

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND THE NEED OF AN INDEPENDENT MINISTRY OF CULTURE IN INDONESIA

HE Sri Astari Rasjid

Artist and former Ambassador to Bulgaria and Macedonia

Email: astari007@gmail.com

Dear friends and organizers,
I am delighted to be invited to the 11th International Graduate Students and Scholars' Conference in Indonesia (IGSSCI), Culture, Technology and Social Transformation in the Quest for Human Dignity.

My talk is about Cultural Diplomacy as the path towards human dignity. Based on my experience as the Indonesian Ambassador to Bulgaria, North-Macedonia and Albania from 2016-2020, I will also tell you about my personal experience in this field.

Human Dignity & Cultural Dignity

Dear ladies and Gentlemen, I have always been proud to call myself an Indonesian artist. Artists in different fields are inspired by the element of their culture and their human experience, that is why they are creative individuals. The Indonesian culture is not only a source of inspiration for artists, but it is one of the most profound cultural heritages in the human world. We have been fortunate to inherit our exceptional and rich cultural heritage in its most dignified form from our ancestors. From my point of view, human being is dignified by the soul of God, and human culture is also dignified as it is the result of generations of people's innovation, creation and discoveries in all fields.

My Artistic background

All along, my artistic exploration has mostly been inspired by our rich tradition and cultural heritage. Just to make you familiar with my artistic and cultural background, let me first share with you some of my life journey in art. My mother was from Solo and my father from Jogjakarta. From a young age, I have always wanted to be a professional artist. This was actually against my mom's doctrine who kept reminding me that artists would always stay hungry.

My childhood in a diplomatic family, living abroad in the neighboring countries of India and Myanmar, with rich Hindu and Buddhist cultural backgrounds have triggered and inspired me to see and appreciate my own rich cultural roots. Even though in the early days our heritage were influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism and Islamic religion, we managed to maintain our own strong Javanese culture and tradition. In my artistic life, I went through many stages creating from two dimensional (painting) to three dimensional (sculpture). When the space could no longer contain the ever-expanding artistic exploration and innovation, we reached out to create art installation utilizing the bigger space and multimedia.

Fortunately, I have succeeded to present my works in National and International stages. In 2013 together with 4 other Indonesian artist I was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale, entitled Sakti. I created An Art Installation piece, a Javanese Pendopo house with 9 life-size wooden Wayang Klitik Bedoyo dancers, entitled "Dancing the Wild

Seas". It speaks about the strong voice within ourselves we must listen, the feminine force that resonates Strength, Love & Compassion. Then in 2013, I was offered to be the Producer and Artistic Director of a Dance, Drama & Musical stage performance, entitled "Pulung Gelung Drupadi" involving 40 dancers, 40 gamelan musicians and a big production team.

My artistic life journey was not always a walk in the park. I also faced many challenges and obstacles, but with a strong determination, persistence and hard work, I made it happened. Even failure is a good lesson. They said when you stumble, that's where your treasure lies. I sometimes I fell rock bottom, only to find the jewel of love, compassion and forgiveness. I didn't realize that the rock bottom fall became the strong foundation for my next journey.

Diplomatic Mission

In 2015, President Joko Widodo appointed me as Indonesian Ambassador for Bulgaria, Albania, and North Macedonia. One week before I left Indonesia for my Ambassadorship at the end of February 2016, I presented my retrospective exhibition at the PPKH (Pusat Kebudayaan Kennedi Hardjosoemantri) at Gadjah Mada University, Jogjakarta. Entitled "Yang Terhormat Ibu", as a tribute to my mother, all mothers and our Mother Nature. The exhibition not only showcased my paintings and sculptures, but also a "Garba" dance performance. And the following night was a farewell wayang kulit performance by the late Dalang Ki Seno Nugroho and Dalang Sujiwo Tejo. That was my farewell exhibition in 2016 at Gadjah Mada University. Coming back after my mission, now I am sharing with you stories of my mission journey at this Gadjah Mada University's Webinar in 2021. This cannot be regarded as a mere coincidence.

Cultural Diplomacy

All Indonesian Ambassadors are expected to prioritize Economic Diplomacy. With my art and cultural background, I strongly believed that I could incorporate my background with my assignment. I felt strongly that Indonesia, with its rich cultural background and old civilization will be able to win the hearts of the host country and many international audiences. Culture will subsequently open doors to new relations in sectors of Trade, Tourism and Investment.

This is what I experienced during my 4 and half years of my ambassador tenure. Let me explain with more details. Two days after my arrival in Sofia, the then Minister of Education and Culture Anies Baswedan arrived and signed the MoU of Culture Cooperation with the Bulgarian Minister of Culture, Vezhdi Rashidov. It was like a sign for me to carry out a cultural mission for my culture-rich country. That was when I formulated my mission strategy as "Cultural Diplomacy".

The peaceful future for human society, could be wisely and elegantly be built on the foundation of culture. Especially when we have a humane, dignified and spiritual culture. Through cultures, we connect people to celebrate the "Unity of Humanity", as in Indonesian we say, "Unity in Diversity". Certainly, cultural approach in diplomacy is a refined procedure that brings confidence, respect, and trust between nations; it also guarantees Peace, creates Harmony and promote Tolerance.

Cultural diplomacy is not something new, it has always been there but as a mission strategy. It is a very known practice of countries and societies which were positioned on the crossroad between different cultures. People interact with each other based on their

cultures. Artists, traders, knowledge seekers, missionaries, political representatives and travelers who were interacting with other people in foreign lands, have been initiators of cultural diplomacy in the world.

Indonesia is a good example of cultural exchange. We became the biggest Muslim country, as the result of cultural exchange. In the modern world, as it was in the past, many countries even try to get influence among the world population, by promoting their movies, music, life styles, culinarians, and most importantly their philosophies and religious beliefs which indicates the power of cultural influence. Cultural diplomacy is a daily activity based on formal or informal interactions, especially in this globalized time.

Informal Ambassadors of Culture

In a diplomatic formal mission, implementing cultural diplomacy will enhance bilateral relations in different aspects. With the government support, this is an effective approach to learn about the other nation's historical, cultural and political background. This will then create a better understanding, which will result in better business and political negotiations. All this interaction also happens informally on daily bases. That's why in my book I wrote, "every Indonesians are informal ambassadors of Indonesia."

Artists are among these informal ambassadors, who go far beyond borders, times and places and they influence the heart and the soul of the people. Art as a universal language between people of different nations, is one of the main elements in cultural diplomacy. One of the best ways to create a trusted environment for interaction between people is to employ their arts. Fine Arts, dance, sculptures and music have a universal language of beauty. We have a very rich culture, and we should use it, for the betterment of Indonesia and resonate the name of our country in the world.

Practice of Cultural Diplomacy in Bulgaria

After only two weeks in Bulgaria, there was a visit from the National Gallery Sofia asking the Indonesian Embassy to participate in "Night of the Museum" program. I immediately accepted as the National Gallery /Museum is a prestigious venue. Fortunately, I did bring a large collection of my personal fine and antique collection of batiks, so I could instantly arrange a batik exhibition.

Since then, The Indonesian Embassy in Sofia has established good relations with the curators of The National Gallery. We have exhibited the best that Indonesia has to offer. I have always avoided using our embassy as a gallery. As it only caters to the diplomatic scene and our own citizens. While the National Gallery/Museum cater to a larger audience and are visited by many local and international tourists. Besides being a beautiful and historic place, it is also less costly. There is no rental fee, except for a meager logistic cost.

On those time the National Gallery/Museum had a section displaying Southeast Asian Art. There were artworks and artefacts from Myanmar, India, Thailand and other countries. Sadly, Indonesia was not represented. I would like to share that now the National Gallery Museum of Sofia has a permanent collection of Indonesian art. Ranging from old batik cloths, Wayang puppets, artifacts from Java, Kalimantan, Bali and Papua, and old jewelry from many parts of Indonesia. This permanent collection was officiated during the visit of our Minister of Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, at the end of 2019.

During my 4.5-year term in Sofia, we held various promotions and exhibits entitled "Wonders of Indonesia" at various Museums in Sofia, that I explained the meanings behind them in my book.

Cultural Diplomacy and Global Peace

A major activity initiated by the Indonesian Embassy in Sofia based on Cultural Diplomacy is the Asian Festival. The festival was first held in 2017, it became a big yearly event at the start of the summer in Sofia. Participated by 15 various Asian countries, as a form of solidarity and togetherness of Asian countries in Sofia. We have succeeded in uniting countries like India and Pakistan, Iran and Saudi at least in a cultural occasion in Bulgaria. This event even brought North and South Korean Ambassadors together in a lunch meeting, before their leaders met at the border, witnessed by the Bulgarian President Rumen Radev.

Indeed, Cultural Diplomacy contributes greatly to global peace. By presenting art and culture of a nation, we can soften many political issues, misunderstandings, and animosities to avoid conflicts. Through cultural exchange, we can create a mutual understanding and trust between nations, and to promote bilateral relations in all aspects effectively. It would open doors to many opportunities and prospects in Trade, Tourism, and Investment as well.

Cultural Diplomacy & Economic Growth

Based on my own experience, a well-planned cultural approach in diplomacy is the most effective way to promote Indonesia to the world. Let me give you an example based on the numbers to tell you why I am emphasizing this much on cultural diplomacy:

From trade statistics, performance trend between Bulgaria and Indonesia, from 2015 to 2019 has been positively improved in terms of volume constantly. For example, in 2018, we achieved a 330% increase in trade volume compared to the last year 2017. Trade balance wise, in the first quarter of 2020 pandemic year (January-April), the figure has grown confidently more than 500% increase. These are the immediate short-term results of cultural diplomacy that comes in the forms of numbers and figures.

Time for The Indonesian Ministry of Culture

As we all know, the Indonesian culture is rich and diverse with many facets of colors like a rainbow, which pleases the eyes and all the senses. Our music lifts the soul to heavens. Our food is cultivated from fertile soil, nurtured through the divine offerings and blessings. Indonesian costumes consist of Kain & Kebaya which are an epitome of grace and elegance. Cultural heritage is a distinction that Indonesia can offer to people around the world. Therefore, Ambassadors, diplomats and our citizens overseas should embrace our cultural identity strongly and get engaged in it consciously as our culture is our national pride and dignity.

From this perspective, we need a base for a successful implementation of this approach in the 21st century and in this postmodern time. To be able to cherish and safeguard our culture in the country and present it effectively and methodologically based on a clear policy, it is the time for Indonesia to have a self-contained Ministry of Culture. An independent body that is responsible for cultural policy and take measures to protect our national heritage. The Indonesian Ministry of culture would optimize the cultural

activities of our KBRI in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After all culture is the core of the nation's character building.

Many countries such as France, England, Iran, Turkey, Spain, China and others have even their cultural centers, independently of their political missions, overseas. They know the importance of Cultural Diplomacy. Many countries have their Cultural Institutions under the Ministry of Culture working with their embassies to create cultural bridges. To establish connections between people and to lay strong foundations for bilateral relations. Expanding their influence among intellectuals, artist and finally spread their values to other countries.

This Ministry of Culture ideally should not be infused nor burdened by the grand mission of education. It should be a dignified body supported by intellectuals, stakeholders, political parties, and education institutions. A ministry solely focusing on putting resources actively to protect and preserve our culture.

Indonesia needs an independent Ministry of Culture, separated from the current one under the Ministry of Education, in order to build a strong character and well cultured nation. To focus on finding the truth of our forgotten history as well as preserving our rich cultural heritage.

The dignity of the Indonesian people in this age of transformation is very much interconnected with the preservation of our dignified culture. It promotes peace, harmony, and tolerance domestically as well as in the global scene. It serves as a filter towards extreme foreign culture, radicalism, and terrorism. Extremism advocates uniformity. Radicalism condemns diversity. Extremism and radicalism are powerful and dangerous instruments that destroy cultures. Preserving our rich cultural heritage and implementing it in our daily life are essential and will secure Indonesia's future as a diverse NKRI (The United Republic of Indonesia).

Conclusion

Sustainable Result of Cultural Diplomacy

To conclude this part of my talk, culture is the core of our nation's character building. It is time for Indonesia to reinvigorate the 3rd Pancasila principle "Persatuan Indonesia". By having an independent Indonesian Ministry of Culture responsible for reuniting and strengthening the culture network.

We should realize that cultural activities bear fruits slowly but surely. This is the same with Cultural Diplomacy, which needs concentration, hard work, determination, and investment. It is indeed a full-time work and requires strong dedication. If we have a good strategy and act wisely, and if correctly implemented, Cultural Diplomacy will bring unimaginable results. The long-term achievement of Cultural Diplomacy, based on the established trust and harmony between people would be sustainable, and will last a lifetime.

As the cultural relation and interaction is important and its vital for Indonesia to claim its deserved place in the world, we need to organize all these activities, under the long-awaited Indonesian Ministry of Culture. Insha'Allah.