

Cultural Diplomacy between Indonesia and Timor Leste 2020-2024

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Abstract (10 PT)

This study analyzes the cultural diplomacy relations between Indonesia and Timor-Leste during the 2020-2024 period. Employing a qualitative approach through library research and interviews, the study finds that cultural diplomacy plays a significant role in strengthening bilateral relations based on three main findings. First, cultural diplomacy strengthens people-to-people diplomacy through arts, education, and cultural festival programs that build mutual trust between communities. Second, its impact extends to the education, economic, and political sectors, demonstrating a spillover effect from cultural cooperation. Third, its implementation faces structural obstacles such as limited financial and human resources, as well as digitalization challenges. Overall, cultural diplomacy proves to be an effective soft power instrument for historical reconciliation and enhancing multidimensional bilateral relations, although it requires strengthening institutional capacity and digital innovation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural diplomacy is an important instrument in international relations that prioritizes a multicultural approach to *soft power* through the exchange of values, arts, education, and traditions between countries (Clarke, 2020). In an increasingly complex global context, countries no longer rely solely on military or economic power, but also utilize cultural power as a means of building a positive image and strengthening bilateral relations (Matosian, A. E. 2024). This is in line with the view that in contemporary international relations, cultural appeal and a positive global image are crucial for the success of foreign policy, especially for developing countries such as Kyrgyzstan, which utilizes soft power through cultural heritage, education, and public diplomacy initiatives (Mokonova, A., & YOĞURTÇU, G. 2025). Indonesia, as a country with high cultural diversity, has great potential in developing cultural diplomacy, especially towards countries with historical and geographical proximity, such as Timor-Leste. Cultural diplomacy is expected to be able to bridge the building of harmonious post-conflict relations and increase cross-sector cooperation between the two countries.

In practice, Indonesian cultural diplomacy is carried out through various programs, such as student exchanges, cultural festivals, scholarship programs, and the dissemination of Indonesian language and literature abroad (Cohen, M. I. 2019). These programs not only aim to introduce Indonesian culture but also to build mutual understanding and trust between the people of both countries. Furthermore, the cultural diplomacy approach allows for more

humanistic and inclusive interactions, thus reaching various levels of society, both at the elite and grassroots levels (Sari, D. S. 2023).

Several previous studies have examined Indonesian cultural diplomacy in various contexts. The study by Bernadette, S., Septiana, R. W., & Kusumawardhana, I. (2022) focuses on Indonesian cultural diplomacy in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) forum through cultural arts festivals, which focus on strengthening regional cooperation and Indonesia's international image. Meanwhile, the study by Oktaviani, W., & Amra, M. F. (2024) examines the effectiveness of the Indonesian Cultural House as a means of cultural diplomacy in enhancing Indonesia's position as a member of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) *cultural superpower*. Both studies show that cultural diplomacy makes a significant contribution to building international relations, particularly in terms of image and cooperation between countries.

However, these studies still have limitations, particularly in terms of their focus, which focuses more on program implementation and its overall effectiveness. Studies specifically analyzing Indonesia's cultural diplomacy relationship with Timor-Leste, particularly in the contemporary period (2020–2024), are still relatively limited. Furthermore, aspects related to the impact of cultural diplomacy and the obstacles encountered in its implementation have not been explored in depth.

Based on these conditions, this study offers scientific innovation in the form of a comprehensive analysis of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy relationship with Timor-Leste, focusing not only on the form and implementation of diplomacy but also on its impact and the various obstacles encountered in the process. This study also positions cultural diplomacy as part of a strategic *soft power* in building more constructive and sustainable bilateral relations.

Based on this background, the problem formulation in this research is: *How is Indonesia's cultural diplomacy relationship with Timor-Leste?* In addition, this study also examines the role of cultural diplomacy, its impacts, and the obstacles faced in its implementation in the 2020–2024 period.

This research aims to analyze and explain the relationship between Indonesia's cultural diplomacy and Timor-Leste, including the roles, impacts, and challenges faced in its implementation, so that it can provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of international relations studies, especially in the field of cultural diplomacy.

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with the aim of understanding and analyzing the phenomenon of cultural diplomacy relations between Indonesia and Timor-Leste in depth in a natural context (*natural setting*). This approach was chosen because it is able to explore the meaning, process, and dynamics of social interactions that occur in the practice of cultural diplomacy.

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the main instrument (*human instrument*) who is directly involved in the data collection and interpretation process. The resulting data is descriptive in nature, consisting of words, documents, and narratives that comprehensively describe the phenomenon.

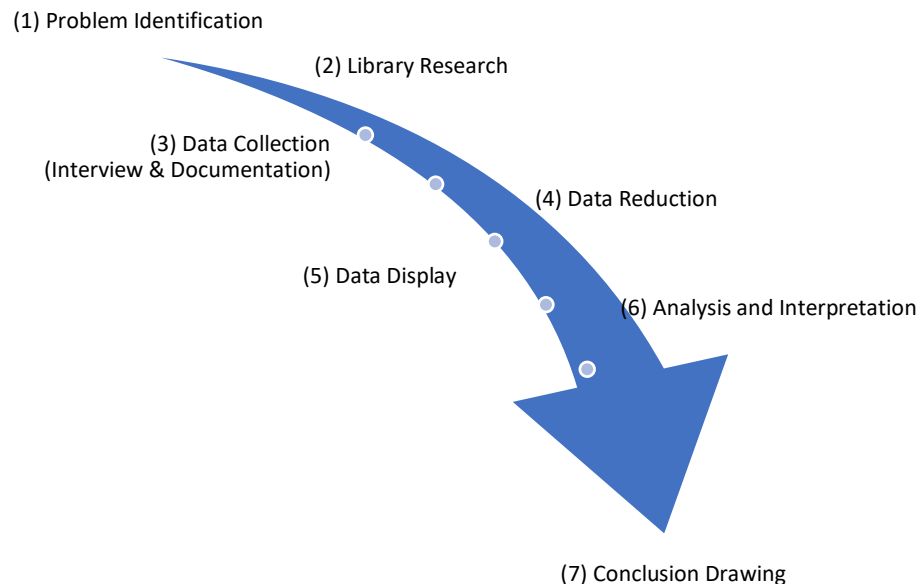
This research was conducted using a library research approach and supported by field data collection. Data sources were obtained from various institutions, including the Muhammadiyah University Jakarta Library, the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP) Library, the University of Indonesia Library, and the National Library of Indonesia. Furthermore, to strengthen data validity, this research also involved interviews with relevant agencies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Indonesian Cultural Center) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (Bureau of Communication and Public Services).

Data collection techniques in this research include (1) Documentation Study, which was obtained from various official documents and archives, such as institutional reports, policy documents, organizational archives, and scientific literature. These documents are used to understand the historical context and policies of cultural diplomacy; (2) Interviews. This was conducted with informants who have knowledge and direct involvement in the field of cultural diplomacy. This technique was used to obtain in-depth primary data through a structured and semi-structured question-and-answer process.

Then, the data analysis in this study uses an interactive model from Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana. (2014) which includes three main stages, namely (1) Data Reduction including the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from the field, (2) Presenting Data in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, or charts to facilitate understanding and interpretation, and (3) Drawing Conclusions and Verification which are drawn in stages and verified through a re-checking process to ensure the validity of the data.

To ensure data validity, this study uses source triangulation techniques, namely by comparing data obtained from various sources and methods, such as interviews, observations, and documentation. This triangulation aims to increase credibility and trust in the research results, so that the data obtained truly reflects the actual conditions.

The following is the research flow used in this study:



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research results, there are three main scientific findings related to Indonesia's cultural diplomacy with Timor Leste, namely: (1) strengthening *people-to-people diplomacy*, (2) increasing multidimensional bilateral relations, and (3) the existence of structural and adaptive barriers in the implementation of cultural diplomacy.

The First findings show that Indonesia's cultural diplomacy with Timor Leste significantly strengthens people-to-people relations (*people-to-people diplomacy*) through arts, education, and cultural programs. Activities such as cultural festivals, student exchanges, and joint arts performances have proven to be effective media in building emotional closeness between the people of the two countries. Nugraha, D. S., Rahardi, R.,

& Setyaningsih, Y. (2020) explain that organized and contextual cultural diplomacy in Timor Leste is relevant to the focus of *people-to-people diplomacy*. The results of the study show program components, participants, and supporting and inhibiting factors that influence its effectiveness.

Scientifically, this phenomenon occurs because cultural diplomacy works at the level of *societal engagement*, where direct interaction between individuals generates trust (*trust building*) that cannot be achieved through formal state diplomacy. This is in line with the findings of Johnson Kennedy, P. S. (2022), who stated that there are ethnic similarities between Indonesia and Timor-Leste because they have the same ancestors, so that cultural communication networks strengthen cross-border relations through ongoing social engagement.

This increasing trend of community interaction also shows that the cultural proximity variable has a positive correlation with the stability of bilateral relations. Countries with historical and cultural similarities tend to be easier to build post-conflict reconciliation, as stated by Clancy S. Cehajic et al (2023) in their diplomatic study on the role of cultural proximity in shaping bilateral relations, noting that “factors such as historical ties and cultural proximity play an important role in shaping each other's foreign policies.” It emphasizes that “the bonds built between these countries over time can be characterized by several different factors,” suggesting that shared history and culture facilitate stronger diplomatic and economic ties, which can help post-conflict reconciliation.

The Second findings show that cultural diplomacy not only impacts the cultural sector but also extends to the education, economic, and political sectors. Scholarship programs, educational cooperation, and cultural promotion through creative economic activities are strategic instruments in strengthening bilateral relations. This phenomenon occurs because cultural diplomacy functions as *entry point diplomacy*, namely the entry point for expanding cooperation to other sectors. From a theoretical perspective of *power*, culture becomes a tool to influence the preferences of other countries without coercion (Nye, 2019).

In addition, this increasing trend of multi-sector cooperation shows that there is an effect *spillover*, where the success of cultural cooperation triggers cooperation in other areas. This is consistent with research by Misnawati, M. (2023), which states that literary and cultural diplomacy can strengthen relations between countries by increasing intercultural understanding, increasing the attractiveness of countries, strengthening economic relations, and improving the country's image. Even in other sectors, it is said that the implementation of IISMA aims to build a national image and a positive image of Indonesia, accelerate the improvement of the quality of education, and promote cultural diversity. It is hoped that this will have a direct impact on the internationalization of education and is a long-term investment in human resource development, especially in the field of education (Kristiana, C., & Benito, R., 2023).

The third finding shows that Cultural diplomacy plays an important role in the historical reconciliation process between Indonesia and Timor-Leste, as well as in building a positive image of Indonesia in the eyes of the Timorese people.

Scientifically, this can be explained through an approach *constructivist international relations*, where identity and perception are key factors in interstate relations. Cultural diplomacy can reshape past narratives into more cooperative relationships (McCourt, D. M. 2022). Social constructivism emphasizes the role of identity and perception in international relations, asserting that these factors shape interests and actions. This approach highlights how human consciousness influences state behavior and the formation of norms in the international system (Saynur Derman, 2021).

This trend suggests that countries previously in conflict can rebuild relationships through non-coercive approaches. Research by Roselle et al. (2020) confirms that cultural narratives

and strategic communication play a crucial role in shaping global perceptions and state legitimacy. Furthermore, according to E. Price, M (2021), cultural narratives and strategic communication are crucial in shaping global perceptions of state legitimacy. They influence how states are perceived, affecting their power and stability, as ideational entrepreneurs craft narratives that can significantly alter a state's image over time.

The fourth finding identified obstacles in the implementation of cultural diplomacy, including: (1) limited financial and human resources, (2) digitalization challenges, and (3) limited quality of cultural content presented. These obstacles are caused by funding constraints, where inadequate financial support limits the scope and scale of cultural programs, limiting outreach and engagement efforts. Furthermore, there is a lack of trained human resources to implement cultural diplomacy initiatives, resulting in ineffective program delivery and reduced impact (Tisnakusumahni & Putri, 2024).

Scientifically, this obstacle arises from capacity gaps between countries, particularly in developing countries like Timor-Leste. Furthermore, digital transformation demands rapid adaptation in the delivery of cultural diplomacy. This aligns with the view of Oktaviani & Amra (2024), who stated that the slow transition to digital platforms for cultural exchange impacts the reach and accessibility of cultural content. Even limited digital skills among target audiences in Timor-Leste can hinder participation in online cultural programs.

This trend of barriers suggests that the success of cultural diplomacy depends not only on programs but also on institutional capacity and technological innovation. This is reinforced by research by Grincheva, N., & Grincheva, N. (2021) that the success of cultural diplomacy is increasingly influenced by institutional capacity and technological innovation, especially in the context of globalization and recent global challenges. As cultural institutions adapt to the digital landscape, they enhance their communication and international outreach, which are crucial for effective cultural diplomacy. This evolution is evident in several key areas.

According to Drach, V. (2024), the success of cultural diplomacy depends on institutional capacity and technological innovation, such as digital platforms and virtual reality, in addition to effective programs. These elements enhance intercultural communication and strengthen international ties in the context of globalization. Bjola & Manor (2021) state that digital diplomacy is a key factor in the effectiveness of modern diplomacy.

Research results and discussion. This both strengthens and expands the findings of previous research. **First**, this research aligns with Laia & Yealta's (2023) study, which states that Indonesian cultural diplomacy in Timor-Leste serves as a key instrument in strengthening bilateral relations. However, this study offers novelty by demonstrating that its impact extends beyond cultural relations to the economic and educational sectors. **Second**, compared to Farizal's (2023) research, which focuses on cultural diplomacy in regional forums, this research places more emphasis on the specific bilateral relations between Indonesia and Timor-Leste and the concrete impacts they generate. **Third**, this study also expands on Nugraha et al.'s (2020) findings regarding Indonesian language diplomacy, by showing that language is not only a communication tool but also a strategic instrument in building regional influence.

Implications for the Research Hypothesis This research substantively answers the problem formulation in the introduction, namely that: Indonesia's cultural diplomacy with Timor Leste has a positive, constructive, and multidimensional relationship, but still faces various obstacles in its implementation.

Thus, it can be concluded that the research's implicit hypothesis that cultural diplomacy strengthens bilateral relations is scientifically proven, supported by empirical findings and theoretical analysis.

Overall, this study shows that cultural diplomacy functions as an instrument of *power*, effective, able to build post-conflict reconciliation, create positive effects *spillover* to other sectors, but requires institutional capacity support and digital innovation. These findings reinforce the position of cultural diplomacy as a key strategy in contemporary international relations, particularly for developing countries in Southeast Asia.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Indonesia's cultural diplomacy toward Timor-Leste is an effective strategic instrument for strengthening bilateral relations based on a non-coercive approach. Scientific findings indicate that cultural diplomacy serves not only as a means of cultural exchange but also as a constructive mechanism for building trust, strengthening community interaction, and encouraging cross-sector cooperation, particularly in the fields of education, social affairs, and the economy.

Conceptually, this research confirms that cultural diplomacy plays a role as a manifestation of *soft power*, which can create effects to strengthen relations between countries. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy has been proven to contribute to the process of historical reconciliation and the formation of a positive image of Indonesia in Timor-Leste, ultimately strengthening the stability of long-term relations between the two countries.

However, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy remains influenced by various limiting factors, particularly institutional capacity, limited resources, and the challenges of adapting to digital technology developments. This demonstrates that the success of cultural diplomacy is determined not only by the intensity of the program but also by the quality of the strategy, innovation, and sustained policy support.

Thus, the research objective has been achieved, namely, identifying the role, impact, and challenges of Indonesian cultural diplomacy towards Timor-Leste. Overall, the results of this study strengthen the hypothesis that cultural diplomacy has a significant influence on building harmonious, constructive, and sustainable bilateral relations, although it requires strengthening in its implementation and strategic aspects.

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