

Embodied Sorrow and Sacred Severance an Ethical Anthropology of Finger Amputation as Ritualized Grief Among the Dani of Papua

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ABSTRACT: Papua, Indonesia's largest island, is a mosaic of cultural identities shaped by its diverse topographies spanning coastal regions to highland valleys. Among the highland inhabitants, the Dani tribe has preserved a poignant mourning ritual known as *Iki Palek*, wherein women amputate fingers to symbolize bereavement. This study aims to (1) trace the historical origins of the *Iki Palek* ritual within Dani society; (2) elucidate the ceremonial intentions behind the practice; (3) examine its cultural significance; (4) detail the ritualistic procedures and materials involved; (5) assess the evolution of this tradition in modern contexts; and (6) interpret the underlying spiritual and social values sustained by the Dani people. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in phenomenology, the study draws on firsthand interviews with tribal elders and a review of existing scholarly literature. Findings reveal that *Iki Palek* transcends mere physical mutilation. It is a profound declaration of grief, fidelity, ancestral connection, and cultural continuity. Despite increasing external influences and the waning of traditional norms, this ritual persists as a symbolic cornerstone of the Dani worldview on mourning, sacrifice, and communal identity.

KEYWORDS - Customary Law, Cultural Symbolism, Dani Women, Finger Amputation, *Iki Palek*

I. INTRODUCTION

The practice of finger amputation among the Dani tribe of Papua is a profound cultural expression intricately tied to the values and spiritual worldviews of the community. Known as *Iki Palek*, this ritual is performed as a manifestation of grief when a loved one, particularly a close relative passes away. Far beyond mere bodily mutilation, the act represents a physical embodiment of sorrow and emotional devastation. Most often undertaken by women, the amputation serves as an external, symbolic representation of inner pain, forming an intimate bridge between emotional suffering and communal acknowledgment of loss. It reflects the sacredness of familial ties and functions as a tangible offering to the deceased, with no expectation of reciprocation. In this sense, *Iki Palek* can be interpreted as an embodiment of selfless devotion, a sacrificial act demonstrating the magnitude of love and emotional loss experienced by the bereaved.

Linguistically, this tradition is deeply rooted in the local vernaculars of the Dani people. In the Grand Valley language, *Iki Palek* refers to the third person ("he" or "she"), while *Niki Palek* is used in the first-person context ("I"), and *Inyeki Palek* denotes the plural form ("their fingers"). Similarly, in the Walak language, the terms *Inggi Mbalek* and *Ininggi Mbalek* are used for singular and plural references, respectively. Among the western Dani specifically the Lani subgroup the terms *Enggi Mbanak* and *Ininggi Mbanak* are commonly used. These various linguistic designations point to the widespread cultural integration and deep historical roots of the ritual within the different Dani-speaking communities. Despite its prevalence in the past, this practice is gradually declining, particularly due to modern influences such as the spread of Christianity and government outreach programs, both of which strongly discourage the ritual. Christian teachings, emphasizing divine sovereignty over life and death, have been pivotal in redefining the community's perspective on mourning and ethical suffering.

The island of Papua, comprising multiple indigenous regions, features seven distinct cultural zones sharing striking similarities in food, lifestyle, belief systems, and social values. The Dani people belong to the Lapago cultural group, residing primarily in the fertile and expansive Baliem Valley in the Papuan highlands. This valley has long been a safe haven and home for numerous tribal groups seeking stability, security, and communal advancement. Despite the wave of modernization sweeping across the region, the Dani tribe continues to uphold many of its traditional customs, one of which is the practice of finger cutting. This deeply emotional and symbolic act reflects the intense psychological and social bonds between family members. In mourning the death of a loved one, particularly sons or daughters, Dani women willingly undergo this painful ritual as a demonstration of their emotional devastation and maternal attachment. The ritual is emblematic of their struggle to accept loss, and often serves as a catalyst for tribal conflicts, especially when death is caused by external forces.

Dani women occupy a central role in familial and societal structures. They are the primary nurturers, guiding their children from infancy through adulthood, instilling values, discipline, and cultural identity. Even before birth, mothers are regarded as the first moral educators, shaping the unborn child's future through emotional and spiritual conditioning. This foundational relationship intensifies the pain of separation when a child dies, compelling women to demonstrate their sorrow through irreversible physical acts [7]. The decision to amputate a finger, although fully aware of its lifelong consequences, is undertaken with unwavering resolve and without regret. This highlights the depth of maternal love and the culturally engrained expectation that women serve as the emotional pillars of the household. The ultimate motivation behind this practice is not despair, but rather a dignified tribute to the deceased, a ritual driven by love, memory, and respect.

The act of finger amputation is not without risks. It results in permanent loss of a body part and exposes the individual to potential infections and long-term health complications. Nevertheless, for the Dani, the ritual is indispensable, serving as a sacred medium for expressing uncontainable grief. It is especially performed when an immediate or extended family member such as a child, sibling, parent, or spouse passes away. The number of amputated fingers on a woman's hand often reflects the number of male relatives she has lost. In addition to the physical ritual, Dani men may express their grief by growing out their hair and mustaches, which are then ceremonially removed at the conclusion of the mourning period. A communal feast, typically featuring pork, marks the end of the grieving process. Known as Magatom, this feast honors the women who have undergone finger amputation by offering them a special share of pork not as payment, but as a sign of deep appreciation and acknowledgment for their suffering and loyalty.

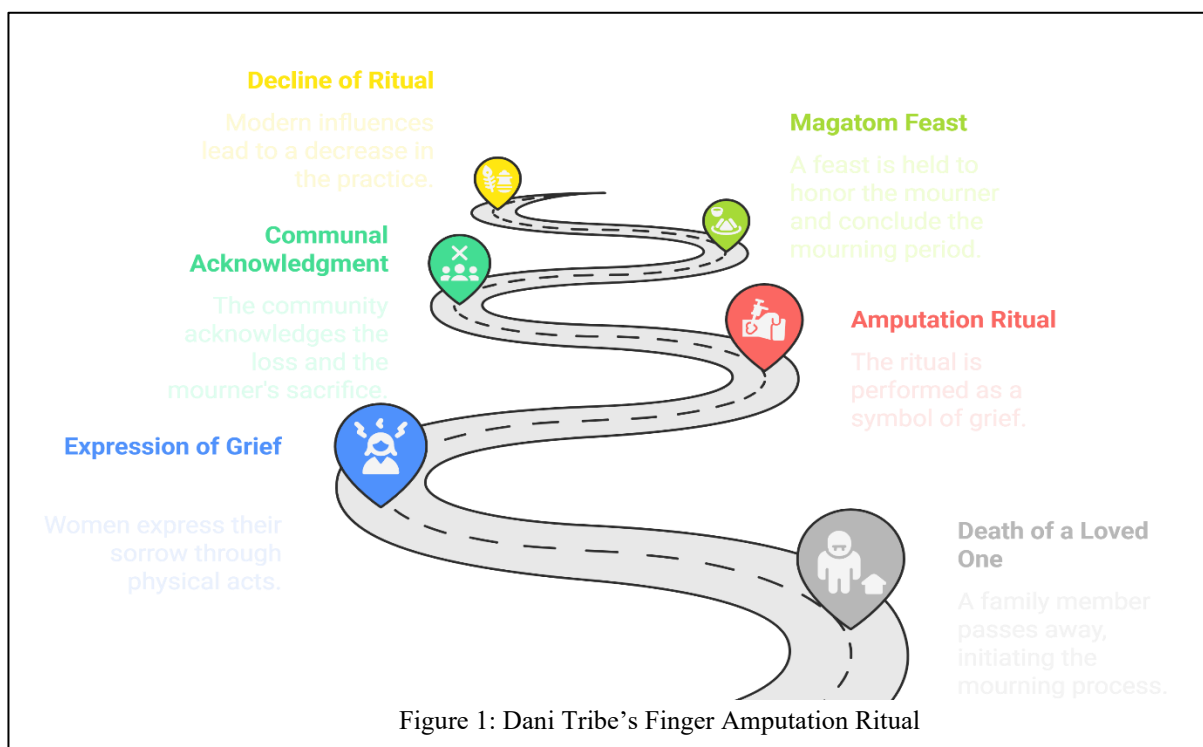


Figure 1: Dani Tribe's Finger Amputation Ritual

This ritual is steeped in profound cultural meaning. When a woman amputates her finger, she publicly displays it during mourning ceremonies to inform the family of the deceased of her act of devotion. The family, in turn, remembers her during the Magatom feast by bestowing her with portions of meat as an emblem of collective solidarity. The significance here lies not in economic transaction but in symbolic reciprocity, a communal embrace of the mourner's sacrifice. This reflects the Dani's deeply ingrained social structure, where grief is not borne in isolation but shared collectively [8]. Women, in particular, are perceived as embodiments of familial strength, capable of enduring and publicly displaying pain for the sake of preserving family unity and honoring the deceased. Their actions serve not only personal purposes but also reinforce communal bonds and uphold ancestral traditions.

The practice has also provoked critical questions regarding gender roles within Dani society. Why, many ask, is finger cutting exclusive to women? The answer lies in the societal perception of women as life-givers and emotional anchors of the family. As the bearers and nurturers of children, women are seen as inextricably linked to their offspring's spiritual and moral development. Consequently, they are expected to feel and express grief more profoundly than men. While this gendered expectation amplifies women's roles in mourning rituals, it also subjects them to disproportionate emotional and physical burdens. Nevertheless, the tradition is waning. Over the past decade, its occurrence has diminished significantly due to religious prohibitions and evolving cultural norms. Christian missionaries have actively campaigned against the practice, asserting that suffering and grief should not manifest in physical self-harm, as divine providence already governs human life and death[9].

Yet, remnants of this sacred custom remain. Although finger amputation is now rarely performed, mourning customs such as hair growth and abstinence persist among the Dani. These practices continue to symbolize the community's resistance to loss and their struggle to reconcile with death. At its core, Iki Palek is not merely about expressing sorrow, it is an act of spiritual defiance, a bold declaration that the departed were, and remain, integral to the living. The Dani's belief that "family is strength" encapsulates their worldview: in times of sorrow and hardship, the family becomes the ultimate sanctuary. This worldview underpins the enduring relevance of the ritual, reinforcing the tribe's collective identity, emotional resilience, and reverence for the sacredness of familial bonds.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive method, aiming to uncover in-depth insights surrounding the cultural practice of finger amputation Iki Palek as performed by the Dani tribe. The primary focus is placed on extracting rich verbal data that reflects both individual and communal experiences related to the ritual. A qualitative framework is deemed suitable because it allows for the examination of nuanced cultural elements that are embedded in subjective lived realities. The intent is to capture the full scope of meaning behind Iki Palek, as interpreted by those who have either witnessed or experienced it. Through this methodology, the researcher seeks to grasp not merely the physical process, but also the emotional, spiritual, and symbolic layers that give the tradition its cultural resonance[10].

In conducting this study, a phenomenological approach is employed, aligning with the social and experiential nature of the subject matter. Phenomenology, as stated by Poerwandari (2011) [1], concerns itself with the inner meanings individuals attach to their experiences. Social phenomena are not external objects but are embedded within the consciousness of those who interpret them. Similarly, Creswell (2012) [3] notes that phenomenological research strives to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of a particular phenomenon through their lived experiences. Within this context, the researcher aims to explore how Iki Palek is not only performed but internalized by its participants especially women of the Dani tribe who embody the ritual as a form of mourning and spiritual devotion.

The research process involves describing observable phenomena exactly as they present themselves in real-life settings. This means that the data collected are grounded in the firsthand experiences of subjects, and the researcher refrains from imposing external interpretations or frameworks. The primary emphasis is placed on capturing the authentic voices of Dani women who have participated in or inherited knowledge of the finger-cutting tradition. The focus of the study is not only to document the mechanics of the ritual but to delve into its

symbolic weight and contextual relevance within the broader social fabric of Dani life. Through this lens, finger amputation is treated not merely as a physical act but as a cultural and emotional phenomenon deserving deep exploration.

In accordance with the phenomenological method, data were gathered through a combination of direct observation and the review of relevant documentation. Observational data provided real-time insights into the ritual's performance, tools used, and the surrounding communal responses, while secondary documentation such as ethnographic reports and scholarly articles served to support and triangulate firsthand accounts. These dual sources of information helped to construct a holistic and multi-layered understanding of Iki Palek, reinforcing the validity of the findings while capturing both contemporary and historical perspectives on the ritual.

The data analysis was conducted following the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014) [4], which outlines three essential steps in qualitative research. The first is data reduction, wherein large volumes of raw information are filtered and categorized to highlight significant themes. The second is data display, which involves organizing information into coherent structures that make interpretation possible. The third is conclusion drawing and verification, a critical phase where patterns are identified, meanings are interpreted, and the trustworthiness of the analysis is confirmed. These steps were undertaken iteratively, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data and aligned with the cultural realities of the subjects.

To safeguard the authenticity and reliability of the research findings, the study employed multiple forms of triangulation. These include: (1) respondent validation, wherein participants were given opportunities to review and confirm the researcher's interpretations; (2) error correction by data sources to ensure factual accuracy; (3) voluntary provision of supplemental information by participants, which enhanced depth; (4) integration of findings into the broader cultural and research context to maintain alignment; and (5) the systematic evaluation of the sufficiency and credibility of data collected. Through this rigorous validation process, the study strives to maintain both ethical sensitivity and methodological precision in presenting its findings.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Cultural Context and Its Values in Life

Culture may be defined as the collective body of beliefs, customs, principles, and behaviors shared by a group of individuals. It manifests in repetitive actions, ritualistic traditions, and shared moral expectations that are consciously embraced and perpetuated by communities over time. These cultural frameworks influence how individuals perceive their environments, engage with societal structures, resolve conflict, and commemorate life's milestones, including death. Cultural context refers to the societal setting in which shared values are constructed and interpreted, shaping interpersonal interactions and the collective identity of the people. Appreciating such contexts is indispensable for understanding the rich and diverse expressions of human emotion, particularly those associated with loss and mourning.

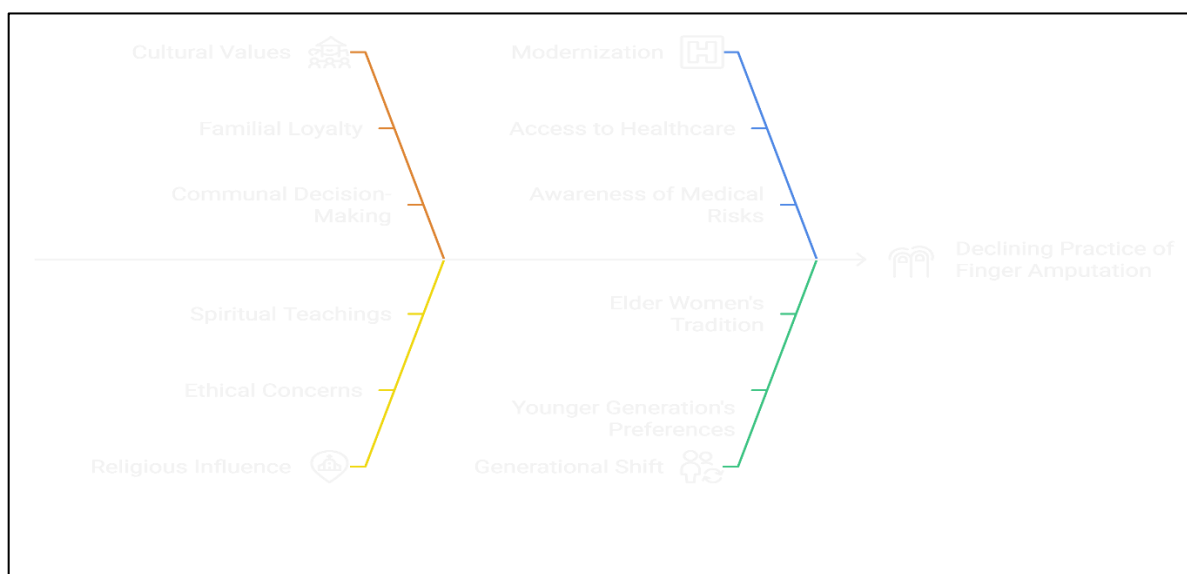


Figure 2: Cultural Context and Ritualistic Practices

Across global societies, including that of the Dani people in the highlands of West Papua, unique cultural values guide individual and communal conduct. Within this context, the act of finger amputation is not simply a personal choice, but a communal ritual governed by collective consensus. In the Dani highlands, values such as familial loyalty, reverence for elders, communal decision-making, and group cohesion hold supreme importance (Hofstede, 2001). These stand in stark contrast to the predominant values in many Western societies, which emphasize individuality, self-reliance, and personal autonomy. While these value systems may appear to diverge, they each offer distinctive frameworks through which human existence is interpreted. In the case of the Dani, the practice of Iki Palek emerges as a cultural ritual that reinforces group identity, fosters emotional solidarity, and expresses reverence for the dead.

The function of cultural context becomes especially evident in the ways community's express emotion, resolve disputes, and perform rituals to navigate personal and collective grief. For the Dani, the amputation of fingers has endured as a grieving ritual for more than five decades, serving not only as an outlet for sorrow but also as a sacred tribute to deceased relatives. When assessed through a Western biomedical lens, such a ritual may appear excessive or even harmful. Yet, within the Dani worldview, this practice is imbued with profound symbolic and emotional significance. It embodies not only sorrow but also an enduring bond with the deceased—particularly among women, for whom the ritual expresses the deepest layers of emotional connection and maternal devotion (Giovanni Okta Mulia et al., 2022) [2].

In the modern era, fostering cultural sensitivity has become increasingly vital across multiple fields, including education, healthcare, law, and digital communication. As cultural interactions become more frequent and complex, misunderstanding and cultural insensitivity can easily arise from a lack of appreciation for differing value systems. Developing intercultural competence, the ability to respectfully engage with people of diverse cultural backgrounds helps reduce biases, foster empathy, and strengthen social cohesion. In the case of the Dani, the practice of Iki Palek offers a compelling example of how grief is interpreted not only as a private emotion but as a deeply communal obligation, where women's physical sacrifices signify their connection to both the deceased and the larger kinship network (Rahmawati R.A. et al., 2024) [6].

Understanding cultural context allows individuals to broaden their worldviews and participate in building more inclusive and empathetic societies. Cultural values, while deeply ingrained, are not immutable. They evolve through time due to external influences such as migration, technological advancement, global communication, and educational transformation. Nevertheless, the fundamental role of culture in shaping individual identity and communal belonging remains undiminished. Through engaging with rituals like Iki Palek, we gain a more comprehensive appreciation of how traditional customs function not only as social practices but also as vehicles for emotional healing and intergenerational storytelling[11].

The cultural weight of Iki Palek lies in its multifaceted symbolic significance. First, it serves as a spiritual safeguard believed to appease the restless spirits of the deceased and thereby protect the living from supernatural harm. Second, it is a raw expression of emotional anguish[12][13]. The physical pain endured through finger cutting reflects the inner turmoil of mourning, offering a corporeal outlet for intangible suffering. Lastly, it symbolizes family unity. The human hand, with its fingers intact, represents balance and strength in the familial unit. The loss of a finger signifies collective grief and the fragmentation of family equilibrium (Okta Mulia, 2022) [2]. Thus, each amputated finger stands as a testament to the enduring power of familial bonds, emotional sacrifice, and cultural memory[17].

In the present day, Christian denominations have played a pivotal role in discouraging finger amputation due to ethical and medical concerns. Religious teachings increasingly view the ritual as incompatible with the spiritual tenets of Christianity, which emphasize divine authority over life and the body. Nevertheless, among elder members of the Dani community, it is still common to observe women with visibly shortened fingers living records of a fading yet deeply significant tradition. These remnants serve as powerful cultural artifacts, preserving the ritual's historical gravity and symbolic richness within the evolving narrative of Dani society.

3.2 The Materials and Process for Finger Cutting in Dani Culture

The tradition of finger cutting in Dani society, particularly among women, is a deeply ritualized act associated with bereavement and familial devotion. This is not a spontaneous or impulsive practice; rather, it

follows a structured set of procedures grounded in longstanding cultural norms. The act is seen as a sacred gesture, requiring both physical materials and psychological readiness. Prior to the actual amputation, the community undertakes several preparatory steps. The necessary materials include a sharpened stone axe, used to sever the finger, a length of rope, tied tightly around the finger joint to minimize bleeding and prevent detachment before the ritual is complete; and banana leaves, laid beneath the site of amputation to absorb the blood and act as a hygienic layer. The cutting is carried out on a flat wooden surface, typically the door of a kitchen, referred to in the Grand Valley dialect as sob[14][15].

Each component serves a specific function in the ritual's successful execution. The rope binds the finger at the base, not only to reduce hemorrhaging but also to ensure the digit is not lost during the procedure. The banana leaves help prevent contamination and are symbolically connected to cleansing and healing. The cutting itself is done by a designated male often a close relative of the woman who uses the stone axe to execute the severance. The woman positions her hand on the sob, with all fingers bent except for the one selected for removal. Once the finger is amputated, the wound is wrapped tightly and monitored closely in the days that follow [6].

One-week post-procedure, the woman soaks her injured hand in a muddy pig bath for several minutes an indigenous form of antiseptic treatment believed to draw out toxins[17]. If signs of infection appear, such as pus or inflammation, the affected area is cleaned using sidluk leaves (a local variant of cogon grass) to remove infected tissue and alleviate pain. These practices reveal the indigenous community's intimate knowledge of natural remedies and their resourcefulness in adapting to the limited availability of formal medical care.

Following the procedure, the severed finger is not discarded but preserved and presented to the deceased's family during communal mourning rites. This act of presentation serves as public validation of the mourner's sacrifice. During the Magatom feast a traditional ceremony marking the end of the mourning period women who have amputated a finger are honored with portions of pork. This gesture is not a transactional reward but a cultural recognition of her emotional and spiritual offering. The pork is shared communally, reinforcing the social fabric and unity of the Dani tribe, where acts of individual grief are transformed into collective experiences of remembrance and reverence[16].

The symbolic depth of the ritual lies in its power to link individual suffering with communal identity. Each severed digit represents a familial void and serves as a lifelong reminder of emotional endurance and loyalty. The amputation may also be achieved by alternative methods, such as tightly binding a finger with rope to cut off circulation, eventually leading to necrosis and detachment. This variation, though slower, is equally symbolic and carries the same spiritual and social significance as the more immediate form of surgical removal. Regardless of method, the ritual is conducted with solemnity, ritual precision, and deep emotional involvement from all participants.

3.3 Changes in the Practices

Historically, the Iki Palek ritual has been a cornerstone of mourning in Dani culture particularly among women as a dramatic yet sacred expression of grief following the death of a loved one. However, in recent years, the frequency and visibility of this tradition have markedly declined. One of the most significant catalysts for this change has been the increasing influence of Christianity[18]. Missionary activity has introduced new moral and spiritual frameworks that challenge the legitimacy of physical self-harm as a mourning practice. As more Dani people convert to Christianity, many have adopted new beliefs that reject finger amputation in favor of alternative mourning practices. These doctrinal shifts have led to a cultural re-evaluation of what constitutes acceptable expressions of sorrow.

Modernization and improved access to healthcare have further accelerated the decline of this ancient practice. With greater awareness of the medical risks associated with unsanitary finger amputation such as infections, permanent disability, and psychological trauma many younger community members have begun to question the necessity and safety of the ritual[18]. As a result, the tradition is now practiced primarily among elder women, while the younger generation increasingly opts for less invasive ways to express their grief. This generational shift signals not a loss of cultural identity, but rather an adaptive evolution in how mourning is expressed within a changing world.

In place of finger amputation, the Dani community has adopted several alternative mourning customs that preserve the symbolic function of grief without inflicting bodily harm. One such practice involves the wearing of specific ceremonial garments or accessories that publicly mark the wearer's mourning status. These symbols enable individuals to honor the deceased while retaining physical integrity[19]. Additionally, communal ceremonies—featuring dancing, singing, and shared meals now serve as forums for collective mourning, where grief is processed in unity rather than solitude.

Other symbolic acts have emerged to take the place of amputation. These include smearing the body with ash or clay[20], abstaining from bathing, or making ritual offerings to ancestors. Each of these alternatives carries symbolic significance and allows mourners to engage in culturally meaningful acts without enduring irreversible physical consequences. In this way, the community maintains its cultural coherence while evolving to meet new ethical and medical standards. The shift away from finger amputation does not diminish the cultural gravity of mourning but reconfigures it within the framework of contemporary values and beliefs.

Despite the decline in traditional practices, the historical relevance of Iki Palek continues to inform the Dani people's worldview. Understanding the origins and transformations of this ritual offers profound insight into the ways human societies navigate grief, express devotion, and maintain social harmony. The waning of finger amputation may reflect cultural change, but the underlying principles of familial unity, sacrificial love, and ancestral honor continue to shape mourning traditions in both visible and symbolic forms.

IV. SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL BELIEF

4.1 Spiritual Belief

The ritual of Iki Palek serves as a profound spiritual expression within the worldview of the Dani people. Exclusively performed by women, this act of finger amputation is not merely a cultural obligation but a sacred demonstration of deep, unwavering love for the deceased [21]. The ritual is anchored in several fundamental spiritual beliefs namely, the expression of grief, the appeasement of spirits, the restoration of spiritual equilibrium, and the enactment of communal mourning that strengthens social and ancestral identity.

The foremost spiritual purpose of the ritual is to outwardly express sorrow. The mourning experienced by Dani women is often profound and deeply embedded in familial relationships be it for parents, siblings, children, or extended kin. The emotional anguish that accompanies such loss compels these women to transform their grief into physical sacrifice. The severing of a finger becomes not only a personal tribute but a public declaration of mourning, symbolizing the depths of their bereavement and their emotional proximity to the departed.

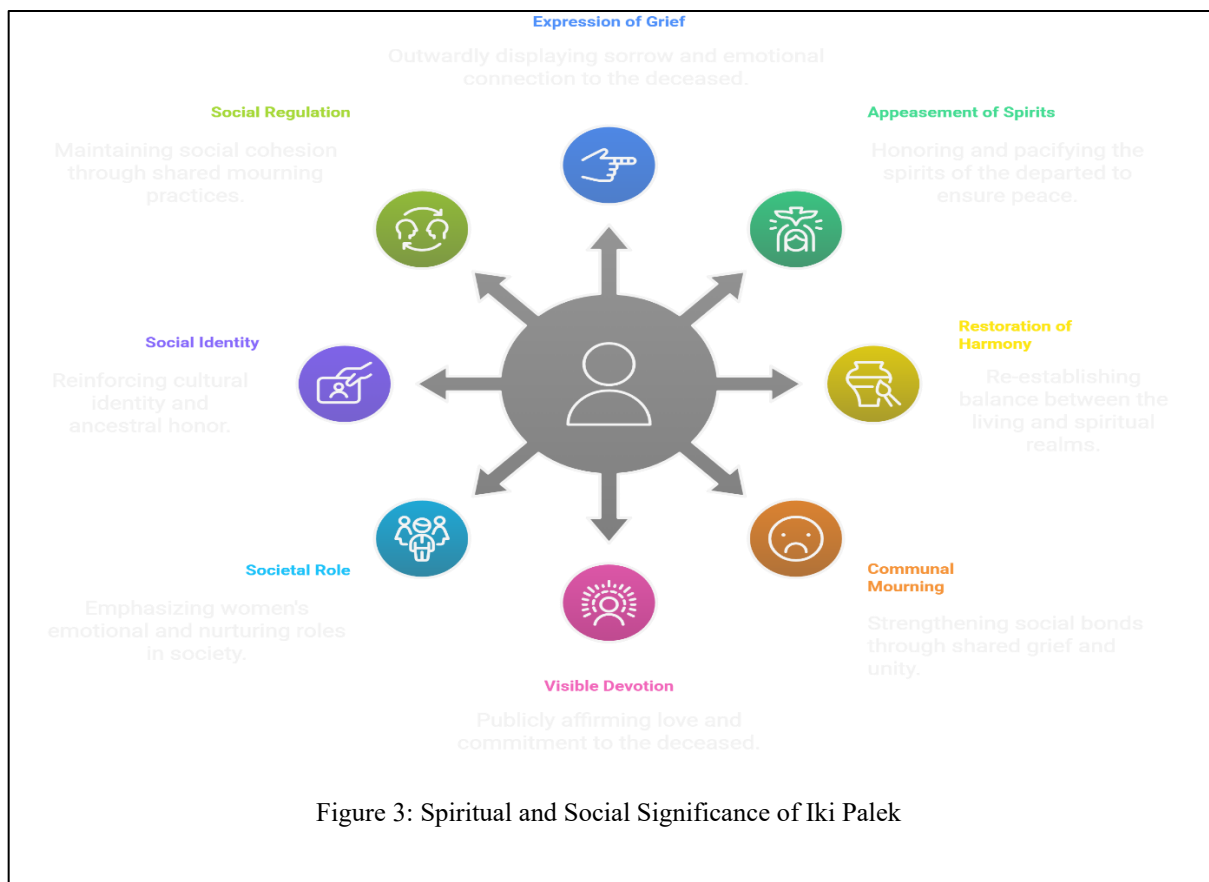


Figure 3: Spiritual and Social Significance of Iki Palek

Another critical spiritual function is to pacify the spirit of the deceased. Within Dani cosmology, it is believed that unresolved grief can disturb the soul of the departed, delaying its peaceful transition to the afterlife. The physical act of finger amputation is intended to soothe and honor the spirit, ensuring that it does not linger in unrest or return to the living realm to cause misfortune. There exists a spiritual understanding that neglecting this rite may provoke supernatural consequences, such as illness, familial discord, or continued mourning. Hence, Iki Palek is perceived as a vital offering that supports the soul's passage to the ancestral world.

Beyond individual expression and spiritual appeasement, the ritual also seeks to reestablish cosmic harmony. The Dani people believe that death introduces an imbalance between the world of the living and the spiritual realm. Through physical scarification, women offer a symbolic bridge that restores this disrupted balance. The severed finger is not viewed merely as a body part but as a sacred token an extension of the mourner's soul and an instrument of reconnection. By giving part of themselves, these women reforge spiritual unity and facilitate emotional closure, both for themselves and the larger community.

Furthermore, Iki Palek functions as a public, communal ritual involving multiple participants who each fulfill specific ceremonial roles. It is not solely an individual act but a collective event that highlights a shared sense of loss and unity. This spiritual solidarity reinforces the bonds among community members and validates the emotional suffering of the bereaved. In performing the ritual, Dani women reinforce their ancestral identity and reaffirm their place within a lineage that venerates familial loyalty, emotional sacrifice, and communal spirituality. The finger, once severed, becomes a permanent symbol both of spiritual submission and cultural continuity.

4.2 Social Belief

The Iki Palek ritual is not only embedded in spiritual doctrine but also in the sociocultural fabric of Dani society. It represents a collective understanding of loyalty, identity, and communal belonging. First and foremost, it functions as a visible symbol of devotion. By willingly undergoing physical pain, women publicly affirm their bond with the deceased, showcasing an extraordinary depth of love and commitment. The amputation becomes

an act of memorialization communicating that the mourner values the memory of her loved one more than the integrity of her own body.

Second, the ritual underscores the responsibility of women within the Dani social order. It is exclusively performed by women, emphasizing their societal role as the emotional anchors of the family. They are seen as the bearers of life, the nurturers of children, and the stewards of tradition. Within this framework, women are expected to carry the burden of grief more visibly and more deeply than men. Their emotional connection to their children and other family members is regarded as sacred, and their sacrifices are understood as essential acts of moral obligation rather than personal loss. Through the act of finger cutting, women manifest their grief in ways that reinforce their identity as protectors, teachers, and emotional leaders.

The ritual also plays a key role in shaping social identity and intergenerational storytelling. Women who have undergone multiple finger amputations are often respected as matriarchs' repositories of experience, resilience, and ancestral honor. Their hands tell stories: each missing digit marks the memory of a loved one lost and reflects the woman's emotional strength. These bodily sacrifices serve as visible legacies, passed down to younger generations as living testimonies of loyalty and mourning. In this context, the amputated finger becomes akin to a cultural insignia like a war medal or a sacred relic.

Furthermore, the ritual is embedded in social regulation. The collective mourning process functions as a mechanism of social control and cohesion, reminding all members of their roles within the larger family and tribal network. The public nature of the ritual discourages emotional isolation and invites communal support, thereby strengthening the bonds between individuals and clans. Through this, grief becomes not a private suffering but a shared journey, marked by symbolic acts and communal recognition.

Lastly, finger amputation historically served as a gesture of love and respect not only for the deceased but also for the deceased's family. It functioned as a social adhesive, uniting families during both joyous and difficult times. The act of cutting one's finger conveyed more than personal sorrow; it reinforced the values of unity, mutual assistance, and unconditional support [22]. This tradition, though physically painful, was emotionally nurturing positioning the family as the core of Dani society and emphasizing the central belief that, in both life and death, one's identity is inseparable from their kinship ties.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the rich cultural diversity of Papua, particularly that of the Dani tribe in the highlands, is vividly expressed through the traditional ritual of Iki Palek, or finger amputation. This practice is far more than a physical act; it encapsulates the emotional, spiritual, and communal dimensions of grief. Through this ritual, Dani women express profound sorrow, deep familial bonds, and unwavering loyalty to the deceased. The act of severing a finger function as a symbol of love and sacrifice, making visible the otherwise intangible pain of loss. It is a cultural testament to the values of kinship, devotion, and ancestral reverence that have been upheld across generations.

Utilizing a phenomenological research approach, this study has explored the historical roots, cultural significance, and contemporary evolution of the Iki Palek ritual. Through interviews with tribal elders and a review of relevant literature, the research uncovered how this mourning practice serves as a conduit for spiritual communication, emotional healing, and social unity. The findings confirm that while modern influences such as religious doctrine, healthcare awareness, and globalization have diminished the prevalence of this practice, the symbolic meanings embedded within it continue to resonate deeply within the community.

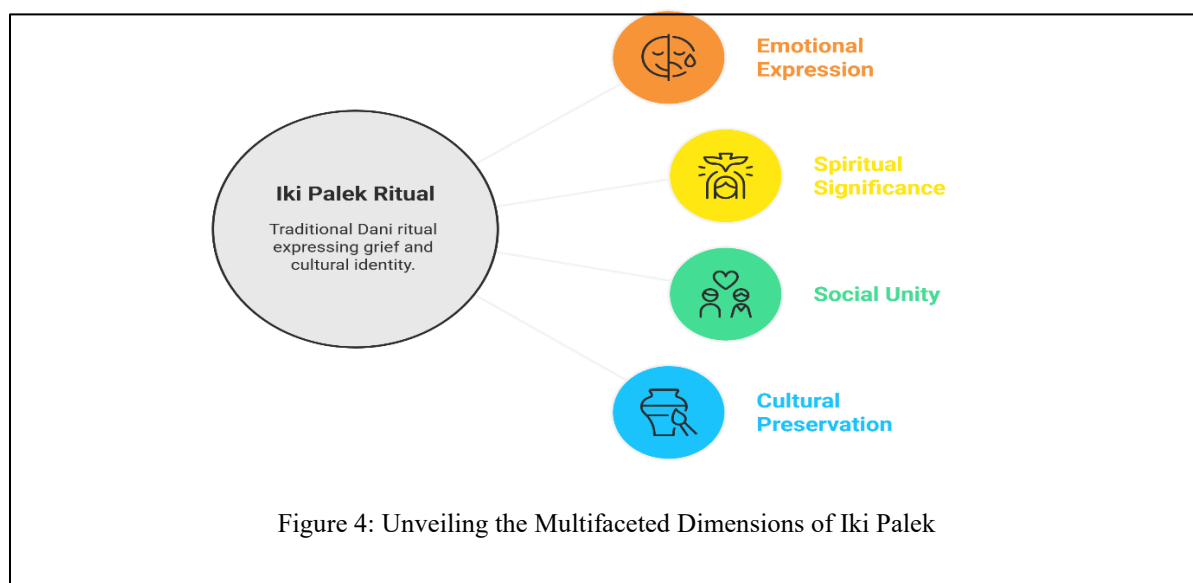


Figure 4: Unveiling the Multifaceted Dimensions of Iki Palek

The ritual of finger amputation offers unique insight into how grief is embodied, honored, and ritualized among the Dani people. It stands as a cultural mechanism for negotiating the pain of loss while affirming social solidarity and spiritual continuity. Even as its practice wanes in the modern era, Iki Palek remains an indelible part of Dani identity etched not only in the bodies of elder women but also in the collective memory and oral history of the tribe.

Preserving such traditions is essential for maintaining the cultural integrity of indigenous communities. Moreover, it enriches the global discourse on how diverse societies confront universal human experiences such as death, mourning, and remembrance. The Iki Palek ritual thus serves as both a cultural archive and a moral compass, guiding the Dani people in their journey through grief, spirituality, and familial devotion.

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