



Volume 7 (2) (2024): 50-57

The Indonesian Journal of Social Studies

Available at <https://journal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/jpips/index>

Sustaining Indonesian Roots:

A Tale of Families, Workers, and Students in Japan

ABUBAKAR PAE Flady Faliyenco Franggaratz
Research Student at Policy Studies, Nanzan University
Nagoya, Japan
Tenconf16@gmail.com

I. Introduction

Inspired by the tradition of “*merantau*,” or migration, Indonesians move globally for better opportunities while staying deeply connected to their cultural roots [1]. In Japan, they actively preserve their culture by organizing festivals, simultaneously serving as cultural ambassadors to build connections with Japanese and international communities. To capture this journey, we conducted interviews with Indonesian families, workers, and students actively involved in organizing and participating in cultural events.

The study unveils compelling stories reflecting the challenges and resilience of Indonesian migrants in Japan. A devoted mother, with her three children, drives 366 kilometers from Tokyo to Nagoya, actively participating in traditional dance practices, emphasizing the importance of cultural activities for her children’s connection to Indonesian heritage. A worker, balancing long hours in Japan while also volunteering for the Indonesian Festival, showcases the challenges of event coordination, sleeping on-site to ensure that everything is ready on the day. University students juggle their academic pressures and part-time jobs while teaching traditional dance to children, preparing them for performances and accompanying them to the stage to ease their nerves.

These stories emphasize the multifaceted challenges faced by Indonesian families, workers, and students in Japan, showcasing their commitment to preserving cultural identity. Importantly, the narratives underscore the need for deeper support from the Indonesian government through funding and other means to ensure the sustainability of these efforts, reflecting the aspirations and hopes of these individuals.

II. What are Indonesian Migrants Doing in Japan?

According to data provided by the Japan Ministry of Justice, the number of foreign residents in Japan as of June 30, 2022, reached 2,961,969. Within this demographic, Indonesian nationals ranked sixth, following China, Vietnam, South Korea, the Philippines, Brazil, and Nepal, with 83,169 residents.

*Corresponding author:

e-ISSN 2615-5966 (Online)

E-mail: Tenconf16@gmail.com

This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA license



Breaking down the types of visas, 39,177 (or 47.1%) were technical intern trainees, 9,481 (or 11.4%) were specified skilled workers, 7,215 (or 8.7%) were permanent residents, 6,330 (or 7.7%) were students, 5,516 (or 6.6%) held designated activities visas, 4,802 (or 5.7%) were Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services visa holders, 3,466 (or 4.2%) were family dependents, 2,432 (or 2.9%) were long-term residents, 2,285 (or 2.7%) were Spouses or children of Japanese nationals, and 8 (or 0.0%) held special long-term residence status. Finally, 2,457 (or 2.9%) were mid to long-term residents with various types of visas not mentioned previously.

From the gathered data, it is evident that the majority of Indonesians in Japan are engaged in employment, followed by students and those residing in the country as dependents of their family members. These migrants from Indonesia often form distinct groups based on their occupations or shared interests. These groups tend to remain relatively separate due to pronounced differences in their respective dynamics that do not match which each other.

The workers, characterized by their demanding schedules and long working hours mandated by Japan companies, face a unique challenge. Japan, despite its ranking among OECD countries for long working hours, sees its workers frequently putting in extended hours even on weekends. This leaves the workers with limited free time. While companies typically align their holidays with nationally recognized ones, such as Japan's Golden Week or specific national holidays, there are cases where companies set their own work schedule and holidays, diverging from the national schedule, thereby further constraining opportunities for collective gatherings with other groups other than their own peers.

Students, while more flexible than workers, face immense academic pressure with varying lab schedules, learning the local language, classes on their main subjects, and publication targets. Their free time is unpredictable, potentially leading to extended breaks or no holidays, especially near publication deadlines. This makes collective gatherings with another group other than students quite challenging. Especially, during these breaks, students often return home, travel, or engage in more extended part-time jobs. Japanese regulations permit student visa holders to work up to 28 hours a week during regular school days and up to 40 hours a week during extended vacations.

Families, particularly those under dependent visas, encounter their own set of constraints to gather with another group of Indonesian expats. Spouses working part-time jobs are required to assist their children with studies and homework, adhering to Japanese school requirements. Despite these commitments, families find time for gatherings on their designated days off, frequently participating in religious-based groups. Providing a platform for imparting religious teachings to their children and fostering connections with

other like-minded families. However, meeting other Indonesians of different faiths, language, and economic backgrounds it still limited.

These groups, though distinct, come together at Indonesian festival. Their shared goal: showcasing Indonesian culture in Japan. Each group adds its unique touch, contributing personal stories to make the festivals vibrant and diverse.

III. Individual Stories

A. A Worker

In the bustling work environment of Aichi Prefecture, Japan, I met Fajri (pseudonym), a 28-year-old Indonesian worker. His regular work hours are from 09:00 to 17:00, but the weekends bring an extra challenge – the company encourages everyone to do more work and offers extra pay for it.

Fajri shares that despite this, his company seems flexible. He can ask for a day off on Saturdays if he has something important to do. However, he is careful not to take too many days off because he doesn't want to make things difficult for his co-workers. According to Fajri, it's a shared responsibility to contribute more to the company by working extra hours – a common practice here [2].

Moving beyond the work setting, Fajri also participates in the Indonesian Festival in Aichi since 2021. Surprisingly, his involvement started with a simple message on a WhatsApp group for Indonesian workers in Aichi. Despite the group being mostly inactive due to everyone's busy schedules, he saw a poster calling for volunteers. Fajri and his friends decided to join the festival after looking at that poster. When asked about his motivation, Fajri told me:

Because it is Indonesian Festival. It was my chance to contribute to my country. It is a calling.

I can feel it in my heart.

As Fajri delves into his volunteering journey, we learn that he plays a crucial role in managing cultural performances on the festival. Despite extensive preparation with weeks of meetings, the festival day brings unexpected challenges – performers showing up late and asking for last-minute changes. Fajri notes the difference from the usual Japanese way of planning everything meticulously. He suggests a need for learning more to adapt to these dynamic situations.

I cannot protest, what the performers want, we make it happen. They are exhibiting our country.

Their performance will determine how we looked. So eventhough it is sudden changes, 10 minutes or even 3 minutes before the performance start, we discuss quickly

and make it happen.

When questioned about why these changes happened, Fajri acknowledges that many issues arise due to a lack of communication from the performers, and quick discussions are vital to finding solutions. Even if these rapid changes sometimes bother him, he thinks it is acceptable.

Another notable aspect of Fajri's story is the dedication he and his friends exhibit. They spend the entire night at the venue before the festival to ensure everything is set up perfectly. When asked about the benefits, Fajri mentions the provisions listed from the beginning – lunch and some money for transportation. While he, living nearby, finds it manageable, he expresses gratitude for others who come from far away, spending their own money to help them make the festival happen.

When asked if that will affect his future involvement with the festival, he told me:

Not at all. I will be the volunteer again next year, remember! It's a calling!

B. A Student

This section delves into the experiences of Sinta, a pseudonymous doctoral student at a prestigious Japanese national university, as she shares her journey in the Indonesian Festival. Specifically, Sinta undertakes the responsibility of training Indonesian children aged 5 to 10 for traditional dance performances during the festivals.

Despite the impending deadline for her doctoral thesis submission, Sinta gracefully juggles her academic commitments with the demanding schedule of training the children. When asked about the motivation behind her efforts, Sinta told me:

We have an Indonesian Children informal group where the children come and learn Indonesian cultures, getting used to talking with their peers in their native language and getting in touch with their roots. We train them in traditional dances and then encourage them to showcase it in front of the Japanese.

This commitment is a testament to Sinta's dedication to preserving and sharing Indonesian cultural heritage among younger generations. However, some serious challenges have arrived impeding her efforts. She told me:

One of the most difficult parts is finding traditional costumes for the performance. We have some available now from previous students, but those costumes are not in good condition and can't be used anymore.

Sinta's words highlight the practical challenges faced by the group, emphasizing the need for adequate resources to sustain cultural initiatives. Sinta contemplates discarding these old costumes and explores options like borrowing from the embassy. However, this also posed another challenge. She said:

We can borrow the costume from the embassy, but after using it, we need to laundry it before sending them back to Tokyo. The thing is, Indonesian traditional clothes have a lot of accessories attached to them, and therefore laundering it will cost a lot.

Despite the arduous preparations, Sinta emphasizes the unwavering parental support and inventive problem-solving within the group. She told me:

Even though we have a very difficult time preparing the performances, the parents keep supporting us in all conditions and always have solutions for the problems. Like last time we don't have the clothes for Sajojo dance, the parents sit together to make it from the plastic rope.

This resilience illustrates the communal spirit that propels the group forward, transcending challenges in pursuit of their cultural mission. Then, when questioned about the kind of support they require, Sinta expresses a desire for embassy assistance. Beyond the traditional roles of protection service, she envisions financial backing for their commendable efforts.

Some years ago, every time we performed, the organizers provided us 5,000 yen. Not much, but with that money, we could buy snacks or small presents for their hard work reward. But now we don't get anything. I hope the embassy can support us, not only for helping us with passports and protecting us but also supporting the children's efforts.

Sinta recalls a time when the committee provided a modest financial contribution after each performance, enabling the purchase of snacks or small presents for the children. This practice has dwindled, compelling the group to fund these rewards from their own pockets, presenting a financial challenge for student-led initiatives.

C. A Family

In this section, we delve into the narrative of Ayu, a pseudonymous individual who embarked on her academic journey in Japan in 2005, eventually establishing a family with her husband, an Indonesian fellow student. Residing in Japan with their three daughters, Ayu actively engages in the annual Indonesian Festival in Nagoya since 2005, showcasing her dedication to preserving and promoting Indonesian culture.

Reflecting on her initial arrival in Japan, Ayu possesses a profound understanding of the importance of showcasing cultural heritage on a global stage. She told me:

When coming to Japan, I brought my traditional costume with me—a complete version. Not only batik or kebaya, because I knew that I'm going to showcase my culture in Japan as well. But most of my friends were not bring it. Maybe because they cannot do the traditional dances. I was the only one who can dance, I dance the one from Minang

Ayu's early realization, stemming from her experiences in the U.S. during the AFS

program, laid the foundation for her commitment to preserving cultural identity abroad. However, her involvement in the first Indonesian festival in Japan marked a notable episode, particularly in attempting the Acehese Saman Dance. The challenge of insufficient members prompted a deviation from tradition, blending male and female dancers, a practice against Acehese cultural norms. These efforts then got a strong refusal from one of the Acehese senior students there. But she told me:

We tried to talk with him, said that we don't want the insufficient members became an obstacle. But nope, he still refused but the show went on, and we did it. We were in the local newspaper the next day.

This incident underscores Ayu's resilience in the face of cultural challenges and her dedication to sharing Indonesian heritage despite unconventional circumstances. Still with the same spirit, reflecting on her most recent experience at the Nagoya Indonesian Festival, Ayu details the journey to attend this festival. Despite residing in Tokyo, Ayu remains actively engaged with the Nagoya community, together with other Indonesian mothers like her, they were preparing to perform a traditional dance. Ayu told me:

Now living in Tokyo, it became so hard to practice together, so we came up with the solution: I make a demonstration video, and they will practice at home. One or two days before the performance, we will gather to finalize the movement.

This adaptive approach exemplifies Ayu's commitment to overcoming geographical constraints, ensuring continued participation. Yet even so, Balancing family responsibilities with volunteering presents a temporal challenge for Ayu. She said:

If you asked me, whats the hardest part? Maybe I can say: time. But I don't want to make it as a challenge. This festival is only once a year while I can spend quality time with my family all year, all the time. So, it's not a challenge. Still manageable.

When asked her perspective on how the festival changes overtime, she said:

Now, people are becoming more individualistic, students are not solid anymore, they don't want to participate because don't have money, but in my prespectice: Just do it voluntarily! Bring your country to the global stage should be your main goal. The feeling of success in bringing your country to the global stage is amazing, can't be bought by money.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, the diaspora of Indonesian migrants in Japan plays a pivotal role in supporting and helping each other, fostering a strong sense of community despite facing multifaceted challenges. The stories of Indonesian families, workers, and students actively engaged in preserving and showcasing their cultural heritage through events like

the Indonesian Festival underscore their commitment and resilience. These interviews reveal that these individuals, often facing distinct challenges based on their roles as workers, students, or families, find a common ground and purpose in collective efforts to promote Indonesian culture in Japan. Workers like Fajri demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility and dedication, not only in their professional lives but also in contributing to cultural events that connect them to their homeland. Students, exemplified by Sinta, showcase a deep commitment to passing on Indonesian traditions to younger generations despite academic pressures and resource challenges. The communal spirit within the group, illustrated by inventive problem-solving and parental support, highlights the importance of collective efforts in cultural preservation.

Families, as portrayed through Ayu's narrative, navigate challenges of time constraints and geographical distances to actively participate in cultural events. The adaptive approach to practicing traditional dances and the emphasis on the importance of showcasing their heritage on a global stage reflect a resilient determination.

The conclusion drawn from these individual stories is that the Indonesian diaspora in Japan, while facing distinct challenges based on their roles, comes together annually at the Indonesian Festival, showcasing the richness and diversity of their cultural heritage. The narratives emphasize the need for continued and deeper support from the Indonesian government to ensure the sustainability of these cultural preservation efforts. Despite the challenges, the shared goal of bringing their country to the global stage unites these diverse groups, creating a strong sense of unity and community among the Indonesian diaspora in Japan.

V. References

- [1] Naim, M. (1971). Merantau: Causes and Effects of Minangkabau Voluntary Migration. In *ISEAS Publishing eBooks* (pp. 1–15).
<https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814380164-002>
- [2] Kanai, A. (2008). “Karoshi (Work to Death)” in Japan. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84(S2), 209–216
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9701-8>