



Strengthening Cultural Diplomacy Between Indonesia and Timor-Leste through Sikka Sarong Weaving as a Medium for Cultural Exchange

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ABSTRACT

This Community Service (PkM) activity aims to strengthen cultural diplomacy between Indonesia and Timor-Leste through Sikka-Flores sarong weaving. The participatory approach includes an exhibition and cultural exchange at the Tais Market Festival in Dili (March 4-7, 2026), meetings with academics from three universities in Dili, and discussions with cultural activists in Kupang. Activity outcomes: the festival was successfully attended, productive discussions took place regarding weaving preservation, the promotion of Flores sarong motifs, and the exchange of ideas to promote Timor-Leste motifs in Flores. A proposal for a joint workshop titled “Exchange of Ideas on Cultural Diplomacy through Weaving” was agreed upon. Formal cooperation was established with academics, and opportunities for cross-marketing of weaving products were identified. Sikka sarong weaving has proven effective as a sustainable medium for cultural diplomacy between the two regions.

INTRODUCTION

Sikka ikat weaving from Sikka Regency, Flores, East Nusa Tenggara, is one of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage that is full of aesthetic values, philosophy, and local wisdom. Epo and Maulina's research shows that each weaving motif not only serves as a decorative element, but also symbolizes social status, kinship relationships, and spiritual values of the local community (Epo & Maulina, 2022). In line with that, Daeng Baji, revealed that the weaving tradition in Sikka not only serves as a means of livelihood, but also as a symbol of cultural identity and a deep inheritance of ancestral values (Baji et al., 2024). In the midst of modernization and globalization, traditional weaving faces serious challenges in the form of declining interest in the younger generation, limited promotional space, and the suboptimal use of weaving as a medium of cultural diplomacy.

As stated by Yin, et al, in their study of traditional clothing as a medium of soft power, cultural diplomacy through traditional textiles has been proven to be effective in various Asian countries, including Indonesia through batik diplomacy. The study identified three models of traditional dress diplomacy: assertive, reactive, and selective. Indonesia is included in the assertive model characterized by frequent and state-supported use (Yin et al., 2024). On the other hand, the neighboring country of Timor Leste has a tradition of tais (traditional weaving) which is also rich in cultural meaning, and this richness and tradition is promoted on the annual routine agenda of the Timor Leste tais festival every year.



Figure 1. One of the Events of the Timor Leste Tais Festival 2026

The cooperation between the two countries, which have almost similar cultural backgrounds, has been studied by researchers before. Dentis' research on Indonesia-Timor Leste cultural relations shows that Indonesia's arts and culture scholarship program has succeeded in creating harmonious relations and enhancing Indonesia's positive image in the eyes of the younger generation of Timor Leste (Dentis, 2024). However, interaction between cultural actors, especially in the field of weaving, is still very limited.

This community service activity aims to strengthen Indonesia-Timor Leste cultural diplomacy through the use of Sikka sarongs weaving as a medium of cultural interaction. This activity is part of the Cultural Interaction Support (DIB) scheme facilitated by Dana Indonesiana, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. Daeng Baji's research shows that the Dana Indonesiana program has an important role in encouraging collaborative, community-based, and accountable governance, so that it is in line with the approach used in this activity (Baji et al., 2024).

The main problem behind this activity is the lack of intercultural meeting space that directly involves weaving artisans from the grassroots level. Elvida's (2015) research in their ethnographic study of women weaver communities in West Timor and Bali identified a value tension between the sacred (sacred) and commercial aspects of traditional weaving practices. This tension actually opens up opportunities for dialogue and collaboration (Elvida, 2015). So far, the promotion of Indonesian weaving is more carried out on a national scale or through exhibitions in developed countries, while interaction with neighboring countries that have similar weaving cultures is less touched. In fact, Timor Leste through Tais Market in Dili has become a meeting center for various weavers from all over Timor Leste, involving weavers, academics concerned with weaving, and cultural communities. This opens up a great opportunity for Sikka weaving to be introduced as well as a bridge of intercultural dialogue.

More specifically, this activity is designed to achieve several strategic targets: (1) introduce the motifs, philosophy, and process of making Sikka ikat weaving to the people of Timor-Leste and international visitors; (2) increasing direct cultural interaction between Sikka weavers and Timorese weavers; (3) building a network of sustainable cultural cooperation, including the potential for product exchange and joint marketing; and (4) encourage the appreciation of the younger generation for traditional weaving as a cultural heritage as well as a creative economic opportunity. Research by Fernandez et al. (2018) revealed that Sikka ikat weaving contains local wisdom values that have the potential to become a creative economic basis for Sikka women, as well as a medium for living cultural preservation. In addition, Zuhro et al. in his research on the practice of Hatta Kabong weavers in Belitung concluded that the sustainability of the weaving culture requires a balance between authenticity and innovation through institutional support, as well as the integration of craft education into formal and informal curricula (Zuhro et al., 2026). The following image shows an example of Sikka cultural motifs that are quite in demand in the Timor Leste area



Figure 2. Examples of Sikka Woven Sheath Motifs

Based on the background that has been described including the rich cultural value of Sikka ikat weaving, the low space for direct interaction between weavers at the grassroots level between Indonesia and Timor Leste, and the great potential for cultural diplomacy through festivals and exhibitions at Tais Market Dili the author sets the title of community service activities (PkM) as follows: "Strengthening Indonesia-Timor Leste Cultural Diplomacy through Sikka Sarong Weaving as a Media of Cultural Interaction". This title was chosen because it expressly reflects efforts to bridge two dimensions at once: first, strengthening cross-border cultural relations through a participatory approach involving

weavers, artists, and academics; second, the use of Sikka sarongs weaving is not just a handicraft product, but as an active medium in cultural interaction that can trigger dialogue, knowledge exchange, and creative economy cooperation.

IMPLEMENTATION AND METHODS

Fairyode Execution

This Community Service (PkM) activity was carried out from December 2025 to March 2026, with the peak implementation in Timor Leste taking place on March 4 to 7, 2026. The entire series of activities followed the post-activity timeline that had been systematically arranged, starting from the initial coordination stage in Maumere, Flores, to the evaluation stage and preparation of reports after returning to Maumere.

Implementation Method

The methods used in this activity are participatory and collaborative, with a phased approach that includes preparation, implementation of cultural interaction in Timor Leste, and post-festival follow-up. This approach is in line with Ginting's (2024) findings on the importance of direct stakeholder involvement in preserving weaving culture through the co-creation storytelling process. The research shows that interactions between various stakeholders create immersive experiences and contribute to the sustainability of the weaving culture.

In the initial stage, precisely from December 7 to 13, 2025, the implementation team carried out coordination and preparations in Maumere. This activity was in the form of a coordination meeting with weavers and sarong-sellers at Alok Market, preparation of administrative documents, and determination of participants who would depart for Timor Leste. The meeting was held in the afternoon, adjusting the free time of the weavers. Then, on February 16 and 17, 2026, a second coordination meeting was held which aimed to ask for the willingness of the weavers to open sales relations to the Timor Leste region as well as finalize the final preparations.

The travel method is carried out in stages. On March 1, 2026, the team departed from Maumere to Kupang via flight, followed on March 2 by road trip from Kupang to Dili, Timor Leste using an interstate bus. Upon arrival in Dili on March 3, the team held a coordination meeting and exhibition preparation at Tais Market, where the cultural festival was held.

The core implementation of the activity took place from March 4 to 5, 2026, where the team attended the second and third day of the festival while promoting woven sarongs from Flores, East Nusa Tenggara. The method used in the festival is an interactive exhibition: the team showcases the collection of Sikka weaving, gives visitors a hands-on explanation of the philosophy of each motif, and communicates with local Timorese weavers. This interactive exhibition method refers to the model of cultural diplomacy identified by Yin, Waheed, and Ang (2024), in which traditional clothing is placed as a soft power tool that not only expresses but also shapes power relations in a multipolar international system.



Figure 3. Sikka Woven Sarongs Motif Promoted to Traders at Tais Market Timor Leste

On March 6, 2026, the method of activities switched to academic meetings and networking. The team met with academics from three higher education institutions in Dili in succession: in the morning at the Dili Institute of Technology (DIT), in the afternoon at the Universidade Da Paz (UNPAZ), and on March 7 met with academics from the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (INTL). In these meetings, consultations were carried out, related to cooperation with the University of Nusa Nipa (Unipa) - Flores, and the creation of cooperation agreements for the continuation of the program, the establishment of mentoring patterns, both academic cooperation, and the planning of follow-up workshops after the Timor Leste Tais festival. As recommended by Zuhro et al. (2025), the sustainability of the preservation of weaving culture requires the integration of craft education into formal and informal curricula, which we followed up through meetings with academics at three universities in Dili.



Figure 4. Meet the Academics of DIT and Unpaz Dili

After the series of activities in Timor Leste was completed, the team returned to Kupang on March 8 via a road trip from Dili to Kupang. The next day, on March 9 morning, the team met with observers and cultural activists of NTT-Timor Leste in Kupang, namely Father Francis Amandus Ninu, Pr., S.Fil. This meeting aims to explore cooperation and discuss the continuation of cultural exchange programs and plans through Flores and Timor Leste woven sarongs, through student exchanges.

The final stage of implementing the activity method was carried out in Maumere from March 10 to 14, 2026. This activity is in the form of preparing reports, documentation, final evaluation with the team in Maumere, and conveying directions from traders at Tais Market Dili to weavers and sellers of sarongs in Maumere. The evaluation method used is a focus group discussion to absorb feedback and formulate sustainable follow-up. Thus, all methods of implementing activities follow the flow of the post-activity timeline in a sequential manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This community service activity has been carried out according to the predetermined timeline. The main result achieved was that the cultural festival activities at Tais Market, Dili, Timor Leste were successfully attended by the implementation team with weavers and companions from Flores. During the two days of the festival on March 4 and 5, 2026, there was a very interesting and dynamic discussion between the team from Indonesia and the festival visitors, local weavers from Timor Leste, and the academics who attended. These results reinforce the findings of Sabunu (2022) that cultural approaches have proven effective in building harmonious relations between Indonesia and Timor Leste, beyond formal government-level relationships.

The discussion was not only limited to the introduction of the motifs and philosophy of Sikka sarong, but also touched on strategic issues such as efforts to preserve traditional weaving amid modernization pressure, the importance of regeneration of young weavers, and the potential for cross-border cooperation in the marketing of weaving products. The visitors and festival participants showed great enthusiasm, especially when explaining the symbolic meaning behind each Flores weaving motif. As revealed by Epo and Maulina (2024), Sikka ikat weaving functions as a medium of cultural communication that is full of symbolic meaning, and this is evident when festival-goers show a high interest in explaining the philosophy behind each weaving motif.

In addition to informal discussions at the exhibition booth, another important outcome was the establishment of formal communication and cooperation with three higher education institutions in Dili. On March 6 and 7, 2026, the implementation team met with academics from the Dili Institute of Technology (DIT), Universidade Da Paz (UNPAZ), and Universidade National Timor Lorosa'e (INTL). In each of these meetings, several concrete results were agreed. The academics expressed their readiness to assist post-festival continuation activities, both in the form of research assistance, weaving documentation, and the development of a local content curriculum on traditional weaving. This is in line with the recommendations of Zuhro et al. (2025) regarding the importance of integrating craft education into the curriculum.

Another result that is no less important is the building of a wider network of cultural cooperation. After returning to Kupang on March 8, 2026, the team met with an observer and cultural activist from NTT-Timor Leste, Father Francis Amandus Ninu, Pr., S.Fil., on March 9, 2026. This meeting produced valuable input on strategies to strengthen cultural diplomacy through weaving, as well as plans to exchange woven sarongs products between Flores and Timor Leste in a more structured manner. Father Francis also offered to be a bridge of communication with cultural communities on the land border of the two countries.

The implementation team actively promotes various woven sarongs motifs from Flores, ranging from Kawali, Sikka, to Maumere motifs, to festival visitors and local weaving actors from Timor Leste. In the promotion process, there was a very valuable exchange of ideas between the team from Flores and the weavers and traders from Timor Leste. The weavers of Timor Leste openly expressed their desire to promote the typical sarongs motifs of Timor Leste, such as *tais fetu* and *tais mane*, to the Flores region and Indonesia in general. This idea was warmly welcomed by the implementation team because it is in line with the principles of reciprocal and equal cultural diplomacy. The exchange of ideas to promote each other's weaving motifs between Flores and Timor Leste shows the collaborative dynamics identified by Vogeley and Oetojo (2025) in the Weaving Dance Engagement model, where the value tension between sacred and commercial aspects actually gives birth to collaboration opportunities.

Furthermore, from the exchange of ideas, a concrete offer emerged to hold a joint workshop entitled "Exchange of Cultural Diplomacy Ideas through Weaving" between Timor Leste and Flores-Indonesia. This workshop is planned to be held in turns, both in Dili and in Maumere, involving weavers, academics, and creative business actors from both parties. The purpose of the workshop is not only to learn each other's weaving techniques and philosophies, but also to formulate a joint strategy in marketing cross-border weaving products. This activity also opens up opportunities for the development of a creative economy based on traditional weaving, as recommended by Fernandez et al. (2018) about the potential of Sikka ikat weaving as a creative economic basis for Sikka women.

In terms of direct achievements in the field, the Sikka weaving exhibition has succeeded in increasing the international community's appreciation of Indonesia's cultural heritage. Many visitors who were previously unfamiliar with Flores weaving became interested and asked about how to buy the product. This opens up creative economic opportunities in the form of cross-marketing: some traders at Tais Market Dili expressed interest in selling Flores sarongs at their stalls, while sarongs sellers from Flores were also willing to accept deposits of Timor Leste *tais* products to be marketed in Maumere. Thus, there is an exchange of products that are economically mutually beneficial.

Overall, the results of this activity show that the cultural diplomacy approach through Sikka sarong-weaving has not only succeeded in creating warm cultural discussions and interactions, but also has given birth to concrete institutional cooperation, network expansion, and sustainable economic opportunities. All of these results have been documented through photos of activities, attendance lists, and interim memorandums of understanding with academic partners in Timor Leste.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This community service activity has been successfully carried out according to the planned timeline, starting from the initial coordination in Maumere, the trip to Timor Leste, active participation in the cultural festival at Tais Market Dili, to networking meetings with academics and cultural activists in both countries. Based on the entire series of activities, it can be concluded that the weaving of Sikka sarongs from Flores has great potential as a medium of cultural diplomacy between Indonesia and Timor Leste. This conclusion reinforces the findings of Yin, (Yin et al., 2024) about the effectiveness of traditional clothing as a soft *power instrument* in international relations, and is in line with Tiring's research that cultural approaches are effective in building harmonious relationships across countries (Sulyistyyaningsih et al., 2024).

This activity also proves that a participatory approach that directly involves weavers and small business actors is very effective in building trust and sustainable cooperation, as recommended by Ginting (2024) on the importance of co-creation storytelling in the preservation of weaving culture. The exchange of ideas to promote the motif of the Timor Leste sarong to Flores, and vice versa, shows that cultural diplomacy should not be one-way, but should be reciprocal. The offer to hold a joint workshop on the exchange of ideas on cultural diplomacy is clear evidence that this activity has gone beyond just an exhibition and has succeeded in giving birth to a follow-up commitment.

In addition, meetings with three universities in Dili as well as with cultural activists in Kupang have strengthened institutional networks that will serve as the foundation for future collaborative programs, such as research mentoring, natural coloring workshops, and student exchanges. This is in line with the recommendations of Zuhro et al. on the need for institutional support and the integration of craft education into the curriculum (Zuhro et al., 2026). From an economic perspective, the communication between sarong traders in Tais Market Dili and sarong sellers in Alok Maumere Market opens up cross-marketing opportunities that can increase the income of artisans and traders in both regions, as well as the creative economic potential of Sikka ikat weaving revealed by Fernandez (Fernandez et al., 2018)

In general, this service activity has achieved all the set targets, namely introducing Sikka weaving at the international level, increasing cultural interaction, strengthening cooperation networks, encouraging cultural preservation, and opening creative economic opportunities. Thus, the Cultural Interaction Support program from the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Indonesia has proven to be very useful and strategic in advancing an inclusive, harmonious, and sustainable culture. Daeng Baji's research also confirms that the Dana Indonesiana program plays an important role in encouraging community-based collaborative governance (Baji et al., 2024).

Based on the experience of implementing this activity, several recommendations can be submitted for improving the quality and sustainability of similar programs in the future.

First, the Cultural Interaction Support program should continue and expand its scope not only at one festival point, but also support post-festival series such as follow-up workshops, reciprocal visits, and cross-border marketing assistance.

Second, the involvement of academics from both countries needs to be increased from the planning stage, not only at the time of implementation, so that activities have a stronger research foundation and the results can be scientifically documented, as recommended by Zuhro et al. (2025).

Third, it is necessary to provide special companion funds to support the exchange of weaving products between Indonesia and Timor Leste, for example in the form of shipping subsidies or joint exhibitions in both countries, so that the economic benefits can be felt more directly by grassroots weavers.

Fourth, similar activities should involve the younger generation, both from Flores and Timor Leste, through cultural internship programs or weaving motif design competitions, so that the regeneration of weavers and appreciation of cultural heritage can be maintained. *Fifth*, collaboration with other ministries or institutions, such as the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, needs to be strengthened so that cultural diplomacy through weaving can be integrated with bilateral tourism and trade promotion programs.

Fifth, documentation and publication of the results of activities such as journal articles, video documentaries, and pocket books about Sikka weaving motifs and Timor Leste tais need to be encouraged as a heritage of knowledge that can be accessed by the wider community.

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