

Javanology's Communication Strategies: Empowering, Adapting, and Developing Javanese Culture through Intercultural Communication and Dialogue

Muhammad Taufiq al Makmun
Sebelas Maret University

Abstract

This article is an ethnographic report based on the observation conducted in Javanology Center of Excellence for Javanese Tradition of Sebelas Maret University in Indonesia. This intends to report the communication strategies done by the center in order to win public acceptance and supports as an organization which focuses on the development of local indigenous Javanese culture amongst the modern developed Javanese society and global culture. Based on the types of activities observed by the writer, the center uses four communication strategies against the attribution toward Javanese culture, they are: (1) self empowerment through academic movement, (2) adapting to the modern cultural practices and technology, (3) developing training center and networks targeting younger generation globally, and (4) employing intercultural communication to bridge the conflict through dialogues.

Keywords: Javanese culture, Javanology, indigenous, communication strategies, intercultural communication

A. Introduction

Indonesia is a multi-ethnic country consisting of more than 200 ethnic groups and speaking more than 700 languages and dialects scattered in more than 17 thousand islands. Geographically, the archipelagic country is located in South-East Asia in the meeting of the two rings of fire. Since the fifteenth century, Islamic values have been an essential color of the national culture as 90% of the population are Muslims. Globalization has posited Indonesia among other nations within the global setting. The Republic of Indonesia is a result of Dutch decolonization. Reaching independence on August 17, 1945, Indonesia used to be affiliated with many different kingdoms and ethnic groups. The Indonesian national identity unites the diverse culture; Indonesia becomes an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006) for the Indonesian people. In fact, they live in their various local indigenous culture in their daily lives. Along with all their unique cultural identity, Javanese people become a local indigenous culture among other local Indonesian cultures, the Indonesian national culture, Islamic culture, and global culture.

The term Javanese is related to people who inhabit Java Island, Indonesia, especially those in Central to East Java. The term is also used to identify the language used and culture practiced by Javanese people. Despite the fact that Java was largely converted to Islam during the 15th century and afterwards, many Hindu (and pre-Hindu) customs and beliefs still exist among ordinary Javanese. According Clifford Geertz (1976), *abangan* or 'nominal' Muslims are the majority in central and eastern Java. Along with Indonesia's progress as a nation-state and globalization, Javanese cultural practices and traditions are commonly perceived as traditional, un-academic, and even some practices criticized by religious groups as mystical. The decreasing numbers of supporters threaten the future of the local Javanese culture. In terms of Javanese language users, the younger generations of Javanese tend to speak in the Indonesian language. Only a few of the community members are still able to read and write Javanese transcription. The founding of the Javanology Center was based on the sad fact. Javanology has an objective to preserve, maintain the practices of, and develop Javanese culture as well as to provide today's generation of, but not limited to, Javanese to be exposed to such Javanese culture.

This article aims to report the communication strategies made by Javanology Center of Excellence, Universitas Sebelas Maret to gain public support academically and socio-culturally to develop Javanese culture, which was labeled as ancient and stereotyped as being left-behind, un-academic, and mystical. The report is an ethnographic report based on the writer's observation and involvement while serving in the center on a community engagement project. It seeks to explain the communication strategies made by the Center seen from the programs and activities conducted.

B. Indigenous Culture, Intercultural Communication, And Communication Strategies

The term 'indigenous' refers to a human ethnic culture that has not moved from its homeland and does not belong to a settler or colonial population. As a result, being indigenous is distinct from global society, such as Western or Euro-American culture. Javanese people and culture had been distinctive against the Dutch colonial culture during the colonial era from the 16th century to 1945. Kauanui (2014) states that the terms 'indigenous' and 'indigeneity' are closely related to colonial history and critical response to the history. Post-independence, within the umbrella of broader diverse identity such as national identity, local culture can be problematic because it perceives its own identity. It is often not in line with the national identity or even global culture due to its unique distinction. Javanese people who maintain Javanese culture might have social problems due to the difference. In defining culture, Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov point that "a person's behavior is only partially predetermined by his or her mental programs: he or she has a basic ability to deviate from them and to react in ways that are new, creative, destructive, or unexpected" (2017, p. 5). A cultural distinction may raise a conflict. If culture is defined as a way of life such as in "mental programming" (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2017), cultural difference creates different life preferences. In the case of Javanese society, being converted into Islam in the 15th century, the coming of Dutch colonial, Indonesia's formation as a new nation, and globalization have alienated Javanese culture and tradition in some ways. Modernity and globalization make Javanese in such a conflicting situation which sends them in the notion of being a foreigner in their own land if not being a competition. Stigmatization may be attributed to such indigenous cultural practices into the ancient and left behind. The absence of academic research and explanation on the indigenous way of life establishes the notion of unscientific. Due to power relations, the indigenous tend to be powerless and stigmatized for being the other, different, and not preferable. For example, the use of Javanese herbal medicine —*jamu*— is considered unhealthy due to the absence of scientific evidence. For Javanese, it has been a long tradition and part of the social belief inherited through generations using the idea of *titen*, empirical pattern, such as a belief that garlic is useful for detoxification.

Self-empowerment matters. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) points to indigenous methodology as an exit strategy to counter the Western colonizing methodology in the academic world. She criticizes how indigenous culture and people have been the object of the Western researcher. Smith (2012), in her introduction to the book "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples", underlines the importance of self-empowerment of the indigenous through an academic institution. Developing indigenous methodology in research could negotiate the agency so that indigenous could be the subject using their way of viewing. It intends to shift the objectified indigenous position from the point of view of Western researchers. Smith considers Edward Said's orientalism as a vital framework to criticize the Western colonizing methodology. Similarly, Kumar & Parameswaran (2018) draw out the contours of a vigilant approach to alterity that can unpack Western modernity's hegemonic identity politics.

Cross-cultural communication, which is prone to conflict, could be bridged through effective intercultural communication. A dialogic approach is essential to intercultural conflict management and harmonious relationships (Jia & Jia, 2017). Gaps of information could be problematic in cross-cultural communication. Attribution and misunderstanding often happen due to cultural differences. Failure to cope with the differences may result in a conflict. Living together in one space with various cultures requires a good communication level to set harmony. Dialogue is essential to bridge differences toward the harmonious relationship between cultural identities (Broome, 2017; Jia & Jia, 2017; Miike, 2017).

Negotiation is important in resolving a conflict. Considering other parties' interests and way of viewing creates a better understanding of making future steps. Negotiation could be a method for searching for justice (Zartman, 2008). In the case of traditional culture, the effort to have equal recognition could seek fairness in such a transactional exchange. Besides, negotiating position by adapting to the new thought and environment could accommodate other parties' paradigm. Adaptation has been part of Javanese society to survive the changing social environment. Historically, Javanese has been through dynamism and animism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Colonialism and Christianity, and modernism to globalization. Javanese cultural practices are found within the religious practices of today's various religions in Indonesia. Despite most Muslims, four other religions live among Javanese society today: Protestant, Catholics, Hindu, and Buddha. It shows how culturally, the Javanese has been adaptive overtimes. In the case of wayang puppet theatre in Bali, Sedana (2016) narrates the innovation of wayang due to adaptation to the social dynamics and development of the society.

Communication strategies involve how and for what contents communication could be done to achieve certain goals. In this case, re-branding to change the way the public views Javanese culture is essential. To develop content that is effective to raise public awareness of the organizational positive recognition matter. Analyzing governmental institutions, Cheong & Kim (2017) underline the determinants of performance that connect to organizational politics and conflicts in organizations. Performance or positive recognition could be obtained through rebranding or image building. In terms of method, the advancement of technology and mass communication nowadays provide various ways to communicate with the public for an organization. Press conferences and releases, public talks and hearings, research and book publications, and internet use through websites and social media are getting common to be used by many institutions and corporations as part of their standard operating procedure. Social media could be an effective communication strategy to reach a more expansive and global audience (Pan, Torres, & Zúñiga, 2019).

C. Methods

This descriptive qualitative research uses ethnographic method to get the information on the subject of the study. I conducted the participatory observation at the Javanology Center of Excellence: Center for Javanese Cultural Traditions, Universitas Sebelas Maret in Surakarta, Indonesia, from February 10 to March 20, 2021. The information gathered from the observation are analyzed by employing the above theories related to intercultural communication and communication strategies to explain the communication strategies used by the Center.

D. Observation At Javanology Center

The Center focuses on developing local Javanese culture by creating awareness of Javanese culture's importance as the local identity and thought despite global modernity. The Javanology Center envisions "the Javanese local wisdom and thoughts as part of the strategic ideology in developing the Indonesian national identity" (<https://javanologi.uns.ac.id/visi-dan-misi/>). The Center is a non-profit organization affiliated with Universitas Sebelas Maret. It is located in Surakarta city or also known as Solo City in Central Java Province, Indonesia. Solo is the Center of Javanese culture. The Surakarta Kingdom —Kasunanan Sultanage— exists until today with the today's King Sri Susuhunan Pakubuwana XIII. Surakarta Sultanate is the legacy of the glorious Mataram Kingdom which ruled most Java island's territories during the Dutch colonial era. Despite no more administrative power, the kingdom has a robust cultural power socially for Javanese, especially Solo and its surroundings. However, the protracted conflict within the royal family since King XII's death in 2004 has decayed its social authority and public trust.

Located at the Center of Java island and the Javanese culture distribution is strategic for the Universitas Sebelas Maret to develop Javanese cultural Center. Established in 2010 as the Javanology Institute, the Center has survived plenty of challenges in upbringing the conscious on Javanese culture's importance as the primary color of the university. Convincing today's Javanese modernized-

globalized society with the majority Muslim community's setting about the significance of local thoughts, traditions, and practices is one of the Center's most challenging jobs. Conflict often happens in social debate both within the university's academic environment, where the Center is affiliated with and the public in general. The Javanology Center seeks to establish the conservation and reinterpretation of local Javanese culture by conducting research, cultural performances, training, and cultural preservation. The Center makes several efforts through various activities, from cultural events to academic activities. What attracts the writer most is the Center's efforts to develop public trust in the importance of local Javanese culture, thoughts, and identity to be continuously practiced despite the changing cultural modern landscape of Javanese society.

In 2020, the Center had greater recognition by receiving the grant from the Directorate of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia to be a Center of Excellence for Javanese Traditions. It has a better status institutionally. The 10-year journey has made tremendous progress; it is now one of the university's flagship centers. National recognition is also essential to see the Center's successful effort in building communication strategies to win academic and public acceptance despite concerns about developing the local culture. The writer is genuinely interested in looking at the Center's communication strategies to cope with the challenges and handle the potential conflict due to indigeneity. It includes what practical strategies can be taken as lessons learned, and a take away for the communication and conflict field.

During the observation, I involved in and observed several activities conducted by the Javanology Center. The activities are as follows: Joining UNS Jawametriik and program planning meeting, moderating a public virtual talk on the university alumnae program on "Maintaining Javanese Culture," observing the routine exercises of two training on traditional Javanese art performances: Ludruk and Reog, and observing the archives of Javanology Center's past activities.

1. UNS Jawametriik and program planning meeting.

I have joined series of meetings in the Javanology Center to contribute ideas in preparing two programs: UNS Jawametric 2021 and *Sirep Kala Sungsang* virtual webinar. One of the meetings was conducted in-person as it was a kick-off meeting. The rests are online due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

UNS Jawametriik is a metric system was created to provide information about various institutions around the world that developed a concern for Javanese culture. The information database originating from UNS Jawametriik will inform about centers, activities, research, cultural events, resources, experts and artifacts on Javanese culture around the world that will enable these institutions to connect and collaborate. The ranking is carried out annually based on the results of an online survey and / or data input from the relevant institution regarding the current conditions for each of the criteria and policies related to the implementation and development of Javanese culture in the relevant tertiary institution This ranking will be useful for universities and institutions around the world to share information about various issues and developments in Javanese culture and its figures. The meeting was conducted in series as the Center would announce the nominations for 2021 on March 2021 virtually and the final result will be announced on May 20, 2021.

While "*Sirep Kala Sungsang*" is a webinar that was held on April 8, 2021. The title is in Javanese which literally means 'deactivating the upside-down moment' which intends to address the pandemic by using point of view of Javanese culture. The webinar invites international speakers outside Indonesia who are Javanese diaspora and Javanese cultural enthusiasts.



Figure 1. The poster of Sirep Kala Sungsang webinar

2. Public Virtual Talk on the university alumnae program on “Maintaining Javanese Culture, Crafting International Recognition”

I took the opportunity offered to be a moderator on Javanology's campaign to talk to the public about who they are and what they commit to in a public forum virtually. It was a 2,5-hour public discussion forum on Zoom followed by about 200 university alumni both home and abroad. It was also LIVE on Youtube program. The link is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrS1Njh8PXU>; I started to lead the discussion as a moderator at the minute 31:15. It was in the Indonesian language. Through the activity, the writer experienced the open dialogue conducted by the Javanology Center with wide public audience and recognized the programs and concerns developed by the Center. The discussion begun with the Head of the Center, Prof. Sahid Teguh Widodo, Ph.D. explaining the major programs of Javanology Centers and invited supports from the floor. Other speakers were Prof Diah Kristina, Ph.D. (the secretary of the Center), John Paterson (Javanese culture enthusiast), Ary Setyawan, Ph.D. (the Head of UNS Jawametrik), and Tresya Yuliana Fitri, M.A. (a Javanese diaspora living in Warsawa, Poland).



Figure 2. The poster of Wedangan IKA UNS

Figure 2. The poster of the public virtual talk

3. Observing the routine exercises of two trainings on traditional Javanese art performances: *Ludruk* and *Reog*.

I enjoyed observing the routines activities of exercises of the two Javanese traditional performances. *Ludruk* and *Reog*. *Ludruk* is a traditional Javanese stage performance that originally only has male performers; male artists perform female characters on stage. The performance, which is commonly found in East Java province, combines traditional Javanese dance, singing, and stage drama. In comparison, *Reog* dance is a massive group performance and initially involves trance dancers. It is originally from Ponorogo city. It is unique due to its Lion headed dancer with peacock feather decoration. The dancer uses jaw strength to lift the 25 kgs mask —called *dadak merak*. Typically, such a mask reaches 40 kgs in weight in regular adult performance. Both are facing social challenges within modern Javanese society. *Ludruk* has been seen as campaigning trans-gender issues and *Reog* as a satanic performance involving trance and spiritual offerings by those who do not support this kinds of traditional Javanese performance. The exercises, however, were conducted by establishing specific pandemic protocols and broadcast online to reach the audience during the pandemic. I am interested in closely looking at how they handle such public stigma to continue conserving local culture. They also recruit young enthusiasts to join the force.



Figure 3. The *reog* dance routines at Javanology Center

4. Archive observation of Javanology Center's past activities.

I conducted the activity to enrich the report's data dealing with past events run by the Javanology Center. The Javanology Center has an excellent archival record since its founding in 2010. The archive observation aims at enhancing the analysis of the discussion in the next part. One crucial piece of data is the monthly zoom discussion conducted from December 2020 until March 2021 to develop Javanese academic methods. The forum invites experts and practitioners on Javanese culture.

E. The communication strategies of Javanology

The learned aspect from the observation is the interplay between the empowerment of indigenous culture and intercultural communication to formulate communication strategies in developing and campaigning Javanese culture and winning public recognition. Despite the challenges, the growing recognition through the changing institutional status and grant achieved to show the positive direction in attaining the goal. Communication model applied by the Center contributes to the communication studies in terms of shifting potential intercultural conflict into productive activities and image building. It is an effort of 'conflict prevention' (Swanström & Weissmann, 2005). In terms of content communication strategies, there are four essential aspects. They are self-empowerment through academic movement, adapting to modern cultural practices and technology, developing training centers and networks targeting the younger generation globally, and employing intercultural communication to bridge the conflict through dialogues. Technically, the Center uses mass media and information technology to enhance the campaign and reach its wider public.

1. Self-empowerment through academic movement.

From the naming itself, the Javanology Center has been in an effort to address Javanese culture as an academic subject. Re-branding matters in this case. Javanology term borrows Latin words of logos which are commonly used in intellectual tradition to name a scientific subject such as biology, sociology, anthropology, etc. It intends to show that Javanese cultural studies can be an academic subject matter.

Developing Javanese academic methods is what Smith (2012) calls 'decolonizing methodologies.' It is an intellectual effort to put Javanology as a Center and scholarly movement and throw Java and Javanese as an academic subject matter. Academic activities conducted through conferences, seminars, workshops, research, journal writing, and book publications are essential to turn the public's perception of the forebears' tradition into new academic matters. Practicing Javanese culture may no longer be perceived as romanticizing the past; it is today's culture of the ordinary. The effort brings the notion of rebranding the Center and the university to have Javanese culture as the unique color of the university. Then, the university is having both academic and cultural strength, the local culture of where it stands firmly. It intends to develop the 'organizational performance' (Cheong & Kim, 2017) of the university and Javanese culture in the public eye at the same time. Instead of being stigmatized as left-behind, it shows the academic and scientific aspect of Javanese culture. A program like UNS Jawametriik also contributes to the university branding and recognition, and development of Javanese culture by recognizing and appreciating Javanese culture's global practices.

2. Adapting to modern cultural practices and technology.

Adaptation is part of a negotiation. In Ludruk and Reog, the Javanology center makes adaptation strategy to negotiate with the public's point of view. Ludruk performance in Javanology has been opened for female performers by justifying that only-male performers historically related to condition during Dutch colonial. A male having a role as a female on stage was a part of the spying strategy during the colonial war. Therefore, within today's context, only-male performer is not an un-negotiable thing in Ludruk performance. In the case of Reog performance, Javanology does not consider spiritual offerings and trance as the main menu of the performance. The symbols that will lead to the interpretation of the art performance for being mystical or even satanic are not practiced. It, however, does not reduce the art aspects of the performance. The adaptive strategy provides more access to those two performances to be performed publicly with better acceptance as pure arts performance expressions.

3. Developing training centers and networks targeting the younger generation globally.

Training Center such as *Ludruk* and *Reog* school mentioned above show the important aspect of skill and knowledge transfer in preserving local indigenous culture. This activity will re-familiarize the forgotten traditional art performance. Most importantly, there is a re-generational process that guarantees future practices. The arrival of global mediated culture has provided young Javanese with many options. The training center will maintain the availability of the opportunity.

Targeting younger generations, the Javanology Center also develops Youth Javanese Networks. It aims to be a global network connecting young Javanese and Javanese diaspora worldwide. The method used is through internet technology such as social media (Pan, Torres, & Zúñiga, 2019). As a movement, networks and supports are essential. This strategy empowers Javanese people of where they live right now and moves them into supporters of the cultural movement, preserving and developing Javanese culture.

4. Employing intercultural communication to bridge the conflict through dialogues.

To listen to the public's point of view and interest to formulate harmony matters. Public talk in such activity mentioned in the observation activities opens a room for dialogue. Dialogue means creating a channel of communication among parties to understand each other. Differences such as cultural differences may be perceived differently through a dialogue toward harmony. The Javanology Center has a chance to know what and how the public views Javanese culture and vice-versa. The wider public will also be able to learn Javanology closely. Dialogue in openness will not sharpen the intercultural differences. It is an effort to create harmony by listening and accommodating each other. From moderating the talking activity, I could see the wide range of possible conflicts. For example, in terms of language use, during the talk there were several audiences suggested using the Javanese

language to show Javanese pride. However, not all the audiences can speak Javanese even when they were all Javanese-related community. Finally, the dialogue only addressed specific Javanese terms during the talk. Bahasa Indonesia tended to be the common language of the virtual night discussion.

F. Conclusion

From the involvement in the activities conducted by Javanology Center, observation, discussion with the actors and thinkers within the Center, and tracing the history of its past recent actions, I could pattern the communication strategies preferred by the Center into four ways: (1) Self-empowerment through academic movement, (2) adapting to modern cultural practices and technology, (3) developing training centers and networks targeting the younger generation globally, and (4) employing intercultural communication to bridge the conflict through dialogues. The four methods have made the Center into growing reputation and recognition institutionally, academically, and socio-culturally. The methods are strategic ways of communicating the Javanese culture. It seeks better recognition and position in the academic society and national socio-cultural life. Technically, the Center utilizes the today's mass communication tool and academic activities effectively such as, press conferences and releases to mass media, social media account (Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube), website, public talks, academic conferences, and publications.

References

- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Broome, B.J. (2017). Moving from conflict to harmony: the role of dialogue in bridging differences. In Dai, X. & Chen, G. (Eds), *Conflict management and intercultural communication: The art of intercultural harmony*, (pp. 13-28). New York: Routledge.
- Cheong, J.O. & Kim, C. (2017). Determinants of performance in government: focusing on the effect of organizational politics and conflicts in organizations. *International Journal of Public Administration*, February, 1-13. doi: 10.1080/01900692.2017.1280818
- Geertz, C. (1976). *The religion of Java*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hofstede, G, Hofstede, G.H., & Minkov, M. (2017). The concept of culture. In *Cultures and organizations : Software of the mind : Intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival* (pp. 1-49). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Jia, Y. & Jia, X.L. (2017). A dialogic approach to intercultural conflict management and harmonious relationships: dialogue, ethics, and culture. In Dai, X. & Chen, G. (Eds), *Conflict management and intercultural communication: The art of intercultural harmony* (pp. 29-37). New York: Routledge.
- Kauanui, J.K. (2014). Indigenous. In Burgett, B. & Handler, G. (Eds), *Keywords for American cultural studies*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kumar, S. & Parameswaran, R. (2018). Charting an itinerary for postcolonial communication and media studies. *Journal of communication*, 68, 347–358. doi:10.1093/joc/jqx025
- Miike, Y. (2017). Between conflict and harmony in the human family: Asia centrality and its ethical imperative for intercultural communication. In Dai, X. & Chen, G. (Eds), *Conflict management and intercultural communication: The art of intercultural harmony* (pp. 38-65). New York: Routledge.
- Pan, Y, Torres, I.M., & Zúñiga, M.A. (2019): Social media communications and marketing strategy: A taxonomical review of potential explanatory approaches. *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 1-18. doi: 10.1080/15332861.2019.1567187
- Sedana, I.N. (2016). Innovation of wayang puppet theatre in Bali. In Xing, J. & Ng, P. (eds.). *Indigenous culture, education and globalization: critical perspectives from Asia* (pp. 66-80). New York: Springer.

- Smith, L.T. (2012). Introduction. In *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples* (pp. 1-19). New York: Zed Books.
- Swanström, N. L. P. & Weissmann, M. S. (2005). *Conflict, conflict prevention and conflict management and beyond: A conceptual exploration*. Retrieved from: www.silkroadstudies.org
- Visi dan Misi. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://javanologi.uns.ac.id/visi-dan-misi/>
- Zartman, W. (2008). Negotiation as a search for justice. In *Negotiation and conflict management: Essays on theory and practice (security and conflict management)* (pp. 51-67). New York: Routledge.