



Wearing *Koteka* in Public Spaces: A Symbol of the Hardened Cultural Identity in Papua

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Abstract — *Koteka* is not merely a traditional article of clothing worn by the indigenous people in the highlands of Papua. Aside from setting the Papuan identity apart from other ethnicities, *koteka* has political and social dimensions. This research uses secondary data from news articles, examined using critical discourse analysis. The findings show that *koteka* worn in public spaces can be seen as a symbol of cultural resistance to fight against the imposition of the dominant culture in Indonesia. This paper also emphasizes that *koteka* is a resurfaced indigenous identity that becomes a form of protest against the marginalization of the native Papuans. Wearing *koteka* in public spaces has reinforced the community's cultural identity, putting into the spotlight the past oppression, injustice, and dark history with the state. Used as a tool of protest, *koteka*, and other customary attributes is a subtle alternative strategy of social movements.

Keywords -- *Koteka*, cultural identity, Papua, customary attributes

I. INTRODUCTION

Koteka is a traditional article of clothing to cover the male genitalia worn by the native Papuans who live in the highlands. Being considered backward, *koteka* was banned during the New Order regime under Suharto's presidency (1966-1998). By Decree of the President of the Republic of Indonesia Number 75 of 1969, the authorities formed the Task Force for the Development of Rural Communities in Irian Jaya (Papua). One of their programs was to replace *koteka* with modern clothing, known as Operation *Koteka* (1971-1974), led by Brigadier General Acub Zainal as Commander of the XVII/Cenderawasih Regional Military Command and Deputy Chair of the West Irian Regional Development Implementation Agency. Under his command, Operation *Koteka* was run with military forces, suppressing any resistance with violence.

The New Order regime pervasively stereotyped and portrayed the native Papuans in a negative light, especially those who upheld the *koteka* culture. They were associated with backwardness and primitiveness, often treated analogously to exotic creatures. In the view of the state, such a primitive, backward society requires serious and exclusive handling. This view was manifested in the abovementioned decree to authorize the formation of a special task force, which was then enhanced by Presidential Decree No. 27 of 1970, aiming to persuade the native Papuans to abandon their traditional *koteka* and adopt modern clothing. As the unstoppable waves of

modernization swept even the remotest areas in Papua, the natives slowly but surely left their traditional *koteka*. The once common article of clothing was rendered performative and suitable only for ceremonial occasions. Along with other customary items, *koteka* is now worn only at certain events and has become a property for tourism campaigns.

In addition, the government's exercise of control did not stop at clothing items but was extended to the staple food of Papuans, attempting to replace the commonplace sago with rice. This intervention is major as it touches the foundation of Papuan culture. Changing the food and clothing of a society or community changes its cultural base. Unfortunately, the government failed to perceive this reasoning and, instead, considered cultural differences a barrier to the integration of Papua into the unified Republic of Indonesia. Uniformity was deemed necessary to unify the state's regions, so the government imposed the so-called modern culture on the native Papuans.

This attempt to make cultures uniform is part of modernization on behalf of the 'development' of the state, so anything considered archaic or 'primitive' will be removed to make way for 'better' alternatives. However, the imposition of cultural aspects is bound to meet with resistance in one way or another. Indeed, tensions arose between the people and the authorities. With the same reasoning (perceiving clothing and food as part of the cultural foundation), the Papuans reassert their uniqueness by upholding their native identity, including the way they dress and what they eat.

Using data from news articles, this paper discusses how this reassertion is conducted by using cultural properties (such as *koteka* and other customary attributes) as a means of seizing space, both physical and non-physical. The critical discourse analysis shows the return of the *koteka* to public spaces speaks volumes about the mistaken image and the attempt to set the record straight—that the traditional article of clothing is not a representation of ignorance, backwardness, and lack of culture. The use of *koteka* in public spaces restores the native Papuans' self-confidence and identity that were about to be stripped by modernization. As a token of cultural identity, the *koteka* community finds its momentum in the wider communal culture. It is a symbol of resistance to marginalization by external cultural forces.

II. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Koteka on Campus

A student named Alfais Yalak from the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Cenderawasih, was scheduled for a thesis defense on Friday, 31 February 2020. Instead of wearing black pants, a white shirt, and a dark tie like any other student, Yalak requested permission from the head of the department, Melpayanti Sinaga, to wear the traditional article of clothing, *koteka*, and to bring customary properties such as arrows, bows, hats, and chest decorations. He argued that this was in line with his thesis topic about the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in the context of the indigenous Papuans' customary rights. Yalak believes there was a massive gap between the exploitation of natural resources in his customary land area and the benefits gained by the people.

Yalak's wearing of the *koteka* in his thesis defense was an expression of protest against the marginalization he had felt and a reaffirmation of his Papuan identity, which has been subdued by external cultural forces. Yalak's example shows that wearing *koteka* as a form of protest is no longer limited to street demonstrations to demand Papua's independence but has expanded to higher education institutions to fight against marginalization. Some students have even started wearing *koteka* in the halls of academia to attend regular lectures. Media have recently reported the action of Devio Basten Tekege (21), a student of the Department of Electrical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Cendrawasih, who came to campus to celebrate *koteka*. Tekege first did this on 28 May 2018, when he left the Tauboria Catholic Student Dormitory and headed to the campus at 8.00 in the morning by motorcycle. He entered the lecture hall at 08.35 and immediately drew the attention of the lecturers and other students. His motive for wearing *koteka* on campus was to preserve the traditional Papuan culture and restore the use of *koteka* daily—not only for certain events at certain places [8].



Figure 1. The student wearing *koteka* in his thesis defense; image by Melpayanti Sinaga, 2 March 2020

Takege's action at Universitas Cenderawasih seems to have inspired other students to do the same, such as those from the Jayapura University of Science and Technology (USTJ) and the Umel Mandiri Law College. They admitted to having worn *koteka* to campus because they were inspired by the culturally-proud Takage. Albertus, one of the USTJ students who wore *koteka* to go to campus, said that the *koteka* was not much different from traditional clothing from other regions in Indonesia. He conveyed this reasoning when a lecturer reprimanded his actions. "What is actually the difference between me wearing (*koteka*) traditional clothing and my friends wearing *batik*?" he said [11].

Albertus' and his friends' reasoning that likens *koteka* to *batik* is an argument in its own right. *Batik* is a Javanese cultural property that has become a national identity. In Papua, many public officers and citizens wear *batik* at various events and occasions. In this perspective, *batik* can be seen as a symbol of the domination of Javanese culture over other cultures in the archipelago. This idea of cultural imposition is especially intense in Papua due to its dark history with the state. Many Papuans still think that the Javanese are colonizers of their 'nation,' as reflected in the indigenous people's rejection of the transmigration program when Papua was given a Special Autonomy status.

Indeed, colonization occurs in many dimensions, one of which is culture. Comparing the rejection of *koteka* with the acceptance of *batik* is an expression of the struggle to earn cultural space for students like Takage and Albertus. Their action was a turning point for the cultural hegemony imposed since Operation *Koteka* during the New Order regime.

Koteka and the Politics of Ethnic Identity

In a demonstration in Manado on 2 May 2016, a Papuan student who joined the demonstration wearing *koteka* said, "This is our identity. We are different from Indonesia. We are Papuans." meanwhile, Hizkia, the coordinator of actions of the West Papua National Committee, said, "We demand a referendum and also support the international parliamentary meeting for West Papua in London, England, for the independence of the Papuan people," [4]. The same message was conveyed in the student demonstration demanding the closure of PT Freeport on 20 March 2017. The Papuan Student Alliance (AMP) and the Indonesian People's Front for West Papua (FRI-WP) went on a demonstration at the Freeport office in Kuningan, South Jakarta. The demonstrators wore traditional Papuan clothing, including *koteka*. The demonstrations show that actions using cultural

properties are effective and not only local to Papua. It has reached the country's capital.

The action by Tekege and his friends, wearing *koteka* while attending lectures on campus, has received support from a member of the Papuan legislature, John NR Gobay. He said, "For me, this is a form of self-expression," in response to the students' actions at three campuses in Jayapura City. According to Gobay, wearing traditional clothes is not shameful but rather courageous, showing one's identity as an indigenous Papuan with the *koteka* culture. Gobay admired this expression of identity through the use of this traditional clothing. He considered it a positive way of expressing feelings of being fed up with the destruction of culture in the name of modernization and cultural imposition in Indonesia. For Gobay, this action shows that native people wearing *koteka* can still attend college and live in their own land [12].

The response from a legislator above shows that students' cultural actions are bound to enter the realm of identity politics, which according to Heller and Sonja (1996) [6], is politics that makes self-difference with other groups the basis of its movement. The idea of difference promises freedom, tolerance, and autonomy to join the playing field. However, dangers, such as intolerance and violence, may also lurk because identity politics include, among other things, racism, and ethnocentrism.



Figure 2. The author posing with the Papuans wearing traditional *koteka* in a public space

Identity is constantly evolving, which means it is not static, final, and successful. Hall (2015) [5] argues that identity is everchanging and that histories and culture have real, material, and symbolic effects on identity. Identity can be social, political, and cultural. In certain situations, such as a defensive position [1], identities can mean anxiety, fear, or self. What the legislator said above is also inseparable from the politics of space in Papua, which has excluded the indigenous people. This is in line with Rutherford's (1990) [10] analogy of identity as a home, a place of return, and where everything starts. This means that there is a desire for the natives to return to their original position. Chauvel (2008) [2] and Laksono (2009) [7] stated that the unintended impact of special autonomy is that it has sparked ethnic nationalism

among the Papuans. Such nationalism may highlight the collective memory of unpleasant experiences with the Indonesian government, such as the allowance of an influx of migrants to their homeland, the economic marginalization, and the brutality of military and political actions against the Papuans. In fact, ethnic nationalism is widely used by local elites to assert their position in the political arena.

Special autonomy is a political or structural product that subsequently impacts culture. Native customs and cultural properties receive a larger space. In this case, traditional elements, including wearing *koteka*, set Papuans apart from the Republic of Indonesia and the immigrants in their land. This distinction is extreme because the only people wearing *koteka* are the native Papuans.



Figure 3. The author with a Papuan in the countryside

***Koteka* and Hardened Culture**

Culture should have the nature of change—flexible and dynamic. However, what happened to the *koteka* culture was the opposite, becoming rigid with reinforced ethnic boundaries. Ethnicity or ethnos in Greek is synonymous with geographical or regional boundaries with a certain political system [9], which then asserts an identity predicate to a person or a group. The inherent characteristic of an ethnic group is the growing communal sense among its members [1]. Although ethnicity is based on a separation between 'us' and 'them,' it does not emerge from alienation or isolation. Erickson (1989) [3] states that a condition for ethnicity to emerge is when a group has established relationships or contacts with other groups considered different, and each group accepts its cultural differences. If these conditions are not met, ethnicity will not emerge because it is not an entity but a relation. Needless to say, an inter-group relationship is not always harmonious. Conflict or tension often appears with the minority group ending up in a subordinate position to the majority group.

III. CONCLUSION

The struggle to regain space using customary properties in Papua occurs in various dimensions. In the cultural dimension, the use of *koteka* reshaped the image of the traditional clothing that had been associated with primitiveness and backwardness. In the political dimension, the action of wearing *koteka* on campus triggered a response from a legislator. In the physical dimension, the struggle to

regain cultural space relates to the struggle to reclaim custom land. The act of wearing *koteka* on campus is more than an expression of individual identity. Instead, it is linked to the dark history of Papua in the context of integration with the Republic of Indonesia. With *koteka*, these students express their aspiration to return to their ‘home in the past,’ which is now dominated by outsiders.

A culture should be future-oriented and continuously constructed in healthy, dynamic, and equal interactions with other cultures. Culture constantly changes as change is part of its nature. However, changes in culture should not come from imposition. Rather, they develop based on exchanges between values in internal and external relations. In the case of the *koteka*, the government could have used a more persuasive approach by referencing other cultures instead of violently oppressing the community through Operation *Koteka*. If that had been the case, people might not harbor dark memory about the past.

Koteka is an article of clothing suitable for hunting and gathering, a mode of production that relies on natural support. This does not necessarily mean a lower level of culture—only a different culture. When a mode of production changes, for example, in the modern society where people work as employees or entrepreneurs, their clothing automatically adjusts. However, types of clothing are not a hierarchy, and people should not be discriminated against on the ground of clothing. After all, everyone in today’s society is a descendant of ancestors dressed in simple clothes made from plants and animal skins.

The oppression by the New Order regime in the past has changed the cultural potential in Papua, which should have been oriented toward the future. With the dark history, culture becomes identity politics oriented toward the past. This case of *koteka* reinvention has also shown that culture should not be confronted with militarism because violence is anti-culture. Instead, it must be approached in cultured ways through dialogues and persuasions. This process may take a long time, especially in a society that has experienced deep

historical wounds, but a sophisticated approach is often more impactful.

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