

Preserving Cultural Pluralism: The Role of *Ondofolo* Leadership in Dondai Village, Jayapura, Papua Province

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Abstract

Background: Global cultural pressure is predicted to erode the nation's valuable treasure, cultural pluralism, with cultural identity owned by each ethnic group. This situation demands a solid cultural wall so the dynamic changes of the modern world will not erode culture and tradition.

Objective: This study aims to describe *Ondofolo*'s leadership pattern in preserving the local wisdom of the Dondai village in Jayapura, Papua.

Methodology: The research method used is descriptive qualitative with an ethnographic approach using direct observation technique.

Results: The results indicate that the *Ondofolo* acts as a custodian of the village's wealth, overseeing sacred items. Additionally, the *Ondofolo* serves as a judge, resolving conflicts between kinship groups (*imea*) and ensuring justice within the community. By enforcing respect for village boundaries and regulating resource usage, the *Ondofolo* prevents conflicts and maintains communal prosperity. Moreover, the *Ondofolo* holds authority over religious and cultural matters, supervising rituals, ceremonies, and daily social behaviours to ensure that traditions are upheld.

Conclusion: Therefore, the leadership pattern is hereditary and built on cultural agreements, allowing *Ondofolo* to preserve local wisdom through his central role in governance, economy, and cultural life.

Unique Contribution: This study provides insight into how traditional governance systems function, how culture and power interact, and how authority is passed down through hereditary lines—crucial for understanding indigenous leadership and community management.

Key Recommendation: There is the need to refine *Ondofolo*'s leadership style to balance preserving cultural values with adaptable governance strategies that address the complexities of a diverse community.

Keywords: cultural sustainability, Indigenous leadership, *Ondofolo*, Papua, globalisation, ethnography

Introduction

In the face of increasing global cultural pressures, many indigenous communities struggle to preserve their cultural identity and pluralism. Globalisation, neoliberal economic policies, and rapid modernisation are predicted to erode the cultural treasures of nations, particularly in regions where traditional practices still dominate (Hasmika & Suhendro, 2021). For indigenous societies, strong cultural barriers are needed to prevent the erosion of values and traditions. These cultural values are crucial as they influence communities' attitudes, behaviours, and social cohesion. However, the geographical, cultural, and economic contexts of inland tribes introduce unique challenges, especially as they confront the global push for modernisation (Sada et al., 2019). Moreover, cultural barriers may hinder the acceptance of modern ideas and technology within tribal communities (Jaysawal, n.d.). The emergence of globalisation and neoliberal economic policies has resulted in the involuntary displacement of tribal populations and the exploitation of their resources (Hershey, 2012).

In Papua, where numerous tribes coexist, traditional leadership, such as the *Ondofolo*, becomes essential in protecting and maintaining cultural heritage. The *Ondofolo*, as the highest authority in local governance, provides leadership that not only preserves the wisdom of ancestors but also adapts to the pressures of modernisation. The typology of leadership in Papua is diverse, comprising figures such as respected elders, kings, and clan heads. However, all leadership systems emphasise fairness, social cohesion, and respect for the community's cultural traditions (Griapon, 2010). Each tribe's unique leadership system reflects its cultural identity, with the *Ondofolo* serving as the leader of leaders, ensuring harmony within the community.

One example of this traditional leadership system is in Dondai Village, located near Sentani Lake in Jayapura, where the *Ondofolo* holds a significant role in maintaining social balance and cultural preservation. In this village, the *Ondofolo* leads and serves the community, ensuring that the leadership is based on mutual respect and care rather than a top-down authoritarian model (Hijjang et al., 2018). Despite the pressures of modernisation, Dondai village has managed to retain its cultural leadership structure, reflecting the resilience of the *Ondofolo*'s leadership in protecting local wisdom and maintaining social harmony.

Ondofolo's Leadership System

The position of *Ondofolo* is a sacred title inherited by the oldest son of *Ondofolo*. *Ondofolo*'s traditional leadership is known as the basis for birthright inheritance and must be male (Warwer & Pontoan, 2023). *Ondofolo* is a leadership that is not shifted by the development of times. Its leadership adheres to several traditional mandates, including living righteously, possessing wisdom and reason, understanding the economy, managing the people, and paying special attention daily (Warwer & Pontoan, 2023). *Ondofolo* prioritises the participation of all stakeholders in solving problems. *Ondofolo* also believes mistakes may result in curses or death (Nawipa et al., 2024).

As a traditional elite, *Ondofolo* symbolises his society and its leader. In this context, an *Ondofolo* is considered a representation of a divine being, embodying society's sacred and religious attributes. This symbolism's religious aspect comprises three components: existence, meaning, and truth. Therefore, a society that adheres to a particular religion believes in the existence, meaning, and truth of something considered sacred. The authority of an *Ondofolo*, as a cultural elite, can be determined by their control over local natural resources such as land, forests, or water. An *Ondofolo* has customary rights in their territory, including regulating usage rights for land belonging to one society being used by another. This is reflected in their

authority to grant permission to search, use, or take advantage of natural resources for society's well-being and prosperity. It is also linked to their authority to supervise the exploitation of natural resources. Supervision is implemented to prevent overexploitation and ensure that each society member respects their *Imea* rights, preventing society from overstepping other village boundaries. *Imea* rights refer to cultivating and managing natural resources in their territory (Bao, 2013, p. 20).

Leadership is a dynamic relationship that must adapt to the specific context in which the leader operates. A formal leader is officially assigned a position within an organisation, with rights and obligations to achieve its goals. In contrast, an informal leader, though not officially appointed, influences a group's psychological condition and behaviour through their qualities and capabilities. Leadership can thus be either official, based on position, or unofficial, based on community recognition and trust (Utami et al., 2021). The *Ondofolo* system is a form of leadership in which the leader's position is inherited. This system is found in Papuan tribes residing in northeast Papua, near the border between Papua New Guinea and Indonesian Papua. Becoming an *Ondofolo* is a challenging task, as it requires not only a strong hereditary connection to the village's mythical founding ancestors but also the necessary leadership qualities. While the leadership position is inherited, competition among heirs is possible due to the requirement to possess leadership qualities in the *Ondofolo* system. According to Puhili et al. (2013), competition typically intensifies as the term of a ruling *Ondofolo* draws close.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to describe the leadership pattern of the *Ondofolo* in Dondai Village and how it plays a role in preserving local wisdom in the face of globalisation. The focus will be on understanding how the leadership structure promotes harmony within a heterogeneous society, supports the community's adaptation to modern changes, and maintains cultural integrity. Additionally, the study will explore how traditional governance functions in this context, how culture and power interact within the leadership system, and how authority is passed down through hereditary lines, offering crucial insights into indigenous leadership and community management.

Methodology

Design of the study

This research is a descriptive qualitative study with an ethnographic approach. Descriptive qualitative design examines a problem or phenomenon from a naturalistic perspective, such as a place, environment, organisation, culture, or time. Suardi (2017) discusses the ethnographic model as a form of qualitative research that recognises the importance of social and cultural context in understanding human behaviour. This approach emphasises the need to avoid defining concepts outside of their context. The term 'ethno' refers to people or social culture members of a community, while 'graphic' refers to writing or notes. Ethnography is an empirical and theoretical approach that provides a detailed description and analysis of a culture based on intensive fieldwork. It involves understanding others' way of life from their own perspective (Borda, 2017).

Population and sample

The study sample was obtained using a purposive sampling technique. A total of 10 informants participated, including the *Ondofolo* as the key informant, the head of the tribe, three prominent public figures, a religious leader, the head of the district, and three community members. This

diverse group was selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and experiences within the community. By including representatives from different sectors, the study aims to capture a wide range of insights that reflect the social, cultural, and political dynamics at play. This approach enriches the data collected and enhances the validity of the findings by incorporating varied viewpoints.

Data collection

Data collection techniques include direct observation and communication. The tools used for data collection are observation, interview, and documentation. Observation and interviews in ethnography cannot be detached from participation, which means the researcher is fully “immersed” in the life of the society being studied. This is called participative observation.

Method of data analysis

During the analysis process, qualitative data is collected through four simultaneous activities: field notes, information collection, information presentation, and conclusion determination. Ethnography employs the researcher as the data collection tool, utilising their senses of vision, hearing, and feeling. The data analysis process includes clarification, interpretation, and descriptive analysis. It is important to maintain objectivity throughout the analysis, avoid biased or emotional language and employ a formal register (Seran & Mardawani, 2020). After completing the data analysis process, a conclusion is drawn from the research results. The ethics statement of this study has been carried out by the declaration of Helsinki for experiments involving humans. Informed consent was obtained for experimentation for observation, interviews, and documentation) with human subjects.

Results

The *Ondofolo* leadership structure consists of three levels: small clans (imea), village level (yo), and confederation level. Each level has a functional hierarchy relationship that can be seen in figure 1.

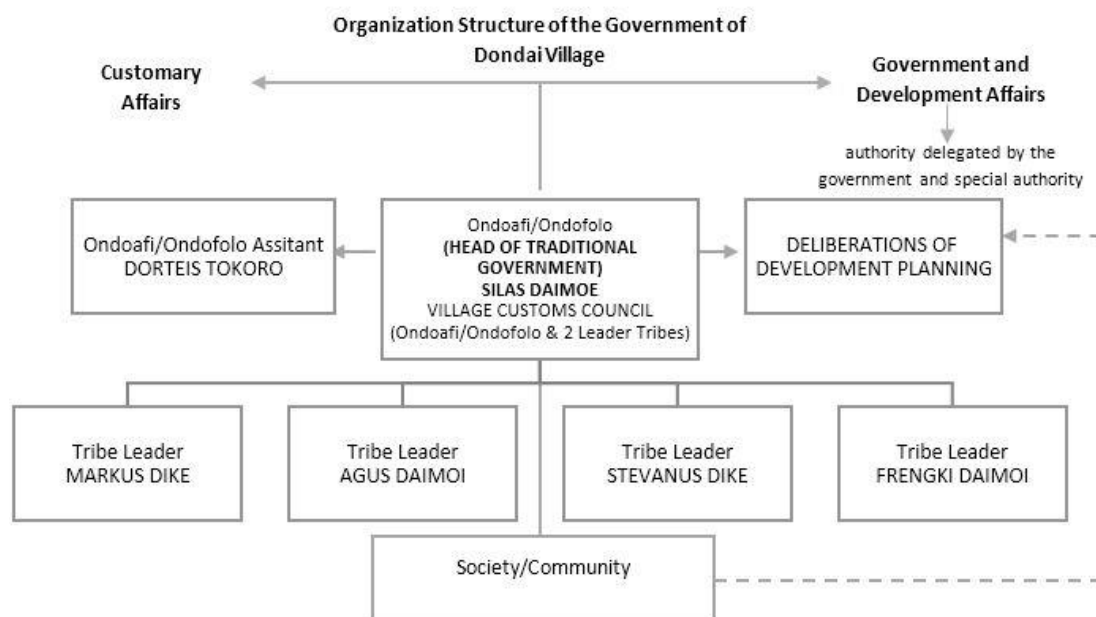


Figure 1. Structure of Dondai Village Government

Leadership Structure of Small Clans (IMEA)

The concept of *Imea* in the Sentani language has three definitions. The first definition is synonymous with the main family, the smallest social unit consisting of a husband, wife, and unemployed children. The second definition is the house where a family lives and resides. The third is a definition of a small clan, which is the formation of several main families that can clearly show their patrilineal heredity line from the same ancestors.

In the structure of the organisation of cultural government, every *imea* is led by a head who is called *khoselo* and is helped by two officers who are *abhu-akho* (the spokesman) and *abhu-akhona fafa* (the treasurer). According to cultural agreements, the position of small clans' leader (*khoselo*) must be held by the previous leader's firstborn. Therefore, the position is ascribed status or achieved and is *primogenitur patrilineal*. Besides, the leader is a relative whose line of heredity can be traced back straight from the founder of small clans. Although there is obedience to the cultural rules and agreements, there are activities that show disobedience. The role of *khoselo* as the head of *imea*, is taking care of and supervising the stuff which are related to his groups' matters. He has no right to be involved in the between-groups issues of other *imea* groups of community. The main roles which become the responsibility of a *khoselo* in his group are about marriage issues, the regulation of natural resources usage, leading cultural ceremonies or rites, and acting as a judge.

The *khoselo's* role in marriage issues includes overseeing dowry payments and managing the process of handing the dowry from the bride's family to the groom's family. For girls ready for marriage, the *khoselo's* wives train them in household care. The *khoselo* has full authority over marriages within his *imea*. Additionally, the *khoselo* supervises natural resources, granting or denying permission to use or exploit land and forests for the prosperity of his group. Another important role of the *khoselo* is serving as a judge resolving conflicts within the group.

Apart from leading the group or tribe, the *khoselo* has specific tasks within the village government structure (*yo*). The *khoselo* is assisted by two officers: the *abhu-akho* and the *akhona fafa*. The *abhu-akho* helps manage cultural ceremonies and funerals, including those for the *khoselo*. The *akhona fafa* acts as the treasurer, safeguarding the group's treasures, such as beads and stone axes.

Leadership Structure of Ondofolo in The Level of Village

The researcher conducted a focused group discussion with *Ondofolo* and the Head of Tribe in Dondai Village to discuss task fields under *Ondofolo's* leadership (Figure 2). The discussion was attended by *Ondofolo* spokesman, the Head of Tribe, a Religious Figure, and members of the society in Dondai village (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Focused Group Discussion at Dondai Village

(Source: Photo: Author's own, with permission of the subjects)



Figure 3. Ondofolo and The Spokesman

(Source: Photo: Author's own, with permission of the subjects)

The primary social unit in Sentani society is the village, or "yo." A village consists of one or more kinship groups, such as small clans or "imea," which may share common ancestry or not. Villages have specific territories with clear borders, known in the East Sentani dialect as *phuke khelahe*. This territory is crucial for providing natural resources for the village's economic needs, including sago production, farmlands, forests yielding edible plants, wood, rattan, and leaves for building and crafting, and areas for fishing. Politically, these resources are reserved for village members, preventing conflicts over usage. Socially, the territory supports the village's economic, political, and social prosperity.

A village community with its *phuke khelahe*, is ruled by a leader who is called *Ondofolo*, who is assisted by a staff divided into four fields of tasking: religious (*phulo yo*), security (*phuyo-ayo*), prosperity (*phume ameyo*), and discipline (*yomme yammeyo*). The language used is clear, objective, and value-neutral, with a formal register and precise word choice. Each tasking has one or more functionalists responsible for their respective fields. In addition to the four fields above, the government organisation of *Ondofolo* also includes two other important positions:

a cultural board institution called *Yono* or *Aranggae*, and a special helper staff known as *Abhu Afaa*.

Ondofolo's position, determined by cultural agreement and legally recognised through heredity, is based on the primogeniture patrilineal principle. This means the first son of an *Ondofolo* inherits the role upon the current leader's incapacity or death. *Ondofolo* holds extensive authority in the village, covering religious, economic, social, security, and justice matters, ensuring the community's prosperity. The *Ondofolo* plays a key role as the primary informant in traditional leadership, especially in Sentani and the surrounding regions, such as Dondai. In the religious field, *Ondofolo* has to supervise and maintain the culture of living and religious ceremonies in his village society. *Ondofolo* is also obliged to activate the culture of living towards his society members through the supervision of polite behaviour in daily socialisation among his society members and the supervision of intensifying cultural ceremonies in his authorised environment. That position allows him to be authorised by *Ondofolo* to give warnings or punishments to members of society who break or disobey existing cultural rules.

The authority of *Ondofolo* in the economic field is demonstrated through his role as the custodian of village treasures, including sacred items such as stone bracelets (*ebha*), beads, and stone axes. These prestigious items, exclusively owned by *Ondofolo*, confer a special status both within the village and among other leaders. Additionally, *Ondofolo* has the right to receive a portion of the dowry payments for village girls married outside the village. He also controls the use of various natural resources within his jurisdiction, granting permissions for their use and supervising their exploitation to prevent overuse and ensure that village boundaries are respected. The authority of *Ondofolo* in the social field is reflected in several ways. First, he receives a portion of the dowry for every girl from his village who marries outside the village. This treasure is used for communal matters, such as helping pay fines for village members who break the rules. *Ondofolo* also pays dowries for boys from his village who marry girls from other villages. Second, he receives the largest share of hunts, fishing, and the first harvest from farms. This cultural practice ensures that commoners refrain from using these resources first, as breaking this rule is believed to bring bad luck.

In the security and stability field, *Ondofolo* has the authority to act inwards and outwards. The authority of *Ondofolo* to act inwards is his right and obligation to keep the security and stability in his society by warning, punishing or even vanishing the member of his own society who is proven to be breaking the culture and is potentially dangerous to public security in the society. The next, the authority outwards, is the right to declare war towards another village which has conflict. The authority of *Ondofolo* in the justice field is reflected in his position as a judge who is responsible for solving conflicts appearing between the members of different ideas in his area of authority. Those wide authorities of *Ondofolo* as mentioned in the previous elaboration is concluded in an expression saying: “*Onfofolo yo longgo, obo isolo – ro isolo*” which is translated as “*Ondofolo* is a banyan which embraces the society, and all villages prosperity have to be handed back to *Ondofolo* because all matters and deaths are his responsibility”. The definition inferred in that expression is that *Ondofolo* is the source of prosperity and wealth in the village, where life and death become his responsibility.

The role and position of *Ondofolo* as the leader of the village community is very important so those who are in the position receive privileges such as: right to receive a part of the first harvest from every farm in his village area; right to monopolise the best type of sago which grow in the village of his society; right to receive the biggest fishing caught by the society in the lake of his village; right to receive a part of dowry for girls in his village; right to have up to five

wives if the first until the fourth wife has no heir (*khoselo* and commoners can have up to three wives); right to possess stone bracelet, *ebha*; right to possess decorative accessories in the pole, wall, or in the roof of the house, which are the symbol of *Ondofolo*'s position in the society; and right to have the biggest house in his village. In the west of Sentani there is one confederation which consists of villages which are Kwadeware, Doyo, Sosiri, Dondai, dan Yakonde. The leader is entitled as *Heusulu Marweri*. This name is also used as the name of the confederation.

A confederation is a union of villages that recognize a common chief leader, formed for shared interests like collective defence or communal ceremonies. Confederations are based on historical ties: villages share a common ancestor and originate from a central village. While new villages have their own authority, they maintain connections to the central village. The authority of a new *Ondofolo* (leader) in a village is valid only if they have a link to one of the mythical ancestors of the main villages, allowing confederations to form despite internal conflicts.

Tak and Authority of Abhu Afaa (The Spokesman)

An *Ondofolo* has a special group of assistants who are called *abhu afaa*. The role of this assistant is as the main advisor for *Ondofolo* in the term of giving advice and considerations to *Ondofolo* before making an important decision. Besides, *abhu afaa* also plays a role as the spokesman for *Ondofolo*. As long as the cultural issues are discussed in *obhe* or a court in *Ondofolo*'s house, the one who speaks is *abhu afaa* instead of *Ondofolo* himself. *Ondofolo* himself just listens to what is delivered by *abhu afaa*. *Ondofolo*'s dignity is falling in front of the culture (*obhe*) if in every meeting he speaks before *abhu afaa*. *Ondofolo* only speaks by the permission of *abhu afaa*. Usually what is delivered by *abhu afaa* cannot be refuted by anyone and culturally has a strong law power.

These roles cause *abhu afaa* to be always beside *Ondofolo* in every official meeting. This position also requires deep and broad knowledge about the details of the culture from someone who becomes *abhu afaa*. Besides, an *abhu afaa* is someone who is loyal and knows how to keep a secret, because he knows all treasure and all classified information of the government of *Ondofolo*. *Abhu afaa* consists of two persons, each of them is called the right-wing assistant, *ayafo nolofo*, and the left-wing assistant, *meakbhan nolofo*. In East Sentani right wing is called *hilo noro* and right wing is called *magkhem noro*, while in West Sentani right wing is called *toware noro*, and left wing is called *ebhun noro*. Those names are suited by their seat when assisting *Ondofolo* in official meetings. Beside the roles of *abhu afaa* as the advisor of *Ondofolo*, each assistant has a specific task.

Right wing assistant, *ayafo nolofo*, has a task as the representative or the officer who substitutes the function of *Ondofolo* if this previously mentioned is not available to run his task because of being ill, being very old or having passed away and the one replacing has not been officially inaugurated. Beside functioning as the representative of *Ondofolo*, another function of an *ayafo nolofo* is as a protector of *Ondofolo* and his family from spiritual attacks of others and as the bridge between *Ondofolo* and the ancestors' spirit in other world so *Ondofolo* is always given power. Therefore, the knowledge of *ayafo nolofo* about the spiritual world is also broad. Because this position is very important, the figure who is rightful to have this position is the *khoselo* from small clans who's according to spoken myth his ancestors who establish the village, *yo*, of the one who may concern.

On the contrary, the left-wing assistant, *meakbhan nolofo*, has a special task to keep and take care of all magical stuff and all treasures of the village including attributes belonging to

Ondofolo. Therefore, the function of *meakbhan nolofo* here is as the village's treasurer. That position, based on cultural agreement, has to be taken care of by a member of a small clan from where *Ondofolo* comes. Usually, it is the oldest brother of *Ondofolo* who is right to have the position.

Discussion

The leadership System of *Ondofolo* is a political power system that is inherited by nature. The leadership of *Ondofolo* manages several capitals of power for their own interest or for the society, including social, symbolic, and material capital. All positions in the leadership system of *Ondofolo*, whether at the small clan level, village level or confederation level, are absolute long-life positions that are inherited patrilineal. Leadership is transferred according to cultural norms when a functionalist is no longer able to fulfil their responsibilities due to death, incapacity, or violation of cultural norms (Enembe et al., 2018).

Dondai Village, led by an *Ondofolo*, is a cultural village where the spatial system is governed by cultural norms and regulations, resulting in a well-structured environment. Rural societies believe in the coherence between space and life, emphasising adequate distance between houses, irrigation systems, and proper waste management to support their way of life. A well-designed spatial layout creates a harmonious lifestyle and adds value to their living process (Yaroseray, 2018). *Ondofolo's* leadership is crucial in addressing cultural differences, communication barriers, and leadership challenges in diverse cultures. They must apply the Local Genius leadership pattern, which embodies cultural identity and the ability to adapt to foreign cultures. The traditional governance structure involving *Ondofolo* ensures that decisions about cultural issues, such as land disputes or rituals, are made within the framework of local customs, safeguarding the community's identity and values (Felle, 2023). The *Ondofolo* holds inheritance rights to valuable family heirlooms, such as stone bracelets (Ebha), beads (Nokhom and Hawa), and stone axes, which grant him a high status within the community. He also has authority over natural resources, granting permission for their use and ensuring proper management. In the religious sphere, the *Ondofolo* oversees traditional rituals, such as initiation ceremonies and head-paying ceremonies, to maintain cultural and spiritual integrity (Pondayar, 2023). An *Ondofolo* is expected to be wise and uphold values integrated and followed by society. This leadership pattern helps preserve cultural values for future generations. In some cultures, the *Ondofolo* holds the highest social status due to cultural traditions that require leaders to embody their society fully, thus gaining higher power and prestige (Aronggear et al., 2020). The collaboration between the *Ondofolo* and the community is also crucial for maintaining the success of village development. If this partnership weakens, it may lead to cultural and social stagnation (Nawipa et al., 2024).

The leadership pattern mentioned above requires several efforts to identify the community's cultural values, diversity, and similarities. Key cultural dimensions include non-verbal communication, local language, time and space orientation, and psychological approaches, all of which impact the effectiveness of leadership communication. Cultural values and norms shape members' dreams, aspirations, attitudes, and behaviours, influenced by concepts of good and bad intentions and societal expectations. Effective leadership aims for community prosperity and involves establishing regulations as guides for action (Puhili et al., 2013). Over centuries, collective leadership has evolved at regional and local levels, with leaders creating organisations to influence and manage attitudes towards work (Hidayat, 2021). An *Ondofolo* must manage the diverse characters and behaviours in Dondai Village, being an innovative, communicative, and effective negotiator between different cultural environments.

However, the limitation of the study on the *Ondofolo* leadership pattern in the Dondai Cultural Village is the potential for researcher bias in data collection and analysis. Ethnographic research relies heavily on the researcher's interpretation and immersion in the community being studied, which could impact the objectivity of the findings and conclusions drawn from the study. Furthermore, due to its focus on a specific cultural village in Papua, the study's findings may need to be more generalisable to other indigenous communities with different leadership structures and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This study examines the leadership of the *Ondofolo* in Dondai Village and its crucial role in preserving local wisdom. The results showed that the leadership pattern of the *Ondofolo* in Dondai Village, Jayapura, Papua, reflects that of an informal cultural figure responsible for key tasks. These include assisting the government in social matters, regulating cultural laws, and preserving, managing, and utilising customary land for societal prosperity. An *Ondofolo* must apply the leadership pattern of Local Genius, which represents a nation's cultural identity, enabling it to appropriately absorb and process foreign influences while remaining true to its character. Consequently, an *Ondofolo* is expected to be wise and knowledgeable and to embody values embraced by all members of society. This leadership pattern requires recognising cultural values by understanding the diversity and similarities within Dondai Village. Key cultural dimensions—non-verbal communication, local language usage, and time and space orientation—are essential to successful communication and leadership. The *Ondofolo* also plays a vital role in managing the village's natural resources, ensuring equitable distribution and preventing disputes, which supports communal cooperation. Cultural and religious leadership is another cornerstone of the *Ondofolo's* duties, including overseeing rituals, ceremonies, and social behaviours. His role as custodian of the village's economic wealth further underscores his leadership, emphasising his symbolic and practical importance.

Additionally, the *Ondofolo* acts as the village's judge, resolving conflicts and maintaining peace. His symbolic representation of the village's collective identity is reinforced through his possession of sacred items, marriage rights, and other cultural symbols. In conclusion, *Ondofolo's* leadership pattern integrates the preservation of cultural heritage with the community's practical needs. This study on *Ondofolo's* leadership has implications for preserving local wisdom, emphasising the need for support to sustain indigenous leadership amidst modern challenges.

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