

Exploring the Role of Cultural Introduction in Rekindling National Pride Among Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of cultural introduction in rekindling national pride among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. With over 2.5 million Indonesian workers in Malaysia, many face challenges such as social isolation, cultural disconnection, and emotional distress. This research investigates how participation in Indonesian cultural activities, including arts, language, and culinary events, can enhance their emotional ties to their homeland and improve their psychological well-being. Through qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and participatory observation, the study highlights the significant impact of cultural programs in fostering a sense of belonging and pride among migrant workers. The findings suggest that cultural engagement not only reconnects workers with their Indonesian identity but also mitigates feelings of alienation. However, the study identifies several challenges, including time constraints and social isolation, that hinder the full potential of these programs. The research concludes by emphasizing the need for greater support from the Indonesian government, migrant worker organizations, and other stakeholders to overcome these obstacles and ensure the sustainability and accessibility of cultural initiatives for migrant workers.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia play a crucial role in the country's economy. The majority of them are employed in sectors heavily reliant on foreign labor, such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work. According to data from the Indonesian National Agency for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BNP2TKI), the number of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is estimated to exceed 2 million as of 2020. Their presence significantly contributes to Malaysia's economic growth, yet at the same time, they often face various challenges related to social, cultural, and psychological issues. In an unfamiliar environment, Indonesian migrant workers are confronted with numerous difficulties that affect their well-being, including feelings of alienation and disconnection from their home country (Fahzaria et al., 2024; Utaminingsih et al., 2024).

One of the primary problems faced by Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is the loss of emotional connection to Indonesia. Working far from their families and home country for long periods often leads to a sense of detachment from their cultural identity (Bernardo et al., 2022). Furthermore, the starkly different customs and culture in Malaysia, combined with the need to adapt to the local environment, may exacerbate feelings of isolation. This, in turn, can diminish their sense of love for their homeland and foster a sense of loneliness and longing (Ernstberger & Adaawen, 2023).

To address this issue, one potential solution is to introduce Indonesian culture more intensively to migrant workers. Such cultural immersion not only provides an opportunity for migrant workers to reconnect with their heritage but also helps them feel more connected to their identity as Indonesians. Programs that showcase Indonesian culture—such as sharing knowledge, arts, language, music, and cuisine—can serve as a bridge between migrant workers and their homeland. These cultural activities allow workers to reignite pride in their Indonesian roots, which they may have long forgotten due to the pressures of living abroad.

Traditional Indonesian arts, such as dance, music, and theatre, hold great potential in rekindling national pride. By participating in cultural performances, migrant workers can relive the rich and diverse cultural atmosphere of Indonesia. In addition, introducing the Indonesian language is another crucial aspect in maintaining and strengthening their national identity. Activities like

language classes or language clubs could improve their communication skills with fellow migrant workers and other Indonesians in Malaysia, thus fostering greater pride in their national identity.

Music and cuisine are also powerful tools for strengthening the emotional connection between migrant workers and Indonesia. Indonesian food festivals held in Malaysia, for example, give migrant workers the chance to enjoy traditional Indonesian dishes, evoking a sense of home. Similarly, Indonesian traditional and modern music, often featured in cultural events, can create deep nostalgia for the workers. Such cultural activities not only provide entertainment but also create spaces for shared experiences and strengthen solidarity among migrant workers, which ultimately reinforces their connection to their homeland (Hassanli et al., 2019; Juul, 2014).

Moreover, the presence of Indonesian migrant worker communities in Malaysia plays a significant role in maintaining a sense of national pride. These communities provide essential support systems where workers can share experiences and offer emotional assistance. Social events within these communities, such as the celebration of Indonesian national holidays or regular gatherings, help foster a strong sense of togetherness and solidarity. These activities contribute to the strengthening of their bond with Indonesia and enhance their sense of nationalism.

However, there are challenges in introducing Indonesian culture to migrant workers in Malaysia. One of the main obstacles is the limited time available to workers, many of whom work long hours and have little leisure time. Additionally, difficulty in accessing information about cultural activities can hinder some workers' participation (Cerisola & Panzera, 2022). Therefore, there is a need for further efforts to create more accessible and flexible cultural programs so that migrant workers can actively participate in them.

Despite these challenges, this research aims to explore how the introduction of Indonesian culture can serve as an effective tool in rekindling national pride among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. By gaining a better understanding of the impact of cultural activities on the psychological and emotional well-being of migrant workers, we can design more targeted and effective programs with meaningful impact (Agyeiwaah et al., 2025; Heyeres et al., 2021). Furthermore, this study will analyze the factors that influence migrant workers' attachment to Indonesian culture, and how they can use culture as a means of reducing feelings of isolation while strengthening their national identity abroad.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia

Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia play a significant role in the economies of both countries. They are an essential labor force in various sectors, particularly in domestic work, agriculture, construction, and manufacturing. According to data from the Indonesian National Agency for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BNP2TKI), the number of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is estimated to have reached 2.5 million in 2020. These workers contribute substantially to Malaysia's economic development, filling labor shortages in sectors where local workers are less inclined to work.

However, despite their crucial role, Indonesian migrant workers often face numerous challenges and adversities in Malaysia. They are frequently exposed to exploitative practices, such as low wages, long working hours, and poor working conditions. Discrimination from employers and fellow workers is also prevalent, contributing to a sense of marginalization (Zhang et al., 2023). These conditions make it difficult for migrant workers to feel truly integrated into the local society, leading to a deep sense of alienation and emotional distress (Noor & Shaker, 2017).

Additionally, social pressures can exacerbate the situation, leaving migrant workers feeling disconnected from their home country. Many workers endure physical and emotional separation from their families for long periods, which can result in feelings of homesickness and isolation (Hack-Polay & Mahmoud, 2020; Martinez et al., 2022). These pressures, combined with the challenges of adapting to a foreign environment, make it harder for workers to maintain strong connections with their Indonesian roots, further diminishing their sense of pride and attachment to their homeland.

Despite these challenges, Indonesian migrant workers are resilient, and many find ways to cope with their difficult circumstances. The introduction of cultural programs aimed at reconnecting workers with their Indonesian heritage could offer a significant opportunity to strengthen their emotional ties to their home country. Such initiatives could help migrant workers regain their sense of identity, national pride, and emotional well-being, reducing feelings of alienation and improving their overall mental health and sense of belonging.

b. Culture and Nationalism

Culture plays a crucial role in the formation of nationalism and a collective sense of identity. According to Putnam (2000), shared cultural experiences allow individuals to build emotional bonds with their community and nation. When people engage in cultural activities, whether through art, language, or culinary traditions, they develop a deeper connection to their heritage and the shared history of their nation. This connection can foster feelings of pride, unity, and belonging, all of which are foundational elements of nationalism.

Cultural engagement is particularly important for individuals living outside their home countries, as it serves as a bridge between them and their roots (Popescu & Pudelfko, 2024). In the case of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, participation in

cultural activities could help rekindle the emotional attachment they have to their homeland. Whether it is through celebrating national holidays, participating in traditional dance or music, or enjoying Indonesian food, these cultural expressions help migrant workers remember and reconnect with their identity as Indonesians.

Furthermore, the experience of cultural pride can have a direct impact on an individual's psychological well-being (E. Zhou et al., 2021). Studies have shown that individuals who actively engage in their cultural traditions tend to have a stronger sense of self-worth and belonging (Kirchner-Häusler et al., 2023; S. Zhou et al., 2025). For migrant workers, participating in cultural events not only reinforces their national identity but also helps combat feelings of isolation and alienation that often accompany life abroad. By celebrating their culture, migrant workers can feel more grounded and supported, even in a foreign land.

Nationalism, nurtured through cultural engagement, is not limited to patriotic feelings toward a country (Dosumxodjaev, 2021). It also involves the recognition and appreciation of one's cultural heritage. For Indonesian migrant workers, this can manifest in an increased pride in their homeland and a renewed desire to contribute positively to their country (Putri et al., 2024). By fostering national pride, cultural activities can serve as a catalyst for creating stronger, more cohesive migrant communities in Malaysia.

c. Cultural Introduction for Migrant Workers

Jatiningsih et al. (2024) have highlighted the importance of cultural engagement in helping migrant workers reconnect with their roots and strengthen their sense of national pride. Research has shown that migrant workers who participate in cultural activities feel more connected to their identities and are better able to cope with the challenges of living abroad (Popescu & Pudelko, 2024). For instance, Juul (2014) conducted a study on migrant workers in other countries and found that cultural programs, such as festivals and art performances, can reduce feelings of isolation and improve their pride in their homeland.

Cultural festivals, language workshops, and art exhibitions are some of the most effective ways to introduce Indonesian culture to migrant workers in Malaysia. These activities not only provide entertainment and enjoyment but also offer opportunities for workers to engage with their cultural heritage. By participating in these events, migrant workers can interact with fellow Indonesians, share experiences, and celebrate their shared identity. Such interactions help build a sense of community, which is essential for combating the feelings of loneliness and disconnection that many migrant workers experience (Enh et al., 2024).

Moreover, the introduction of cultural programs creates an avenue for migrant workers to strengthen their emotional well-being (Heyeres et al., 2021). The act of engaging with familiar cultural practices can provide comfort and stability, offering an emotional anchor for workers who may feel adrift in a foreign land. This emotional reinforcement can be particularly valuable for workers who are experiencing homesickness, as it provides a tangible connection to their homeland and a reminder of their roots.

However, for cultural programs to be effective in fostering national pride, they must be accessible and relevant to the needs of migrant workers (Jatiningsih et al., 2024). The programs should consider the specific challenges faced by workers, such as limited free time and language barriers, and be designed in a way that accommodates their daily schedules. By making these cultural activities more inclusive and flexible, they can have a lasting impact on migrant workers, helping them reconnect with their national identity and fostering a renewed sense of pride in their country (Tanveer et al., 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach, incorporating in-depth interviews and participatory observation. The research was conducted in Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding areas, where many Indonesian migrant workers are employed. The participants in the study were migrant workers who had participated in various Indonesian cultural activities, such as Indonesian language training, arts performances, and cultural festivals. By selecting this group, the research aims to understand the impact of cultural engagement on the workers' connection to their national identity and pride.

In addition to interviews, the researcher also observed Indonesian cultural events held in Malaysia. This observation was crucial for understanding how these cultural activities were organized, how migrant workers engaged with them, and what emotional or psychological effects these events had on the participants. Through this combination of interviews and observation, the study aimed to gain a comprehensive insight into how cultural activities influence the workers' feelings of connection to Indonesia and their sense of national pride.

a. Data Collection Techniques

Data for this research was collected through in-depth interviews with Indonesian migrant workers who had participated in various cultural activities. These interviews were structured to explore the workers' experiences, emotions, and perceptions regarding their participation in cultural events. The interviews also aimed to uncover the significance of these activities in rekindling their connection to Indonesia, as well as their views on how such programs might influence their love for their homeland. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in Indonesian cultural activities to provide insights into the effectiveness of these programs.

Alongside interviews, the researcher conducted observations of cultural events organized in Malaysia, including Indonesian festivals, language workshops, and artistic performances. These observations allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the atmosphere of the events, the level of engagement of the migrant workers, and how these activities contributed to their

emotional well-being. The combination of interviews and field observation provided a holistic perspective on the role of cultural introduction in strengthening national pride among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia.

b. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data. The researcher carefully analyzed the transcripts from the in-depth interviews and notes taken during the observations to identify recurring themes related to the impact of cultural introduction on nationalism and identity. This approach allowed the researcher to explore how the cultural activities influenced migrant workers' emotional connections to Indonesia and their sense of belonging to their homeland.

Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to categorize various responses and observations, highlighting the specific aspects of cultural programs that contributed to fostering a stronger national identity. Themes such as the sense of community, emotional connection to Indonesian culture, and renewed pride in the homeland were central to the analysis. By identifying these themes, the study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how cultural engagement can shape the nationalistic feelings and cultural identity of migrant workers.

DISCUSSION

a. The Influence of Cultural Introduction on National Pride

The findings of this study indicate that the introduction of Indonesian culture has a significant impact on enhancing migrant workers' sense of national pride. Cultural activities that involve Indonesian arts, language, and cuisine provide workers with opportunities to reconnect with their homeland. Through these activities, migrant workers can experience a sense of nostalgia and pride in the culture they left behind. For many, these experiences evoke memories of home, reinforcing their emotional bond with Indonesia, even while they are living in a foreign country.

Cultural programs also serve as a platform for migrant workers to engage with other Indonesians, creating a supportive community where they can share experiences and offer mutual encouragement. This sense of belonging within a community of fellow countrymen is crucial for workers who may feel isolated in Malaysia. Through shared cultural activities, they are able to re-establish connections with their national identity, reinforcing their pride in being Indonesian. This connection to a larger community also provides a sense of comfort, which can alleviate the emotional stress of living far from home.

Moreover, participation in cultural activities helps to counteract the feelings of alienation that many migrant workers face (Zhang et al., 2023). The experience of participating in a traditional Indonesian festival or enjoying familiar food and music fosters an emotional connection to their homeland, making them feel more grounded in their cultural identity. These activities act as a buffer against the loneliness and homesickness that are common among migrant workers, enabling them to retain a sense of belonging to their homeland despite being physically far from it (Liu et al., 2022).

Additionally, the introduction of culture provides migrant workers with a deeper understanding of their national heritage. Programs that focus on the rich diversity of Indonesian culture, from its various regional traditions to its history, help workers to appreciate their cultural roots in a way that may have been overlooked in their daily lives (Mariyono, 2024). By re-engaging with these cultural elements, workers can develop a renewed sense of pride and respect for their identity, which contributes positively to their psychological well-being.

In conclusion, the introduction of Indonesian culture plays a pivotal role in strengthening the national pride of migrant workers. These cultural programs provide emotional support, foster community building, and alleviate feelings of isolation, all of which help workers reconnect with their identity as Indonesians. As such, cultural engagement is not only a means of preserving national pride but also a valuable tool for enhancing the mental health and emotional resilience of migrant workers.

b. Factors Affecting Attachment to Indonesian Culture

The study also reveals that the duration of a migrant worker's stay in Malaysia is a significant factor in the level of attachment to Indonesian culture. Workers who have been in Malaysia for a longer period tend to experience a gradual decline in their connection to Indonesian culture. This decline is often due to their increased adaptation to Malaysian culture and the challenges they face in maintaining strong ties to their homeland. Over time, the demands of living abroad, along with the need to assimilate into a new environment, can lead to a sense of detachment from the cultural practices they once embraced (Popescu & Pudelho, 2024).

Additionally, the pressures of daily life, such as long working hours and the need to send money home, can further contribute to the weakening of cultural ties. Many workers find it difficult to dedicate time or energy to cultural activities, especially when they are focused on meeting the immediate demands of work and survival. This lack of time, combined with the physical distance from their families and communities in Indonesia, can create a barrier to maintaining their cultural practices and rituals.

Despite these challenges, cultural introduction programs offer a potential solution for re-strengthening migrant workers' attachment to Indonesian culture. Through engaging in cultural events and activities, workers can re-establish connections to their heritage, which may have diminished over time (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2021). These programs provide a reminder of their identity

and offer a platform for them to rediscover the importance of their cultural roots, even if they have been living abroad for many years.

However, the effectiveness of these programs in rekindling cultural attachment depends on several factors, including the accessibility of these programs and the level of interest among workers. Migrant workers who are more engaged with their cultural roots prior to migrating are more likely to participate actively in cultural programs (Gong et al., 2025). On the other hand, those who have adapted more fully to Malaysian culture may require additional support or encouragement to participate in such activities. Therefore, the design and implementation of cultural programs must consider the varying levels of attachment among different workers.

In summary, the length of time spent in Malaysia and the process of adaptation to local culture are key factors that influence the attachment of Indonesian migrant workers to their cultural heritage. While these challenges pose difficulties, cultural introduction programs have the potential to re-engage workers with their Indonesian identity, even if their connection to it has diminished over time. By offering accessible and inclusive cultural activities, it is possible to reinforce workers' attachment to their homeland, fostering a stronger sense of national pride.

c. Challenges in Cultural Introduction in Malaysia

Despite the positive impacts of cultural introduction programs, there are several challenges that hinder the effective implementation of these initiatives. One of the primary obstacles is the limited amount of free time that migrant workers have due to their demanding work schedules. Many migrant workers in Malaysia work long hours, often in physically taxing jobs, which leaves them with little time or energy to engage in cultural activities. As a result, participation in cultural events or programs can be seen as an added burden, rather than an opportunity for personal enrichment.

Another significant challenge is the difficulty in reaching out to more isolated migrant workers, particularly those who work in remote areas or in sectors with fewer social connections. These workers often have less access to information about available cultural programs, and their social isolation can make it harder for them to participate in community-based activities. The lack of accessible channels for communication and outreach, coupled with language barriers, further limits the reach of cultural programs to those who could benefit the most from them.

In addition to logistical challenges, there are also issues related to the relevance and appeal of the cultural programs themselves. If these programs are not tailored to the specific needs and interests of migrant workers, they may fail to engage the target audience. For example, cultural events that are too formal or unrelated to the daily lives of the workers may not attract their participation. Therefore, it is essential to design programs that are both accessible and relatable, ensuring that they resonate with the workers and encourage active involvement.

Moreover, the lack of financial resources and support for organizing such cultural activities can also be a barrier. Many organizations and community groups that aim to promote Indonesian culture in Malaysia operate on limited budgets, making it difficult to sustain long-term initiatives. Securing funding and resources is essential for the success of these programs, and partnerships with local businesses, government agencies, and NGOs may be necessary to ensure their continuity and effectiveness.

In conclusion, while cultural programs can have a positive impact on migrant workers, there are significant challenges that need to be addressed for these initiatives to reach their full potential. Overcoming issues related to time constraints, social isolation, program relevance, and resource limitations is crucial to ensuring that cultural introduction programs are successful in reconnecting workers with their cultural identity and fostering national pride. By addressing these challenges, it is possible to create more inclusive and effective cultural programs that can benefit a wider range of migrant workers in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of Indonesian culture to migrant workers in Malaysia proves to be an effective means of fostering a deeper sense of national pride and connection to their homeland. Cultural activities, such as arts, language training, and festivals, provide migrant workers with valuable opportunities to reconnect with their cultural roots, which, in turn, has a positive impact on their psychological well-being. These activities help mitigate feelings of alienation and loneliness, offering a sense of community and emotional support. However, for such cultural programs to reach their full potential, it is crucial that they receive strong support from various stakeholders, including the Indonesian government, migrant worker organizations, and other relevant parties. Addressing the logistical and social challenges faced by migrant workers, such as limited time, isolation, and access to resources, will be key to ensuring the success of these programs. By working collaboratively, these entities can create a more accessible and sustainable framework for cultural engagement, ultimately helping migrant workers preserve their cultural identity while enhancing their emotional resilience and national pride.

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