

The Existence of Noken in the Era of Modernization and Globalization: A Study of the Identity of Indigenous Papuans in Jayapura City

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ABSTRACT

Noken is a cultural heritage of the Indigenous Papuan People (OAP) that holds strong social, cultural, and symbolic meaning. Amidst the currents of globalization and modernization in Jayapura City, the existence of noken faces challenges in the form of lifestyle changes, penetration of industrial products, and shifts in cultural values. This study aims to analyze how noken survives as an OAP identity in urban spaces, as well as the adaptation strategies undertaken by Papuans in maintaining the meaning and function of noken. The study used a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies. The results show that noken functions not only as a tool, but also as a symbol of identity, ethnic pride, and a medium for cultural negotiation amidst globalization. The sustainability of noken is supported by the role of Papuan women, cultural policies, and innovations in design and marketing.

INTRODUCTION

The Globalization has transformed the social, economic, and cultural landscape worldwide, including in the easternmost regions of Indonesia (Ayu Nadira Wulandari et al., 2024). In Papua, rapid urbanization, market expansion, migration, digital communication, and state development programs have intensified interactions between local communities and global systems. Jayapura, the capital of Papua Province, is at the center of this transformation. The city serves as a meeting point for indigenous Papuans, migrants from various regions in Indonesia, government institutions, educational centers, and commercial networks. In this dynamic urban environment, indigenous cultural symbols face challenges and opportunities in negotiating their relevance and sustainability (Nur Hidayah, 2024). One such symbol is the noken, a traditional woven bag deeply embedded in Papuan social and cultural life.

The noken is more than a utilitarian object used to carry goods. Traditionally, noken are handmade from tree bark fibers or other natural materials (Decky Wospakrik & Elias Hence Thesiar, 2024). The noken serves as a multifunctional means of transporting agricultural products, daily necessities, and even babies. However, its significance extends far beyond practical use. The noken embodies indigenous knowledge systems, ecological relationships, gender roles, and the transmission of skills between generations. In many Papuan communities, a woman's ability to weave a noken signifies maturity, responsibility, and a sense of belonging within the community. The weaving process itself reflects patience, discipline, and communal values, connecting individuals to ancestral heritage and collective identity.

International recognition further underlines the importance of noken culture. In 2012, the noken tradition was included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (Helena Grace Binu et al., 2024). This recognition places noken not only as a local artifact but also as a symbol of global cultural heritage. While such recognition provides legitimacy and protection, it simultaneously situates noken within global discourses on heritage

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preservation, tourism, and commodification. As a result, the meaning of noken can shift from a lived cultural practice to a marketable cultural product.

In urban contexts such as Jayapura, globalization manifests itself in the proliferation of modern consumer goods, factory-made bags, and branded fashion items that compete directly with traditional crafts. The younger generation, influenced by social media trends and modern lifestyles (Niken Aurora Citra Ayu & Laudia Sinta Bela, 2023), some even consider traditional objects to be outdated or less prestigious. As a result, everyday use of noken faces practical and symbolic challenges. At the same time, noken has also adapted to new contexts. Today, noken is commonly used at formal events, academic environments, government offices, and public campaigns that promote Papuan identity. Civil servants, students and community leaders often carry noken as a visible confirmation of indigenous pride.

This dynamic illustrates that globalization does not always result in the loss of culture, but instead that globalization can result in a process of negotiation, reinterpretation and reinvention (Hilalludin Hilalludin et al., 2015). Noken is a place where identity is constantly being constructed and contested. For Indigenous Papuans (OAP), especially those who live in urban areas, cultural symbols such as the noken function as markers of difference in a pluralistic society. Di Jayapura, tempat penduduk asli Papua hidup berdampingan dengan beragam populasi migran, penanda identitas memainkan peran penting dalam mendefinisikan batas-batas sosial, solidaritas, dan klaim politik. Thus, noken not only functions as material culture but also as a symbolic boundary that differentiates OAP from non-indigenous groups.

Furthermore, the persistence of noken in urban life reflects broader questions about cultural resilience. Indigenous communities often face structural inequality, marginalization, and demographic pressures. In this context, maintaining cultural symbols becomes an act of resistance and affirmation. The use of noken in public demonstrations, church activities, traditional ceremonies, and official government events highlights its political dimension (Arie Januar, 2017). It signifies a sense of belonging, affirms the presence of indigenous peoples in urban spaces, and strengthens collective memory amid rapid socio-economic change.

However, the sustainability of the noken tradition also depends on intergenerational transmission. As economic activities diversify and formal education expands, younger Papuans may have limited time or motivation to learn traditional weaving techniques. The availability of cheaper synthetic alternatives further complicates this situation. Questions arise as to whether noken will remain a living tradition embedded in everyday practice or gradually transform into a symbolic accessory detached from its original cultural context. Research on the material culture of indigenous communities in urban environments remains crucial to understanding how traditions persist under conditions of globalization.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Type and Approach

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive ethnographic approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand the meaning, values, and symbols attached to the noken as an identity of Indigenous Papuans (OAP) in Jayapura City. According to John W. Creswell (2015), qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meanings ascribed to social or humanitarian issues. In this context, the research seeks to explore how Papuans interpret the noken amidst the currents of globalization and modernization. An ethnographic approach was used because this research emphasizes understanding culture, social practices, and symbols of identity in everyday life. Spradley (2007) states that ethnography aims

to describe and analyze the cultural patterns of a community group through the researcher's direct involvement in the field.

Research Location and Time

This research was conducted in Jayapura City, Papua, which is the center of government, education, and economic activity. This city was chosen because it serves as a meeting place for indigenous Papuans and migrants, making it an important arena for the negotiation of cultural identity. The research was conducted over approximately four months, from October 2025 to January 2026, and included observation, interviews, and documentation collection.

Subjects and Informant Selection Techniques

The research subjects were Indigenous Papuans living and working in Jayapura City. The informants included: female noken craftspeople, traditional or community leaders, students or employees of the indigenous Papuan people who use noken, and noken traders or business owners. The informants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves deliberately selecting informants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (John W. Creswell, 2015).

Data Collection Techniques

To obtain comprehensive data, this study employed several data collection techniques, as follows:

- a. Observation. Observations were conducted by directly observing the use of noken in daily life, traditional activities, religious activities, and formal activities in public spaces.
- b. In-depth Interviews. Interviews were conducted semi-structured to explore the meaning of noken as a symbol of identity, experiences maintaining tradition, and informants' perspectives on globalization.
- c. Documentation. Documentation was conducted by collecting photographs, archives of regional policies, and documents related to the recognition of noken as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO (2012). This documentation was used to complement and strengthen the data from observations and interviews.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis technique used the interactive analysis model proposed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman (1994), which includes three stages: Selecting and focusing data relevant to the research, Organizing data into descriptive narratives and thematic categories, Interpreting the meaning of the data based on theories of globalization and ethnic identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Eksistensi noken sebagai identitas Orang Asli Papua di Kota Jayapura

The existence of the noken in Jayapura City demonstrates that cultural symbols do not merely persist as a legacy of the past, but continue to thrive and be negotiated within a dynamic social space. Amidst globalization, urbanization, and multicultural interactions, the noken remains a marker of Indigenous Papuan (OAP) identity (Kayame, 2022). Its presence extends beyond its material role as a traditional bag to its symbolic role, representing the values, history, and collective pride of the Papuan people. In urban contexts, identity is often challenged by encounters with other cultures (Fadilla Fahma et al., 2024).

Jayapura, as a center of government and economy, brings together Indigenous Papuans with immigrant communities from various regions across Indonesia. This situation creates a space of symbolic competition, where identity needs to be affirmed and maintained. The noken is one of the most visible mediums in this process. The use of the noken by students, civil servants, activists, and traditional leaders in public spaces demonstrates that this symbol functions as a visual marker that distinguishes Indigenous Papuans from other groups. Referring to Fredrik

Barth's theory of ethnic boundaries, ethnic identity is maintained through symbols and social practices that emphasize differences between groups (Fredrik Barth, 1969).

In this case, the noken serves as a boundary symbol that strengthens the internal solidarity of indigenous Papuans while affirming their presence within a pluralistic society. When an indigenous Papuan wears or carries a noken in government offices, on campus, or in shopping centers, the act is not only practical but also communicative, conveying messages about their origins, culture, and social position. Beyond serving as a marker of ethnic boundaries, the noken also carries profound cultural significance. Traditionally, noken are knitted by women using natural fibers (Nikmatul Ula et al., 2023). This process is not merely an economic activity but also a social practice that transmits knowledge, patience, and responsibility between generations. Amidst modernization, the practice of knitting noken continues, albeit with adaptations in materials and design. These changes demonstrate that tradition is not static, but rather flexible and able to adapt to the needs of the times.

UNESCO's recognition of the noken as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2012 further strengthened its symbolic legitimacy. This recognition increased Papuan pride in the noken and encouraged various local policies promoting its use in formal activities. In Jayapura, the use of noken at official events, celebrations of important holidays, and educational activities serves as a form of affirmation of cultural identity. Thus, the noken serves not only as a traditional symbol but also as a political one, affirming the presence of indigenous Papuans in social and government structures.

However, the noken's existence also faces challenges from market logic and modern lifestyles. More practical and varied factory-produced bags have become the choice of many urbanites. Younger generations exposed to global popular culture through social media may potentially view the noken as a less modern symbol. In this situation, the noken's meaning is not lost but rather negotiated. Many young Papuans combine the noken with modern clothing, creating new styles that combine local identity with global trends. This phenomenon demonstrates a process of cultural hybridization, where identity is not abandoned but reconstructed. The commodification of noken in traditional markets and souvenir shops in Jayapura is also part of the dynamics of its existence.

On the one hand, commercialization opens up economic opportunities for Papuan women as artisans. On the other hand, there are concerns that the symbolic meaning of noken will be reduced to a mere commodity. However, in many cases, artisans and users of noken continue to emphasize their cultural values and identity, so the commodification process does not completely eliminate their social significance. Instead, through the market, noken gains a new space to be recognized and appreciated more widely. The existence of noken in Jayapura can also be understood as a form of cultural resilience. Despite facing the pressures of globalization, the indigenous Papuan community does not passively accept change. They actively select, interpret, and adapt cultural symbols to suit the needs of the urban context. Noken becomes a symbol of cultural resistance to global homogenization, as well as a symbol of flexible adaptation to social change.

Factors influencing the sustainability of noken amidst globalization

The sustainability of the noken amidst globalization is not automatic; it is influenced by various social, cultural, economic, and political factors. In Jayapura City, the noken remains a symbol of Indigenous Papuan identity, but its existence continues to negotiate with changing times. Factors influencing this sustainability can be seen both internally within the community and through broader external influences:

Awareness of identity and cultural pride. Noken is not only understood as a traditional bag, but as a symbol of indigenous Papuan identity (Ahwad Anding et al., 2025). This collective awareness encourages the community to continue using noken in various activities, both formal and informal. The use of noken by students, civil servants, and traditional leaders reflects an effort to affirm identity in the public sphere. In the context of a multicultural society like Jayapura, cultural symbols serve to emphasize social boundaries while strengthening internal solidarity. As long as this sense of identity is maintained, noken will continue to have social relevance.

The role of women as inheritors of tradition is crucial. Traditionally, noken are woven by women, and these skills are passed down from generation to generation. This process is not simply a transfer of techniques, but also the transmission of values, norms, and ecological knowledge. If the younger generation of Papuan women remains motivated to learn to knit noken, its sustainability will be ensured. However, challenges arise when formal education, modern jobs, and urban lifestyles reduce the time and interest in learning traditional crafts. Therefore, the sustainability of noken is highly dependent on the continuity of the cultural inheritance process at the family and community level.

Policy support and formal recognition. UNESCO's recognition of noken as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2012 enhanced its symbolic legitimacy, both locally and internationally. In Papua, various regional policies encouraging the use of noken in official activities, traditional celebrations, and educational institutions have helped maintain its visibility. Support from the government and traditional institutions creates a symbolic space that strengthens noken's position as a collective identity, not just a simple handicraft.

The economic dimension and commodification have ambivalent effects. On the one hand, the sale of noken in traditional markets, souvenir shops, and online platforms provides a source of income for Papuan women. This economic incentive can encourage sustainable production because noken have a market value. On the other hand, commercialization has the potential to shift symbolic meaning into a mere market commodity. If economic orientation prevails over cultural values, there is a risk of simplification of meaning or mass production that neglects traditional qualities. However, in many cases in Jayapura, artisans maintain cultural elements in every noken they make, making the economic dimension an adaptive strategy for survival in the global system.

The influence of globalization and lifestyle modernization are external factors that cannot be ignored. Modern bag products that are more practical, lightweight, and varied have become direct competitors for noken in urban spaces. Furthermore, the influence of social media and global popular culture shapes the tastes of the younger generation. However, globalization is not always destructive. Some young Papuans actually combine noken with modern clothing, creating a more contextual form of identity expression. Design innovation, the use of diverse colors, and the adaptation of materials demonstrate that the sustainability of noken is also determined by its ability to transform.

Cultural Adaptation and Negotiation Strategies Used by Papuan People

Amidst increasingly intense globalization, Papuan people, particularly Indigenous Papuans (OAP) in Jayapura City, are not passive in the face of change. Instead, they demonstrate various cultural adaptation and negotiation strategies to maintain their identity while adapting to evolving social, economic, and political dynamics. These strategies are evident in everyday practices, the use of cultural symbols such as the noken, and even in formal spaces and public policies, such as:

a) Reinterpretation of cultural symbols.

Noken is no longer understood simply as a traditional bag for domestic or agricultural needs, but is represented as a symbol of identity, pride, and cultural resistance. In urban contexts, noken are used in government offices, universities, churches, and official events as a form of affirmation of Papuan identity. This strategy demonstrates that society is not simply preserving traditions statically but rather giving them new meanings relevant to contemporary situations. Thus, culture is not maintained in its original form but reconstructed to keep it alive.

b) Creative adaptation to modernity.

Globalization brings industrial products and modern lifestyles that influence the tastes of the younger generation. Rather than rejecting modernity, many Papuans integrate local elements with global trends. Noken are combined with modern clothing, their designs modified with new colors and motifs, and they are produced using a wider variety of materials. This process reflects cultural hybridization, the blending of local and global elements without losing their fundamental identity. This kind of adaptation allows culture to remain relevant and accepted by the younger generation.

c) Strengthening identity through public spaces and formal institutions.

Papuans utilize public spaces to display cultural symbols as a form of social recognition. The use of noken in official activities and ceremonial events demonstrates how identity is negotiated within bureaucratic and educational structures. The international recognition of noken by UNESCO in 2012 further strengthened this symbolic position. This legitimacy serves as both a source of pride and a tool of cultural diplomacy, broadening recognition of Papuan identity globally.

d) Culture-Based Economic Strategy

The commodification of noken in traditional markets and souvenir shops in Jayapura reflects the community's efforts to capitalize on economic opportunities without completely abandoning cultural values. The production and sale of noken provide a source of income for Papuan women while maintaining the sustainability of knitting skills. In this case, the economy is not seen as a mere threat, but rather as a negotiating space for maintaining tradition within the global market system.

e) Strengthening intergenerational cultural transmission.

Amidst the busyness of formal education and modern work, families and indigenous communities continue to play a role in transmitting traditional values and skills. The process of learning to knit noken, understanding its symbolic meaning, and learning about cultural history are part of the effort to maintain identity continuity. When the younger generation understands that noken is not just an object, but a symbol of identity, cultural continuity has a stronger foundation.

f) Papuan society also negotiates identity politics.

In complex social situations, cultural symbols become tools to affirm the existence and collective rights of indigenous Papuans. The use of noken in social actions or community activities demonstrates that culture can function as a medium for political expression. Identities are not only maintained culturally, but also mobilized to strengthen social positions in multicultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

The noken is not simply a traditional bag, but a symbol of cultural identity imbued with meaning for Indigenous Papuans (OAP). Amidst globalization, which has brought changes in lifestyles, consumption patterns, and value systems, the noken retains a strategic position as a

marker of ethnic identity, a symbol of social solidarity, and a representation of human relationships with nature and their communities. As a cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the noken embodies historical, spiritual, and social values that strengthen the identity of the Papuan people. In Jayapura City, a heterogeneous urban space, the noken has undergone a transformation in meaning and function. While in the traditional context, the noken is used to carry garden produce, firewood, or daily necessities, in the urban space, the noken also emerges as a representative symbol of identity in formal activities, traditional ceremonies, religious activities, and even in bureaucratic and educational settings.

The noken's existence is not static, but adaptive. Indigenous Papuans employ a strategy of cultural negotiation by reinterpreting the noken's use to ensure its relevance in modern life. This adaptation is evident in design innovations, color variations, and its use in creative economic activities. Globalization certainly presents challenges in the form of commercialization, shifting tastes of the younger generation, and the influx of mass-produced industrial products. However, on the other hand, globalization also opens up opportunities for cultural promotion through social media, tourism, and national and international markets.

Amidst the multicultural social dynamics of Jayapura City, the noken serves as a symbol of both differentiation and integration. It serves as an identity marker that distinguishes indigenous Papuans from immigrant groups, while also serving as a medium for cultural dialogue in broader social interactions. Thus, the noken plays a crucial role in strengthening internal community solidarity while building external recognition of Papuan identity. The noken's sustainability is greatly influenced by several factors, including the role of families in transmitting knitting skills, support from indigenous communities, local government policies, and the strengthening of identity narratives in education and public spaces. If the process of cultural inheritance weakens, the noken's existence could potentially be reduced to mere commodities. Conversely, if its philosophical values continue to be reproduced in everyday social practices, the noken will remain vibrant as a dynamic symbol of identity.

RECOMMENDATION

Further research is recommended to examine the role of Papuan youth in preserving the noken amidst the development of digital technology and the increasingly strong currents of globalization. Furthermore, comparative research across various regions in Papua is needed to understand the differences in the meaning, function, and use of the noken in the lives of indigenous communities. A study of the influence of tourism, the creative economy, and government policy on the sustainability of the noken as a symbol of Papuan cultural identity is also crucial to broaden our understanding of its future existence.

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