



PRESERVING NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH A SOCIO-CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM: THE INDONESIAN DIASPORA IN JOHOR BAHRU

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ABSTRACT

In the Asia-Pacific region, intensified cross-border mobility has reshaped how national identity is experienced and sustained among diaspora communities, particularly in culturally proximate yet politically differentiated contexts. This study examines how the Indonesian diaspora in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, preserves Bangsa Indonesia within everyday transnational life, moving beyond cultural symbolism to foreground the relational and institutional conditions that enable identity continuity. Employing a qualitative case study design, this study draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected Indonesian migrant workers and students. Data were analysed using a thematic approach. The results demonstrate that national identity preservation operates through a socio-cultural ecosystem comprising three interdependent pillars: (1) diaspora communities as cultural fortresses that sustain identity through ritualised practices and regional heritage; (2) community networks as social safety nets that provide emotional, material, and moral security; and (3) institutional scaffolding provided by the Indonesian

Consulate and host universities, which confers legitimacy, resources, and public visibility. These mechanisms function unevenly across diaspora positions: migrant workers predominantly mobilise bonding social capital oriented towards survival and solidarity. At the same time, students activate bridging and linking capital to perform national identity through cultural diplomacy and institutional engagement. This study contributes to Asia-Pacific diaspora scholarship by conceptualising national identity preservation as an ecosystemic, stratified, and institutionally mediated process rather than a passive or homogeneous attachment. By integrating diaspora identity theory with social capital analysis, this study offers a transferable analytical framework for examining identity, power, and belonging across regional migration corridors.

Keywords: Diaspora, national identity, social capital, Indonesian, community

INTRODUCTION

In Southeast Asia, the preservation of national identity unfolds within a distinctive regional ecology shaped by labour migration regimes, proximity-based mobility, and historically fluid boundaries among ethnic, religious, and national affiliations (Kumar and Sharma 2023). For Indonesian migrants in Malaysia, identity preservation is not merely an extension of ethnic heritage; rather, it can be understood as a conscious assertion of Bangsa Indonesia within a context marked by cultural familiarity, including shared linguistic and religious repertoires, as well as intermittent geopolitical tensions and everyday stereotyping (Damayanti 2024). Yet much of the existing literature continues to treat identity maintenance primarily as symbolic expression—such as food, festivals, and language use—rather than as a relational ecosystem: an interdependent configuration of community networks and institutional scaffolding that enables identity to endure, adapt, and acquire legitimacy. As a result, key actors and infrastructures, including consular institutions, religious networks, student associations, and regional community organisations, often remain analytically peripheral, even though they frequently organise resources, mediate risks, and shape the “rules of belonging” for diaspora members (Muqsith et al. 2023).

The scale of the Indonesian diaspora itself reinforces the significance of this issue. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more than three million Indonesian citizens live abroad, with Malaysia hosting the largest share, approximately 1.33 million people (Yonatan 2025). Nearly half of the Indonesian diaspora therefore resides in Malaysia, predominantly as migrant workers in construction, plantation, and domestic sectors, alongside growing numbers of students, professionals, and families. Major centres of concentration include Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Kota Kinabalu, Kuching, Penang, and Tawau (Arisman and Jaya 2020). This demographic concentration makes Malaysia not only a major destination for Indonesian mobility but also a key site for examining how national identity is maintained under transnational conditions.

In the Indonesia–Malaysia migration corridor, identity-related tensions are frequently underestimated because shared historical roots, linguistic proximity, and cultural familiarity lead to the assumption of seamless integration (Safitri and Wibisono 2023). This study challenges that assumption by demonstrating that migrant identity is neither automatic nor culturally self-sustaining, but continuously reproduced through organised socio-cultural practices, institutional mediation, and transnational solidarity networks. Johor Bahru constitutes a strategically significant case due to its position within the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore growth triangle, where intensive cross-border mobility of workers, students, and families generates complex forms of interaction, adaptation, and belonging (Safitri and Wibisono 2023). Rather than viewing identity preservation solely as symbolic cultural nostalgia, this study advances a more rigorous perspective by conceptualising identity as an adaptive socio-cultural ecosystem sustained

through welfare coordination, information exchange, legal facilitation, collective rituals, and public recognition. This framework offers a novel contribution to migration studies by revealing how diasporic identity is actively negotiated through everyday institutional and community-based practices within transnational urban spaces.

The significance of Johor Bahru also lies in its socio-cultural ambiguity. On the one hand, linguistic and cultural proximity between Indonesians and Malaysians may facilitate adaptation and everyday interaction. On the other hand, that very proximity can blur national boundaries and make identity preservation a more active and self-conscious process. Members of the Indonesian diaspora in Johor Bahru do not preserve Bangsa Indonesia solely through nostalgia or symbolic attachment to the homeland. They also do so through participation in cultural events, religious and regional associations, student organisations, mutual-aid networks, and engagement with institutions such as the Indonesian Consulate General and host universities. These practices suggest that national identity is sustained through a broader socio-cultural ecosystem rather than through isolated acts of remembrance (Putnam 2000; Siisiäinen 2000; Koukoutsaki-Monnier 2015).

Nevertheless, the existing literature has not yet adequately captured this ecosystemic character of identity preservation. Studies on migration and diaspora have made important contributions to understanding labour precarity, integration, cultural reproduction, ethnic networking, and diaspora discourse. However, identity preservation is still often reduced to symbolic practices alone, including food, language, rituals, and festive performances. Far less attention has been given to the interaction between everyday practices, community infrastructures, and institutional scaffolding that together enable identity to endure, gain legitimacy, and remain meaningful across unequal social positions. This limitation is particularly visible in studies of Indonesian migrants in Malaysia, where scholarship has tended to focus either on migrant protection and labour issues or on ethnic and cultural continuity, without sufficiently examining how different forms of social relation and institutional support jointly sustain national belonging (Naufanita et al. 2018; Saleh et al. 2020; Ichsan 2021; Sunarti et al. 2022; Ridho and Nugraha 2024).

This study addresses one central gap in the literature: the absence of an integrated explanation of how Bangsa Indonesia is preserved in Johor Bahru as a socio-cultural ecosystem. More specifically, the literature remains limited in three interrelated respects. First, it frequently reduces identity preservation to cultural symbolism. Second, it under-theorises the interaction between community organisations and formal institutions. Third, it rarely compares how identity preservation differs across diaspora positions, particularly between workers and students, who occupy unequal conditions of risk, visibility, and institutional access. To address this gap, this study conceptualises national identity as reproduced through the interaction of three interdependent dimensions: community-based cultural reproduction, mutual support within diaspora networks, and institutional scaffolding provided by formal actors such as the Indonesian Consulate General and host universities (Putnam 2000; Siisiäinen 2000).

The analysis is informed by social capital theory, particularly the distinction among bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding social capital refers to close and inward-facing ties that reinforce solidarity and trust within relatively homogeneous groups. Bridging social capital refers to connections across different groups that facilitate cooperation, support, and broader recognition. Linking social capital refers to vertical ties with institutions and authorities that provide legitimacy, resources, and protection. Viewed through this lens, identity preservation is not a passive inheritance but a relational and structured process that unfolds across micro-level practices, meso-level organisations, and macro-level institutions (Putnam 2000; Siisiäinen 2000).

Accordingly, this study addresses three questions: How do members of the Indonesian diaspora in Johor Bahru construct and reproduce Bangsa Indonesia in everyday transnational life? How do bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital operate through community organisations and formal institutions to sustain national identity? And how do these mechanisms differ between workers and students, who occupy unequal social and institutional positions within the diaspora? By answering these questions, this study contributes to Asia-Pacific diaspora scholarship in three ways. Theoretically, it reconceptualises identity preservation as an ecosystemic and stratified process rather than a purely symbolic one. Empirically, it provides a focused account of Indonesian diaspora life in Johor Bahru as a strategic site of regional mobility. Practically, it offers a framework for diaspora engagement policies that connects cultural continuity with welfare, representation, and institutional support.

PAST STUDIES ON INDONESIAN MIGRATION, DIASPORA, AND IDENTITY IN MALAYSIA

Scholarship on diaspora and migration has long established that identity is not fixed but socially produced, negotiated, and rearticulated across space. Rather than understanding migrants as either assimilated into host societies or attached to their homelands, more recent work shows that belonging is shaped through ongoing interaction between memory, representation, everyday practice, and structures of power. From this perspective, national identity in diaspora is neither automatically preserved nor inevitably eroded. It is maintained through social action, often under conditions of uncertainty, marginality, and unequal recognition (Brubaker 2005; Anthias 2008; Koukoutsaki-Monnier 2015).

Within this broader field, studies of Indonesian migration and diaspora in Malaysia have generated important insights, though they remain uneven in their emphasis. A substantial body of research focuses on migrant labour, protection, and vulnerability. Arisman and Jaya (2020), for example, show that Indonesian labour migration to Johor Bahru must be understood within the broader ASEAN political economy, where migrant workers often occupy structurally vulnerable positions despite their importance to local sectors. Safitri and Wibisono (2023) similarly argue that Indonesian migrant workers' insecurity should be read through a human security lens, especially in relation to protection deficits and everyday exposure to risk. More recent socio-legal work likewise underscores that Indonesian workers in Malaysia continue to navigate fragile social environments, making informal support systems highly consequential (Parashtheo et al. 2025).

A second cluster of studies examines diaspora discourse, community organisation, and the political significance of Indonesian communities abroad. Naufanita et al. (2018) show how the category of "Indonesian diaspora" was discursively reworked by state and non-state actors into an asset-oriented concept tied to remittances, skills, and symbolic capital. Meanwhile, according to Effendi (2022), the diaspora is important to public diplomacy, so it should be positioned as a social asset and a strategic network for the country (Effendi 2022). Surwandono and Nugroho (2022) further demonstrate that Indonesian diaspora communities in Malaysia can function as civic and peace-building actors, not merely as migrant aggregates (Surwandono and Nugroho 2022). These studies are important because they move beyond narrow labour framings and show that diaspora life also involves organisational agency, collective representation, and transnational political meaning. Nevertheless, they tend to privilege the macro-discursive or institutional level and leave the everyday relational mechanisms through which national identity is reproduced.

A third line of research highlights ethnic, regional, and cultural continuity among Indonesian-origin communities in Malaysia and adjacent spaces. Ichsan (2021), for instance, shows how Acehese migrants in Malaysia sustain identity through commercial networks and community-

based ethnic cohesion. Ridho and Nugraha (2024) and Sunarti et al. (2022), although focused on the Bugis maritime world, likewise underline how migration traditions and inherited cultural repertoires can serve as resources for sustaining diaspora resilience. This literature is valuable because it reminds us that Indonesian identity abroad is often mediated by regional attachments, vernacular languages, religious practices, and shared locality. At the same time, this body of work tends to foreground ethnicity or regionality more than national identity as such. It explains how cultural continuity is maintained, but less clearly how regional affiliations are articulated into a broader sense of Bangsa Indonesia.

There is also a smaller but relevant body of work on Indonesian student associations and overseas student communities. Saleh et al. (2020) show that Indonesian student organisations in Malaysia do not merely provide peer companionship; they may also assist in support, networking, and broader citizen protection. This suggests that student associations can become important intermediaries between diaspora members and institutions. Yet studies in this area remain limited and often treat student communities separately from worker communities. Ismowati et al. (2025) wrote about the government's presence, through the Indonesian Consulate General in Johor, which also strengthens the community through the establishment of the Sekolah Indonesia Johor Bahru, which serves as an educational centre and a means of instilling nationalist values in Indonesian migrant children and strengthening the community ecosystem beyond the territory. The Sekolah Indonesia Johor Bahru can be positioned as a key hub for families, communities, and Indonesian Consulate- and Indonesian Consulate-facilitated networks (Ismowati et al. 2025). As a result, the literature has not sufficiently examined how identity preservation differs across social groups with unequal institutional access, public legitimacy, and everyday vulnerability.

At the conceptual level, social capital theory provides a useful bridge for addressing these limitations. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as resources embedded in durable networks, while Putnam (2000) distinguishes between forms of capital that reinforce internal solidarity and those that connect actors outwardly (Siisiäinen 2000). Siisiäinen (2000) clarifies the analytical distinction between Bourdieu's and Putnam's formulations, and Keles (2015) shows the usefulness of bonding, bridging, and linking capital for understanding social relations and belonging in migration-related contexts. Taken together, this framework enables an analysis of how identity is not merely expressed but socially organised, institutionally supported, and unevenly distributed across positions.

Taken together, existing studies offer important insights into Indonesian migration in Malaysia, especially regarding labour vulnerability, diaspora discourse, ethnic continuity, and organisational life. However, one central gap remains. The literature has not yet adequately explained how the preservation of Bangsa Indonesia in Johor Bahru operates as a relational process sustained across everyday practices, community infrastructures, and institutional support. More specifically, the interaction between migrant associations, student organisations, the Indonesian Consulate General, and host universities remains underexamined, and the differences between workers' and students' identity strategies remain insufficiently theorised. This study addresses that gap by examining Indonesian diaspora life in Johor Bahru through an ecosystemic lens grounded in bonding, bridging, and linking social capital.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how Indonesian diaspora members in Johor Bahru preserve national identity within everyday transnational life (Creswell 2016). Johor Bahru was selected as an information-rich site for three reasons. First, it functions as a major mobility corridor connecting Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, attracting diverse migrant profiles (workers, students, and families). Second, the setting is characterised by cultural

proximity (overlapping linguistic, religious, and historical repertoires) that can both facilitate everyday integration and blur national boundaries. Third, the Indonesia–Malaysia relationship periodically experiences socio-political friction, making Johor Bahru a particularly relevant context for observing how identity preservation operates under conditions of both familiarity and tension.

Informants were selected using purposive, criterion-based sampling to capture perspectives from diaspora members most actively engaged in identity-related practices. Initial access was obtained through established Indonesian diaspora networks in Johor Bahru, including student association contacts, the Indonesian Students Association, and community leaders within migrant worker organisations and religious associations. These gatekeepers facilitated first contact by introducing the researchers to potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. The recruitment and data collection procedures were conducted in accordance with established qualitative research standards and ethical principles, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) Indonesian citizenship or self-identification as part of the Indonesian diaspora; (2) residence in Johor Bahru for at least six months; (3) active participation in diaspora organisations or identity-preserving activities (e.g. cultural events, religious or community programmes, and student association initiatives); and (4) willingness to provide informed consent. To ensure greater diversity and representativeness, participants were purposively recruited from two prominent diaspora sectors—student and worker communities—encompassing a range of roles (including leadership and grassroots levels), gender identities, and age groups. This study further adhered to recognised ethical research standards concerning participant anonymity, data protection, and the responsible handling of qualitative information throughout the research process.

The final sample comprised five informants representing distinct socio-cultural roles: a student association head (S), an active student member (F), a community leader and worker (B), a worker active in community organising (T), and a migrant worker and community activist (JD). Ages ranged from the early 20s to the late 50s, thereby enabling intergenerational perspectives. Informants' profiles are summarised in Table 1. Notably, the intention was not statistical representativeness, but rather analytic depth and role-based coverage typical of qualitative case inquiry, in which smaller samples are appropriate for generating context-rich explanations rather than population-level claims (Creswell and Poth 2017).

Table 1: List of informants

No.	Initial name	Age	Sex	Job description
1	S	22	Male	Chairman of the Indonesian Students Association, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Johor Bahru
2	F	24	Female	Master's student at UTM, Johor Bahru
3	B	59	Female	Indonesian community leader from East Nusa Tenggara, Johor Bahru, and factory worker
4	T	44	Male	Migrant worker and Chairman of Ikatan Keluarga Muslim Indonesia, Johor Bahru
5	JD	25	Female	Migrant worker and member of Ikatan Keluarga Muslim Indonesia, Johor Bahru

Following the initial interviews, recruitment proceeded through a limited snowball sampling technique, in which participants recommended other individuals actively involved in identity-related activities or community leadership. This approach was deliberately bounded to avoid homogeneity bias; referrals were accepted only when they contributed to role diversity (e.g., student versus worker, leadership versus member, and variation in gender and age). Recruitment continued until conceptual saturation was achieved, resulting in five informants representing distinct positions within the Indonesian diaspora ecosystem in Johor Bahru.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between September and December 2024. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, allowing sufficient time for narrative elaboration and reflexive probing. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations selected collaboratively with participants to ensure comfort, privacy, and safety. These locations included quiet rooms in community centres, meeting spaces near workplaces, and university facilities for student participants. No interviews were conducted in participants' homes to minimise power imbalance and privacy concerns. Interviews were conducted primarily in Bahasa Indonesia, with occasional code-switching into Malay or local dialects when participants felt more expressive. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken immediately after each interview to document contextual observations, interaction dynamics, and preliminary analytic reflections.

The semi-structured interview guide covered five core domains: (1) meanings and expressions of Bangsa Indonesia; (2) participation in community, religious, and student organisations; (3) experiences of mutual support and crisis management; (4) interactions with formal institutions (e.g. the Indonesian Consulate and universities); and (5) perceptions of integration pressures, stereotyping, and internal diversity within the diaspora.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, combining inductive theme development with systematic coding procedures (Creswell and Poth 2017; Muqsinh et al. 2022). Transcripts were analysed in three stages: (1) open coding to identify initial concepts; (2) axial coding to establish relationships between categories; and (3) selective coding to integrate findings into an ecosystem-level explanation of national identity preservation. Saturation was assessed analytically rather than numerically. After the fourth interview, emerging codes consistently reproduced established categories related to cultural preservation, social safety nets, and institutional support. The fifth interview served as a confirmatory case, yielding no substantively new themes but reinforcing existing conceptual relationships. At this stage, additional data collection was deemed unlikely to enhance theoretical insight, indicating conceptual saturation appropriate for a bounded qualitative case study (Tayibnapis et al. 2022).

Methodological Considerations and Limitations

Although this study draws on five informants, several considerations strengthen its credibility. First, participants were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling to ensure high relevance to identity-preserving practices and to capture role diversity across student and worker sectors. Second, this study prioritises depth, contextual richness, and process explanation over breadth, consistent with the goals of qualitative case studies. Third, saturation was evaluated through constant comparison and was reached when additional interviews produced repetition rather than conceptual expansion. The methodological process was therefore organised as a coherent sequence linking informant selection, purposive recruitment, interview-based data collection, observation, thematic analysis, triangulation, ethical safeguards, and reflexive acknowledgement of limitations. This sequence strengthens this study's analytical contribution by showing that the findings are not derived from isolated narratives but

from a structured process that connects participants' social positions, community involvement, institutional relations, and identity-preserving practices within the Indonesian diaspora ecosystem in Johor Bahru.

Nevertheless, limitations remain. The sample primarily includes diaspora members already embedded in organised networks; thus, perspectives of unaffiliated or less-connected migrants may be underrepresented. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable. Future research should broaden recruitment beyond formal community structures, include additional sites across Malaysia, and consider complementary quantitative mapping of diaspora networks to test the ecosystem model under varying institutional and socio-legal conditions.

RESULTS

There are approximately 2.7 million Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, of whom 1.6 million have followed the official placement procedure. There is no precise, real data on the Indonesian diaspora (Parashtheo et al. 2025). Permanent voter data (*daftar pemilih tetap*) released by the General Elections Commission for the 2024 General Election indicate that Indonesian voters in Malaysia are concentrated in several locations: Kuala Lumpur recorded 447,258 registered voters, while Johor Bahru accounted for 119,491 registered voters. Other regions include Penang (42,660 registered voters), Kota Kinabalu (98,000), Tawau (59,442), and Kuching (61,912). Johor Bahru emerged as the second-most selected destination among the Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia. Johor's distinctive geographical location is at the southern tip of Peninsular Malaysia, bordering the Strait of Johor, and separated from Singapore and Indonesia (Batam Island). The Johor Strait functions as a vital waterway for regional trade and transportation (BERNAMA 2024). Several Indonesian regions, including Kalimantan and Sumatra, share maritime borders with Malaysia.

Analytically, these three pillars are interpreted through social capital as a set of relational resources operating across layered contexts (Putnam 2000). Bonding capital consolidates identity through dense, inward ties that reproduce shared narratives and practices; bridging capital connects actors across subgroups and facilitates mutual aid beyond immediate circles; and linking capital connects diaspora actors vertically to institutions that confer legitimacy, protection, and resources. Read as a socio-cultural ecosystem, identity preservation is not reducible to symbolic expression alone but emerges from interactions between micro-level agency (everyday identity work), meso-level organisations (community and student associations), and macro-level institutional scaffolding (consular and university support). As illustrated in Figure 1, this visual model operationalises the core theoretical framework of this study, demonstrating how bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital interact across individual, community, and institutional levels.

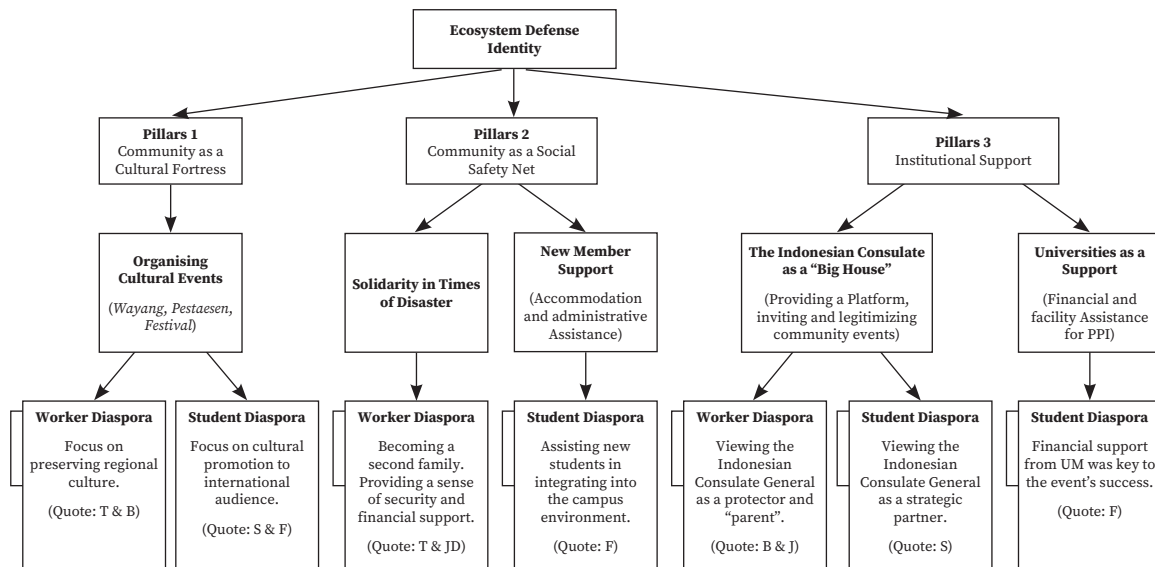


Figure 1: Ecosystem defence identity map.

The Community as a Cultural Fortress: Staging and Preserving Indonesian Identity

The most visible function of diaspora organisations lies in their role as cultural fortresses, which foster bonding social capital among members through shared rituals, language, and cultural expressions. These proactive spaces help community members remember, enact, and preserve Indonesian identity, while countering the cultural dilution experienced in host environments. Cultural preservation emerges through large-scale communal events, regional identity expression, and role-specific approaches among workers and students. These practices intensify internal cohesion and reflect the mechanisms of bonding social capital, which strengthens solidarity within homogeneous groups based on shared national and local heritage.

First, the performance of culture: communal celebrations and national commemoration. A cornerstone of the community's role as a cultural hub is the organisation of large-scale events that commemorate significant national and cultural milestones. The most prominent commemoration is Indonesia's Independence Day (*Hari Ulang Tahun Republik Indonesia*) on 17 August. This event transcends simple celebration and has become a powerful ritual of national affirmation. Informants from both worker and student communities described these celebrations as essential. The worker community's event was characterised by nostalgic activities that replicated Indonesian celebrations. Informant T, a factory worker and leader of the Islamic community organisation, *Ikatan Keluarga Muslim Indonesia*, emphasised the importance of these rituals: "to strengthen Indonesian culture, we also always commemorate the Independence Day of the Republic of Indonesia with competitions with fellow Indonesian migrant workers and *Ikatan Keluarga Muslim Indonesia* members".

This commemorative ritual functions as a mechanism of bonding social capital: it renews thick trust, shared memories, and a collective sense of "Indonesian-ness" through repeated, emotionally charged practices. Beyond cultural performance, such events also generate symbolic capital in Bourdieu's sense—publicly reaffirming the legitimacy of belonging to *Bangsa Indonesia* (Indonesia nation) and converting nostalgia into collective recognition within the diaspora space.

These competitions, likely familiar games such as sack races or cracker-eating contests, are potent symbols of a shared childhood and national experience, momentarily collapsing the distance between Malaysia and Indonesia. Similarly, Informant B (worker), founder of the regional organisation for people from East Nusa Tenggara, highlighted the official recognition that these events receive, noting that the Indonesian Consulate plays a central role in orchestrating them. His account exemplifies how diaspora communities enact identity through performative rituals (as shown in Figure 2) highlighting the role of state-invited events in affirming national culture and bonding capital:

The Consulate General constantly invites community organisations and the diaspora to national day commemoration events, especially the annual Independence Day anniversary. The Consulate gives every organisation a chance to display the culture from their region. (Informant B)



Figure 2: Sasak traditional clothing display and Peresean dance and Berugak dance during Indonesia's anniversary at the Indonesian Consulate General in Johor Bahru.

Source: Informant JD's documentation (2024).

This official invitation validates the communities' efforts and frames their cultural performances within a state-sanctioned narrative of national unity. For the student diaspora, this performative aspect takes on a slightly different character, geared toward a broader, more international audience. Informant S (student), the head of the Indonesian Students Association at UTM, described their flagship event, the Indonesian Festival (Infest) and articulated a clear objective beyond internal celebration. Informant S said: "in terms of culture, many activities uphold Indonesian values and disseminate Indonesian culture, such as the Indonesian Festival (Infest) held every two years". Indonesian students studying overseas are organised under the Indonesian Students Association. The Indonesian Students Association s in countries where Indonesian students are enrolled in bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and postdoctoral programmes at various educational levels are recognised as members of Indonesian Students Association Global (Saleh et al. 2020).

This perspective was echoed by Informant F (student), who added that events such as Infest involved selling food and traditional dance performances. The goal is not merely preservation but also promotion and cultural diplomacy. In Informant S's words, the students see themselves as ambassadors or icons who represent their country. These festivals thus serve a dual function: they allow students to connect with their own culture while simultaneously presenting Indonesia's positive and vibrant image to their international peers and university community.

Second, the locus of authenticity: preserving regional heritage. A deeper analysis revealed that national identity is most powerfully expressed through the lens of regional heritage. The cultural fortress is often built with the bricks and mortar of specific local traditions from places such

as Lombok, Cilacap, or other parts of Java. This finding suggests that a monolithic Indonesian identity is less salient than the mosaic of distinct regional identities that constitute the national whole. Community organisations are often structured along regional lines, serving as sanctuaries for local languages, cuisines, and art forms.

Informant B (worker), in her role as the founder of the Persatuan Masyarakat NTB Johor (NTB Community Association Johor), provided a vivid account of how this regional preservation is meticulously practised. She described their regular gatherings not just as social events but also as disciplined cultural exercises:

Every month we gather for *Yasinan* (Islamic prayers) and *Arisan* (a social lottery). During these gatherings, it is emphasised that we use the Sasak language, and the menu also features traditional Lombok dishes. We also practice Lombok's cultural arts like Gamelan, Sasak Gambus, and Peresean. (Informant B)

Notably, national identity is enacted through regional repertoires (language, cuisine, and arts), suggesting that Bangsa Indonesia is often reproduced through a mosaic of local identities rather than a singular national script. In ecosystem terms, regional associations operate as meso-level habitats where cultural transmission is deliberately curated. At the same time, this raises a theoretical tension: strong bonding around a region can strengthen identity continuity while also risking fragmentation of national cohesion. This issue becomes analytically important when comparing how different groups narrate Indonesia abroad. Informant B articulated the explicit goals of this study: “so that East Nusa Tenggara citizens abroad do not forget their origins, do not forget their ancestral language and customs, essentially so they do not lose their identity despite being in another country”.

This phenomenon was not unique to the East Nusa Tenggara community. Informant T (worker) described a similar dynamic within the Javanese diaspora, particularly among those from Cilacap, which is known for its strong community bonds and cultural activities such as Kuda Lumping and Reog. He mentioned attending events with Javanese community associations in Johor, the Cilacap association, the Kebumen association, etc. Therefore, these regional groups function as primary loci of cultural authenticity. For many members, being Indonesian in Malaysia was intrinsically linked to being Sasak or Javanese. National identity is not an abstract concept; rather, it is felt and lived through the tangible and familiar traditions of one's home region.

Third, divergent approaches: nostalgia versus diplomacy. Although both student and worker groups use their communities as cultural fortresses, their methods differ due to social positioning. Workers emphasise continuity and nostalgia, reinforcing bonding capital, whereas students perform culture diplomatically for external audiences, thereby cultivating bridging capital across cultural contexts (Lim et al. 2024). For the worker diaspora, cultural activities are deeply rooted in nostalgia and a desire for continuity. Their Wayang, Kuda Lumping, and Peresean performances are primarily intended for an internal audience of fellow Indonesians. These events recreate a sense of home and provide an emotional anchor in a foreign environment. The focus is on preserving traditions as they are remembered, offering comfort and a shared sense of history.

In stark contrast, the student diaspora's cultural activities are outward-facing and diplomatic. Educated, upwardly mobile individuals in formal academic settings are aware of their role as representatives of their nation. Their cultural performances are often polished, curated, easily digestible, and appealing to non-Indonesian audiences. Informant F (student) stated that their objective was to introduce Indonesian culture to the international community. This positions them less as preservers of a lived, everyday culture and more as presenters of a national brand.

This is not a criticism but an observation of their distinct functions. Their cultural fortress is not merely a defensive wall to keep traditions in; it is also a display window that showcases a carefully selected version of these traditions to the outside world.

The divergence between workers' nostalgia-oriented practices and students' outward-facing cultural diplomacy illustrates how social capital is shaped by positionality. Workers tend to mobilise bonding capital to secure emotional continuity and survival-oriented solidarity, whereas students more frequently mobilise bridging capital to gain recognition within host institutions and multicultural settings. This difference supports an ecosystem reading: identity preservation is co-produced by role-specific constraints and opportunities, rather than by a uniform diaspora identity logic.

The Community as a Social Safety Net: Providing Security in a Foreign Land

Beyond cultural expression, the diaspora community also fulfils a deeper function: creating a robust social safety net. This safety net exemplifies bridging capital by linking individuals across different community sectors and facilitating mutual aid (Safitri and Wibisono 2023). For many members, especially those in more precarious positions, the community's role as a source of practical and emotional support was the primary driver of their participation. The analysis revealed that the community acts as an informal form of social insurance, transforming from a mere association into a surrogate family (*keluarga kedua*) that provides security, solidarity, and a crucial sense of belonging. This function manifests in different but equally vital ways for worker and student groups.

First, solidarity in crisis: the indispensable support system for workers. The primary function of the diaspora community is to provide a vital support system for workers, particularly during times of crisis. Migrant workers often face precarity, including health emergencies, economic insecurity, and social isolation (Parashteo et al. 2025). In the absence of institutional welfare, community-formed mutual aid structures provide alternative forms of support, illustrating how bridging social capital addresses urgent needs across disparate individuals and groups. This function is also a powerful manifestation of bonding social capital, built on dense networks of trust, shared norms, and strong reciprocity among members, particularly within homogeneous communities. The establishment of crisis funds, for instance, represents a highly institutionalised form of this capital.

The Cilacap community is the most solid ...solid in the sense that when a family from Cilacap in Malaysia faces a calamity, an accident, or a death, whether they know them or not...they swiftly collect voluntary donations from one area to another... I remember helping collect for a death social fund ...we gathered over MYR10,000. (Informant T)

This mutual-aid mechanism is best conceptualised as high-intensity bonding capital—dense networks of obligation and reciprocity rooted in shared locality and trust. However, it generates outcomes typically associated with bridging functions, namely assistance that extends beyond intimate ties, demonstrating that bonding capital can scale up into community-wide welfare practices under conditions of precarity. In Putnam's (2000) terms, the key analytical point is not only "who connects to whom", but what the network enables: rapid resource mobilisation that substitutes for formal welfare arrangements.

This testimony is remarkable. This illustrates a highly effective, trust-based, informal insurance system that operates independently of any formal institution. The phrase "*entah kenal atau tidak*" (whether they know them or not) is particularly telling, indicating that the sense of obligation is

based on a shared regional identity rather than personal relationships, as illustrated in Figure 3. This figure illustrates the mobilisation of bonding and bridging capital in practical contexts, showing how regional identity facilitates solidarity and emotional security. This system provides not only financial relief but also immense psychological security. Similarly, Informant JD (worker), an activist in several community organisations, shared images and accounts of their efforts to help find the heirs of a sick, stranded Indonesian citizen who had lost contact with their family in Java for 40 years.



Figure 3: Cilacap community helps collect for a death social fund.

Source: Informant T's documentation (2024).

These are not trivial acts of charity but fundamental operations of a communal safety net that manages life's most severe risks. This function underscores the community's importance to its members, fostering deep loyalty and a strong sense of reciprocity. Consequently, participation in cultural events is underpinned by the knowledge that the same community will be present to provide support in times of crisis.

Second, the community as a second family. The perception of the community as a second family reinforces both emotional solidarity and shared obligation, two key characteristics of bonding social capital. This sentiment was most directly articulated by Informant JD (worker), who stated the following when asked about the importance of the community: "Of course, it helps immensely with everything. As a migrant, friends are the second family abroad... We support each other".

Reframing one's peers as kin constitutes a profound psychological adaptation to life in a foreign country. It imbues the community with a sense of warmth, obligation, and unconditional support that transcends the organisation's formal structure. Informant T (worker) similarly invoked familial language when describing his organisation's approach: "applying communication with workers in Indonesia with a familial nature to guard Indonesian cultural identity".

This sense of family motivates members to, in Informant JD's words, take every incident involving Indonesian citizens seriously. The community, therefore, becomes a space in which members are not merely passive recipients of aid but also active participants in a web of mutual care.

Third, the student experience: a safety net for integration. The safety net also addresses the distinct vulnerabilities faced by the student diaspora. These risks are not typically related to physical labour or legal status, but to the social, academic, and bureaucratic challenges of entering a new educational environment (Lim et al. 2024). Indonesian Students Association

has developed a support system tailored to these needs, focusing on the crucial initial period of a student's arrival. Informant F (student) provided a detailed step-by-step description of this process:

During the re-registration period, I went to a UTM office that handles international students, and several Indonesian students were waiting along the sides of the room, wearing maroon jackets as a sign that they were from Indonesian Students Association, on duty to receive new Indonesian students. They were there to help with registration, accommodation, and to answer any questions from the new students and their parents... (Informant F)

For students, the safety net is therefore less concerned with emergency welfare and more focused on institutional navigation—accessing information, accommodation, and bureaucratic pathways. This constitutes a bridging-capital process, as it connects newcomers to broader support networks beyond family, while simultaneously preparing them to activate linking ties with the university. From an ecosystem perspective, student organisations function as meso-level intermediaries that translate institutional systems into accessible forms, preventing isolation and enabling identity continuity alongside integration.

The Vital Role of Institutional Support: The Scaffolding of the Diaspora Ecosystem

The third pillar of this identity ecosystem is supported by linking social capital—the vertical connections between diaspora communities and institutions of authority, such as the Indonesian Consulate and the host university. The analysis clearly shows that the cultural and social activities of diaspora communities, driven by grassroots energy, do not operate in a vacuum (Lim et al. 2024). Rather, they are significantly enabled, legitimised, and sustained by a crucial scaffold of institutional support provided primarily by the Indonesian Consulate General and, for students, the host university. This support structure supplies resources, platforms, and official recognition that allow community initiatives to flourish.

First, the Indonesian Consulate is the *rumah besar* (the big house). Across all interviews with workers and students, the Indonesian Consulate in Johor Bahru was consistently identified as a central and indispensable actor. The Consulate is perceived not merely as a bureaucratic body, but as the emotional and symbolic centre of state representation. Its role exemplifies linking social capital by providing formal legitimacy, institutional access, and protection to the diaspora. This sentiment was powerfully captured by Informant B (worker), who stated: “The role of official institutions [the embassy/consulate] in identity preservation is vital. Because the embassy/consulate is our home and our parents for the diaspora while in Malaysia”.

This conceptualisation of the consulate as a “home” and “parent” highlights its dual function as a provider of both security and authority. This is where diaspora members feel symbolically connected to their homeland and protected by their state. This role is made tangible through Indonesian Consulate's proactive community engagement. Multiple informants confirmed that the Consulate invited community organisations to participate in official events, providing them with a prestigious platform. Informant JD (worker) pointed to the specific government function responsible: “Of course, the representative office has an important role in cultural programmes through the socio-cultural affairs function at the Johor Bahru Consulate”. For students, the consulate was considered a strategic partner. Informant S (student) described the consulate's role as essential for validating and supporting the existence of numerous community organisations: “As the country's representative, their role in providing a vessel for these organisations keeps Indonesian culture alive despite being outside the country”.

By facilitating cultural events, mediating disputes (as shown in Figure 3 of the consulate engaging with striking workers), and providing a central gathering point, Indonesian Consulate acted as the primary institutional anchor for the diaspora ecosystem.

Second, the university is a direct resource for students. While bonding capital ensures internal strength, the diaspora's ability to thrive depends heavily on linking social capital and vertical ties to institutions that hold formal power and resources. The Indonesian Consulate General and the host university (UTM) are key institutional bridges. The consulate provides legitimacy, a formal platform for cultural events, and a sense of state protection, which participants described as the role of a parent. Access to state-sanctioned recognition is a critical resource that empowers community leaders and validates their activities. Informant F (student) was unequivocal about this crucial support: "UTM provides more financial support; usually, significant events that need funding are assisted by UTM".

In addition to funding, the host university also plays a critical role by providing logistical support, further reinforcing the link between diaspora members and host institutions. Despite the strength of these social capital networks, diaspora members still face notable challenges in preserving their national identity. Informants reported experiencing cultural stereotyping, pressure to assimilate to Malaysian norms, and internal tensions between regional identities (such as Javanese or Sasak) and national identity as part of Bangsa Indonesia. For instance, student informants described subtle pressures to blend in with Malaysian campus life, which occasionally led to diluted expressions of their heritage. Workers, meanwhile, highlighted difficulties in accessing public recognition and respect for Indonesian cultural contributions, particularly when confronted with discriminatory attitudes. These barriers underline the ongoing negotiation and resistance involved in maintaining national identity abroad.

Informant F added that: "UTM serves as a kind of storage room, usually used to store items such as traditional clothing and its accessories. There is also the lending of buildings for venues for events that Indonesian Students Association will hold". Host-university support demonstrates how linking capital can extend beyond homeland institutions to include host-country infrastructures. Material resources (funding, venues, and storage) enable diaspora actors to scale cultural practices into public-facing events, which in turn produce reputational gains and wider bridging connections. In Bourdieu's (1986) terms, institutional resources can be converted into symbolic capital – enhancing the diaspora's capacity to represent Indonesia credibly within multicultural campus fields.

Taken together, the findings show that bonding, bridging, and linking operate as interlocking components of a socio-cultural ecosystem: bonding sustains internal continuity, bridging expands support and recognition across subgroups, and linking stabilises these practices through institutional legitimacy and resources. Crucially, these forms of capital may also conflict—strong regional bonding can compete with national cohesion; reliance on institutional linking can privilege groups with greater access (e.g., students) over more vulnerable workers. This tension is precisely what the ecosystem model makes visible, moving the analysis beyond description toward an explanatory account of how identity is preserved—and unevenly enabled—across diaspora positions, as per Figure 4. This synthesis figure distils this study's key analytical insight – that identity is preserved through an interactive ecosystem of social and institutional mechanisms, differentiated by diaspora role.

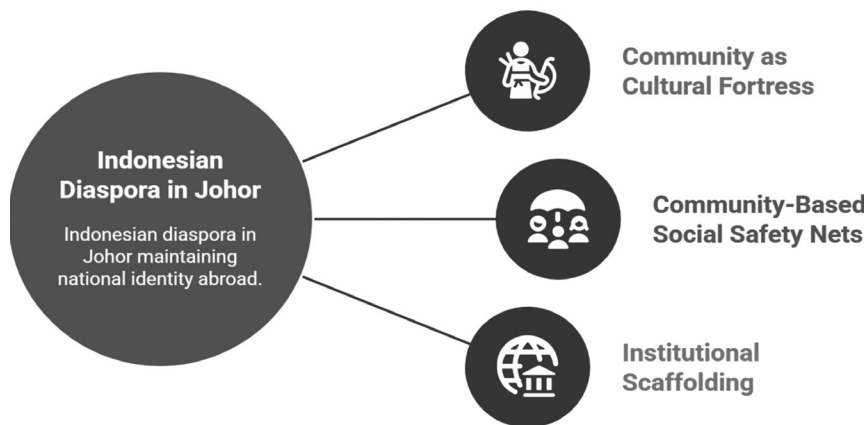


Figure 4: Unveiling the Indonesian diaspora's identity preservation.

Source: Prepared by the authors using Napkin AI (2025)

DISCUSSION

This study advances an ecosystemic understanding of diaspora identity, showing that the preservation of Bangsa Indonesia in Johor Bahru is neither a residual attachment nor a purely symbolic practice, but rather a relational, stratified, and institutionally mediated process. Drawing on diaspora identity theory and social capital frameworks, the findings reveal how national identity is actively produced through differentiated strategies shaped by positionality, power relations, and access to institutions. In doing so, this study responds to calls within diaspora scholarship to move beyond descriptive accounts of cultural maintenance towards more analytical, layered, and comparative models of identity work. The findings strongly resonate with Hall's (1990, cited in Ayuningtyas et al. 2022) conception of identity as "becoming" rather than "being". Rather than treating national identity as a fixed essence carried intact across borders, Hall conceptualises diaspora identity as continuously produced through representation, memory, and practice, shaped by socio-historical contexts. In Johor Bahru, Bangsa Indonesia is reconstructed through festivals, rituals, and public performances that reflect both internal community dynamics and external institutional expectations.

Importantly, these performances are not neutral. They reflect Hall's (1996, cited in Ayuningtyas et al. 2022) politics of representation – how identity is shaped by the desire to be seen and recognised. Student-led cultural diplomacy illustrates this clearly: national identity becomes a curated, strategically performed image that projects richness and harmony. While this enhances visibility and legitimacy, it also limits space for representing more vulnerable aspects of diaspora life, such as labour precarity or marginalisation.

The stratified identity strategies of workers and students echo Anthias' (2008) concept of translocational positionality – the intersection of legal status, class, gender, and institutional access. Workers primarily mobilise bonding capital within regional and religious groups to ensure survival and dignity. In contrast, students draw on bridging and linking capital to secure institutional recognition and symbolic visibility. This finding confirms that identity work is not homogeneous but shaped by positional and structural inequalities. These positional differences have theoretical implications. Although both groups invoke Bangsa Indonesia, their capacity to define it differs. Students' institutional access allows them to dominate representational spaces, while workers' identity practices remain inward and necessity-driven. This unequal distribution of linking capital prompts reflection on which narratives become authoritative in diaspora identity discourse.

This study also engages with Brubaker's (2005) view of nationalism as a practice rather than ideology. Effendi (2022) argued that diaspora is important in public diplomacy, so it is important to position it as a social asset and a strategic network for the country. In Johor Bahru, diasporic nationalism is enacted through everyday boundary-making: reinforcing Indonesian-ness while managing internal diversity. Rituals such as Independence Day events become "nationhood practices" (Muqith et al. 2022) that reaffirm collective belonging even without explicit nationalist discourse. Yet, such boundary-making can be ambivalent. Strong regional and religious ties offer solidarity but may also fragment national cohesion. The prominence of Islamic groups, while crucial for support, also shapes the moral and symbolic boundaries of belonging. This aligns with Brubaker's concern that diaspora nationalism can both unify and marginalise, privileging some forms of identity over others.

The Indonesian Consulate (KJRI) plays a strategic legitimising role, offering platforms and symbolic validation that shape which identity expressions gain visibility. This reflects Anthias' (2008) concept of institutionalised positional advantage, and echoes Brubaker's idea that nationhood is enacted through routines. Yet, this support introduces dependency and gatekeeping: formal recognition often favours compliant or visible groups, potentially marginalising dissenting or informal identities. A reflexive view of the informants' positionality is therefore critical. Most participants occupy leadership or visible roles, which may skew narratives towards unity and institutional harmony. As Anthias warns, this risks elite bias. Less-connected migrants may experience identity as more pragmatic or disengaged. Still, this bias is analytically valuable: these actors reveal how identity is intentionally built rather than passively inherited. By integrating Hall's identity-as-process, Anthias' focus on positionality and inequality, and Brubaker's nationhood-as-practice, this study proposes a critical ecosystem model. National identity emerges as a negotiated and stratified outcome, shaped by relational power and institutional access. It reframes the question from whether identity is preserved to how it is produced, by whom, and under what power conditions. In doing so, this study contributes to Asia-Pacific diaspora scholarship by centring identity preservation as a structural and political process (Brubaker 2005; Anthias 2008; Ayuningtyas et al. 2022; Kamal and Ayuningtyas 2024).

CONCLUSION

The preservation of national identity among the Indonesian diaspora in Johor is not the result of isolated efforts, but a collective endeavour shaped by a dynamic ecosystem of social capital. Bonding ties foster internal solidarity, bridging ties facilitate communal support, and linking ties secure institutional recognition and resources. This ecosystem is sustained through the interaction of three essential forms of social capital: (1) bonding capital within close-knit community structures; (2) bridging capital across diverse diaspora networks; and (3) linking capital facilitated by institutions such as the Indonesian Consulate and host universities.

Theoretically, this study contributes to diaspora and migration studies by advancing a multilayered model of social capital and demonstrating how its three dimensions function interactively within the diasporic context. It extends the application of social capital theory beyond traditional settings by situating it within a transnational ecosystem of identity preservation.

Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for Indonesian state actors, particularly in designing inclusive and responsive diaspora engagement strategies. The roles of consular support, student organisations, and community-based initiatives should be prioritised in foreign policy frameworks aimed at strengthening cultural cohesion and national belonging among citizens overseas.

Future research may expand this model through comparative studies in other Malaysian states or among Indonesian diasporas in different countries to test its cross-cultural validity. Further exploration of unaffiliated diaspora members—those not engaged in formal community structures—would also offer a fuller understanding of identity resilience outside organised networks. The socio-cultural ecosystem approach not only enriches academic understanding of transnational identity but also provides concrete pathways for the Indonesian government to institutionalise care, protection, and cultural continuity for its diaspora populations.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

This study was conducted as part of a community service programme rather than a clinical or experimental research project. Accordingly, formal ethical approval from an institutional ethics committee was not sought or required under the applicable institutional procedures at the time the study was conducted.

Prior to data collection, all prospective participants were informed of the objectives of the activity, the nature of their involvement, the topics to be discussed during the interviews, and the intended use of the information they provided. Participation was entirely voluntary. Individuals who agreed to participate attended the activity of their own free will and provided informed consent before the interviews commenced. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences. To protect participants' privacy, all identifying information was anonymised, and the data were stored securely with access restricted to the research team.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the study was carried out without any financial or commercial ties that might be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

UTILISATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

AI-based tools such as Grammarly, Quillbot, Scispace, Napkin AI, and ChatGPT were used only to support language editing and phrasing suggestions. All research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretations, and conclusions were conducted and verified by the authors.

NOTES

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