

Preserving Indigenous Papuan Communication Practices in The Era of Globalization: The Kaonak Greeting Tradition

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Abstract

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In the era of globalization, Western communicative norms increasingly shape global interaction and often overshadow indigenous practices with deep cultural significance. This study examines Kaonak, a traditional Papuan greeting, to explore how indigenous communication systems function as cultural preservation and subtle resistance to homogenization. Using a qualitative ethnographic design, data were gathered from five indigenous Papuans in Jayapura through interviews, participant observations, and field notes, then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings show that Kaonak embodies the Papuan philosophy of *basodara* (brotherhood), expressing unity, respect, and relational harmony. Although modernization has reduced its use among younger generations, the greeting remains meaningful for those who view it as cultural heritage. Its continued practice reflects an assertion of identity and a moral worldview rooted in Papuan cosmology. The study argues that sustaining Kaonak contributes to cultural resilience and highlights the importance of integrating indigenous communicative traditions into educational and intercultural programs.

Kata Kunci:

*budaya Papua,
globalisasi, komunikasi
masyarakat adat,
ketahanan budaya,
salam Kaonak*

Di era globalisasi, norma komunikasi Barat semakin mendominasi interaksi global dan kerap meminggirkan praktik komunikasi lokal yang memiliki makna budaya mendalam. Penelitian ini mengkaji Kaonak, salam tradisional Papua, untuk memahami bagaimana sistem komunikasi adat berfungsi sebagai bentuk pelestarian budaya sekaligus resistensi terhadap homogenisasi. Menggunakan pendekatan etnografi kualitatif, data diperoleh dari lima orang asli Papua di Kota Jayapura melalui wawancara, observasi partisipatif, dan catatan lapangan, kemudian dianalisis dengan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Kaonak mewujudkan filosofi *basodara* (persaudaraan) yang menekankan persatuan, penghormatan, dan

harmoni relasional. Meskipun modernisasi mengurangi penggunaannya di kalangan generasi muda, salam ini tetap bermakna bagi mereka yang memandangnya sebagai warisan budaya. Praktik Kaonak menjadi penegasan identitas serta representasi pandangan moral dalam kosmologi Papua. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa mempertahankan Kaonak memperkuat ketahanan budaya dan penting untuk diintegrasikan dalam program pendidikan maupun interkultural.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of international media, education, and human mobility in today's hyperconnected world has made Western communication norms even more dominant. These customs, which are represented by eye contact, handshakes, and spoken pleasantries have grown so ingrained that people frequently assume they apply to everyone (Thussu, 2018). However, there is a process of cultural erasure going on behind this seeming universality. Local customs are being displaced, degraded, or trivialized more and more as global communication practices proliferate. In order to obtain social legitimacy, indigenous societies are frequently under pressure to adopt globalized standards (Judijanto & Aslan, 2024). This process is referred to as symbolic colonization, which is a subtle but widespread dominance over speech, gesture, and greeting (Kaur, 2023). In addition, communication is a vehicle of cultural worldview as well as a means of expression. Particularly, nonverbal cues represent ingrained social and moral norms that influence communal life (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2016). The cultural logic that shapes interactions with others, the natural environment, and the self, along with its communicative expressions, is lost when such gestures no longer exist (Eco, 2020). In this context, maintaining indigenous communication practices becomes an act of resistance, identity reconstruction, and epistemological survival rather than merely maintaining cultural continuity (Dutta & Elers, 2020).

With more than 250 regional dialects and dozens of indigenous ethnic groups, Papua is one of Indonesia's most linguistically and culturally varied areas (Ananta et al., 2016). Every gesture has spiritual and moral significance for Papuans, whose social cosmology is intricately entwined with communication

(Syarfina et al., 2022). The Kaonak greeting is one of the most well-known and significant of these customs.

Despite its importance, Indonesian indigenous communication methods have received little scholarly attention and are mostly descriptive (Mukarom, 2020). The roles of nonverbal communication in professional and educational settings have been examined in earlier research by Ghafar and Ali (2023), Bambeeroo (2017), and Khuman (2024), however, these studies frequently ignore the semiotic systems ingrained in indigenous cultures. One of the first comprehensive descriptions of Kaonak in the Papuan setting was given by Aulia et al (2024), who noted that its communicative functions include identity, peace, familiarity, respect, and social approach. That study, however, failed to place Kaonak in larger global and sociopolitical contexts. By redefining Kaonak as an indigenous semiotic heritage and a communication system that both reflects local cosmology and defies global homogenization, the current work expands on that conversation. This study conceptualizes Kaonak as a dynamic conflict between tradition and modernity rather than as a static cultural product, drawing on Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian, 2017), Postcolonial Communication Theory Luthra (2020), and Critical Applied Linguistics (Pennycook, 2022). This theoretical framework enables the analysis to progress from functional description to symbolic interpretation, comprehending how Kaonak conveys the Papuan concept of equality, peace, and relational balance while maintaining cultural agency in international arenas.

The communicative functions of Kaonak have been established by previous research like Aulia (2024), but none have examined its cultural and political relevance in light of globalization. Thus, by investigating how Kaonak functions as a communication tactic of cultural resistance and preservation, this study closes a significant gap. Instead of treating Kaonak as just a behavioral gesture, it views it as a communicative episteme a method of knowing and relating that is ingrained in Papuan cosmology. Additionally, it links local communication with global power dynamics by positioning Kaonak as a symbolic act of resistance to global cultural uniformity. Additionally, this study highlights the usefulness of conserving indigenous communication methods as a way to promote intercultural

understanding and support heritage-based pedagogy and inclusive education in Papua. This study highlights questions of identity, belonging, and the right to cultural self-expression by examining Kaonak as both a macro-symbolic discourse and a micro-culture practice.

In order to preserve Papuan identity and values in the face of globalization's demands, this study investigates the Kaonak greeting as an indigenous communicative practice. It looks for the hidden meanings, social roles, and difficulties of preserving Kaonak in contemporary settings. Three main questions are specifically addressed by this study: (1) how the Kaonak greeting represents indigenous Papuan values and worldview; (2) how Kaonak is used and interpreted in the context of the shifting sociocultural landscape brought about by globalization; and (3) how Kaonak preservation supports the sustainability of indigenous communication practices.

This study advances knowledge of how indigenous communicative forms negotiate their position in international discourse, which benefits the larger disciplines of intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, and cultural linguistics. It has implications for cultural and educational policies and illustrates how gestures serve as semiotic systems that encode social memory and identity. In the end, this study sees Kaonak as more than just a gesture; it is a philosophical assertion of identity, solidarity, and peace that upholds the Papuan presence in an Indonesia that is becoming more globalized.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to understand how the Kaonak greeting, as a form of indigenous Papuan communication, is preserved and practiced within the dynamics of globalization. Ethnography was chosen because it enables the researcher to interpret communicative behavior in its natural and cultural context through direct engagement with the community. Guided by a critical cultural perspective (Pennycook, 2021), the research views Kaonak not as a static tradition but as a living expression of cultural resilience and identity negotiation in contemporary Papua.

Fieldwork was conducted in Jayapura City, Papua, where local traditions coexist with increasing global influences. Five indigenous Papuans were purposively selected to represent diverse generations and social backgrounds, including elders, educators, and youth activists. Data were collected over three months through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes, depending on participants' availability and depth of experience. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Indonesian, and later translated into English by the researcher for analytic purposes. Translations were cross-checked with two Papuan speakers to maintain linguistic accuracy and cultural nuance. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

Participant observation was conducted in several community settings where the Kaonak greeting typically appears, including church gatherings, local cultural meetings, and neighborhood interactions in Sentani and Abepura. A total of six observation sessions were carried out, each lasting 1–2 hours. The observations focused on everyday interactions, generational differences in greeting practices, and how Kaonak is used during communal or ritual activities. Field notes documented contextual cues, gestures, and social meanings emerging from these interactions.

Data were analyzed using Miles And Huberman (1983) interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Thematic analysis helped identify recurring patterns that illustrate how Kaonak embodies Papuan values of kinship, respect, and peace while adapting to the pressures of modernization. Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained reflexivity, recognizing his dual position as both observer and interpreter, ensuring cultural sensitivity and accuracy in representing indigenous voices

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the core findings of the study on the Kaonak greeting tradition as an indigenous communicative practice in Papua. Through in-depth interviews, field observations, and reflexive journaling, three major themes were identified. Each theme reveals the ways in which Kaonak operates as a site of cultural meaning, negotiation, and continuity amid the influence of globalization.

Kaonak as Cultural Embodiment and Moral Philosophy

For many participants, Kaonak represents far more than a simple greeting it is an embodiment of Papuan moral philosophy and a reflection of deeply rooted cultural ethics. The gesture encapsulates the essence of *basodara*, a worldview grounded in kinship, equality, and mutual respect. Participants consistently described Kaonak as a symbolic act that connects hearts rather than merely hands, signifying relational unity beyond spoken words.

Table 1. Participants’ Kaonak as Cultural Embodiment and Moral Philosophy

Participant	Extract
AP (Elder)	“When we do Kaonak, we don’t just shake hands; we connect hearts. It means, I see you as my brother, my equal. Even if we fight before, Kaonak means peace again.”
AL (Teacher)	“Kaonak teaches us respect without words. It’s a sign of peace. You can say sorry or show forgiveness just by doing it.”

These narratives highlight the spiritual dimension embedded in the Kaonak gesture. Rather than serving as a social routine, Kaonak functions as a ritual of recognition, forgiveness, and harmony. The act carries emotional weight, symbolizing reconciliation after conflict and reaffirming the collective identity of the community.

From an emic perspective, this moral and emotional depth reveals the ontological foundation of Papuan communication one that values connection over efficiency, emotion over performance. Observations during community gatherings showed how Kaonak often precedes decision-making or reconciliation rituals, reinforcing its role as a moral language of peace. In this sense, Kaonak operates as both an ethical practice and a spiritual expression that unites members through embodied empathy.

Negotiating Kaonak in Modern Contexts

The second theme illustrates how Kaonak is negotiated within the shifting socio-cultural landscape of urban Papua. As modernization, education, and digital culture reshape communicative habits, the practice of Kaonak has become a marker of identity negotiation among younger generations. While traditionalists continue to uphold it as a symbol of respect and belonging, some youth perceive it as outdated in urban or academic environments.

Table 2. Participants’ Negotiating Kaonak in Modern Contexts

Participant	Extract
TK (Student)	“We rarely do Kaonak at campus. People think it’s old-fashioned. Sometimes, if I greet my friends with Kaonak, they laugh and say, ‘Bro, that’s for old men.’”
CNS (NGO Worker)	“In our office, I always use Kaonak when I meet other Papuans. It reminds us who we are. It keeps our spirit. Globalization brings many changes, but Kaonak is our way of saying we are still here.”

The data show a clear generational and contextual divide in the interpretation of Kaonak. For urban youth, particularly those engaged in formal education or professional settings, Kaonak is often replaced by more cosmopolitan greetings like handshakes or verbal salutations in Indonesian. However, for others like CNS, Kaonak remains a symbolic act of cultural assertion an embodied reminder of Papuan identity amidst homogenizing pressures.

Field observations reinforced this dichotomy. In urban offices or campuses, Kaonak was rarely observed, yet in community-based NGOs and local gatherings, it remained a common greeting. This duality reflects the broader struggle faced by indigenous communities: balancing modern professionalism with cultural authenticity. Through this negotiation, Kaonak becomes a communicative site where globalization and indigeneity intersect a form of everyday resistance to cultural erasure.

Sustaining Kaonak through Intergenerational Adaptation and Cultural Resilience

The final theme explores how efforts to sustain Kaonak serve as a foundation for preserving indigenous communicative traditions and moral values in contemporary Papuan society. Despite the pressures of modernization, participants

expressed a strong sense of responsibility to pass down the practice to younger generations, often framing it as an act of cultural guardianship. Elders emphasized that maintaining Kaonak is not only about retaining a gesture, but also about preserving the moral universe that underlies Papuan ways of communication.

Table 3. Participants’ Sustaining Kaonak through Intergenerational Adaptation and Cultural Resilience

Participant	Extract
AP (Elder)	“If Kaonak disappears, it means our way of respecting each other is lost. I teach my grandchildren to do Kaonak every morning before school. It’s our reminder that we are one family.”
DW (Community Leader)	“We use Kaonak in every meeting to remind young people that our tradition is still alive. Even if they study abroad or work in the city, they must bring Kaonak in their heart.”

These testimonies reveal that Kaonak is viewed as a *living heritage*—a communicative bridge between generations. Through community events, church gatherings, and family rituals, the act of Kaonak continues to transmit values of empathy, humility, and social harmony. Its continuity ensures that Papuan communication practices remain grounded in relational ethics, resisting the fragmentation of identity in an increasingly individualistic world.

At the same time, younger participants described innovative ways of integrating Kaonak into modern life. Some mentioned adapting the gesture into cultural performances, digital storytelling, or school-based heritage programs. These creative reinterpretations signify that the preservation of Kaonak does not rely solely on repetition of the old, but on its re-contextualization in new spaces of meaning.

Participant	Extract
JR (Student)	“We post Kaonak videos on Instagram to show that it’s not just old culture. It’s still ours, just in a new way.”

Such hybrid expressions demonstrate *cultural resilience*: the ability of indigenous practices to evolve without losing their core values. Rather than viewing globalization as a threat, some participants saw it as an opportunity to share Kaonak beyond the local setting, transforming it into a symbol of Papuan pride and intercultural dialogue.

Overall, the findings suggest that the sustainability of *Kaonak* depends on both *continuity* and *creativity*. While elders preserve its original moral and spiritual essence, the youth contribute by reimagining its relevance in digital and global spaces. Together, these intergenerational efforts ensure that *Kaonak* remains a dynamic expression of Papuan identity one that continues to unite hearts, sustain respect, and embody indigenous wisdom in the modern era.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that *Kaonak* is not simply a greeting ritual but a profound communicative act that embodies the Papuan moral universe of *basodara* brotherhood, respect, and peace. This aligns with hall (2017) and helm (2024) notion that communication is not merely the exchange of information but a reflection of cultural worldview. Within this worldview, *Kaonak* operates as a moral and emotional language, representing a relational ontology where human connection is prioritized over transactional efficiency. The emphasis on reconciliation, equality, and empathy demonstrates that communicative acts in Papuan culture are intertwined with ethical and spiritual dimensions, functioning as a moral discourse of peace (Pamungkas, 2022).

These findings support shafrian (2015) framework of Cultural Linguistics, which argues that linguistic and communicative practices are shaped by shared cultural conceptualizations. In this light, *Kaonak* is an embodied schema that transmits Papuan values of harmony, balance, and kinship. Recent studies echo this idea, highlighting that indigenous communication practices across Indonesia serve as repositories of moral philosophy and cultural identity amid modernization pressures mahaswa (2025) and yeti (2025) As observed among participants, *Kaonak* operates as both a personal expression of empathy and a communal performance of unity an indigenous communicative epistemology that sustains social cohesion and emotional integrity.

At the same time, the negotiation of *Kaonak* among younger generations illustrates the ongoing tension between cultural continuity and global transformation. Dukut (2018) describe this process as *symbolic colonization*, where

globalized communicative norms subtly displace local semiotic systems. In urban Papua, youth often replace *Kaonak* with more cosmopolitan greetings, associating it with rural or outdated identities. This shift mirrors broader sociolinguistic changes in which globalization redefines what counts as “modern” communication (Danesi, 2017; Dukut, 2018). In addition, as some participants demonstrated, choosing to perform *Kaonak* in professional or digital contexts becomes an act of symbolic resistance a way of asserting indigenous presence in the face of homogenizing forces. Such acts illustrate what pennycook (2022) calls *micro-political practices* everyday communicative decisions that challenge dominant linguistic ideologies.

Furthermore, the persistence of *Kaonak* highlights the adaptive capacity of indigenous semiotic systems. As Bertaux (2020) emphasizes, cultural schemas are dynamic and distributed across generations; they are renegotiated rather than lost. The fact that *Kaonak* continues to hold symbolic value, even when reinterpreted by youth, indicates resilience rather than decline. This resonates with Leff (2015) argument that indigenous communication strategies in non-Western contexts evolve as “knowledge strategies,” adapting to new socio-political realities without abandoning their epistemic foundations. In this sense, *Kaonak* exemplifies what Rupiassa et al (2024) describe as ritualized resistance where traditional gestures become symbolic expressions of cultural continuity.

The implications of these findings extend beyond ethnographic documentation. They point to the necessity of rethinking communication education and intercultural dialogue through a decolonial lens. As Tierney (2018) state decolonizing communication requires recognizing that meaning-making is culturally situated and morally loaded. In Papua, integrating local communicative traditions such as *Kaonak* into educational and social programs could strengthen students’ cultural awareness, empathy, and sense of belonging. Recent research underscores that culturally responsive pedagogy rooted in indigenous values fosters inclusive learning environments and intercultural understanding (Guberina, 2023). Thus, *Kaonak* should not only be preserved as heritage but also recontextualized as a pedagogical and ethical framework for coexistence in a multicultural Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The Kaonak greeting has been examined in this study as an indigenous communication method that reflects Papuan ideals of peace, kinship, and respect while adjusting to the sociocultural demands of globalization. Kaonak is more than just a gesture; it is a philosophical and moral system a way of knowing and connecting that places communication within the moral framework of equality and harmony within the community. The results show that Kaonak serves as a live narrative of Papuan cosmology, a mode of resistance, and a cultural embodiment all at once. In the face of global homogenization, Papuans maintain their identity and relational perspective through their ongoing performance.

The study also demonstrates how Kaonak is continuously negotiated across generations and social contexts. While urban youth may perceive it as outdated, cultural advocates reinterpret and recontextualize Kaonak as an emblem of pride and resilience. This negotiation reflects the dynamic nature of indigenous communication its ability to adapt without losing its ethical and symbolic essence. By viewing Kaonak through postcolonial and critical linguistic lenses, this research highlights that communication practices are not neutral but are deeply entangled with power, identity, and epistemology.

Ultimately, preserving Kaonak means preserving a way of seeing and being in the world. As globalization continues to shape communication norms, the endurance of Kaonak stands as a reminder that cultural diversity is not a relic of the past but a living archive of human knowledge, morality, and coexistence. In this light, Kaonak is not simply a greeting it is a declaration of presence, solidarity, and peace within an increasingly uniform world.

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