

The Collaborative Theater and Dance of Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong as a Medium of Cultural Diplomacy Between Indonesia and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The Dance Theater Collaboration Workshop as a Media for Cultural Diplomacy UNJ–UiTM was a community engagement program aimed at reintroducing the traditional performing arts of Lenong Betawi (Indonesia) and Mak Yong (Malaysia) to younger generations, strengthening academic and cultural cooperation, and creating spaces for intercultural interaction. Conducted over six months through a participatory and collaborative approach, the program involved artists, academics, and local communities. The activities included concept preparation, workshops, joint training, collaborative rehearsals, performances in Jakarta and Selangor, and public discussions. The results demonstrated an increase in participants' knowledge and skills in performance techniques, understanding of local wisdom values, and mastery of the artistic elements of both traditions. Academic cooperation was established through knowledge exchange, joint script development, and the signing of an Implementation Arrangement as a commitment to sustainability. The collaborative performances and public discussions created a shared cultural space that fostered understanding, tolerance, and appreciation across cultures. This program confirms that collaboration in traditional performing arts can serve as an effective medium for cultural diplomacy and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the global era.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Culture, Lenong, Makyong

1. Introduction

Indonesia and Malaysia possess a rich heritage of traditional performing arts that serve not only as entertainment but also as representations of cultural identity, social values, and collective history. In Indonesia, Lenong Betawi is a form of folk theater originating from the Betawi community in Jakarta, combining humorous dialogues, gambang kromong music, kembang silat, and the distinctive Betawi language as a symbol of local identity (Agyta Abdullah & Haris Fateghipon, 2018). In Malaysia, Mak Yong is a traditional dance-theater recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, blending elements of dance, drama, music, and ritual (Ann Hardwick, 2020). Both art forms are not only aesthetically valuable but also rich in social, ethical, and philosophical meanings passed down across generations.

In the context of international relations, traditional performing arts hold strategic potential as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power. Nye (2008), defines soft power as the ability to influence others through cultural attraction, political values, and legitimate foreign policy. Ang et al. (2015), emphasize that cultural diplomacy should transcend narrow national interests by fostering mutual understanding and long-term relationships. Cowan and Arsenault further developed the 3D model, monologue,

dialogue, and collaboration, placing collaborative arts activities as the highest form of public diplomacy since they are capable of creating shared values (Fitzpatrick, 2017).

The Community Service Program (Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat, PKM) conducted by Universitas Negeri Jakarta (UNJ) in collaboration with Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) and Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) adopted the concept of cultural exchange through a joint performance of Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong. This collaboration was designed not only as a vehicle for cultural preservation but also as a form of people-to-people diplomacy that engaged artists, academics, and local communities from both countries. Such a model aligns with the idea of nation branding, which positions traditional arts as pillars of a nation's positive image on the global stage (Kelechi, 2024).

Empirical identification in the field revealed specific challenges faced by both traditions. In Jakarta, the frequency of Lenong Betawi performances in public spaces has steadily declined, with modernization and digital entertainment displacing its role in urban society (Agyta Abdullah & Haris Fateghipon, 2018). Similarly, Mak Yong in Malaysia has faced restrictions on performance venues due to Sharia-based regulations in Kelantan, limiting its accessibility to younger audiences (Sripaoraya, 2022). UNESCO's report on Intangible Cultural Heritage further emphasizes the urgency of safeguarding Mak Yong as a global heritage under threat (UNESCO, 2008). These findings highlight the relevance of collaborative interventions to revive public interest, strengthen cultural identity, and foster sustainable cultural diplomacy networks (Agyta Abdullah & Haris Fateghipon, 2018; Sripaoraya 2022).

The main objectives of this initiative are: (1) to reintroduce Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong to the broader society, particularly to younger generations; (2) to strengthen academic and cultural cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia; and (3) to create spaces for intercultural interaction that foster understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Problem-solving is carried out through a series of workshops, joint rehearsals, cultural discussions, and collaborative performances involving artistic communities in Jakarta and Malaysia. This approach is consistent with the principles of intercultural citizenship education, which places art as a medium for learning social values, empathy, and cross-cultural tolerance (Fleming, 2023; Matos & Melo-Pfeifer, 2020).

Thus, this PKM initiative not only contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage but also serves as a strategic vehicle for building cultural diplomacy networks between Indonesia and Malaysia through the performing arts. The integration of soft power perspectives, cultural preservation, and intercultural learning provides both the theoretical foundation and operational framework for this program.

2. Problem Statement

This community service program addresses three interrelated strategic challenges that affect the sustainability of traditional performing arts and their potential as a medium of cultural diplomacy between Indonesia and Malaysia, particularly Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong. These challenges are the crisis of generational regeneration, the weakness of cross-national academic networks, and the suboptimal use of traditional arts as an instrument of soft power.

2.1 Declining Exposure and Youth Interest

Jakarta has declined significantly in line with the rapid growth of digital entertainment, the commercialization of performing arts, and shifting patterns of cultural consumption. Agyta Abdullah & Haris Fateghipon (2018), show that the frequency of

Lenong performances in Jakarta's public spaces has steadily decreased, thereby reducing opportunities for teenagers and university students to learn the art's distinctive acting techniques, improvisation, and the gambang kromong musical idiom. This trend is further evidenced by the disappearance of Lenong Bocah from mainstream entertainment after 2000, only recently revived through Lenong Bocah Reborn 2025 at Taman Ismail Marzuki, with the Jakarta Cultural Office emphasizing Lenong's role in embodying Betawi identity and values (SinPo.id, 2025). Complementing this, a GNFI survey involving 202 respondents aged 18–24 revealed that while 55.4% of youth recognize the importance of cultural preservation, only 19.8% actively participate, highlighting a gap between awareness and practice (Mansah, 2024).

A similar trend is evident for Mak Yong in Malaysia. Sripaoraya (2022), notes that the implementation of Sharia-based regulations in Kelantan has restricted performance venues, narrowing opportunities for students and the younger generation to appreciate and practice this art form. Yousof (2017) further documents that despite UNESCO's recognition of Mak Yong in 2005, official preservation plans were not seriously implemented, leading to the decline of veteran performers and limited regeneration. Persatuan Warisan Sary (Kelantan) also records Mak Yong's transformation from royal entertainment to village performances, and more recently into a medium for education and cultural diplomacy. Together, these indicators point to a widening gap between the richness of intangible cultural heritage and the actual interests of younger audiences, threatening the continuity of both performers and spectators. Without deliberate intervention through educational and revitalization programs, the philosophical values and local wisdom embodied in these traditions risk being eroded by modernization and digital entertainment pressures (jkkn.gov.my, 2025).

2.2 Limited and Unstructured Cross-National Academic Collaboration

Indonesia and Malaysia share deep Malay cultural roots, however, sustainable academic collaboration in the field of traditional performing arts remains limited and tends to be event-based or ad hoc. Student and faculty exchanges in the performing arts have thus far taken the form of temporary activities, such as short-term festivals or workshops, and have rarely been documented within a comprehensive institutional framework. Such a framework would ideally encompass the development of joint curricula, the production of collaborative teaching modules, and the creation of cross-national performance scripts that can be permanently integrated into the learning process.

The absence of formal mechanisms has restricted the thorough transfer of knowledge concerning crucial aspects of traditional arts. Important domains such as dramaturgy, traditional vocal and musical techniques, for instance the use of the rebab, gendang, and serunai in Mak Yong, as well as the staging and performative conventions of Lenong, have yet to be systematically incorporated into the curricula of the two universities. As Arnold et al. (2022) emphasize, the success of cross-sector collaboration in arts education depends heavily on strong institutional support that allows teaching and research to develop in a sustainable manner. Without such an institutional foundation, efforts to preserve and develop traditional arts risk remaining at the level of short-term projects, leaving the full potential of Indonesia–Malaysia collaboration in the performing arts largely untapped.

2.3 Traditional Art Not Yet Optimally Utilized as a Medium of Cultural Diplomacy

Within the context of bilateral relations, traditional performing arts hold considerable potential as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy and as an instrument of soft power (Nye, 2008). Yet this potential has not been fully realized. Collaborative platforms that can bring together artists, academics, students, and diverse publics across national borders remain scarce, limiting the reach of cultural messages, values of tolerance, and mutual understanding between the two nations.

Media coverage and scholarly dissemination generated by traditional arts activities often stand in isolation and are not systematically linked to a broader nation-branding strategy. Ang et al. (2015) argue that effective cultural diplomacy must go beyond narrow national interests and build long-term relationships based on reciprocal understanding. Without a carefully planned integration of performing-arts activities into the agenda of cultural diplomacy, the soft power embodied in Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong cannot be fully leveraged to strengthen the positive international image of both Indonesia and Malaysia.

3. Method

This PKM, was carried out through a participatory and collaborative approach between UNJ and UiTM, involving the traditional performing arts communities of Lenong Betawi in Jakarta and Mak Yong in Selangor. The choice of a participatory approach was based on the belief that the active involvement of all stakeholders, academics, artists, and the community would produce processes and outcomes that are relevant to the needs and aspirations of the target community. The program was implemented over a six month period, covering the stages of preparation, implementation, and evaluation. The preparation stage began with both online and offline coordination meetings to develop an activity plan, assign roles, and compile an inventory of performance materials to be integrated. During this stage, the team collected data on the history, philosophy, and performance techniques of Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong, which were subsequently used as the foundation for designing the collaborative performance concept.

Data collection was conducted through direct observation of workshops, rehearsals, and performances, semi-structured interviews with artists, academics, and student participants, and questionnaires administered to both participants and audiences. These instruments were complemented by document analysis of scripts, archival records, and performance notes, ensuring that the collaborative process was captured comprehensively. The use of multiple techniques allowed the research team to obtain both experiential and reflective insights, while also measuring levels of satisfaction, engagement, and cultural understanding among participants and audiences. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative approaches. Observation notes and interview transcripts were examined through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns related to cultural values, collaboration dynamics, and audience responses. Questionnaire results were processed using descriptive statistics to measure satisfaction levels, perceived learning, and engagement. Triangulation across these sources was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of findings, ensuring that the evaluation reflected both subjective experiences and measurable outcomes.

The success of the program was assessed through operational indicators that allowed the achievements to be measured clearly and objectively. These indicators

included the extent of participant engagement throughout workshops and rehearsals, the quality of artistic integration between Lenong and Mak Yong elements in the collaborative performances, the responses of audiences in terms of increased cultural appreciation and understanding, and the evidence of cross-cultural learning outcomes among participants. Sustainability was also considered an important measure of success, reflected in the documentation of follow-up initiatives such as proposals for joint curricula, future collaborative performances, and continued communication between institutions.

The program culminated in collaborative performances held in Jakarta and Selangor, followed by public discussion sessions to capture audience feedback. Evaluation was conducted through direct observation, interviews, and questionnaires administered to both participants and audience members in order to assess the program's effectiveness, the quality of the performances, and the enhancement of cross-cultural understanding. This method combined cultural-interactive and intercultural dialogue approaches, positioning performing arts as a medium for two-way communication and shared learning (Arnold et al., 2022; Matos & Melo-Pfeifer, 2020). Furthermore, the activities were grounded in local wisdom to ensure that the cultural messages conveyed remained authentic while also being relevant to audiences across national boundaries.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Preservation and Revitalization of Traditional Arts

This PKM originated from concerns over the declining interest of younger generations in traditional performing arts, both in Indonesia and Malaysia. In Indonesia, Lenong Betawi has experienced a decrease in public performances over the past decade due to competition with popular entertainment and media commercialization (Agyta Abdullah & Haris Fateghipon, 2018). In Malaysia, Mak Yong has faced restrictions on performance spaces as a result of Sharia-based regulations in Kelantan (Sripaoraya, 2022), which have led to adjustments in both form and narrative.

The program served as a platform for revitalization by bringing together two art forms rich in aesthetics, philosophy, and local wisdom. In the case of Lenong Betawi, the workshops highlighted values such as communal cooperation (*gotong royong*), politeness in language, religiosity, and egalitarianism as its cultural hallmarks (Aurelya et al., 2025). Workshop participants not only learned Lenong's characteristic acting and improvisation techniques but also gained an understanding of the meanings embedded in the dialogues, which often convey subtle social critique in line with Leech's Politeness Principle (Lustyantie & Dewi, 2019). Meanwhile, the Mak Yong sessions emphasized dance techniques, the use of traditional instruments such as the *rebab*, *gendang*, and *serunai*, as well as the interpretation of symbolic gestures closely linked to Malay cosmology (Ann Hardwick, 2020; Zulkafli, 2024).

The results demonstrated an increase in participants' knowledge of the history and philosophy of both traditions. UNJ students were able to correctly perform basic Mak Yong movements, while UiTM students successfully mastered the humorous improvisational dialogues typical of Lenong. Questionnaire data from ten UiTM students reinforced these findings, 90 percent understood the collaboration as an effort in cultural diplomacy, 70 percent viewed movement as both spiritual expression and aesthetic form, and 60 percent stated that the combination of the two traditions made the performance more vibrant. These figures provide operational evidence that revitalization not only preserved traditional forms but also generated tradition-based innovations positively received by younger generations. These findings support Ang et

al. (2015), concept of cultural hybridity, which posits that cultural encounters can generate new forms while preserving traditional roots.



Figure 1. Students from UiTM Practicing Lenong Betawi

Revitalization was also evident in its impact on local artistic communities. Several Lenong artists involved in the program expressed that the experience provided them with new perspectives on the possibilities of developing Lenong narratives that are more inclusive and open to cross-cultural collaboration. This aligns with the view of Suratmi & Fita Heriyawati (2018), who emphasized that traditional arts can serve as a medium of intergenerational education when presented in formats that appeal to younger audiences. Thus, the preservation and revitalization stage of this program did not merely stop at the transfer of technical skills, but also stimulated tradition-based innovations that remain relevant to contemporary challenges.



Figure 2. Students from UNJ Practicing Mak Yong

4.2 Strengthening Academic and Cultural Cooperation

This PKM successfully fostered cross national cooperation that involved not only artists, but also academic institutions and art communities in Jakarta and Shah Alam. The collaboration began with a series of alignment meetings between the UNJ, UiTM, and UPI teams, aimed at agreeing on the performance concept, role distribution, and expected outcomes. These meetings served as the foundation for technical coordination while simultaneously strengthening academic relations between the universities.

The next stage consisted of intensive discussions on the dance-theater script. In these discussions, lecturers and students from UNJ and UiTM explored how elements of Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong could be integrated into a single, coherent storyline.

The process involved the exchange of knowledge on dramaturgical structures, symbolic gestures, and linguistic styles, in line with Lestariningsih (2022) findings, which emphasize the importance of understanding linguistic and cultural elements in performing arts as a means of preserving cultural identity.

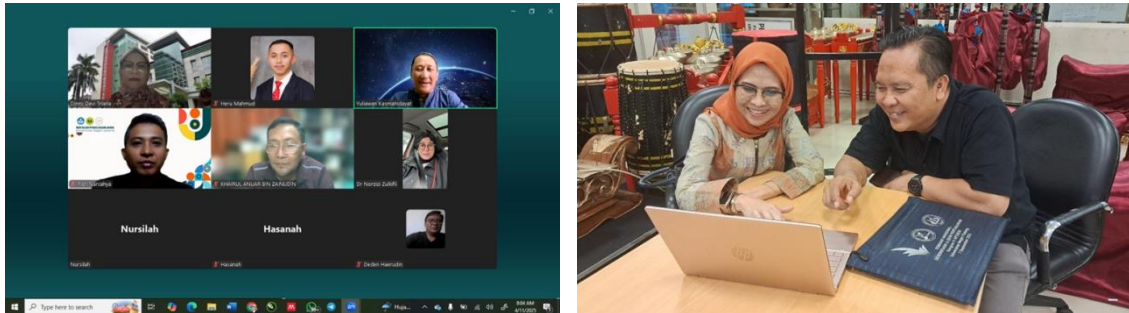


Figure 3. Alignment Meeting between UNJ and UiTM and Script Discussion of Dance-Theater with Artists

Academic cooperation was further reinforced when the two teams conducted prototype rehearsals at UNJ, followed by additional sessions at UiTM. These rehearsals functioned as a form of knowledge exchange, enabling students and artists from both countries to practice acting techniques, traditional dances, and musical accompaniment. Evidence of achievement can be seen in the active involvement of ten UiTM students throughout the program, with 80 percent of respondents stating that the joint rehearsals enriched their learning experience and enhanced their cross-cultural understanding. This process reflects the principle of co-creation in cultural diplomacy as discussed by Cowan & Arsenault, where creative collaboration is seen as a stronger vehicle for building shared values compared to one-directional exchanges (Fitzpatrick, 2017).

The cooperation extended beyond artistic activities to include the signing of an Implementation Arrangement (IA) between UNJ and UiTM as a formal commitment to sustaining academic and cultural partnerships in the future. This document serves as operational proof that the collaboration was not limited to a short-term project but was directed toward integration into research and teaching agendas. As Arnold et al. (2022) argue, the sustainability of cross-national artistic collaboration is highly influenced by strong institutional support, as it allows similar programs to be integrated into research and teaching agendas. Through these activities, academic and cultural cooperation between UNJ and UiTM has evolved into a strategic partnership that not only enriches participants' artistic experiences but also strengthens cultural diplomacy networks rooted in higher education institutions.



Figure 4. Signing of the Implementation Arrangement (IA)

4.3 Creating Spaces for Intercultural Intercation

The culmination of this PKM was a collaborative performance of Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong, staged at the UNJ and UiTM campuses. The performances were open to the public and attended by students, lecturers, artists, and community members from diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby creating a cross-cultural atmosphere rich in interaction. The collaborative performance presented a storyline that combined the humor of Lenong with the aesthetic movements of Mak Yong. Spontaneous Betawi dialogues full of improvisation were adapted to align with the tempo and symbolism of Mak Yong movements. This process of adaptation reflects the concept of cultural hybridity (Ang et al., 2015), in which the encounter of two traditions generates new forms while preserving the essence of each.

Intercultural interaction extended beyond the stage through public discussions held after the performances. These sessions provided opportunities for audiences to directly engage with the performers and trainers about the philosophy of movement, performance techniques, and the cultural values embedded within the traditions. This activity resonates with the views of Matos & Melo-Pfeifer (2020), and Fleming (2023), who argue that art can serve as an effective medium for fostering empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and awareness of diversity. In addition to bringing together artists and audiences from both countries, these spaces also involved students as facilitators and cultural interpreters. Their involvement expanded intercultural learning into a lived experience that cannot be acquired solely through theoretical study. Further evidence of achievement was seen in local media coverage in Jakarta and Shah Alam, which amplified the cultural diplomacy messages conveyed through the performances, as well as in the national seminar held at UPI Bandung, which extended the program's impact into academic and public spheres.

Thus, the creation of intercultural spaces in this program not only produced collaborative performances but also strengthened cultural diplomacy through the involvement of audiences, students, and media. These findings support Nye's (2008) concept of soft power and Byram & Wagner (2018) perspective on intercultural citizenship, demonstrating that traditional arts can serve as strategic instruments for building a positive national image while deepening cross-cultural understanding.



Figure 5. Collaborative Performance of Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong

In sum, the collaborative performances and the series of interactions surrounding them created a shared learning space that strengthened understanding, tolerance, and cross-cultural cooperation. This activity demonstrates that traditional performing arts can serve not only as an effective medium of cultural diplomacy but also as a profound instrument of intercultural education. Nevertheless, several challenges were

encountered during the implementation. Differences in rehearsal schedules and limited time allocation posed difficulties in achieving optimal synchronization between Lenong and Mak Yong elements. Language barriers and variations in cultural expression also created initial misunderstandings among participants. These limitations were addressed through flexible scheduling, the use of bilingual facilitators, and continuous dialogue to ensure mutual adaptation. In addition, the reliance on institutional support was crucial in overcoming logistical constraints, as formal agreements and resource sharing allowed the collaboration to proceed smoothly. Thus, while challenges were present, the solutions adopted highlight the importance of adaptability, communication, and institutional commitment in sustaining intercultural initiatives.



Figure 6. Cross Cultural Seminar and Discussion Session

5. Conclusion

The Community Service Program Dance Theater Collaboration Workshop between UNJ and UiTM demonstrated that traditional performing arts collaboration can serve as an effective instrument for cultural preservation and community-based diplomacy. Evaluation data from ten UiTM students confirmed this achievement: 90 percent understood the collaboration as cultural diplomacy, 80 percent believed costumes strengthened cultural representation, and 70 percent stated that public discussions enhanced their appreciation of cultural values. These figures provide measurable evidence that the program successfully transferred technical skills, historical knowledge, and local wisdom of Lenong Betawi and Mak Yong to younger generations.

Beyond immediate outcomes, sustainability was ensured through the signing of an Implementation Arrangement (IA) between UNJ and UiTM, which formalized institutional commitment to future collaboration. Planned follow-up activities include integrating the results into teaching and research agendas, as well as developing further cross-cultural performances. In this way, the program not only contributed to Indonesia Malaysia cultural diplomacy but also offered a replicable model of traditional arts collaboration that maintains the relevance of cultural heritage in the global era.

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