
UNDERSTANDING *NOKEN*: A SUBSTANTIAL IDENTITY OF PAPUAN PEOPLE

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A. Introduction

Culture is the whole system of ideas and feelings, actions, and works produced by humans in a social construct, which are made their own by learning. The word culture comes from the Sanskrit word "buddhayah", the plural form of buddhi which means mind or intellect (Koentjaraningrat, 2005). J.J. Honingmann in his book *The World of Man* (1959) distinguishes the existence of three "cultural phenomena", namely ideas, activities, and artifacts. This is then confirmed by the opinion of Koentjaraningrat (2009) which states that there are three forms of culture, namely; (1) the form of culture as a complex of ideas, values, norms, rules and so on. (2) the form of culture as a complex of patterned activities and actions from humans in society. (3) the form of culture as objects created by humans. The first form is the ideal form of culture. It is abstract, cannot be touched or photographed, its location is in the head, or in other words, in the minds of the people in the community where the culture resides. The second form of culture is called a social system, regarding the patterned actions of humans themselves. This social system consists of human activities that interact, relate and associate with each other in every second, day and year, accordingly to certain patterns based on customary behavior. The third form of culture is called physical culture, taking the form of all physical products and activities, actions and works of all humans in society. They are most concrete in nature and are in the form of objects or things that can be made, seen, and photographed.

As a cultural object, a container or tool is a place for hoarding, loading and storing goods. Various kinds of containers can be classified according to their raw materials, namely wood, bamboo, bark, shell, fibers, or clay. The manufacture of fiber containers such as various types of baskets has attracted the attention of many ethnographers, especially because many ethnic groups in various parts of the world have developed various ways of weaving baskets that are complex and beautiful (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Likewise, with *noken*. *Noken* is a Papuan original container made from twisted roots woven into a net. Because of its net form, the *noken* becomes very elastic. The elasticity of this bag is not due to the material used such as rubber, but due to the type of webbing which has the property of pulling one another. *Noken* can function as a bag to carry few items, but can also be transformed into a basket to carry lots of items. It is a versatile bag for everyday purposes. For example, to transport crops (taro, sweet potatoes, vegetables, fruit or firewood) from the garden to the house, market or other places. Thus, based on this function, the *noken* is made very strong. This bag is made of a single yarn woven made of twisted plant fibers. *Noken* is multi-functional because it can be used to carry vegetables and fruits, babies and even pigs (Laksmana, 2010). *Noken* is also often worn during traditional celebrations or given as a sign of safety.

Weaving *noken* is a mandatory job for Papuan women. Women and *noken* cannot be separated, because in their culture, this social bond has been embedded and ingrained, so that it has high socio-cultural values in society. As one of the traditional crafts of Papua, in the process of the making, *noken* has a very important meaning. *Noken* as a handicraft is a living witness of Papua culture. A *noken* captures a side of cultural customs of the Papuan people, such as the dynamics of the traditional life of the people (Emi, 2003). The existence of specific objects that mark the characteristics of a group can be seen as a materialization of identity which becomes a medium for binding communal togetherness (De Marrais, 1996). Because of its uniqueness, on December 4th, 2012, UNESCO designated *noken* as an intangible cultural heritage of the world. Therefore, we must protect and preserve *noken* as a Papuan culture. This paper aims to review the existence of *noken* as a Papuan ethnic identity and the meanings that surround it. The literature study method is carried out by a series of activities related to the method of collecting library data, reading and taking notes, and processing research materials.

B. *Noken* as the identity of the Papuan tribe

Since the beginning of its existence, humans have developed and are able to adapt to the natural environment around them, because humans have a system of reason and an instinct that is capable of capturing natural phenomena and responding to them adaptively and create "culture" as an "adaptation system" in relation to maintain the relationship with the natural surroundings

(Daeng, 2008). Therefore, a concept became known that there is a close relationship between humans, nature and culture as a cultural triangulation relationship. In which case that humans create their culture to cope with conditions that occur in their natural environment or vice versa that nature forms the culture of humans who live in that natural environment (Bruce, 2007). According to Malinowski, as quoted in Koentjaraningrat (1987), that all human activities or any activities in cultural elements are actually intended to satisfy a series of instinctive needs of human beings related to their entire life. Thus, it means that every society in different natural environments, will carry out activities adjusted to the surrounding nature, forming various activities to fulfill the needs, forming cultures according to natural conditions and the natural environment around (geo-culture). *Noken* is a fulfillment of the needs of the Papuan people because it is one of the tools used to accommodate goods and a product that was first recognized by the Papuan tribes as a tool of storing and transporting living equipment before the existence of modern tools.



Figure 1. *Noken* is worn as a place to store various items including money. This woman keeps her money from selling vegetables in her *noken*

(Source: Ariani, 2017)

As a Papuan ethnic identity, both tangible and intangible, *noken* has a peculiarity that cannot be found anywhere else. One of them is the raw material used to make fibers which are then woven into a strong bag-like knot. The basic materials used to make *noken* are *damiho* plants (*Anthocephalus cadamba*) and *epiho* plants (*Guazuma ulmifolia*). These two plants are combined with yellow and black orchid plants. *Damiho* bark is said to have straight fiber because of the longitudinal orientation of the dominant cells with the constituent of the bark towards the stem axis. In general, straight fibrous wood like this is more in demand by Papuan mothers (the term for married Papuan women) who use the bark fibers as raw material for *noken*. The diversity of flora in Papua with unique characteristics in each region causes several types of trees to be used as raw material for making *noken*. The Yali tribe community in Hubakma village uses bark from seven types of plants, namely: *Ficus arfakensis*, *Ficus copyosa*, *Artocarpus altilis*, *Ficus elastica*, *Ficus sp*, *Gnetum gnemon* and *Pipturus argenteus* as raw materials for making *noken* (Walianggen and Rumatora, 2016).



Figure 1. Several types of *noken* with different colors
(Source: Ariani, 2017)



Figure 2. A Papuan woman in Sentani is weaving *noken*
(Source: Ariani, 2017)

The process of making *noken* in each region is different. Some were done by taking them directly from the tree, some were dried in the sun, boiled, and some were beaten until the fibers are apparent. After the wood fibers are formed, the spinning is done to form threads, followed with coloring process. Several types of *noken* use natural dyes as an aesthetic element. The basic ingredients for coloring are still very traditional, using lime, *biya* shell (finely ground clam shells), charcoal, turmeric and other natural ingredients (Kondologit and Ishak, 2015). The coloring is adjusted to the *noken* motif that will be used, for example to color the *noken* in red, chalk and betel are used as a dye tool. The lime and betel are mashed until it is red. Then the strands of wood fiber yarn or types of grass plants to be used are colored, and then dried and woven to form a pouch or bag (Januar, 2017). Some other natural dyes used are red seed (some tribes call it *Yonggo Ibu*) which produces red color, *biya* shells for white, charcoal from pine or *yonkori* trees for black, turmeric for yellow, *nerica* leaves for green, and purple flowers to produce purple (Cahyadi et al, 2013).

As previously mentioned, *noken* has elastic properties. The elasticity of this bag is not from the material but from the way it is woven. This type of webbing is to produce a space in each knot where the threads can move and shift easily, thus allowing a change in size. *Noken* webbing is made of one continuous thread and forms an intertwined figure of 8. The type of webbing is done in pairs (two by two), where every segment of thread that arises will definitely fall on two and only two other threads and every two segments of thread will be overwritten by the other two threads. The elasticity occurs due to the type of woven thread that is not tied to one another. From this detachment, the knots can move to suit the needs. The Papuan people have unconsciously applied mathematics (using geometric transformations) in making *noken*. This has been demonstrated in estimating the circumference of the bag and determining its maximum volume. In addition to *noken*, there are many other handicrafts in the Papua region in which ethnomathematics can be revealed, for example the numeration system, arrows, traditional boats, traditional Papuan houses, dances, and many more (Haryanto et al, 2015).

The shapes, patterns and colors of the *noken* are made by each tribe in Papua. This shows the diversity in the *noken* culture. Thus, as already mentioned, *noken* is part of the cultural identity of each tribe and is also the cultural identity of the Papuan people as a whole. The *noken* that someone wears can indicate the area of origin. Community leaders, such as tribal leaders, sometimes wore *noken* with special patterns and decorations that indicated their social status to those who understood. The continued use of *noken* in Papuan society encourages the growth of relationships between *noken* and the Papuan people's view of life, such as people's independent attitudes and habits of helping. *Noken* is also interpreted as "walking house" because it is used as a container for various needs. In addition, *noken* is considered a symbol of fertility for women.

C. The meaning of *noken*

As a traditional craft, *noken* is owned by almost all Papuans. Almost all tribes in each region of Papua have this kind of craft with various motifs and functions. *Noken* is an intangible cultural heritage of the Papuan people, because it can only be made in the Papua region. This local wisdom is a cultural heritage of the Papuan people that has existed since the past, and has become an

inseparable part of their lives. *Noken* crafts are not new to the people of Papua and each region has these handicrafts with different motifs. The differences are based on the use or function that is tailored to the owner needs. In mountainous areas, apart from being a bag, *Noken* also functions as a protector and clothing for women (Januar, 2017). Based on the results of the research, it is known that *noken* is used in traditional ceremonies or celebrations, such as complementary proposals for girls, marriage ceremonies, child initiation ceremonies, appointment of tribal chiefs, and storage of inheritance. When welcoming guests, the *noken* appears with traditional clothes worn by the local community. It can be used by anyone, and is often given as a souvenir and a token of friendship, for example in marriage ceremonies and proposals. Even it is used by some tribes as gifts to create peace between the disputing parties (Cahyadi et al, 2013).

For Papuans, *noken* carries many meanings and philosophies, thus is used as a symbol of identity (Januar, 2017). In the life of Papuans, the skills in making *noken* is acquired through a set of knowledge and practices originating from life experiences that are carried out continuously with nature (Ahimsa-Putra, 2008). Through these experiences, the community local knowledge is formed in terms of efforts in producing various crafts to support their lives, and one of which is *noken* (Indrawardana, 2012). *Noken* is a cultural work that has high artistic value in society. This can be seen from the manufacturing process which is done carefully, with great patience, and persistence. As a symbol of identity, it contains a high cultural value, such as during traditional ceremonies for appointing tribal heads, welcoming guests' ceremonies and as a complement to marriage (dowry).

Papuans and *noken* have strong social ties, especially between craftsmen, the goods they produce, and the users. This inner bond is inherent because in making *noken* involves an emotional process that indirectly creates a reciprocal relationship affecting each other between the maker, the object that is made, and its users (Soekanto, 2006). Therefore, the inner bond between the craftsman, the *noken*, and its users is inseparable, because in this craft a mutually exclusive relationship has been formed. As a traditional craft, *noken* has a very influential role in the life of the people, such as the relationship between humans and nature. Apart from the human's inner bond with nature, the mental bond is also attached to the user. Papuan women make *Noken* intended for their children, to foster a sense of love between mother and child. In the Papuan tradition, children who start learning to walk are given a small *noken* by their mother, which contains foods such as sweet potatoes. It forms a habit for children to carry their own needs or to help their fellow relatives or friends. And to embed this value, *noken* is always brought closer to the children.



Figure 3. A Korowai tribe woman carrying her child with *noken*, a beautiful picture
by Julio Sacristan

(Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Byp3IHWCoQx/?igshid=n9yr3mkpba20>, 2020)

Cahyadi et al (2013) in the book entitled *The Development Module of Local Content of Noken* explains some of the philosophical meanings contained in *noken* as follows:

1. Harmony with nature, local wisdom, and environmental conservation.

The life of indigenous Papuans cannot be separated from and depends on nature. Nature provides what society needs. And on the other hand, people treat nature wisely and try to always live in harmony with it. Most of the things they wear come from the nature. The use of *noken* for various needs of their life is one proof of the harmonious relationship between society and nature. *Noken* is an object made from natural materials coming from the natural surroundings, such as bark, fiber,

and tree roots. Natural ingredients are easily obtained from the natural surroundings and have reliable strength. The most important thing is that when the *noken* has been damaged, the natural material will re-unite with the soil and will not cause negative impacts to environment such as the use of synthetic materials. If Europeans and Americans are starting to realize the importance of using natural ingredients for various purposes, then the Papuan people, with their *Noken*, have been practicing a harmonious way of life with nature for hundreds of years.

2. Symbol of fertility

For Papuan women, *noken* is a symbol of fertility and the health of a woman's womb. This philosophy is identical to the shape and elastic properties of *noken*, which can adapt to what it carries, such as a woman's womb containing a small fetus to grow big and ready to be born. In the past, when reaching puberty, a girl had to be able to knit or weave *noken*. It is used as a sign of childbearing age in a girl and is ready to be married. The skill of making *noken* must be mastered by a girl before she marries. In Papuan culture, a girl who has not been able to make *noken* will not be proposed by a boy. So, the skill of making *noken* is a requirement for a girl to enter a marriage, a prerequisite to go through an advanced stage in her life cycle.

3. Symbol of cultural diversity

Noken is interpreted as a symbol of the cultural diversity of the Papuan people. All Papuans know it and know the characteristics of each region that makes it, both in shape and in material. *Noken* sizes vary from small to large. In terms of color, it also varies, from plain to colorful. There are ones accessorized with bird feathers and beads, and also some without accessories. The raw materials for making *noken* vary according to the region. The Papuan people who live in coastal areas tend to use materials that are easily attained, such as sea pandan leaves. People in this area use the technique of making *noken* by weaving. Meanwhile, the Papuan people who live in the inland region use bark, wood fiber or tree roots and use knitting method in making *noken*. It has been mentioned that there are many terms for naming *noken* but there is a common understanding of their meaning and function. Although diverse, UNESCO's designation of *noken* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage on the list has further strengthened the sense of community unity throughout Papua. *Noken* is increasingly becoming a cultural identity and pride of the people there.

4. Outlook on life

Noken symbolizes the view of life and identity of the Papuan people. People interpret *noken* as a cultural heritage that reflects the ideals of their life in this world. With it, people have a good understanding of nature and everything in it. In their life, Papuan people reflect on the existence of a *noken*. Philosophically, it is filled with good things, likewise the Papuan people always fill themselves with good things. Through the existence of *noken*, the people of Papua are reminded to always have a harmonious relationship with nature and provide the best for others. *Noken* also symbolizes independence as seen in the various objects in it that are used to meet the needs of life. "*Noken* humans" are those who always work hard to make ends meet. The independence of *noken* humans does not make them selfish. With various items in the *noken*, Papuans share with others. In this case, *noken* is interpreted as "a walking house" because in it, a various need that ensure survival can be met.

5. Inner Bond

Noken worn by a child will create an inner bond with the parents and the land of their birth. It is said to be the inner binding between Papuan children and their parents because the mother, in particular, always makes *noken* for her child. In addition, it symbolizes a bond with the land of one's birth because it is made from natural materials around the house or hometown. This special *noken* will always be used for various activities by the child. Often times this happens, the *noken* made by Papuan mothers for their children is used by the child from childhood to adulthood. This creates a strong bond between the child and their mother. Papuan children who have grown up and continuing their education outside of the region usually wear *noken* to shed their longing for their mother and their ancestral land. *Noken* is inherent in the minds of Papuan children because they are introduced to these cultural objects since childhood. When Papuan children are born into the world, they are introduced to the *noken* as the sling. After they reach the age of toddlers, they will be put to sleep in a *noken* tied to a tree and swayed until they fall asleep. The series of events are continuously remembered by the person and the *noken* becomes memorable memories that are carried to death.

Apart from the philosophical meanings, the other meanings contained in *Noken* are explained as follows:

1. Social meaning

Noken has a social meaning related to the relationship between fellow citizens, residents and their leaders, as well as between residents of different tribal communities. It characterizes one's ethnic origin and becomes the tribe identity through the shape and characteristics. Asmat *noken*, for example, is different in shape and characteristic from Wamena *noken*. Likewise, the Paniai *noken* is different from the Biak *noken*, and so on. Hence, the shape and characteristics of *noken* can function as a social bond of a tribe in Papua. A member of a tribe can recognize other residents of the same ethnicity based on the *noken* he carries or wears. Apart from being an identity and social bond, it is a cultural object that marks social stratification in Papuan society. A *noken* functions to regulate community relations between leaders and those being led. A person's social position can be seen from the *noken* worn. The *noken* worn by the chief, for example, is different from the *noken* worn by ordinary citizens. A person who has used a tribal chief's *noken* must be able to behave like a leader who can protect and be fair to his community. On the other hand, community members generally use *noken* for ordinary people according to their position in a tribal community. It is impossible for an ordinary citizen to wear the *noken* that should be worn by the chief of the tribe. This shows that there is a good understanding among community members about a person's social position through the symbolization of *noken*.

Noken means recognition of someone's property. The Papuan people really value someone's property and are careful about everything that belongs to others, including objects contained in the *noken*. Even though it is clearly visible to others, the objects in the *noken* are still safe in the hands of their owners. This means that the Papuan people really value property rights and even take part in protecting the ownership of others by not wanting other people's belongings. *Noken* reminds them of the importance of respect for honesty and recognition of ownership of an item. Another social meaning of *noken* is high respect from one person to another. *Noken* is used as an object of giving or a memento to someone who is considered special and is a merit for the giver. Guests who come to Papua usually receive a *noken* garment as a form of respect. This guest is seen as a "king" for the people of Papua so that a cultural object that is commensurate and appropriate to respect his arrival is *noken*. By giving *noken*, Papuans identify themselves as hosts who welcome guests with respect and intimacy.

2. Cultural meaning

Noken is an ancestral heritage bearing a deep cultural meaning for the Papuan people. Thus, the Papuan people wholeheartedly preserve the *noken* by using it in various activities such as proposing, wedding ceremonies, initiations, the appointment of tribal chiefs, and so on. In proposals and wedding ceremonies, *noken* plays a special role as one of the dowries and a place for *timor* cloth, another mandatory condition in wedding ceremonies, especially in West Papua.

Noken is a symbol of maturity at the initiation ceremony, a traditional ceremony carried out at transitional phases in the human life cycle. For example, a transition from children to adult. In some areas, such as in Paniai Regency, *noken* is a requirement for a girl or a boy to be recognized as an adult. Girls who have been recognized as adults are allowed to marry, while boys will obtain the rights to participate in traditional meetings.

Papuan society consists of hundreds of tribes living in a location which sometimes close to one another and this often cause conflicts between tribes. In a conflict, there is usually an unwritten agreement between the two parties that to end the conflict, holding a peace ceremony is necessary. Inter-ethnic conflicts will continue to occur if the link that causes conflict, such as murder, has not been cut off. Without a peace ceremony, retaliation will continue to happen. To carry out a ceremony, *noken*, along with pigs and *biya* skins are traditional objects that must be provided as a prerequisite. When the three objects are complete, the peace ceremony is considered valid and the two warring tribes will make peace. Thus, the *noken* serves as a medium of balance and harmony between the tribal communities in Papua. The culture of peace that is symbolized, one of which by this *noken*, will be guarded with sincerity by the two parties.

3. Economic meaning

Noken has economic meaning for the people of Papua. With *noken*, Papuans can ensure that food supplies are maintained in their family. *Noken* also reminds Papuans to always provide foodstuffs that are their daily needs. When food is running low, they have to replenish their *noken* so that it can become a kind of "early warning system" for their survival. Sweet potato, petatas, sago are food ingredients that are always available in *noken* hanging in the household kitchens of the Papuan people. *Noken* also has a high enough selling power so that it becomes a "savings" for Papuan mothers when they have to provide money for urgent needs such as sending their children to school or sending a certain amount of money to children who are studying outside Papua. In ancient times, *noken* even functioned as a medium of exchange or bartering, if there were residents who needed certain items, they could be obtained by exchanging a *noken*. As a customary object, *noken* also has a high economic value because it is always needed by the Papuan people in general.

Conclusion

As a cultural object that is full of meaning, we should defend and preserve the existence of *noken*. Currently, *noken* is not only made from natural materials such as wood fibers and grasses, but has switched to factory threads such as wool, nylon, and other synthetic materials. This shift is inevitable, because factory-processed goods are easier to find than natural materials. The process of working with the fabrication process is also relatively shorter. A wise view is needed in addressing this because in artificial objects, *noken* loses its true meaning as a cultural object. The existence of *noken* should continue to be raised and disseminated so that people not only recognize it as a cultural object seen from its physical side, but also the meanings contained in it.

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