

Enhancing Cultural Literacy Through Community Creativity : The Role of Menjing Village Residents in Preserving Papua Heritage

Wuli Oktiningrum^{a*}, Andi Wibowo^b, Adzimatnur Muslihasari^c, Dyah Ayu Pramoda Wardhani^d, Luthfiatus Zuhroh^e

^{a,b,c,d,e} Universitas Islam Raden Rahmat, Malang, Indonesia

*Corresponding: wulie.okti@uniramalang.ac.id

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Abstract

Indonesia, as a unitary state with rich cultural diversity, requires continuous efforts to cultivate cultural literacy as a means of strengthening national identity. Cultural literacy involves the ability to understand, appreciate, and engage with cultural expressions, values, and traditions, especially in multicultural settings. This community service program aimed to develop cultural literacy among the residents of Menjing Village by applying the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method. Through participatory planning and action, the community collaboratively selected Papuan culture as the focus—recognizing the importance of introducing lesser-known regional cultures to a broader audience. The program facilitated the creation of traditional Papuan clothing, headpieces, replica houses, and weapons, involving women's groups (PKK), youth (Karang Taruna), and local men. The process fostered intergenerational collaboration, strengthened community engagement, and deepened understanding of cultural meaning. Results indicate that PAR is an effective strategy for promoting cultural literacy through meaningful, community-based educational experiences that honor Indonesia's diverse heritage.

Keywords

Cultural literacy, Participatory Action Research, Papuan culture

Introduction

Indonesia is a unitary nation characterized by vast cultural diversity, encompassing a wide range of traditions, regional languages, races, ethnic groups, religions, belief systems, and other cultural expressions. Despite this complexity, Indonesia has demonstrated a strong capacity to maintain national unity, as reflected in its foundational motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* — "Unity in Diversity." Historical evidence indicates that diverse cultural systems in Indonesia have not only coexisted but have also evolved in parallel and in mutual support (Mappaenre et al., [2023](#)). *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is not merely a slogan, but a guiding principle that enables Indonesians to remain united amidst diversity. In the face of globalization and rapid societal changes, the need to nurture this diversity becomes even more urgent—as it represents a valuable social asset for building an inclusive and sustainable nation (Pursika, [2009](#)).

Sustaining this unity in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, cultural literacy becomes essential. Cultural literacy refers to the ability to understand, appreciate, and respectfully engage with cultural differences (Haniifah et al., [2024](#)). Cultural literacy extends beyond merely recognizing traditional arts and customs passed down through generations; it encompasses the capacity of individuals and communities to actively apply, internalize, and preserve cultural values in daily life (Nawir et al., [2025](#)). By fostering cultural literacy, societies are better equipped to comprehend the philosophical meanings and moral principles embedded within their cultural heritage (Triyono, [2019](#)). This deeper understanding plays a crucial role in reinforcing national identity and cultivating a strong sense of cultural self-awareness.

Cultural literacy can be promoted through diverse strategies, such as integrating cultural content into formal education, organizing culturally-rooted community programs, and utilizing digital technologies to engage younger generations with local cultural heritage (Iskandar et al., [2024](#)). For the general public, cultural literacy is crucial for developing awareness, respect, and appreciation toward the diverse cultural expressions that coexist across the archipelago (Aeni, [2023](#)). It empowers individuals to interact harmoniously within multicultural settings and to actively participate in preserving local wisdom (Suswandari, [2018](#)). Moreover, learning about and acknowledging the cultures of other regions represents

a true manifestation of cultural literacy—one that goes beyond personal heritage and embraces the broader spectrum of national diversity (Asti Widiastuti et al., [2023](#)).

Therefore, one of the ways in which communities can actively practice cultural literacy is through the organization of cultural parades. These parades serve as vibrant celebrations of Indonesia's rich cultural diversity by showcasing traditional elements from various regions across the archipelago. Participants often replicate traditional attire, display indigenous weapons, perform with traditional musical instruments, and even construct miniature models of traditional houses.

A notable example can be found in the cultural parade held by the residents of Menjing Village, in which one of the cultural themes highlighted was the traditional heritage of Papua. The community created representations of Papuan traditional clothing, weapons, and traditional houses with remarkable attention to detail. The selection of Papua culture was intentional and meaningful. It aimed to introduce and honour one of the easternmost and often underrepresented regions of Indonesia. By highlighting Papua culture, the villagers not only expanded their cultural knowledge beyond their own locality but also demonstrated solidarity and respect for the cultural richness that exists across the nation.

Such efforts are instrumental in reinforcing the principles of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), ensuring that all cultural identities regardless of geographical distance or population size are recognized, valued, and celebrated as integral parts of Indonesia's national identity. This initiative also opens valuable opportunities to examine how creative community participation contributes to the development of cultural literacy, and to document both the process and impact of Menjing Village's engagement in cultural preservation. Ultimately, it provides insights into community-based cultural education and supports the safeguarding of minority cultural heritage.

Method

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) method is employed in the implementation of community service initiatives. PAR has the potential to foster transformation among individuals within a community setting (Syaifuddin, [2024](#)). Moreover, this method is widely accepted and effectively applied because it aligns with the abilities and contextual realities of the community members. As stated by Borda ([1999](#)) in Morales ([2016](#)) PAR serves as a strategy to generate changes that are responsive to the community's actual needs.

Consequently, this approach can cultivate a shared reflective understanding among community members regarding various issues that affect their environment.

The term Participatory Action Research (PAR) consists of three main elements: participation, research, and action (MacDonald, [2012](#)). This means that the research findings obtained through direct involvement of the community are then implemented as real actions within their environment (Rahman et al., [2021](#)). The PAR approach is based on a phenomenological perspective, also known as an interpretive or social meaning-based approach, where people's experiences and viewpoints are considered essential (Jacobs, [2016](#)). In addition, Novianty ([2018](#)) state that the core principle of the PAR method lies in collaboration and active participation between researchers and community members in creating change, by taking into account the lived experiences and social perspectives of the people involved.

PAR was carried out in a continuous cycle consisting of the following stages:

1. Planning

In the initial phase, the implementing team, together with community members and local leaders, identified both the needs and cultural potential that could be highlighted. Through participatory discussions, Papuan culture was chosen as the central theme of the activity, given the importance of introducing cultural elements from eastern Indonesia, which are often underrepresented in local events.

2. Action

This stage involved the implementation of a cultural parade by the residents of Menjing Village. The activities included the creation and presentation of traditional Papuan attire, replicas of traditional weapons, musical instruments, and miniature traditional houses. The creative work was collaboratively carried out by different community groups: traditional clothing and decorative headpieces were crafted by the women's organization (PKK) and the village youth group (Karang Taruna), while the men contributed by constructing the traditional house replicas and weapons. This process reflected the practical application of cultural literacy through active community participation.

3. Observation

The team conducted participatory observation to monitor the level of community involvement, group dynamics, and forms of cultural expression that emerged throughout the activities. In addition to written field notes, photo and video documentation were used to visually capture the process.

4. Reflection

Following the event, a reflection session was held with the villagers to evaluate their experiences and assess the impact on their understanding of interregional cultural diversity. This reflective dialogue served as a space to review the outcomes of the activity and to plan more sustainable follow-up initiatives.

Results and Discussion

The community service activity based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Menjing Village yielded significant findings that demonstrate an increase in cultural literacy through the participatory process of the residents. The results and discussion are organized according to the stages of PAR: planning, action, observation, and reflection.

1. Planning: Fostering Cross-Regional Cultural Awareness

In the planning stage, the implementation team, together with residents and community leaders, conducted participatory discussions to determine the cultural theme to be highlighted. Papuan culture was chosen as a form of respect for Indonesia's cultural diversity, as well as a means to introduce the culture from the eastern region, which is often underrepresented in local cultural activities. This choice reflects an initial effort to build cross-regional cultural awareness, an important dimension of cultural literacy.

2. Action: Collaborative Practice of Cultural Literacy Through Creative Work

The action stage became a space for the actualization of cultural literacy through creative and collaborative activities. The village residents were divided into several workgroups: The women's group (PKK) and the youth organization (Karang Taruna)

were responsible for making traditional Papuan clothing and headpieces using materials such as felt fabric, cardboard, raffia string, synthetic feathers, beads, and hot glue. The production process involved searching for visual references and discussing the symbolic meanings of Papuan traditional attributes. The men's group worked on replicas of the Honai traditional houses and traditional weapons such as bows and arrows, using recycled wood, cardboard, and bamboo. This activity strengthened technical skills while deepening the understanding of the functions and philosophy of Papuan traditional structures.



Figure 1: Documentation of traditional clothing and headpiece making

[Figure 1](#) showed that how the practice of cultural literacy goes beyond merely recognizing cultural forms to include understanding and appreciating the underlying meanings and values through the process of creation and representation.

3. Observation: Active Participation as an Indicator of Cultural Literacy

During the process, the team conducted participatory observations of community involvement. Residents appeared enthusiastic and showed a high level of curiosity about Papuan culture. Intergenerational dialogue was also observed, with older residents guiding the younger generation in technical work and explaining the cultural context of the elements being created. This indicates that the process successfully fostered cultural literacy in a collective and reflective manner.



Figure 2: Documentation of community activities during the process

4. Reflection: Strengthening National Identity and Planning for Sustainability

In the reflection stage, residents shared their experiences and new understandings of Papuan culture. Many expressed surprise and curiosity, admitting that they had previously known very little about Papuan customs or symbols. However, through hands-on involvement, they developed a greater appreciation for cultural differences and began to view them as essential components of national identity. Residents responded enthusiastically, highlighting that the activity had not only been enjoyable but also eye-opening, offering them a chance to learn about parts of Indonesia they had never explored. They also proposed making the cultural parade an annual event with different regional cultural themes each year. This demonstrates that the activity not only increased cultural literacy but also fostered a spirit of cultural preservation and intercultural solidarity within the community.



Figure 3: Documentation of the cultural parade and final community works

This activity demonstrates that the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach is not only effective in fostering active community participation, but also serves as an educational tool to enhance cultural literacy in a comprehensive manner. Through each phase—from planning to reflection—the residents of Menjing Village were not merely participants but also creators and preservers of the nation's cultural values.

The selection of Papuan culture as the main theme was a strategic step to introduce and appreciate the diversity that is often underrepresented. The community not only learned to recognize cultural symbols, but also to understand the philosophical meanings and local wisdom embedded within them. The creative process, which involved women, youth, and men collectively, contributed to strengthening social cohesion and reinforcing national identity within the framework of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity).

Driven by the spirit of collaboration and inclusiveness, this initiative stands as concrete evidence that the promotion of cultural literacy does not have to rely solely on formal approaches. Instead, it can grow and flourish through meaningful community-based activities. In the future, similar initiatives can be expanded to include other cultural heritages across the archipelago, as part of efforts to preserve cultural legacy and build national character rooted in diversity.

Conclusion

This community service program demonstrates that Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an effective method for enhancing cultural literacy at the community level. Through participatory planning, collaborative creative action, reflective dialogue, and active observation, the people of Menjing Village were not only involved in cultural expression but were also empowered to critically understand, appreciate, and preserve Indonesia's cultural richness.

By focusing on Papuan culture—an often marginalized yet integral part of the national identity—the activity served as a medium to introduce the values, symbols, and philosophies of a distinct cultural tradition. The collaborative production of traditional attire, ornaments, weapons, and house replicas reflected not just artistic creativity, but also an evolving process of cultural understanding and intergenerational learning.

Most importantly, the program strengthened cultural literacy by moving beyond passive knowledge toward active engagement with cultural diversity. It allowed community members to become both learners and transmitters of culture, reinforcing national identity through appreciation of difference. As Indonesia continues to navigate its multicultural identity, initiatives like this serve as vital tools for cultivating inclusive and sustainable cultural awareness rooted in local participation.

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