

Transformation of Papuan Independence Values: Looking at the Conflict in Papua through Post-secular Society Perspective

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Abstract

The evolution of Papuan independence values illustrates a historical transition from traditional cosmological beliefs, linking freedom to ancestors, land, and nature, to modern political aspirations. Influences from missionary education, colonial governance, and contemporary political systems have reshaped these values, leading to the rise of ethnonationalist consciousness. This study aims to analyze how traditional religious conceptions of freedom shifted toward demands for political sovereignty within a post-secular social context. A qualitative exploratory approach was applied, using expert interviews with traditional leaders, religious figures, youth leaders, activists, and government officials in Manokwari and Jayawijaya, complemented by literature review and NVivo-assisted coding. The findings show that traditional religious values—expressed through rituals such as *korero*—were secularized and reinterpreted as political symbols. This transformation strengthened Papuan ethnonationalism and contributed to prolonged conflict, especially after dissatisfaction with *Penentuan Pendapat Rakyat* (PEPERA) and the emergence of movements such as OPM. The study implies that understanding the Papuan conflict requires acknowledging the spiritual foundations of political aspirations.

Evolusi nilai-nilai kemerdekaan Papua menggambarkan transisi historis dari keyakinan kosmologis tradisional yang mengaitkan kebebasan dengan leluhur, tanah, dan alam, menuju aspirasi politik modern. Pengaruh dari pendidikan misionaris, pemerintahan kolonial, dan sistem politik kontemporer telah membentuk ulang nilai-nilai ini, yang pada gilirannya memicu munculnya kesadaran etnonasionalis. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana konsepsi agama tradisional tentang kebebasan bergeser menuju tuntutan kedaulatan politik dalam konteks sosial pasca-sekuler. Pendekatan kualitatif eksploratif diterapkan, menggunakan wawancara dengan pemimpin tradisional, tokoh agama, pemimpin pemuda, aktivis, dan pejabat pemerintah di Manokwari dan Jayawijaya, dilengkapi dengan tinjauan literatur dan pengkodean dengan bantuan NVivo. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai agama tradisional—yang diekspresikan melalui ritual seperti *korero*—telah disekularisasi dan ditafsirkan ulang sebagai simbol politik. Transformasi ini memperkuat etnonasionalisme Papua dan berkontribusi pada konflik yang berkepanjangan, terutama setelah ketidakpuasan terhadap Penentuan Pendapat Rakyat (PEPERA) dan munculnya gerakan seperti OPM. Studi ini menyiratkan bahwa memahami konflik Papua memerlukan pengakuan terhadap dasar spiritual dari aspirasi politik.

Keywords: conflict in Papua; Habermas's perspective; Papuan independence value; post-secular society; transformation

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Introduction

While independence is widely viewed as a modern political aspiration, among the Papuan people it remains deeply rooted in traditional spiritual and cosmological beliefs (Singh 2017). These beliefs are embedded in their cultural identity, shape their understanding of autonomy and self-determination. For example, land is a sacred ancestral heritage and an integral part of their identity and existence. As such, a struggle for independence is not only an attempt to achieve political sovereignty, but also to fulfill ancestral promises, to attain spiritual liberation, and to maintain the harmony of the cosmos (Giay 1995; Rutherford 2012). This echoes the traditional beliefs in other societies, such as Thai society, which stewards its natural resources based on religious beliefs (Chunhabunyatip et al. 2018). Hanita (Hanita 2019) stated that the Papuan nationalism movement is an ethno-nationalist movement, which concerns traditional rights and obligations in relation to aspects of ownership, such as land or natural resources (Ishak et al. 2022). This right to manage property over land and natural resources (civil law) is part of the identity and religious belief of the Papuan people (Polontoh 2015).

The natural environment, including the social and economic systems that underpin the livelihood systems of the region, is closely linked to the traditional way of life of the Papuans. In Papua, communities that rely on forests embrace a "diverse economies" paradigm that incorporates subsistence, market-based, and alternative forms of production to support their livelihoods and conservation objectives (Dwiartama et al. 2024). By fusing contemporary technologies with traditional farming practices, the indigenous Papuan populations actively manage modernization while

preserving ecological adaptation and cultural identity (Jaizul, Sulistya, and Lianingsih 2025). Their interaction with the environment is also evident in their way of life and their economic and spiritual ties to the land and forest, which are an important part of their cultural identity (Lakau 1997).

According to Vilsmaier and Ross (2024), transformation refers to dynamic, non-linear changes across multiple levels and dimensions that are needed to address the polycentric nature of humanity. Their work explores transformation in transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts, showing how it influences research, education, and knowledge creation with wide-ranging impacts on society. In the context of Christian spirituality, Christo (2015) defines transformation as a significant change in identity that spiritual experience brings. In the context of computer science, Maghawry et al. (2019) define transformation as the systematic modification of code to achieve a specific objective, often carried out through automated methods. In political science, European Union crisis management illustrates how shifts in the political context can drive major systemic change (Schramm 2024). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that transformation can be understood as a process of adaptation to changing conditions, directed toward achieving a desired outcome.

Djojosoekarto et al. (2012) explain that Papuan values of independence are embedded in the cultural, political, and social aspirations of the Papuan people. They argue that these values should be integrated into development policies to strengthen unity and belonging among Papuans. Initially, however, these ideals were not framed as political goals for Papuan independence or unification (Trzciński 2016). Meanwhile, Mutaqin (2014) shows that Papuan students and civil society view the demand for

independence as both a response to past injustices and a call for greater political representation. A key example of organized resistance is the Free Papua Organization (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka* - OPM), which seeks international recognition (Sarjito 2023). Studies on Papuan independence further highlight that this aspiration is rooted in traditional values that have been reinterpreted in contemporary contexts.

Studies on the conflicts in Papua, such as that by Latif and Shiddiqy (2023), highlight the conflict in Papua, which has been going on for more than 50 years, mainly due to the desire of the OPM to establish a free Papua. The conflict has intensified due to issues such as racial discrimination and illicit arms trafficking, which affect various social groups. Its roots trace back to the 1945 claim by the Dutch East Indies (Anas et al. 2024). According to Rona and Maryanah (2024), the conflict spans social, economic, political, cultural, and security dimensions, with persistent challenges including economic disparity and human rights violations, despite its recognition as a special case. The conflict is also related to the conditions in which people feel denied their rights to human and natural resources, so they react with a call for independence.

Previous research on Papuan independence has largely focused on how traditional values have evolved into modern ones, as well as on the conflicts arising from Papuan aspirations for political independence. However, what remains unclear is the original ideology that served as the driving force behind the emergence of the social movements demanding independence. The novelty of this study focuses on the transformation of traditional spiritual values into political aspirations in Papua. This study provides new insights into the ethno-political and spiritual dynamics that occur in Papua. This

study confirms that the transformation occurs through the intersection of traditional values, Christianity, and political modernity. Through applying Habermas' perspective, this study interprets the early ideology of Papuan independence as a form of the secularization of faith.

This study aims to analyze the changes in the Papuan values of independence in the context of social transformation, as reflected in the secularization process. This research seeks to understand how the so-called modernity has transformed the values of autonomy that were previously rooted in spiritual beliefs and practices. The study also looks into the relationship between these changes and the social and cultural identity of the Papuan people, while focusing on the process of secularization. The findings should provide a deeper insight into how people adapt to value changes in different aspects of their lives.

Building on the above discussion, this research was guided by a series of questions designed to structure data collection and analysis (Tarrozzi 2015). Specifically, the study raises several key questions regarding the meaning of freedom in the Papuan context: 1) What does the word *merdeka* signify in Papuans' traditional beliefs? 2) How is the secularization of traditional Papuan beliefs being implemented? 3) How does the transformation of these traditional beliefs influence the dynamics of conflict?

This research was conducted with a qualitative research approach as exploratory (not confirmatory), namely to explain the values contained in the meaning of Papuan independence based on the perspective of Habermas' theory. Data collection was carried out through theory-generating expert interviews. Informants were regarded as individuals

with specialized knowledge who hold a particular status or play a role in decision-making within specific fields of action (Bogner and Menz 2009). In this sense, expert knowledge carries a socially relevant dimension, as it actively shapes and defines the area of action (Döringer 2021). Thus, interviews were conducted freely but arranged in a structured manner with community leaders, religious leaders, youth leaders, women leaders, and academics who were considered competent in explaining the meaning of Papuan independence. Interviews were also conducted with youth leaders or those who influence youth groups and community movements demanding Papuan independence politically (see Table 1).

In addition to interviews, data collection also involved a literature review. This served to provide material for constant comparison and to ensure the inclusion of relevant information that might not have surfaced during the interview (Suter 2012). The literature review includes journals, books, and historical manuscripts that record events related to the topic in this study.

The audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed to extract key textual information. A similar approach was applied to

the observation notes, which were systematically narrated. Literature sources, including books, journals, and other relevant manuscripts, were also organized according to the research subtopics (Bogdan and Bilken 1992). This process formed part of coding and categorizing the data to reduce the volume of raw information, followed by identifying significant patterns, deriving meaning, and constructing a logical chain of evidence (Patton 2015).

The aim is to explore the values, intentions, beliefs, thoughts, and characteristic feelings related to the phenomenon or object under study (Basit 2003). Traditionally, coding was carried out manually, often using colored pens to categorize data, followed by cutting and sorting. Today, electronic methods of data coding are increasingly common among qualitative researchers (Wong 2008). Software now handles much of the marking, cutting, and sorting once done by hand, thereby improving efficiency and speeding up the process of grouping data into categories and retrieving coded themes. Nevertheless, researchers remain responsible for synthesizing and interpreting the meaning of the data (Roberts and Wilson 2002).

Table 1
Research Informat

No.	Name/Initials	Position
1	KM (R1)	Customary Council of Region III Domberay
2	DFW (R2)	Intellectuals and Youth Leaders
3	Pdt. NM (R3)	Religious Figures
4	JK (R4)	Kesbangpol Manokwari
5	ET (R5)	Secretariat of the West Papua House of Representatives
6	MM (R6)	Members of the West Papua People's Assembly
7	AN (R7)	KNPB Activist
8	TG (R8)	KNPB Activist
9	BL (R9)	KNPB Activist
10	BR (R12)	Doreri Tribe Owners of Mansinam Island Customary

Source: Personal Documentation

In this study, the coding and categorization of data were carried out using NVivo software developed by QSR International (Melbourne, Australia), the world's largest qualitative research software developer that enables qualitative researchers to code, sort, and present data (Wong 2008). The results of the data analysis can be presented in graphs, tables, and figures (Priyatni et al. 2020).

The Meaning of *Merdeka* in the Papua Traditional Beliefs

Traditional religions in Papua already existed and had developed in the 17th century (Hanita 2019) before the arrival of modern religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism). These indigenous religions have then become widely accepted religions. Based on the data collected, several traditional beliefs observed by the Papuans include *Aber Niki* (Lani), *Ugatame* (Me Tribe), and *Hai* (Amugme Tribe) (Suryawan 2017). This belief is based on the Papuan people's sense of identity with the creator of the universe as an integral part of their natural environment.

In this belief system, followers adhere to traditions centered on myths and ancestral spirits, with a focus on the afterlife. The values of these indigenous Papuan religions began to change when local communities came into contact with missionaries who introduced the Gospel (Steenbrink and Aritonang 2008). The meeting resulted in a clash between traditional and modern Christian belief systems. The inability to find a conceptual common ground between tribal teachings and the Christian gospel accelerated the birth of a new religion among the Papuan people. Papuan indigenous leaders sought to combine elements of traditional religion with Christian beliefs, especially the Christian view of the end times. This belief

movement is referred to as the cargo cult (Kamma 1972, 2013). Several religions were born after that, including the Korero Movement in Biak (Kamma 1972, 2013), the Zakeus Package Movement in Paniai (Giay 1995), Jesus Turot in Sorong, the Children of Peace in Asmat, the Kasyep movement, and the Samson movement in Genyem (Strelan and Godschalk 1998).

A prominent case study of cargo cults can be observed in the islands of Vanuatu, where local populations established a tradition predicated on the anticipation of the arrival of material goods. Following World War II, the United States military introduced a diverse array of modern goods and amenities to the islands, leading many locals to develop a belief that they too were entitled to share in this newfound wealth. In this context, numerous individuals incorporated elements of Christianity into their traditions, operating under the assumption that adherence to these religious norms would grant them divine blessings and facilitate the arrival of desired goods (Lindstrom 1993).

This phenomenon underscores the frustrations and aspirations of marginalized communities within the framework of modernization. The presence of these modern goods is perceived as a symbol of social status and prosperity, thereby blurring the boundaries between spirituality and materialism. The practices associated with cargo cults can be interpreted as a form of protest against social injustice, as well as a broader interpretation of religious experience. Through this lens, the cargo cult serves not only as a response to external influences but also as a reflection of the socio-economic challenges faced by these communities (Otto 1993).

The Korero Movement is a new tribal belief system in Papua that expresses the Papuan people's vision of freedom (Webster 2001). This understanding of freedom, rooted in the Korero

Movement, originates from traditional Papuan religion (Senis et al. 2024). In the Biak language, the word *koreri* is formed from two parts: *ko* (meaning “we” or “together,” with a plural sense) and *reri* (meaning “changing skin”) (Kamma 1972). The idea of “changing skin” refers to a transformation that can occur only in sacred or significant places within Biak culture. Together, the word *koreri* reflects not only a physical or spatial concept but also a spiritual one, embodying both communal unity and transcendental values. Followers of the movement believed in the return of a figure who would lead them into a life of freedom, prosperity, and peace (Hanita 2019).

The local people’s understanding of freedom is closely tied to their traditional beliefs, which are expressed through rituals connected to the natural environment in which they live. These beliefs are rooted in sacred rituals that hold deep cultural significance.

“Papuan traditional ceremonies are usually filled with ritual singing to express freedom and independence through song, and for those who sing,” (R6).

Through traditional religious rituals, people express beliefs that are closely connected to nature, which in turn shapes their sense of freedom. The following responses from informants were used to analyze the interview data on the meaning of freedom:

“We want to live in freedom with nature, in freedom to live our own lives,” (R2).

The desire of the Papuan people to live freely with their nature can be interpreted differently across areas of life. For the Papuan people, the desire to live in freedom arises from their encounters with outside communities that seek to control or restrict their access to resources. Interview data indicate that one manifestation of this is the limited access they face to their traditional lands.

“The land conflict in Papua is because they (Javanese migrants) live on the land that the government takes from the people and gives to them. The government doesn’t pay for the customary land owned by the municipality,” (R1).

The Papuans govern customary lands with the belief that there is a strong link between nature and tribal sovereignty (Sopaheluwakan et al. 2023). The relationship between the Papuan people and nature has historically shaped the identification of their phenotypic characteristics, distinguishing them from other ethnic groups. More importantly, their ethnic identity is closely tied to the recognition of customary rights, particularly rights to customary land, which also serve as a marker of their cultural identity. Cultural symbols associated with the traditional land are interpreted by the Papuan people in animist and dynamic beliefs.

The Secularization of Traditional Papuan Beliefs

In this discussion, a significant focus is placed on the manifestation of traditional beliefs within public spheres. The presence of these traditional beliefs in public spaces serves as a foundation for the emergence of ethnonationalism. The Berber, or Amazigh, populations in North Africa illustrate how traditional identity can galvanize a political movement. For centuries, Berber communities resisted Arabization and maintained their distinct cultural identity through language, music, and customs. The contemporary Berber movement has emerged as a response to political marginalization and cultural oppression, drawing on traditional beliefs to promote demands for language rights, political representation, and cultural preservation. The movement highlights the potency of traditional identity in mobilizing communities toward independence and greater

autonomy within nation-states (Bengio and Maddy-Weitzman 2024).

Some informants stated that Papua has been independent since 1961, so recognition is needed. The interview data were then analyzed in relation to the concept of freedom in traditional Papuan religion. This connection illustrates a shift in values: from the traditional belief that freedom was tied to harmony with nature, to a more contemporary understanding of independence as the aspiration for statehood..

Figure 1 is a word cloud is a visual representation of the frequency of words in a text or data set. Words that appear larger in size have a higher frequency of occurrences, while words that are smaller in size have a lower frequency of occurrences.

As shown in Figure 1, there are several central concepts that are the focus of discussion, namely values, the state, *koreri*, and Papuan. First, the concept of 'values' shows the importance of the transformation of values in Papuan society, so that it becomes the most frequently discussed topic in the text analyzed. Second, the term 'state', which is a central issue in the analysis of this image, indicates the role and formation of the state, as well as the

relationship between society and state entities. Next, *koreri*, as a spiritual-messianic movement of the Biak-Papuan people, which combines local beliefs with the vision of liberation, shows that there is an intense discussion about this concept as the basis of cultural values and resistance of the Papuan people. Finally, the term 'Papuan' emphasizes the focus of the analysis on the identity, values, and experiences of indigenous Papuans, which are integral to understanding the broader context (Webster 2001).

Figure 1 illustrates how the traditional religious understanding of freedom has shifted into a new concept—freedom in the form of statehood. The condition of statelessness was a central feature of colonialism, while the idea of establishing a utopian state had already been envisioned and planned during Dutch colonization. To pursue this, the Dutch invested in education as a means to accelerate human resource development. As noted in Longginus Pekey's (2017),

"The educational activities and infrastructure development undertaken by the Dutch in Papua were for the benefit of the Dutch. The emphasis was that, in essence, the Dutch were trying to carry out Papuanization."

Figure 1
Word Frequency Query Spirit *Koreri*



Source: N-VIVO Result Analysis

The Dutch colonial government, through its theology of “gold, glory, and gospel,” sought to instill an ideology of Papuan ethnonationalism by using education as the foundation for a utopian state (Hasirun, Suryo, and Wulandari 2019). This education was built on values that resonated with those already present in Papuan traditional religion, serving as a basis for strengthening awareness and recognition of Papuan ethnic identity.

Christian education serves as a pivotal medium for disseminating values that contribute to the formation of ethnonationalism. In the context of the Philippines, for instance, Christian educational institutions have played an instrumental role in imparting essential principles of democracy, freedom, and human rights, particularly during the struggle against American colonialism in the early twentieth century. This form of education not only instills an ideology of ethnic nationalism but also underscores an identity rooted in Christian teachings (Schumacher 1975). The spirit of Philippine ethnonationalism has now transformed into new religious movements (NRMs). It has not only changed the religious landscape of the Philippines but also profoundly affected its democratization process as an important factor, especially in the coming 2025 election (Ma 2025).

The transformation of Papuan belief systems rooted in traditional religion reflects a post-secular character, in the sense described by Jürgen Habermas. His thesis on post-secular society argues that traditional religions and beliefs are not wholly abandoned in the modern era; rather, they undergo partial secularization, creating space for the reconstruction of normative values (Zainun 2022). In this context, Papuan conceptions of independence are not merely products of modernization that displace tradition, but emerge from a dynamic dialogue

between old and new values, generating normative resources that continue to function in the public sphere (Mujibuddin and Zuliana 2019).

Colonial and Christian missionary education introduced modern values such as education, political organization, and law, while retaining the religious and cosmological foundations of indigenous peoples (Machingura and Kalizi 2024). This is in line with Habermas's view that post-secular societies allow religion to play a role in the public sphere, not just a residue of the past (Mujibuddin and Zuliana 2019).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that traditional rituals that symbolize freedom, such as *koreri*, are rearticulated as symbols of the political struggle for independence. This process shows that religious-spiritual values have not only survived but have also been adapted to respond to modern political challenges.

The Effects of the Transformation of Traditional Papuan Beliefs on Conflict Dynamics

The transformation of traditional trust values in Papua into a desire for independence, characterized by aspirations to establish a sovereign state, represents a significant political phenomenon that has emerged in the post-World War II era. The manifestation of these aspirations has not been without conflict. The enduring struggles for autonomy and self-determination have engendered prolonged periods of unrest and violence, echoing similar scenarios observed in other post-colonial contexts, such as India. The Indian independence movement, particularly in the context of British colonial rule, provides a pertinent example of how traditional values and communal identities can intersect with political aspirations,

culminating in significant socio-political upheaval (Hřřbek 2025).

The period between 1960 and 1969 was the peak when the goal of making Papua a country reached its highest point. However, the effort to establish Papua failed because the results of PEPERA were not in line with the efforts that had been prepared long before. Although the efforts to establish the state of Papua have failed, the efforts made by the Dutch colonial government in reviving ethnonationalism have been imprinted in the paradigm of the Papuan people (Senis et al. 2024).

The ethnonationalism embedded within Papuan society can be seen as a driving force behind movements seeking separation from the Indonesian state. Some Papuans who were dissatisfied with the results of PEPERA protested and led to the formation of the Free Papua Organization (OPM). This organization is regarded as a representative body advocating for the Papuan people's right to freedom (Drooglever 2011). The notion of *merdeka* (freedom), rooted in their traditional religion, has become a demand to be realized. Since the establishment of OPM, independence movements have spread across the Land of Papua (Saltford 2005).

The basis for the Papuan people's demand for secession from the Indonesian state is fear of silencing their freedoms. In 1961, Papua legally

established itself as an independent country. The Dutch government also facilitated the Papuan youth to form the New Guinea Raad (Papuan Parliament) as a sign of the establishment of the Papuan government (Timmer 2007). The Papuan flag was raised on the Land of Papua as a symbol of independence. Table 2 shows the opinion of the informant as the basis for the demand that Papua should be independent and independent from Indonesia.

Papuan groups demanding independence are officially classified as separatist movements. In response, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) have carried out various military operations in Papua aimed at suppressing aspirations for secession. The military operation against the Free Papua Movement turned into an armed confrontation. From 1970 to 1999, Papua was designated a military operations area due to aspirations for separation from the Republic of Indonesia (Dewi 2024). This designation disrupted development in the region and reinforced perceptions among Papuans that their land and natural resources—viewed as their inherent rights—were being taken by the state. These conditions generated tension and a strong sense of injustice. The prolonged military presence negatively affected daily life and further strained relations between the central government and the Papuan people.

Table 2
Statements on the meaning of freedom

"Independent Indonesia does not include Papua, because Papua is still colonized by Jakarta," (R7).

"Indonesia's independence is not the independence of the Papuan people, and Indonesian independence does not automatically mean Papuan independence," (R8).

"Papua has been independent since 1961, so we must recognize its independence," (R9).

The conflict that arose between the Papuan people and Indonesia shows the face of Janus-state syndrome: on the one hand, the state acts as a protector of development and the propagator of modernization, but on the other hand, it acts repressively against the expression of the ethno-religious identity of the Papuan people (Wight 2021). This contradiction reinforces Habermas's argument that in a post-secular pluralistic society, the failure of the state to accommodate religious and cultural identities can lead to social and political fragmentation.

Conclusion

The meaning of independence in traditional Papuan beliefs was originally a spiritual, cultural, and ecological value that emphasized harmony with ancestors, creators, and nature, as well as the right to customary land as a cultural identity. However, this value of freedom was transformed into a political aspiration in the form of demands for the sovereignty of the state of Papua. This change shaped the consciousness of the ethnonationalism of the Papuan people, which later became the driving force of separatist movements such as OPM. The aspirations for political freedom that clash with the Indonesian government's integration policies have fueled protracted conflicts, exacerbated by repressive military approaches, indigenous land grabs, and structural injustices.

This study contributes to the literature by applying Habermas' post-secular theory to the Papuan conflict, revealing how indigenous spiritual values have transformed into political aspirations. It proposes a novel interpretation of *merdeka* as a hybrid of traditional, ecological, and political identity, and shows how secularization processes fostered ethnonationalism rather than diminishing religious-cultural identity. This research provides a fresh perspective on the failures of national integration in Papua.

A key limitation of this study is its focus on the construction of ethnic identity based on the traditional values of the Papuan people. This construction serves as the primary foundation of ethnonationalism. A deeper understanding of the construction of the ethnic identity of the Papuan people is important because it can be a capital in efforts to reconstruct and place the Papuan people within the framework of Indonesian national identity. This not only has the potential to enhance the diversity of national identity but can also encourage a more inclusive dialogue between Papuans and other communities in Indonesia.[]

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