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The cultural influence of the noken system on political participation in Papua

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Abstract

The noken system is a unique cultural tradition in Papua that plays a significant role in organizing and facilitating political participation. This study explores the noken system's cultural influence on political engagement in Papua. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation in several regions. The findings reveal that the noken system functions not only as a symbol of social solidarity but also as a consensus-based democratic mechanism that enhances political awareness and citizen involvement. Communities that practice the noken system tend to be more politically active and exhibit greater trust in electoral processes. However, this study also highlights ongoing debates about the compatibility of the noken system with modern democratic principles and human rights, including concerns over potential vote manipulation and limited individual voting freedom. The research contributes theoretically to understanding consensus democracy and indigenous political systems, encouraging further discussion on democratic pluralism in local contexts. Thus, the noken system holds a strategic role in strengthening culturally grounded democracy in Papua.

Keywords
Noken System, Political Participation, Papua, Local Wisdom, Democracy, Society

1 | INTRODUCTION

Papua, with its diverse cultures, has traditions that are often overlooked in conventional political considerations. For centuries, noken have been closely connected to Papuan social, economic, and spiritual life. They symbolize identity, solidarity, and deep socio-political values for Papuans. Noken is not just a tool for transporting goods; it also represents local wisdom (Salhuteru & Hutubessy, 2020), demonstrating the relationship between humans and nature and showcasing the collective values that underlie people's lives.

As one of the provinces in Indonesia, Papua boasts a diverse cultural heritage, with one prominent aspect being the noken system, a traditional electoral method used by the Papuan people (Nugraha, 2021). In this system, voters use woven bags called noken to cast their votes instead of conventional ballot boxes. This practice not only reflects the cultural values of the Papuan people but also illustrates traditional ways of engaging in the political process. Before outside intervention, the noken system played a crucial role in various aspects of Papuan life, including conflict resolution, exchange of goods and services, and collective decision-making.

Papua's traditional governance system emphasizes deliberation and consensus, often followed by the exchange of noken as a sign of agreement (Faiz et al., 2023). Noken fosters strong social relationships, facilitates peaceful negotiations, and conveys complex messages through non-verbal communication. For example, to resolve a customary land dispute, a person may present a noken to indicate their willingness to reconcile and participate in the mediation process.

The noken system, also referred to as the ikat system, is utilized in several districts of the Central Highlands region and Papua Highlands of Indonesia. It derives its name from the noken, a bag made from bark fiber that holds significance for the Papuan people. The origins of the noken system remain somewhat unclear (Samderubun et al., 2023). Some suggest it arose spontaneously during a Papuan stone-burning ceremony, while others argue it was introduced by the Indonesian government in the 1970s and was not initially a long-standing tradition in the region.

Several tribes in the indigenous territories of Mee Pago and La Pago continue to implement the noken system. The Mee Pago which includes Nabire, Dogiyai, Deiyai, Paniai, Intan Jaya, and Mimika, alongside La Pago territories such as Puncak Jaya, Puncak, Nduga, Jayawijaya, Lanny Jaya, Central Mamberamo, Tolikara, Yalimo, Pegunungan Bintang, and Yahukimo, utilize the noken system in their electoral processes (Arthur Gerung & Mantu, 2021).

Practiced since 1971, (Yahya et al., 2023), the noken system was declared constitutional by the Constitutional Court in 2009. It embodies essential values of tradition and fairness, ensuring equal opportunities for participation in decision-making while respecting local culture. The court had previously affirmed the constitutionality of the system, as evidenced in a 2009 case involving a pastor named Elion Numberi, who alleged election fraud. The court confirmed that the election in Yahukimo utilized the noken system, a form of acclamation.

The implementation of the noken system during the first election period was primarily due to the mountainous terrain of Papua, which posed significant challenges in transportation and logistics (Hill, 2024). Additionally, many Papuans, especially in the mountainous regions, had limited formal education and struggled to comprehend the electoral process, prompting the adoption of the noken system as a guide through community deliberation. This system aligns closely with Papuan socio-cultural traditions, where customary elders help mediate decisions.

Despite its cultural importance, the noken system has sparked considerable debate. Critics argue it contravenes democratic principles and human rights by restricting citizens' rights to vote freely. Democracy necessitates a fair and transparent electoral process, where each citizen has the equal right to select their preferred candidates. However, the noken system can compel voters to adhere to local leaders' influence, thus limiting their freedom to vote based on personal choice (Aspinall et al., 2017). This dynamic is perceived as a potential

infringement on human rights, allowing undue pressure on voters and undermining the integrity of the voting process.

Political participation is a vital indicator of democratic quality, encapsulating citizens' voluntary involvement in electing leaders and shaping public policies (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). In Papua, political participation is heavily influenced by local cultural facets, with the noken system being one of the most significant. In this context, noken transcends its role as a mere tool and becomes a symbol of Papuan identity and solidarity. The system embodies traditional values of justice within Indigenous Papuan society, promoting equal opportunities for public engagement in decision-making.

Papua's rich cultural tapestry fosters unique social dynamics in which the noken system serves as a bridge between community and political processes. The research aims to investigate how the cultural nuances of the noken system influence political participation Papua (Wakia, 2025). While deeply rooted in tradition, the noken system encounters challenges in aligning with contemporary democratic frameworks. Therefore, understanding the interplay between the noken system and political participation is crucial in harmonizing this traditional practice with modern democratic values.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Political participation theory provides a framework for understanding the multiple factors that either encourage or inhibit individual involvement in formal and informal political contexts. Factors such as education level, socioeconomic status, access to information, political beliefs, and political self-efficacy play significant roles in shaping political engagement (Kasfir, 2023). Cultural theory further posits that a society's values, norms, beliefs, and symbols significantly impact social behavior, including political actions. Culture not only shapes individuals' preferences and perceptions but also motivates their responses to political issues and their engagement in decision-making processes.

One relevant study is titled "Political Participation and Political Culture of the Community in the Keuchik Election in Kajhu Village, Baitussalam District." This research explored the political participation and culture within the Kajhu community during the keuchik election. The study found that the Kajhu community exhibited high political awareness and active involvement in the election, although challenges to electoral participation remain that need addressing to further enhance community engagement (Alinda et al., 2020; Lakwo et al., 2020).

Another relevant research project examined the "Political Participation of Baduy Indigenous People in General Elections." This study highlighted the close relationship between the Baduy people's traditional political structure and their electoral participation (Kurniawan et al., 2022). Despite existing political frameworks, the Baduy people lack representation in parliament, and their electoral participation often feels obligatory rather than impactful. Their strong adherence to customary leadership led by figures such as the Puun and Jaro shapes their political engagement, as they often prioritize traditional celebrations over formal voting due to a perceived lack of significant influence from elections on their lives.

In discussing political culture in Indonesia, the study "Political Culture in Pragmatic Society" highlighted that political culture reflects shared values that drive collective decision making (Sumartono, 2018). However, Indonesia's political landscape still bears the marks of feudalism, primordialism, and colonial influences. As a result, citizens may prioritize short-term gains and practical solutions over the quality of the political process. This pragmatic political culture presents challenges for robust political participation.

The study titled "The Influence of Community Leaders on Community Political Participation in Village Head Elections" revealed that community leaders play a crucial role in shaping political participation in village elections

(Laksito & Saputra, 2023).By offering guidance and encouragement, these leaders can enhance political awareness and motivate community members to exercise their voting rights. This research underscores the significant influence community leaders have on increasing electoral participation at the grassroots level, acting as educators who bolster community engagement in the political process (Penney, 2016).

Building on these previous studies, the current research aims to explore the influence of the Noken system culture on political participation (de Villiers, 2024). The research will be informed by participatory democracy theory and political representation theory, which will help analyze how community involvement in elections aligns with or challenges democratic principles (Yunus, 2020).

In the context of Papuan society, the Noken system transcends its identity as a traditional artifact. It serves as a metaphor and social mechanism that shapes how individuals articulate their interests, forge solidarity, and engage in the political arena (Baldi, 2020). The use of Noken in elections reflects not only a voting method but also the values centered around collectivity, deliberation, and communal representation that are integral to Papuan culture. Thus, understanding political participation within Papua necessitates a comprehensive analysis that combines insights from political participation theory and a thorough examination of the Noken system as a dynamic cultural element.

This includes investigating how the Noken system interacts with formal political structures, mediates conflicts of interest, and facilitates or inhibits the political representation of marginalized groups. Political participation encompasses citizens' active engagement in political processes, which distinguishes it from mere political mobilization that might occur in response to decisions made by leaders (Budiardjo, 2008). In a democratic context, participation serves a vital function, ensuring that power remains with the public, as democracy relies fundamentally on the engagement of citizens.

3 | METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews and participatory observation as its primary data collection methods. Data were gathered from multiple regions across Papua, particularly those known for their strong adherence to the Noken system, a traditional method of decision-making and community representation. The respondents included community elders, local leaders, election officials, and citizens who actively participated in the electoral process. Their insights provided a comprehensive understanding of how the Noken system functions in practice and its role in local governance and democratic participation.

The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis, allowing the researcher to identify recurring patterns, themes, and social dynamics within the Noken based electoral practices. This method enabled a nuanced interpretation of both explicit narratives and underlying cultural values embedded in the responses. By examining these themes, the study aims to illuminate the complex interplay between tradition and modern democratic systems, contributing to a deeper understanding of indigenous political practices in Papua and their implications for broader electoral integrity and representation.

4 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of the Noken system in enhancing political participation among Papuans. It goes beyond being a mere traditional or symbolic electoral method, revealing that the Noken system actively encourages deeper involvement in formal democratic processes. Communities engaged in the Noken mechanism demonstrate higher levels of electoral participation, indicating that it serves not only as a method of aggregating votes but also as a catalyst for increasing political awareness and fostering a sense of ownership in public decision-making (Pamungkas, 2017). The stark contrast in participation rates between communities involved with the Noken system and those that are not emphasizes the importance of understanding and incorporating the socio-cultural context of elections in Papua.

Additionally, this study uncovers another key aspect of the Noken system: its ability to strengthen relationships between communities and local leaders (Warami & Mofu, 2024).. This closer connection improves communication between leaders and constituents while fostering mutual trust and accountability. Public trust, cultivated through ongoing interaction and genuine representation, is essential for the legitimacy of government and societal stability. Therefore, the Noken system not only boosts electoral participation but also enhances governance through community engagement and trust. These findings suggest the need for a deeper exploration of how to effectively integrate the Noken system within the larger political framework, respecting both local cultural values and universal democratic principles (Silo & Ismail, 2022).

The results indicate that the Noken system plays a significant role in promoting political participation among Papuans, as individuals involved in the system are more likely to engage in elections than those who are not. Moreover, the Noken system fortifies the relationship between communities and local leaders (Sari & Rahman, 2021), resulting in increased public trust within the political realm. The subsequent sections will delve deeper into the implications of this research:

4.1 | The Noken System as a Form of Consensus Democracy

Consensus democracy as defined by (Lijphart, 1999), is a model of decision-making that focuses on deliberation to reach a common agreement, as an alternative to the majoritarian democracy model that bases legitimacy on the majority vote. In this context, the Noken system that applies in some indigenous areas of Papua can be interpreted as a manifestation of consensus democracy, as it emphasizes the process of collective negotiation and deliberation in determining political choices. This process often involves traditional leaders, community leaders, and representatives of various interest groups to reach a mutually agreeable solution.

The legitimacy of the Noken system in indigenous Papuan communities is supported by several studies (Timmer, 2009; Widjojo et al., 2010) that highlight the socio-cultural aspects inherent in the tradition. The system is considered representative of the deep communal, kinship, and gotong royong values of Papuan society. Decisions made through Noken are often seen as representing the collective will and maintaining social harmony. However, it should be recognized that this legitimacy is contextual and tied to the customary norms that apply in a particular community.

However, the Noken systbp/em is not immune to criticism. (Mietzner, 2018) highlights the potential limitations of the system in guaranteeing individual rights, especially in the context of modern elections. The collective decision-making mechanism in Noken is criticized for potentially ignoring minority voices or individuals who hold different views from the majority. Additionally, transparency and accountability in the Noken process are also important issues, given the potential for manipulation or coercion practices to influence the final outcome.

The Noken system has been applied in various elections, both legislative and executive elections. Constitutional Court Decision No. 47-81/PHPU.A-VII/2009 recognizes this system as part of Papua's specificity (Faizab & Israac, 2023). The Noken system reflects a model of consensus democracy based on customary values and collective community involvement in political decision-making. In this system, the tribal chief or customary leader acts as a community representative responsible for determining political choices based on deliberation and consensus.

One concrete example of the application of the Noken system occurs in Puncak Jaya Regency, where political decisions in elections are often made through large deliberations between tribal chiefs and community members. In this process, each community group puts forward their views on which candidate to support, and the final decision is taken collectively to ensure social stability and harmony (Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017)**.**

Data from the KPU Papua report (2020) shows that in some districts, such as Tolikara and Yahukimo, the Noken system plays an important role in keeping voter turnout high. This is because communities feel they have direct involvement in the electoral process, even though elections are conducted collectively through tribal chiefs.

However, this system also faces challenges in terms of transparency and the principle of freedom of choice. Some election monitoring reports, such as the one published by Bawaslu Papua (2019), note the potential for domination by adat elites that can limit the choices of individuals within the community. There needs to be a stricter oversight mechanism to ensure that decisions made truly reflect the will of the community at large (Green, 2022).

The Noken system raises debates about the balance between respect for local culture and modern democratic principles (Raharusun, 2017). On the one hand, the system provides space for indigenous peoples to make their choices collectively. On the other hand, criticism has arisen regarding the potential for political manipulation and limitations on individual participation. Therefore, there is a need for a policy that accommodates local values without ignoring universal democratic principles.

4.2 | Level of Community Political Participation

Political participation is an important indicator in measuring the extent to which people are involved in the democratic process. It serves as one of the main indicators of democracy. According to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), political participation encompasses various forms of citizen involvement in the political process, either directly or indirectly (Adenrele & Olugbenga, 2017).

In Papua, the Noken system represents a unique form of political participation, recognized by Indonesia's Constitutional Court as a legitimate voting method (Faiz et al., 2023). However, its application has often sparked controversy regarding transparency and accountability. During the 2019 elections, the Noken system was implemented in several districts in Papua, including Pegunungan Bintang and Yahukimo. Reports from the General Election Commission (KPU) indicate that community participation in these areas reached levels of 80-90%. Yet, this participation does not necessarily reflect individual involvement; rather, it often represents collective decisions made by traditional leaders.

Data from the Papua Provincial General Election Commission (KPU) shows that in the 2019 General Election, participation rates in regions utilizing the Noken system were notably high, with an average of 85%. However, an independent survey conducted by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) revealed a contrasting picture, indicating that only 40% of community members felt they were actively engaged in the decision-making process. This discrepancy highlights the complex dynamics at play in political participation within the context of the Noken system, where collective action may overshadow individual agency.

To determine the level of community political participation in the Noken system, it can be seen from two perspectives, as follows:

4.2.1 | Active Participation:

Active participation within the Noken system refers to the direct involvement of community members in political decision-making through customary deliberations (Setyanto et al., 2020). In this model, decisions are made collectively, often guided by discussions facilitated by tribal chiefs, elders, or other traditional leaders. These deliberative forums are grounded in consensus, allowing community members to express their preferences and jointly determine political support. This reflects the core principles of deliberative democracy, where legitimacy stems from inclusive dialogue rather than majority rule.

Despite its strengths, active participation under the Noken system is not without limitations. In practice, access to these decision-making spaces is often restricted to adult men or customary elites, while women and youth remain underrepresented or excluded. This reflects prevailing social hierarchies in traditional Papuan communities, where authority and political expression are shaped by age, gender, and lineage. As such, although decisions are

reached through communal processes, the inclusivity and representativeness of those decisions may be compromised.

To strengthen the democratic value of active participation within the Noken framework, it is essential to promote broader involvement across different social groups (Efriandi et al., 2021). Efforts should be made to encourage the participation of marginalized voices, particularly women and young people, in deliberative forums. In doing so, the Noken system can evolve as a culturally embedded yet progressively inclusive mechanism of political engagement, aligning more closely with democratic ideals while preserving the traditional structures that underpin Papuan society.

4.2.2 | Passive Participation:

Passive participation occurs when political decisions are accepted by the community without their direct involvement, typically made solely by traditional leaders. These decisions are often rooted in customary considerations, such as loyalty to tribal affiliations or kinship ties.

Within the Noken system, political participation extends beyond individual engagement to encompass collective, community-based practices. While this approach tends to increase overall voter turnout, it simultaneously raises concerns regarding individual freedom of choice. A study conducted by LIPI (2021) across 15 villages in Papua found that 60% of respondents were unaware of the political platforms of the candidates they ostensibly supported through the Noken system.

A notable example occurred during the 2020 regional elections in Yahukimo Regency, where a traditional leader unilaterally endorsed a regent candidate without prior deliberation. The community accepted the decision, perceiving the leader as a "guardian of collective wisdom." Consequently, the endorsed candidate secured 95% of the vote in the district despite the absence of open political dialogue with the electorate.

Passive participation is frequently criticized for enabling forms of customary oligarchy or facilitating political manipulation. In Pegunungan Bintang District, for instance, reports indicated that certain traditional leaders received material incentives from political parties in exchange for directing Noken-based votes (Prihastuti & Adnan, 2019). Nonetheless, many communities perceive such practices as an expression of adherence to customary authority, which is often deemed more significant than individual autonomy in decision-making.

Table 1. Examples of regions and election results under the noken system

Region	Election Year	Form of Participation	Vote Share (%)	Notes
Yahukimo	2020	Passive	95%	Decision made solely by traditional leader without public deliberation
Puncak Jaya	Not specified	Active (Deliberative)	Collective decision made	Community and tribal leaders hold mass deliberations to decide political support
Tolikara	2020	Active	High turnout (~85%)	Community involvement through traditional channels; helps maintain high voter turnout

Pegunungan Bintang	2019	Passive (Potential Manipulation)	Not specified	Alleged material rewards to adat leaders for vote direction

5 | CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Noken system plays a pivotal role in shaping political participation in Papua by integrating indigenous cultural practices into democratic processes. Serving as a symbol of collective identity and solidarity, the Noken system enhances political engagement and fosters community-based decision-making rooted in deliberation and consensus. Communities employing this system often showcase higher levels of electoral participation and stronger trust in political institutions.

However, the Noken system also encounters challenges when scrutinized against universal democratic standards. Issues such as limited individual voting rights, lack of transparency, and potential manipulation highlight the tension between traditional governance and modern democratic principles. Despite these obstacles, the cultural legitimacy and social cohesion nurtured by the Noken system underscore its enduring significance in Papuan society.

Thus, efforts to strengthen democracy in Papua must strive to balance the preservation of cultural traditions with the promotion of democratic values. Policymakers should work to harmonize local wisdom with democratic reforms by crafting inclusive frameworks that respect indigenous practices while safeguarding individual political rights. By doing so, the Noken system can meaningfully contribute to a pluralistic and culturally grounded model of democracy in Indonesia.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors declare truthfully that in the conduct and preparation of this research, there is no conflict of interest of any kind that has the potential to affect the objectivity, integrity, or validity of the research findings. Conflicts of interest include, but are not limited, financial relationships, professional affiliations, personal relationships, or ideological beliefs that could bias or favour the results of the study. The authors have no affiliation with any company, organisation, or individual that could benefit directly or indirectly from the results of this study. Similarly, there is no financial or other form of support received by the authors that could be conditioned towards the achievement of any particular research outcome. Thus, the authors guarantee that this research was conducted independently and based on strict scientific principles, and the results obtained reflect honest and accurate analyses of the available data.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. Data not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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