



# Bringing Past to Present: Unraveling Papua's Culture of Shame with Forms of Cultural Resilience

Wigati Yektiningtyas<sup>1</sup> and Ekawati Marhaenny Dukut<sup>\*2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language and Arts, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Cenderawasih, Jayapura, 99000, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, Soegijapranata Catholic University, Semarang, 50234, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup>wigati\_y@yahoo.com, <sup>\*2</sup>ekawati@unika.ac.id

\*corresponding author

**Abstract.** Papua is blessed with rich customs that are used to regulate vertical relations between humans and the Creator and horizontal relations among humans. In the past, every members of the Papuan society maintained and respected these rules. Violators of norms felt ashamed and tried to erase their shame by paying customary fines. Some even committed suicide because they could not bear the shame. This cultural practice underscores the Papuan's resilience and how they adhere to their values. Ironically, today, the culture of shame has begun to fade. Stealing, corruption, and adultery are done without feeling burdened. This cultural shift, therefore, highlights the need of exploring the cultural resilience, which takes in the form of Papuan's culture of shame. In the past, the culture of shame is needed to provide social awareness to today's society about the importance of these ancestral noble values. This article, thus, reflects the reviving and re-implementing of the culture of shame to show the role of cultural resilience in maintaining social norms. This article has the aim to (1) explore various cultures of shame in Papuan society, and (2) discuss how society deals with shame. The method used to analyze the data is descriptive-qualitative. Data for the study were collected during March-July 2024 through (1) observation and interviews with informants, who are traditional elders and community elders and (2) written documentation regarding the culture of shame in Papuan society. Because Papua is large, this study limits itself only on the Sentani tribe, in Jayapura. This article concludes that the culture of shame in Sentani tribe is (1) stealing and (2) committing adultery. The way to deal with shame is to pay a customary fine in the form of beads (*hayae, hawa, nokho*), stone axes, and sometimes accompanied by money depending on the case and the customary area.

**Keywords:** Cultural resilience, Culture of shame, Sentani tribe, Customary fines

## 1 Introduction

Papuan society, which consists of hundreds of tribes, has a variety of customs that are used to regulate a vertical life between humans and creators, and the horizontal life between humans and humans, and the universe (Yektiningtyas & Dewi, 2023). This custom is respected and very well maintained by the community that supports it. The Sentani people, for example, have the expression *Igwayo hubayo, Igwayo manjo* to show that a peaceful village can only be possible when it has a traditional order. This expression refers to the importance of obeying customs (*mam*) so that people can live in peace. Some of the traditional values have been taught even from childhood are about respecting parents or elders, helping each other, cooperation, mutual cooperation, etc. as well as various prohibitions, such as stealing, lying, adultery, etc.

There are blessings (*onomi*) for those who perform good and curses (*pelo*) for those who violate customary rules. Another phrase: *hamang nenaisele emei roibuyae helemende*, which means that food does not come by itself except with sweat (Yektiningtyas, 2022) teaches people to always work hard to meet their daily needs. Stealing is, thus, a shameful violation of the Papuan custom. Failure to do good according to custom results in shame (*fe*) or shame culture (Bedford, 2003; Schneider, Grady, Leistra, Van Lier, & Merckelbach, 2020)

This culture of shame is directly related to respect and self-esteem (Lewis, 1995) (Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006) so that to make up for a person's shame with honor and self-esteem, a person will do anything, including ending his life (Kosasih, 2019) (Hirohisa & Masato, 2022). An informant, Irenius Pepuhu (2024) said that for the people of Sentani, looking for other people's garden products is considered very embarrassing. To make up for this embarrassment, a person had to pay a fine according to how large or small of the mistake is using customary property, for example beads (*hayae, hawa, nohko*), stone axes, or stone bracelets. If not, then the person will be dubbed by the community as a *yambi*, that is, a weak, helpless and unreliable person. The word *yambi* is a word that degrades a person's dignity so much that most Sentani people try to avoid the nickname by committing commendable deeds. Through an interview session, Corry Ohee (2024) said that for the people of Sentani, looking for other people's garden products is considered very embarrassing.

In a folktale entitled "The Sinking of Nelenhu Village", it is told of an *ondofolo*, the highest traditional leader, who committed adultery with the wife of another village *ondofolo*. As an *ondofolo*, of course, he knows the consequences of his actions. But in the folktale, he did not try to make up for his embarrassment even though he had the opportunity to do it and he knew the norm. In this situation, he will deal with the Almighty for all his wrongdoings. At the end of the story, finally the village of *Ondofolo* sank (Yektiningtyas, Fatubun, & Jakarimilena, 2009; Yektiningtyas-Modouw, 2018). This became the result of his shameless actions. The community had to also suffer for the consequences of his actions.

In another story, it is told that an *ondofolo* pays for the losses suffered by other *ondofolo* because he has deceived him. He handed over expensive customary property to make amends for his mistakes (Yektiningtyas, Fatubun, & Jakarimilena, 2009). Corry Ohee (2024) and Anthoneta Ohee (2024) informed that making up for the shame

for people who make mistakes in various ways, one of which is through the payment of customary property, will ease their steps in living their lives. Psychologically, the committer can only show face in the community when the community has forgiven him.

Based on observations and interviews with the informants, the culture of shame is now, unfortunately, starting to loosen up. Today, ironically, lying, stealing, disrespecting others, being selfish, even committing adultery are carried out in real terms by certain people without feeling ashamed. This kind of behavior is considered something commonplace. If in the past someone punished themselves by hurting themselves or paying a fine, in today's society, the person who committed wrong doings are forced by others to be punished by the law. In the midst of public turmoil with this phenomenon, this paper is a reflection on the possibility of re-involving the noble values of the old Sentani people about the culture of shame in regulating the norms of modern society. In addition, this article is expected to be a lesson for today's society and awareness of the importance of the culture of shame that is upheld and practiced by the ancestors. In other words, this paper aims to (1) explore the various cultures of shame in Papua, (2) discuss how people redeem their shame by discussing also on the cultural resilience that may take place in the society. Various oral, semi-oral, and non-verbal, socio-cultural, and linguistic folklore in the Land of Papua have been extensively researched, but the culture of shame has never been discussed by researchers.

## 2 Review of Literature

Shame culture and guilt culture are identities and are the most important elements of the eastern customs of Indonesia (Sostrodihardjo, 1998; Hirohisa & Masato, 2022; Achmad, Susanto, Rapita, Yulianeta, & Fatmariza, 2003). Furthermore, Sostrodihardjo (1998) argues that the culture of shame and guilt is a traditional value developed to regulate interactions between family members and between communities. Shame is the result of guilt for doing something that is forbidden in a community. Shame will encourage a person to be careful about other people's views of that person (Lumbanraja, 2022) because shame is directly related to a person's honor and self-esteem. Therefore, shame can limit a person from doing something that can humiliate himself and his extended family in front of others.

The culture of shame is a wisdom that exists in every society as explained by Schneider, et.al (2020) and contains social norms and values that regulate the balance between the carrying capacity of the natural environment and human lifestyles and needs. In addition, traditional wisdom is born from a very long process of experience from one generation to another and continues to be maintained and passed on to the next generation. The value of traditional wisdom is used to create order and balance between social life, culture and the preservation of natural resources.

Shyness encourages a person to adapt to the environment and by obeying the various rules that exist, so that he can be accepted and respected by others. A person will try to respect and follow the norms that have been agreed upon by the group in which he lives. Norms are a benchmark or guide in doing good and not doing inappropriate

behavior. This is in line with the regulation that shame is a determinant of the success of a social behavior, namely a person's physical and psychological activities towards others or vice versa in order to meet the needs of themselves or others in accordance with social demands (Bedford, 2003) so that there is harmony in the self and harmony in the family and society. Kosasih (2019) and Budianto & Helmi (2021) underline that shame is part of personal emotions related to self-affairs, judgments, and the measure of others. Shame related to self-affairs is related to self-esteem, personal achievements, and personal attitudes. Shyness can influence a person to make themselves the main concern. In a culture of shame, one form of social institution is the feeling of loss of public trust, which is seen as the heaviest form of punishment that makes a person try to take action to regain his or her self-esteem by doing various ways (Negara, 2018).

Since childhood, the people of the Land of Papua have been accustomed to customary rules expressed in various oral folklore, namely folklore (myths, legends, fables, fairy tales), oral chants, traditional expressions, and even non-verbal folklore such as carvings and paintings that tell about the culture of shame, guilt, and ways to redeem shame (Yektiningtyas-Modouw, 2018). A famous fable of Sentani entitled “*Ebi and Kandeï*” talks about the friendship between the *ebi* and *kandeï* fish. Once Kandeï was angry with Ebi because he was too greedy to eat. Kandeï pierced Ebi’s eyes with a hot banana. Ebi roared in pain. Because he felt guilty, he immediately went to the bottom of the lake to hide. After being mediated by a crane, Kandeï finally apologized to Ebi and they became friends again. Stories like this are used by the Papuan people to teach the culture of shame and the culture of guilt.

The Papuan people, who are predominantly Christian, have also been taught about shame that comes from guilt for breaking the rules since Sunday School. It is said that Adam and Eve violated God’s command by eating the fruit of good and evil knowledge, and finally realized that they were naked. Then they hid in shame like told in the Bible of Genesis 3:10. This is in line with the thinking from Lewis (1995) in his book *Shame: The Exposed Self*, which underlines that shame is related to the consequences of wrongdoing. The Gospel also tells that after betraying Jesus, Judas felt guilty and ended up being ashamed and made up for it by throwing 30 pieces of silver from Jesus’ sale into the temple and then hanging himself like written in Matthew 27:5. Meanwhile, it is said that the Apostle Peter felt guilty for denying Jesus 3 times before the rooster crowed, like referred in Matthew 26:75. Because of his great shame, according to a tradition recorded by Jerome, when Peter was crucified, he asked to be crucified with his head down.

The people of Japan are one of the societies in the world that highly uphold the culture of shame. Since childhood children have been trained to tidy up their own shoes and if they do not do it, they will feel ashamed of their friends (Kosasih, 2019). The culture of shame that is taught, exemplified, habituated, and nurtured from childhood is what makes people always maintain and respect themselves by obeying customary norms. According to observation and experience, there are almost no thieves in Japan. When one of the author’s laptop was left on the Tokyo-Nagoya Shinkansen train in April 2023, it can be retrieved at the nearest police station. Purity of obeying norms, maintaining self-esteem, guilt culture, and shame culture in Japan society result in the

perpetrator committing *harakiri* (suicide) to redeem his shame and show the importance of self-esteem.

Cultural resilience is the ability for a person to endure and adapt to new challenges while keeping attached to several core cultural values. For the Papuan society resilience may take in the form of adhering to the norms of communal living and respect for others despite the strong current of external pressures from the phenomenon of globalization, urbanization and other Western influences (Miedema & Stasch, 2010). In practice, some Papuan communities have continued to resist cultural assimilation, consistently maintain their tribal languages and rituals, and systems of social organizations (Koczberski, Curry, & Bue, 2001). Even as urbanization and modernization bring new forms of individual beings, most Papuan villages continue to organize communal activities that help preserve and make cohesions on their traditional cultures.

Shame as a value plays a significant role to the formation of cultural resilience by acting as a shield against the corrosion of the village's traditional cultures. When Papuans practice their ceremonies there would be public displays of respecting their elders and faithfulness to their traditional gender roles. The initiation ritual or the wedding ceremony is an example of how Papuans should adhere in their dress, behavior, and speech. If individuals do not do as required by the community, they will face criticism or shame from their community members (Wassmann, 1998). Thus, as a result there is reinforcement for the younger generation to follow up with the communal expectations.

Another example, is the expectation for those who leave their village for work or study opportunities in urban centers to continue provide the well-being of their families back home. If they do not fulfill this, they will be shamed for neglecting their responsibilities and distancing themselves from their cultural roots (Miedema & Stasch, 2010). This is especially difficult at times when globalization encourages the value of self-reliance, individualism, and continuous mobility. With the rise of digital technologies like the television, internet and various forms of social media for expressions of personal freedom, the Papuan youths' collective mentality is increasingly challenged (McLeod, 2007).

The cultural shift of Papuans who had their own religious beliefs and now having a substantial denomination of the Christian faith, has a profound impact also on the Papuan's lives. Christianity has introduced new moral frameworks that emphasized guilt, sin and individual repentance that differ from the traditional concept of the culture of shame. However different the transfer of the moral standards may be, there is some negotiation process that allows the Papuan community to adapt the religious influences of making cultural hybrid means of not losing the core value of the importance of communal integrity and shame (Haley & Manggut, 2011). Hence, preserving the culture of shame is significant as a social control mechanism.

### 3 Method

This descriptive-qualitative research was conducted in May-July 2024. This study captures the culture of shame of the Papuan people which was more practiced in the past and compares it with the present. Data was collected through observation and in-depth

interviews with informants, namely traditional stakeholders and community elders both in person (face-to-face) and by telephone. In addition, the data obtained is enriched with oral folklore, namely folklore, oral chanting, traditional Papuan expressions that speak and chant about the culture of shame and how figures or communities redeem shame. Various books and articles about the culture of shame and redeeming shame are also used to enrich the existing data. Because Papua is very large, this study is focused on the culture of shame in the Sentani people in Jayapura Regency.

## 4 Results and Discussion

The culture of shame in the Sentani language is called the term *fe*. Shame is caused by violating customary rules. For the people of Sentani, stealing is a shameful act. According to Irenius Pepuho (July 2024 interview), what is categorized as stealing is stealing garden products, livestock, and land boundaries. Usually, embarrassment arises when the thief is caught. However, it was also conveyed by Agus Ongge (2024) there are also thieves who consciously feel guilty and ashamed so that they consciously want to remove their shame so that they can be accepted back by the community. Stealing land boundaries that are clearly owned and transferring land ownership is a taboo and a serious offense and results in the death, war and extinction of a clan. Land ownership (*ulayat*) is closely related to the Creator who is known to the Sentani people as *hu* (God). Many stories were told by the informants about the theft of this land boundary. Irenius Pepuho (2024) tells the story of a husband and wife who died because they manipulated land boundaries in Kleblouw Village. In the 2020s, it was reported that an *ondofolo* died after receiving land payment money. For the people of Sentani, customary land is actually a mandate of the Gods (*hu*) to be used for the welfare of the people, not for personal pleasure. Many experiences show that sellers of customary land and their descendants do not live with autonomy (blessings). Instead, they live miserable, sickly and unsuccessful in school and work.

In addition to stealing, the act of adultery is a serious shameful act. What is classified as adultery is the existence of a bodily relationship between a married person and another person who is single or married. Adultery is also when a sexual relationship occurs between single people who have not been or are not bound by marriage. This taboo act resulted in war and death. The people of Sentani even dubbed the children of adultery as “grass children” and “other boat children”. In addition to adultery, incest relationships, incest relationships are also taboo in Sentani society which is considered shameful. The perpetrator of incest, according to Irenius Pepuho (2024) is thrown away or exiled to the forest and the child from this relationship will be hung on a stake until he dies. This punishment is a warning not to be done by others.

To cover the embarrassment, the violator of the norm pays a customary fine in the form of customary property. For the Sentani indigenous people, there are three types of traditional property (*robhoni*), namely beads consisting of *hayae* (yellow beads), *hawa* (green beads), and *nokho* (blue beads) (Modouw & Yektiningtyas, 2021). *Nokho* is the most expensive bead. In its use, it will usually be accompanied by *hayae* and *air*. In addition to the beads used to pay customary fines, there are also stone axes of various

sizes and customary values. This stone axe is nil on top of the beads. The highest value is *ebha* which is shaped like a jade bracelet. The payment of *robhoni* will depend on the size or size of the violation. However, as stated by Irenius Pepuho (2024) and Agus Ongge (2024) this customary fine does not guarantee that the perpetrators will be readmitted to the community just like before they committed the violation.



**Fig. 1.** Customary property (*robhoni*) used to, among other things, pay customary fines: beads, stone axes, and stone bracelets  
(photograph by author)

According to Corry Ohee (2024), Agus Ongge (2024), and Irenius Pepuho (2024), the amount of customary property paid is not determined. It usually depends on the payer. There are people who pay quite a lot of customary property because with this amount, they feel enough to remove their shame so psychologically, they feel that they have been accepted back by the community as a clean citizen.

The act of adultery is quite complicated in solving it and cannot be solved by paying customs alone. For adultery between people who have a family, if it can be resolved familiarly, it can usually be resolved by paying a very large customary fine. However, if it cannot be resolved familiarly in ancient times, it usually ended in war. Furthermore, an *ondofolo*, Marten Ohee (2024) explained that because adultery is a very shameful act, the perpetrator will deal with *hu*. Spiritually, the Sentani people believe in the power of *hu* (gods) as expressed in the traditional expression *hu jokho erele* (god always sees) (Yektingtyas & Dewi, 2023). In the case of adultery, it is usually the god who will punish directly. The people of Sentani call it a *pelo* (curse). The doer will live a life full of suffering. Irenius Pepuho (2024) added that the “severe punishment for adulterers” from the gods shows that adultery is a shameful act but also has serious consequences. According to him, this is also one of the ways the Sentani people protect marriage. For adultery committed by both of whom are single, customary fines are imposed. The type and amount depend on the families of both parties. Usually, if it is agreed with marriage, the fine is paid as a symbol to remove the shame of having violated the norm.

The old Sentani people have the value of wisdom in regulating good relations between people, considering that damaging this good relationship is a shameful act that leads to illness or death and customary fines. This feeling of shame is a psychological burden that causes violators of this norm to feel shunned and not accepted by society. This is related to the writing of Negara (2018) that shame is a determinant of the success of a human relationship with others in meeting the needs of themselves or others in

accordance with social behavior, namely a person's physical and psychological activities against social demands (Schneider, et al., 2020) (Wahyuni, Istiyana, & Asmarani, 2023). Thus, there is harmony and harmony in the family and society. A person will also be careful in doing things by thinking about the consequences of his actions that will bring down his self-esteem and his extended family.

For the people of Sentani, shame due to guilt needs to be recognized so that the perpetrators are free from natural laws or gods and stigma from society. Paying fines is one way to make up for mistakes and shame due to stealing and adultery. However, as stated by the informants, paying customary fines is not fully and guarantees that a violator of norms is accepted back by the community. At least they have lost public trust. However, as time goes by and if the violators of the norms have done a lot of good, it is possible that the community will forget the mistake. In line with this, the people of Sentani also believe that mistakes that are not acknowledged result in illness and death even though the person concerned has been treated by a great doctor. In addition to submitting to the punishment of nature and the gods, the people of Old Papua also punished shameful acts such as adultery, namely being thrown out of the way, namely being thrown out of the way. Even in the Sentani community, children from incest relationships in ancient times were hung on a stake until they died. Otherwise, they are branded as "other boat cubs" or "grass cubs".

Costly fines and sadistic laws have long been a way for Papuans to protect marriage and women. Even when they have not yet received the truth, adultery is the most fatal act of shame. In the past, due to socio-cultural interests, Sentani men had more than one wife. It is usually carried out by traditional leaders. However, they remain disciplined and obedient in maintaining their relationship.

Today's reality is the opposite, where even though the level of violation of customary norms inherited from generation to generation is higher, the consequences of customary law, such as death, do not even occur, even though the payment of fines can still be found. In fact, the increase in violations occurred after the Papuan people were introduced to the Gospel which emphasized and even sharpened the good cultural values. Papuans actually live and practice the norms that govern the social life of the community from the perspective of the Gospel. Nowadays, when the people have known the truth with the entry of the Gospel into the Land of Papua and the people are more advanced and smarter, several shameful acts often occur. Ironically, theft, corruption, infidelity, adultery have become commonplace and "understood" by society. Perpetrators do not feel ashamed to live in society and society cannot "reach" them, especially if it is done by a high-ranking and influential person. In urban areas, customs are still alive today, but the practice is fading. If in the past paying fines was mostly done because of self-awareness, now it is done more because of pressure from family and the community. Therefore, this article is also for modern society of today, who needs to reflect, and disseminate the value of the wisdom of the Sentani people about customary norms and consequences for violators.



## 5 Conclusion

The study concluded several important findings. In the past, the cultural wealth of the Sentani people was very cared for and respected by the community. One of them is the culture of shame which is used as a medium to build good relationships between humans and God and humans and humans. Violators of this relationship will get stigmatized as shameless, ignorant of customs. Violating customary norms such as stealing, adultery, incest is a shameful act that becomes a psychological burden for the offender and his extended family. Therefore, to remove the shame, they pay customary fines to the victim and his family in the form of *robhoni* (Sentani) and sometimes a certain amount of money. However, fines do not guarantee that they can be fully accepted by the public. This reality is a reflection for people to be more careful in their actions so that they still maintain their self-esteem. Even in the past, fines could not erase the act of adultery. War, exile, death are the consequences. What is interesting to note is that even though the shameful act is not seen by others and denied by the perpetrator, the Sentani people believe that the gods or nature will punish them in their own way. Ironically, when people have known modern social media facilities and modern religion that make them abandon the old way of communication and practice religion, violations of norms such as theft, corruption, infidelity, and adultery have become “common-place” acts. The perpetrators did not feel ashamed and their actions seemed unstoppable. This article is a reflection that everything that is ancient does not mean that it is no longer meaningful today. Learning from the old Papuan people, it is hoped that modern society will be wiser in living life.

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