

From Wim to Wene: Bakar Batu as a Performative Epistemology of Conflict Classification in Indigenous Papuan Peacebuilding

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Abstract: This study introduces Wene–Wim—an indigenous conceptual distinction in the Nduga language of the Papuan Highlands between Wene (matters amenable to dialogue) and Wim (states of armed enmity)—as a theoretical framework for understanding indigenous epistemologies of conflict classification and resolution. Drawing on in-depth interviews with eighteen key informants across Wamena, Mimika, and the Nduga negotiation network, this article argues that the Bakar Batu (stone-burning) ritual functions not merely as a ceremonial reconciliation mechanism but as a performative epistemology through which the Wene–Wim classification is contested, tested, and authorised. Using Stuart Hall's circuit of culture and Victor Turner's ritual process theory as complementary analytical lenses, the study reconstructs the epistemic architecture underlying Bakar Batu, including its five-stage interpretive system, divinatory dimensions, and temporal horizon of seven generations. The 2023 Mehrstens hostage case is examined as a paradigmatic instance in which the reframing from Wim to Wene opened a culturally legitimate pathway to the 593-day resolution that formal mediation could not achieve. The findings yield three theoretical contributions: first, Wene–Wim constitutes a non-Western conceptual vocabulary that warrants inclusion in international peace studies alongside ubuntu, gacaca, and bashingantahe; second, Bakar Batu operates as an embodied epistemology in which conflict classification is enacted through ritual signs rather than asserted through propositional statements; third, indigenous epistemologies offer mechanisms for testing the authenticity of peaceful intent that formal mediation procedures structurally lack. The study contributes to ongoing debates on the decolonisation of peace and conflict studies, vernacular peacebuilding, and the epistemological autonomy of indigenous knowledge systems in asymmetric conflicts...

Keywords: Wene–Wim; Bakar Batu; indigenous epistemology; Papuan Highlands; performative ritual; vernacular peacebuilding; decolonial peace studies.

Introduction

Peace and conflict studies have, over the past several decades, been dominated by conceptual frameworks rooted in the liberal–rationalist Western intellectual tradition. The canonical works of Johan Galtung on structural violence and positive peace, John Paul Lederach on conflict transformation and moral imagination, and John Burton on basic human needs have shaped the standard vocabulary deployed both in academic research and in international diplomatic practice (Galtung, 1990, 1996;

Lederach, 1997, 2005; Burton, 1990). Since the late 2000s, however, a wave of decolonial critique pioneered by Smith (2012), Connell (2007), and Santos (2014) has raised a fundamental question: do non-Western societies experiencing protracted conflict not possess their own conceptual frameworks that are analytically equivalent to those of the Western tradition? This question has generated a growing literature on indigenous peacebuilding (Mac Ginty, 2008, 2011), vernacular peacebuilding (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013), and hybrid political orders (Boege et al., 2008). Yet the majority of studies in this tradition still tend to document indigenous practices as case studies that illuminate Western theoretical frameworks rather than to elevate indigenous epistemologies as theoretical frameworks in their own right.

The Papuan conflict—particularly in the Highlands centred on Wamena and the Baliem Valley—offers a rich context for exploring this argument. For more than five decades since the 1969 integration, Highland Papuan communities have faced a broad spectrum of conflict, ranging from asymmetric vertical conflict with the Indonesian state involving armed groups such as the *Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat* (TPNPB, the West Papua National Liberation Army) to horizontal inter-tribal conflict (*perang suku*) that unfolds across generations through cycles of revenge and customary fines (Pamungkas, 2024; Forsyth, 2025). Throughout this same period, Highland Papuan communities have practised and continued to develop their own conceptual frameworks for classifying, interpreting, and resolving conflict—frameworks that remain largely unfamiliar to international peace studies.

This study focuses its analysis on one conceptual framework that the authors consider most productive for theoretical development: the *Wene–Wim* distinction in the Nduga language, between *Wene*, which may be understood as "matters that can be dialogued, deliberated upon, and unpacked," and *Wim*, which refers to "a state of war, armed enmity, or blood debt." This distinction was articulated by Djoni Karel Rumpaidus (Informant I-02), one of the principal negotiators in the 2023–2024 hostage case involving Phillip Mark Mehrstens, the New Zealand-citizen Susi Air pilot. Asked about the strategy he used to persuade the TPNPB faction led by Egianus Kogoya to release Mehrstens, Djoni stated emphatically: "This pilot has no *Wene*. What exists is *Wim*. But that *Wim* is between the TPNPB and the Indonesian state. The pilot is *Wene*. So resolve it with *Wene*, not with *Wim*" [Indonesian original: "*Pilot ini Wene-nya tidak ada. Yang ada Wim-nya. Tapi Wim itu antara TPNPB dengan negara Indonesia. Pilot ini Wene. Maka selesaikan dengan Wene, jangan dengan Wim*"] (I-02, personal communication, March 2026). This study argues that the statement is not merely negotiation rhetoric but a substantive epistemological operation: Djoni was performing a reclassification of the conflict that opened a resolution pathway previously closed.

The central argument of this article is that the *Bakar Batu* tradition—a communal ritual characteristic of Highland Papuan societies that involves cooperative cooking using heated stones—functions as a performative epistemology through which the *Wene–Wim* classification is contested, tested, and authorised. *Bakar Batu* is not merely a closing marker of a peace agreement but an epistemological medium in which the authenticity of peaceful intent is tested through a structured sign system (the condition of the leaves, the doneness of the food, the reaction of the piglet when shot with an arrow), the legitimacy of the classificatory framework is validated through collective bodily participation, and the transformation from *Wim* to *Wene* is performed through a strict ritual choreography. *Bakar Batu* thereby furnishes what the authors propose to call an *embodied epistemology*—knowledge that is not only thought or uttered but lived through the body and ratified through ritual.

This study contributes to three theoretical debates. First, it adds conceptual vocabulary to the international peace-studies literature by introducing *Wene–Wim* as an analytical distinction comparable with concepts such as *ubuntu* (Southern Africa), *gacaca* (Rwanda), *bashingantahe* (Burundi), and *musyawarah-mufakat* (Indonesia/Southeast Asia more broadly). Second, it challenges the tendency in the *indigenous peacebuilding* literature to treat customary practices as merely procedural instruments, by showing that such practices in fact carry substantive epistemological content. Third, it offers a rich empirical case—the 593-day Mehrstens hostage situation of 2023–2024—as a paradigmatic instance illustrating how indigenous epistemology can open exits from the impasses of formal negotiation in contemporary asymmetric conflicts.

The article is organised into seven sections. Section 2 reviews the literature on the decolonisation of peace studies and on *Bakar Batu*. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework, integrating Hall's circuit of culture, Turner's ritual process theory, and Fricker's epistemic injustice. Section 4 describes the research method, including the informant code table that underpins the analysis. Section 5 presents the findings and discussion in four sub-sections that reconstruct the epistemological architecture of *Wene–Wim* and its operationalisation through *Bakar Batu*. Section 6 develops the theoretical discussion and policy implications, and Section 7 concludes with a reflection on limitations and an agenda for further research.

Literature Review

2.1 The Decolonisation of Peace Studies and Indigenous Peacebuilding

Scholarly discourse on the decolonisation of peace studies has developed substantially since Smith (2012, 2021) raised the question of indigenous epistemology in *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Her core argument is that academic research about indigenous communities has historically been dominated by conceptual frameworks rooted in a colonial–Western tradition, in which the voices and knowledges of indigenous peoples have been treated as raw data to be interpreted through Western theoretical frameworks rather than as sources of autonomous theory. Smith advances a methodological agenda that situates indigenous epistemology as equivalent to—rather than subordinate to—mainstream academic traditions.

In the field of peace studies, Mac Ginty (2008, 2011) developed the concepts of *indigenous peacebuilding* and *vernacular peacebuilding* to describe practices of conflict resolution rooted in local culture and operating outside the formal architecture of the *liberal peace*. Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) extended the argument by showing that *vernacular* approaches are not merely supplementary but are often more effective than international interventions that import foreign conceptual frameworks. Boege, Brown, Clements, and Nolan (2008) added the concept of *hybrid political orders* to describe situations in which customary authority and state authority operate in parallel, sometimes in conflict and sometimes in synergy.

One important critique of this literature—which serves as the point of departure for the present study—is that many *indigenous peacebuilding* studies continue to treat customary practices as cases that illuminate or challenge Western theoretical frameworks rather than as theoretical sources in themselves. As Connell (2007) argues in *Southern Theory*, communities of the global South continue to be positioned as sites of empirical extraction, while conceptual–theoretical work remains monopolised by the academy of the global North. The present study seeks to contribute to the next wave of decolonising peace studies by situating an indigenous Papuan conceptual framework—*Wene–Wim*—as an analytically equivalent theoretical framework.

2.2 Bakar Batu in the Academic Literature

The academic literature on the *Bakar Batu* tradition in Papua is not abundant but has nevertheless developed along several distinct analytical directions. Wanane (2020) offers a basic anthropological account of *Bakar Batu* as a customary reconciliation mechanism in Papua, focused on its socio-structural function. Karyadi (2020) takes a different approach by framing *Bakar Batu* as a reflection of Pancasila ideology, foregrounding the dimensions of *gotong royong* (cooperative work), *musyawarah* (deliberation), and distributive justice, which she argues resonate with Indonesian national values. Budiarti (2018, 2020, 2022) explores the thermodynamic and pedagogical dimensions of *Bakar Batu*, showing that the ritual embodies substantive empirical technical knowledge about heat transfer, the heat capacity of volcanic stones, and techniques of thermal insulation using leaves and earth.

Pamungkas (2021) extends the analysis to the peacebuilding dimension by positioning *Bakar Batu* and similar traditions as mechanisms for the prevention of religious conflict in Papua, foregrounding the capacity of such traditions to integrate plural communities. Hernawan (2018) provides historical–political contextualisation of reconciliation in Papua, although not focused specifically on *Bakar Batu*.

Mulyadi (2019) addresses the legitimacy of the *Ondoafi* in Sentani—which may be regarded as an institutional parallel to customary authority in the Highlands—in the settlement of customary land disputes.

What has not yet received adequate attention in this literature is the **epistemological dimension** of *Bakar Batu*. The existing studies tend to treat *Bakar Batu* as a ritual practice whose features can be described, whose function can be analysed, or which can be linked to particular theoretical frameworks (Pancasila, peacebuilding, thermodynamics). There has, however, been no systematic attempt to reconstruct the epistemological knowledge inherent in the ritual itself—knowledge of how to classify conflict, how to test the authenticity of peaceful intent, and how to validate the success of reconciliation through signs. The present study seeks to address this gap.

2.3 The Mehrtens Case and Asymmetric Conflict in Papua

The hostage case of Phillip Mark Mehrtens, the New Zealand-citizen Susi Air pilot held by the TPNPB faction under Egianus Kogoya from 7 February 2023 to 21 September 2024, has become a case study in several academic and journalistic accounts. Pamungkas and Zamzamy (2023) conduct a comparative framing analysis of the case as reported by Kompas.com and Suara Papua, highlighting the polarisation between security narratives and human-rights narratives. McDougall (2021), though written before the Mehrtens case unfolded, provides context on the international dimensions of the Papuan conflict and the involvement of neighbouring states such as Australia and New Zealand.

This literature, however, consistently locates the Mehrtens case within the frameworks of geopolitics, international diplomacy, or media analysis; it has not yet explored the dimension of customary epistemology in the negotiation process. The present study argues that the success of a 593-day negotiation—culminating in a release officially confirmed by the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs to have occurred without ransom payment—cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the epistemological work performed by Papuan negotiators in reclassifying the conflict from *Wim* to *Wene*. In this reading, the Mehrtens case becomes a paradigmatic case not only because of its duration and international dimensions but because it reveals how indigenous epistemology can operate as a conceptual infrastructure for the resolution of contemporary asymmetric conflict.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical frameworks to construct its analysis of *Wene–Wim* as a performative epistemology operationalised through *Bakar Batu*.

First, Stuart Hall's (1997) *circuit of culture* provides a framework for mapping how cultural meaning is produced, represented, consumed, negotiated through identity, and regulated by institutions. The present study draws on Hall's five moments to analyse how the *Wene–Wim* distinction and the *Bakar Batu* ritual operate as a dynamic system of meaning: who produces the classification of conflict, how that classification is represented across various discourses, how it is consumed or interpreted by different actors, how it shapes participants' identities, and how it is regulated by customary and state authorities.

Second, Victor Turner's (1969) theory of the ritual process develops the concepts of *liminality* and *communitas* as transformative phases within ritual. This study draws on Turner's three-phase framework—separation, liminal, and reaggregation—to analyse how *Bakar Batu* creates the structural conditions under which conflict identities may be set aside, equal negotiation may proceed, and identity transformation may be authorised. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the *third space* complements Turner's framework by showing how liminal space enables a more productive negotiation of identity than the arena of formal confrontation.

Third, the framework of *epistemic justice* developed by Fricker (2007) and extended by Dotson (2014) on *epistemic oppression* provides the conceptual tools for addressing how indigenous

epistemology has historically been marginalised in academic and policy domains, and how the present study seeks to contribute to *epistemic reparation* by positioning *Wene–Wim* as analytically equivalent to Western frameworks. Fricker's argument on *hermeneutical injustice*—injustice in access to the conceptual vocabulary needed to understand one's experience—is relevant for explaining why Papuan practices have long remained hidden from the international literature.

Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case-study design with a cultural-studies orientation and elements of reflective ethnography. The case study was chosen because it allows in-depth analysis of a complex contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2018), particularly where the analysed phenomenon—*Bakar Batu* as the operationalisation of the *Wene–Wim* epistemology—cannot be separated from the socio-political setting in which it operates.

4.2 Sites and Period of Research

Fieldwork was conducted at three principal sites: Jayawijaya Regency (Wamena), as the cultural centre of the Highland Papuan region and the domicile of many Lani–Dani customary leaders; Mimika Regency (Timika), as the initial locus of negotiation in the Mehrtens case and the place of residence of several key informants; and a network of communication with Nduga leaders, some of whom reside in Wamena and Jakarta. Data collection took place between January and May 2026, with several follow-up interviews conducted through remote communication.

4.3 Informants and Purposive Sampling

Eighteen informants were selected purposively to ensure balanced representation across the various socio-structural positions relevant to an epistemological analysis of *Bakar Batu*. Table 1 presents the informant codes used throughout the article to refer to testimony without repeating full names. Sensitive identities have been pseudonymised.

Table 1. Research Informant Codes

Code	Name	Position	Location	Actor Category
I-01	Edison Gwijangge	Former Acting Regent of Nduga; principal negotiator in the Mehrtens case	Nduga / Wamena	Local Papuan elite / Negotiator
I-02	Djoni Karel Rumpaidus	Assistant I, Regional Secretariat of Nduga; principal negotiator in the Mehrtens case	Nduga / Jayapura	Local Papuan elite / Negotiator
I-03	Dr Abisai Kogoya	Customary leader and Lani intellectual	Wamena	Customary leader
I-04	Herman Dogu	Head of the Indigenous Peoples' Council (LMA) of Papua	Wamena	Customary leader
I-05	Paulus Gwidjangge	Community leader of Mapenduma	Nduga / Wamena	Customary leader

I-06	Tinus Giban	Head of the District Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs	Wamena	Religious leader
I-07	Eko Hariyanto	Head of the Islamic Community Affairs Section, MoRA; FKUB figure	Wamena	Religious leader
I-08	Karolice Cikwa	Christian Women's Affairs Officer, MoRA	Wamena	Religious leader
I-09	Lt Col (Inf) Ilham Datu Ramang	Commander, Military District Command 1702/Jayawijaya	Wamena	Security apparatus (Army)
I-10	AKP Albertus Mabel	Deputy Chief, Jayawijaya District Police	Wamena	Security apparatus (Police)
I-11	Heru	Mid-ranking officer, Kodim Wamena	Wamena	Security apparatus (Army)
I-12	Kompol Junan Plitomo	Deputy Chief, Mimika District Police	Mimika	Security apparatus (Police)
I-13	Waren Wandigbo	Head of Kesbangpol	Wamena	Regional bureaucrat
I-14	Yohana Paliling	Assistant for Economic Affairs, Regency Government	Mimika	Regional bureaucrat
I-15	Denius Kogoya	High-school principal	Wamena	Local intellectual
I-16	Usi	Master's student at UNY, originally from Wamena	Wamena / Yogyakarta	Youth generation
I-17	(Identity withheld)	Senior customary leader	Highlands	Customary leader
I-18	(Identity withheld)	Former negotiator	Papua	Negotiator

4.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with each informant, non-participatory observation at several customary events and coordination meetings, and analysis of documents including media reports from the 2023–2026 period, Special Autonomy policy documents for Papua, and related academic literature. Each interview lasted between 90 and 180 minutes, was audio-recorded with permission, and was transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was thematic and guided by Hall's circuit of culture, proceeding through four iterative stages: (1) open coding to identify key concepts emerging from the data, with particular attention to customary terminology in the Nduga, Lani, and Dani languages; (2) axial coding to

establish relationships among those concepts, especially to reconstruct the epistemological architecture of *Wene–Wim*; (3) selective coding to identify central themes and cross-informant patterns; (4) theoretical interpretation through the lenses of Hall, Turner, and Fricker. Validity was ensured through source triangulation (multiple informants for each principal claim), method triangulation (interviews, observation, documents), member checking with selected key informants (in particular I-01, I-02, and I-03 for the conceptual validation of *Wene–Wim*), and researcher reflexivity documented in field notes.

4.5 Translation Procedure and Interpretive Validity

All interviews were conducted in Indonesian and in the local dialects of the Highland Papuan region (with Nduga, Lani, and Dani lexical elements). Transcription was carried out verbatim in the original languages, and the transcripts were subsequently translated into English by the authors. To safeguard interpretive validity, several procedures were applied. First, back-translation was performed on conceptually critical statements—particularly those articulating the *Wene–Wim* distinction, the five-stage evaluative system of *Bakar Batu*, and the temporal horizon of "seven generations"—to ensure that the meaning intended by the informants was preserved. Second, culturally bound terms (*cultural-bound terms*) whose meanings would diminish or be biased if translated were retained in their original form, set in italics, and accompanied by a contextual English gloss at first appearance (e.g., *Bakar Batu*, *Wene*, *Wim*, *Kerepem Sakuko*, *ndugure*, *Ondoafi*). Third, for direct quotations carrying particular conceptual, emotional, or political weight, the original-language wording is provided in square brackets following the English translation, so that international readers can assess the linguistic structure of the original utterance. Fourth, key conceptual translations were validated through member checking with informants I-01, I-02, and I-03.

Findings and Discussion

5.1 The Epistemological Architecture of *Wene–Wim*: Categorial Distinction as Conceptual Technology

The first argument developed in this section is that *Wene–Wim* is not merely a customary vocabulary for "matters" and "war," but a conceptual technology through which Papuan actors classify conflict situations and determine the corresponding pathways of resolution. This understanding emerges with particular clarity from the testimony of I-02, who articulates the distinction in the context of the negotiations leading to Mehrstens's release.

I-02 sets out the classificatory framework he employs with striking conceptual precision: "This pilot has no *Wene*. What exists is *Wim*. But that *Wim* is between the TPNPB and the Indonesian state. The pilot is *Wene*. So resolve it with *Wene*, not with *Wim*. If you use *Wim*, the pilot will surely die. Because *Wim* is a blood debt; it must be repaid in blood. But if you use *Wene*, there is a way to sit and talk" [Indonesian original: "*Pilot ini Wene-nya tidak ada. Yang ada Wim-nya. Tapi Wim itu antara TPNPB dengan negara Indonesia. Pilot ini Wene. Maka selesaikan dengan Wene, jangan dengan Wim. Kalau kau pakai Wim, pilot itu pasti mati. Karena Wim itu hutang darah, harus dibalas dengan darah. Tapi kalau kau pakai Wene, ada jalan duduk bicara*"] (I-02). Read through Hall's (1997) analytical framework, this statement is a highly self-aware and strategic operation of meaning production. I-02 is performing a fundamental reframing: a conflict classified in Indonesian national-media narratives as "an act of terrorism by KKB" (*Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata*, or armed criminal group), framed in international media as "national liberation struggle," and treated by Indonesian security forces as a "security situation," is reclassified through a customary framework as "*Wene*"—a matter within the domain of what can be dialogued.

This epistemological operation has wide-ranging practical implications. As I-02 explains further: "Because I said this is *Wene*, I could then invite the families. Those who held that pilot included Nirigi, Gwijangge, Kogoya, Wandikbo, Tabuni, and Murib. There are many of them in there. So we invited them. The families sat down together first, and then we burnt the stones" [Indonesian original: "*Karena saya bilang ini Wene, maka saya bisa undang keluarga-keluarga. ... Keluarga-keluarga itu duduk bareng dulu kita bicara. Baru kita bakar batu*"] (I-02). A strict procedural logic is at work here: classification as *Wene*

opens the resolution pathway that mobilises kinship networks and the *Bakar Batu* ritual; classification as *Wim* would close that pathway and direct events down the channel of continuous reprisal.

Dr Abisai Kogoya (I-03), as a customary leader and Lani intellectual, offers a complementary understanding of the distinction from a broader vantage point. He explains: "There are matters that can still be talked about, and there are matters whose time for talking has passed. If it can still be talked about, we settle it by sitting down, by custom. If the time for talking has passed, when the machetes and arrows have been drawn, that is different. That is already *Wim*. But what is interesting is that *Wim* can also return to *Wene*, if a *ndugure* [respected war-leader/peace-broker] speaks, if a *Bakar Batu* is carried out properly" (I-03). I-03's statement broadens the authors' understanding of *Wene–Wim* with one critical insight: the distinction is not static but dynamic. A conflict initially located in the domain of *Wim* can be brought back into the domain of *Wene* through specific interventions, including a *Bakar Batu* properly performed. This is the point of departure for the article's central argument: *Bakar Batu* is not merely a closing ritual once a matter has been resolved but an epistemological technology that can alter the very classification of the conflict.

The consistency of the *Wene–Wim* distinction is further corroborated by the testimony of I-05, a community leader from Mapenduma, who explains the concept of *Kerepem Sakuko* as a Nduga customary fine mechanism: "If there is a problem, there is its *Kerepem Sakuko*. How much must be paid, with what, and to whom—there is a reckoning. If the *Kerepem Sakuko* is met, the problem is resolved. If it is not, it can become *Wim*. *Wim* means everything has been lost; there is no longer anything that can be talked about" (I-05). The *Kerepem Sakuko* system, as explained by I-05, is thus the operational bridge between *Wene* and *Wim*: it is the mechanism that sustains classification as *Wene* so long as customary compensation can be negotiated and paid, while failure of *Kerepem Sakuko* is the threshold that moves the classification towards *Wim*.

Table 2 summarises the principal dimensions of the *Wene–Wim* distinction as reconstructed from a triangulation of informant testimony.

Table 2. Dimensions of the *Wene–Wim* Distinction

Dimension	<i>Wene</i>	<i>Wim</i>
Ontology of conflict	A matter that can be unpacked and discussed	A state of war / armed enmity
Resolution pathway	Dialogue, deliberation, customary compensation	Armed combat, retaliation
Principal actors	Customary elders, families, mediators	War parties, war-leaders (<i>ndugure</i>)
Mechanism	<i>Kerepem Sakuko</i> , sitting together, <i>Bakar Batu</i>	Taking up arms, declaration of war
Temporal horizon	Short to medium term (<i>musyawarah–mufakat</i>)	Cross-generational (cycles of revenge)
Convertibility	May convert into <i>Wim</i> if it fails	May convert back into <i>Wene</i> through <i>ndugure</i> and <i>Bakar Batu</i>

From this reconstruction, the first thesis of this study can be formulated: *Wene–Wim constitutes a conceptual technology that allows for the dynamic classification of conflict situations, with direct implications for the resolution pathways considered legitimate and practicable*. This framework differs fundamentally from Western frameworks that tend to treat conflict in terms of gradations of intensity (low, medium, high) or structural typologies (interpersonal, communal, international). The *Wene–Wim* distinction is a categorial distinction that determines whether the channel of dialogue is still open or has been closed.

5.2 Bakar Batu as Performative Epistemology: The Five Evaluative Stages as a Sign System

The second argument developed in this section is that *Bakar Batu* operates as a performative epistemology—knowledge that works through the enactment of ritual rather than through propositional statement. This claim is built on the testimony of I-01, who articulates the five-stage evaluative framework of *Bakar Batu* as a sign system through which the authenticity of peaceful intent and the success of reconciliation can be read.

I-01 sets out this framework systematically: "*Bakar Batu* has five stages. First, people burn the stones; they raise the smoke. The smoke rises—that is to say, 'we are here.' The smoke goes up so that we are. But before the smoke, there is the killing of the pig. People watch the pig at the moment its bristles—with the arrow, how the arrow strikes. That is judged. Second, the smoke. Third, the cooking—people see the condition of the cooked food. Is it raw, fully cooked, or burnt? That is judged. Fourth, the distribution. Once everything is cooked, people from all directions gather for the communal feast. Is the distribution fair or not? That is judged. Fifth, honour. How are the guests honoured, how are the elders honoured? That, too, is judged" (I-01).

These five stages, on careful analysis, constitute a highly structured sign system—what the authors propose to call a *semiotic system* in Hall's (1997) terminology. The first stage (the shooting of the pig) communicates the capacity and seriousness of the host party. The second (the smoke) functions as an ontological communication—"we are"—an affirmation of the existence of the community holding the ritual. The third (the condition of doneness) functions as divination concerning the success of the ritual; if anything is burnt or undercooked, this is a sign that something is amiss. The fourth (distribution) tests fairness and inclusivity. The fifth (honour) validates the socio-moral structure being reaffirmed.

What is crucial for the epistemological argument is that **the truth of the ritual is not declared verbally but shown through signs to be read**. I-03 deepens the divinatory dimension of this point: "No. There are certain people who are skilled in seeing it. We can also be taught. If the leaves look like this, it means success. If the leaves look like that, it does not. If the cooking is not burnt and turns out well, that means success. If the leaves covering the food show burning, that is also a sign of misfortune. If it is undercooked, that, too, is a sign of misfortune" (I-03). This capacity to read the signs, as I-03 emphasises, is not a universal skill but an epistemic competence held hierarchically by certain customary figures who have been "taught."

I-11 (Heru, a mid-ranking officer at Kodim Wamena) adds a more dramatic dimension to this sign system: "If the piglet is shot with an arrow and dies immediately, it means that the two sides are truly sincere and that peace will hold. But if it is shot and then runs about before dying, their confidence is that peace will be tainted. Within a few days, conflict will return" (I-11). This testimony is particularly arresting because it comes from a member of the state security apparatus—someone institutionally expected to operate within the rational-procedural framework of the state—yet who articulates the logic of the customary sign system with notable skill. That I-11 describes this divinatory dimension in detail and appears to accept its validity as useful field-level intelligence indicates that the epistemology of *Bakar Batu* is understood not only by customary actors but has also entered the comprehension of state actors.

I-15 (Denius Kogoya) reinforces the argument concerning the performative dimension through testimony on the sacrality that materialises physically: "When the stones are burnt, the pig that is sacrificed does not come only from one side. Both sides. Together. And it is cooked together. Eaten together. The point of sacrality lies right there" (I-15). Sacrality, in I-15's reading, is not an abstract category but a condition created through collective bodily action: jointly contributing the pig, jointly cooking, jointly eating. This is what the authors mean by *embodied epistemology*—knowledge that is not only thought or stated but performed through the body.

From this reconstruction, the second thesis of the study can be formulated: *Bakar Batu operates as a performative epistemology that supplies a mechanism for testing the authenticity of peaceful*

intent that is structurally absent from formal mediation procedures. Formal mediation operates on a logic of propositional statement: the parties declare that they agree to make peace, the agreement is documented, and it is treated as binding by virtue of the accompanying legal authority. *Bakar Batu* operates on a different logic: parties must *show* their peaceful intent through material contribution, ritual patience, and bodily participation, and the authenticity of that intent is tested through a sign system legible to the community. A written agreement can lie; signs within ritual are difficult to manipulate.

5.3 Operationalising Wene–Wim in the Mehrtens Case: Bakar Batu as an Exit from Impasse

The third argument developed here is that the 2023–2024 Mehrtens hostage case may be read in depth as a paradigmatic case of the operationalisation of the *Wene–Wim* epistemological framework through the *Bakar Batu* ritual, and that this case shows the capacity of indigenous epistemology to open an exit from formal-negotiation impasses in contemporary asymmetric conflict.

The Mehrtens hostage situation began on 7 February 2023, when the Susi Air aircraft that he was piloting landed at the airfield of Paro District, Nduga Regency, and was seized by a TPNPB unit under Egianus Kogoya. The aircraft was burned and Mehrtens taken hostage. The initial demand conveyed by TPNPB spokesperson Sebbi Sambom was recognition of West Papuan independence—a demand that the Indonesian government could not structurally meet, so that formal negotiation reached an impasse from the outset. A military approach was also rejected by the New Zealand government because of the risk to the hostage's safety, and by the Indonesian government because previous military operations in Papua had demonstrated a high risk of civilian casualties.

In this context of impasse, the negotiating network led by I-01 (Edison Gwijangge) and I-02 (Djoni Karel Rumpaidus) began to work within a different framework. I-01 explains the philosophy of his approach: "I used AD6—a family approach, a cultural approach, a customary approach, a humanist approach, a religious approach (we are children of God, we must use a religious approach), and a social approach. I attended a meeting with President Prabowo. He even summoned me, and I introduced this pattern" [Indonesian original: "*Saya pakai AD6. Pendekatan keluarga, pendekatan budaya, pendekatan adat, pendekatan humanis, pendekatan religi—kita anak-anak Tuhan, harus pakai pendekatan religi—dan pendekatan sosial*"] (I-01). The AD6 framework developed by I-01 is, on close analysis, a practical operationalisation of the case's classification as *Wene*: the family, cultural, customary, humanist, religious, and social approaches are all pathways open within the domain of *Wene*; all are closed within the domain of *Wim*.

The epistemological work performed by I-02 in classifying the case as *Wene* had immediate practical consequences. As he explains: "Because I said it is *Wene*, I could then invite the families. The families sat down together first, and only then did we burn the stones" [Indonesian original: "*Karena saya bilang ini Wene, maka saya bisa undang keluarga-keluarga. Keluarga-keluarga itu duduk bareng dulu kita bicara. Baru kita bakar batu*"] (I-02). Classification as *Wene* opens the channel of kinship networks—the Nirigi, Gwijangge, Kogoya, Wandikbo, Tabuni, and Murib clans, each of whom has members on both sides of the conflict (in the TPNPB and within government/civil society). This network, which cannot be mobilised through the state's institutional framework, can be activated through the customary framework.

The *Bakar Batu* rituals carried out within the framework of the Mehrtens negotiations were therefore not merely ceremonial events accompanying the negotiation process; they were the arena in which the negotiation process itself unfolded. I-02 details the coordination required: "At that time we communicated with the Regional Military Commander, the Joint Regional Defence Command III commander, the Provincial Police Chief, the Head of the State Intelligence Agency for Papua, and the District Police Chiefs of Jayawijaya, Nduga, Mimika, and Lanny Jaya—so that across these areas, when the young people we had sent in moved through, there would be no incidents" (I-02). This high-level security coordination was necessary precisely because the *Bakar Batu* ritual required a safe space in which to be held: TPNPB members had to be able to attend without risk of arrest, customary elders had to be able to move between different territories, and logistical coordination had to proceed without military intervention that could disrupt the process.

What deserves particular attention is how the *Wene–Wim* epistemological framework enables what the authors propose to call *strategic ambiguity*—a productive blurring. Within the framework of *Wene*, the Mehrtens case was treated as "a matter that can be dialogued," a classification that opened a resolution pathway. Yet this dialogue did not require the TPNPB to withdraw its demand for independence, nor did it require the Indonesian government to make substantive political concessions. Demands and concessions remained within the broader domain of *Wim* (structurally between the TPNPB and the Indonesian state), while the resolution of the Mehrtens case specifically proceeded within the domain of *Wene*. This strategic blurring enabled both sides to maintain their political positions while resolving the concrete case at hand.

I-09 (Lt Col Inf Ilham Datu Ramang, Commander of Kodim 1702/Jayawijaya) offers a striking reflection on the Mehrtens case from the perspective of the state apparatus: "I don't know. As for how he was eventually freed, whether by cultural approach, mediation, or military operation, I don't know. Those who were on duty at the time would know better. Perhaps the previous office-holders understand it, because it was during their tenure" (I-09). The acknowledged unknowing of I-09 is analytically revealing: it indicates that the Mehrtens resolution proceeded through channels largely undocumented in the formal institutional communications of the security apparatus, and that knowledge of the process is dispersed across more informal networks. This is what the authors propose to call *epistemic invisibility*—effective resolution pathways that remain invisible to formal institutions.

Mehrtens's release was finally achieved on 21 September 2024, after 593 days in captivity. Crucial for the present argument is the official confirmation by the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Hadi Tjahjanto, that the release occurred without ransom payment. This confirms that the effective resolution pathway was not transactional—not an exchange of money for the hostage—but epistemological and ritualistic: a reframing of the conflict from *Wim* to *Wene*, the activation of kinship networks, and a *Bakar Batu* ritual that ratified the transformation.

From this analysis, the third thesis of the study can be formulated: **the Mehrtens case demonstrates the capacity of the indigenous *Wene–Wim* epistemology, operationalised through *Bakar Batu*, to open an exit from formal-negotiation impasses in contemporary asymmetric conflict involving non-state actors with fundamental political demands.** This capacity rests on three structural features: (1) the *Wene–Wim* classification allows an analytical separation between the concrete case and structural demands; (2) the *Bakar Batu* ritual activates kinship networks inaccessible to the state; (3) the sign system of *Bakar Batu* supplies a mechanism for testing authenticity that substitutes for the need for legal–formal guarantees.

5.4 The Seven-Generation Temporal Horizon and the Scale of Indigenous Epistemology

The fourth and final argument of this section is that the *Wene–Wim* epistemology, as operationalised through *Bakar Batu*, operates on a temporal horizon fundamentally different from that of formal policy frameworks. This horizon, articulated by I-01 as "seven descendants" (*tujuh turunan*), offers a temporal frame for understanding the long-term effectiveness of the ritual that is difficult to capture through annual or five-year policy planning cycles.

I-01 explains this temporal dimension explicitly: "The disputing parties must come back into peace. As people say, the blood is washed. 'Washing the blood' means the cooking instrument is the pig—the bleeding thing—cooked together there. Cooked together, eaten together. Done. It runs all the way to children and grandchildren, to the seventh descendant. It is safe; they do not suffer the impact, they do not bear the risk" [Indonesian original: "... sampai berbuntut sampai anak cucu ke tujuh turunan. Itu aman, dia tidak kena dampak, tidak kena risiko"] (I-01). The concept of "seven descendants" offered by I-01 is not merely a metaphor for "the long term" but a specific temporal frame that determines the scope of the obligation and protection produced by the ritual. A conflict properly resolved through *Bakar Batu*, in this understanding, generates conditions of safety that extend across seven generations—and conversely, a conflict not properly resolved produces a blood debt that likewise extends across generations.

This understanding is corroborated through the testimony of I-04 (Herman Dogu) on the structure of customary law: "In custom, when there is a killing, it is not only between the perpetrator and the victim's family. It is between two clans, extending into the generations to come. If it is not resolved properly through ritual, revenge can surface in the third, fourth, or fifth generation. That is why resolution must be complete. *Bakar Batu* is the guarantee of that completeness" (I-04). What is markedly different here, compared with modern legal frameworks, is the temporal scale of accountability. In modern law, criminal liability is subject to statutes of limitations; civil violations are resolved within fixed periods; legal responsibility is not, except in special cases, inherited. In the customary epistemology articulated by I-04, accountability and obligation are inherited across generations, and *Bakar Batu* is the mechanism that can sever or bind that cycle.

The epistemological implication of this temporal scale is consequential for the article's argument. If formal policy operates on a relatively short temporal horizon—a single term of office, a five-year plan, a single budget cycle—then such policy cannot, structurally, address conflict that operates on a seven-generation horizon. This, in the authors' view, is one fundamental reason why formal approaches frequently fail in Papua: not only because of insufficient cultural legitimacy but because of a fundamental mismatch between the temporal scale of policy and the temporal scale of conflict. The *Wene–Wim* epistemology, with *Bakar Batu* as its operationalisation, offers a temporal frame commensurate with the actual scale of the conflict.

I-05 reinforces the argument by stressing the role of cross-generational "witnesses" within *Bakar Batu* for large-scale conflicts: "For major conflicts, many must be present. Not only the families of the two sides. There must be the head of the tribe, customary leaders, religious leaders, government, security personnel, the community, and sometimes officials also come. Because this is not a one-person matter. For a major conflict, everyone needs to know that the matter is resolved. So that for the coming generation, if anyone should try to revive the matter, it can be said: there was already a *Bakar Batu*; these people were already present; it is already settled" (I-05). The witness function explained by I-05 adds an important dimension to the epistemology of *Bakar Batu*: the ritual is not only an event but the production of collective memory that will be transmitted to future generations as knowledge of a resolution that has taken place.

From this reconstruction, the fourth thesis of the study can be formulated: **the *Wene–Wim* epistemology operates on a seven-generation temporal horizon that differs structurally from formal policy frameworks, and it is this difference of temporal scale that partly accounts for the relatively greater capacity of indigenous epistemology to address protracted conflict in Papua.** The practical implication is that the integration of indigenous epistemology into policy cannot proceed by shrinking the temporal horizon of the customary system to fit the policy cycle; rather, the policy framework must be expanded to accommodate a longer temporal horizon.

Discussion

This section addresses the theoretical and practical implications of the four theses constructed above, situating the findings of this study within contemporary debates in peace studies, the anthropology of conflict, and political epistemology.

6.1 Contribution to the Decolonisation of Peace Studies

The principal argument of this study is that *Wene–Wim* is an indigenous Papuan epistemological framework analytically equivalent to well-established conceptual frameworks in the international peace-studies literature. This claim engages directly with the decolonisation agenda advocated by Smith (2012, 2021) and Connell (2007). The authors argue that, in order to qualify as an equivalent conceptual framework, an epistemological system must satisfy at least three criteria: (1) it must possess a distinctive vocabulary that captures analytical distinctions not captured by other frameworks; (2) it must have a practical operationalisation testable against empirical reality; (3) it must yield implications transferable to other contexts through appropriate adaptation.

Wene–Wim satisfies the first criterion through a categorial distinction between two states of being that is not fully captured by Galtung's framework of violence (direct, structural, cultural) or Lederach's framework of justpeace. Galtung addresses forms of violence; *Wene–Wim* addresses the basic categories of the conflict domain. Lederach addresses dimensions of conflict transformation; *Wene–Wim* addresses the initial classification that determines whether such transformation is still possible or has already passed into the domain of revenge.

Wene–Wim satisfies the second criterion through the practical operationalisation in the Mehrtens case analysed above. The case shows that the framework is not a mere ethnographic abstraction but a conceptual technology that can be mobilised to resolve concrete conflicts. That resolution occurred without ransom payment, through kinship networks activated by classification as *Wene*, and was ratified through the *Bakar Batu* ritual, is the empirical proof of that operationalisation.

Wene–Wim satisfies the third criterion, with certain qualifications, through the possibility of transfer to other contexts. The authors do not claim that *Wene–Wim* can be applied directly outside the Highland Papuan context; each society has its own conceptual frameworks. However, the principles that underpin *Wene–Wim*—categorial classification rather than gradation, the analytical separation between the concrete case and structural demands, the testing of authenticity through a performative sign system, and a cross-generational temporal horizon—may inspire the development of analogous frameworks in other conflict contexts in Melanesia (see Adamo, 2018 on Bougainville; Forsyth, 2025 on the PNG Highlands) and beyond.

6.2 Contribution to Ritual Theory and Performative Epistemology

This study also contributes to ritual theory by extending Turner's (1969) framework of the ritual process with a more explicit epistemological dimension. Turner classically emphasised the structural–functional dimension of ritual: how ritual generates *communitas*, how it facilitates liminal transition, how it produces identity transformation. The present study adds that ritual also functions as an *epistemic technology*—a knowledge system that reads, classifies, and validates social reality.

The concept of *embodied epistemology* advanced by the authors in Section 5.2 brings out a dimension that has, in the authors' view, been insufficiently explored in the ritual literature: that knowledge within ritual is not only demonstrated or communicated but *produced* through bodily action. When I-15 says "the point of sacrality lies right there," referring to the moment of cooking and eating together, he is not describing a ritual that communicates a sacrality existing prior to and outside the ritual. He describes a ritual that *produces* sacrality itself through bodily participation. This is a fundamentally different understanding from much of the ritual literature, which tends to treat ritual as a medium for the expression of pre-existing meaning.

The five evaluative stages of *Bakar Batu* articulated by I-01 also supply a more systematic analytical contribution than the general descriptions of ritual common in the ethnographic literature on Papua. These five stages are not merely a chronological sequence of activities; they constitute a structured sign system in which each stage serves as a distinct test of a different dimension of the reconciliation process: seriousness (the shooting), the existence of community (the smoke), ritual success (doneness), distributive fairness (the sharing), and socio-moral structure (honour). This system anticipates that the reconciliation process requires multidimensional testing—a more complex understanding than that built into most formal mediation frameworks, which tend to operate on only one or two dimensions.

6.3 Implications for Conflict-Resolution Policy in Papua

At the policy level, the implications of this study must be conveyed with care to avoid the instrumentalisation of indigenous epistemology by formal policy frameworks. The authors wish to underline several principles emerging from the analysis.

First, the integration of indigenous epistemology into conflict-resolution strategies in Papua cannot proceed through formalisation or standardisation. Attempts to absorb *Bakar Batu* into official

state protocols, or to render *Wene–Wim* a legal category amenable to codification, would precisely paralyse the transformative power of the epistemology. What can be done is recognition: recognition of customary authorities as legitimate actors, recognition of ritual processes as mechanisms capable of validating resolution, and recognition of a longer temporal horizon as a relevant framework for evaluating effectiveness.

Second, the *institutional learning* identified in the testimony of security-apparatus informants (in particular I-09 and I-11) indicates that an understanding of indigenous epistemology can be developed through long-term field experience, and that such experience needs to be institutionalised in training and personnel-rotation policies. At present, the knowledge held by apparatus members such as I-09 and I-11 about the customary framework depends largely on their personal involvement in Papua; rapid rotation of postings risks destroying this accumulated knowledge.

Third, fiscal support sensitive to cultural logic—such as the dedicated budget code for *Bakar Batu* funding described by I-14—represents an institutional-adaptation model worth considering for replication in other Papuan regencies. Such support acknowledges the legitimacy of customary mechanisms without forcing them into legal formality.

6.4 Limitations and Reflexive Considerations

The authors note several limitations of this study. First, the claim that *Wene–Wim* is a stabilised concept in the Nduga language requires further linguistic and ethnographic validation. The authors derived the distinction from the testimony of I-02 and corroborated it with several other informants, but comparative mapping with parallel conceptual frameworks in Lani, Dani, Yali, and Hubula communities would enrich the analysis. Consultation with linguists of the Highland Papuan languages and review of dictionaries and earlier ethnographic literature constitute an important agenda for further research.

Second, the gender dimension within the *Wene–Wim* epistemology and *Bakar Batu* practice requires deeper exploration. The study purposively included I-08 (Karolice Cikwa) as a female informant, and several other informants (including I-16) touched on gender dimensions in the distribution of ritual roles. Yet the role of women in the Mehrtens case in particular (especially Mama Rebeka Wandikbo, mentioned by I-02) deserves dedicated analysis. Further studies focused on gender in Papuan customary reconciliation will complement the present argument.

Third, the generalisation of the findings from the Highland Papuan context to other Papuan settings (coastal, lowland, urban) must be undertaken with caution. The conceptual frameworks equivalent to *Wene–Wim* may differ in vocabulary and operationalisation in different Papuan communities. Comparative cross-regional studies are an important research agenda for the future.

Fourth, the position of the authors as researchers not originating from the Highland Papuan community raises reflexive questions about the authority to elevate and theorise indigenous epistemology. The authors sought to address this limitation through extensive member checking with key informants (in particular I-01, I-02, and I-03) and by explicitly positioning the informants' voices as the primary sources of conceptual analysis, with the authors acting as mediators and translators into the idiom of international academic discourse. Ideally, subsequent research on *Wene–Wim* will be undertaken by Papuan researchers themselves, who can bring deeper epistemic insight and more substantive cultural authority.

Conclusion

This study has sought to reconstruct *Wene–Wim* as an indigenous Papuan epistemology for the classification and resolution of conflict, and to show how this epistemology is operationalised through the *Bakar Batu* ritual as an *embodied epistemology* that tests the authenticity of peaceful intent through a performative sign system. Four principal theses have been developed. First, *Wene–Wim* constitutes a conceptual technology that allows for the dynamic classification of conflict situations, with direct implications for the resolution pathways considered legitimate. Second, *Bakar Batu* operates as a performative epistemology that supplies a mechanism for testing authenticity absent from formal

procedures. Third, the Mehrtens case demonstrates the capacity of the *Wene–Wim* epistemology to open an exit from formal-negotiation impasses in contemporary asymmetric conflict. Fourth, the *Wene–Wim* epistemology operates on a seven-generation temporal horizon that differs structurally from formal policy frameworks.

The study contributes to the decolonisation agenda in peace studies by positioning *Wene–Wim* as a conceptual framework analytically equivalent to Western frameworks. Specific contributions include the addition of new conceptual vocabulary to the international literature, the development of the concept of *embodied epistemology* as an extension of Turner's ritual theory, and an empirical demonstration through the Mehrtens case of the operational capacity of indigenous epistemology in contemporary asymmetric conflict.

A research agenda for further work may be identified along four lines: (1) deeper linguistic and ethnographic studies to validate and broaden the understanding of *Wene–Wim* in the Nduga language and of parallel conceptual frameworks in other Highland Papuan languages; (2) comparative studies with the customary conflict-resolution epistemologies of other indigenous communities in Melanesia and beyond, to develop a more systematic comparative model; (3) gender-focused studies exploring the role of women in the operationalisation of *Wene–Wim* and *Bakar Batu*; and (4) longitudinal studies of the durability of the Mehrtens resolution on a longer temporal horizon, to test empirically the "seven descendants" claim that is a fundamental feature of this epistemology.

Ultimately, the argument the study seeks to advance is that Papuan societies have long possessed substantive conceptual frameworks for understanding and resolving conflict, and that the task of academic research is not to import frameworks from elsewhere to be imposed upon Papuan realities but to bring forward the frameworks that already exist so that they may contribute to the global conversation. *Wene–Wim*, with *Bakar Batu* as its operationalisation, deserves a place alongside *ubuntu*, *gacaca*, *bashingantahe*, and similar frameworks in the conceptual vocabulary of international peace studies

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