

NOKEN LOCAL WISDOM AS REPRESENTATION OF GOD'S LOVE

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Abstract

This study aims to describe, explore, and analyze the local wisdom of noken as a symbol of Papuan culture which holds a significant religious-spiritual meaning for the Papuan. It employed a qualitative research design, relying on primary data from interviews and observations of women who produce and use noken within Papuan society. The participants are those who play influential roles in the community, such as religious and community figures, and the experts noken production. The findings revealed that noken is a vital aspect of Papuan life, serving as a vessel and source of life that embodies religious-spiritual values. It is widely regarded as a symbol of God's love for the people of Papua, instilling a sense of faith and hope in the Creator. Furthermore, noken is also considered to be a second womb, as infants are placed in noken for growth and development until they begin crawling. In addition, a specific type of noken is crafted for children to promote honesty. For generations, noken has been an integral part of Papuan life, passed down and taught as a crucial aspect of life. Therefore, it is considered a symbolic representation of God's inclusion and preservation of Papuan life. The Papuan ancestors used to be explorers who inhabited the island and utilized the regional language of the tribes, Ugatame, to teach the art of noken weaving. It serves as a reminder that God is the Creator of the heavens, the earth, and humans, and that they are made within His image.

Keywords: noken, local wisdom, cultural symbol, religious value, representatuon

INTRODUCTION

Noken has gained worldwide prominence and recognition since it was designated as an intangible cultural heritage of Indonesia by UNESCO on December 4th, 2012 (Avianto et al., 2021). This recognition has bestowed legal certainty for the protection, acceptance, and support of the preservation of *noken* as an ancestral cultural heritage that contributes to the local Papuan identity and embodies noble values of life (Brauchler, 2014; Lefaan, 2022; T. Pekei, 2013). *Noken* serves as a medium for Papuans to connect individually and

collectively (Foley, 2014; Kayame, 2022). In this context, vigorous community participation in preserving cultural heritage is crucial. As a signatory to the convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, Indonesia is committed to preserving its cultural legacy through various measures, including protection, promotion, and transmission of knowledge (Brauchler, 2014; Diana & Tiaraputri, 2020).

Noken holds an important place in the daily lives of the Papuan people, fulfilling multiple functions such as transportation for collecting and carrying goods like crops, food, and daily necessities, as well as serving as a

baby carrier (Lefaan, 2022; Salhuteru & Hutubessy, 2020).

The art of making a *noken* has been transmitted from generation to generation by Papuan tribal ancestors. It continues to be practiced today using raw materials derived from the surrounding natural environment in Papua. The raw materials are from various regions, including hills, inland areas, coasts, and comprise tree fibers, bark, swamp grass, rattan stems, and pandan leaves from the forest (Wanma et al., 2013; Zebua et al., 2020). In the Papuan Indigenous community, *noken* is generally made by women, who are referred to as "*mama-mama noken*" (*noken*-making moms). This practice has been passed down for hundreds of years in seven customary territories (Ransta, 2018; Suryawan, 2017).

Noken, as a traditional bag made of tree fiber and bark, holds significant meaning in the lives of Papuan people. It represents local wisdom and serves as a symbol of Papuan culture, embodying many noble values. Furthermore, it is utilized in various aspects of traditional ceremonies (Wanma et al., 2013). One aspect of the values highlighted in this study is the high religious and spiritual values of the people of Papua.

This research aims to describe, explore, and analyze the religious value that Papuans understand and internalize. To accomplish this goal, the researchers formulated three research questions as a guide to elaborate on the intended topic, namely:

- a) what are the values and meanings of *noken* for Papuans?
- b) how is *noken* regarded as a cultural symbol of religious-spiritual values among Papuans?
- c) what are the implications of *noken*'s religious-spiritual values for developing religious life among Papuan communities?

This study focuses on answering the three research questions outlined above, offering novel insights, and expanding knowledge on the religious aspects of *noken*.

This study begins with the premise that *noken* manifests the Papuans' Indigenous wisdom, religious beliefs, and cultural heritage, reflecting their profound connection and love for the Creator through His creation. One example is the abundance of tree bark, which only grows in Papua's natural environment and can be utilized as the community's primary resource for producing *noken*. *Noken* is more than just superficially

understood as a unique traditional bag of tree fiber. It also carries significant spiritual values and meanings that are extremely important to the lives of Papuans. *Noken* connects and establishes horizontal relationships among Papuans and signifies vertical relationships, the spiritual connection between Papuans and God. *Noken* serves as a sign of God's love for humanity, preserving, guaranteeing, and sustaining the livelihood of Papuans from their ancestors to the present.

Literature Review

Currently, existing research on *noken* has focused on the following three aspects. Firstly, studies that examine *noken* from the perspective of democratic politics (Brauchler, 2014; Nugraha, 2021; Setyanto et al., 2020; Yunus, 2020). The literature has shown that the *noken* is more than just a local identity; it is also a political heritage of global culture. The *noken* system is a product of strengthening cultural, political, and local democracy. In other words, the *noken* system elaborates the constitution that provides space for the social diversity in Indonesian society. Secondly, the literature shows that *noken* has evolved into a source of income and a creative economic force that has succeeded in ensuring the well-being of the Papuan people for decades. (Avianto et al., 2021; Risamasu et al., 2019; Salhuteru & Hutubessy, 2020). Third, a gender-based study of *noken* reveals that the continued existence of *noken* is due to the tireless efforts and active participation of Papuan women. They are committed to preserving their *noken* weaving skills and passing them down to the younger generation. Thus, Papuan women have become a crucial representation of the significance of women's identity in preserving the *noken*. Accordingly, it is critical to treat women's rights with the same respect and equality as men. The marginalization of Papuan women in society's social fabric presents a challenge that is hard to reconcile with societal norms and values (Kanem & Norris, 2018; Marit, 2016; Riyana et al., 2020). Previous research needs to pay more attention to the theological and spiritual implications of *noken*, indicating that scholars have neglected the religious values of *noken* that stem from Papua's natural beauty. As a result, there needs to be more literature examining *noken* from a religious standpoint.

This study aims to fill this void and add to the existing knowledge on the subject.

Conceptual Framework

This study on *noken* delves deeper into how the Papuan people perceive, experience, and live the spiritual values of *noken*. To achieve these aims and objectives, the researcher uses a representation lens with the initial assumption that everyone has their own perception and mental construction. The term “representation” refers to an object, idea, concept, or relationship that an individual possesses. In the context of this study, the focus is on *noken*. Thus, representation explains that humans gain their experience of the world not directly but through the representations created and utilized. This representation can influence how humans respond to and behave towards the world around them. This influence is affected by culture, experience, and social context (Celis & Mazur, 2012; Mansbridge, 2011; Saward, 2006).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, relying on primary and secondary data. The secondary data source was relevant literature on the topic of *noken* research. At the same time, the primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews at the participants’ houses. The participants of this study consisted of religious figures, prominent community figures, and *mama-mama noken* at the *Noken Iwin Miobo* workshop, which serves as the central location for *noken* production in Jayapura, Papua. They were purposively selected based on the consideration that the *noken*-making mothers have direct involvement in producing *noken*, while the religious and community figures play a key role in instilling the spiritual values of *noken* into the social life of Papua.

The name of the *noken* workshop, *Iwin Miobo*, is derived from the local Kurudu language, where “*Iwin*” means “Woman” and “*Miobo*” means “Island”. Thus, *Iwin Miobo* can be interpreted as “Island Woman”. Traditionally, the people of Kurudu refer to themselves in their local language as *Iwin Miobo*, which means “Island Woman”. The *noken* weavers who work at this workshop are women from Kurudu Island who now reside in

Jayapura after migrating from their home island.

The data collection took place from October 2022 to early 2023. It began with literature review focusing on the previous research about *noken*, by gathering relevant literature.

The techniques used for analyzing the data in this study involved three stages, namely: (a) data reduction, which refers to organizing the data thematically to make it more systematic; (b) data display, which involves presenting the research results in the interview excerpts; and (c) data verification, which entails checking the trends obtained from the data during the collection process. The data processed through these three stages were then analyzed using descriptive and content analysis. Firstly, data description served as the basis for the interpretive process, which was conducted contextually. Secondly, the analysis in this study followed the research process conducted by Spradley (2000). The stages and techniques used in this study were employed to formulate conclusions.

DISCUSSION

This study found that non-locals generally perceive *noken* as having no value other than a simple bag worn for everyday use. On the other hand, in the context of Papuans’ social life, *noken* carries many deep values and meanings for its people. Based on the interviews conducted with the participants, the following knowledge of the Papuan community was revealed:

a) Women in Papua must weave *noken*. Given this context, one could suggest that *noken* and women are inseparable and that their social bond is attached and deeply rooted. Equally important, the level of proficiency in weaving *noken* is considered a prerequisite for a Papuan woman to be ready for marriage. In a broader sense, the more delicately a woman weaves *noken*, the more highly she is regarded. Moreover, her status will become even more elevated if she manages the household, displays maturity, and exhibits a good attitude (Interview with community figures, February 20th, 2023 and *mama-mama noken*, November 18th, 2022).

b) In social context, *noken* is utilized as a bag or pouch used for storing and carrying things and as a cupboard for storing foods. When food supplies run low, they will gather

and store food inside the *noken*, which they treat like a food barn. Besides, *noken* also embodies the values of honesty and respect for one's and others' belongings. Its transparent and netted form is meant to remind Papuan people to live with integrity in their daily activities. (Interviews with religious-community figures and *noken*-making mothers, January – February 2023).

c) in cultural context, *noken* is a mandatory item in traditional wedding ceremonies, including as part of dowry. This sacred craft has enormous historical significance in people's lives, and it is also used as a symbol of authority during traditional leader inauguration.

Besides, *noken* also symbolizes tribal peace. By playing a role in various peace-making ceremonies, *noken* promotes unity among different tribes and fosters a sense of equality through its shared ownership.

d) As a handcraft of the Papuan Indigenous community, the making of *noken* requires skills and willingness, sincerity, perseverance, and loyalty to achieve satisfying results. This has been the focus of attention passed down from generation to generation among the Indigenous people of Papua. Seven Indigenous communities in West Papua have preserved and maintained their knowledge of crafting *noken*. Those seven communities are: (1) The indigenous territories of Mamta Jayapura, Sarmi, Kerom and their surrounding areas; (2) The indigenous territories of Saireri Biak, Yapen Waropen and their surrounding areas; (3) The indigenous territories of Domberai Manokwari, Sorong and their surrounding areas; (4) The indigenous territories of Bomberai Fakfak, Kaimana and their surrounding areas; (5) The indigenous territories of Anim-ha Merauke Asmat and their surrounding areas; (6) The indigenous territories of La-pago Jayawijaya Pegunungan Bintang, Puncak Jaya and their surrounding areas; (7) The indigenous territories of Mepago Paniai, Timika, Nabire and their surrounding areas (Interview with community figures, February 13th, 2023).

e) The Papuan people, who lack a tradition of written cultural practices, view *noken* as a symbol of their oral cultural heritage and living traditions. *Noken* enriches universal and specific cultural elements with values, meaning, and functions corresponding to their roles and activities in everyday life.

(Interview with religious and community figures, February 2023)

f) *Noken* is a philosophy of life, often referred to as '*noken* of life'. This implies that *mama-mama noken* have existed among Papuans in the past. Despite different tribes not knowing each other, they shared knowledge on how to weave *noken* according to their traditions. It was only after having contact with Christian missionaries that the Papuan women, skilled at crafting *noken*, began to recognize one another as fellow indigenous Papuans. (Interview with religious figure, February 2023).

g) These are the following definitions of *noken* which have been developing within Papuan society: 1) *noken* is a woven bag made from fibers of tress, bark, leaves, or stalks, sometimes dyed and ornamented with various decorations, including coloring, to satisfy the inner desires of weavers and *noken* enthusiasts; 2) *noken* is a traditional handcraft produced by practically all indigenous tribes in Papua that has been passed down as an intangible cultural element that ensures life's sustainability by serving as a way to keep, store, and carry things for regular use; 3) *noken* is a safe and practical container made by hand weaving and braiding that is used to keep and store various goods; 4) *noken* is a personal container where the ownership of the *noken* can be identified by the items placed inside; 5) *noken* is a traditional handcraft of the indigenous customary society in Papua that reflects cultural norms, customs, and ethics passed down through generations; 6) *noken* is a Papuan traditional handcraft in the form of a bag with a strap that can be worn around the neck or hung from the forehead towards the back. *Noken*, like a traditional bag, is used to carry daily necessities; 7) *noken* is a unique traditional Papuan bag made of natural materials such as tree fibers, various types of bark based on tribal traditions, yellow and black orchids, forest rattan, pandan leaves, sago leaves, and nipa leaves, according to the ecology of the natural forest and surrounding geographic conditions (Interview with religious figure, community figure, and *mama-mama noken*, December 2022).

Workshops, such as the *Iwin Miyobo* workshop in Jayapura City, have been developed to conserve the sustainability of the *noken*, particularly the skill of creating the *noken*. *Iwin Miyobo* honors the island women

who still weave traditional *noken* inherited from their ancestors' cultural heritage at Jayapura City's *iwin Miyobo* workshop. 'Mama-mama *noken*', a group of older women, teach younger generations the art of weaving *noken*. The craft of *noken* weaving is used as a non-formal, informal, and formal education to preserve intangible cultural heritage or world cultural heritage, which is passed down to school-age children, tourism ambassadors, church youths, and other environmental teenagers as a cultural heritage of Papua that has been promoted to gain global recognition (T. Pekei, 2013; T. C. Pekei, 2008; Benjamin Tukan, 2018).

Figure 1. *Noken*-making mothers in Iwin Myobo workshop in Jayapura city



Source: Document of Researcher 2022

Meanwhile, the value and meaning of *noken* for Papuans can be seen as follows: a) *Noken* is a *noken* of life, which means that *noken* is a source of life. *Noken* is made of natural materials such as bark, tree fibers, swamp grass, pandan leaves, coconut, nipa, and jungle rattan. The Indigenous people of Papua can process materials from the forest and natural environment into *noken*, a multifunctional bag produced through the knitting or weaving technique that is uniquely handcrafted by the Papuan Indigenous community. b) *Noken* is a cultural identity that exists within Papua's culture. Papuan society's daily activities cannot be separated from the use of *noken*, which is why *noken* has become their attribute, marker, and identity. c) *Noken* serves as a means of livelihood for the Papuan people, which implies that *noken* has proven to have a high economic value and has become a commodity even at the global level, thus becoming a source of living to ensure the survival of the Papuan people from the past to the present d) *Noken* is referred to as the

'second womb' because after a mother gives birth, *noken* serves as a container for the growth and development of the child until they begin crawling. The mother creates a special *noken* for the purpose to train the child's independence. The child's belongings are placed in the *noken* and they are taught to take only what they need. Taking food from someone else's *noken* means stealing. At the same time, using their own *noken* indicates independence. Stealing is regarded as a sin in custom and religion. Therefore, in the understanding of *noken* tradition, it has become a commandment and prohibition passed down from generation to generation and has been preserved until now (interview with religious figures, community figures, *mama-mama noken*, December 15th, 2022 & February 23rd, 2023).

Furthermore, *noken*, as explained by the participants, is a multifunctional object. *Noken* creates a deep unity and oneness of life among the indigenous population in a theological or eco-theological sense. Love, faith, and hope are religious values contained in *noken*. *Noken* teaches the value of living in community and sharing love to overcome life's challenges. *Noken* trains people to live with faith, collaborate with others in making *noken*, develop faith according to their beliefs, commit to mutual respect without prejudice, and prioritize tolerance in daily life. *Noken* is regarded as a symbol of God's love for all Papuans, as God has preserved and nourished the live of Papuan people by providing extraordinary natural resources to be used for their welfare. It is also hoped that the people of Papua can be grateful for and maintain natural resources, local wisdom, and cultural heritage as social capital to live in harmony, peace, tolerance, and faith in God.

Essentially, Indigenous Papuans (*Orang Asli Papua*) have always used the *noken*. They consider *noken* as a container or a living space. *Noken*, in other words, is a source of life that functions as a multifunctional container. *Noken* can be filled with necessities of life, store life essentials, and a means of transportation to carry daily necessities.

In religious life, the multifunctional purpose of *noken* is to facilitate sharing, overcoming, and solving problems with tolerance and mutual respect, fostering

tolerance and harmony between religious communities. Religious values embedded in the cultural heritage of the Papuans' cultural heritage include tolerance towards fellow believers and adherents of different religions. *Noken* emphasizes religious values, tolerance, kinship, unity, and togetherness. This happened not only recently but since the time of our ancestors. This indicates that *noken* benefits all generations, past, present, and the future. In other words, *noken* is an investment in the temporary world, guaranteeing life in the afterlife.

Noken has been around for a long time and is a concept that has been introduced previously. The importance of *noken* in human life has been taught and passed down from generation to generation, starting from the Papuans' ancestors who migrated to the land of Papua Island. This tradition continues today, with *noken* still being an important part of Papuan society (T. C. Pekei, 2008).

The strategy used by the ancestors in instilling religious values and meaning among the Papuan people was through the use of their indigenous languages in various tribes across Papua. The people of Papua refer to and know "*Ugatame*" as the name of Allah, the Creator of the heavens, and earth and everything within them, including humans who were created in His likeness.

This is done so that *noken* can be considered as a manifestation of God's love for humans, particularly the Papuan community. As a result, *noken* becomes a cultural asset and source of local wisdom uniting the Papuan community while also inspiring them to believe in God (Interview with religious and community figures, February 17th, 2023).

Therefore, *noken* has become a symbol of cultural identity, a craft item that permeates the source of life, a life under the authority of *Ugatame* (God the Creator), encompassing all aspects of human survival.

This study confirms the finding of previous studies that cultural symbols can depict a respected presence, playing a significant role in preserving ancestral heritage from one generation to the next generation (Adjil & Rahayu, 2019; Indrastuti, 2018). Described symbols carry information with values and meaning embedded within them. In addition, symbols are often considered as markers of unique conditions based on

standards established within a specific society (Liro et al., 2022). Symbols are defined as a form of interpersonal communication and the foundation of society's cultural features.

The terminology of symbols in this context is defined within the scope of cultural studies. Symbols are understood as a concept with numerous hidden meanings that serve as indicators of a more profound and hidden substance. Symbols exist to display the presence of the object they represent. A symbol is a tangible object seen by the senses whose meaning is a product of human spiritual activity. Symbols emerge as physical manifestations of human thoughts, feelings, and desires (Bayadilova-Altybayeva et al., 2023; Hegy, 2023; Kokosalakis, 2001; Liro et al., 2022). The cultural symbols used in Papuan society in this study are *noken* and local language.

Noken is recognized by the world as an intangible cultural heritage of Indonesia. It embodies the wisdom and local culture of Papuan society and has a wide range of values and meanings. One of them is that *noken* denotes the respected and believed presence of a personal entity who stands for and preserves the lives of Papuan society from the past until today. This personal entity is named using the language of the Papuan tribes, namely *Ugatame*. The knowledge and values of ancestral cultural heritage have always been passed down from generation to generation, teaching that *noken* is not just a traditional bag made by the Papua women, but it represents *Ugatame*, who is believed to be the Creator and Protector of the universe, including the lives of Papuans. As a result, this study affirms or confirms prior findings that language is a symbolic aspect of culture (Bayadilova-Altybayeva et al., 2023; Liro et al., 2022).

Language is necessary for humans to communicate with one another. The distinction in values and meaning conveyed through language symbols represent the culture of a particular social group. This is in line with Temirbekov (2005) who asserted that several elements form culture, one of them is language. Language is a crucial element in communication because language has cultural and history dimensions (Trudgill, 2010). This is the result of the historical and cultural development of society, which determines the historical stage of each ethnic group. Language is more than just a symbolic system. The entire

culture conveys this system, a great heritage of every nation and an achievement of its history. Culture is embodied in texts, proverbs, and phraseological units that are passed down from generation to generation. Through language, every nation can gain information about the spiritual essence and cultural wealth of its people because language can absorb and passed down the reality, worldview, and customs of the nation from generation to generation as heritage (Bayadilova-Altybayeva et al., 2023; Brauchler, 2014; Hegy, 2023; Liro et al., 2022; Sihombing, 2018).

Language, as a cultural component of an ethnic group's communication space, serves various vital social functions. It combines and multiplies values that contribute to the acquisition of experiences necessary for the formation of an individual. A language develops within the communicative space of an ethnic group.

This study examines the presence and significance of the close relationship between religious, cultural identity, and local wisdom using the perspective of cultural symbols. Symbols convey meanings that are formed in the process of interpretation and direct sensory and emotional perception by the receiver (Bayadilova-Altybayeva et al., 2023; Hegy, 2023). Symbols bridge the gap between the transcendent and immanent realms. Symbols allow humans to express and communicate deep values and meanings in their relationship with the "other" (Sihombing, 2018). According to that statement, *noken* is a spiritual cultural heritage. *Noken* is a semantic layer of natural preservation that is also intangible cultural heritage (spiritual).

Culture appears as a synthesis of material and spiritual aspects. The relationship between meaning and symbol determines the inseparable oneness of culture's spiritual and material parts. As a result, culture is a complex system that combines spiritual and material product that are perceived and used by members of society, and passed down from generation to generation. (Idang, 2018; Liro et al., 2022).

The use of the local language, *Ugatame*, to refer to Allah shows that language carries ethnocultural values. Moreover, language enables a connection between the past and present and allows ethnic groups to project the development of their culture into

the future (Bayadilova-Altybayeva et al., 2023).

CLOSING

This research proves that the existence of *noken* is more than just a traditional bag made by *mama-mama noken* using natural raw materials. *Noken*, on the other hand, has a great spiritual value that has long been lived on by the Papua ancestors and passed down from generation to generation until today's generation recognizes it. The *noken* is a cultural symbol representing Allah's presence and His affection for His people, particularly the Papuan community. The natural blessings of the universe, with all its beauty and abundance, provide a source of livelihood for economic prosperity while also allowing the Papuans to be grateful and faithful to the Creator. The Papuans strongly believe that the continuity of life and the preservation of the homeland nature are made possible through divine protection and love, symbolized in the concept of *Ugatame*. *Ugatame* connotes a linguistics expression and embodies a profound cultural value and spiritual significance for the Papua community.

The religious perspective adopted in this study allows for a view of Papuan community policies through the lens of spiritual-religious values. Previously, *noken* has been positioned as an object in discourse and a commodity with high economic value. However, this perspective enables the examination of the roles of religious and cultural figures in the community, including the relationship between religious and spiritual values and *noken*.

The finding has enriched the discursive studies on the prominent role and significance of cultural symbols, local wisdom, religious values, and meanings in human life. The ability of ethnic groups to maintain their existence by utilizing their cultural strengths is crucial. Teaching the noble values of life through the cultural heritage to the younger generations is an effective strategy. The richness of values and meanings embedded in the local wisdom of Papuan ethnic groups can be preserved and maintained. As demonstrated in the context of this study, *noken*, as local cultural heritage of Papuan society, is reflected and deeply

interpreted as a symbol of representation of God's love.

Since this research only examined *noken* made by *mama-mama noken* in *Iwin Miyobo* workshop in Jayapura city with limited religious and community figures, further research is required to include more comprehensive participants from all *noken*-making workshops in Papua. Therefore, the obtained information and insight about *noken* in the life of Papuan communities as a source of local wisdom, cultural, and prosperity, which has received international recognition as an intangible cultural heritage, revealing invaluable values and meanings in life, is expected to be more varied and comprehensive.

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