



TRADITIONAL ATTIRE AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION A CROSS BORDER SERVICE LEARNING CASE STUDY

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Abstract: Traditional attire is a crucial medium for expressing cultural identity and preserving collective memory, yet it often receives less scholarly attention compared to performative heritage forms such as dance or music. This article examines the significance of traditional attire within a student-led service-learning program conducted in Kampung Tanjung Surat, Johor, Malaysia, where Indonesian students introduced regional costumes as part of a cultural showcase. The initiative aimed to foster cultural awareness, promote intercultural understanding, and strengthen Indonesia–Malaysia relations through grassroots engagement. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were drawn from program documentation, participant observations, and multimedia evidence. The students presented traditional attire alongside other cultural elements, positioning the garments as visual representations of Indonesian diversity. Findings indicate that the attire generated strong community interest and appreciation. Villagers expressed curiosity about the origins, symbolism, and regional distinctiveness of the costumes, while students experienced a deepened sense of pride and responsibility in representing their heritage. At the institutional level, collaboration between universities and local authorities helped build trust and provided a foundation for sustained cultural partnerships. This study contributes to literature on embodied heritage, service-learning, and cultural diplomacy, emphasizing how attire functions as both a pedagogical tool and a medium of intercultural dialogue.

Keyword: Traditional attire, cultural preservation, embodied heritage, service-learning, intercultural relations, Indonesia–Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Traditional attire is more than clothing; it embodies cultural memory, conveys values, and reflects identity across generations. Garments often signify social status, ethnicity, and regional belonging, making them vital to heritage preservation. Scholars have increasingly noted that attire represents a form of *embodied heritage*, where culture is carried not only through narratives and



performance but also through lived and worn expressions (Liu et al., 2024). However, globalization has transformed patterns of dress, with younger generations often favoring modern, globalized fashion over traditional garments. UNESCO (2021) warns that intangible cultural heritage—including traditional attire—faces marginalization without deliberate preservation efforts.

In Southeast Asia, traditional attire is a strong marker of identity within diverse, multi-ethnic societies. Countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia have long histories of regional clothing traditions, each reflecting cultural values shaped by geography, religion, and history. Yet these traditions increasingly compete with contemporary lifestyles. Mohd, Ismail, and Rahim (2022) highlight that preservation in such contexts requires community-based strategies that link heritage to everyday experience rather than treating it as a static artifact.

Kampung Tanjung Surat, a coastal village in Johor, Malaysia, exemplifies these challenges. Although cultural traditions remain strong within the community, awareness of traditional attire among younger villagers is declining, reflecting broader generational shifts. The lack of exposure to attire as heritage risks weakening cultural literacy and diminishing opportunities for intercultural understanding.

The declining recognition and appreciation of traditional attire among younger generations is a pressing issue in Southeast Asia. While garments once served as visible symbols of identity, they now risk being relegated to ceremonial occasions or cultural exhibitions. Nugroho (2023) notes that Indonesian youth increasingly prioritize globalized cultural products, while Phan (2021) identifies similar patterns across ASEAN, where local traditions lose visibility in daily life. If these trends persist, traditional attire may become disconnected from the communities it represents, leading to cultural homogenization and the erosion of embodied heritage.

This study focuses on a cultural service-learning program that placed traditional attire at its center. The program was designed with four objectives:

1. Introduce Indonesian traditional attire to a Malaysian community.
2. Foster awareness of attire as embodied heritage and its role in preserving cultural identity.
3. Strengthen cross-border cultural ties through the visual and symbolic power of clothing.
4. Empower students to act as cultural ambassadors by presenting and interpreting attire in intercultural settings.



These objectives align with service-learning pedagogy, which integrates academic goals with community engagement to create reciprocal benefits (Setiawan, Pratiwi, & Kurnia, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Approach and Implementation Techniques

This research adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the role of traditional attire in cultural preservation and intercultural dialogue. A case study approach is appropriate because it enables in-depth analysis of a bounded initiative—specifically, a student-led service-learning program that presents Indonesian traditional attire to a Malaysian community. Such a design allows for contextualized insights into how attire functioned as a medium of cultural transmission (Yin, 2021).

Activity Stage

The program was implemented through several stages. During the preparation stage, the team coordinated with the community partner, conducted a needs analysis, and developed materials for attire presentation. The implementation stage involved core activities such as presenting traditional attire through demonstrations, workshops, and interactive cultural showcases. Evaluation was carried out by reviewing program documentation, observation records, and multimedia evidence to assess community engagement, audience response, and student empowerment. Follow-up activities focused on sustainability by reinforcing program outcomes, promoting continuous awareness of traditional attire, and encouraging student-led cultural activities in collaboration with the community.

Target, Location, and Time Of Implementation

The target group of this program consisted of villagers in Kampung Tanjung Surat, Johor, Malaysia, and participating students from Universitas Riau Kepulauan, Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan, and Universitas Ibnu Sina. The program was conducted in the village during June–July 2024.

Activity Flow Diagram

The activity flow followed the sequence: preparation → implementation → observation and documentation → reflection and reporting → follow-up routines, which in the formatted manuscript can be presented as a simple flowchart as directed by the template.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The cultural program placed traditional attire at the center of its activities. Students carefully prepared regional costumes, ensuring that garments represented different cultural traditions of Indonesia. Preparation involved sourcing, coordinating colors and accessories, and rehearsing the presentation to highlight each attire's symbolic meaning. During the event, students wore the costumes on stage, creating a visual narrative that complemented other cultural elements but was distinctive in its focus on clothing as heritage.

The presentation of traditional attire generated strong audience interest. Villagers expressed enthusiasm through applause and verbal appreciation, responding particularly to the diversity of costumes displayed. Observational accounts noted curiosity among community members, who asked questions about the origins and cultural significance of the garments. The vivid colors, intricate patterns, and symbolic accessories drew attention and became central points of engagement, allowing the audience to experience Indonesian cultural identity in a tangible, visible form.

For the villagers, the introduction of traditional attire provided exposure to forms of heritage not commonly encountered in their daily lives. The clothing served as an accessible entry point for intercultural learning, requiring no prior knowledge of language or performance traditions. This accessibility reinforced attire's role as *embodied heritage*, where culture is communicated through visual and material expression. Audience responses suggested that attire was effective in broadening awareness of Indonesian cultural diversity and stimulating appreciation for its symbolic value.

Students benefited from the process of preparing and presenting attire. By wearing the garments and presenting them before an international audience, participants developed pride in their heritage and greater confidence in representing cultural identity. The experience also fostered teamwork, as costume preparation required collective effort and coordination. More broadly, students gained skills as cultural ambassadors, learning to interpret and communicate the meanings associated with traditional attire to an unfamiliar audience.

The success of the attire presentation was also enabled by institutional collaboration. Universities provided resources and coordination, while local authorities ensured the availability of infrastructure to support the showcase. The visible support of community leaders helped legitimize the event, encouraging villagers to participate actively. This cooperation strengthened



trust between institutions and the community, laying the groundwork for future cultural exchanges where attire could again serve as a bridge for engagement.

Although the attire presentation achieved its immediate goals of cultural exposure and student empowerment, the outcomes remain qualitative. No systematic measures were employed to evaluate long-term changes in cultural knowledge or shifts in attitudes. As a result, conclusions are limited to immediate observations of enthusiasm, appreciation, and empowerment. Future programs would benefit from structured assessments to determine whether attire presentations have enduring effects on awareness and intercultural understanding.

The results demonstrate that traditional attire functioned effectively as a form of embodied heritage, visually communicating identity and cultural values. The enthusiasm and curiosity expressed by the community highlight clothing's accessibility as a medium of cultural preservation. Unlike dance or music, which require interpretation through performance, attire is immediately visible and interpretable. This finding resonates with Liu, Williams, Xie, Wang, and Zuo (2024), who emphasize that material heritage forms such as garments are uniquely powerful because they integrate aesthetic, historical, and symbolic dimensions in a tangible format.

For student participants, preparing and presenting attire fostered pride, confidence, and teamwork. Wearing traditional garments became an embodied act of cultural representation, positioning students as both learners and transmitters of heritage. These experiences align with research by Setiawan, Pratiwi, and Kurnia (2022), and Rahim (2023), highlighting reciprocal benefits of service-learning programs for both students and communities.

The villagers' reactions illustrate the potential of attire as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue. Clothing attracted attention, invited questions, and created conversations about cultural diversity. This supports Hussin (2024), who argued that visual cultural elements integrated into community events strengthen social bonds and foster cross-group appreciation. Attire required no linguistic or performative translation, making it a universally accessible medium.

Beyond education and preservation, the presentation carried symbolic diplomatic value. Showcasing Indonesian costumes in Malaysia reinforced cultural ties between the two countries. This complements state-led initiatives on attire as a national symbol in international diplomacy (Indonesia's Engagement in Cultural Diplomacy, 2024), showing that student-led efforts can extend cultural diplomacy into everyday community life.



The findings suggest several important implications. First, traditional attire should be recognized as a central medium of heritage education. Second, integrating attire into service-learning programs creates opportunities for students to develop cultural literacy and ambassadorial skills. Third, small-scale attire presentations can function as informal cultural diplomacy. Fourth, collaboration between universities and local authorities is critical to ensuring authentic and impactful cultural programming.

Despite these contributions, outcomes were based on qualitative observations, without systematic evaluation of knowledge gains or long-term impact. The short duration limited sustained engagement beyond the event.

Future studies should explore attire systematically as embodied heritage, using mixed-method approaches to measure shifts in awareness and attitudes. Longitudinal research would determine whether initial enthusiasm translates into sustained cultural engagement. Greater attention to youth perspectives on wearing and presenting attire would deepen understanding of generational dynamics in heritage transmission.



Figure 1. Activity Program



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the role of traditional attire in a student-led cultural service-learning program conducted in Kampung Tanjung Surat, Johor, Malaysia. Four objectives guided the analysis: introducing Indonesian traditional attire to a Malaysian community, fostering awareness of attire as embodied heritage, strengthening cultural ties through visual representation, and empowering students as cultural ambassadors.

The findings indicate that these objectives were achieved. The preparation and presentation of traditional attire provided villagers with direct exposure to Indonesian cultural identity. Audience responses—applause, curiosity, and verbal appreciation—demonstrated that clothing served as an accessible and engaging medium of heritage transmission. For the community, traditional attire created an immediate visual connection to cultural diversity, stimulating appreciation without requiring prior knowledge of performance or language.

For students, the process of preparing and wearing attire reinforced pride in their heritage and developed their capacity to act as cultural representatives. By embodying heritage through clothing, participants gained confidence, teamwork experience, and intercultural communication skills. These outcomes support the view that service-learning enhances student learning by combining academic goals with meaningful community engagement.

At an institutional level, collaboration between universities and local authorities contributed to the success of the program. The provision of resources and community mobilization underscored the importance of partnerships in cultural preservation initiatives. This cooperation strengthened trust across institutions and highlighted the potential of attire-focused programs to complement broader cultural and diplomatic efforts.

The contributions of this study are threefold. Empirically, it documents how traditional attire can be central to cultural programming, offering a distinctive and effective means of heritage transmission. Theoretically, it situates attire within the framework of embodied heritage, showing how clothing conveys identity and cultural values in visible, material form. Practically, it underscores the value of incorporating attire into service-learning and cultural diplomacy, expanding the repertoire of strategies available for educators and policymakers.

Nonetheless, limitations remain. The outcomes were observed qualitatively and over a short timeframe, making it difficult to assess long-term impacts or sustained cultural learning. Future



research should employ mixed-methods approaches, including surveys and longitudinal studies, to better understand the enduring significance of attire-focused initiatives.

In conclusion, the program demonstrates that traditional attire is not merely decorative but a powerful medium of cultural preservation and intercultural dialogue. By integrating clothing into service-learning contexts, educators and communities can revitalize awareness of heritage, empower youth, and strengthen cultural ties across borders.

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Proceeding
UNRIKA International Conference on Community Service (UICCS)
Universitas Riau Kepulauan, Batam, November 27, 2025

Volume 1(1), 165-173, 2025

E-ISSN:
XXXXXXX

E-ISBN:
XXXXXXX

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