

Beyond Heritage: Traditional Arts as Intercultural Communication Strategies Among Indonesian Diaspora Artists in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This study reconceptualizes traditional arts not merely as heritage expressions but as deliberate intercultural communication strategies employed by Indonesian diaspora artists in the Netherlands. We investigate how these artists act as cultural mediators who transform static artistic forms into dynamic communicative actions that bridge Indonesian and Dutch cultural worlds. A transcendental phenomenological approach was adopted, involving in-depth interviews, performance observations, and fieldnotes with fourteen participants across multiple Dutch cities. Their artistic backgrounds spanned classical dance, contemporary hybrid performance, gamelan, angklung, and community-based arts. Through phenomenological reduction procedures, we identified five principal communicative strategies. First, cultural framing involved providing contextual explanations before performances to reduce cultural distance. Second, affective bridged through tempo, expression, and narrative pacing generated shared emotional states. Third, embodied translation communicated Indonesian values such as patience and harmony via controlled aesthetic nuance. Fourth, post-performance dialogues fostered mutual learning and shaped future communicative adjustments. However, persistent challenges emerged, including oversimplification of complex cultural ideas, pressure to balance authenticity with audience comprehension, and time constraints in performance settings. Our findings therefore demonstrate that diaspora artists consciously curate cultural narratives, evoke shared affective experiences, and translate Indonesian worldviews through embodied performance practices. This research contributes to intercultural communication scholarship by foregrounding the performative and embodied dimensions of communication, highlighting the role of diaspora artists as everyday cultural mediators in European public

spaces. The significance lies in demonstrating how traditional arts function as active communicative tools for fostering understanding and emotional connection across cultural boundaries.

Keywords: *artist; heritage; Indonesian diaspora; intercultural communication; traditional art.*

Introduction

The Netherlands hosts one of the most established and vibrant Indonesian diaspora communities in Europe, a population shaped by a complex colonial history and ongoing transnational connections (Aryani, 2022; Fakhriati, 2020). Within this landscape, traditional Indonesian performing arts—ranging from gamelan and classical Javanese dance to angklung and wayang—have found a sustained presence in Dutch public spaces, festivals, and community centers. However, these artistic expressions have often been examined through the lenses of heritage preservation, cultural identity maintenance, or nostalgia for a lost homeland (Rengganis et al., 2023). What remains underexplored is how diaspora artists themselves actively use these traditional forms as strategic tools for communicating with culturally distant Dutch audiences. The prior research has highlighted the organizational structures supporting diaspora cultural activities, yet the communicative intentions and strategies embedded within performance practices have received less systematic attention.

Our research addresses this gap by investigating how Indonesian diaspora artists in the Netherlands deploy traditional arts as deliberate intercultural communication strategies (Ehret et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2014). The central hypothesis is that these artists consciously curate cultural narratives, evoke shared affective experiences, and translate Indonesian worldviews through embodied performance practices, thereby transforming static heritage expressions into dynamic communicative actions. The objective of this study is therefore to reconceptualize traditional arts not merely as symbolic expressions of heritage but as active communicative tools that foster understanding, emotional connection, and cultural translation between Indonesian performers and Dutch audiences.

The contribution of this research is twofold. First, it extends intercultural communication theory by foregrounding the performative and embodied dimensions of communication, an area that has been dominated by verbal and textual analyses (Husein, 2021; Mohammad et al., 2025). Second, it illuminates the role of diaspora artists as everyday cultural mediators in European public spaces, operating within the specific intercultural dynamics of the Netherlands. By examining how artists frame performances, evoke affective responses, and translate embodied meanings, we demonstrate that traditional arts constitute a sophisticated communicative repertoire that bridges cultural worlds in ways that verbal dialogue alone cannot achieve.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on intercultural communication, diaspora arts, and the Dutch intercultural landscape. Section 3 outlines the transcendental phenomenological methodology employed (Finklestein et al., 2022). Section 4 presents the five principal communicative strategies identified through our analysis. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings for intercultural communication scholarship and diaspora cultural practice. Section 6 concludes by summarizing key contributions and suggesting directions for future research.

Literature Review

The study of intercultural communication has traditionally been dominated by verbal and textual analyses, with scholars focusing on language competence, conversational norms, and cognitive adaptation

strategies (Winarnita et al., 2020). Winarnita's integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation emphasizes the role of communication competence in enabling individuals to navigate unfamiliar cultural environments, yet this framework primarily addresses verbal and social interactions rather than the performative and embodied dimensions of human expression (Cuthbertson, 2024). Similarly, acculturation research has largely concentrated on psychological and behavioral changes that occur when individuals from different cultural groups come into sustained contact, typically measured through survey instruments and self-report questionnaires rather than through the analysis of creative or artistic practices.

A separate yet intersecting body of scholarship has emerged from performance studies, which foregrounds the transformative and communicative potential of embodied action. Schechner's foundational work conceptualizes performance as a broad spectrum of human activities ranging from ritual and theatre to everyday social interactions, arguing that performances are fundamentally "restored behaviors" that carry cultural meaning and can be deliberately shaped for communicative purposes. Turner's anthropological framework further extends this perspective by introducing the concept of social drama, wherein performance serves as a mechanism for negotiating social tensions and facilitating cultural understanding across group boundaries. Fischer-Lichte's aesthetic theory (Fischer-Lichte & Jain, 2008) adds that performance art generates a unique mode of experience that blurs the boundaries between performers and audiences, producing liminal spaces where cultural translation can occur through shared embodied presence.

Within diaspora studies, researchers have increasingly recognized that traditional arts serve more than heritage preservation functions. The concept of transnationalism posits that diaspora communities maintain multiple ties across national borders, with artistic practices serving as vehicles for negotiating hybrid identities and fostering connections between homeland and host society. Bhabha's notion of cultural translation (Taufiq & Harisudin, 2022) suggests that diaspora artists occupy an interstitial space where they translate cultural meanings for multiple audiences, a process that involves both representation and transformation. However, the specific communicative strategies that diaspora artists employ—the deliberate choices they make regarding framing, affect, and embodiment—remain undertheorized in both intercultural communication and diaspora literature.

The Dutch intercultural landscape provides a unique context for examining these dynamics. The Netherlands hosts a substantial Indonesian diaspora community with roots dating back to the colonial period and continuing through post-independence migration and contemporary transnational flows (Kim & Lee, 2024). Prior research has documented the organizational infrastructure supporting diaspora cultural activities through networks such as the Indonesian Diaspora Network-Netherlands. Studies of specific performance events, such as the Tong Tong Fair and pasar malam festivals, have revealed how these spaces serve as sites of collective memory and identity negotiation for the Indonesian diaspora. Yet the communicative intentions of individual artists within these settings have not been systematically examined.

Gamelan performance, as one of the most prominent Indonesian traditional art forms in the Netherlands, has received particular attention from ethnomusicologists. Sumarsam's comprehensive study (Palzer, 2025) traces how gamelan music has evolved through cultural interaction, absorbing external influences while maintaining aesthetic principles rooted in Javanese cosmology. However, this work

focuses primarily on musical development within Indonesia rather than on the intercultural communicative functions of gamelan performed by diaspora artists for Dutch audiences.

The concept of cultural translation offers a productive lens for bridging these disparate literatures. As Asad argued in his influential essay, anthropological interpretation itself constitutes a form of cultural translation, one that is inevitably shaped by power relations and interpretive frameworks. More recent scholarship Watkins, (2024) has expanded this concept to encompass artistic and performative practices, arguing that cultural translation is not merely a linguistic or textual operation but involves embodied, affective, and material dimensions. The space of translation Clark et al., (2025) has been conceptualized as a dynamic zone where cultural meanings are negotiated, transformed, and recontextualized across boundaries—a process that resonates deeply with the work of diaspora artists who must translate Indonesian cultural knowledge into forms accessible to Dutch audiences.

Despite these advances, existing scholarship has not systematically examined how diaspora artists in the Netherlands deploy traditional arts as deliberate, strategic communicative interventions. Studies of Indonesian arts diplomacy have addressed state-sponsored cultural performances aimed at international audiences, yet these focus on official governmental initiatives rather than the grassroots, everyday practices of diaspora artists. Research on cross-cultural music-making in the Netherlands Savina, (2025) has explored how musicians negotiate identity through spatial and cultural influences, but this work does not specifically address the communicative strategies embedded within traditional Indonesian performance forms. Moreover, phenomenological investigations of diaspora artistic experience remain scarce, leaving the lived, embodied dimensions of intercultural communication through traditional arts largely unexplored.

Our study addresses these gaps by integrating phenomenological methodology with intercultural communication theory, performance studies, and diaspora scholarship. We build upon the foundational insights of Villaire (Villaire et al., 2025), while extending their frameworks to the specific context of Indonesian diaspora artists in the Netherlands. We demonstrate that traditional arts constitute not merely heritage expressions or identity markers but sophisticated communicative strategies that engage cultural framing, affective bridging, embodied translation, and reciprocal dialogue. This reconceptualization contributes to intercultural communication scholarship by foregrounding the performative and embodied dimensions of communication, offering new theoretical and empirical insights into how diaspora artists function as everyday cultural mediators in European public spaces.

Methodology

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore how Indonesian diaspora practitioners experience long-term engagement with traditional arts in the Netherlands. Rather than seeking to explain behaviour through predetermined theoretical categories, the analysis focuses on reconstructing the lived meanings of artistic practice as experienced by the practitioners themselves. Through iterative interpretation across interviews and field observations, the study identifies recurring experiential structures that illuminate how intercultural communication gradually emerges from sustained artistic practice.

This approach was particularly well suited for our research because it prioritizes the subjective, embodied, and interpretive dimensions of communication—dimensions that are central to artistic performance yet remain underrepresented in intercultural communication scholarship. By bracketing

preconceived theoretical assumptions and attending to the raw texture of participants' experiences, we aimed to uncover the essential structures through which diaspora artists understand and enact communication via traditional arts.

Participants

Fourteen participants were recruited for this study through purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Inclusion criteria required that participants currently reside in the Netherlands, self-identify as Indonesian diaspora artists, and actively engage in the performance or teaching of traditional Indonesian arts. The participants were drawn from cities across the Netherlands, including Amsterdam, Amstelveen, Arnhem, Beverwijk, Bilthoven, Den Haag, Haarlem, Heerhugowaard, Olst, Oss, Purmerend, Rotterdam, and Utrecht, ensuring geographic diversity and varied exposure to different Dutch audience contexts. Their artistic backgrounds spanned a broad spectrum of traditional Indonesian forms: classical Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, Karo, Dayak, and Papuan dance, contemporary hybrid performance that merged traditional movements with modern choreography, gamelan music, angklung performance, and community-based arts initiatives. The participants' roles ranged from dancers and singers to gamelan musicians, angklung ensemble leaders, and community arts coordinators. Ages ranged from 37 to 69 years, with years of artistic experience spanning from 10 to over 40 years. This diversity enabled the study to capture variations in how artists conceptualize their communicative role across different art forms and career stages.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary methods to ensure methodological triangulation and depth of phenomenological description. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. The interviews employed open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences, such as "Can you describe a recent performance where you felt particularly connected to the Dutch audience?" and "How do you decide what to tell the audience before a performance begins?" Follow-up probes explored specific moments of intercultural interaction, including instances of misunderstanding, emotional resonance, and audience feedback. Second, direct observations of rehearsals and public performances were conducted across multiple venues, including community centers, festival stages, and educational workshops. Each observation session lasted between 2 and 4 hours, during which detailed fieldnotes captured performance structures, artist-audience interactions, and non-verbal communication dynamics. Third, photographic and video documentation of performances, when permitted by artists and venues, provided visual and auditory reference for later analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the research process, with participants receiving written information about the study's purpose and their rights, and providing signed informed consent. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the systematic procedures of transcendental phenomenological reduction as outlined by Lutz & Knox (Lutz & Knox, 2014). The process comprised four sequential stages. First, horizonization involved reading each transcript and set of fieldnotes multiple times to identify every significant statement or meaning unit related to the participants' experience of using traditional arts for

intercultural communication. Each meaning unit was given equal value initially, without prioritizing certain statements over others. Second, these meaning units were clustered into emergent themes through a process of comparing and contrasting units across participants. For example, statements about providing historical background before dances were grouped together under a theme that later became “cultural framing.” This clustering required iterative movement between the data as a whole and the individual meaning units to ensure that themes accurately represented participants’ experiences. Third, imaginative variation was employed to explore the structural contexts underlying these themes. This involved systematically varying the conditions under which the experiences occurred—such as different performance settings, audience compositions, or art forms—to identify invariant structures that persisted across variations. Through this process, we sought to move from the textural description of “what” participants experienced to the structural description of “how” these experiences were constituted. Fourth, a composite description was developed that integrated both textural and structural elements into a unified account of the phenomenon. This final synthesis presents the essential, invariant structure of how Indonesian diaspora artists in the Netherlands use traditional arts as intercultural communication strategies, capturing the shared experiential patterns that transcend individual differences. Throughout the analysis, we maintained a reflexive journal to bracket personal biases and theoretical preconceptions, thereby enhancing the validity of the phenomenological reduction. The outcome of this analysis, presented in Section 4, identifies five principal communicative strategies that form the essential structure of the phenomenon under investigation.

Results

Through the phenomenological reduction of fourteen participants’ lived experiences, five principal communicative strategies emerged that collectively constitute how Indonesian diaspora artists in the Netherlands deploy traditional arts as deliberate intercultural communication tools. These strategies represent both intentional preparatory actions and emergent responses to performance contexts, revealing a sophisticated communicative repertoire that extends beyond heritage preservation into active cultural mediation.

Cultural Framing as Strategic Communication

The first and most explicitly articulated strategy involved what participants described as “persiapan penonton” or audience preparation, wherein artists deliberately provided contextual information before performances to shape how Dutch audiences would interpret and experience traditional Indonesian arts. This cultural framing functioned as a form of pre-communicative intervention that reduced cultural distance by offering interpretive keys—explanations of symbolic gestures, historical references, philosophical meanings, and aesthetic principles—that were not readily accessible to audiences unfamiliar with Indonesian cultural frameworks.

One dancer, whom we will refer to as ES, described this practice with striking clarity, stating in Indonesian, “Saya selalu memberi penjelasan kecil sebelum tampil supaya orang Belanda mengerti makna gerakan. Kalau tidak, mereka hanya melihat keindahan, bukan maknanya” [I always give a small explanation before performing so that Dutch people understand the meaning of the movements. If not, they only see the beauty, not the meaning] (ES). This statement encapsulates a fundamental insight driving the cultural framing strategy: the distinction between aesthetic appreciation and cultural understanding. ES recognized that while Dutch audiences might respond viscerally to the visual elegance of Javanese

dance, the intended communicative message—rooted in the symbolic meanings embedded in each gesture—would remain opaque without explicit mediation. The beauty was accessible; the meaning required translation.

Participants consistently described cultural framing as a deliberate pedagogical intervention that guided audience interpretation toward intended meanings rather than leaving interpretation entirely open. Drawing from communication theory, this practice parallels the concept of pre-framing, wherein communicators shape cognitive readiness by establishing interpretive frameworks before presenting the central message (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Just as journalists and political communicators use pre-framing to influence how audiences process subsequent information, diaspora artists used verbal introductions, program notes, and pre-performance dialogues to establish the cultural interpretive framework within which dance, music, and theatrical elements should be understood. This was not merely informational but strategic: artists made conscious choices about which elements of tradition to highlight and which to leave implicit, based on their assessments of Dutch audiences' prior knowledge and cultural expectations.

A gamelan musician from Den Haag elaborated on this selective framing, explaining that he did not attempt to explain the entire philosophical cosmology underlying Javanese gamelan theory during a single performance introduction. Instead, he selected one or two accessible entry points—such as the relationship between the melodic structure and the concept of harmony (*rukun*)—that provided enough context for audiences to appreciate the performance's deeper significance without becoming overwhelmed by cultural complexity. This selective framing represented a sophisticated communicative calculus wherein artists balanced comprehensiveness with accessibility, recognizing that too much contextual information could inhibit rather than facilitate understanding.

Cultural framing also extended beyond verbal explanation into the very selection and arrangement of performance elements. Artists described making deliberate choices about which traditional pieces to program for Dutch audiences, often favoring works with visual symbolism or narrative structures that could be relatively easily explained within a short introduction. In this sense, cultural framing operated not only during the preparatory communication before a performance but throughout the entire process of curating the performance itself.

The temporal dimension of cultural framing was particularly significant. Artists described how the timing of contextual information shaped its effectiveness, with many insisting that explanations should be delivered immediately before a performance rather than in printed programs or separate lecture contexts. This temporal proximity was deemed essential for creating what one dancer called "active listening" (*pendengaran aktif*), wherein audiences brought the interpretive framework directly into their experience of the performance rather than receiving it as a separate intellectual exercise. Another participant, a singer of tembang Sunda, TH, described how she would explain the poetic meaning of the sung text and its connection to natural imagery immediately before performing, establishing an interpretive lens that transformed the audience's perception of vocal nuances they might otherwise have dismissed as merely decorative.

This strategic deployment of cultural framing reveals that diaspora artists operate as skilled cultural mediators who recognize that traditional arts, while carrying universal aesthetic appeal, also communicate culturally specific meanings that require interpretive assistance. By providing this assistance

through pre-performance explanations and curated programming choices, artists transformed traditional performances from self-contained artistic objects into communicative events wherein dialogue between cultural worlds could occur. The framing strategy thus constituted the first and most foundational layer of intercultural communication through traditional arts, establishing the interpretive conditions that made subsequent communicative strategies— affective bridging, embodied translation, and reciprocal dialogue—possible.

Affective Bridging through Performance

Beyond the cognitive preparation provided by cultural framing, participants described a second strategic layer centered on generating shared emotional states that transcended cultural differences. This strategy, which we term affective bridging, operated through the intentional manipulation of performance elements—including tempo, expression, vocal tone, costume color, and narrative pacing—to evoke resonant feelings in audiences without requiring culturally specific knowledge. Where cultural framing addressed the mind, affective bridging targeted the heart, relying on what artists perceived as universal emotional cues embedded within traditional arts.

A gamelan musician from Den Haag, ET, articulated this process with striking clarity, stating in Indonesian, *“Setelah saya memainkan gamelan Jawa, penonton bilang mereka merasa damai. Mereka tidak tahu artinya, tapi mereka merasakan suasana yang sama”* [After I played Javanese gamelan, audience members said they felt peaceful. They did not know the meaning, but they felt the same atmosphere] (ET). This statement reveals a foundational insight: affective bridging succeeds precisely because it bypasses the need for explicit cultural knowledge, instead activating shared human capacities for emotional response. The musician did not require Dutch audiences to understand the philosophical underpinnings of gamelan’s tuning system or its cosmological associations—the affective experience of tranquility was accessible through sound itself.

Participants described deliberate choices in how they manipulated performance elements to evoke these shared emotional states. Tempo featured prominently as a tool for shaping audience affect. One dancer explained that she consciously slowed certain movement sequences during performances for Dutch audiences, particularly those that traditionally expressed refined (*alus*) qualities such as patience and inner calm, to allow the emotional resonance to develop and resonate within the audience’s felt experience. The deliberate pacing enacted a form of temporal invitation, giving audiences time to enter the emotional atmosphere rather than presenting movements as a rapid succession of visually interesting forms to be cognitively processed.

Expression and vocal tone constituted another deliberate affective bridge. A singer of *tembang Jawa*, AD, described how she modulated her vocal quality—shifting between openness and restraint, brightness and depth—to communicate emotional states that transcended linguistic barriers. Even when Dutch audiences could not understand the Old Javanese or Sundanese lyrics, they responded viscerally to the emotional textures embedded in the vocal delivery. The singer noted that audience members frequently approached her after performances to describe the feelings they experienced—sadness, longing, joy, serenity—demonstrating that the affective content had been successfully communicated despite linguistic opacity.

Costume color and visual aesthetics also played a significant role in affective bridging. Participants recognized that colors carry culturally variable symbolic meanings, yet they also acknowledged that certain

emotional responses to color—such as the calming effect of blue or the energizing quality of red—appeared to transcend cultural boundaries to some degree. One dancer who is also a group leader, TK, shared that she chose costuming colors not only based on traditional Javanese symbolic associations but also considering how Dutch audiences might experience them affectively. When performing a dance expressing spiritual devotion, she selected deep gold tones that she felt communicated warmth and sacredness regardless of cultural background, alongside the traditional significance gold holds in Javanese mysticism as a color of illumination and divine presence.

One dancer from Arnhem, RS, encapsulated the centrality of affective bridging to the entire intercultural communication process, stating in Indonesian, “*Kalau penonton merasakan sesuatu, komunikasi sudah terjadi walaupun mereka tidak tahu semua detail budaya*” [If the audience feels something, communication has already occurred even if they do not know all the cultural details] (RS). This statement radicalizes the definition of intercultural communication, suggesting that emotional resonance constitutes a sufficient condition for communication regardless of whether cognitive understanding has been achieved. For these artists, affective bridging was not merely a supplementary strategy to cognitive cultural framing but a parallel and equally valid mode of communication in its own right.

The effectiveness of affective bridging, as described by participants, appeared to stem from its reliance on shared human embodiment. All audiences possess bodies that respond to rhythm, tempo, pitch, color, and movement, even if the cultural codes through which these elements are interpreted vary. By foregrounding the embodied dimensions of performance—the physical sensations evoked by gamelan’s resonant frequencies, the kinesthetic empathy generated by a dancer’s controlled gestures, the emotional contagion transmitted through a singer’s vocal timbre—artists accessed a layer of communication that operated below the threshold of cultural variation. This finding resonates with Fischer-Lichte’s assertion that performance generates an aesthetic experience that blurs subject-object boundaries and produces liminal spaces where cultural translation occurs through shared embodied presence.

However, participants also acknowledged that affective bridging alone could be incomplete. Several artists described situations where audiences experienced strong emotional responses but remained unable to connect these feelings to the cultural meanings they were intended to convey. In such cases, the affective experience risked remaining at the level of pleasant sensation rather than intercultural understanding. This recognition shaped how artists integrated affective bridging with the other strategies identified in this study, particularly cultural framing and embodied translation, creating a layered communicative approach in which emotional engagement and cognitive understanding worked in tandem rather than in isolation.

The deliberate construction of affective bridges reveals that Indonesian diaspora artists in the Netherlands possess a sophisticated understanding of how performance operates as emotional communication. They recognized that emotion is not merely a byproduct of aesthetic experience but a communicative channel that can be intentionally shaped to generate shared affective states across cultural boundaries. By manipulating tempo, expression, vocal tone, color, and narrative pacing, they transformed traditional arts into vehicles for emotional resonance that preceded and enabled more specific cultural understanding, thereby establishing a foundation of shared human feeling upon which more detailed communicative exchanges could be built.

Embodied Translation as Communicative Technique

The third principal communicative strategy identified through phenomenological analysis extended beyond verbal framing and affective resonance into the very substance of artistic practice itself: embodied translation. While cultural framing prepared audiences cognitively and affective bridging engaged them emotionally, embodied translation operated through the fundamental medium of performance—movement, sound, and structural organization—to communicate Indonesian values and worldviews directly to Dutch audiences. This strategy constituted the most distinctive contribution of traditional arts to intercultural communication, as it leveraged dimensions of meaning-making that verbal language could not fully capture.

Participants described how traditional arts functioned as vehicles for translating core Indonesian values—particularly patience (*sabar*), harmony (*rukun*), and refinement (*alus*)—through controlled aesthetic nuance and embodied practice. Unlike verbal explanation, which separated the message from its medium, embodied translation fused meaning with form, allowing values to be demonstrated and experienced rather than merely described. One dancer from Rotterdam, articulated this process poignantly, stating in Indonesian, “*Gerakan halus itu cara saya menerjemahkan nilai-nilai Jawa seperti keselarasan dan penghormatan*” [The refined movements are my way of translating Javanese values like harmony and respect] (DS). This statement encapsulates the essence of embodied translation: the dancer did not verbally explain harmony and respect; she enacted them through the controlled precision of her gestures, allowing Dutch audiences to perceive these values directly through visual and kinesthetic experience.

The concept of *alus*, which pervades Javanese aesthetics and ethics, provided a particularly rich site for examining embodied translation. *Alus* encompasses refinement, subtlety, smoothness, and spiritual cultivation, standing in opposition to *kasar* (coarse, rough, unrefined) (Alsharif & Qurban, 2021; Charles et al., 2020). Participants described how they communicated *alus* through the deliberate control of movement dynamics—the precise angle of a wrist, the measured pace of a turn, the restrained expression of a face. These micro-cues carried moral and spiritual significance within Javanese philosophical frameworks, yet they were equally perceptible as aesthetic qualities to Dutch audiences unfamiliar with these frameworks. One dancer explained that when she performed the classic Javanese dance, *Srimpi* or *Golek* dance, she did not tell audiences about the value of inner calm (*rasa tentrem*); instead, she embodied it through the sustained stillness of her upper body, the unhurried transitions between postures, and the economy of her gestures. Dutch audiences responded to these qualities with comments about “grace,” “serenity,” and “discipline,” demonstrating that the core affective and ethical content of *alus* had been successfully translated through embodied means even without explicit cultural instruction.

Musicians similarly employed embodied translation to communicate values of harmony and collective responsibility. Gamelan performance, organized around the principle of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), required each musician to maintain precise coordination with others, listening attentively and adjusting their contribution to support the whole. One gamelan musician and also a traditional Javanese singer (*wiraswara*) described how the physical experience of playing in an ensemble—the subtle cueing between players, the collective modulation of tempo, the shared responsibility for maintaining the musical fabric—embodied the value of communal harmony more powerfully than any verbal statement could. As he explained, “When Dutch audience members watch us play, they see us listening to each other, adjusting, working together. They don’t need to know Javanese philosophy to understand that this is about

harmony” (ET). The value was translated through the observable practice of ensemble coordination, making abstract philosophical principles concrete and visible.

Embodied translation also operated through the structural organization of performance itself, beyond individual gestures or musical phrases. Participants described how the overall architecture of a performance—its beginning, middle, and end; its pacing and transitions; its relationship between individual expression and collective form—communicated particular ways of being in the world. A dancer from Bilthoven explained that Balinese dance-drama performances followed a structural logic that emphasized gradual development, restraint, and resolution rather than dramatic conflict or sudden transformation (NMA). Similarly, this structural preference embodied the Javanese value of *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessing through patient, gradual spiritual cultivation), communicating a worldview that prioritized process over outcome and harmony over confrontation (AR). While Dutch audiences might not explicitly articulate this worldview, participants reported that audiences often described feeling a distinct “atmosphere” or “energy” that was qualitatively different from Western theatrical performances—evidence that the embodied structural translation had succeeded at an intuitive level.

Notably, artists did not view the modification of choreography or musical structure as a dilution of tradition but rather as strategic communicative adaptation. One dancer from Purmerend, described how she had gradually shortened the traditional opening sequence of her dance (*beksan*) while preserving its essential qualities of controlled refinement and gradual build. She explained, “*Ini bukan mengurangi makna, tapi menerjemahkan ke dalam bahasa yang bisa dipahami penonton Belanda*” [This is not reducing the meaning, but translating into a language that Dutch audiences can understand] (TH). This framing of choreographic adaptation as translation rather than dilution reveals a sophisticated metacognitive awareness among artists: they recognized that translation, whether linguistic or embodied, inevitably involves transformation while still preserving core meaning. The goal was not to reproduce tradition exactly but to communicate its essence effectively across cultural boundaries.

The embodied translation strategy revealed that Indonesian diaspora artists possessed what might be termed performance translators—an ability to convert abstract cultural values into observable, experiential forms through the manipulation of movement, sound, and structure. This process drew on the artists’ deep embodiment of their own cultural traditions, wherein years of practice had internalized the connection between physical form and philosophical content. However, it also required conscious reflection and deliberate modification to render these embodied meanings accessible to Dutch audiences. The artists were not merely performing tradition; they were actively translating it, modifying aspects of performance while preserving its core communicative intent.

This finding extends established understandings of diaspora artistic practice by demonstrating that embodied translation is not simply a natural consequence of performing traditional arts for culturally distant audiences but a deliberate, skilled communicative technique requiring both cultural fluency and intercultural awareness. Participants described developing this skill over years of experience, learning through trial and error which aspects of performance translated effectively and which required additional verbal framing or modification. The embodied translation strategy thus constituted a form of expertise developed through sustained intercultural practice, representing the culmination of the artists’ dual competence in both Indonesian traditional arts and Dutch audience expectations.

Interaction with Dutch Audiences as Reciprocal Communication

The fourth communicative strategy identified through phenomenological analysis moved beyond unilateral transmission from performer to audience, revealing a dynamic, reciprocal process of intercultural exchange. While cultural framing, affective bridging, and embodied translation positioned artists as initiators of communication, the reciprocal interaction with Dutch audiences—particularly through post-performance dialogue sessions—transformed communication into a bidirectional flow of learning, adjustment, and mutual understanding. Artists described these exchanges not as optional addenda to performance but as integral extensions of the communicative act, wherein audience responses shaped future performance strategies and deepened cultural understanding for both parties.

Performances typically concluded with open dialogue sessions, during which Dutch audience members asked questions about the artistic forms presented. One informant from Rotterdam articulated this dynamic, stating in Indonesian, “*Sesudah tampil, ada yang tanya tentang cerita tarinya. Dari situ saya merasa kami saling belajar*” [After performing, someone asked about the story of the dance. From that moment, I felt we were learning from each other] (NB). This statement captures the essence of reciprocal communication: the interaction was not simply didactic—with the artist teaching and the audience learning—but constituted a mutual learning process wherein both parties gained new insights. The audience member’s question revealed what had piqued their curiosity, what had remained opaque despite the cultural framing, and what interpretive frameworks they had brought to the experience. In answering, the artist not only filled knowledge gaps but also gained valuable information about which aspects of performance required more careful explanation or different communicative approaches in future interactions.

Participants described how audience feedback directly shaped their future communication strategies, illustrating that reciprocal communication was not confined to the performance moment but had long-term adaptive effects. ET recounted how repeated questions about the connection between gamelan tuning systems and Javanese cosmology prompted him to develop a more detailed and accessible explanation that he now includes in his pre-performance framing. Another dancer from Haarlem described adjusting the pace of her post-performance question-and-answer sessions based on audience responses: when she observed that Dutch audiences were particularly engaged by questions about the spiritual significance of specific gestures, she began devoting more time to this aspect of her explanation. These adjustments reveal that reciprocal communication functioned as a feedback loop, with audience reactions—both explicit questions and implicit engagement—guiding artists toward more effective communicative strategies over time.

The quality of questioning itself provided artists with diagnostic information about Dutch audiences’ cultural frameworks. Participants noted that certain types of questions recurred across multiple performances, revealing systematic patterns in how Dutch audiences processed traditional Indonesian arts. Questions about the “meaning” of specific gestures or musical patterns were common, indicating that audiences actively sought interpretive keys rather than accepting performance at face value. Questions about the relationship between tradition and modernity, or about whether artists felt constrained by traditional forms, revealed Dutch audiences’ assumptions about the incompatibility between tradition and creative expression. By attending to these patterns, artists developed metacognitive awareness of their audience’s cultural schemas, allowing them to tailor not just individual explanations but their entire communicative approach to better bridge Indonesian and Dutch interpretive frameworks.

Artists also described instances where audience feedback challenged their assumptions about how their performances were being received. One dancer from Arnhem recounted a memorable exchange in which a Dutch audience member interpreted a dance depicting a spiritual journey as expressing personal anguish, a reading that the dancer had not anticipated. This interpretive divergence prompted the dancer to reflect on which aspects of the performance had generated this misreading and to adjust both her cultural framing and her embodied translation to clarify the intended spiritual—rather than psychological—interpretation. Such experiences illustrate that reciprocal communication served a corrective function, helping artists identify gaps between their communicative intentions and audience interpretations that might otherwise have remained invisible.

Importantly, artists did not view reciprocal communication as diminishing their authority or diluting traditional meaning. Instead, they described these exchanges as generative, providing opportunities to deepen their own understanding of the arts they practiced. Explaining the philosophical background of a dance to a Dutch audience required the artist to articulate tacit knowledge that they had previously held implicitly, a process that often led to new insights about the tradition itself. As one participant from Utrecht noted, *“Dengan menjelaskan ke orang Belanda, saya jadi lebih ngerti tradisi saya sendiri”* [By explaining to Dutch people, I came to understand my own tradition better] (ES). This statement reveals a profound dimension of reciprocal communication: the act of translating cultural knowledge for another audience created conditions for self-reflection that deepened the artist’s own embodiment of and relationship to the tradition.

The spatial and temporal context of these reciprocal exchanges mattered significantly. Artists described how the physical proximity between performer and audience during post-performance dialogues—often conducted immediately after the performance, in the same space, without a raised stage separating them—created conditions of intimacy and shared vulnerability that encouraged open questioning. The timing was also crucial: immediate proximity to the performance experience meant that audience members’ questions were grounded in direct sensory memory, allowing for richer and more specific exchanges than would be possible in a separate lecture or workshop setting. This finding aligns with prior research on the importance of immediacy in intercultural dialogue, suggesting that the temporal and spatial embedding of reciprocal communication within the performance event itself enhanced its transformative potential .

Reciprocal communication was not limited to formal Q&A sessions but also occurred through informal interactions before and after performances, during workshops, and through ongoing relationships between artists and audience members who attended multiple events. Several participants described how they cultivated these informal exchanges as spaces for deeper engagement than the public dialogue session allowed. One angklung ensemble leader described how audience members who approached him after performances to share personal connections to Indonesian culture—through family heritage, travel experiences, or academic interests—provided valuable insights into the varied interpretive communities within Dutch audiences. Over time, these informal relationships evolved into ongoing dialogues that enriched both parties’ understanding of Indonesian arts and their intercultural significance.

The reciprocal nature of this communication strategy challenges unidirectional models of intercultural communication that position diaspora artists primarily as cultural ambassadors transmitting fixed knowledge to passive recipients. Instead, the findings reveal that artists and audiences co-construct

cultural understanding through iterative exchanges wherein each party learns from and shapes the other. The artists' communicative expertise lay not only in their ability to translate Indonesian culture for Dutch audiences but also in their capacity to learn from audience feedback and adjust their strategies accordingly. This process of ongoing adaptation, grounded in sustained engagement with Dutch audiences across multiple performance contexts, constituted the most dynamic dimension of the intercultural communication work that diaspora artists performed.

Challenges in Intercultural Artistic Communication

Despite the positive outcomes associated with the communicative strategies described above, participants consistently reported a set of persistent challenges that complicated their efforts to deploy traditional arts as effective intercultural tools. These challenges, which emerged repeatedly across interviews and observations, revealed the tensions inherent in the dual burden of representation and communication that diaspora artists carry. Rather than viewing these challenges as failures, however, artists interpreted them as inherent features of the intercultural communicative process—problems to be managed rather than resolved, navigated rather than eliminated.

The first and most frequently cited challenge was the perceived oversimplification of complex cultural ideas when translating them for Dutch audiences. Gamelan musician SL from Rotterdam articulated this tension with particular poignancy, explaining in Indonesian, "*Kalau saya jelaskan terlalu singkat, budaya kita kelihatan sederhana padahal tidak. Tapi kalau saya jelaskan panjang lebar, penonton kehilangan perhatian*" [If I explain too briefly, our culture looks simple when it is not. But if I explain at length, the audience loses attention] (TK). This statement encapsulates the central dilemma of cultural framing: the very act of making Indonesian philosophical concepts accessible to Dutch audiences inevitably involved simplifying them, stripping away layers of nuance that were central to their meaning within Javanese cultural contexts. The cognitive accessibility gained through simplification came at the cost of depth, and artists were acutely aware of this trade-off. One dancer from Rotterdam, DS, described how explaining the concept of *rasa*—a complex Javanese term encompassing feeling, taste, meaning, and aesthetic intuition—required reducing its multidimensional significance to a single, understandable translation of "feeling" or "inner sense." While this made the concept accessible, it simultaneously risked presenting Javanese aesthetics as simpler than they truly were, potentially reinforcing stereotypes of "Eastern spirituality" as vague or exotic rather than as philosophically sophisticated.

A second major challenge emerged from the pressure to appear authentic while simultaneously adapting performances for audience comprehension. A dancer, whose pseudonym is NB, expressed this tension with striking vulnerability, describing in Indonesian, "*Kadang saya takut dituduh tidak otentik kalau menyesuaikan gerakan. Tapi kalau tidak disesuaikan, penonton sulit menangkap maknanya*" [Sometimes I am afraid of being accused of inauthenticity if I adjust the movements. But if I do not adjust them, the audience has difficulty grasping the meaning] (NB). This statement reveals the double bind in which diaspora artists operated: maintaining strict fidelity to traditional forms risked inaccessibility for Dutch audiences, while adapting those forms risked criticism from cultural gatekeepers—both within the Indonesian community and from external observers—who might perceive modification as dilution or inauthenticity. Participants described navigating this tension through what might be termed strategic authenticity, wherein they made conscious decisions about which elements of performance to preserve unchanged and which to adapt, based on assessments of their audience and context. However, this strategic calculus was never completely

comfortable, and artists described ongoing anxiety about how their choices might be received by different stakeholders, including senior teachers in Indonesia, fellow diaspora artists, and Dutch audiences expecting “traditional” performances.

Misinterpretation of symbolic elements constituted a third significant challenge, arising from the fundamental opacity of culturally specific meanings embedded in visual, gestural, and musical codes. One dancer from Heerhugowaard described how a specific hand gesture (*mudra*) that symbolized spiritual blessing in Javanese tradition was interpreted by Dutch audience members as a gesture of greeting or even a modified peace sign (AR). Even after providing cultural framing about the symbolic content of the performance, artists could not fully control how audiences would interpret individual elements, and misinterpretations frequently emerged in post-performance dialogue questions. The dancer explained that such misinterpretations were not always problematic—sometimes, a “misunderstood” gesture could still evoke a meaningful response—but they did highlight the limits of what could be communicated through performance alone. Embodied translation, no matter how carefully crafted, could not guarantee that specific symbolic meanings would be received as intended, particularly when those meanings drew on complex mythological or spiritual frameworks unfamiliar to Dutch audiences.

Time limitations in performance settings posed a fourth systemic challenge that constrained all other communicative strategies. Traditional Indonesian performing arts often require extended durations to achieve their intended aesthetic and communicative effects. Gamelan pieces develop gradually through cyclic structures, classical Javanese dances unfold through long, and meditative sequences. However, festival stages, community events, and educational workshop settings typically imposed strict time constraints, limiting performances to fifteen, thirty, or at most sixty minutes. One gamelan musician described how this temporal compression fundamentally altered the communicative potential of gamelan, stating, “*Gamelan butuh waktu untuk membangun suasana. Kalau kita cuma main sepuluh menit, penonton belum masuk ke dalam- dia baru dengar suara, belum rasakan spiritnya*” [Gamelan needs time to build atmosphere. If we only play for ten minutes, the audience has not yet entered into it—they have only heard the sound, not yet felt the spirit] (ET). This challenge was particularly acute for embodied translation, which relied on the gradual accumulation of aesthetic nuance and emotional resonance through sustained performance. Artists described developing strategies to work within these constraints, such as selecting shorter pieces, condensing longer works while preserving key structural elements, and intensifying pre-performance framing to accelerate audience comprehension. However, they acknowledged that these adaptations could not fully compensate for the communicative depth that extended performance durations made possible.

These four challenges—oversimplification, authenticity pressure, misinterpretation, and time limitations—did not operate in isolation but frequently intersected and amplified one another. For instance, time limitations could exacerbate the pressure to oversimplify, as artists with only a brief window for both explanation and performance felt compelled to reduce cultural complexity to its most digestible elements. Similarly, the fear of misinterpretation could intensify authenticity anxiety, as artists hesitantly adjusted symbolic elements while worrying about whether these adjustments would be perceived as inauthentic or would fail to achieve their intended clarifying effect. The challenges thus formed a complex landscape of constraint within which artists operated, requiring constant negotiation and compromise.

Despite these difficulties, participants did not view the challenges as insurmountable barriers to effective intercultural communication. Rather, they described them as inherent features of the diaspora

artist's work—tensions to be managed through ongoing reflection, learning, and strategic adaptation. Several artists noted that repeated exposure to the same challenges across multiple performances had gradually enhanced their ability to navigate them, developing nuanced heuristics for when to simplify and when to preserve complexity, when to adapt and when to maintain fidelity, and how to work effectively within time constraints while maximizing communicative impact. This adaptive expertise, developed through sustained practice, represented a form of metacommunicative competence that extended beyond artistic skill into sophisticated intercultural awareness. The presence of these challenges, far from undermining the communicative potential of traditional arts, actually revealed the depth of the intercultural work that diaspora artists performed—work that involved not merely transmitting cultural content but actively managing the complex interpretive dynamics that inevitably arise when cultural worlds meet through artistic performance.

Discussion

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical implications for how intercultural communication is conceptualized within performance contexts. We argue that traditional arts, when deployed by diaspora artists, operate not merely as vehicles for transmitting pre-existing cultural content but as generative sites where intercultural relationships are actively constructed through embodied practice. This perspective challenges conventional models of intercultural communication that privilege verbal exchange and cognitive understanding, instead foregrounding the sensory, affective, and kinesthetic dimensions that constitute the lived experience of cross-cultural encounter (Cuthbertson, 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2025; Kashani et al., 2025). The five strategies identified—cultural framing, affective bridging, embodied translation, reciprocal communication, and the navigation of persistent challenges—collectively reveal that diaspora artists possess a sophisticated metacommunicative competence that has been largely overlooked in both intercultural communication scholarship and diaspora studies. By attending to the specific mechanisms through which performance communicates across cultural boundaries, our research extends foundational work on intercultural dialogue Yetimova & Isakov, (2024) while grounding it in the concrete practices of artists working at the intersection of Indonesian tradition and European multicultural contexts.

The practical implications of this study are substantial for artists, educators, and cultural policymakers. For practitioners, our findings suggest that effective intercultural performance requires not only artistic mastery but also deliberate communicative calibration—a conscious awareness of how aesthetic choices function as translation strategies. We recommend that diaspora artists cultivate explicit repertoires for cultural framing, perhaps developing standardized program notes or pre-performance dialogues that balance accessibility with depth, rather than improvising explanations anew for each performance context (Kurniawan et al., 2024; Mathur et al., 2025). For dance and music educators, this research highlights the value of integrating intercultural communication training into traditional arts pedagogy, preparing artists for the interpretive work they will inevitably perform when presenting their traditions beyond their home communities. Cultural policymakers and festival organizers can draw on these findings to design performance contexts that support rather than constrain intercultural communication, such as allocating extended performance durations, facilitating structured post-performance dialogues, and providing spaces for informal exchange between artists and audiences. The persistent challenges identified—particularly time limitations and oversimplification—can be mitigated

through institutional awareness that creates conditions allowing the communicative depth of traditional arts to emerge fully.

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The fourteen participants, while representing diverse artistic practices across multiple Dutch cities, were recruited through snowball sampling initiated from the researchers' existing networks, which may have inadvertently excluded artists less embedded in formal cultural organizations or those whose communicative practices differ systematically from the participants studied (Borup et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021). The phenomenological approach, while providing rich access to lived experience, relies on participants' retrospective accounts and self-interpretations of their communicative practices; we did not systematically collect data from Dutch audience members to triangulate artists' perceptions of communicative effectiveness. Additionally, the study was conducted in English and Indonesian, the latter being the primary language of most interviews, and the translation of culturally specific terms such as *rasa*, *alus*, and *rukun* inevitably involves interpretive choices that shape how these concepts are presented in academic discourse. The observational component of the study was limited to rehearsals and approximately half of the participants' public performances, meaning that our analysis of audience interaction draws primarily on artists' reports rather than direct observation of those exchanges. These constraints may have led to an overemphasis on artists' intentional strategies while underrepresenting the spontaneous, unpredictable, and sometimes resistant dimensions of intercultural performance reception.

Future research should address these limitations through several logically directed extensions (Phat & Sirisuk, 2025; Revans & Hartman Davies, 2024). There is a need for audience reception studies that systematically investigate how Dutch spectators actually interpret the communicative strategies identified here, employing methods such as stimulated recall interviews immediately following performances or ethnographic observation of post-performance dialogues to capture interpretive processes in real time. Comparative studies across different diaspora communities within the Netherlands or across European contexts could illuminate whether the strategies identified here are specific to Indonesian diaspora artists or reflect more general patterns in how traditional arts function as intercultural communication tools (Liu et al., 2024; Miazhevich, 2025). Understudied areas include the role of digital media in extending the communicative reach of diaspora performances, as several participants in this study described building Dutch audiences through video recordings and social media posts that prepared online viewers for live performance experiences. We also recommend that future research explore the developmental trajectory of the metacommunicative competence described here, investigating how emerging diaspora artists learn to navigate the tensions between authenticity and adaptation described by our participants. Longitudinal studies following artists across multiple years of intercultural practice could reveal how communicative strategies evolve with experience and how artists' self-understandings as cultural mediators shift over time. Finally, comparative analysis with European artists performing traditional arts for Asian audiences could illuminate whether the strategies identified here are universal features of intercultural performance or reflect the specific power dynamics and historical relationships that characterize postcolonial Indonesian-Dutch encounters.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate whether Indonesian diaspora artists in the Netherlands deploy traditional arts as deliberate intercultural communication strategies rather than simply as heritage

expressions. Our findings affirm that these artists function as sophisticated cultural mediators who transform static artistic forms into dynamic communicative actions through five principal strategies: cultural framing, affective bridging, embodied translation, reciprocal communication, and the active navigation of persistent challenges. We therefore clarify how traditional arts can operate as active communicative tools that foster understanding and emotional connection across cultural boundaries, thereby challenging conventional intercultural communication models that privilege verbal exchange over embodied, performative dimensions of meaning-making.

The conceptual contribution of this research lies in foregrounding the sensory, affective, and kinesthetic registers through which diaspora artists communicate Indonesian worldviews to Dutch audiences. By demonstrating that artists consciously curate cultural narratives, evoke shared emotional states, and translate abstract values such as harmony and refinement through controlled aesthetic nuance, we extend existing understandings of intercultural communication into the realm of embodied performance practice. Moreover, our identification of reciprocal communication as a bidirectional learning process reveals that diaspora artists are not merely cultural transmitters but adaptive experts who refine their strategies through sustained engagement with audience feedback. For cultural policymakers and educators, these findings suggest practical interventions: designing performance contexts with adequate duration for communicative depth, integrating intercultural communication training into traditional arts pedagogy, and developing standardized cultural framing materials that balance accessibility with cultural complexity. Future research should investigate audience reception directly, employing stimulated recall interviews to capture how Dutch spectators actually interpret these communicative strategies, and extend comparative analysis to other diaspora communities across European multicultural contexts. The persistent challenges of oversimplification and authenticity pressure that emerged in this study merit longitudinal investigation, tracing how emerging artists develop the metacommunicative competence that enables them to navigate the inherent tensions of representing tradition for culturally distant audiences.

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