Interculturality as a Potential Factor of Effectiveness and Acceptance of Peace Missions in Africa

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Abstract

Existing research and ongoing peacekeeping operations in Africa reveal mixed outcomes, ranging from success to failure. While political, economic, and societal challenges have been thoroughly examined as factors affecting peacekeeping missions, cultural challenges -particularly the lack of intercultural competence among blue helmets - remain underexplored. Interculturality plays a pivotal role not only in the implementation of peace mission mandates but also in building constructive relationships with host communities. This article underscores the critical importance of interculturality in the success of United Nations peacekeeping operations. Specifically, pre-deployment training that includes intercultural skills is essential for effective collaboration within peace missions. Additionally, fostering intercultural dialogue is crucial for legitimizing mission mandates and building trust with local stakeholders. These findings emphasize the need to integrate intercultural considerations at every stage of peace operation deployment.

Keywords: Peacekeeping, Interculturality, Effectiveness, MINUSMA, MINUSCA

1. Introduction

Interculturality is pivotal in peacekeeping operations, where the ability to understand and manage cultural differences often determines mission success or failure. Recently, the major peacekeeping operations in Africa[1] have either closed (United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, henceforth MINUSMA) or are winding down

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[1] As of December 31, 2023, four of the largest peacekeeping operations—MINUSMA, MONUSCO, MINUSCA, and MINUSS - were active in Africa. These missions are notable for deploying the highest number of blue helmets, with over 10,000 soldiers. They are also characterized by substantial budgets, with each mission operating on an annual budget of approximately $1 million (Ozouy, 2023).

(United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, MONUSCO), partly due to perceived inefficiency. Additionally, UN peacekeeping missions in Africa confront more challenging obstacles, including direct assaults on peacekeepers, complex and often ambiguous mandates, and inconsistent political support. These difficulties hinder the troops' ability to operate effectively (Sarjoon & Yusoff, 2019). Moreover, these missions frequently face resistance from host governments and skepticism or outright rejection by local populations (Dawit & Meressa, 2022). Against this backdrop, addressing interculturality during the deployment of peace operations emerges as a crucial strategy to enhance both their effectiveness and their acceptance within African conflict zones. Given that United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions are deployed across diverse regions, each with unique cultural, historical, and traditional contexts, the multicultural composition of these forces further underscores the need for intercultural competence to foster cooperation and achieve their objectives.

Conceptually, Interculturality refers to the interaction or influence between individuals or groups from two or more distinct cultural backgrounds, occurring directly in person or indirectly through various means. At its core, interculturality embodies the encounter, exchange, and interaction between cultures, offering a framework for plural socialization that bridges multiple cultural dimensions. More broadly, it can extend to international political or economic engagements where individuals or groups from different nations interact or impact one another. In the context of peacekeeping operations, interculturality involves managing and addressing the diverse cultural interactions in areas of intervention. This includes recognizing, understanding, and respecting the cultural norms, values, customs, and traditions of local populations, as well as fostering effective collaboration among peacekeeping personnel from different cultural and national backgrounds. Cultural diversity, even within communities, can pose challenges to multinational cooperation. However, understanding regional, national, and local cultural dynamics equips UN personnel and other international actors to foster sustainable partnerships and enhance mission effectiveness (Obuseh, 2017).

The literature review on interculturality in peacekeeping operations highlights a significant gap in focused studies on the topic. While numerous works have examined the role of culture in peacekeeping missions and military operations more broadly, specific insights into interculturality remain limited. Haddad (2024) explores the importance of cultural proximity and awareness among peacekeepers, emphasizing its impact on public perceptions of peacekeepers and their mission. Similarly, Bove & Ruggeri (2019) investigate how cultural distance - measured by geography, language, and religion - affects the operational effectiveness of peacekeeping missions. These authors suggest that, within a single mission, contingents from diverse cultural backgrounds can complement one another regarding skills and expertise. Earlier studies also emphasize the cultural dimensions of peacekeeping. Heiberg (1991) argues that the cultural and social distance between peacekeepers and local populations influences mission outcomes. Sahnoun (1994) illustrates this by discussing the Somalia peace mission, where aligning food relief distribution with local social norms proved essential to success. Conversely, Stanton (1994) shows how a lack of cultural understanding can lead to mission failures. Furthermore, Caligiuri (2011) examined the role of cultural training in enhancing the competence of U.S. military personnel, while Vollhardt (2019)

demonstrated how effective management of cultural differences between peacekeepers and local populations can mitigate violence directed at peace missions. Lutumbu é and Dieu (2022) also contributed a report outlining preliminary findings on interculturality in peacekeeping operations. There is a consensus that a comprehensive approach, coupled with a deep understanding of the host country's cultural and societal dynamics and fostering strong relationships with the local population, is crucial for the success of peacekeeping missions (Vollhardt, 2019; Newby, 2018; Tomforde, 2010).

In recent years, many studies have sought to highlight the faults and challenges that have hindered peacekeeping operations from successfully achieving their objectives (Nordin, Wan Norhasniah, & Salleh, 2022; Sarjoon & Yusoff, 2019). While scholars have emphasized the political, economic, and societal challenges facing peacekeeping operations, the literature often overlooks cultural challenges, such as the lack of intercultural skills among blue helmets. Furthermore, debates around liberal peacebuilding have highlighted that external actors' interventions and assistance often focus too heavily on imported models of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, rather than considering the specific context in which these activities take place (Anguilar, 2023; Hauge & Gilles, 2015). Additionally, the top-down strategies employed by the UN and aid workers have frequently been criticized for their limitations (Autesserre, 2014). As a result, peacebuilding efforts have become uniform, professionalized, and evaluated based on external standards, with minimal attention paid to how these efforts are experienced by local populations on the ground (Milar, 2014).

This article examines how integrating interculturality into the training and deployment of UN peacekeeping forces can enhance mission effectiveness. Boutros-Ghali (1993) defines peacekeeping as the deployment of lightly armed UN military personnel for non-enforcement tasks, such as monitoring ceasefires and controlling buffer zones between hostile parties. Interculturality, in particular, can improve interactions between the mission, the host country, and the local population, fostering greater acceptance of peacekeeping operations worldwide, especially in Africa. For peacekeeping missions to gain broad acceptance from the communities they are designed to serve, they must be culturally aware. High social distances can negatively impact mission performance due to the "social deafness" of Blue Helmets (Bove & Ruggeri, 2019). Moreover, the limited and approximate nature of training provided to some peacekeepers remains a significant obstacle to effective cultural interactions. While this training may encourage innovation and adaptability to some extent, it often falls short of equipping personnel with the necessary skills. Thus, pre-deployment training must prioritize the development of intercultural competencies, enabling peacekeepers to create meaningful integration mechanisms within local communities. This approach is essential to ensure both mission effectiveness and acceptance.

From an epistemological perspective, this study adopts a qualitative methodological approach. Given the challenges in measuring interculturality within peacekeeping missions, this approach is particularly suitable. It enables an in-depth exploration of the personal experiences of individuals, thereby enhancing our understanding of their interactions and the functioning of societies (Mucchielli, 1996). The data for this study were collected between 2021 and 2023 through a semi-structured interview guide with 15 military personnel of Cameroonian, Guinean, and Beninese nationalities. These participants, selected for their field

experience in peacekeeping missions in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)[2], provided relevant and concrete insights into the complexities of United Nations peacekeeping operations. Table 1 presents a detailed overview of the key demographic and professional characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Characteristics		Percentage	Characteristics		Percentage
Nationality	Benin	33%	Rank	Officers	46%
	Cameroon	40%		non-commissioned	34%
	Guinea	27%		Private class	20%
Gender	Male	80%	Age	Less than 35 years	40%
	Female	20%		More than 35 years	60%

The low percentage of females (20%) indicates potential challenges in capturing gendered experiences and perspectives within this population. The larger proportion of older participants (60%) may align with the higher representation of officers (46%), as senior ranks typically correlate with age and experience. While Cameroon has the largest share (40%), the inclusion of participants from Benin (33%) and Guinea (27%) adds valuable diversity so that participants can have different points of view. The choice of these countries is determined by the availability of financial resources. The interview data will be the subject of qualitative thematic content analysis in a cross-comparative manner to produce an interpretation that is both global and detailed of the object studied.

From a theoretical point of view, constructivism, symbolic interactionism, and strategic analysis were used to interpret the social reality under study. Constructivism as defined by Bourdieu (1981) made it possible to understand the diversity of cultures in UN peace operations as a construct of the actors. Symbolic interactionism is used to analyze the cultural interactions between the various players involved in peacekeeping missions and to use the codes and signs present as objects of communication and dialogue. Finally, strategic analysis enables us to understand the strategies deployed by peacekeepers in contact with the cultures of the host country's populations and administrations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study draws on constructivism, symbolic interactionism, and strategic analysis to interpret the social reality under investigation. Constructivism, as defined by Bourdieu (1981), provides a framework for understanding the diversity of cultures in UN peace operations as constructs shaped by the actions and perspectives of the actors involved. Symbolic interactionism is employed to analyze the cultural interactions among the various stakeholders in peacekeeping missions, focusing on the use of codes and symbols as tools for communication and dialogue. Lastly, strategic analysis sheds light on the strategies adopted by peacekeepers as they engage with the cultures of the host country's populations and administrations. This approach helps to uncover how peacekeepers navigate and adapt to these complex cultural environments.

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[2] MINUSCA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic.

The remainder of this paper is divided into two sections. The first section explores cultural values as a foundational principle of UN peacekeeping missions. Given that peacekeeping missions consist of multicultural and intercultural teams, it emphasizes the importance of contingents acquiring intercultural skills through pre-deployment training. The second section examines the benefits of intercultural dialogue in enhancing mandate legitimacy and fostering acceptance of peacekeeping missions within host countries. Together, these discussions provide insight into the mechanisms for integrating interculturality during deployment.

2. Highlighting Cultural Values in United Nations Peacekeeping Missions

The United Nations system is founded on the principle of unity in diversity, emphasizing the promotion of mutual understanding, peace, democracy, and development. Mandated peace operations are deployed in conflict-affected countries to support efforts in restoring peace and stability. This section demonstrates that cultural diversity and intercultural interactions are integral to UN peacekeeping operations. It further argues that acquiring intercultural skills is essential for achieving the objectives of peace missions.

2.1 Peacekeeping Personnel, a Multicultural and Intercultural Work Team

Culture serves as a powerful tool for building connections across differences. It unites people and promotes social cohesion, peace, and security. Once humanity fully embraces cultural diversity, it will be equipped to overcome challenges such as racism, ethnic prejudice, and xenophobia. Respect for cultural diversity is a core value of the UN, particularly within its multicultural work environment. Since 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognized cultural diversity as a common heritage of humanity and a driving force for peace and prosperity[3]. In peacekeeping operations, diversity within contingents reflects the wide range of attributes and backgrounds of personnel. UN peacekeeping missions frequently include trained individuals from various ethnicities and nationalities. Duffey (2000) noted that UN forces are not a homogenous group; aside from language differences, each battalion brings its own culture, assumptions, strategies, training, and interpretations of the mandate.

Peacekeepers represent diverse cultures from their troop-contributing countries, and each contingent carries its own institutional culture, whether from the military, civilian, or police sectors. Individual soldiers embody multiple cultural influences, including those of their nation, social background, religion, or political affiliations. For example, MINUSCA personnel come from countries across all continents, reflecting a rich mix of cultures and beliefs. The "culture of peace" within peacekeeping operations is a shared system of meanings learned and internalized by deployed personnel. This culture emphasizes peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution, non-violence, tolerance, mutual respect, dialogue, and reconciliation. It encompasses implicit references and shared representations that unconsciously shape the perceptions, actions, and interpretations of peacekeepers. By

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[3] The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity was adopted by UNESCO in 2001.

nature, peacekeeping missions, like the UN itself, are multinational and multicultural endeavors.

Consequently, interculturality becomes a critical factor in their success. The significance of interculturality in peacekeeping missions is illustrated by the experience of a Cameroonian soldier during deployment[4]: "On one mission, I put my arm on the shoulder of an Egyptian colleague while taking a group photo. She reacted as though my arm had burned her. This behavior offended not only her but also our male Egyptian colleagues, who quickly expressed their disapproval. Later, an interpreter from our contingent explained that my action was inappropriate and culturally unacceptable in Egyptian society". This incident underscores the need for cultural agility - defined as the ability to apply cultural understanding effectively to interact across cultural contexts (Caligiuri, 2011). It highlights the importance of training soldiers in intercultural awareness before deployment and ensuring that these lessons are applied in practice.

Adaptability to cultural differences must be actively encouraged. Team members should be prepared to adjust their behaviors and expectations based on the cultural context. Intercultural collaboration can be fostered by promoting teamwork and emphasizing the shared goals of the mission. Facilitating the exchange of best practices between diverse cultural groups further strengthens these efforts. Operational and cultural differences, if unaddressed, can hinder peacekeepers' ability to present a unified message or coordinate incentives, both of which are critical for effective persuasion and engagement (Morjé, 2019).

2.2 Acquiring Intercultural Skills in Pre-Deployment Training

The level of preparation before deployment in peacekeeping operations (PKOs) varies significantly, particularly regarding equipment and knowledge of the local contexts in which peacekeepers will operate. Acquiring intercultural skills is essential for fostering relationships and facilitating exchanges among individuals from diverse origins and cultures. This is especially critical within heterogeneous groups that must coexist and work together peacefully (UNESCO, 2013). Intercultural competencies refer to the ability to navigate complex environments characterized by diverse peoples, cultures, and ways of life. These skills enable individuals to interact effectively and appropriately with others who differ in language and cultural backgrounds (UNESCO, 2009; Fantini, 2019). For peacekeepers, developing these skills helps them manage cultural differences within their forces, facilitating understanding and cooperation. These skills, often referred to as *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1980), represent durable and transposable dispositions that unconsciously shape actions, perceptions, and reflections. Such competencies must be acquired before deployment to ensure operational effectiveness. Interculturality is vital because peacekeeping is inherently grounded in intercultural dialogue. The success of peace missions depends on peacekeepers' ability to navigate cultural differences, engage in conflict prevention and resolution, and promote tolerance, dialogue, and reconciliation. This underscores the necessity of integrating intercultural training into pre-deployment preparation.

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[4] Interview with a Cameroonian non-commissioned officer deployed with MINUSMA (2023).

The content of intercultural skills can be derived from several key UN documents on human rights. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the first international instrument to establish a comprehensive list of rights applicable to all individuals in all societies. This declaration serves as a basis for managing relations between various peoples and the many groups to which they belong. Article 26 (2) states that "*education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.*" Human rights include civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as fundamental principles such as universality and inalienability, indivisibility, and interdependence of all these rights, equality, and non-discrimination (including women's rights, the rights of Indigenous peoples, the rights of the child, the rights of persons with disabilities, and the rights of migrant workers).

The training provided by the UN primarily focuses on familiarizing personnel with its rules and practices. While intercultural skills are not central to the UN's conceptual and operational framework, they should complement human rights, which act as catalysts for fostering a culture of peaceful and harmonious coexistence. Peacekeeping missions are inherently multicultural, bringing together military, police, and civilian personnel from diverse nationalities. Effective cooperation among these components relies on mutual understanding and respect for cultural differences. To achieve this, basic training on the cultures present in the area of operation is essential. Such training enables peacekeepers to quickly gain an understanding of the socio-cultural context in which they operate (Caligiuri, 2011). This includes information about the history, religion, traditions, values, and social norms of local populations. Beyond gaining knowledge about human rights, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) report, published in 2015, outlines several themes for new directions in PKOs. Notably, it emphasizes the need for each mission to adapt to specific local contexts and to refocus efforts on benefiting local populations. Even before the publication of this report, the 2008 Capstone Doctrine had explicitly highlighted the importance of considering local cultural realities when implementing mandates. These developments underscore the necessity of adapting peacekeeping operations to evolving security contexts and contemporary challenges.

Intercultural communication skills, including proficiency in local languages, are essential for successful peacekeeping missions. Such communication is vital for fostering harmonious collaboration and effective teamwork within the mission. It is crucial to ensure that the language used is clear and understandable to all team members. Language courses or interpreters can play a significant role in bridging communication gaps. Interpreters, widely used in military operations, also serve as valuable sources of cultural learning. In some missions, unit commanders have emphasized the importance of language training for peacekeepers. For example, a coordinator of a police unit comprising 140 to 150 personnel recommended language courses not only for individual officers but also for command staff. According to this unit leader, language mastery is crucial for gathering intelligence and interacting effectively with religious authorities and local communities. "*In any relationship in the field, you have to prioritize language missions. Because when you express yourself in*

the language of your interlocutor, he lowers his guard and he is no longer suspicious; he no longer thinks they come from elsewhere, etc.". The training should help participants to understand the nuances of non-verbal communication and to develop active listening skills. Multilingualism (the ability to communicate in several languages) and translation (expressing the same idea in several languages) are essential to intercultural dialogue; they also indicate intercultural skills. To be effective in the field, every peacekeeper should have the cognitive and behavioral ability to change language and gestures according to his or her interlocutors and the context (cultural permutation according to Silverstein (1976)).

Furthermore, education about cultural conflicts is essential. Cultural awareness of oneself and others is crucial to avoiding cultural misunderstandings between peacekeepers and residents (Tomforde, 2010; Rubinstein, 2005). It helps address potential sources of cultural conflict and provides strategies for resolving them. This may include scenario simulations to help participants understand cultural differences and develop peaceful solutions. It can also build understanding and practical skills, as well as mediation and negotiation techniques that account for cultural sensitivities. The link between human rights and intercultural dialogue is extensive, as they are mutually reinforcing in creating inclusive societies. A global culture of human rights requires skills for intercultural dialogue, and it is through such dialogue that the UN peacekeeping mission can effectively carry out its mandate.

3. Intercultural Dialogue, a Guarantee of Effectiveness in Peacekeeping Operations

Intercultural relations are a process that can be jointly built by all participants in peace operations. If they manage the process well, they demonstrate intercultural skills. In other words, cultural diversity can be a strength if properly managed. Staff must respect the norms, values, and customs of other team members. This respect can help avoid misunderstandings and cultural conflicts. Viewing cultural diversity as a resource is valuable for establishing lasting intercultural dialogues. The concept of co-constructing interactions with others lies at the heart of intercultural dialogue. Indeed, intercultural dialogue is an essential tool for resolving intercultural conflicts peacefully and is a prerequisite for developing a culture of peace. From this perspective, intercultural dialogue provides peacekeepers with a means to reinforce the legitimacy of the mission, on the one hand, and facilitate the achievement of objectives during deployment, on the other.

3.1 The Contribution of Interculturality to Strengthening the Legitimacy of the Mission

The United Nations does not undertake any peacekeeping operation without clear authority that is, without having the power or the right to do so. Peacekeeping operations (PKOs) are designed to promote and protect human rights and uphold international law. Respect for human rights positively impacts peace. A PKO derives its legitimacy from the fact that it is created based on a mandate granted by the United Nations Security Council, which holds primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. The conduct of a PKO in the field profoundly influences its legitimacy. A mandate is an official directive, authorization, or order requiring specific actions. Peacekeeping personnel are deployed to carry out or implement the tasks defined in the mandate, making it essential for them to understand the mission's mandate thoroughly.

The legitimacy of a PKO can be undermined by the behavior of its forces on the ground, particularly when they are accused of committing sexual abuse, exploitation, or war crimes, or when they fail to protect civilians from violence as required by their mandate. Peacekeepers must adhere to common professional ethics and follow the rules of good conduct while on a mission. They must also understand the local realities of the populations they serve to address the challenges effectively (Williams, 2010). In the context of MINUSMA, a lack of cultural dialogue has often caused friction between local populations and peacekeepers, compromising the mission's objectives (Boutellis, 2015). To address such issues, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) has implemented cultural awareness programs aimed at improving relationships with local communities in cases of mission rejection. MONUSCO's efforts to involve local communities and respect their traditions have been vital in gaining their trust and cooperation.

Operations perceived as illegitimate must contend with multiple challenges to fulfill their mandate. Often, they face resistance from key players in the theater of operations, including the parties to the conflict, the host country, and local communities. In clan-based cultures, trust in outsiders is often inconsistent. People tend to treat outsiders differently, guided by their own behavioral norms within the clan. One person we interviewed recounted an anecdote on this subject: "During our mission in the Central African Republic, our unit was stranded for a few days in a small village when our vehicles broke down. After two days, we ran out of water, and the villagers prevented us from accessing their water point. Without insisting, we remained calm. When the water pump eventually broke down, our assistance in repairing it reassured the local population. In return, they allowed us to use the water point and provided useful information about the insecurity in the area." As Bove and Ruggeri (2019) note, trust levels often depend on how close people feel to others or how well they know them. Intercultural awareness is therefore crucial for ensuring the legitimacy of a mission's mandate in the field. It equips peacekeepers with the skills to better understand populations and their needs, facilitating social interaction and collaboration.

Peacekeepers must communicate the purpose of the mission and, most importantly, find ways to provide visible assistance to the population. This approach helps the populations benefiting from the mission to perceive it as legitimate. Ensuring the legitimacy of a peace operation among the parties in conflict, the host country, and local populations is a key factor in its success (Williams, 2010). A testimony from a MINUSCA peacekeeper in the Central African Republic highlights that local communities, the intended beneficiaries of peacekeeping operations, do not always accept or understand the purpose of these missions. Instead, they may feel as though they are experiencing an "*invasion*"[5]: "*When we were on patrol and arrived in certain villages, we noticed that the people had an aggressive attitude toward us. They didn't want to see us or talk to us. We realized that the mission was not accepted in this area*"[6]. Peacekeepers must engage with these populations to address such challenges and

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[5] Expression used by a soldier, former MONUSCO blue helmet, native from Benin (April 2023).

[6] Interview with a soldier, former Guinean peacekeeper of MINUSCA (June 2022).

improve relationships. Missions perceived as legitimate are far more likely to achieve their objectives. This is because, in addition to political support and cooperation from the host country, they benefit from intelligence sharing and support from local populations

3.2 The Contribution of Interculturality to the Operational Effectiveness of Peacekeepers

When planning and implementing its core programs and activities, a UN PKO should aim to promote national and local ownership while fostering trust and cooperation with national actors. The host country and its local population possess unique cultural norms and traditions that may differ significantly from those of international personnel. To fulfill the objectives of a peace mission's mandate, it is essential to establish a genuine connection between the peacekeeping force and the host communities. A failure to understand local cultural norms can result in misunderstandings, tensions, and even rejection of the mission. To ensure operational effectiveness, soldiers must develop an understanding of the key cultural elements of the environment in which they operate. This knowledge is critical for building trust and effectively interacting with civilians and public officials in the field (Williams, 2010).

According to a former peacekeeper deployed in Mali as part of MINUSMA: "*One of the obstacles to carrying out our mission was language. To overcome this barrier, a community liaison officer helped facilitate our integration into the community. However, based on my observations, this officer was sometimes perceived ambiguously - either as a trafficker or an enemy. In some areas where the local population viewed us unfavorably, he was seen as a traitor. In contexts where the mission was not accepted, the interpreter was often perceived as someone providing information to the enemy, making it difficult for him to connect us with the local population*". The deployment of community liaison officers helps bridge intercultural barriers by facilitating the integration of Blue Helmets and fostering closer connections with local communities.

The presence of cultural mediators fosters trust between peacekeeping troops and local populations, enabling closer and often more effective cooperation. Mediators are individuals or teams specifically trained to facilitate communication and understanding between international troops and local communities. By mastering local norms and values, mediators can anticipate potential sources of conflict and intervene to prevent or resolve misunderstandings (Boutellis & Naureen, 2016; Richmond, 2005). Beyond translating language, they also convey cultural nuances and sensitivities, ensuring communication remains clear, respectful, and contextually appropriate (Rubinstein, 2003).

The success of peace operations depends significantly on their ability to engage with local cultures and adapt to the socio-cultural realities on the ground (Lederach, 1997). Pouligny (2006) explores the interactions between peacekeeping missions and local populations, emphasizing the importance of understanding and respecting local cultures to build trust and foster cooperation. Autesserre (2014) asserts that interventions aligned with local values and traditions tend to be more effective and sustainable. Similarly, Bove and Ruggeri (2019) argue that peacekeepers from culturally similar countries are often more effective. Their cultural proximity enhances their ability to connect with local populations and understand

local conflict dynamics, facilitating better communication and collaboration (Vollhardt, 2019).

A soldier deployed to MINUSMA in 2021 as the head of a unit shared that missions involving groups of soldiers from the same nationality were often successful due to the homogeneity of language and cultural familiarity. For instance, teams composed of Togolese soldiers spoke the same languages and shared cultural practices with the local populations. As a result, they were honored and warmly received by the local population during their patrols and visits.[7]. Peacekeepers who share cultural similarities with local populations tend to establish more trusting and cooperative relationships. This cultural alignment can lead to a significant reduction in violent incidents against peacekeepers. Indeed, culture serves as a powerful force multiplier in peacekeeping missions. There is a clear correlation between ethno-cultural factors and the security of peacekeeping forces (Vollhardt, 2019).

Intercultural training can significantly enhance the cultural awareness of peacekeepers, equipping them to understand and respect the values, beliefs, and practices of local communities. Soldiers who are better prepared can adapt more effectively to cultural contexts, collaborate with local populations, and contribute positively to the success of peacekeeping missions. A former Beninese peacekeeper, who served as the coordinator of a Nepalese-formed police unit, shared his experience during an interview. He noted that he had never worked with Nepalese personnel before and lacked knowledge about their behavior and way of life. Relying only on limited information gathered from the internet, he often felt worried and stressed, fearing cultural missteps. This uncertainty led to prolonged observation and hesitation, which, as he regretfully acknowledged, negatively impacted the efficiency of their collective work.

The nature of peacekeeping requires urgent action, with the primary focus on saving lives and addressing the most immediate needs. Due to these demands, peacekeepers often receive minimal pre-deployment training, relying on on-the-job learning and rapid adaptation to unfamiliar cultural contexts. The success of peacekeeping missions largely hinges on the ability of forces to build understanding and interact effectively with various stakeholders and local populations (Obuseh, 2017). A female soldier from Benin, who had previously served as an individual staff member with MINUSMA, shared her unexpected experiences in peacekeeping on the ground. She described her role in supporting women affected by conflict-related violence and advocating for their rights but noted that her efforts were not always well-received by the communities. She explained, *"The men were suspicious of us and could sometimes be aggressive during working sessions with women's associations. They thought we were trying to get their wives to rebel against their authority[8]",* To address these challenges, she and her team focused on raising awareness and communicating the purpose and benefits of their activities. This approach eventually reassured the men and even some women who were initially concerned about the stability of their homes. However, she

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[7] Entretien avec un ancien soldat camerounais déployé à la MINUSMA, (juillet 2021).

[8] Interview with a senior female officer of the rank of captain who has been deployed to MINUSMA (2021).

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highlighted a key limitation in peacekeeping preparation: intercultural agility. This crucial skill, absent in pre-deployment training, had to be learned on the job. She reflected, *"Acquiring this skill through experience took me time, which would not have been the case during the pre-deployment training"*[9]. Her account underscores the need for better training programs that emphasize cultural sensitivity and adaptability to improve the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions. Soldiers often acknowledge that they truly understand the cultural realities of their deployment areas only after arriving on the ground, as this aspect is insufficiently addressed during their training[10]. To address these challenges effectively, pre-deployment training must include a stronger emphasis on cultural awareness, practical learning, and the sharing of experiences by seasoned trainers. Incorporating structured feedback mechanisms is also essential to prepare personnel for the complexities of peace missions (Noé, 2010; Martocchio & Baldwin, 1997).

Generally, what peacekeepers often lack is cultural awareness. Scholars define cultural awareness as the ability to recognize the fundamental cultural values, beliefs, and perceptions of a given culture, along with a basic understanding of appropriate behaviors and practices - the necessary "do's and don'ts" (Yalçınkaya & Özer, 2017). This awareness is the first step toward preventing miscommunication across cultures. Adequate training in intercultural dialogue should enable peacekeepers to adapt to intercultural environments and overcome prejudices about local populations (Bonnewitz, 2002). However, peacekeepers deployed in villages sometimes hold preconceived notions about the local population, leading to uninformed assumptions about their cultural norms and traditions. These biases can affect the quality of information they gather, as local people, aware of the disdain some soldiers may harbor, may withhold trust or cooperation[11].

4. Conclusion

This article examines the role of integrating interculturality into the training and deployment of UN peacekeeping forces to improve mission effectiveness. Through semi-directive interviews with military personnel who gained field experience in peacekeeping missions in Mali and the Central African Republic, the study employed qualitative content analysis to explore this topic. The findings highlight the importance of acquiring intercultural skills during the pre-deployment phase. Such skills are essential for equipping peacekeepers with the tools needed for cultural adaptation and integration. Interculturality is identified as a strategic advantage for enhancing the success and acceptance of peacekeeping missions, particularly in the diverse African context. Recognizing the cultural diversity of both military contingents and local populations fosters better team cohesion and facilitates more respectful and productive interactions with host communities. Rather than viewing interculturality as a challenge, the study suggests it should be embraced as an opportunity to maximize the impact of peacekeeping missions. By deepening their understanding of cultural dynamics, the United

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[9] Idem.

[10] Interviews with individual personnel deployed to MINUSMA and MINUSCA in 2022 and 2023.

[11] Interview with FMM soldier deployed in the Far North of Cameroon, (12th of May 2023).

Nations can enhance the legitimacy, effectiveness, and long-term success of its operations, contributing to stability and sustainable development across the African continent.

These findings provide valuable insights for actionable recommendations. First, it is essential to design more comprehensive and context-specific intercultural training programs. Such programs should incorporate detailed case studies and hands-on simulations to strengthen the competencies of peacekeepers. Second, increasing the participation of women and integrating their perspectives could significantly enrich intercultural interactions and enhance local acceptance of missions. Lastly, implementing systematic evaluations of mission outcomes based on their intercultural strategies can generate critical empirical data, which would help inform and refine future operations.

This study has certain limitations that open avenues for future research. From a methodological perspective, the sample was drawn exclusively from three African countries, which limits the generalizability of the findings to all UN member states and constrains the understanding of specific gender dynamics within these missions. Furthermore, future research could benefit from focusing on detailed case studies of peacekeeping operations to provide deeper insights. Despite these limitations, the study highlights critical questions for the UN, particularly regarding the essential role of incorporating intercultural considerations into peace missions.

No additional data are available.

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Glossary of terms:

MINUSMA: The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MONUSCO: The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

MINUSCA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic.

MINUSS: United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan

ONU: United Nations Organization

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

OMP: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

HIPPO: High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations