Cultural Diplomacy as Public Relations in an Indonesian Consulate in Australia

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Abstract

In this paper we investigate the similarities and possible convergence between public relations and cultural diplomacy in the work of the Indonesian Consulate General in Perth, Western Australia. Using a qualitative research approach, interviews were held with Consulate staff and heads of Indonesian organisations based in Western Australia. The findings show that the Consulate General does perform a public relations role through its culturally based communication practices. Indonesian community organisations liaise with the Consulate General and its publics, and effectively serve as a communication channel to the Indonesian citizens in Perth. Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth, is an example of an international actor performing cultural diplomacy on behalf of Indonesia. The research concludes that cultural diplomacy is another form of public relations, in which two-way symmetrical communication and mutual understanding are pursued.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, consular diplomacy, intercultural communication

Introduction

The proximity of Indonesia and Australia, and their history of cooperation and communication, has led to a reciprocal interest between the countries’ citizens. This interest spans various fields such as employment, tourism and education. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2012), there were more than 15,000 Indonesian students enrolled in Australian institutions in 2012. In addition to these recent migrants are Indonesian citizens who were born, live, and work in Australia, while keeping their Indonesian citizenship.

An embassy is the representative of a government outside the country and has responsibility for the wellbeing of its country’s citizens. Toward other countries, an embassy has a role in public relations for its country, in which it seeks to establish and maintain a relationship between its nation and the foreign counterpart. The role of public relations carried out by the embassy can be seen as public diplomacy, where its purpose is to communicate the country’s policies and to maintain a positive image of the country in the view of the foreign public.

The Indonesian Embassy in Australia is situated in the national capital, Canberra. However, because Perth is geographically remote from the other states and there are numerous Indonesian citizens living and/or studying in Western Australia, the Indonesian government established a Consulate in Perth in 1993, becoming a Consulate General in 2010. As an organisation, its main purpose is to provide citizen services, including assisting Indonesian citizens with their visa requirements. Indonesian citizens living in Australia have formed a range of student, religious-based and ethnic-based organisations, to accommodate the needs of Indonesians for social and shared experiences. As an alternative conduit for Indonesian citizens, some of these organisations may need to communicate with Indonesian representatives across Australia, depending on the scope of their activities. Likewise, the embassy and consulate could consider these organisations as representatives of residents in Western Australia and channels of communication to their wider public, the Indonesian citizens.

Thus, government representatives overseas carry the task of connecting government (and people) on both sides. The government-to-government relations known as diplomacy, has been performed since the ancient era and is now known as traditional diplomacy (Signitzer and Coombs, 1992). However, a new era of diplomacy appeared with public diplomacy, in which the main agents are not just governments. Public diplomacy takes different forms,
as Cull (2008) proposed in his taxonomy. Differing across countries, one of the key aspects of public diplomacy is cultural diplomacy. This signifies the act of encouraging culture as a way to introduce and promote a nation to a foreign public. Key objectives in conducting cultural diplomacy are to gain the host nation’s interest and to enhance the image and reputation of one’s country. Public diplomacy has been traditionally studied in the international relations field. Researchers such as Signitzer and Coombs (1992) have attempted to see public diplomacy and public relations within one perspective or to combine both into a new field of study. However, there has been criticism about the effort to unify or to find similarities between these two areas (eg. L’Etang, 2008).

Differences in public relations practice between Asian nations and the USA, and the need to consider the variance in cultural values across cultures as part of a global view of public relations, have been noted (Sriramesh, 2003; 2009). The particular importance of interpersonal relationships in Asian cultural contexts and the use of personal influence models have been addressed in recent research (Devereux and Peirson-Smith, 2009; Kent and Taylor, 2011). Multiculturalism, ethnocentrism and different worldviews may colour the process of building mutual relationships between nations. In exploring this territory we asked two research questions: How does the Indonesian Consulate General in Perth conduct public relations in the form of cultural diplomacy? Can students’ and workers’ organisations’ participate in these processes as third parties?

Methodology

Using a qualitative research methodology situated within an interpretive paradigm, this study aimed “to understand how people in everyday natural settings create meaning and interpret the events of their world” (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006, p. 113). Semi-structured interviews with key staff of the Indonesian Consulate General and members of Indonesian organisations were conducted in Perth in 2011. Information gleaned from interviews was supplemented with documentary research and periods of participant observation by one author (Vidyarini) as an intern at the Consulate and at Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth, an autonomous Indonesian language and cultural organisation.

Consulate staff interviewed included the Consul General and vice consuls from the Cultural and Information Division, the Consular Division, and the Economic Affairs Division. The head of Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth (BPIP) was also interviewed.

The heads of three Indonesian organisations were interviewed as part of the research: PPIA WA (Perhimpunan Pelajar Indonesia di Australia-Indonesian Students’ Association of Western Australia), AIPSSA (Australian Indonesian Postgraduate Students’ and Scholars’ Association) and KIPAS (Karyawan Indonesia di Perth Australia-Indonesian Workers in Perth Australia).

Recorded interviews were transcribed and then analysed using the “constant comparative technique”, first articulated by Glasser and Strauss in 1967 (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006, p. 113). The qualitative analysis software NVivo8 was used to facilitate this process. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Indonesian language. Respondents answered in a mixture of Indonesian languages-in which various slang and dialects were used, as well as Javanese and English. The interpretation was done in Indonesian, and then translated to English.

Findings

Culture and Diplomacy

Generally, we found that the understanding of the term diplomacy by the Consulate General staff is about understanding the needs of the people whom the diplomats represent and how to provide for those needs. The Consul General himself believed that public diplomacy was a part of diplomacy as a whole and allowed the harnessing of the whole community. One of the goals of the overseas mission is to create a positive image which involves using all assets of the country, in this sense including Indonesian citizens who are living in the area of accreditation. The Consul General stated that: “We have to introduce Indonesia. That is why what I have in mind is how to showcase Indonesia's performances…with a polite and friendly attitude, in terms of fighting for the interest
of Indonesian Republic.” Although Indonesia is relatively close to Australia and the relationship between the two countries has been established over a long period of time, the Consulate General referred to improving the knowledge Australians have of Indonesia and of the need for Indonesia to constantly inform Australia of its true identity and what it has to offer.

The diplomats interviewed during this research are central to the creation of an image. Image is sculpted by various tools, one of which is culture, and it is the concept of cultural diplomacy which underlines its the use of culture as a tool or means to promote one’s country. The term culture is often interpreted as something that is related to performing arts, indigenous ornaments and traditional artefacts. In this sense culture is something visible that defines one’s own identity as a member of a large group of people (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2008). This understanding was expressed by multiple Consulate General staff, particularly in relation to the use of cultural performances as a means for conveying a message; that is, the cultural heritage possessed by Indonesia as a nation.

Cultural activities conducted by the Consulate General ranged from independent cultural exhibitions and performances; tourism promotion, such as the Bali promotion road-show; and joint expos with other countries, such as the Perth Holiday and Travel Expo (Cultural and Information Division, 2010). These core events are being held annually. Promotional activities were associated with stage performances, exhibitions and art related events, including dancing and playing traditional musical instruments. They are seen as key promotional means, and important to giving a tangible identity to Indonesian culture.

Building Relationships with Mutual Understanding

One of the main duties of the Consulate General focuses on the relationship and cooperation with the Western Australian government. The purpose of the relationship is related to the protection of Indonesian citizens in WA. The Vice consul of the Consular Division explained that:

With the state government, for example with the premier, it's more of bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and WA. We become the link. For example, the East Java government has a sister city cooperation, we convey (the message) that we have this intention to cooperate. Or when we have a function we also invite the state government. That is more of cooperation...but, if it's the level of Australia (the coordination and leadership) is in Canberra.

The Consulate General acted as a link or channel of intention from provincial governments in Indonesia to WA, whereas the scope of the Indonesian embassy in Canberra covered Australia. The Consulate General cooperates with Western Australian government agencies such as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The Economic Affairs Division has a strong relationship with the AIBC (Australia Indonesia Business Council). The Cultural and Information Division handles applications from the Western Australian media who wish to report in Indonesia, which is then sent to Jakarta. On a weekly and monthly basis, the Cultural and Information Division performs media monitoring particularly in the areas of culture and humanities. This media monitoring report, combined with reports by the Consular Division and the Economic Affairs Division, is sent to Jakarta. The Cultural and Information Division in partnership with the Western Australia Department of Education and Training offers the Language Assistant Program to provide teacher assistants for Indonesian Language teachers in WA. It also connects Western Australian schools and universities with researchers, schools and universities in Indonesia.

Other than inter-governmental cooperation, or so-called government to government cooperation, the Consul General also carries out informal liaison with the Western Australia government. This approach is employed as a reinforcement of a previous formal relationship and is carried out by individual contact. The one on one approach denotes the significance of knowing the counterpart individually outside the institution to which they belong. In the process of establishing a relationship with the other party, one must have significant knowledge about that other party. This includes knowledge of the culture, the demeanour of the other party, way of life, language, and other cultural aspects.

The Consul General underlined the use of the cultural approach in conducting diplomacy, when he said, “diplomacy is an art, a method. It is the means. It can be cultural, educational, economic.” He further added, “We also need to see the formal rule, but the means is through culture.” Culture is seen as a broad term, more than the iconic and daily life perspectives. By saying that diplomacy is a tool or a means, and by indicating that culture is
used as a tool, diplomacy may be understood as more than just the process of formal negotiation. Diplomacy is an action that involves many aspects, from formal through institutionalised meetings, through to informal via other aspects, such as cultural experiences.

**Partnership with Indonesian Organisations**

Indonesian organisations were formed to accommodate the needs of Indonesian citizens of various backgrounds, such as students, certain ethnic groups and religious affiliations. The three organisations considered in this research were selected from the many that assist the Consulate General, directly and indirectly through the provision of labour, ideas, independent action and inter-organisational partnerships. Most of these organisations were created without formal recognition from the Consulate General. Membership is voluntary and members often belong to more than one organisation.

AIPSSA has around 300 members, consisting of postgraduate students, scholars and their family members. AIPSSA contributes to the Consulate General activities through their large membership and close connection with academics in educational institutions. PPIA WA is a smaller branch of PPIA based in Canberra and covers Indonesian students from all levels of education, without having an official registration system for membership. However, in order to get all the benefits from the organisations, students are still required to register. Despite its function to accommodate the needs of Indonesian students in Western Australia, PPIA WA also promotes Indonesia through entertainment, social relations and cultural events.

While AIPSSA and PPIA help in promotion in the fields of education and entertainment. KIPAS works closely with Indonesian workers in Western Australia. It supports the Consulate General in the promotional effort by providing labour, ideas, performers, and information about the work situation in Western Australia. For example, a recent Employment Workshop organised by KIPAS gathered ideas that arose from Indonesian workers’ real experiences and the results of observation of their everyday encounters with Western Australians. Resulting information on opportunities and competencies required by Western Australian companies was conveyed to the Consulate General.

From their membership databases, these organisations provide information required by the Consulate General to track Indonesian citizens living in Western Australia. Indonesian citizens travelling overseas are advised to inform the government representative in the country of visit about their arrival, by doing a self-report. This action is compulsory according to the Indonesian Law of Population number 23/2006 (The Government of the Republic of Indonesia, 2006) and allows the Embassy, Consulate General or Consulate to identify the citizens and give service and protection in case of need. However, the law has not been properly socialised resulting in many Indonesians overseas being unaware of their obligation and remain unregistered. The gap in information can potentially be filled by the Indonesian organisations. For example, KIPAS assisted the Consulate General during the last Indonesian Presidential election. PPIA WA has a one day a week meeting with students, especially during new students’ orientation, where it introduces itself and directs the students toward the Consulate General. This program allows the Consulate General to reach newly arrived students benefitting both the organisations and the Consulate General. The student organisations have an important role as a channel of communication to Indonesian students about laws and regulations.

The Consulate General cooperates with the heads of Indonesian organisations to liaise with Indonesian communities. The contacts are established through the use of new communication technologies such as a smart phones utilizing social networking. The head of AIPSSA reported that the Consulate General seldom sent formal letters to the leaders of organisations calling them to meetings, “But all kinds of consulate activities are announced by gethok tular.” The expression, gethok tular, in Javanese can be translated as mouth to mouth or word of mouth. The use of communication technology such as smart phones or email assumed a close two-way connection between both parties unconstrained by formal bureaucracy.

The partnership between the Consulate General and the organisations runs both ways. The organisations have ideas and plans about events which they convey to the Consulate General. The communication process puts emphasis on the importance of word of mouth and public information mediums, such as posters. The organisations conduct informal communication with their members and the Consulate General provides formal invitations to
some members. Through mutual cooperation, the Consulate General obtains valuable labour and assistance for their events while the organisations accept significant support, other than money, and some status because their activities are noticed by an Indonesian authority.

Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth (BBIP)

Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth Inc. (BBIP) was established in 2008 by an Australian language teacher with the support of the Indonesian Consulate in Perth. The initial plan was to create a cultural centre for Indonesians and Australians who were interested in learning about Indonesian culture. The organisation is autonomous and run by a board which includes representatives from the community, the Indonesian Consulate in Perth and the Westralian Indonesian Language Teachers Association (WILTA). Describing itself as “a cultural, non-profit organisation” (Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth Inc, 2011a), BBIP aims to provide Indonesian language and culture education to assist Australians and Indonesians to interact more effectively. A key role involves providing access to conversational Indonesian language classes at a range of levels for both adults and school children (Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth Inc, 2011c). The stakeholders for BBIP are a combination of Indonesian and Australian citizens, but particularly Australians who may not have accessed Indonesian language in schools and who can learn more about Indonesia.

BBIP regularly organises events introducing Indonesian culture. Examples include the July 2009 Indonesian Language Expo, 2010 events held to introduce the participants (mostly Australians) to the cooking of Indonesian cuisine and Indonesian Business Insight seminars (Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth Inc, 2011b). BBIP cooperates with the Australia Indonesia Business Council (AIBC), attending their events to represent the aims of the organisation. Besides organising events for itself, BBIP also supports other cultural activities synchronised with their objective of fostering positive attitudes between both countries.

Although the major means of media communication is through its website, BBIP has a close relationship with the Western Australian Journalists Association (WAJA). A current board member is a freelance journalist for a government agency. In 2010, BBIP developed a media award, to be presented at the WAJA awards, for a journalist who reports positive news about Indonesia and/or the Indonesian-Australian relationship.

BBIP is a non-profit organisation whose main objective is to build relationships between the two countries through education in the language sector and through pursuing a positive attitude among its participants. BBIP therefore has a public relations role. The current chairperson of BBIP stated:

We want to promote the everyday Indonesia. We want to promote contemporary Indonesians and that means, I guess, showing people how Indonesians live their daily lives but integrating the traditional into the modern. So we want people in Australia to know what traditional Indonesia’s like but how an Indonesian takes that tradition and uses it day to day....Language is central to what we’re doing because, you know, we believe in order to understand that culture you really have to start understanding it through the language.

For BBIP language is being introduced as a separate entity from culture. However, it is essential for someone to learn a language to be really exposed to and understand a culture. It is important to recognize the counterpart’s mindset, values, way of life, belief, and try to acknowledge the differences. The process of creating mutual understanding between both parties includes one’s knowledge about the other. As the chairperson of BBIP explained:

It’s not just about us teaching Australians about Indonesians, but about letting Indonesians know that in Australia, the concept of space is different, or the concept of time or, yeah, modesty - all those sorts of things.

As an organisation run primarily by Australians, BBIP serves the purpose of introducing Indonesian culture and providing a gateway for a closer relationship between both countries. It has the benefit of its Australian members who understand Australian culture. However, the Consulate General also has an interest despite BBIP being an autonomous and non-governmental entity.

Discussion
The Consulate General performs vital tasks in providing citizen services and promoting a positive image of Indonesia. An essential element in the process is communication. The public for the Consulate General are both Indonesians and Western Australians. Both publics are reached with different tools of communication and receive different intended messages. The use of traditional and modern communication technologies implies that the Consulate General enacts the role of communication technician (Broom, 2009). The Consulate General plans, creates and produces its packaged message. Two-way communication occurs in relation to Consular matters and immigration rules. Furthermore, this means other public relations models such as public information and two-way asymmetrical communication, or even the combination of the four models are still relevant for the Consulate General (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). The challenge facing the Consulate General in establishing two-way symmetrical communication, that cultivates mutual understanding, may lie in the nature of the Consulate General as a government agency. The autonomy of Balai Bahasa Indonesia Perth (BBIP) as a nongovernmental organisation may preserve the independence of that organisation. Publics will tend to ignore cultural agents that are seen as official; such as the Consulate General enacts the role of communication technician (Broom, 2009). The Consulate General emphasised an informal one on one approach, accessing a larger range of people than only Western Australian government officials. Personal meetings were seen as strengthening the formal approach already conducted with various government agencies by the Consulate General and his staff. It can be said that the Indonesian government wants Indonesia to be known as a nation that is polite and friendly; an attitude which becomes a part of the national identity (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2008). The more subtle approaches of the personal and the informal indicate that contemporary public diplomacy is not about propaganda per se (Gilboa, 2008). Diplomacy is an intricate process in which an initial interpersonal relationship that accentuates the interest in developing a mutual understanding, is the precursor to a lasting nation to nation relationship.

To promote Indonesia, the Consulate General uses various formal and informal means. The formal means are consistent with what Signitzer and Coombs (1992) have called traditional diplomacy; government to government. However, the findings show the Consulate General also employed informal strategies, including personal approaches and cultural promotions. The Consul General emphasised an informal one on one approach, accessing a larger range of people than only Western Australian government officials. These personal meetings were seen as strengthening the formal approach already conducted with various government agencies by the Consul General and his staff. It can be said that the Indonesian government wants Indonesia to be known as a nation that is polite and friendly; an attitude which becomes a part of the national identity (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2008). The more subtle approaches of the personal and the informal indicate that contemporary public diplomacy is not about propaganda per se (Gilboa, 2008). Diplomacy is an intricate process in which an initial interpersonal relationship that accentuates the interest in developing a mutual understanding, is the precursor to a lasting nation to nation relationship.

The image building activities described are consistent with Curtin and Gaither’s (2007) view that the main publics targeted for image cultivation are governments (WA government) and other international actors, such as NGOs (non-government organisations). In this case, the Australia Indonesia Business Council (AIBC) and BBIP are the international actors with BBIP fulfilling the cultural diplomatic role of a nongovernmental agency (Wang, 2006). It is interesting that BBIP is a WA based organisation with the majority of committee members being Australian. BBIP is not just Western Australians receiving the outcomes of promotion by the Indonesian government, it actively promotes Indonesian culture.

The Consulate General’s activities reflect the dimensions of public diplomacy put forward by Nye (2008) and cover not only daily interaction with the foreign public but also the effort of the agency to build long term relationships. The activities show the soft power of diplomacy through interpersonal relationships, with public relations at the centre. Our findings also show that Western Australians and Indonesians are different types of public. Indonesian citizens could be defined as an active public (Signitzer and Wamser, 2006) who may influence how the Consulate General performs its duties. Western Australians connect with the Consulate General for limited purposes, such as visa requirements, business, or as guests at certain cultural events and may thus be seen as aware publics (Signitzer and Wamser, 2006).

In relation to the Consulate General’s cultural programs, structured research into public opinion would be useful to define the Western Australian public it will face. Through research, the Consulate General is listening to the public (Cull, 2008). It scans the environment and collects information about their primary public, which is an initial step in public diplomacy (Cull, 2008). Toward the Indonesian government, the Consulate General enacts the role of a boundary spanner when it is relaying information about the environment to the organisation in which the process is conducted in a symmetrical fashion (Fawkes, 2007). The media monitoring conducted by the Consulate General could be expanded into deeper research on the nature of Western Australians resulting in more effective cultural communication. With respect to what L’Etang (2008, p. 212) has referred to as “a government-sponsored official notion of national culture”, a richer mutual understanding may require more than displays of arts,
performance and delicious cuisine. Still, it is clear that messages about culture, packaged in the form of the arts (dances, music, cuisine, costume etc), do allow Western Australians to identify with the iconic culture of Indonesia. This iconic culture represents the identity of Indonesia as a nation, whose members are Indonesian (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2008). However, to truly understand Indonesia, Western Australians would need to take into account the varied ethnic identities, languages and cultural practices that make up the diverse nation of Indonesia. So while iconic cultural activities are considered to be supportive elements of the formal relationship between both governments, their influence and effectiveness in cultivating deeper mutual understanding, and for promoting a certain image, are perhaps limited but have the potential to be extended.

Ananto (2004, p. 278) has commented on the collective nature of Indonesian culture and the concept of “gotong royong (spirit of mutual responsibility for a task where each person belongs to a team)”. In cooperating with the Indonesian organisations to reach Indonesians in Western Australia, the Consulate General displays the nature of a collectivistic society utilising available members (Hofstede, 1984; Kent and Taylor, 2011). In order to reach dispersed communities, other than through community visits, the Consulate General communicates with key persons of Indonesian communities or organisations. The key person or people in the group act as an important gatekeeper and a channel of communication with the Consulate General. With respect to public relations, Indonesian organisations play an important part in the communication process. Indonesian organisations can initiate and accommodate dialogue, and thus become a link in a collective society type of public relations. The Indonesian organisations initiate dialogue through the utilisation of information and communication technologies, such as social networking. The organisations themselves facilitate communication between the Consulate General and Indonesian communities, thus performing a role described as communication facilitator (Broom, 2009). The use of communication technologies such as social networking on mobile devices may become the key to enhanced communication and promotion by the Consulate General, and perhaps cultivate real two-way symmetrical communication. This method of communication can also be used with Western Australians, a means that may support the formal promotion efforts from the central government. In this way aware publics can be made into active publics.

Although two-way symmetrical communication is an ideal seldom realised, there are significant elements of cultural exchange occurring in the interactions of the Indonesian Consulate General in Perth. Indonesian community organisations play a key role in assisting the Consulate General to communicate with its publics. Overall, this project has found that cultural diplomacy is a form of public relations, enacted through culturally based promotional activities using a combination of traditional and modern communication practices.

References


