

The Maritime Cultural Ecology of the Biak People: A Historical Study of the Sowek Region, Supiori Regency, Papua

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Abstract

This article, using historical and ethnographic methods, explores the maritime cultural ecology of the Biak people in Sowek Village, Supiori Regency, Papua, Indonesia. Historically part of the Biak-Numfor and Supiori islands, Supiori became a separate district in 2003 under Law No. 35 of 2003. The Biak people in Sowek Village, who identify as the Sowek people, have lived in the Aruri Archipelago of Supiori Island for centuries. While their language and culture are part of the Biak-Numfor cultural family, their identity is rooted in their specific geographic location. Supiori Regency is predominantly oceanic and covered by mangrove forests, with only 25% of its land being dry. This landscape has shaped the Sowek people's reliance on marine resources and maritime trade. Contact with the outside world began long ago, facilitated by maritime trade and headhunting expeditions to Maluku, Ternate-Tidore, and the Raja Ampat Archipelago. The Sowek people navigate these waters using traditional boats such as the Wairon, Waimansusu, and Karures, guided by advanced astronomical knowledge of constellations like Orion (*sawakoi*) and Scorpion (*romanggwandi*). The maritime cultural ecology of the Biak people in Sowek Village, still preserved as a historical heritage, includes traditional fishing with nets, the cultivation of mangosteen (*aibon*), blacksmithing (*kamasan*), and the ecological conservation of mangrove forests, which serve as both fish habitats and natural fortifications for the village.

Keywords: Maritime Cultural Ecology; Sowek Village; Traditional Fishing; Ecological Conservation; Papua, Indonesia.

Introduction

This paper discusses the Maritime Cultural Ecology of the Biak People in Sowek Village, Supiori Regency, Papua Indonesia. The Biak people in Sowek Village, Aruri Archipelago District, Supiori Regency are still preserving the historical heritage and maritime culture of their ancestors, including traditional fishing culture, culinary culture, blacksmith culture, and protecting the ecological environment of the mangrove forest as a fish house and natural fortress for human settlements. The Biak people in this village prefer to be called "Sowek" people to show their identity with their living environment in the form of houses on the sea. They depend on marine products for their livelihood as fishermen or actors in trade shipping. This paper aims to reveal the history and

ecology of the maritime culture of the Biak people in Sowek Village, Aruri Islands, Papua.

As the world's largest archipelago, Indonesia consists of 17,508 large and small islands, including the major islands of Sumatra, Java, more than three-quarters of Kalimantan, Sulawesi, the Maluku Islands, and the western part of the large island of Papua New Guinea (West Papua). Indonesia's territory includes a land area of approximately 1.92 million square kilometres, archipelagic waters and a 12-nautical-mile territorial sea of 3.1 million square kilometres, and a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 2.7 million square kilometres. The archipelagic character of some parts of Indonesia has led to cultural diversity and allowed foreign influences to enter (Rochwulaningsih et al. 2019). Historically, coastal areas are rich in unique landscapes, both on land and at sea, and contain

many intangible cultural artefacts and heritage. Coastal and maritime cultural heritage is bounded by the sea and the coast, both geophysically and socially constructed. Coastal cultural heritage itself is formed with its own characteristics, one of which is adjusted to their needs for the use of marine space (Ounanian, et al. 2021). Supporting communities that live on the coast are also known as maritime communities. Naping (2017) stated that a maritime community is a unit of human life that depends on marine resources, either directly or indirectly.

Studies on maritime culture have been conducted by Sutanto (2024) who explained that the traditions, values and perceptions of people in the world are determined by geography. Maritime geography has also shaped traditions and become the center of economies and national identities. Sutanto (2024) argues that the maritime identity and culture of island nations play an important role in shaping aspects of people's lives, economies and cultures. Basically, humans and the environment are two things that cannot be separated. Mujabuddawat (2015) states that the environment greatly influences the way humans carry out their activities. An ecosystem is formed from the reciprocal relationship between living things in it. Studies on the Soweik community are still rare. Meanwhile, a study of the Biak Numfor community was conducted by Warami (2019). He studied the culture of the Biak Numfor community from the perspective of Anthropological Studies, focusing on the diversity of languages and cultures that characterize national identity. In this context, the Biak Numfor community has a language identity spoken by native speakers (Biak ethnicity) and Amber language users (non-Biak ethnicity; ethnic archipelago migrants). Those who are fluent in Biak Numfor in Warami's research (2019) are referred to as Guyub Tuttur Biak Numfor (GTBN). These studies have also provided an overview of one of the identities of the Biak Numfor community. However, no research has specifically focused on the ecology and maritime culture of the Biak community in Soweik. The discussion begins with a description of the geographical and topographical conditions of Biak Numfor and the Supiori Islands, followed by the maritime cultural ecology of the Biak people as a background. The

maritime ecology of the Biak Numfor people, which is also part of their livelihood, includes local knowledge of astronomy and traditional fishing methods with Kapirepi nets.

Geographical and Topographical Areas of the Biak-Numfor and Supiori Islands

The Biak-Numfor region is an island located at sea level north of Geelvink Baai, Papua Island. This island is known as Schouten-Eilanden. De Bruyn called this island, Schouten en Padaido Eilanden, also called the Naik Maju Supiori-Byak-Numfoor-Padaido Islands, Papua "Er mambo be farander. Literally, the word Sup-ori-byak means, Land of the Rising Sun, by the Biak people. The location of the Biak-Numfor Islands is between 37° and 20° South Latitude, 135° 18' and 136°-26' East Longitude, while the eastern end of the Padaido Islands group is at a position 136° 48' East Longitude and Ayawi Island 20° South Latitude and 135° 1' Longitude East. The Biak Numfor and Supiori areas are dominated by marine waters which are very rich in coastal potential and marine life, such as mangroves, sea grass and coral reefs. These two areas are directly opposite the Pacific Ocean which is dubbed the ocean of the future because it has abundant ecological and economic potential and greatly supports the welfare of its inhabitants (Feulletau de Bruyn 1920).

Geographically, Aruri Islands borders in the east by the South Supiori District, the west and south by the Aruri Sea, to the north by the North Supiori District. Soweik Village consists of 32 islands and villages, namely: Rayori Village (Soweik), Rani Island, Insumbabi Island, Aibonrambondi Island, Aruri Island, Nifadudi Island, Ineki Island, Ramesi Island, Insumandudi Island, Sawori Island, Arfui, Insomni Island, Injefi Island, Manisi Island, Krei Island, Wantdi Island, Anyandi Island, Mioskandi Island, Miosebai Island, Yusemberi Island, Yerumi Island, Mahani Island, Mioskapapu, Miosmawa, Mangkaperba, Musakfandu, Munsaki, Soi, Joint, Island Meosekar, Meosingawer Island, Miosido and Farfiai Island, and there are two major straits namely; Pariori Strait and Kasoni Strait as well as Mount Rayori, Mount Pariari, Mount Nyawone, Mount Paduari

and Mount Onamba (Statistical Office of Supiori 2016).

The total area of Supiori Regency is 119.77 km² with a population of 5,034 people. For comparison, the total area of Papua Province is 421,981 km² with a total population of 2, 112,756 inhabitants. Meanwhile, the land area is only 3,130 km² or only 14.5% of the total area of Papua. Aruri Islands District consists of 9 administrative villages, namely; Aruri Village (15.52 km²), Yamnaisu Village (14.43 km²), Ineki Village (9.98 km²), Rayori Village (9.98 km²) (Statistical Office of Supiori 2016). Mbrurwandi Village (6.66 km²), Manggonswam Village (6.66 km²), Wongkeina Village (23.28 km²), Imbirsbari (23.28 km²), and Inumbrei (9.98 km²). The village that is the object of the study is Sowek Village, which used to be 1 (one) large village, namely Sowek Village, which has now been divided into three villages, namely: Rayori Village, Brurwandi Village, and Manggonswam Village. This village is divided into three areas due to earthquake and tsunami in 1996.

Social Organization and Kinship System

The most important social unit and place of residence in the life of the Biak people, both in the past and in the present, is the *keret*, or small clan. A *keret* consists of a number of nuclear families called *sims*. The real manifestation of this social unity in the past was a large house called a *keret* house. The *keret* house is a long rectangular building with a length of approximately 30-40 m and a width of 15 m. The *keret* house is built on a pillar and is divided into a number of rooms or *sims* located on the left and right and separated by an empty space in the middle of the house that extends from front to back. The big house is inhabited by a number of nuclear families, each of which occupies a certain room or cubicle called a *sim*. Therefore, the nuclear family is also called *sim*. A unit of such a crate house was called an *aberdado* and could accommodate all members of the clan. In one *keret* house there are family members who come from three or even four generations, namely the father with his family and the families of his own children as well as the families of their children (Mansoben 1984).

The social structure of the Sowek Village community which is built on a shallow sea is

arranged according to *keret-keret* and is in one *mnu* (village). As a barrier is the coastline / sea. *Keret-keret* or clans that inhabit the village (*mnu*) Sowek, among others; *Keret/Marga Mansawan*, *Keret Rumbekwan*, *Keret Kafiar*, *Keret Mandosir*, *Keret Manufandu*, *Keret Kawer*, *Sawor*, *Keret Sawen*, *Kurni Kurni*, *Keret Fainsienem*, *Keret Arwakon*, and *Keret Wambrauw-Sarawan*. In addition, there are also other carriages such as *Asaribab*, and several other clans and tribes who currently live together in one village. Biak people in Sowek Village generally prefer to be called Sowek people. This tribal group likes to have a diaspora throughout the Papua region. Their whereabouts can be traced through the villages of Biak-Numfor and Supiori in the Mamberamo-Tabi region to the Raja Ampat islands. Sowek people overseas always form a family bond based on their hometown and also a bond based on their clan or clan. For example, the Sowek Family Association (IKS) in Jayapura City, Nabire, Sorong-Raja Ampat and so on (Rumbekwan 2017).

The life of the Biak tribe in ancient times, before the entry of Christianity and the Dutch colonial government, was strongly influenced by the mythology that underlies the cultural values and life cycle of the Biak people from birth to death. Some of the mythologies that are important in the socio-cultural life of the Biak people are the belief in *Manggundi* or *Manseren Nanggi*. In this belief, the Biak-Numfor people believe in the existence of the ruler of the sky as the highest center of the universe. The Biak people call it *Nanggi* (sky), or the horizon, namely the moon, stars and sun. Meanwhile under the sky there are other rulers such as the spirits of the dead (*arbur/ korwar*) who inhabit caves, trees, oceans, islands and others.

Maritime Cultural Ecology

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The Biak-Numfor people divide the world into two groups, namely East and North as a place of forces that are considered good to humans and West and South as a place to dwell forces that are considered evil and detrimental to humans. Objects such as the sun, moon and stars are believed to be the rulers of the sky which are positioned in the direction of East and North, while the rulers of the earth and the underworld, namely the spirits of the dead, jinn, demons, are positioned in the west and south (Kamma 1972). This belief has a close relationship with the sustainability of the life cycle of the Biak people. The Biak people view the universe and themselves as a single entity that has a master or creator. Therefore, there needs to be communication between Biak humans and "God of Heaven" as creator. The means of connecting communication is "Wor" or dance/singing which is intended for "God of Heaven". *Wor Fa Nanggi* or praise to the God of Heaven is a ceremony of feeding or giving offerings to *Manseren Nanggi* (God of Heaven). The *Wor Fa Nanggi* ritual is carried out by a Mon (priest, shaman) as an intermediary or a shaman. The *Wor Fa Nanggi* ritual is carried out both during times of abundance of garden and marine products, as well as during times of stress. The purpose of carrying out the "Wor" ritual is for Manseren Nanggi to bless and protect all the efforts of the Biak people, when gardening or at sea or carrying out trade voyages and so on.

For the Biak people in the past, the implementation of "*Wor Fa Nanggi*" was a must, because through this *wor* there was communication between living humans and their dead ancestors in the land of spirits, the land of the wind, and the clouds, or incarnated in the form of animals. These ancestral spirits act as intermediaries for the welfare of the surviving Biak people. The manifestation of the representation of the ancestral spirits called in the communication is contained in the *korwar/aibu*, which is tied in a

statue called "*amfyanir korwar*" or *korwar* statue. The statue is expected to benefit the crew members, prevent calamity, disease, and provide assistance in hunting and fishing efforts. The importance of belief in "*Manseren Nanggi*" for the Biak people is a form of religious awareness of the relationship and dependence of humans with the surrounding natural environment, which always shows that humans are vulnerable to attack (Kamma 1972)

By carrying out *wor* or rituals to "*Fa Nanggi*" (God of the sky), the Biak people get legality or approval to carry out a great work related to the continuation of the life cycle of the Biak people in the midst of the world. For examples when starting to open a new garden, preparing a long voyage for trade, and holding initiation and incidental parties in a family or *keret*. In the world of shipping, the Biak people always wait or wait for instructions from a *mon* or shaman who is believed to be able to predict natural situations and conditions through rituals aimed at the spirit realm who are invited into the *korwar* statue, with the intention of seeking approval and blessing from the ancestral spirits for the journey. or voyage to be carried out. For that in the boat (*wai mansusu* and *wairon*) used there is always a *korwar* statue. In addition, on the body of the boat there are always carvings with large dragon or snake motifs that have religious magical meanings in the lives of the Biak people and other tribes in Cenderawasih Bay. The purpose of the existence of these symbols in the boat is so that the spirits do not wander around and disturb or be rude to their family members (clan) who are traveling or sailing (Arnold 2007)

The course of a maritime voyage in the middle of the ocean in the past required a good knowledge of the wind system and astronomy. An excellent navigator, must have this ability to sail his ship to the other country. Today a maritime voyage relies on a compass, and a more modern navigation system, so that it is able to detect wind direction, depth and shallowness of sea water, measure the distance between headlands, straits and islands by monitoring in the available navigation space. Long before the invention of the compass and the steamboat engine by the Europeans, the ethnic groups in the archipelago (which later became Indonesia) which were scattered on various islands

had been connected to each other through traditional shipping with a simple wind and navigation system based on the universe. The Indonesian people have developed a maritime network as communication and traffic between islands in the archipelago, in the economic, cultural, and political fields. This process has been going on since the days of the Hindu kingdoms and Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago, or around 1500 to 1600.

Local knowledges on astronomy

Knowledge of astronomy in the past was very important for the inhabitants of the islands and the coast, who depended on marine natural resources by boat or ship. This lifestyle can be seen in the lives of the people of Biak-Numfor who inhabit the Biak-Supiori and Numfor islands in Cenderawasih Bay. The area of the ocean that exceeds the land and is directly opposite the Pacific, makes some Biak-Numfor people move and depend on the sea for their lives. The Biak-Numfor people are one of the tribes in Papua who have good knowledge of astronomy and function as determinants of natural conditions in the lives of the Biak-Numfor people. When entering the transition season or the change of seasons, the Biak-Numfor people must pay attention to the appearance of certain constellations at night and calculate the time of the arrival of the wind in the change of seasons. This process is important, so that the Biak-Numfor people can carry out trade voyages, go to sea and grow crops. Several seasons are important in the astronomical knowledge of the Biak-Numfor people, including: the Southeast Monsoon or the South-West monsoon which lasts from June-October. At this time there will be a hot dry season and very strong *wambrau* (Southeast wind) winds will blow. This caused the waves crashing on the coast to hinder sailing due to heavy rainfall from the West to the South coast, and the Southwest to the North coast. During this season, the Biak-Numfor people cannot carry out sailing or fishing activities. This monsoon season takes place for 4 to 8 days, and begins to subside at night. The Biak people call it " *Wam Andai*" (Lapian 2008).

The annual calendar count starting in March, in the Biak language, respectively, is: *Marweri* (March), *Airami* (April), *Ayuni/Wampasi* (May),

Sarmuri (June), *Saremibeba* (July), *Saremi-wedari* (August). *Romanggwan-beba* (September), *Romanggwan-wedari* (October), *Wambarus-beba* (November), *Wambarus-wedari* (December), *Inseri* (January), and *Sarwir* (February) (Joshua 1984). The calculation of the seasons in the Biak community is based on astrology. The Biak people on Numfor Island divide the period of the twelve months based on the limbs of the Scorpion star (*romangguandi*). The night is divided into four times: *mandira* (6-9 p.m.), *rob* (9-12 p.m.), *robdi fandu* (0-3 o'clock), and *meser muryas* (3-6 in the morning). The seasons defined by the stars Orion (*Sawakoi*) and Scorpio (*Romangguandi* or *Romanggwandi*), and several other stars such as the Southern Crown, known by the Biak people as the "sky dragon's tail", in times of the West wind always make the sea turbulent. However, as soon as the Dragon star appears on the horizon, then the shady season arrives. When the Dragon star begins to rise and the Orion star disappears into the sea (below the horizon), the males looking for the female (Pleides and Taurus) can catch the females in the sea, and generally comes the breeding season.

Several types of stars in the astronomical knowledge of the Biak-Numfor people, which are named in the Biak language are; Venus-Makbram, Jupiter-*Koembendi*, Delphinus-Abiober, Antares-*Kanggoenben*, Sagittarius and Scorpion-*Romanggwan* Beba, Hydra-*Wambores beba*, Pegasus-*Inggansoe/Inggawon*, Carpricornus-*Baki*, Groote Beer-*Sraiknam*, *Lyra Wega-Maksrai*, Chepeus-*Apiam*, Cassiopela-Snifer, Perseus-Manseraruer, Pleiadeb-*Bargar (insandi)-Waikbaki*, Zwaan-*Makdwoer*, Orion-*Wai big sarwan/Sawakoi*, *Kraanvogel-Zoerai*, *Eridanusvloed-Poerai*, *Hyden* or *Aldebaran-Inkomdarof*, and *Andromedarof*. Giving the names of the stars in the Biak-Numfor language, aims to facilitate the way of mentioning when communicating during shipping activities. In sailing, a navigator must know the direction of the land breeze and sea breeze, so that the trade shipping process and fishing can take place properly, when he wants to sail out in the morning and return to his village in the afternoon. Likewise, when a navigator leads a voyage at night, starlight is seen to indicate the cardinal directions. For

example, traditional Bugis fishermen, when they travel to look for *torani* fish (flying fish) in the Makassar Strait, they have their own calculations. In order to catch more fish, they have to wait until the East monsoon season takes place, around early April to late August (Pelras 2006). The Biak-Numfor people, by calculating the seasons, types of winds and astrology, shipping and farming activities can be carried out. Feuilletau de Bryun said that the Biak people's astronomical knowledge was very good, so that they became quite experienced navigators, able to be oriented with the help of the positions of certain star groups even though only some of them were visible. Biak people's astronomical knowledge regarding the division of the cycle of seasons which is calculated for 12 months is equal to one year and is based on the position of the stars (Mansoben 1984).

Traditional catching fish

Kapirepi (as shown in Figure 2) is a fishing net/tool in the form of a trawl which is specially designed with a pocket in the middle of the trawl, so that the fish will be confined in the bag. *Kapirepi* nets, made from marine plants, namely seagrass (*Enhalus acoroides*) which in the local language is called Andoi kraf. *Kapirepi* can also be made from *genemo* bark spun into yarn. The thread from the seagrass or *genemo* is the basic material for making *Kapirepi* nets. The use of *Kapirepi* nets cannot be done by one person, but must be in groups. There must be several people in charge of holding the *Kapirepi* and several others must direct the fish to enter and be trapped in the net bag. The owner of the net is obliged to share the catch with relatives or people in the village who are involved in fishing. *Kapirepi* nets are only used to catch the *samandar* (*baronang*) fish. In the use of *capirepi* nets, the most important thing is togetherness and cooperation to get maximum catches. This type of net is only used by the Soweik people who live on the island of Insubabi, Supiori (No author 2020).

The location fishing ground from *keret-keret* in Soweik Village has been determined long ago. For example, the fishing ground for *keret* Rumbekwan is around Ineki Island and Rani Island, while Rosiboi Island is the fishing ground for Keret Mandosir and Mansawan. Rani and Insubabi islands were formerly empty islands, however, the

island of Insubabi began to be inhabited around 1957 because at that time the Dutch government opened marine fisheries on the island. Now the island of Insubabi belongs to Keret Manufandu. During the wind and wave season, Keret Kawer, Menufandu and Kurni usually catch fish in Odori Bay, while Keret Sawen usually catch fish on the island of Mburwandi. But now there are no more territorial restrictions on fishing. Each cage can catch fish in any fishing area, depending on the ability of each cage to reach potential fishing locations. The various types of fish caught and sold by Soweik fishermen include: goropa fish (grouper), bobara fish, red snapper, goat fish, samandar fish, sako fish, teteruga (turtle), octopus and squid. The fish are sold for Rp 20.000-50.000,-/bundle. There is also fish that is smoked and made salted and sold at a relatively cheap price. Fisherman Soweik is the largest fish supplier from the Supiori area to the fish market in Biak-Numfor. Per day no less than 20-30 boxes/cars carrying fish with a volume of up to 10-20 tons of fish of various types are supplied to the fish market in Biak.

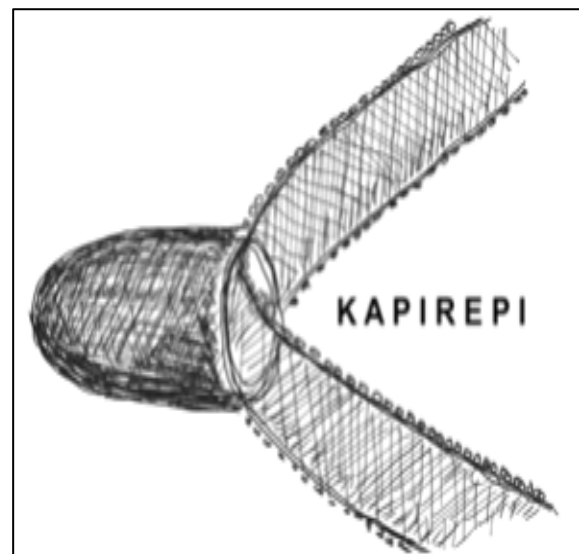


Figure 1. *Kapirepi* Fishing Nets.

Conclusions

The Biak people in Soweik Village, Aruri Supiori Islands are an integral part of the Biak cultural family, which inhabit the Biak, Supiori and Numfor islands. The interaction of the Biak people with the natural environment results in the values of local wisdom and local knowledge which are formulated in their view of *Manseren Nanggi* (God of

Heaven), with a ritual called “*Wor Fa Nanggi*” (the ceremony of feeding the God of Heaven). For the people of Soweik Village, *Manseren Nanggi* is a source of cosmology, natural adaptation and utilization of natural potential as a living space. The Biak people in Soweik Village live above the water, making a living as fishermen, catching fish with capirepi nets or trading outside the island. They have a good knowledge of astronomy so that they can travel far to new territories and bring back new cultures into the original culture of the Biak people, such as the technique of forging iron which was later called *kamasan*, China porcelain, and new titles (*mambri*, newspaper, etc.). *dimara*, *sangaji*, etc.) in the social structure of the Biak community.

In studying the ecology of the maritime culture of the Biak people in the Biak cultural area in particular and Papua in general as an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Indonesian people in the eastern region, adequate space, time and funding are needed to carry out the research, documentation and scientific publication processes.

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