

Empowering Cultural Heritage Through North Sumatran Batik for Nihongo Partners from Japan and Local Indonesian Communities

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ABSTRACT. *This community service project aimed to strengthen cultural identity through the introduction and practice of North Sumatran batik among Japanese Nihongo Partners and local Indonesian participants. The program addressed the growing need for cross-cultural understanding and cultural preservation in the era of globalization. The method employed was participatory and experiential learning, which included demonstrations, guided batik workshops, and cultural dialogues. Participants were introduced to the history, techniques, and symbolic meanings of batik patterns unique to North Sumatra. The activity not only enhanced participants' technical skills in traditional textile production but also deepened their appreciation for Indonesian heritage. Japanese participants, in particular, reported meaningful cultural insights and creative satisfaction through hands-on engagement. The outcomes of the program included increased intercultural awareness, the preservation of local batik knowledge, and opportunities for community-based entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the initiative supported environmental sustainability by promoting eco-friendly dyeing methods. In conclusion, the program proved effective in bridging cultural gaps and inspiring mutual respect through shared creative experiences. It also contributed to the promotion of batik as a symbol of cultural diplomacy and sustainable heritage education.*

Keywords: *Batik Education, Cultural Identity, Community Empowerment, Cross-Cultural Exchange, North Sumatra*

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the influx of foreign pop culture continue to challenge local cultural identities around the world. In Indonesia, this trend has raised concerns about the erosion of indigenous traditions and arts, as dominant global cultures can overshadow local heritage (Taptiani et al., 2024). Batik, a traditional wax-dye textile art, stands out as a crucial bastion of Indonesian cultural identity amid these pressures. UNESCO's recognition of Indonesian batik as an Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes that batik is "more than just a craft; it is an integral part of Indonesian culture," woven into everyday life and the social fabric of society. Indeed, batik is deeply embedded in rituals, attire, and community practices, symbolizing creativity and spirituality in Indonesian communities. This recognition has bolstered national pride and inspired conservation commitments – local artisans and authorities across Indonesia have launched initiatives to safeguard batik heritage following UNESCO's inscription. Yet, preserving cultural identity requires more than recognition; it demands active engagement and transmission, especially in the face of modernizing influences (Steelyana & WawoRuntu, 2024).

Despite batik's acknowledged importance, contemporary youth in Indonesia are often swayed by global fashion trends. Recent studies highlight that Western and Korean styles dominate daily wear among Indonesian youth, with many reserving batik only for formal occasions. Such shifts in everyday habits reflect how global cultural integration can dilute the visibility of local culture. Paradoxically, the same research reveals a strong latent pride in batik among the youth: 97% of respondents in one survey reported feeling proud when wearing batik and viewing it as representative of the national identity. A majority even agree that batik plays a significant role in strengthening national identity. This suggests a critical gap between appreciation and practice – younger generations esteem batik as a symbol of Indonesian identity, yet they struggle to incorporate it into modern life. To bridge this gap, educators and cultural activists have called for innovations that integrate batik with contemporary fashion, making it relevant to today's lifestyle without losing its essence. The underlying challenge remains: how to reinforce cultural identity in a way that resonates with both local communities and an increasingly globalized youth culture (Yulianingrum et al., 2022).

One promising approach is to revitalize engagement with regional batik traditions, such as those of North Sumatra, through inclusive, intercultural collaboration. While batik is often associated with Javanese

motifs, North Sumatran batik (sometimes called Batik Batak) embodies the rich cultural mosaic of Sumatra's ethnic groups. North Sumatran batik motifs draw from the heritage of indigenous Batak communities – Mandailing, Toba, Karo, Simalungun, and others – incorporating designs inspired by ulos woven cloth and local folklore. These patterns differ markedly from the plant-and-animal motifs common in Javanese batik, instead reflecting the identity of each Batak subgroup and the natural environment of the region. As a result, Batak batik is not merely an art form but a visual narrative of North Sumatra's multicultural identity. However, outside of its locale, North Sumatran batik has not enjoyed the same level of national or international exposure as its Javanese counterpart. This relative obscurity poses a risk that the knowledge and practice of Batak batik could wane among the younger generation of Batak and other Indonesian communities. Strengthening cultural identity in North Sumatra thus involves both preserving these unique motifs and raising awareness of their value as part of Indonesia's pluralistic heritage. Engaging new audiences in the batik-making process – especially audiences that span cultures – can be a powerful strategy to invigorate this preservation effort (Harahap & Mujib, 2022).

International cultural exchange offers a novel and impactful avenue to achieve these goals. Indonesia and Japan, in particular, have a history of friendship and educational exchange that can be leveraged for cultural learning. The Nihongo Partners program, which places Japanese volunteers in Indonesian schools to support language education, is one such bridge between the two cultures. These Japanese partners, typically youth or young adults, come eager to learn about local culture while sharing their own. By involving them in North Sumatran batik workshops alongside Indonesian community members, a reciprocal learning experience can be created. For Japanese participants, hands-on immersion in batik enriches their understanding of Indonesian cultural heritage beyond surface tourism. For Indonesian participants, seeing foreigners actively appreciate and practice their traditional art can heighten their own sense of pride and interest in that heritage. Cross-cultural batik activities thus serve as a form of people-to-people diplomacy, fostering mutual respect and understanding. Previous research has shown that arts and cultural immersion can enhance intercultural competence and empathy among participants. In this context, batik becomes not only a medium of artistic expression but also a conduit for international friendship – much like how Indonesian batik has been used as a diplomatic symbol at global

events (Steelyana & WawoRuntu, 2024). Unlike state-level cultural diplomacy, however, a grassroots exchange centered on batik directly empowers community members and foreign partners to learn from each other's cultures in an equitable setting. This kind of exchange can reinforce Indonesian identity internally while also educating outsiders, effectively "strengthening cultural identity" from both within and outside.

To date, community service initiatives around batik have largely focused on local empowerment or economic development, with limited international involvement. Many programs in Indonesia have successfully trained local women's groups and artisans in batik production to preserve heritage and improve livelihoods. For example, workshops in West Sumatran villages taught mothers to create batik with indigenous Minangkabau motifs, yielding both cultural preservation and new economic opportunities for the community (Rahmi et al., 2023). Such efforts, while valuable, generally operate in a domestic context and do not tap into the potential of cross-cultural exchange. On the other end of the spectrum, studies on cultural exchange often emphasize macro-level initiatives—such as using batik in international exhibitions or as gifts by diplomats—to promote national culture abroad (Steelyana & WawoRuntu, 2024). What has not been explored is a community-based program that unites local and international participants in the collaborative practice of batik-making. In prior service activities, no explicit model exists where foreign volunteers are integrated into traditional craft workshops aimed at strengthening local identity. This presents a clear gap in both the literature and practice of community engagement. By addressing this void, there is an opportunity to innovate a new form of community service—one that merges cultural preservation with intercultural education. The convergence of North Sumatran batik artistry and Japanese Nihongo Partners is thus a pioneering concept, responding to the twin needs of reviving local textile traditions and enriching cross-cultural understanding. This initiative is expected to not only fill the gap left by earlier programs but also set a precedent for how cultural heritage can be leveraged as a tool for international community building.

Objectives: In response to the above challenges and gaps, this community service program is designed with the following research-based objectives:

1. **Enhance Intercultural Understanding through Batik:** Facilitate a collaborative learning experience where Japanese Nihongo Partners and Indonesian community members jointly participate in North

Sumatran batik-making. This aims to deepen the Japanese partners' appreciation of Indonesian cultural heritage and simultaneously broaden locals' perspectives by engaging with international learners, fostering mutual respect and cultural exchange (Afdholy, 2024).

2. **Strengthen Local Cultural Identity and Pride:** Reinvigorate the cultural identity of the Indonesian participants – especially youth in North Sumatra – by reconnecting them with their ancestral batik traditions in an interactive setting. Through the validation of seeing foreign enthusiasts value their batik, local participants are expected to gain increased pride and confidence in their cultural identity (Yulianingrum et al., 2022). The project will reinforce that batik is a living heritage relevant in modern contexts, thus addressing the identity gap identified in prior studies.
3. **Empower the Community through Skills and Heritage Preservation:** Provide hands-on batik training that not only transfers artistic skills but also empowers local batik artisans and enthusiasts (including women's groups and students) to become custodians of North Sumatran batik. By creating marketable batik products featuring Batak motifs and sharing the cultural narratives behind them, the community can explore creative entrepreneurship opportunities. This objective aligns with literature calling for community involvement in heritage preservation as a means of sustainable development and cultural continuity (Afdholy, 2024).

Through these objectives, the program seeks to create a sustainable intercultural platform that leverages North Sumatran batik as a catalyst for cultural exchange and identity preservation. By the end of the project, it is anticipated that Japanese Nihongo Partners will have gained profound insight into Indonesia's cultural richness, while Indonesian participants will experience a revitalized sense of cultural pride and unity. This approach directly ties the act of community service to scholarly insights on cultural heritage empowerment and fills a strategic gap by blending local tradition with international partnership. Ultimately, "Strengthening Cultural Identity Through North Sumatran Batik" aspires to demonstrate how preserving a local art form can simultaneously fortify community identity and build bridges across cultures (Afdholy, 2024).

METHODS

This community service program employed the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework in combination with Service Learning to ensure collaborative, experiential engagement among all participants. These methods

were selected not only to transfer knowledge and skills but also to foster mutual learning between Japanese Nihongo Partners and Indonesian community members, particularly those from North Sumatra.

The program followed five key stages: (1) Socialization, (2) Cultural Orientation, (3) Skill Training, (4) Intercultural Practice, and (5) Reflection & Evaluation. Each stage emphasized active participation, reflection, and co-learning. The socialization phase introduced participants to the program's objectives, cultural values, and expectations. The cultural orientation provided historical and philosophical context for North Sumatran batik. The skill training involved hands-on workshops, where participants practiced motif sketching, wax application (canting), dyeing, and finishing techniques under the guidance of experienced batik artisans.

Participants were grouped into multicultural teams to enhance cross-cultural exchange. Japanese and Indonesian participants collaborated in designing batik patterns inspired by local Batak motifs. This phase promoted creative exchange and served as an intercultural learning platform, where participants learned about the symbolic meanings in textile design.

The target subjects of this program were:

1. 15 Japanese Nihongo Partners, comprising university students and language teachers assigned to Indonesia.
2. 30 Indonesian participants, including university students, lecturers, and local community members, particularly women and youth from Medan and Deli Serdang.

Data Collection and Analysis: To assess the effectiveness of the program, qualitative data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and structured feedback forms. Reflections from participants were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key learning outcomes, cultural insights, and changes in attitudes toward cultural heritage. Photographic documentation and samples of the participants' batik works were also collected as evidence of engagement and learning outcomes.

Evaluation focused on three dimensions:

1. **Skill acquisition**, measured by the ability to produce completed batik pieces.
2. **Cultural understanding**, assessed through reflection sessions and participant surveys.
3. **Collaboration quality**, evaluated based on group interaction, creative outputs, and testimonial narratives.

This methodological approach ensured that the program was both academically grounded and practically impactful, creating space for

sustainable knowledge transfer and intercultural solidarity. By integrating theory and action, the community service initiative embodied the spirit of batik—not only as a craft but as a shared cultural journey between nations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Pride and Identity

The community service program successfully fostered a strong sense of cultural pride among participants. Local Indonesian artisans and community members expressed renewed confidence in the value of North Sumatran batik after sharing it with the Japanese Nihongo Partners. The enthusiastic reception by the Japanese volunteers validated the importance of batik as part of the local identity. This outcome echoes findings by Mistriani et al. (2023), who observed that artisans feel a deep sense of pride and belonging when their traditional works gain recognition beyond their local community (Snigdhya et al., 2024). In the workshops, Indonesian participants took pride in explaining the symbolism of batik motifs and techniques, reinforcing their own understanding of batik's cultural significance. Such pride is not merely anecdotal – UNESCO has noted that the craft of batik is intertwined with the cultural identity of the Indonesian people. By engaging in this program, the local community strengthened its cultural identity, as sharing batik with an international audience deepened their appreciation for their heritage. This finding aligns with broader studies on intangible heritage, which emphasize that community involvement in preserving traditional crafts bolsters cultural identity and cohesion (Du et al., 2024). Participant feedback during the program highlighted that seeing foreigners value North Sumatran batik enhanced their own sense of cultural worth, a result in line with research on pride in craftsmanship (Snigdhya et al., 2024). These reactions illustrate how the program functioned as a catalyst for cultural pride, empowering the community to view their batik heritage as a source of dignity and international esteem.

Cross-Cultural Creativity and Collaboration

The collaborative nature of the batik workshops stimulated cross-cultural creativity among Japanese and Indonesian participants. Working side by side, they experimented with integrating Japanese artistic elements (such as floral motifs akin to sakura/cherry blossoms) into North Sumatran batik patterns. This led to innovative batik designs that blended two traditions, demonstrating how cultural exchange can spark creative fusion. Such outcomes support Yuliarni's (2022) recommendation that artisans

embed foreign influences into traditional crafts to broaden appeal without losing authenticity. During the program, local batik artists learned new design perspectives from the Japanese participants, while the latter learned to apply their artistic sensibilities in a batik context. This two-way exchange resulted in novel motifs that maintained the essence of batik while incorporating fresh ideas – a tangible example of cross-cultural creative synergy. The literature indicates that exposure to global trends and international design elements can increase innovation and collaboration in traditional art forms. Our program's results mirror this: the Nihongo Partners' input encouraged local artisans to step outside their usual motif repertoire, enhancing creative diversity. Notably, prior studies have found that many batik producers struggle to innovate due to limited resources and market access. By providing an intercultural platform and institutional support, the program helped overcome some of these barriers. Participants reported that brainstorming with partners from a different cultural background sparked ideas they would not have conceived alone. This outcome aligns with Andansari et al. (2024), who documented that integrating local motifs with global design elements increases product appeal and market reach (Snigdha et al., 2024). Overall, the cross-cultural collaboration in the batik-making process not only produced creatively enriched batik pieces, but also built participants' confidence in continuing such collaborative innovation in the future.

Heritage Preservation and Community Engagement

Beyond immediate creative outputs, the program contributed to the preservation of batik heritage through education and community engagement. By involving youth, local artisans, and foreign partners in batik-making, the initiative ensured that knowledge of North Sumatran batik techniques and meanings was transmitted to new audiences. This educational aspect is crucial for the sustainability of the craft: intangible cultural heritage like batik survives when communities actively document, teach, and practice it. The inclusion of Japanese volunteers as learners further underlines the point that cultural heritage can be safeguarded through intercultural sharing. In line with Santosa et al. (2021), who noted that government and community partnerships recognize community involvement as crucial for the sustainable management of cultural resources, this program leveraged institutional support from both Indonesian cultural agencies and Japanese partners to engage the community in preservation efforts. Local authorities and educational institutions played a supportive role (e.g., providing batik instructors, venues, and materials), illustrating the

importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in heritage programs. Similar community-based cultural projects have shown that empowering local people to be guardians of their traditions fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility toward the heritage (cf. Sudarmadi, 2023). We observed a comparable effect: community members, seeing their batik valued in an international context, became more motivated to preserve and continue these practices. Additionally, participants discussed plans to maintain batik study groups and incorporate what they learned into local schools or community centers, indicating a lasting impact on heritage preservation efforts. This aligns with national initiatives in Indonesia that encourage villages to revive and promote local arts as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage (Muryanti, 2023). In essence, the program functioned as both a results-driven workshop and a discussion forum on why preserving batik matters, thereby reinforcing the community's commitment to sustaining this cultural legacy (Saputra, 2024).

Environmental Awareness in Batik Craft

A distinctive thematic outcome of the program was the integration of environmental awareness into cultural education. The batik workshops included discussions on sustainable practices, such as the use of natural dyes and proper waste management in the batik process. Participants learned that traditional batik production often involves chemical dyes and disposals that can harm the environment, a fact highlighted by recent studies on batik entrepreneurs' practices. By introducing natural coloring techniques using local plant-based dyes, the program raised awareness about eco-friendly batik making. The Japanese Nihongo Partners, coming from a culture with strong environmental consciousness, were particularly interested in these sustainable methods and participated in experiments using natural dye on batik cloth. Local artisans noted that this was their first exposure to some of these techniques, reflecting the gap identified by Phang et al. (2022) – many batik producers have only a limited awareness of greener methods due to lack of exposure and technology (Phang et al., 2022). Emphasizing environmental responsibility in a cultural workshop proved to be highly effective. It not only taught practical skills (like preparing natural dyes from indigo and other plants) but also instilled an understanding of why such practices matter for community health and heritage longevity. This outcome aligns with broader trends: researchers have found that adopting natural dyes and eco-friendly materials in batik can give artisans a competitive advantage and meet rising consumer demand for sustainable products. Nugroho et al. (2022) further note that a shift to natural dye batik can

conserve biodiversity and even create side-business opportunities (for instance, cultivating dye-producing plants) that benefit rural economies (Phang et al., 2022). Participants in our program echoed these points, discussing how eco-friendly batik could become a selling point and a source of community pride. The immediate result was an increased willingness among local batik makers to consider greener practices. Some even pledged to pursue follow-up training on natural dye production. In summary, the program's focus on environmental aspects enhanced its impact, combining cultural preservation with sustainability. This approach is in line with global calls for more green batik initiatives to mitigate the environmental impact of traditional textile arts, ensuring that heritage preservation and environmental stewardship go hand in hand (Saputra, 2024).

Educational Diplomacy and Mutual Understanding

The involvement of Japanese Nihongo Partners in this community batik program exemplifies the power of educational diplomacy at the grassroots level. Through hands-on cultural exchange, both the Indonesian hosts and the Japanese volunteers built mutual understanding and respect. The Japanese participants—initially in North Sumatra to assist with language education—became informal ambassadors of cultural exchange, actively learning Indonesian heritage art. Such people-to-people interactions are a cornerstone of cultural diplomacy: they help individuals develop intercultural competence and often turn participants into agents of soft power bridging the two nations. In our program, this was evident as Japanese partners expressed deep appreciation for Indonesian culture, while local participants gained more nuanced insights into Japanese perspectives. Joint activities (like informal language lessons, sharing stories behind motifs, and even wearing each other's traditional attire during a closing ceremony) created friendships and lasting connections. These outcomes support the findings of El-Asri and El Karfa (2024), who reported that exchange students markedly improved their intercultural awareness and became active agents of cultural diplomacy through authentic cultural exchanges (El-Asri & Karfa, 2024). Likewise, global trends in public diplomacy emphasize that educational and cultural exchange programs increase cultural understanding, promote bilateral cooperation, and create friendships worldwide. The experience in this program reinforced those trends on a micro scale: both Japanese and Indonesian participants benefitted, reflecting a two-way exchange of knowledge. The local community members not only taught batik but also learned about Japanese culture (for example, learning basic Japanese terms for colors or art, and discovering similarities between

batik and certain Japanese fabrics). This reciprocity in learning ensured that intercultural exchange was not one-sided. Literature on international exchange shows that such interactions are mutually beneficial, with both hosts and guests gaining greater empathy and cross-cultural skills. Our observations confirmed that: by the end of the program, participants on both sides demonstrated greater cultural sensitivity and expressed interest in future collaborations. Institutional support from organizations in both countries (such as the Japan Foundation and local cultural centers) was pivotal in this success, underlining the fact that educational diplomacy works best with strong backing and facilitation. This community service initiative thus served as a form of educational diplomacy, strengthening people-to-people ties between Indonesia and Japan. It contributed to a positive image of Indonesia's cultural richness among the Japanese volunteers, while also showcasing Japan's respect and curiosity to the Indonesian community – a diplomatic win-win at the community level. Consistent with public diplomacy scholarship that calls such exchanges a powerful tool for building international relationships (Hajdari et al., 2024), the program left a legacy of goodwill and mutual understanding that extends beyond the formal project timeline.

Community Impact and Sustainability

Overall, the results of the program demonstrate multi-faceted community impacts. In the short term, participants acquired tangible skills (batik-making, natural dyeing techniques) and intercultural experience. Several Japanese participants successfully produced pieces of North Sumatran batik with guidance, which they regarded as personal accomplishments and souvenirs of cultural significance. Many local participants, in turn, improved their communication skills and confidence by teaching and interacting in a cross-cultural setting. In the long term, the community stands to benefit economically and socially from these efforts. The initiative drew local media attention and interest from neighboring villages, enhancing the profile of North Sumatran batik as a heritage craft and potential tourism attraction. This corresponds with Rahayu et al. (2023)'s observation that promoting cultural industries like batik can have significant economic benefits for communities (Saputra, 2024), especially when coupled with tourism and creative economy support. Indeed, community leaders have noted that empowered artisans can leverage the new designs and techniques to diversify their products and reach new markets, potentially increasing income. There are plans to continue collaborations between the host institution and the Japan Foundation to

dispatch future Nihongo Partners to similar programs, indicating institutional commitment to sustainability. The positive outcomes observed – from heightened cultural pride and creative capacity to greater environmental consciousness and cross-cultural friendship – all contribute to a stronger, more resilient community. By reinforcing cultural identity and innovating within tradition, the program helped ensure that North Sumatran batik is not seen as a static relic, but as a living art with contemporary relevance. This dynamic approach to heritage, supported by educational diplomacy, community engagement, and creative innovation, sets a model for how community service activities can generate meaningful, lasting impact. The discussion above, supported by scholarly evidence, underlines that strengthening cultural identity through batik in a cross-cultural context can yield rich dividends in pride, creativity, preservation, sustainability, and international goodwill. The program's results thus affirm the value of culturally-grounded community empowerment initiatives and suggest they could be replicated or adapted to other cultural domains for broader societal benefit. Each thematic finding – cultural pride, cross-cultural creativity, heritage preservation, environmental awareness, and educational diplomacy – contributes to a holistic understanding that community service in the arts can play a pivotal role in both local development and international friendship. The synergy of these outcomes ensures that the impact of the program will persist, as participants carry forward the lessons learned and the relationships formed well into the future.

CONCLUSION

This community engagement program successfully strengthened cultural identity through a collaborative batik-making initiative between Japanese Nihongo Partners and Indonesian communities. The program enhanced local pride by highlighting the uniqueness of North Sumatran batik and validating its cultural value through cross-national appreciation. Creative collaboration led to innovative batik designs that integrated Japanese and Batak elements, demonstrating the potential of intercultural exchange to spark artistic innovation.

Beyond creativity, the initiative contributed to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage by engaging youth and foreign participants in traditional batik practices. It also introduced sustainable methods using natural dyes, fostering environmental awareness among artisans. The Japanese participants, in turn, served as agents of educational diplomacy, building mutual understanding and friendships that extended beyond the

program.

Institutionally, the initiative generated interest for continued cultural cooperation, while the community gained visibility and empowerment. Thematically, the results confirm the program's impact across five key areas: cultural pride, cross-cultural creativity, heritage preservation, environmental sustainability, and educational diplomacy. Altogether, this project illustrates how culturally grounded, participatory service learning can create lasting social, educational, and intercultural benefits.

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