institutional platforms?
- What were the symbolic and rhetorical devices each leader employed to cultivate international solidarity?
- How has their legacy shaped the evolution of Global South public diplomacy and solidarity in the post-colonial era?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons:

- Theoretical Contribution: It deepens the academic discourse on public diplomacy by foregrounding liberation movements and non-state actors from the Global South as critical agents of soft power (Melissen, 2005; Adar, 2011).
- Historical Value: It reinterprets two iconic liberation leaders not only as political actors but as sophisticated communicators and strategists in the international arena.
- Contemporary Relevance: The study offers insights into how historical models of “liberation diplomacy” can inform present-day South-South cooperation and India’s ongoing engagements with African states.
- Interdisciplinary Bridge: It draws from international relations, history, postcolonial studies, and strategic communication to produce a rich, comparative narrative.

Limitations of the Study

While the study is designed to offer original insights, it is subject to the following limitations:

- Scope of Comparison: The comparison is restricted to two individuals and does not encompass the broader ecosystem of public diplomacy actors within SWAPO or the Indian National Congress.
- Source Availability: There may be disparities in archival access, particularly regarding unpublished internal communication within SWAPO compared to the well-documented Gandhi archives.
- Temporal Contexts: Gandhi and Nujoma operated in distinct historical eras with different geopolitical dynamics and communication technologies, which may affect direct comparability.
- Language and Translation: Some of Nujoma's speeches and documents exist in translation or fragmented archival records, which could affect textual analysis.

Data and Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design grounded in historical and interpretivist approaches. It draws upon primary and secondary sources to analyse how Gandhi and Nujoma constructed their public diplomacy narratives.

Data Sources

Primary Data

- Gandhi's letters, editorials in *Indian Opinion*, and key speeches (e.g., Quit India address, Round Table Conference statements).
- Nujoma's speeches at the UN (especially from 1973–1986), SWAPO communiqués, and key writings such as *Where Others Wavered*.
- Archival records from the United Nations, British Colonial Office documents, SWAPO archives, and Indian National Congress materials.

Secondary Data

- Scholarly biographies and historical accounts (e.g., Brown, 2011; Dobell, 2000).

- Theoretical and conceptual texts on public diplomacy, liberation movements, and postcolonial strategy (e.g., Nye, 2004; Gilboa, 2008; Thussu, 2013).

Methods of Analysis

- Document Analysis: The study uses qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes, narratives, and rhetorical strategies in public speeches and writings.
- Comparative Framing Analysis: Applies Entman's (1993) model of framing to analyse how each leader constructed international appeal.
- Historical Contextualization: Situates each leader's public diplomacy within broader geopolitical developments (e.g., Cold War, decolonisation, Non-Aligned Movement).

Ethical Considerations

As the study relies on publicly available archival material and published texts, no human subjects are involved. However, care will be taken to acknowledge all intellectual sources appropriately and represent the historical contexts with fidelity and nuance.

Literature Review

Rethinking Public Diplomacy through the Global South

Public diplomacy as a field has historically been rooted in Western-centric paradigms, with early scholarship focusing on the instruments of American and European foreign policy, particularly during the Cold War (Cull, 2008; Nye, 2004). These models framed public diplomacy as a state-led effort to influence foreign publics, primarily through broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, and educational exchanges. However, this narrow state-centric perspective is increasingly challenged by scholars who emphasise the role of non-state actors and historically marginalised regions in shaping international discourse (Melissen, 2005; Gilboa, 2008; Katjavivi, 1988; Melber, 2014).

From this perspective, the Global South emerges not as a passive recipient of global influence but as a producer of public diplomacy practices rooted in moral legitimacy, ideological conviction, and grassroots mobilisation (Thussu, 2013; Mignolo, 2011). Anti-colonial leaders, liberation movements, and diaspora communities from Asia, Africa, and Latin America have long employed communicative strategies to advance their causes on the global stage. These strategies often depend

on symbolism, human rights discourse, and moral framing rather than material power.

A key concept that emerges in this expanded view is liberation diplomacy: the deployment of public diplomacy tools by liberation movements to gain international recognition, moral legitimacy, and strategic alliances (Adar, 2011; Spies, 2018). Gandhi and Nujoma, while vastly different in context and method, exemplify this tradition. Their public communication transcended the national sphere and contributed to shaping global perceptions of colonialism, justice, and sovereignty. In doing so, they not only advanced their respective liberation struggles but also laid the intellectual groundwork for a decolonial approach to diplomacy.

Gandhi as a Public Diplomat and Communicator

Gandhi's role in India's struggle for independence is well documented in both historical and political literature. However, his contribution to global communication and public diplomacy is often overlooked in mainstream diplomatic studies. As scholars such as Brown (2011) and Chatterjee (1986) argue, Gandhi was not merely a political tactician but a communicator who understood the performative power of symbolism. His philosophy of satyagraha, rooted in truth, nonviolence, and civil disobedience, was simultaneously a political strategy and a communicative act designed to generate global empathy and solidarity.

Gandhi's use of culturally resonant symbols such as the spinning wheel (charkha), homespun cotton (khadi), and fasting was deeply strategic. These symbols communicated resistance in a language that was both locally authentic and globally intelligible, particularly to audiences concerned with morality, justice, and human dignity (Chakrabarty, 2008; Hardiman, 2003). Gandhi's visual identity as a simple ascetic served to contrast the opulence and violence of empire with the humility and righteousness of resistance.

In addition to symbolic communication, Gandhi made effective use of print media and diaspora networks. His journal *Indian Opinion* and other publications became transnational platforms that connected struggles in South Africa, India, and beyond (Hofmeyr, 2013; Weber, 1997). Gandhi's engagements with international institutions, such as his attendance at the 1931 Round Table Conference in London, further illustrate his understanding of international opinion as a force that could shape colonial policy. These efforts foreshadowed key elements of

modern public diplomacy, strategic narrative construction, global engagement, and the cultivation of soft power.

Sam Nujoma and Liberation Diplomacy in Multilateral Institutions

Compared to Gandhi, Sam Nujoma operated in a more institutionalised and legally complex global environment. The post-World War II period saw the rise of the United Nations and the codification of international human rights law, both of which provided new arenas for liberation movements to engage the global public. Nujoma, as the founding leader of SWAPO and later the first President of independent Namibia, emerged as a central figure in this phase of African liberation diplomacy.

While early literature on Nujoma focuses primarily on military and political dimensions of the Namibian struggle (Dobell, 2000), recent works have begun to recognise the sophistication of SWAPO's diplomatic strategy. From the early 1960s, Nujoma embarked on a sustained international campaign to present Namibia's case at global forums. This included speeches at the UN General Assembly, lobbying for sanctions against apartheid South Africa, and building alliances across the Global South and the socialist bloc (Selassie, 1993; Adar, 2011; Katjavivi, 1988).

Nujoma's diplomatic framing emphasised the illegality and brutality of South Africa's occupation, aligning the Namibian struggle with broader global movements against racial discrimination, colonialism, and neo-imperialism. The UN General Assembly's 1973 resolution recognising SWAPO as the sole legitimate representative of the Namibian people was a major diplomatic achievement, signalling the success of liberation diplomacy in shifting international norms (United Nations, 1973).

Moreover, Nujoma's engagements were not merely legalistic but also deeply moral. His rhetoric often invoked the suffering of Namibian people, the injustice of apartheid, and the urgency of freedom, echoing Gandhi's earlier strategy of appealing to global conscience. Unlike Gandhi, who operated in a largely non-institutional global space, Nujoma worked through the mechanisms of international law, but both leaders shared a commitment to winning moral authority as a means of advancing their causes.

Symbolism, Soft Power, and Strategic Communication

Both Gandhi and Nujoma exemplify the critical role of symbolic and moral communication in public diplomacy. Drawing on Entman's (1993) theory of framing, it becomes evident that both leaders were adept at constructing narratives that diagnosed colonialism as a moral and legal

crime, identified the people as victims, and positioned themselves as legitimate voices of justice. Their communicative strategies operated not merely through information but through powerful emotions, empathy, indignation, and hope.

Gandhi's soft power emerged from his capacity to project moral clarity and spiritual authority. His commitment to nonviolence and simplicity challenged Western notions of power, while simultaneously appealing to their ethical sensibilities (Nye, 2004). Similarly, Nujoma's diplomacy relied not on coercive power but on building solidarity, invoking shared anti-colonial histories, and framing Namibia's cause as part of a larger global justice movement (Melber, 2003).

Thussu (2013) calls this "contra-flow soft power", an alternative model in which Global South actors shape international discourse not through dominance but through resonance. Gandhi and Nujoma crafted identities that were both rooted in national struggle and elevated to universal significance. Their actions helped reorient public diplomacy from an elite-driven practice to one deeply embedded in people's movements and liberation ethics.

Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

Despite their clear engagement in public diplomacy, neither Gandhi nor Nujoma is consistently analysed through that lens in mainstream diplomatic studies. Gandhi's public communication is more often studied in religious, ethical, or nationalist terms, while Nujoma's diplomacy is typically framed within African liberation historiography. What remains missing is a comparative and theoretical account that positions both figures as strategic communicators in a pre-digital global public sphere.

This study addresses this scholarly gap by applying public diplomacy theory to two iconic figures from the Global South. It reclaims Gandhi and Nujoma as public diplomats who shaped global narratives through symbolism, moral rhetoric, and institutional advocacy. In doing so, it contributes to the decolonisation of public diplomacy studies and underscores the historical agency of African and Asian leaders in shaping global norms and forming soft power.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon a multi-theoretical framework to analyse the public diplomacy strategies of Mahatma Gandhi and Sam Nujoma. Situated at the intersection of international relations, communication

studies, postcolonial theory, and Global South scholarship, the framework integrates five key concepts: public diplomacy, liberation diplomacy, soft power, strategic framing, and epistemologies of resistance. Together, these lenses enable a comparative analysis of how these two leaders communicated their liberation struggles to the world, cultivated transnational solidarity, and contributed to the development of diplomatic agency in the Global South.

Public Diplomacy Beyond the West

Public diplomacy is commonly defined as the effort by state and non-state actors to influence foreign publics and build international legitimacy through communication, cultural engagement, and strategic narrative (Gilboa, 2008; Nye, 2004). Traditional models emphasise institutional actors, such as governments and diplomats, and practices like cultural exchanges, broadcasting, and media diplomacy. However, newer paradigms acknowledge a more pluralistic, networked, and participatory global communication landscape (Melissen, 2005; Zaharna, 2010).

This study adopts an expanded definition of public diplomacy that includes non-state actors and movements operating in the Global South before and during decolonisation. Gandhi and Nujoma exemplify how public diplomacy practices were employed even before the formal diplomatic infrastructure of post-colonial states existed. Their efforts broaden the scope of public diplomacy beyond statecraft to include moral leadership, symbolic resistance, and liberation communication. In this way, the study contributes to the decolonisation of the field by integrating Southern epistemologies and historical experiences into diplomatic theory (Thussu, 2013; Katjavivi, 1988; Melber, 2014).

Liberation Diplomacy as Strategic Moral Communication

To better conceptualise the specific kind of public diplomacy practised by Gandhi and Nujoma, the study uses the framework of liberation diplomacy (Adar, 2011; Melber, 2003). Liberation diplomacy refers to the strategic use of international platforms, moral narratives, and legal instruments by anti-colonial movements to gain recognition, legitimacy, and support. It often emerges in asymmetric contexts where the actors involved lack conventional power resources (e.g., armies, economies, or states) and must instead rely on symbolic and communicative forms of influence.

Both Gandhi and Nujoma used liberation diplomacy to recast their respective national struggles as matters of global justice. Gandhi's satyagraha and Nujoma's appeals to the United Nations exemplify this strategic shift from

domestic resistance to international advocacy. In doing so, they both moved from local actors to global figures, leveraging moral authority and multilateral sympathy *in lieu* of traditional diplomatic leverage.

Soft Power from the Margins

Another central concept informing this analysis is soft power, first articulated by Nye (2004) as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. While soft power is often associated with large states leveraging media, culture, and political values, this study follows Thussu's (2013) notion of "contra-flow soft power", the emergence of soft power from the Global South, generated through historical experience, ideological resonance, and ethical consistency.

Gandhi and Nujoma both projected a form of moral soft power rooted in suffering, nonviolence (in Gandhi's case), and political legitimacy. Their messages resonated not because of material capabilities, but because they articulated a universal language of freedom, justice, and human dignity. In Gandhi's case, soft power stemmed from ascetic simplicity, global networks of pacifists, and media representation. In Nujoma's case, it arose from legal legitimacy, institutional engagement, and the symbolic alignment with the global anti-apartheid movement.

Framing Theory and Narrative Construction

To understand how Gandhi and Nujoma communicated their struggles effectively, this study also employs framing theory as developed by Entman (1993). Framing is the process by which political actors define issues, attribute causality, make moral evaluations, and suggest remedies. In public diplomacy, framing is crucial to shaping how international audiences perceive a conflict or cause.

Gandhi framed British imperialism as morally bankrupt and spiritually corrosive, positioning Indian self-rule as a path to both national dignity and global peace. Nujoma framed South African occupation as a violation of international law and human rights, placing the Namibian struggle within the broader global fight against apartheid. In both cases, framing served as a tool of diplomatic persuasion, helping garner international support and reframing their liberation struggles as universal moral imperatives rather than local grievances.

Integrative Analytical Lens

Taken together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive analysis of Gandhi and Nujoma not just as political leaders, but as strategic

communicators and public diplomats. This study treats public diplomacy not as a function of institutional states alone, but as a historical process by which marginalised actors in the Global South engaged global publics, shaped discourse, and redefined the norms of legitimacy and justice.

By bridging liberation diplomacy with soft power and framing theory, the study contributes a historically grounded, theoretically pluralistic model of public diplomacy rooted in decolonial praxis. It repositions the Global South from the periphery of public diplomacy discourse to its intellectual and strategic centre, engaging critically with African and Indian liberation archives (Nujoma, 2001; Gandhi, 1927).

Here is the revised and expanded Section 4, now including additional recent scholarly perspectives on Gandhi from the fields of Indian diplomacy, media studies, and postcolonial communication theory:

Gandhi as a Public Diplomat: Communicating Moral Authority in a Colonial World

Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to India's independence movement has been extensively studied, yet his role as an architect of public diplomacy remains insufficiently theorised within mainstream international relations discourse. Beyond being a political strategist or moral philosopher, Gandhi functioned as a global communicator whose campaigns against colonialism fused local authenticity with global intelligibility. His work prefigures many of the core tenets of contemporary public diplomacy, particularly as practised in postcolonial contexts (Thussu, 2013; Melissen, 2005).

Gandhi's Early Transnational Messaging: South Africa as a Test Ground

Gandhi's experience in South Africa (1893–1914) was formative in developing his communicative methods. Here, he confronted legal discrimination against the Indian diaspora and began crafting the transnational messaging strategies that would later underpin his campaigns in India. His launch of the multilingual Indian Opinion in 1903, printed in Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil, and English, allowed him to narrate the diasporic struggle against racial injustice while connecting Indian communities across geographies (Hofmeyr, 2013; Ganguly-Scrase, 2005).

This media initiative exemplified what Uday Mehta (1999) and Arjun Appadurai (1996) later described as “moral publics”, imagined transnational audiences who could be mobilized through ethical appeals

rather than material interests. Gandhi's framing of South African policies as violations of universal dignity laid the foundation for a broader, liberation-oriented diplomacy from the Global South.

Satyagraha as Symbolic Diplomacy

Gandhi's political actions functioned as carefully constructed communicative performances. The 1930 Salt March was not just civil disobedience; it was symbolic diplomacy. By challenging colonial control over salt, a common necessity, Gandhi universalised the Indian struggle and framed it in terms of moral absurdity (Chakrabarty, 2008; Brown, 2011). This aligns with Entman's (1993) framing theory, which emphasises defining issues, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and proposing remedies.

Nandy (1983) emphasises Gandhi's use of indigenous cultural idioms as a form of epistemic resistance, what he terms "the intimate enemy." By staging nonviolence in public spaces and using his own body as a site of protest (e.g., hunger strikes), Gandhi conveyed a message of moral vulnerability, inviting identification and solidarity from global audiences. These methods helped recast India's national movement into a global story of justice and emancipation.

Gandhi's Engagement with International Forums and Global Audiences

Gandhi's 1931 participation in the Round Table Conference in London was both political and theatrical. By wearing his khadi shawl and sandals to Buckingham Palace, Gandhi contrasted imperial ceremony with the simplicity of resistance, leveraging visual cues to project humility and authenticity (Nye, 2004; Guha, 2013). His interactions with journalists, pacifist groups, and politicians during this visit reflected an acute understanding of interpersonal and symbolic diplomacy.

Scholars such as Ramachandra Guha (2013) argue that Gandhi consciously cultivated his global image as a universal figure of nonviolence, appealing to conscience rather than national interest. His ability to blend moral consistency with strategic flexibility was central to the success of his international outreach.

Visual and Moral Rhetoric in Print and Symbolism

Gandhi's mastery of visual and moral rhetoric allowed him to build bridges between local resistance and global sympathies. His strategic self-presentation—barefoot, with a wooden staff, draped in homespun cloth—was deeply political. It simultaneously signalled anti-colonial defiance and humanised the struggle to global onlookers (Zehra, 2021).

His prolific writings in journals like *Young India*, *Harijan*, and *Indian Opinion* presented the ethical case for Indian independence, appealing not only to Indian audiences but also to British liberals, American pacifists, and European humanists. Gandhi's ethical storytelling, as Daya Thussu (2013) notes, represents an early form of "South-South soft power" shaped by narrative, rather than resources or coercion.

Gandhi's Public Diplomacy Legacy

Gandhi's model of ethical leadership has deeply influenced figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Julius Nyerere, and Nelson Mandela. As Henning Melber (2016) notes, Gandhi's symbolic repertoire inspired many African liberation leaders who saw in him a template for both resistance and communication. His techniques underscore the significance of communicative capacity in conditions of material asymmetry, a hallmark of Global South diplomacy.

Gandhi's public diplomacy continues to offer a prototype of moral statecraft wherein leadership is enacted through resonance rather than dominance. His life invites a re-theorisation of diplomacy that is historically grounded, ethically informed, and inclusive of Southern agency in the making of global norms.

Table 1: Gandhi's Public Diplomacy Tools and Global Impacts

Tool / Strategy	Description	Global Impact
Satyagraha	Nonviolent resistance as moral and communicative strategy	Framed British colonialism as morally indefensible; inspired civil rights models
Symbolic Performance	Spinning wheel, khadi cloth, fasting, Salt March	Visually compelling narratives of resistance with global appeal
Diasporic Media	<i>Indian Opinion</i> , multilingual journals	Connected diaspora and homeland; built transnational moral networks
International Forums	Round Table Conference (1931), meetings with UK elites	Raised visibility; humanised Indian resistance in Western capitals
Open Letters & Appeals	Public messages to British citizens and leaders	Reframed struggle as universal ethical cause
Ascetic Visual Identity	Lifestyle choices reflecting political values	Projected authenticity; redefined soft power from the Global South

Note. This table summarises Gandhi's public diplomacy tools, ranging from nonviolent resistance and symbolic acts to diasporic media and international engagement, demonstrating how he mobilised global moral support and reshaped anti-colonial discourse through ethical, visual, and communicative strategies.

Sam Nujoma as a Diplomatic Communicator: Framing the Namibian Liberation Struggle

Sam Nujoma's role in Namibia's path to independence is often discussed in terms of armed struggle and political leadership. However, his contribution to internationalising the Namibian cause through strategic communication and public diplomacy warrants greater scholarly attention. As the founding President of SWAPO and later the Republic of Namibia, Nujoma embodied the dual function of liberation leader and global diplomatic envoy. His engagements with the United Nations, Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) reflected a deliberate attempt to reframe Namibia's struggle as a universal moral imperative and a case of decolonisation delayed by apartheid aggression.

Early Framing of the Namibian Question in International Forums

From as early as 1960, Nujoma undertook diplomatic missions to mobilise international support for Namibia. His address to the UN General Assembly in 1966 and subsequent annual engagements systematically presented South Africa's occupation of Namibia as a violation of international law and human rights (United Nations, 1976). According to Selassie (1993), these appeals helped shift the issue from a regional conflict to an international concern, galvanising support for sanctions, military assistance, and political recognition.

Ngavirue (1997) situates these diplomatic activities within the broader political pluralism of Namibia under South African rule, where SWAPO had to not only consolidate domestic support but also present itself as the sole legitimate voice of Namibians internationally. This dual legitimacy, domestic and international, was carefully constructed through rhetorical appeals to justice, democracy, and African unity.

Liberation Diplomacy and the Construction of Legitimacy

Mbuende (1992) notes that SWAPO's diplomatic strategy combined ideological clarity with pragmatic coalition-building. It tailored its message for different audiences: invoking anti-colonial solidarity with African states, emphasising self-determination in UN legal debates, and aligning with socialist rhetoric when addressing the Eastern bloc. This multi-layered communication approach allowed SWAPO to secure military, financial, and moral support from a broad range of international actors.

Theo-Ben Gurirab, another key diplomatic architect, was instrumental in framing SWAPO's messages in international legal terms while ensuring

the movement remained visible and credible in multilateral spaces. His negotiation skills, according to Melber (2014), were vital in maintaining momentum for Namibia's cause at the UN over more than two decades. Gurirab's work illustrated that diplomacy from the Global South was not merely reactive but strategically crafted and sustained.

Communicative Strategies and the Moral Politics of Liberation

Nujoma's speeches often invoked the suffering of the Namibian people under apartheid, juxtaposing their plight against international commitments to human rights and decolonisation. In his autobiography *Where Others Wavered* (2001), Nujoma reflects on the importance of "naming the injustice" as a communicative act. His messaging regularly framed Namibia's struggle not just in terms of territorial liberation but also as a moral challenge to global inaction.

Much like Gandhi, Nujoma deployed symbols and narratives that resonated with multiple audiences. The repeated use of visual images of displaced Namibians, children in refugee camps, and victims of apartheid brutality served to construct a moral frame that demanded international attention. These were further amplified by SWAPO's use of international radio, solidarity networks, and conferences.

Public Diplomacy through Multilateralism

Nujoma's public diplomacy was also institutional. He spearheaded Namibia's formal recognition as a UN Trust Territory and helped secure the 1973 General Assembly resolution recognising SWAPO as the sole legitimate representative of the Namibian people (United Nations, 1973). These legal milestones, achieved through sustained lobbying and symbolic presence, were critical diplomatic victories.

Hage Geingob, who would later become Namibia's third president, served as SWAPO's representative to the UN and later as Director of the United Nations Institute for Namibia (UNIN) in Lusaka. Geingob's efforts, as noted by Melber (2005), focused on capacity-building and policy formulation, reinforcing the view of SWAPO not just as a guerrilla movement but as a proto-government-in-waiting with a serious diplomatic and developmental vision.

Nujoma's Enduring Legacy in Global South Diplomacy

Sam Nujoma's diplomatic legacy lies in his ability to elevate the Namibian cause from an African conflict to a global injustice requiring collective redress. His style of public diplomacy combined institutional engagement with moral clarity, grounded in anti-colonial ethics and

African solidarity. He demonstrated that liberation diplomacy was not a stop-gap until independence but a foundational pillar of international legitimacy for post-colonial states.

His communicative strategies laid the groundwork for Namibia's post-independence foreign policy orientation: principled, multilateral, and rooted in historical memory. Like Gandhi, Nujoma represents a model of diplomatic communication where legitimacy flows not from institutional power but from moral authority and rhetorical skill.

Table 2: Sam Nujoma's Public Diplomacy Instruments and Global Outcomes

Tool / Strategy	Description	Global Impact
UN General Assembly Addresses	Annual speeches highlighting illegal occupation	Framed Namibia's struggle as a global issue; justified sanctions and support
Legal Diplomacy	Use of international law, UN resolutions	Secured recognition of SWAPO as legitimate representative (UN, 1973)
Liberation Symbolism	Visuals of apartheid brutality, refugee camps	Elicited international empathy and built solidarity networks
Strategic Framing	Messages of justice, sovereignty, anti-racism	Positioned Namibia within broader anti-colonial and human rights discourse
Multilateral Engagement	Engagement with OAU, NAM, Socialist and Western blocs	Broadened support base; built cross-bloc alliances
Capacity-building Institutions	UNIN under Hage Geingob	Enhanced SWAPO's governance credibility pre-independence

Note. This table outlines key public diplomacy strategies used in Namibia's liberation struggle, showing how SWAPO leveraged international law, symbolic messaging, multilateral engagement, and institution-building to globalise its cause, secure legitimacy, and prepare for post-independence governance

Comparative Synthesis and Analysis: Gandhi and Nujoma as Architects of Liberation Diplomacy

Mahatma Gandhi and Sam Nujoma were transformative communicators who demonstrated that public diplomacy is not the exclusive domain of established states but a powerful instrument of anti-colonial agency. Despite their differing historical contexts—Gandhi in the early 20th-century British Empire and Nujoma during the Cold War decolonisation wave—they shared a strategic understanding of how to

use symbolic acts, rhetorical framing, international institutions, and coalition-building to recast local struggles as global imperatives. In doing so, they helped redefine the contours of public diplomacy from the perspective of the Global South (Melissen, 2005; Thussu, 2013; Zaharna, 2010).

Strategic Context: From Imperial Power to Multilateral Governance

Gandhi's efforts unfolded in a pre-institutional global environment, where power was centralised within colonial empires. His diplomacy thus relied on appealing to the moral sensibilities of the British public and global civil society through symbolic actions, media campaigns, and nonviolent protest (Brown, 2011; Chatterjee, 1986). His absence from formal state structures necessitated reliance on soft power, informal networks, and the mobilisation of diaspora platforms.

Conversely, Nujoma engaged a structured international order shaped by the United Nations, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). His diplomatic arsenal included formal petitions, legal arguments, and representation in global fora, backed by sustained lobbying and strategic alliances (Dobell, 2000; Selassie, 1993). Gurirab (2003), who served as Nujoma's UN envoy, documented how diplomatic tenacity, legal framing, and transnational solidarity eventually led to the recognition of SWAPO as the sole legitimate representative of the Namibian people (UNGA Resolution 3111).

Framing and Rhetoric: Moral Universalism vs Institutional Legitimacy

Gandhi's framing strategies drew from spiritual and ethical registers. His invocation of *satyagraha*, the charkha (spinning wheel), and salt as symbols of resistance established a lexicon of protest intelligible to global audiences (Chakrabarty, 2008; Hofmeyr, 2013). He presented British colonialism not simply as a political imposition but as a moral failure, one that contravened the conscience of humanity.

In contrast, Nujoma's rhetorical strategies, shaped by his legal advisers and diplomats such as Mbende (1986) and Geingob (1996), emphasised international law, UN resolutions, and the right to self-determination. His appeals aligned Namibia's struggle with the post-WWII human rights regime, invoking legal injustice, racial subjugation, and violations of sovereignty. These efforts were strategic: by shifting Namibia's narrative from a South African domestic issue to an international legal crisis, Nujoma internationalised the liberation agenda.

Table 3: Comparative Communication Strategies

Aspect	Gandhi	Nujoma
Primary Mediums	Print journalism, nonviolent protest	UN platforms, diplomatic correspondence, state visits
Audience Focus	British civil society, global moral public	UN members, African states, socialist and non-aligned blocs
Key Institutions Engaged	British press, Indian diaspora networks	United Nations, OAU, NAM
Symbolic Language	Simplicity, nonviolence, self-reliance	Resistance, legitimacy, self-determination
Persona Projected	Spiritual ascetic, ethical visionary	Revolutionary diplomat, principled statesman

Note. This table compares Gandhi and Nujoma's communication strategies, showing how Gandhi relied on symbolic protest and moral appeals to British civil society, while Nujoma utilised multilateral diplomacy and legal framing to engage global institutions and position SWAPO as a legitimate liberation movement.

Both leaders adapted their communicative tools to the constraints and opportunities of their geopolitical contexts. While Gandhi relied on moral storytelling and symbolism, Nujoma worked through institutional channels to create political and legal legitimacy.

Soft Power as Public Diplomacy in Practice

Gandhi's soft power operated as a form of ethical contagion: his ascetic image, symbolic acts, and philosophical coherence evoked admiration and empathy across cultural lines. His communicative mastery lay in aligning personal conduct with political messaging, thus embodying the cause he espoused (Nye, 2004).

Nujoma, meanwhile, developed what Mbuende (1986) and Ngavirue (1997) call "institutional soft power." Through disciplined diplomacy, moral consistency, and inclusive messaging, he established Namibia's liberation as a cause aligned with global justice. His ability to draw support from Sweden, India, the Soviet bloc, and the frontline states illustrates the gravitational pull of principled, coalition-based diplomacy.

Gurirab (1995) reflections at the UN reveal how SWAPO's diplomatic campaign was anchored not just in legality but in storytelling, framing Namibia as the "last colony in Africa," evoking moral urgency and geopolitical responsibility.

Public Diplomacy as Decolonial Praxis

The legacy of both Gandhi and Nujoma lies in their ability to redefine diplomacy as an emancipatory practice. They did not merely seek freedom for their nations; they also challenged the ontological premises of international relations—who speaks, who listens, and what constitutes legitimate global engagement.

Their approaches resonate with contemporary calls to decolonise diplomacy and international communication (Thakur & Van der Westhuizen, 2004; Melber, 2014). They exemplified what Zaharna (2010) terms “relational public diplomacy,” focusing not on unilateral messaging but on solidarity, shared identity, and long-term reputation-building.

Nujoma and Gandhi proved that public diplomacy from the margins could exert real pressure, transform international opinion, and shape policy outcomes. Their success disrupts the narrative that diplomacy is only the realm of powerful states, demonstrating instead that justice, when effectively communicated, can be a source of power.

Conclusion and Policy Reflections

Conclusion

This study has conducted a historically grounded, theoretically pluralistic comparative analysis of Mahatma Gandhi and Sam Nujoma as foundational figures in the evolution of public diplomacy from the Global South. While emerging from vastly different geopolitical contexts, colonial India at the height of British imperialism and Namibia under apartheid South African rule, both leaders demonstrated a strategic grasp of communication as a lever of moral power and political transformation. Their contributions affirm that public diplomacy is not solely the province of sovereign states or formal diplomatic corps but can be profoundly shaped by liberation movements, moral entrepreneurs, and subaltern communicators.

Gandhi's public diplomacy was predicated on symbolic performance, print culture, and ethical resistance. His use of the spinning wheel, salt march, and fasting transformed personal sacrifice into collective global messaging. Through diasporic newspapers, public forums, and spiritual appeals, Gandhi redefined colonial resistance as a universal moral cause. Nujoma, operating in a post-World War II institutionalised international system, deployed a different arsenal—legal argumentation, United

Nations platforms, and alliances with the Non-Aligned Movement and socialist countries—to elevate SWAPO's legitimacy. He masterfully used diplomatic visibility to gain formal recognition, sanctions against apartheid, and tangible international support.

The comparative analysis highlights four core continuities in their public diplomacy practice:

- Both framed their national liberation struggles as globally relevant moral narratives, transcending narrow nationalist discourses.
- They generated legitimacy as non-state actors, prior to acquiring the institutional trappings of sovereign leadership.
- Their communicative strategies fused narrative framing, symbolic acts, and consistent ethical messaging, making them credible agents of global solidarity.
- They both exemplified soft power from the Global South—projecting influence not through coercion or material resources, but through moral authority, cultural resonance, and symbolic clarity.

Yet, the primary divergence lies in their institutional environment and tactical modalities. Gandhi operated in an era without multilateral legal instruments, relying on civil society, transnational media, and moral suasion. Nujoma, by contrast, utilised the architecture of global governance—the UN system, human rights conventions, and Cold War diplomacy—to formalise SWAPO's international standing and Namibia's eventual statehood.

This comparative study underscores the need to decolonise the study of public diplomacy by recognising that key innovations in strategic communication and moral diplomacy originated in anti-colonial movements. Gandhi and Nujoma's legacies remind us that non-state actors, especially from the Global South, have long been agents of normative change, using narrative, symbolism, and transnational networks to reshape the international order.

Policy Reflections

The findings of this study yield several policy-relevant insights for current and future public diplomacy practitioners, particularly in the Global South:

- **Recognition of Liberation-Era Legacies:** Modern diplomatic institutions in post-colonial states should actively incorporate the communication strategies pioneered by liberation movements into

official diplomatic training and public engagement frameworks. Figures like Gandhi and Nujoma offer more than symbolic inspiration—they provide blueprints for strategic messaging under conditions of power asymmetry.

- **People-Centred Diplomacy:** As global politics becomes increasingly multipolar and networked, there is an urgent need to integrate bottom-up, values-driven communication into state-led diplomacy. Contemporary challenges such as climate justice, migration, and digital equity require moral authority and soft power, not just traditional negotiation skills.
- **Institutional Memory and Historical Literacy:** Ministries of foreign affairs and diplomatic academies across the Global South should document, teach, and celebrate the diplomatic contributions of national liberation movements. This will ensure continuity in values-based diplomacy and enhance national confidence in engaging international platforms.
- **Reframing South-South Cooperation:** The strategic and communicative solidarities pioneered by Gandhi and Nujoma can inform current efforts at revitalising South-South cooperation. Emphasising shared histories of resistance and mutual support can deepen trust and accelerate multilateral collaboration among developing nations.
- **Digital Liberation Diplomacy:** In today's digital age, Gandhi's and Nujoma's emphasis on message discipline, visual symbolism, and global resonance remains instructive. Governments and civil society actors can adapt these strategies to the digital realm, using social media, diaspora engagement, and visual storytelling, to challenge neo-colonial narratives and advocate for equitable global norms.

Ultimately, the legacy of Gandhi and Nujoma underscores that diplomacy is not merely about negotiation or protocol; it is about shaping the moral and discursive terrain of international relations. Their contributions affirm the power of narrative, symbolism, and ethical clarity in mobilising change. As such, they should be studied not only as national leaders but also as visionary communicators and architects of a truly global, decolonial public diplomacy.

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