

WALKING THE OCEAN WITH *PAPOESCHE ZEEROVERS*: HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN NAVIGATION, MARITIME, AND BIAK IDENTITY IN INDONESIA

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Abstract *Technology is not merely an instrumental device but an embodied configuration of materiality, movement, and meaning sedimented within objects. Focusing on the tempayan in the Hulu Sembakung community along the Indonesia-Malaysia border, this study examines how a ritual artifact functions within a cross-border riverine lifeworld that unsettles fixed territorial governance. Methodologically, the research employs digital ethnography and digital spatial observation, tracing ongoing interactions among community members through Facebook, where prior ethnographic relations have been sustained and extended. The findings demonstrate that river morphology enables continuous mobility that exceeds state territorial boundaries, while the tempayan embodies hybrid cultural materiality shaped by historical encounters between Chinese ceramics and local ritual systems. Through processes of cultural recontextualization, the object becomes detached from its original production logic and reconstituted as a vessel of kinship, obligation, and intergenerational continuity. Its circulation across waterways and state borders generates friction with state materiality, particularly attempts to stabilize sovereignty through fixed territorial administration. These findings demonstrate that embodied technologies such as the tempayan actively mediate relations between mobility, community, and state power, revealing how borderland materiality destabilizes territorial sovereignty and generates alternative moral geographies.*

Keyword:

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1. Introduction

Indonesia is known as an archipelagic country formed by the power of the sea, not only in terms of geography, but also in the context of its history, culture, and social identity of its people. As a region with thousands of islands and coastlines spanning more than 80,000 kilometres, the dynamics of maritime life are an important element in the formation of local societies and civilisations in the archipelago. However, not all maritime groups in Indonesia receive equal attention in national historiography. Narratives about great kingdoms such as Sriwijaya,

Majapahit, or Makassar dominate the story of the glory of the sea. At the same time, maritime groups from eastern Indonesia, especially from Papua, are still often excluded or only appear in colonial archives as border "problems", pirates, or threats to stability (Pelras, 2006).

One of the most interesting and complex examples of this is the term *Papoesche Zeerovers*, which literally means "Papuan pirate" in Dutch. This term is widely found in Dutch colonial documents from the 17th to the 19th centuries to describe a group of sailors from Biak Island and its surroundings who often carried out long-distance sea expeditions and attacks on settlements and merchant ships in the Maluku region, the coast of Papua New Guinea, and even the northern region of Australia. In colonial records, this group was considered a threat to be dealt with due to its non-compliant nature, high mobility, and inability to be subdued by the colonial administrative system. As noted in the VOC archives, the existence of a group of sailors from Biak was identified as a source of maritime turmoil and therefore labelled as pirates or pirates (Bellwood, 2007).

When examined from the perspective of local society and historical anthropology, this kind of narrative shows a structural bias in the construction of colonial discourse against the eastern people of Indonesia. The label of *zeerovers* given to the Biaks often ignores the local context of their sailing practices. The Biak people have a very old shipping tradition, known as *Mansorandak*, which is a kind of maritime expedition carried out for various purposes such as searching for new territories, establishing political relations, trading, and even responding to the dynamics of conflicts between regions. This tradition not only shows their technical ability in open sea navigation, but also shows a strong social, political, and spiritual dimension in the structure of Biak society (Kamma, 1972a).

The Biak people are known to have expertise in reading the direction of the wind, the movement of sea currents, and orientation based on star clusters, which are important capital in making cross-ocean voyages (Salim, 2021) In their oral tradition, the sea is not just an economic space, but also a spiritual and political space. According to Rumsey and Weiner's formulation (Rumsey & Weiner, 2000) the maritime identity of a community cannot be separated from the cultural narrative that accompanies it. In this context, sailing is not just about moving places, but also about expanding social networks, asserting collective identities, and demonstrating power in a distinctively local way.

Colonial approaches to groups such as the Biak people showed a tendency to equate maritime mobility with chaos or disobedience to the modern state system. This is part of the construction of the imperial discourse that positions indigenous peoples as wild, disorderly, or dangerous if they do not conform to the colonial legal and economic framework. As explained by (Spyer, 2000) perceptions of violence and assault in colonial archives often reflect European anxieties rather than actual local realities. Thus, it is important to reread the term *Papoesche Zeerovers* as a product of colonial construction, not as an objective representation of the social reality of the Biak people.

Previous studies have shown that the Biak sailors not only present as a threat to colonial powers but also played an important role in connecting remote areas of the Southwest Pacific (Kamma, 1972a; Rumsey & Weiner, 2000) They establish relations with other ethnic groups, engage in the exchange of goods and services, and even spread cultural influence through a system of interracial relations and inter-regional marriages. In this context, the term "pirates" becomes too narrow and unfair to describe the complexity of the role of the Biak people in the maritime history of eastern Indonesia.

Unfortunately, until now, the narrative about *the Papoesche Zeerovers* has not received much attention in national historical discourse and in history education in Indonesia. This

reflects the epistemological marginalisation of local experiences and knowledge from Papua and eastern Indonesia. In fact, the deconstruction of these kinds of colonial terms is an important step in building a more inclusive understanding of Indonesia's history as a maritime nation. This is in line with the agenda of decolonisation of science that invites us to reconstruct the narrative from the perspective of local communities, not solely from the perspective of colonial rulers or the state (Bamualim, 2020).

To re-understand the strategic position of the Biak people in Indonesia's maritime history requires confronting the long-standing marginalisation embedded in both colonial and national narratives. Dutch colonial historiography often portrayed Papua as remote and peripheral, emphasizing European exploration while overlooking indigenous maritime networks across the Pacific (Rumbekwan, 2017). In reality, the Biak were skilled seafarers whose mobility connected islands and coastal regions far beyond present-day administrative borders. After integration into Indonesia, dominant national narratives continued to privilege Java-centric visions of maritime glory frequently associated with polities such as Majapahit while sidelining eastern Indonesian and Papuan contributions. As a result, Biak's historical agency was diminished, and Papua was symbolically constructed as the nation's "edge" rather than as an active maritime node.

This marginalisation persists today in structural, political, and epistemic forms. Despite Papua's rich natural resources, socio-economic inequality remains high, and development policies are often designed through top-down approaches that limit indigenous participation. The legacy of securitised governance especially during the era of Suharto has reinforced stigma, framing Papua primarily through lenses of conflict and instability rather than cultural knowledge and maritime heritage (Rumansara, 1995). Moreover, national media representations frequently reduce Papua to narratives of poverty or violence, marginalising indigenous cosmologies, sea-oriented knowledge systems, and customary land rights. Re-examining Biak's maritime past, therefore, is not merely a historical correction; it is a political and intellectual effort to reposition Papua as a central actor within Indonesia's maritime and Pacific worlds.

The focus of this paper is on the deconstruction of the term *Papoesche Zeerovers*, which in Dutch documents is used to refer to a group of sailors from Papua, especially Biak, as "pirates". This kind of colonial narrative not only frames the Biak people in a negative light but also ignores the complexities of the social structure, shipping strategies, and cultural motivations that underlie their maritime activities. Therefore, this article begins its study by reconstructing the colonial narrative and shows that the label "pirates" is not a neutral category, but the result of a colonial discourse strategy to discipline and legitimise forms of local sovereignty that are not in accordance with the interests of imperial power (West, 2012).

More than just criticising colonial discourse, this study also seeks to display the complexity of the knowledge and skills of the Biak people in the field of traditional shipping and navigation. The study aims to show how the Biak people have complex and precise navigation systems, which allow them to explore the vast waters of the Southwest Pacific region. This knowledge includes an understanding of monsoons, ocean currents, star constellations, and other natural signs, proving that their voyages were not speculative or wild acts, as assumed in colonial narratives, but rather the result of sophisticated and structured maritime knowledge systems (Kamma, 1972b).

In this context, it is also important to understand how the shipping tradition of the Biak people, known as *Mansorandak*, is not only a practice of migration or territorial expansion, but also an expression of a deep collective identity. *Mansorandak* was a way for the Biak people to

establish social relations, expand their cultural influence, and assert their political presence in the vast maritime region. This tradition holds spiritual, social, and political significance that is inseparable from the way the Biak people understood the sea as a living space unbounded by the administrative boundaries of the modern state. By reinterpreting this tradition, this article wants to re-elevate the maritime dimension of the Biak tribe as something authentic and valuable in local and national history (Mansoben, 1995).

In addition, this article will explore the position of the Biak people as active social agents in the maritime network in the eastern region of Indonesia and even to the Melanesian and Pacific regions. Their role was not only limited to shipping activities, but also included inter-tribal diplomacy, the formation of political alliances, and cross-island trade. By viewing them as empowered maritime actors, this article challenges the long-held view that Papua is an isolated and passive region in the history of the archipelago (Susilowati et al., 2025).

All this exploration culminated in a larger agenda: the decolonization of the discourse on Indonesia's maritime history, especially from the perspective of Papua. By dismantling terms constructed within the colonial framework and replacing them with an understanding rooted in the experience and cosmology of local communities, this article offers a repositioning of Papuan history in the larger narrative of the Indonesian nation (Andaya, 1993). Decolonization here is not only about criticizing the past, but also about making room for voices that have been silent, as well as embracing the diversity of maritime experiences as part of a more inclusive and equitable national identity.

By presenting these five dimensions, namely the reconstruction of the colonial narrative, the discovery of traditional navigation systems, the reinterpretation of *Mansorandak*, the recognition of the role of the Biak people in the maritime network, and the decolonisation of the history, this article aims to build a deeper and balanced understanding of Biak as an important part of Indonesia's maritime history (Berkes, 2018). This understanding is expected not only to enrich the treasure of academic knowledge but also to become a foothold in efforts to recognise and respect the maritime heritage of the Papuan people who have been eliminated from the official historical stage (Tuhwai Smith, 2012). This research aims to re-explore the narrative of the *Papoesche Zeerovers* through ethnohistorical and maritime approaches. The author wants to highlight how the traditional navigation system of the Biak people, their shipping practices, and the construction of maritime identity formed from them are an important part of Indonesia's maritime history that has been marginalised. By combining colonial archival data, oral traditions, and anthropological studies, this article will show that the Biak sailors were not pirates in the criminal sense, but rather autonomous actors who played a key role in the socio-political dynamics in the waters of the Indonesian Pacific (Rochwulaningsih et al., 2019).

Through this study, it is hoped that a new understanding will emerge about the importance of re-reading historical terms that are full of colonial ideological content and how societies such as the Biak people should be placed as historical subjects, not just objects of colonial narratives. Thus, this study also contributes to the development of Indonesian historiography that is more equitable, inclusive, and reflects the true diversity of experiences of the archipelagic people.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach that aims to explore the meaning, values, and socio-cultural dynamics hidden behind the term *Papoesche Zeerovers*. It also aims to explore in depth the practices of shipping, navigation, and the formation of maritime identity of the Biak tribe. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the character of research that focuses on the interpretation,

reconstruction of meaning, and historical and cultural context of a social phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

In a qualitative framework, the literature study method is used to excavate and analyze historical, ethnographic, and colonial sources that document the existence and activities of the Biak tribe in the past. This research draws on various primary sources such as Dutch archives, colonial reports, and the classic writings of early ethnographers and anthropologists. Secondary sources in the form of contemporary scientific articles, maritime history books, and Papuan anthropological studies are also used to enrich the analytical perspective. This literature study was carried out systematically to find narrative patterns and discourse biases that emerged in the colonial construction of the Biak people.

As revealed by (Machi & McEvoy, 2009) literature study is not only a literature review activity, but also a critical analysis process of how ideas and representations are formed and disseminated. Therefore, this study not only records historical facts but also reads the power structures in these texts.

This study uses an ethnohistorical approach to deepen understanding of the cultural and social aspects of the Biak tribe. Ethnohistory allows researchers to combine historical data with local narratives, oral traditions, and cultural understandings of indigenous peoples (Lightfoot, 1995) With this approach, the shipping activities of the Biak tribe, such as *Mansorandak*, are not only seen from the colonial perspective, but also from the perspective of the Biak people themselves. This approach is crucial because it helps to restore local voices and perspectives that have been overlooked in the dominant historical narrative.

Ethnohistory provides a space for dialogue between written sources, oral narratives, and forms of collective memory of communities. In this context, this method paves the way to reconstruct the shipping history and maritime identity of the Biak tribe by considering their cultural values.

The data used in this study was collected from various Dutch digital archives, academic journals, Papuan ethnographic books, and relevant colonial historical documents. Data analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis and critical hermeneutics, namely reading texts contextually and looking for hidden meanings in narratives written by colonial parties and early ethnographers. The author identifies key themes such as navigation, pirates, maritime identity, and *Mansorandak* and interprets how these themes emerge, are arranged, and are constructed sociopolitically.

In this process, researchers maintain the validity of the findings by comparing various sources, observing differences in viewpoints, and placing all narratives in the context of colonial and customary space and time. Validity is also improved through source triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) which involves combining colonial archives with contemporary ethnographic perspectives and cultural narratives of the Biak people.

Re-reading *Papoesche Zeerovers* today is not simply about correcting the historical record; what is at stake is the power to redefine who is recognised as a legitimate actor in Indonesia's maritime past and present. Colonial labels such as "sea raiders" framed Papuan seafarers particularly the Biak as threats rather than as participants in complex regional trade and mobility networks. Revisiting this narrative allows the author to challenge inherited categories that continue to shape contemporary perceptions of Papua as peripheral, unstable, or backward. By critically reinterpreting *Papoesche Zeerovers*, the article seeks to unsettle these enduring representations and to reposition Papuan maritime knowledge, agency, and political subjectivity at the centre of Indonesia's oceanic history.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Reconstruction of Colonial Narratives on the Term *Papoesche Zeerovers*

That is a valuable suggestion. Placing the argument in dialogue with existing scholarship on piracy would strengthen the article conceptually and clarify its analytical positioning. If piracy is understood, as you suggest, as a historically contingent category that distinguishes between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" violence at sea, then the term becomes less a neutral description of criminality and more a political label. Throughout maritime history, what counts as piracy has often depended on who holds sovereign authority and who has the power to define legality. Violence conducted by imperial navies or licensed privateers has frequently been framed as lawful, while similar actions by indigenous maritime

groups were criminalised as piracy.

By situating *Papoesche Zeerovers* alongside this scholarship, the author could demonstrate that the colonial depiction of Biak seafarers was not merely descriptive but classificatory an act of epistemic and legal domination. Framing Papuan maritime practices as “sea raiding” or piracy positioned Dutch colonial authority as the sole legitimate arbiter of violence at sea. Engaging explicitly with theories of piracy as contested sovereignty would therefore sharpen the article’s intervention: it is not only about rehabilitating Biak’s historical image, but about exposing how maritime legality itself was produced through colonial power.

The narrative of the *Papoesche Zeerovers* reveals a rich historical and cultural landscape of the maritime community of Biak that has played an important role in the dynamics of shipping and inter-regional relations in the eastern region of Indonesia for centuries. Through the reconstruction of the term *Papoesche Zeerovers*, the designation given by Dutch colonial sources to the Biak sailors, a new understanding emerged that the label should not be read literally as a form of criminalisation, but rather as a reflection of colonial amazement at the extraordinary maritime mobility of this community. In many VOC reports and colonial administrative records from the 17th to 19th centuries, the Biak people are recorded as an agile, resilient group in sea shipping, even reaching distant areas such as Raja Ampat, Maluku, Halmahera, and the coast of Southwest Papua (Rumbekwan et al., 2025).

Clarifying this transition from language to policy would strengthen the article’s argument by demonstrating that “piracy” operated as a governing technology rather than a neutral descriptor. The discourse shaped how space was mapped, how sovereignty was asserted, and how indigenous maritime practices were criminalised. Making this connection more explicit would show that the colonial archive does not simply record governance it actively produced the legal and political conditions through which Papuan maritime life was controlled and marginalised.

Instead of simply being interpreted as “pirates,” the research interprets the term in a positive local knowledge framework, namely as an expression of courage, high navigational ability, and cultural adaptability of the Biak people in facing the vast and challenging maritime world. The naming of *Zeerovers* (Dutch for pirates) may reflect a colonial perspective that did not fully understand the cultural context of the Biak people’s voyage. But on the other hand, it admits that they are sea actors that cannot be ignored in the political and economic interaction of the region. As revealed by (Ballard, 2002) Maritime colonialism often positions local sailors in a narrative of fear, as they demonstrate a strong capacity to rule the ocean independently outside the colonial power structure.

Shipping activities carried out by the people of Biak are part of a noble tradition called *Mansorandak* which involves inter-regional travel, the formation of kinship alliances, the exchange of goods, and the spread of social and cultural influences. This tradition is not random or violence-based but is based on a value system that is deeply rooted in the local customary order and spirituality. Behind their bravery to sail the vast oceans, there was a meticulous system of navigation education, passed down from generation to generation through folk songs, rituals, and heroic stories. This knowledge includes the ability to read wind directions, ocean currents, the position of constellations, and signs of weather changes, a cultural technological achievement equal to the excellence of Austronesian sailors in the Pacific.

The alternative narrative built in this study uses the term *Papoesche Zeerovers* as a starting point to reconstruct Indonesia’s maritime history from the perspective of indigenous peoples. When the people of Biak sailed as far as the Tanimbar, Seram, and Cenderawasih Islands, they brought with them the values of diplomacy, cultural exchange, and social integration that enriched the maritime network in the eastern part of the archipelago. They are not rioters of the sea, but guardians of cultural relations and connectors of civilization. Their shipping activities show that Papua, especially Biak, is an important part of Southeast Asian and Pacific shipping history that has rarely had a place in the mainstream narrative (Nugroho, 2021).

So far, the people of Biak have built relationships with other communities through the inter-regional marriage system, the exchange of marine and forest products, and the use of strategic stopover

points that have become the forerunners of multiethnic settlements. This search reveals that the Biak sailors did not just explore, but also created new social networks, expanded the language, and affirmed the values of ethnic solidarity that have lasted for centuries. This research also shows that the voyage of the Biak people has a strong spiritual aspect; They believe that each voyage is an inner pilgrimage that connects them with the ancestral spirits and forces of nature that keep the world in balance.

In this context, the term *zeerovers* can be culturally reinterpreted as a symbol of the resilience and heroism of the Biak people during the currents of colonisation and hegemony of external narratives. This research not only rehabilitates the meaning of the term but also confirms that the Biak people have a high cultural agency in defining their relationship with the sea. As Kirsch (2006) explains, in many Melanesian societies, the sea is a living home of cosmological and social spaces that form identity, not just an economic terrain or political route.

With this new understanding, it is hoped that it can make an important contribution to the discourse on historical decolonisation, especially Indonesia's maritime history. He opened space for new readings of local figures and communities who had been marginalised in the national historical narrative. By re-voicing local experiences and meanings of shipping activities, the people of Biak can reclaim their historical spaces and define their maritime identity not as passive objects in colonial history, but as active actors that colour the dynamics of the region. Their knowledge of the sea, technical navigational capabilities, and values of solidarity in shipping are cultural heritage worthy of recognition as part of Indonesia's rich maritime treasures.

3.2 Complex Traditional Navigation Systems of the Breeders

The traditional navigation system of the Biak people reflects the sophistication of cultural technology developed by coastal communities in Papua for hundreds of years. In the context of Papuanism, the Biak tribe occupies a unique position because it has a very strong identity as a seafaring community (Ali & Abdullah, 2024). For the Biak people, the sea is not just a geographical space, but a cosmological landscape that holds spiritual, historical, and social values. Navigation, in this sense, is not just the practical skill of moving from one point to another in the vast ocean, but a *living knowledge* that demands a thorough understanding of the universe and its dynamics.

Basically, the traditional navigation system of the Biak people is very complex and holistic. They do not rely solely on one instrument or method but combine various forms of local ecological and cosmological knowledge. This knowledge is codified orally, transmitted through folklore, sailing songs (such as *yospan* or other sacred songs), and passed down through firsthand experience in sea expeditions. Biak children have been introduced from an early age to the technique of reading natural signs, recognising the direction of the wind, and understanding the right time to go to sea, which is often closely related to the phases of the moon and the movement of the stars.

One of the main aspects of this system is the ability of the Biak people to use the stars as the main guide for night cruises. Constellations such as *the Pleiades* (Seven Stars), *Orion*, and *Crux* (Southern Cross) are very important directional indicators, which are not only used for the orientation of sea passages but also serve as markers of seasons and times related to economic and spiritual activities. In the anthropological literature, this is often referred to as *stellar navigation* an ancient method used by many Austronesian peoples in ocean migration and exploration thousands of years ago (Said, 1978). In the context of Biak, this system is more than just a practical science. It is cosmological, since it is believed that the stars are the traces of the ancestors who illuminated the human journey on earth.

No less important is the use of wind and ocean currents in determining the time and direction of the voyage. The Biak people are aware of the seasonal patterns of east and west winds (monsoon) that affect the currents in the Seram, Cenderawasih Bay, and Halmahera Sea. They developed a local knowledge system to classify the types of winds based on sound, temperature, and direction of arrival. The ocean currents between coral islands are crucial in avoiding sharp corals or large waves. This kind of sensitivity is not the result of one-time observation, but rather an accumulation of cross-generational experiences involving intimate spiritual and ecological relationships.

Something that is also noteworthy is the use of waves as directions. The Biak people can feel certain wave patterns created by reflections from distant land. In bad weather conditions or a pitch-black night, when the stars are covered in clouds, they can determine the direction based on the wave movement pattern that touches the boat's hull. This knowledge is not theoretical, as in modern science, but is embodied in the body and intuition. As presented by (Gladwin, 1970) in his research on traditional Micronesian sailors, this kind of navigation is *embodied*, that is, inherent in the human body as the main instrument in reading nature.

In the Biak social system, sailors or navigators are not only people with engineering expertise, but figures who are respected because they are considered to have a spiritual closeness to the power of the sea. They are believed to be interpreters of the messages of nature and the link between the human world and the spirit world (Ounanian et al., 2021). Before the voyage begins, there is usually an offering ceremony to the sea spirits or ancestors to ask for blessings so that the journey is safe. This shows that the navigation of the Biak people has a very strong sacred dimension, in contrast to the Western view that tends to separate the spiritual aspect from the technical activities.

Any long-distance sailing expedition is usually arranged by a manservant or tour leader who can read the weather, lead rituals, and regulate social harmony in the boat. Their decisions are final because they are based on divine knowledge acquired from ancestors. Travel routes are usually not only arranged based on geographical maps but also involve social networks places with kinship ties, trading locations, or sacred sites. Thus, this navigation system also becomes a form of social and cultural mapping that transcends physical boundaries.

Kirsch (2006) noted that in Papuan society, there is a form of land-sea orientation that unites the land and the ocean in one complete system of meaning. In this view, the orientation of space is not divided, but rather complements each other. Marine navigation is inseparable from the understanding of the land landscape, because each island or cape has its own history and guardian spirit. Thus, the navigation ability of the Biak people not only shows their intellectual capacity but also shows how knowledge and spirituality can come together in daily life.

Nevertheless, these traditional navigation systems are currently facing serious challenges. Globalisation, urbanisation, and the dominance of the formal education system that tends to ignore local knowledge have made many of Biak's young generation begin to lose basic skills in traditional navigation. The modernisation of shipping tools such as GPS and radar shifted the function of tradition as the main guide (Lapian, 2008). Therefore, it is necessary to make serious efforts to document, revive, and integrate this local navigation system into the cultural education curriculum as well as the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

Overall, the traditional navigation system of the Biak people is a clear example of the archipelago's maritime greatness, which is often forgotten in the mainstream historical narrative. He shows that local knowledge is not an outdated ancient heritage but a complex, sophisticated system of thought that remains relevant if it is well managed in today's cultural and ecological context.

3.3 *Mansorandak* Tradition as an Expression of Maritime Identity

The *Mansorandak* tradition that lives and thrives in the Biak community in Papua is one of the cultural expressions *that* reflects their strong maritime identity. This tradition is not just a series of customary rites, but a form of collective celebration that is full of symbolic meaning for human relations with the sea, ancestral lands, and social communities. *Mansorandak* literally means "to step on the land" and is usually done when a person who has been sailing, travelling, or returning from a long trip returns to their hometown. However, in its social and cultural practices, *Mansorandak* goes beyond the ordinary meaning of welcome. It is a ceremony of honour for the sailors and explorers who have conquered the seas and returned safely a form of social recognition of the maritime expertise and resilience of the Biak people's identity as a maritime people.

This tradition took place with a lively and sacred welcoming ceremony. Those who return will be welcomed with traditional dances, and the accompaniment of extended family and village people. He

will pass through the procession of stepping on the plate as a symbol of self-cleansing and blessing of the ancestral land, then be given a crown of leaves or bird feathers as a sign of honour. In this context, *Mansorandak* became an important event that strengthened the relationship between individuals and communities, while affirming that the sea is not only a source of livelihood but also a spiritual and existential space. The sea in Biak's perspective is not seen as a dangerous alien space, but rather as a transitional space that matures the soul, strengthens one's identity, and expands one's social horizons.

This tradition also contains a strong symbolic message about travel as a form of transformation. When a person goes on a voyage or travels, he not only moves physically but also undergoes a process of self-formation, which is customarily authorized when he returns. In the *Mansorandak* ceremony, the community does not just physically welcome the person who goes home, but celebrates maturity, knowledge, and new experiences from the outside world. This reflects the Biak worldview, which considers that identity is not something static but the result of continuous interaction with the world, including voyages and migratory experiences (Rochwulaningsih et al., 2019).

As Rutherford (2003) notes in coastal communities of Papua, including Biak, there is a strong collective narrative of "mobility as a virtue." Mobility is not just the act of moving, but it is a moral quality that demonstrates courage, intelligence, and spiritual attachment to origins. The *Mansorandak* tradition represents this ethos concretely. By welcoming back sailors or nomads as cultural heroes, the people of Biak internalise the importance of the sea as a space for identity formation. In this view, the sea is not a barrier or boundary separating islands, but rather a path that connects life, shapes individuals, and affirms cultural roots.

Furthermore, *Mansorandak* became a cultural mechanism to strengthen the collective memory of Biak as a nation of sailors. In each welcoming ceremony, maritime symbols such as traditional boats (*wuramon*), oars, and sea songs are also displayed, which implies that sailing is an integral part of the long history of the Biak people. These symbols are not just ornaments, but a tool of cultural pedagogy that conveys noble values to the younger generation. As explained by West (2012) this kind of tradition plays an important role in reproducing social memory and maintaining the continuity of ethnic identity during changing times.

Socially, this tradition also affirms the value structure of the Biak community based on appreciation for experience and courage. A returning sailor or nomad is respected as an individual, used as a moral reference, and a symbol of hope. The *Mansorandak* ceremony became a cultural stage where the community renewed their bonds with each other, while strengthening social solidarity and the memory of their history as guardians of the sea.

From an ethnohistorical perspective, *Mansorandak* can also be understood as a form of cultural resistance to the colonial narrative that has been dwarfing the role of the Biak people as *Papoesche Zeerovers* or Papuan pirates. Instead of being portrayed as perpetrators of maritime violence, the *Mansorandak* tradition shows that the voyage of the Biak people is a noble expression of socially and spiritually organised maritime mobility. By reconstructing the meaning of shipping within a cultural framework, the Biak people display that they are not pirates but cosmological navigators with a value system and a deep knowledge structure about the sea and the world (Ali & Abdullah, 2024).

Mansorandak is a concrete reflection of how maritime identity is constructed, celebrated, and inherited through cultural rites that bring together collective memories, experiences, and hopes. This tradition affirms that being a Biak person means being part of a long, noble, and meaningful maritime tradition. In a constantly changing world, traditions like *Mansorandak* become cultural anchors that keep the continuity of history and ancestral values alive and relevant.

3.4 The Biak Tribe as a Social Agent in the Archipelago and Pacific Maritime Network

The Biak tribe has played an important role as a social agent in the maritime network that stretches widely in the archipelago and the Pacific region. This role is not a passive position in the flow of history, but an active involvement that proves that the people of Biak have long been the main actors in social, political, economic, and cultural relations in the vast maritime region. Their navigational skills, courage to explore the high seas, and their ability to forge alliances and inter-island trade make them important actors in shaping the dynamics of the region that is broader than just their local environment.

In the context of the maritime history of Southeast Asia and Oceania, Biak's position is very strategic because it is located between the West Pacific Sea and the eastern region of the archipelago. Since premodern times, the Biak people have made cross-island voyages to the Maluku region, Papua New Guinea, and possibly even to the southern Philippines. Through their traditional boats called *wuramon*, the Biak tribe formed an active and dynamic network of communication and exchange. This network is not only economic, but also a path for the dissemination of knowledge, cultural values, and social solidarity. As noted by Bellwood (2007) Austronesian peoples such as the Biak people have a history of high mobility that makes them pioneers in the exploration and integration of Pacific islands and Southeast Asia.

As social agents, the Biak tribe also had the ability to form complex diplomatic and social relations with various other ethnic groups in the region. They not only traded but also established marital relationships, military alliances, and cultural exchanges that strengthened their position in the maritime social network. This shows that they understand network power as a form of social power that allows them to survive, thrive, and influence in local and regional power structures. As explained by Ap et al., (2021) Traditional maritime societies live off the sea and build a social world on it. In this case, the Biak people formed their own world on a sea network, which brought together various islands and communities through fluid yet binding relationships.

In Dutch colonial records, the Biak people were even referred to as *Papoesche Zeerovers* or Papuan pirates because of their aggressive shipping activities, including robbing and attacking merchant ships. However, when viewed from a local point of view, these actions are not just acts of violence, but part of a long-standing maritime economic and political system. Within the structure of Biak society, shipping, including armed expeditions, was a way to show courage, expand influence, and protect their territory from outside threats. Therefore, the term "pirate" attached by colonialism is a form of simplification of the complexity of the social role played by the Biak people in the maritime world. As explained by Ap et al., (2021) many maritime groups in Southeast Asia were stigmatized as pirates by colonial powers, even though they ran legitimate social and economic systems within their cultural contexts.

The Biak people are also famous for their ability to convey identity narratives through cultural practices connected to the sea. One important practice is the *Mansondak* tradition, which is a form of social rite for a person's return from a voyage or overseas. In this rite, the ocean is interpreted as a space of transformation and self-formation, not just a battlefield or trade route. This rite reflects how the Biak people instilled maritime values in the formation of their collective identity as a nation of sailors. Traditions like this reinforce the awareness of the importance of the ocean not only as a resource, but also as a spiritual and existential space that shapes the structure of society.

As social agents in the maritime network, the Biak tribe also played a role in the spread of material and immaterial cultures. Their traces are found in various cultural artefacts such as house shapes, shipping equipment, as well as vocabulary and oral narratives spread across Indonesia's east coast and even into the Melanesian region. The Biak language itself is included in the Austronesian language family, which is one of the important indicators of migration and the spread of maritime culture in the Asia-Pacific region. The linguistic similarities between the Biak people and ethnic groups in the western Pacific, such as those in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji, indicate a strong historical connection formed through shipping and intercultural exchange (Pawley & Ross, 1995)

In the contemporary context, understanding the role of the Biak people as social agents in the maritime network is important to reconstruct the grand narrative of Indonesia's maritime. In the national narrative, the people of eastern Indonesia, especially Papua, are often marginalised, and their contribution to the nation's maritime history is not recognised. In fact, as the history of the Biak tribe shows, they have maritime capacities and traditions that are on par with, even surpassing, other seafaring communities in the archipelago. Recognition of this role is important not only for historical justice but also for formulating maritime development policies that are inclusive and based on local culture.

Therefore, seeing the Biak tribe as social agents in the archipelago and Pacific maritime network means placing them in an active and strategic position in shaping the history of the region. It is not just about their ability to sail the sea or make trades, but about how they build the social, cultural, and

political world on the vast sea. In a world that continues to move towards globalization, this heritage must be reread as a cultural force that can contribute to the revival of Indonesia as the world's maritime axis.

3.5 Decolonisation of Terminology and Repositioning of Papua's Maritime History

The process of decolonising terms and repositioning Papuan maritime history is an intellectual and cultural effort that aims to dismantle the colonial narrative legacy that has long shaped public perception of Papuan maritime society, especially the Biak tribe. One form of this heritage is the Dutch colonial fixation of the term *Papoesche Zeerovers* on the sailors of Biak, which means "Papuan pirates." The term has influenced the outside world's view of Papuan maritime communities' social and political dynamics, shifting them from positions of knowledgeable sailors and explorers to uncivilised perpetrators of maritime chaos. In the lens of colonialism, this kind of label becomes a hegemonic tool to legitimise the intervention of colonial power and negate the existence of established local social systems.

Decolonisation begins with the realisation that the colonial narrative is not historical truth, but a product of the construction of power. The term "pirates" attached to the Biak people does not reflect their social and cultural reality but rather is a way to define and control a maritime population that is considered to threaten the stability of colonial power. In many cases, the Biak people's militaristic shipping actions were carried out within territorial protection, maritime diplomacy, or complex economic strategies. As stated by Said (1978) in *Orientalism*, colonial domination occurs not only through the power of arms, but also through the control of discourse that is, knowledge and language used to portray the "Other" in degrading ways.

Decolonising this term means reclaiming the narrative right of the Biak people to interpret their history from an internal perspective, not from a biased and hegemonic external lens. In the local narrative of Biak, sailors are symbols of courage, knowledge, and wisdom. They are not just pirates of the sea, but guardians of traditions, forming social networks between regions, and preserving ancestral values through shipping. This repositioning process aims to re-elevate these roles into the realm of official and academic history and make them an integral part of Indonesia's broader maritime history. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) states that maritime history in Asia needs to be re-read by emphasizing local actors as active subjects that shape history, not just objects of colonization.

The repositioning of Papuan maritime history also includes a narrative reconstruction that places the sea not as a space of chaos (as depicted in colonial logic), but as a cosmological space that connects humans with ancestors, island with island, and cultural values that continue to be inherited. In this context, the sea is understood as a field of social, economic, and spiritual relations and a source of identity that continues to be strengthened through cultural practices such as shipping, *Mansorandak* ceremonies, and the tradition of making *wuramon* boats. This repositioning shows that the people of Biak, like many other maritime communities in the archipelago, have a complex and distinctive maritime knowledge system, which makes them a pioneer in establishing inter-regional relations in the Pacific and Eastern Indonesia.

This step of decolonization and repositioning also demands a revision in the education system and national cultural policy, where local narratives such as Biak's maritime history must have an equal place in the history curriculum and textbooks. So far, Indonesian history has focused more on centralistic narratives that rely on Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi, ignoring the contributions of eastern regions such as Papua. As a result, Papuan maritime identity was eliminated from the national stage and only remembered through the lens of folklorism or stereotypes. By re-elevating the maritime narrative of Biak from a local point of view, the Papuan people are given space to speak and interpret their history, not as "stepsons" of history, but as the main actors who participate in shaping the face of Indonesia's maritime life.

This process is also part of a broader cultural movement to reaffirm indigenous peoples' agency in shaping their futures. In the contemporary context, the decolonization of the term paves the way for the strengthening of local identity, cultural revitalization, and advocacy of indigenous peoples' rights to the sea and its living space. As expressed by Tuhiwai Smith (2012) in *Decolonizing Methodologies*,

decolonization is not only an academic effort, but also a political and cultural practice that aims to restore local dignity and knowledge to a space that the colonial epistemic system has dominated.

In this case, the term *Papoesche Zeerovers* needs to be dismantled semantically and replaced with a new term that better reflects local values and pride of identity. For example, the mention of "East Nusantara navigator" or "Pacific explorer" gives a new meaning that affirms the skills and wisdom of the Biak people in building a vast maritime network. It's not just a matter of terminology; it's about an empowering, non-oppressive reinvention of identity.

Finally, decolonizing the term and repositioning Papua's maritime history is an important project in building a more inclusive and plural Indonesia. It is not only a form of historical correction, but also a foundation for a more just future, in which every ethnic group has the right and place to interpret its past. Thus, the Biak sailors are no longer remembered as "pirates" but as guardians of the ocean, shapers of civilisation, and an integral part of the mosaic of Indonesia's maritime history

4. Conclusion

The article's conclusion confirms that the Biak people, who have been stigmatised in colonial narratives as *Papoesche Zeerovers* or Papuan pirates, are accomplished sailors, formidable navigators, and social agents in the vast maritime network in the archipelago and the Pacific region. When reviewed through ethnohistorical approaches and literature studies, the term colonial reflects a biased, hegemonic, and reductive perspective on the socio-political role of the Biak people in the dynamics of the past sea.

the section would benefit from a clearer statement on how this study contests not only Dutch colonial narratives but also Indonesian nationalist accounts. Colonial writings framed Papuan maritime actors through criminalising categories, while post-independence narratives often privileged Java and western polities as the primary sources of maritime civilisation. Celebrated oceanic pasts frequently linked to entities such as Majapahit have overshadowed eastern regions, leaving Biak and other Papuan communities positioned symbolically at the margins.

By articulating this dual intervention more directly, the author can clarify the broader intellectual stakes of the research. The study moves beyond correcting European misrepresentations; it also questions nation-centered storytelling that consolidates authority in particular geographic and cultural centers. Highlighting this point would show that the project seeks to reposition Papuan maritime agency within Indonesia's historical imagination rather than allowing it to remain peripheral.

Awareness of the importance of rereading history with a more critical and fair approach opens opportunities to integrate Papua's maritime narrative into Indonesia's more inclusive national history. This enriches our understanding of the archipelago's maritime heritage and reaffirms the important position of the Biak people as active subjects in Indonesian history and culture. Thus, from the *zeerovers* who were labelled wild by colonialism, the Biak people were repositioned as guardians of the ocean, inheritors of shipping knowledge, and symbols of the resilience of Indonesia's eastern maritime identity.

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