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The Recognition Trap in Papua: Ethnic Inequality and the Politics of Multicultural Governance

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Abstract

The expansion of multicultural governance has increasingly been regarded as a pathway for addressing historical injustice and strengthening the political inclusion of Indigenous peoples, yet persistent ethnic inequality across many postcolonial societies raises important questions about the transformative capacity of recognition itself. Papua, Indonesia, represents a particularly revealing case where the implementation of Special Autonomy, affirmative policies, and broader institutional recognition of Indigenous Papuans (*Orang Asli Papua*/OAP) has progressed alongside enduring disparities in political authority, bureaucratic influence, and access to strategic state resources. Drawing on critical ethnographic research conducted in Jayapura through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis, this article examines how recognition operates within the everyday practices of multicultural governance. Rather than treating recognition as a normative achievement or merely an incomplete policy agenda, the analysis reveals that it has become embedded within bureaucratic procedures, administrative classifications, and institutional arrangements that formally acknowledge Indigenous identity while simultaneously preserving unequal relations of power. These empirical dynamics provide the basis for developing the concept of the Recognition Trap, which explains how recognition may function as an institutional mechanism that expands symbolic inclusion while reproducing structural inequality through the governance of ethnic identity. By positioning Papua as a theory-generating case rather than a peripheral illustration of existing theories, the article offers a broader conceptual contribution to debates on nationalism, ethnic politics, and multicultural governance, arguing that meaningful recognition requires not only legal and cultural affirmation but also the transformation of institutional structures through which political authority, citizenship, and public resources are organized.

Introduction

Papua occupies a distinctive position in contemporary debates on ethnic politics, multicultural governance, and postcolonial state formation because it presents a persistent paradox between expanding institutional recognition and enduring structural inequality. Across many postcolonial societies, recognition has increasingly become a central strategy through which states govern ethnic diversity while seeking political stability and national integration. Papua represents one of the clearest empirical expressions of this broader governance dilemma, where expanding legal recognition has coincided with the persistence of ethnic inequality rather than its reduction. The enactment of Law No. 2 of 2021 on the Second Amendment to Law No. 21 of 2001 concerning Special Autonomy for Papua institutionalized the Indonesian state's commitment to strengthening the recognition of Indigenous Papuans (*Orang Asli Papua*, OAP) through broader political affirmation, improved fiscal arrangements, enhanced representation in local institutions, and greater emphasis on education, health, and community economic empowerment. The revised Special Autonomy framework was intended not only to accelerate development but also to reduce long-standing disparities and strengthen the protection of the basic rights of Indigenous Papuans. However, despite this expanded architecture of legal and administrative recognition, significant disparities in political influence, economic opportunity, bureaucratic

representation, and access to state resources continue to characterize relations between Indigenous Papuans and migrant communities. This contradiction suggests that the persistence of ethnic inequality cannot be explained solely by policy implementation gaps or uneven development. Instead, it raises a more fundamental question concerning the nature of recognition itself: why do ethnic inequalities persist even as the state expands formal recognition through increasingly comprehensive multicultural governance? Rather than treating Papua merely as another case of diversity management, this article argues that the Papuan experience provides a critical empirical site for rethinking the relationship between recognition, power, and ethnic inequality in postcolonial states.

Existing scholarship on Papua has generated important explanations for the region's enduring political, ethnic, and socio-economic inequalities. Historical studies have traced these dynamics to the contested process of Papua's incorporation into Indonesia and the continuing tension between state-building and Papuan nationalism (Chauvel, 2004). Building on this historical perspective, Ballard (2001, 2002) demonstrates that struggles over natural resources, territorial control, and the political economy of extractive industries have profoundly shaped relations between Indigenous Papuans and the Indonesian state, reinforcing unequal access to economic and political power. Other scholars have emphasized the political consequences of demographic transformation, showing how state-sponsored and spontaneous migration has reshaped ethnic relations, patterns of economic competition, and access to public resources between Indigenous Papuans and migrant communities (Tirtosudarmo, 2022). Anderson (2015) further argues that persistent insecurity in Papua cannot be understood merely through armed conflict but reflects deeper institutional weaknesses, uneven governance, and the limited legitimacy of state authority in Indigenous society. Research on Special Autonomy has likewise demonstrated that although affirmative policies have expanded formal recognition of Indigenous Papuans through reserved political representation, customary institutions, and preferential public employment, their implementation has been constrained by bureaucratic centralization, uneven institutional capacity, and competing political interests (Widjojo et al., 2010). Ethnographic and anthropological scholarship has added another important dimension by illustrating how everyday interactions between Indigenous Papuans and migrants are shaped not only by economic disparities but also by contested identities, historical memories, sovereignty claims, racialization, and unequal experiences of citizenship (Timmer, 2007; Kirksey, 2012; Rutherford, 2019; Chao, 2021). Similarly, King et al. (2011) argue that contemporary Papua can only be understood by integrating historical injustice, political exclusion, human rights, development, and Indigenous aspirations for self-determination within a broader analysis of state–society relations.

Although these studies approach Papua from different analytical perspectives—including political history, migration, political economy, governance, security, and ethnography—they converge in explaining persistent inequality as a consequence of historical incorporation, uneven development, institutional weakness, and contested state formation. However, they generally interpret these conditions through the lenses of historical exclusion, governance failure, political conflict, or uneven development, while paying considerably less attention to how state-led recognition itself may function as an institutional mechanism that reproduces ethnic hierarchy and unequal citizenship. Recognition is therefore predominantly treated as a policy response to inequality rather than as a possible institutional process

through which inequality is reproduced. It is precisely this overlooked relationship between recognition and the reproduction of inequality that this article seeks to explain.

This unresolved question becomes particularly significant when situated within broader debates on the politics of recognition. Classical theories of multiculturalism conceptualize recognition as a normative condition for justice in culturally diverse societies (Taylor, 2021), while Fraser (2008) argues that recognition must be accompanied by redistribution to overcome structural inequality. More critical scholarship, however, has questioned whether recognition necessarily produces emancipatory outcomes. Coulthard (2014) demonstrates that state recognition may reproduce colonial domination by incorporating Indigenous identities into existing state structures without transforming underlying relations of power. Decolonial scholars similarly argue that modern governance often regulates cultural difference through epistemic and institutional forms of control rather than enabling genuine political transformation (Mignolo, 2020; Escobar, 2018). More recently, Gregson (2025) extends this critique by suggesting that recognition may function as a "recognition trap" when subjects become confined within externally imposed categories of identity. While these perspectives substantially advance recognition theory, they have rarely been examined through the empirical dynamics of multicultural governance in Papua, where recognition operates not only through discourse but also through affirmative policies, bureaucratic institutions, and everyday practices of ethnic governance.

This gap is particularly evident at the intersection between recognition theory and the empirical literature on Papua. While studies of Papua document persistent inequality despite institutional reforms, and recognition theory critiques the limitations of multicultural governance, little research has systematically examined how recognition itself becomes an institutional mechanism through which ethnic hierarchy is reproduced. Consequently, existing scholarship tends either to treat recognition as an incomplete policy project or to interpret inequality primarily as a consequence of implementation failure. Recognition has therefore been conceptualized primarily as an unfinished remedy for exclusion rather than investigated as one of the institutional processes through which unequal citizenship is continuously reproduced. Such approaches overlook the possibility that administrative recognition, affirmative policies, and multicultural governance may simultaneously acknowledge Indigenous identity while stabilizing unequal access to political authority, economic resources, and citizenship. Addressing this analytical gap requires moving beyond evaluating whether recognition exists toward examining how recognition actually functions within state institutions and everyday social relations.

Drawing upon critical ethnographic research conducted in Jayapura, this article introduces the concept of the Recognition Trap to explain this paradox. Rather than viewing recognition simply as symbolic inclusion or moral acknowledgement, the Recognition Trap refers to a governance mechanism through which Indigenous identities are formally recognized while remaining institutionally constrained within unequal political, administrative, and economic structures. Unlike Gregson's (2025) philosophical formulation, which primarily examines recognition as a problem of subject formation, the concept developed in this article explains how recognition becomes institutionalized within multicultural governance and thereby reproduces unequal access to political authority, bureaucratic representation,

and state resources. The concept emerged inductively through iterative interpretation of ethnographic evidence collected in Jayapura and was subsequently refined through dialogue with recognition theory, decolonial scholarship, and studies of ethnic politics. Rather than applying an existing theoretical framework to Papua, this article develops the Recognition Trap from the Papuan case itself. In this sense, Papua is not treated merely as an empirical illustration of existing theories but as a theory-generating case that reveals important limitations in dominant understandings of multicultural governance.

This article makes three theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualizes recognition as an institutional technology of ethnic governance rather than merely a normative principle of justice. Second, it develops the Recognition Trap inductively from the Papuan case, demonstrating how theory can emerge from empirical analysis rather than simply being applied to it. Third, by positioning Papua as a theory-generating case rather than a peripheral example, the article extends comparative debates on multicultural governance beyond Euro-American contexts and contributes to broader scholarship on nationalism, ethnic politics, and postcolonial state formation, arguing that meaningful justice requires not only cultural recognition but also the redistribution of power and the transformation of institutional relations that sustain ethnic hierarchy.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a critical ethnographic design to analyze the relationship between political recognition, structural inequality, and multicultural governance in Papua, with an empirical focus on Jayapura. A critical ethnographic approach was chosen because it allows researchers not only to understand social practices in everyday life but also to reveal how power relations operate in shaping structures of inequality and the social experiences of society (Madison, 2011). Epistemologically, this study is based on a critical-constructivist paradigm that views social reality as the result of historical construction and power relations, and is enriched with a decolonial perspective to examine how state recognition practices operate within the framework of colonial power (Mignolo, 2020; Escobar, 2018). Thus, this study aims not only to describe phenomena but also to critique structures that produce social injustice.

Critical ethnography was selected not only because it enables the examination of power relations embedded in everyday social life, but also because it provides an appropriate methodological framework for developing theoretical insights inductively from situated empirical experiences. The research location is focused on Jayapura, which includes Jayapura City and its surrounding areas as a social space that clearly demonstrates the interaction between Indigenous Papuans (OAP) and migrant groups. Jayapura was chosen because it is the center of economic, political, and administrative activity in Papua, as well as being the locus of implementation of special autonomy policies and affirmation for indigenous communities. Within the framework of critical ethnography, this location is not only understood as a geographical space, but as an arena of power relations where practices of recognition, identity classification, and resource distribution take place concretely in everyday life (Madison, 2011).

Therefore, Jayapura is positioned as an ethnographic space that allows researchers to observe how the recognition trap works empirically in social relations between Indigenous Papuans and non-Indigenous Papuans.

Fieldwork was conducted over a six-month period, from June 2025 to January 2026, providing sufficient time to observe institutional practices and everyday interactions among Indigenous Papuans, migrant communities, customary authorities, and government institutions. Given the sensitivity of issues surrounding ethnic identity, political recognition, and state–society relations in Papua, the research was undertaken with considerable ethical caution. Building rapport and establishing trust with prospective participants were therefore prioritized throughout the fieldwork, enabling informants to share their experiences more openly and confidently. Access to participants developed gradually through repeated interactions and recommendations from community leaders, customary authorities, civil society actors, and previous informants. This prolonged engagement strengthened both the depth and credibility of the ethnographic data while reducing the likelihood of superficial responses to politically sensitive issues.

Data collection techniques included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Participant observation is a key technique in critical ethnography for directly understanding social practices, including interactions between groups, the use of identity categories such as komin and amber, and everyday practices that reflect power relations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In-depth interviews were used to explore informants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on recognition practices, social inequality, and identity politics. Meanwhile, documentation studies included analysis of government policies, special autonomy documents, and institutional reports that represent the formal framework of recognition politics. This combination of techniques enabled data triangulation while strengthening the depth of ethnographic interpretation.

Participant observation was conducted across multiple social and institutional settings in Jayapura where interactions between Indigenous Papuans and migrant communities regularly occurred. These settings included government offices responsible for implementing affirmative policies, customary institutions, community meetings, local markets, educational institutions, and other public spaces where access to state services, bureaucratic procedures, and everyday social relations could be directly observed. The observations focused on how recognition was enacted through routine administrative practices, interactions between public officials and citizens, the use of ethnic classifications, patterns of participation in decision-making, and negotiations over access to public resources. Field notes were recorded throughout the research process to capture both verbal and non-verbal interactions, institutional routines, and contextual dynamics that could not be fully elicited through interviews alone. These observations complemented the interview data by providing direct empirical evidence of how recognition was experienced, negotiated, and institutionalized in everyday governance, thereby strengthening the credibility of the ethnographic interpretation and contributing to the development of the Recognition Trap as an empirically grounded analytical concept.

Informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, taking into account their involvement in social and political relations relevant to the research issue. Informants included traditional leaders, Jayapura regional government officials, academics, civil society activists, and community members from various ethnic backgrounds. In critical ethnography, informant selection is based not only on social representation but also on their position in the power structure, whether as dominant actors or marginalized groups (Carspecken, 2013). The snowball technique was used to expand the informant network through recommendations from initial informants, allowing researchers to access diverse perspectives and understand the dynamics of power relations more comprehensively. The following table presents the profiles of research informants, which have been anonymized to maintain confidentiality, in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research. The use of codes such as INF01, INF02, and so on aims to protect informants while maintaining analytical clarity in the presentation of the data. For further details, Table 1 regarding the research informants is presented below:

Table 1
Research Informants

Informant Code	Informant Category	Role/Position	Ethnic Background	Relevance to Study
INF01	Customary Leader	Ondoafi / Traditional Leader	Indigenous (OAP)	Indigenous authority & recognition practices
INF02	Local Government	Social Affairs Officer	Non-OAP	Implementation of affirmative policies
INF03	Academic	Social Sciences Lecturer	Indigenous (OAP)	Critical analysis of inequality & policy
INF04	NGO Activist	Indigenous Rights Advocate	Indigenous (OAP)	Advocacy & critique of state recognition
INF05	Local Community	Market Trader	Indigenous (OAP)	Everyday experience of economic inequality
INF06	Migrant Community	Entrepreneur	Non-OAP	Perspective on economic dominance
INF07	Youth Leader	Youth Activist	Indigenous (OAP)	Youth identity politics
INF08	Local Government	District Administrative Staff	Non-OAP	Local-level policy implementation
INF09	Indigenous Woman	Household Member / Micro-entrepreneur	Indigenous (OAP)	Gendered experience of inequality
INF10	Academic	Local Researcher	Non-OAP	Social relations OAP–non-OAP
INF11	Religious Leader	Community Religious Figure	Indigenous (OAP)	Social cohesion & moral perspectives
INF12	Student Activist	Papuan University Student	Indigenous (OAP)	Identity politics & resistance

Source: Researcher Data Processing, 2026

The data analysis followed Madison's (2011) critical ethnographic framework, which emphasizes the interpretation of everyday social practices in relation to power, ideology, and structural inequality. The analytical process involved four interconnected stages: (1) developing thick descriptions of observed social interactions and institutional practices; (2) identifying recurring patterns of domination, recognition, exclusion, and ethnic differentiation; (3) interpreting these empirical patterns through dialogue with the literature on recognition politics, decoloniality, and ethnic governance; and (4) reflecting critically on their implications for broader questions of social justice and institutional transformation.

Beyond these analytical stages, the study adopted an abductive analytical strategy in which empirical observations and theoretical interpretation evolved iteratively rather than sequentially (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Rather than testing a predetermined theoretical framework, the analysis moved continuously between field evidence and existing scholarship. Initial coding focused on recurring themes concerning bureaucratic recognition, affirmative policies, ethnic categorization, political representation, and unequal access to state resources. As these patterns became increasingly evident across interviews, observations, and documentary evidence, they were interpreted through sustained dialogue with the literature on recognition politics, decoloniality, and ethnic governance. Through this iterative analytical process, the concept of the Recognition Trap emerged as an explanatory framework for understanding how formal recognition simultaneously acknowledges Indigenous identity while institutionalizing unequal political, administrative, and economic relations.

Accordingly, the Recognition Trap should not be understood as a theoretical framework imposed upon the Papuan case. Rather, it represents an analytical concept developed inductively from the empirical realities of Papua and subsequently refined through engagement with broader debates on recognition, decolonial governance, and ethnic politics. This analytical strategy positions Papua as a theory-generating case, thereby strengthening the integration between ethnographic evidence, conceptual innovation, and comparative debates on multicultural governance.

Results and Discussion

The Recognition Gap as a Manifestation of Structural Inequality

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted across Jayapura consistently revealed a striking discrepancy between the state's formal commitment to recognising Indigenous Papuans (*Orang Asli Papua*, OAP) and the realities encountered in everyday governance. Although recognition has become increasingly institutionalised through Special Autonomy, affirmative recruitment, Indigenous political representation, and the formal acknowledgement of customary institutions, these measures rarely translated into comparable improvements in political influence, economic opportunity, or bureaucratic authority. Across interviews with customary leaders, government officials, academics, activists, and community members, recognition was widely perceived as an important constitutional achievement, yet few participants associated it with substantive changes in their everyday access to state institutions. What gradually became apparent across these encounters was that the central issue was not the absence of recognition itself, but the widening distance between symbolic inclusion and substantive equality.

Everyday observations further demonstrated that this discrepancy was reproduced through ordinary administrative practices rather than exceptional political events. Within district government offices, affirmative recruitment procedures formally verified Indigenous status through administrative documentation and legal classifications before applicants could access preferential recruitment schemes. Similar processes were observed in community meetings and customary institutions, where

Indigenous identity continued to provide cultural legitimacy but exercised limited influence over formal bureaucratic decision-making. In many cases, recognition functioned primarily as an administrative category through which Indigenous identity was acknowledged without substantially altering institutional arrangements governing authority, resource allocation, or career advancement. Rather than appearing as isolated instances of bureaucratic inconsistency, these interactions revealed a recurring institutional logic embedded within the everyday operation of multicultural governance.

Accounts provided by participants consistently converged around this concern. An Indigenous academic remarked that "*we are recognized culturally, but not economically*" (INF03), emphasizing that constitutional acknowledgement had not been accompanied by equivalent improvements in access to political and economic opportunities. Similarly, an Indigenous rights activist observed that "*recognition is often reduced to documentation and identity labels, but it does not change our living conditions*" (INF04). Comparable reflections emerged from customary leaders, Indigenous entrepreneurs, government officials, and civil society representatives, although expressed through different institutional experiences. Read together, these accounts suggest that formal recognition has become an accepted component of governance, while substantive redistribution of power and opportunity remains considerably more limited. Recognition therefore appears less as a transformative political process than as an administrative practice through which inequality is accommodated rather than fundamentally challenged.

Placed alongside the existing scholarship on Papua, the ethnographic material reveals an important analytical distinction. Previous studies have convincingly explained the persistence of inequality through historical incorporation into the Indonesian state (Chauvel, 2004), the political economy of extractive industries (Ballard, 2002), demographic transformation and migration (Tirtosudarmo, 2022), institutional fragility (Anderson, 2015), and the uneven implementation of Special Autonomy (Widjojo et al., 2010). Ethnographic research has likewise demonstrated how Indigenous identity continues to be negotiated through contested citizenship, historical memory, sovereignty claims, and everyday social interaction (Timmer, 2007; Kirksey, 2012; Rutherford, 2019; Chao, 2021). While these studies provide compelling explanations for why inequality persists, they generally approach recognition as a policy instrument intended to reduce exclusion rather than examining how recognition itself becomes embedded within the institutional reproduction of unequal citizenship. The ethnographic evidence presented here therefore complements rather than contradicts earlier scholarship by shifting analytical attention from the effectiveness of recognition policies to the institutional consequences of recognition as a mode of governance.

This institutional dynamic also complicates dominant debates within the politics of recognition. Classical approaches understand recognition as a normative condition for justice (Taylor, 2021), while Fraser (2008) argues that meaningful recognition must be accompanied by redistribution if structural inequality is to be overcome. Decolonial scholarship advances this critique by demonstrating that recognition may reproduce rather than transform colonial relations of power when Indigenous identities are incorporated into state institutions without altering the structures that sustain domination

(Coulthard, 2014; Mignolo, 2020; Escobar, 2018). The Papuan case reinforces these critiques but simultaneously extends them. Rather than operating exclusively through political discourse or legal recognition, unequal power relations become institutionalised through routine bureaucratic procedures, administrative classifications, affirmative policy implementation, and everyday governance practices. Recognition therefore functions simultaneously as a language of inclusion and as an institutional technology through which ethnic hierarchy is normalised within the operation of the state.

Viewed as a whole, the ethnographic record reveals a recurring institutional logic that extends well beyond individual experiences or isolated shortcomings in policy implementation. Across different research settings, recognition repeatedly appeared as an administrative process that formally acknowledged Indigenous identity while leaving the underlying distribution of political authority, bureaucratic representation, and state resources largely unchanged. It was through this convergence of everyday experiences that the concept of the Recognition Trap gradually emerged. Unlike Gregson's (2025) philosophical formulation, which primarily examines recognition as a problem of subject formation, the concept developed in this study explains how recognition becomes institutionalised within multicultural governance itself. Recognition is therefore understood not merely as an incomplete project of justice but as a governance mechanism through which Indigenous identities are simultaneously acknowledged and administratively contained within unequal institutional structures. By developing this concept inductively from the Papuan case, the analysis demonstrates that recognition may function not only as a response to inequality but also as one of the institutional processes through which ethnic hierarchy is reproduced in postcolonial multicultural states.

Identity Politics and Social Fragmentation in Papua

One of the most striking patterns emerging from this study is that ethnic identity in Papua has become increasingly significant not because cultural differences have intensified, but because everyday interactions with state institutions continuously reinforce ethnic distinctions. Across bureaucratic procedures, public employment, political representation, and access to government programs, Indigenous Papuan identity has gradually evolved from a cultural marker into an institutional category that shapes opportunities and constraints. Rather than functioning merely as an expression of collective belonging, identity has become embedded within administrative processes through which citizenship, participation, and access to public resources are negotiated. Consequently, ethnic identity is experienced less as a static cultural inheritance than as a practical condition influencing everyday encounters with the state.

This institutionalization of identity was consistently reflected in the narratives of research participants. An Indigenous youth leader remarked that "*being Papuan is not simply about culture; it determines whether our voices are heard in political decisions*" (INF07), highlighting the close relationship between ethnic identity and political recognition. Likewise, an Indigenous trader explained that "*people always ask whether you are OAP or migrant before discussing opportunities*" (INF05), suggesting that ethnic categorization has become intertwined with economic transactions and social trust. Public officials also

acknowledged that affirmative policies have unintentionally intensified ethnic classification because administrative procedures increasingly require formal verification of Indigenous status (INF08). Community activists similarly described public debates over recruitment, political appointments, and government assistance as arenas where ethnic identity becomes particularly visible (INF04). Although expressed from different social positions, these accounts consistently indicate that identity has become institutionalized through routine governance practices rather than emerging solely from cultural consciousness.

What becomes apparent from these narratives is that social fragmentation in Papua is produced through the interaction between recognition and unequal institutional opportunities. Formal recognition undoubtedly enhances the public visibility of Indigenous Papuans and responds to longstanding historical demands for justice. At the same time, however, the expansion of affirmative mechanisms has also increased the administrative significance of ethnic classification. As access to political office, bureaucratic representation, and certain public benefits becomes increasingly associated with officially recognized Indigenous status, ethnic boundaries acquire renewed political and social importance. In this context, recognition does not simply acknowledge pre-existing identities but actively shapes the conditions under which those identities become politically meaningful.

This interpretation complements a substantial body of scholarship on Papua while also extending its analytical scope. Previous studies have convincingly demonstrated that contemporary Papuan identity has been shaped by historical incorporation into Indonesia (Chauvel, 2004), struggles over natural resources and extractive development (Ballard, 2002), demographic transformation through migration (Tirtosudarmo, 2022), institutional fragility (Anderson, 2015), and contested sovereignty (Rutherford, 2019). Ethnographic research has likewise illustrated how Indigenous identities are continually negotiated through historical memory, racialization, and everyday experiences of citizenship (Timmer, 2007; Kirksey, 2012; Chao, 2021), while King et al. (2011) emphasize that political exclusion remains fundamental to understanding contemporary Papua. More recent scholarship further demonstrates that experiences of racism and unequal development have strengthened Indigenous political consciousness and collective mobilization (Eichhorn, 2023; Webb-Gannon, 2023). Building upon these contributions, the present findings suggest that identity politics is reproduced not only through historical grievances or political conflict but also through the routine implementation of recognition policies that institutionalize ethnic categories within public administration.

The broader implications of these findings also contribute to comparative debates on ethnic politics. Constructivist scholarship has long argued that ethnicity becomes politically salient when institutional incentives encourage the activation of ethnic boundaries (Fearon & Laitin, 2000; Chandra, 2006; Brubaker, 2004). Wimmer (2008, 2013) similarly demonstrates that ethnic boundaries are continually produced through state institutions, political competition, and social classification, while Cederman et al. (2010, 2011) show that unequal access to state power frequently intensifies ethnic mobilization. The Papuan case reinforces these theoretical insights but also introduces an important refinement. Rather than emerging solely from exclusion, ethnic boundary-making may also be strengthened through formal

policies of inclusion when recognition itself becomes institutionalized within bureaucratic governance. In this respect, recognition functions simultaneously as a mechanism of political inclusion and as an administrative technology through which ethnic differentiation is continually reproduced.

These interconnected processes ultimately illuminate a central dimension of the Recognition Trap developed in this article. The findings indicate that recognition has not dissolved ethnic divisions nor substantially transformed unequal relations of power. Instead, multicultural governance has incorporated Indigenous identity into administrative systems that continue to organize political participation, bureaucratic representation, and access to state resources through ethnic categorization. Recognition therefore produces an important paradox: while Indigenous identity receives greater formal acknowledgement than in previous periods, the institutionalization of recognition simultaneously reinforces fragmented citizenship and reproduces the structural conditions under which ethnic inequality persists. This empirical pattern, emerging directly from the Papuan case, demonstrates that recognition may function not only as a pathway toward justice but also as a mechanism through which existing hierarchies are reorganized and sustained.

The Limits of Administrative Multiculturalism and Ethnic Governance in Papua

The institutional expansion of multicultural governance under Papua's Special Autonomy has significantly altered the formal architecture through which Indigenous Papuans are recognized within the Indonesian state. Successive policy reforms have introduced affirmative recruitment, reserved political representation, legal recognition of customary institutions, and targeted development programmes designed to address historical inequalities experienced by *Orang Asli Papua* (OAP). From an institutional perspective, these measures represent a substantial shift away from earlier assimilation-oriented policies toward a governance model that explicitly incorporates cultural diversity into public administration. Yet the empirical evidence collected during this study indicates that the expansion of institutional recognition has not been accompanied by an equivalent transformation of political authority, bureaucratic decision-making, or control over strategic public resources. Recognition has therefore become increasingly visible within administrative structures while remaining considerably less effective in restructuring the institutional foundations of inequality.

The experiences reported by research participants illustrate how this paradox operates in everyday governance. Government officials consistently described affirmative policies as evidence of substantial progress in accommodating Indigenous interests, referring to increasing numbers of Indigenous civil servants, the establishment of representative institutions, and greater consultation with customary leaders. Indigenous respondents, however, interpreted these developments differently. Several civil servants acknowledged that although affirmative recruitment had improved numerical representation, Indigenous officials continued to occupy relatively limited positions within strategic bureaucratic decision-making (INF09). Customary leaders likewise explained that their participation was frequently

sought during planning processes, yet their recommendations rarely possessed binding influence over policy outcomes (INF11). Similar concerns emerged among community representatives, who perceived that recognition had become increasingly procedural, emphasizing compliance with administrative requirements rather than meaningful redistribution of institutional authority. These contrasting perspectives suggest that formal inclusion and substantive influence have evolved along different trajectories within Papua's governance system.

Such findings indicate that the principal limitation of administrative multiculturalism cannot be reduced to implementation failure alone. Rather, it reflects the institutional logic through which recognition is operationalized. Bureaucratic procedures increasingly rely upon official verification of Indigenous status, administrative certification, representative quotas, and formal consultation mechanisms to organize participation within public institutions. While these arrangements undoubtedly strengthen the legal visibility of Indigenous Papuans, they also transform Indigenous identity into a bureaucratically regulated category that can be incorporated into existing administrative systems without fundamentally redistributing power. Recognition therefore functions not only as a legal guarantee of cultural difference but also as an administrative technology that defines the conditions under which Indigenous participation becomes institutionally acceptable. In this respect, governance shifts from managing cultural diversity toward managing administratively recognized identities.

This interpretation both corroborates and extends existing scholarship on Papua. Earlier studies have demonstrated that the implementation of Special Autonomy has remained constrained by centralized governance, uneven institutional capacity, and competing political interests (Widjojo et al., 2010; Anderson, 2015). Other scholars have shown that migration, extractive industries, and the historical incorporation of Papua into Indonesia continue to shape unequal political and economic relations between Indigenous Papuans and migrant communities (Ballard, 2002; Tirtosudarmo, 2022). More recent scholarship similarly argues that contemporary governance practices continue to reproduce racialized inequalities despite the formal expansion of Indigenous recognition. Chao (2022) demonstrates that racialization remains embedded within everyday encounters between Indigenous Papuans and state institutions, while Eichhorn (2023) further argues that extractive development has become intertwined with institutional forms of racial exclusion. Webb-Gannon (2023) likewise illustrates that experiences of racism have strengthened Indigenous political mobilization, whereas Wangge & Lawson, (2023) shows that state responses to the Papuan conflict continue to prioritize securitization while marginalizing Indigenous political voices. Woodman (2023) further situates these developments within broader dynamics of settler colonialism and institutional domination. Collectively, these studies suggest that contemporary governance increasingly incorporates Indigenous identity into state institutions without fundamentally transforming the unequal political structures through which governance is exercised.

Viewed more broadly, these findings also contribute to comparative debates on multicultural governance. Liberal theories of multiculturalism generally assume that institutional recognition enhances democratic inclusion by accommodating cultural diversity within public institutions (Taylor,

2021). Fraser (2008), however, argues that recognition cannot achieve social justice unless accompanied by redistribution of political authority and material resources. Extending this critique, Coulthard (2014) demonstrates that recognition may reproduce colonial domination when Indigenous peoples are incorporated into institutional arrangements that leave existing relations of power intact. The Papuan case supports these critical perspectives while also advancing them empirically. Rather than operating solely through constitutional provisions or symbolic discourse, recognition becomes embedded within routine bureaucratic practices that classify, regulate, and administer Indigenous identity. Administrative multiculturalism therefore functions simultaneously as an inclusive policy framework and as an institutional mechanism that stabilizes existing hierarchies by transforming ethnic identity into an administratively governable category.

The implications of these findings extend beyond Papua itself. They suggest that multicultural governance should not be evaluated exclusively according to the extent of formal recognition or institutional representation. Equally important is the manner in which recognition reorganizes authority within state institutions. In Papua, recognition has expanded opportunities for Indigenous participation while simultaneously preserving the bureaucratic structures through which political authority, administrative influence, and public resources continue to be distributed unevenly. It is within this institutional paradox that the Recognition Trap proposed in this article becomes most apparent. Recognition no longer appears merely as an incomplete policy agenda or an unrealized normative ideal. Instead, it operates as a governing rationality through which Indigenous identity is simultaneously acknowledged, incorporated, regulated, and constrained within existing institutional arrangements. Consequently, multicultural governance succeeds in expanding formal recognition while reproducing the structural conditions that continue to sustain ethnic inequality. Rather than indicating the failure of multiculturalism, the Papuan case demonstrates the limits of administrative multiculturalism itself, where recognition becomes institutionalized without fundamentally transforming the unequal distribution of power that it was originally intended to address.

Papua as a Mirror of the Dilemma of Multiculturalism in the Global South

Beyond its significance as a case of Indigenous politics in Indonesia, Papua provides an important lens through which to reconsider one of the central dilemmas confronting multicultural governance across the Global South. During the past three decades, multicultural reforms have increasingly been promoted as institutional responses to ethnic diversity, Indigenous marginalization, and historical injustice. Constitutional recognition, affirmative action, decentralization, and legal protection of Indigenous rights have become dominant policy instruments through which postcolonial states seek to reconcile nation-building with cultural pluralism. These institutional reforms are generally expected to strengthen democratic inclusion while reducing long-standing inequalities between Indigenous populations and dominant political groups (Taylor, 2021; Parvin, 2009). Nevertheless, the Papuan experience suggests that the expansion of formal recognition does not necessarily alter the institutional distribution of

political authority, administrative influence, or economic opportunity. Instead, multicultural governance may coexist with persistent structural inequality, revealing a deeper tension between symbolic inclusion and substantive transformation.

This institutional paradox is by no means unique to Papua. Comparative scholarship demonstrates that similar dynamics have emerged across numerous postcolonial societies where Indigenous recognition has expanded without fundamentally restructuring inherited systems of governance. Studies from Latin America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand show that constitutional recognition often improves the legal visibility of Indigenous peoples while leaving bureaucratic institutions, resource governance, and political decision-making largely unchanged (Tully, 2000; Parvin, 2009; Ivison et al., 2000). More recent debates similarly argue that multicultural policies frequently succeed in accommodating cultural diversity without adequately addressing structural inequalities embedded in state institutions and political economies (Meer & Modood, 2012; Modood, 2018). Consequently, recognition may enhance institutional legitimacy while simultaneously preserving unequal distributions of power. The Papuan case therefore reflects a broader governance dilemma that extends well beyond the Indonesian context and speaks directly to comparative debates on multicultural governance in postcolonial societies.

The evidence presented throughout this study also challenges several assumptions that continue to underpin mainstream theories of multiculturalism. Liberal multicultural approaches have generally conceptualized recognition as a normative foundation for justice, assuming that institutional accommodation of cultural difference promotes democratic inclusion and equal citizenship (Taylor, 2021; Kymlicka, 1995). Critical perspectives have questioned this assumption by arguing that recognition alone cannot dismantle structural inequality unless accompanied by meaningful redistribution of political authority, economic resources, and institutional power (Fraser, 2008). Coulthard (2014) further demonstrates that state recognition may reproduce colonial domination when Indigenous peoples are incorporated into institutional arrangements that leave existing relations of power fundamentally intact. The Papuan case not only reinforces these critical perspectives but also extends them by illustrating that the reproduction of inequality occurs through ordinary bureaucratic routines rather than exclusively through constitutional design or political discourse. Recognition becomes institutionalized through administrative procedures, affirmative regulations, and governance practices that formally acknowledge Indigenous identity while simultaneously regulating its political expression within pre-existing state structures.

Recent scholarship on Papua further strengthens this interpretation by demonstrating that contemporary governance increasingly combines recognition with securitization, racialization, and bureaucratic control. Wangge & Lawson, (2023) argues that the securitization of the Papuan conflict continues to marginalize Indigenous political voices despite expanding formal recognition, while Webb-Gannon (2023) shows that experiences of racism have become central to Indigenous political mobilization and claims for justice. Similarly, Eichhorn (2023) demonstrates that extractive development continues to reinforce racialized inequalities through institutional arrangements governing land, resources, and economic development. Woodman (2023) likewise situates these dynamics within broader processes of settler colonialism,

illustrating how state institutions may simultaneously recognize Indigenous identity while consolidating territorial and political control. Together with ethnographic accounts highlighting the everyday experience of racialization and unequal citizenship (Chao, 2022), these studies suggest that multicultural governance cannot be understood simply as an inclusive institutional project. Rather, it constitutes a contested field in which recognition, security, development, and state authority become mutually reinforcing dimensions of governance.

These broader comparative and theoretical insights provide the foundation for the concept of the Recognition Trap advanced in this article. Existing scholarship has generally interpreted recognition through two contrasting perspectives: either as a pathway toward democratic inclusion or as a mechanism through which colonial domination is reproduced. The findings from Papua suggest a more nuanced institutional dynamic. Recognition neither simply succeeds nor entirely fails. Instead, it becomes embedded within administrative systems that formally acknowledge Indigenous identity while simultaneously organizing political participation, bureaucratic representation, and access to public resources through institutional categories established by the state. Under these conditions, recognition functions simultaneously as a language of inclusion and as a technology of governance that stabilizes rather than transforms existing power relations.

The contribution of the Papuan case therefore extends beyond the Indonesian context and invites a broader reconsideration of multicultural governance in the Global South. Rather than evaluating multiculturalism solely according to the existence of constitutional recognition, affirmative policies, or legal protection of Indigenous rights, greater analytical attention should be directed toward the institutional mechanisms through which recognition is implemented and exercised in everyday governance. The Papuan experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of multicultural governance depends not only on recognizing cultural diversity but also on transforming the bureaucratic structures, political institutions, and distributions of power that organize access to citizenship and public authority. In this respect, Papua should be understood not merely as a regional case of Indigenous politics but as a theory-generating case that reveals one of the most persistent dilemmas confronting multicultural governance across postcolonial societies. The concept of the Recognition Trap therefore offers a broader analytical framework for explaining why formal recognition frequently coexists with enduring ethnic inequality, fragmented citizenship, and institutionalized asymmetries of power in many parts of the Global South.

Conclusion

The Papuan experience reveals that the central challenge confronting multicultural governance is not simply the absence of recognition but the institutional conditions under which recognition is organized and exercised. Throughout this study, the expansion of Indigenous recognition through Special Autonomy, affirmative policies, and multicultural governance has been shown to coexist with persistent disparities in political authority, bureaucratic influence, and access to state resources. Rather than diminishing ethnic inequality, these institutional arrangements frequently reinforce the distinction

between symbolic inclusion and substantive citizenship. The findings therefore suggest that recognition should not be evaluated solely by its constitutional or legal presence but by its capacity to reshape the institutional distribution of power that structures everyday relations between Indigenous communities and the state.

This institutional paradox provides the empirical foundation for the concept of the Recognition Trap developed in this article. The concept moves beyond the conventional binary that portrays recognition either as a successful project of inclusion or as a failed policy of multicultural accommodation. Instead, it demonstrates that recognition may evolve into an institutional logic through which Indigenous identities are formally acknowledged while simultaneously being incorporated into administrative systems that regulate participation, representation, and access to public resources. Recognition thus performs a contradictory role: it expands legal visibility and political legitimacy while preserving many of the structural arrangements that continue to generate unequal citizenship. From this perspective, inequality is reproduced not outside recognition but increasingly through the institutional forms of recognition itself.

Seen from a broader comparative perspective, Papua offers more than an account of Indigenous politics within Indonesia. It illustrates a wider dilemma confronting multicultural governance across many postcolonial societies where constitutional reforms, affirmative measures, and legal recognition have progressed more rapidly than institutional transformation. The analysis presented here therefore invites a reconsideration of one of the most enduring assumptions within multicultural theory—that expanding recognition necessarily produces more inclusive and equitable governance. The Papuan case demonstrates that institutional recognition alone cannot resolve historical injustice unless accompanied by meaningful redistribution of authority, administrative reform, and more balanced access to political and economic power. In this respect, the Recognition Trap provides a conceptual framework through which similar dynamics may be examined in other Indigenous and ethnically diverse societies across the Global South.

Rather than positioning Papua as a peripheral case located at the margins of comparative politics, this study argues that it should be understood as a productive site of theoretical innovation. The empirical realities of Papua do not merely confirm existing theories of recognition or multiculturalism; they expose important limitations within those theories while opening new directions for understanding the relationship between identity, governance, and inequality. Future research may further refine the Recognition Trap through comparative ethnographic studies across different postcolonial settings, examining how diverse institutional configurations of recognition shape citizenship, ethnic boundary-making, and state legitimacy. Such comparative inquiry would not only strengthen the explanatory scope of the concept but also contribute to a more context-sensitive understanding of multicultural governance beyond the assumptions derived predominantly from Euro-American experiences.

Declarations

Consent to Participate

All research participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study before their involvement. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Ethical declaration:

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Cenderawasih University (Approval No. 0010A/UN20.1.3/DT/2025). The approval was granted and signed by the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee, Marlina Flassy, Ph.D. All research procedures complied with the ethical standards for social science research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity were maintained throughout the study.

Consent to Publish

All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and consent to its publication. The identities of research participants have been anonymized to protect their privacy and confidentiality. No personally identifiable information is disclosed in this article.

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Author Contribution

Usman Idris: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, and Writing – Review & Editing.Vinsensio M. A. Dugis: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – Review & Editing, and Theoretical Framework Development.Toetik Koerbardiati: Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Formal Analysis, and Writing – Review & Editing.Simon Abdi Kari Frank: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Validation, Investigation, and Writing – Review & Editing.All authors contributed to the intellectual development of the manuscript, reviewed and approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for their respective contributions.

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Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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