

## The Features of Dawanese Traditional House as a Cultural Identity Marker of Dawanese People in Timor Island Indonesia



Florens Max Un Bria<sup>1</sup>, Aloysius E. Monteiro<sup>2</sup>, Emanuel Inocentius D. Je'eMaly<sup>3</sup>, Fransiskus Bustan<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Lecturer of Higher Education Pastoral, Great Diocese of Kupang Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>Lecturer of Nusa Cendana University Kupang Indonesia

**ABSTRACT:** This study explores features of Dawanese traditional house as a cultural identity marker of Dawanese people in terms of its forms, functions, and meanings in view of semiotics, a branch of science which is concerned with the study of signs. The study is descriptive. The procedures of research were field research and the library research. The data were analyzed by using inductive method as the analysis was started from the data to the local-ideographic theory providing a written description regarding the features of Dawanese traditional house as a cultural identity marker of Dawanese people. The results of study show the traditional house of Dawanese people known as *ume kubhu* has unique and specific features in terms of its forms, functions, and meanings. The *ume kbubu* is designed in the form of a round shape without window, the roof is shaped like a hairstyle that is rounded and tapered at the top, and the door is short of about one meter in height so that adults entering the house must bow. The *ume kbubu* serves as a place for performing such activities as sleeping, gathering with their family, cooking, weaving, storing foodstuffs, receiving guests, and carrying out various rituals. Along with its practical and symbolic functions, the *ume kbubu* serves social, economic, historical, and religious meanings. The *ume kbubu* designates the ways Dawanese people view and make sense of the world as it is not simply defined as a house that anchors them to a place, divides them into visible groups, and expresses their continuity of relationships over generations but also as a cultural identity marker for them as a house based-community.

**KEYWORDS:** feature, Dawanese traditional house, form, function, meaning, cultural identity marker

### INTRODUCTION

It has been widely acknowledged that, due to the impact of cultural globalization in the last few decades, pluralism has been a universal phenomenon characterizing the life situation of all nations in the world. On the basis of existing plurality indicators, there are many large pluralistic nations in the world today and Indonesia is no exception. Indonesia is identified as the fourth largest pluralistic nation in the world for the basic reasons that its population is formed from the diversity of ethnic groups widely spreading across around 13 thousand islands and 14 provinces throughout Indonesian archipelago. As every ethnic group has its own local culture and local language, Indonesia is known not only as a multiethnic nation but also as a multicultural and multilingual nation (Bustan, 2006; Bustan, 2007). The miniature of Indonesia as a multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual nation can be seen in the province of East Nusa Tenggara. This is because the population of East Nusa Tenggara province is formed from 18 ethnic groups spreading over five big islands, including the island of Flores, Sumba, Timor, Alor, and Lembata, and dozen of small islands such as Sabu, Rote, Semau, Palue, Rinca, and Komodo (Bustan, 2006; Bustan, 2007; Gana et al, 2022). Therefore, along with its existence as the miniature of Indonesia as a multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual nation, Bustan (2006) propounded that the province of East Nusa Tenggara is one of the cultural tapestries of Indonesian archipelago (Bustan, 2007; Gana et al, 2022).

The island of Timor has been established as one of the tourism destinations in the province of East Nusa Tenggara because, in addition to having beautiful natural panoramas, there are also various cultural products inherited from the ancestors of Timorese people serving as the icons of cultural tourism objects. One of the cultural products that attracts tourists to come to the island of Timor is the traditional house of Dawanese people as one of Timorese ethnics residing in the regent of Kupang, the regent of South Central Timor, and the regent of North Central Timor (Maria et al, 2006; Prasojo, 2015; Windi & Whittaker, 2012). The traditional house of Dawanese people has unique and specific features designating the ways they view and make sense of the world, involving the factual world and the symbolic world. As in the features of traditional houses belonging to other ethnic groups in the province of East Nusa Tenggara such as the traditional house of Manggarai ethnic group (Bustan & Pous, 2008), the unique and specific features of Dawanese traditional house are reflected in its forms, functions, and meanings. Therefore, the traditional house of

## **The Features of Dawanese Traditional House as a Cultural Identity Marker of Dawanese People in Timor Island Indonesia**

Dawanese people should be maintained and preserved in the face of change as it can increase the socio-economic welfare of Dawanese people sourced from cultural tourism sector.

Bearing the matters stated above in minds, this study explores the features of Dawanese traditional house with special reference to its forms, functions, and meanings. The study is conducted for the basic reason that the features of Dawanese traditional house are unique and specific to Dawanese culture as the parent culture in which the traditional house in question is embedded designating the ways Dawanese people view and make sense of the world. This comes closest to the conception of anthropologists that housing represents not only shelter for human beings but also an expression of their cultural knowledge and, as such, the study of inhabited space, its construction, and daily use can provide a way in to a whole culture and its ideas. Culture in this light serves an important role in understanding why certain houses are built, their shapes or designs, the kinds of materials of which they are made, and the purposes for which they are constructed. As seen in Indonesia nowadays, houses and buildings are widely built using concrete materials such as bricks, tiles, and metals, while wood and a wide range of other organic materials are used in more limited amounts (Waterson, 1990).

In line with the changes in the materials used to build houses, it is also found out that their forms, functions, and meanings have changed in some respect. In some cases, traditional houses that have unique and specific features in their forms, functions, and meanings have been replaced by modern housing (Hoed, 2008; Bustan & Opus, 2009). The traditional house of Dawanese people is no exception from such changes due to the dynamics of Dawanese people in pursuing the constellation of modern life (Maria et al, 2006; Dima et al, 2013; Prasojo et al, 2015; Maria et al, 2006; Prasojo, 2015; Windi & Whittaker, 2012). As the traditional house of Dawanese people serves as a link with their past in many ways, it is important to investigate the features of their traditional house, especially in view of semiotic perspective because Dawanese traditional house signifies the existence of Dawanese people as a house-based community. This is also one of the reasons why we are interested in exploring in more depth the features of Dawanese traditional house in terms of its forms, functions, and meanings along with its significance as a cultural identity marker of Dawanese people as a house-based community.

### **FRAMEWORK**

As mentioned earlier, this study is viewed from the perspective of semiotics as a branch of science which is concerned with the study of signs and their codes together with their uses in a society (Piliang, 2005; Piliang, 2011). This comes closest to the conception of Zoest and Sudjiman (1992) that semiotics is the study of signs and all related things to signs like the functions, the relationship, the sender and the receiver of the signs which refer everything that should be given meaning. As meaning is its main concern, semiotics can be used to study the cultural phenomena. In the perspective of semiotics, culture is defined as a system of signs which are interconnected by means of understanding meanings stated and implied in the signs. The interconnection of signs in a culture is based on social convention and, as such the study of meanings stated and implied in the signs should be based on the conceptualization ascribed in the cognitive map of a people as members of a social who shares the culture in question. Parallel to this, Piliang (2011) propounds that, as the interconnection of signs, codes, and texts makes up a culture, it is a truism that culture in this light is defined as the amalgamation of signs, codes, and texts.

Based on the conception of Saussure, according to Barthes (in Hoed, 2008), there are two dichotomy concepts of semiotics, involving syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation and denotation and connotation. The concept of syntagm and system is used as the basis of analyzing such cultural phenomena as signs (Sobur, 2004). As there is a close relationship between a sign and its object used as referent, Pierce (in Zoest & Sudjiman, 1992) classifies signs into three main categories, including icon, index, and symbol. Icon refers to a category of sign in which the relationship between the sign and its object is based on perceptible similarity or likeness. Even though icon can be easily perceived, it is complicated to be interpreted because of its implicit meaning. Index refers to a sign whose meaning is interpreted on the basis of the context of its use. The relationship between an index and its referent is a cause-effect relationship like smoke as a sign is an index of fire. Symbol is a sign which refers to a certain thing or object. Symbol as a category of sign can have iconic aspects as well as indexical aspect depending on its use in certain context (Sobur, 2004; Bungin, 2007). In terms of its physical features, symbol can be represented in the material and nonmaterial forms. The material symbols are referred to as the forms of symbols which are tangible such as houses, clothes, and foods. In contrast, the nonmaterial symbols are referred to as the forms of symbols which are intangible like language, knowledge, and the system of belief. Regardless their physical appearances, the meanings of symbols are called symbolic meanings. As the symbolic meanings are closely related to culture, culture is defined as a system of meaningful symbols. As it puts emphasis on culture as its main concept, one of the branches of semiotics is cultural semiotics which is mainly concerned with the study of symbols explored through the prism or lens of culture in which the symbols are embedded (Sobur, 2004).

Referring to the conceptions and views provided above, the symbols of a culture can be identified into two forms, involving material symbols and nonmaterial symbols. The material symbols refer to the tangible products of culture that can be seen and touched and,

## **The Features of Dawanese Traditional House as a Cultural Identity Marker of Dawanese People in Timor Island Indonesia**

in contrast, the nonmaterial symbols refer to intangible products of culture that cannot be seen and touched. Both the material symbols and the nonmaterial symbols are manifested in many different kinds. One of the material symbols of culture serving as an identity marker of a people in a given culture is traditional house. The features of a traditional house belonging to a people in a given culture are unique and specific to the parent culture in which the traditional house is embedded (Keesing, 1981; Koentjaraningrat, 1992; Koentjaraningrat, 2004; Bustan & Pous, 2009; Gana et al, 2022). As can be seen in the South East Asian, the unique and specific features of a traditional house are reflected in its forms, functions, and meanings (Erb, 1999; Bustan & Pous, 2009; Gana et al, 2022). This is one of the reasons why we are interested in exploring features of Dawanese traditional house as a cultural identity marker of Dawanese people as a house-based community in terms of its forms, functions, and meanings as the main concerns of study.

### **METHOD**

This study is descriptive in nature as it is aimed at describing the features of Dawanese traditional house in terms of its forms, functions, and meanings along with its significance as a cultural identity marker of Dawanese people on the basis of conceptualization ascribed in their cognitive map (Muhadjir, 1995). The sources of data were primary and secondary data. Referring the ways of acquiring the data, the procedures of research done were field and library research. The field research was aimed at collecting the primary data dealing with the features of Dawanese traditional house. To achieve the intended aim, the field research was carried out in the regency of South Central Timor with the main location of research was in Soe town. The methods of data collection were observation and interview (Bungin, 2007; Sudikan, 2001; Spradley, 1997). The observation was carried out to have data regarding a general view on features of Dawanese traditional house as the basis of identifying its forms, functions, and meanings. Based on the data of observation, the interviews were carried out the members of Dawanese people as the sources of data, especially those living in Soe town as the main location of the field research. However, for the purpose of the study, they were represented by 4 key informants selected on the basis of ideal criteria proposed by Sudikan (2001), Spradley (1997), and Bungin (2007) in which the most important criterion is that they understand deeply regarding the forms, functions, meanings of Dawanese traditional house. The techniques of data collection were recording, elicitation and note-taking. The library research was aimed at collecting the secondary data. The method of data collection was documentary study. The documents used as the sources of data were general references (books) and special references (result of research, articles and papers). The collected data were then analyzed qualitatively by using inductive method as the analysis was started from the data to theory. The theory is local-ideographic in nature as it provides a written description regarding the features of Dawanese traditional house as a cultural identity marker of Dawanese people as a house based-community.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Results**

The results of study show that the traditional house of Dawanese people has unique and specific features to Dawanese culture as the parent culture in which the traditional house is embedded. The unique and specific features of Dawanese traditional house are reflected in its forms, functions, and meanings designating the ways Dawanese people view and make sense of the world, involving both the factual world and the symbolic world which refers to the world in which the object as referent is imaginative in nature as it conceptualized in their cognitive map. As conceptualized in the cognitive map of Dawanese people, their traditional house is not simply defined as a house that anchors them to a place, divides them into visible groups, and expresses their continuity of relationships over generations but also as a cultural identity marker inherited from their ancestor which is closely tied up with birth, marriage, and death events. Added to this, it is also conceptualized in the cognitive map of Dawanese people that their traditional house serves an important role as a link with their past in many ways.

#### **Discussion**

Referring the results of study provided above, this section discusses in more depth the features of Dawanese traditional house as a cultural identity of Dawanese people, as reflected in its forms, functions, and meanings, along with the conceptualization ascribed in their cognitive map.

#### **Forms**

The traditional house of Dawanese people is known as *ume kubhu* in Dawanese language. As seen in the physical features of its words or lexical items, the term *ume kbubu* appears in the form of a noun phrase or nominal made up of two words as its component parts. The two words as its component parts are the word (noun) *ume* 'house' as the core word that functions as the HEAD (H) and *kbubu* 'round' as its MODIFIER (M). Based on the lexical meanings of the words as its component parts, the term *ume kbubu* means 'round house'. As its name implies, in terms of its design, the *umme kbubu* has a round shape without window and the roof is shaped like a hairstyle that is rounded and tapered at the top of the house. The kinds of materials used to build the house are taken from the natural surroundings. The unique and specific features in the forms of the *ume kbubu* are also reflected in its door which

## **The Features of Dawanese Traditional House as a Cultural Identity Marker of Dawanese People in Timor Island Indonesia**

is short of about one meter in height so that adults entering the house must bow (Maria et al, 2006; Windi & Whittaker, 2012; Dima et al, 2013; Prasajo et al, 2015).

### **Functions**

The ume kbubu has many functions which include not only practical functions but also symbolic functions. In general, the ume kbubu serves as a place for performing such activities as sleeping, gathering with their family, cooking, weaving, storing foodstuffs, and receiving guests. Other than those functions, the ume kbubu also serves as a place for mother to give birth as well as a place to carry out various rituals, including agricultural rituals which are performed during the process of planting corn, before harvest time, until the moment it is ready to eat. The rituals are concerned with the local faith of Dawanese people on the existence of the almighty God known known as Uis Neno which means “the sun god” or Amoet Afakaet which means “the creator and king” in Dawanese language. The door of the ume kbubu which is about one meter in height, as mentioned above, functions not only to keep the house warm but also to force adults entering the house to bow. The pattern of nonverbal behavior entering the house is conceptualized in the cognitive map of Dawanese people as a part of giving respect to their gods represented by foodstuffs stored in the house, especially corn (pena) as their staple food. Being the staple food, the members of Dawanese people greatly respect the corn as they regard the corn as king (usim nahat) and the ume kbubu functions as a palace (Maria et al, 2006; Windi & Whittaker, 2012; Dima et al, 2013; Prasajo et al, 2015).

### **Meanings**

In accordance with its forms and functions, it is conceptualized in the cognitive map of Dawanese people that the ume kbubu has manifold meanings as it serves not only as the center of the word or axis mundi but also as an image of universe. Based on the phenomenological realities experienced by Dawanese people in the contexts of living together for years and across generations, the most prominent meanings of the ume kbubu are social, economic, historical, and religious meanings. The social meanings of the ume kbubu are reflected not only its physical shape as a round house but also in its use as the living place of the members of a family as a whole, the meeting place for them to conduct such events as birth, marriage, and death, and the place of performing such social activities as gathering with other families and receiving guests. The economic meanings of the ume kbubu are reflected in its use as a place for cooking, storing foodstuffs especially corn as the staple food of Dawanese people as dry land farmers. The historical meanings of the ume kbubu are related to its use as a place for storing their ancestors’ heritages. As conceptualized in the cognitive map of Dawanese people, the ancestors’ heritages stored in the ume kbubu are the sources of historical references for them to trace their genealogic descents as that they originated from the same ancestors. This implies that the ume kbubu is one of the historical evidences confirming the existence of Dawanese people both as a patrilineal-genealogic clan and a house-based community because they are bound by the awareness of the ownership of the ume kbubu as their origin house (Maria et al, 2006; Windi & Whittaker, 2012; Dima et al, 2013; Prasajo et al, 2015).

The religious meanings of the ume kbubu are reflected in its use as a place to carry out various rituals that include agricultural rituals which are performed routinely and intensively during the process of planting corn, before harvest time, until the moment it is ready to eat. The rituals are concerned with the local faith of Dawanese people on the existence of the almighty God known known as Uis Neno “the sun god” or Amoet Afakaet “the creator and king” in Dawanese language. The door of the ume kbubu which is about one meter in height is not only aimed at keeping the house warm but also aimed at forcing adults who enter the house to bow which is regarded by Dawanese people as a part of giving respect to their gods represented by foodstuffs stored in the house, especially corn as their staple food (Maria et al, 2006; Windi & Whittaker, 2012; Dima et al, 2013; Prasajo et al, 2015). As mentioned earlier, Dawanese people greatly respect the corn as it is conceptualized in their cognitive map as king and the house as palace. As the foodstuffs stored in the ume kbubu are conceptualized by Dawanese people as the representation of gods, the ume kbubu is also defined as a sacred house.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The traditional house of Dawanese people known as ume kbubu in Dawanese language has unique and specific features to Dawanese culture as the parent culture in which the house is embedded. The unique and specific features of the ume kbubu as the cultural identity of Dawanese people are reflected in its forms, functions, and meanings. In terms of its forms, the ume kbubu has a round shape without window and the kinds of materials used to build the house are taken from the natural surroundings. The roof is shaped like a hairstyle that is rounded and tapered at the top of the house. The unique and specific aspect of the ume kbubu is also reflected in its door which is short of about one meter in height so that adults entering the house must bow. The ume kbubu has not only practical functions but also symbolic functions. In general, the ume kbubu serves as a place for performing such activities as sleeping, gathering with their family, cooking, weaving, storing foodstuffs, and receiving guests. In addition to functioning as a place for mother to give birth, the ume kbubu also serves as a place to carry out various rituals, including agricultural rituals which are performed during the process of planting corn, before harvest time, until the moment it is ready to eat. The rituals are concerned with the local faith of Dawanese people on the existence of the almighty God known known as Uis Neno “the sun god” or Amoet

## The Features of Dawanese Traditional House as a Cultural Identity Marker of Dawanese People in Timor Island Indonesia

Afakaet “the creator and king” in Dawanese language. The door of the ume kbubu which is about one meter in height functions not only to keep the house warm but also to force adults entering the house to bow which is regarded by Dawanese people as a part of giving respect to their gods represented by foodstuffs stored in the house, especially corn as their staple food. As conceptualized in the cognitive map of Dawanese people, the ume kbubu is not simply a house because it serves several meanings that include social, religious, historical, and economic meaning. The meanings of the ume kbubu are interconnected reflecting the ways Dawanese people view the world and make sense of the world. Due to its unique and specific features, the ume kbubu has been established as an icon of cultural tourism object in the province of East Nusa Tenggara province. Therefore, it is suggested for Dawanese people to preserve the ume kbubu in the face of change as it can increase their socio-economic welfare sourced from cultural tourism sector. The success of preserving the ume kbubu depends not only the awareness of Dawanese people but also the good will of local governments to allocate fund to revitalize the ume kbubu as a cultural identity marker of Dawanese people as a house based-community.

### REFERENCES

- 1) Bungin, B. (2007). *Penelitian Kualitatif: Komunikasi, Ekonomi, Kebijakan Publik, dan Ilmu Sosial Lainnya*. Jakarta: Kencana.
- 2) Bustan, F. (2006). “Dari kemajemukan bangsa Indonesia menuju GENTANIA (GERAKAN CINTA PARIWISATA DAN SENI BUDAYA).” Makalah. Disajikan dalam diskusi panel: APA KATA MEREKA TENTANG KEPARIWISATAAN SONGSONG NTT GERBANG ASIA PASIFIK, yang diselenggarakan Kantor Dinas Pariwisata dan Seni Budaya Provinsi NTT di Kupang, 09-13 Oktober 2006.
- 3) Bustan, F. (2007). “NTT: “Permadani budaya nusantara yang terlupakan”. Makalah. Disajikan dalam Temu Budaya yang diselenggarakan Kantor Dinas Pariwisata dan Seni Budaya Provinsi NTT di Kupang, 10 Desember 2007.
- 4) Bustan, F., Pous, H. (2009). “Bentuk, fungsi, dan makna mbaru gendang dalam realitas sosial budaya kelompok etnik Manggarai”. Hasil Penelitian. Jakarta: DP2M DIKTI DEPDIKNAS.
- 5) Dima, T. K., Antariksa, A., Nugroho, A. M. (2013). “Konsep Ruang Ume Kbbubu Desa Kaenbaun Kabupaten Timor Tengah Utara. *Jurnal RUAS, Jawa Timur*, Vol. 11, Nomor. 1, pp. 28-36, 2013.
- 6) Hoed, B. H. (2008). *Semiotik dan Dinamika Sosial Budaya*. Jakarta: Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya (FIB) UI Depok.
- 7) Erb, M. (1999). *The Manggaraians: A Guide to Traditional Lifestyles*. Singapore: Times Edition.
- 8) Gana, F., Bustan, F. Bili Bora, D. (2022). “The features of Sumbanese traditional house as an icon of cultural tourism object in East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia”. *RES MILITARIS* 12 (2), 2068-2075, 2022.
- 9) Koentjaraningrat. (1992). *Beberapa Pokok Antropologi Sosial*. Jakarta: DIAN Rakyat.
- 10) Koentjaraningrat. (1992). *Kebudayaan Mentalitas dan Pembangunan*. Jakarta: Gramedia.
- 11) Maria, S., Limbeng, J., Sunarto, A. (2006). *Kepercayaan komunitas adat suku Dawan pada siklus ritus tani lahan kering di Kampung Maslete, Kecamatan Kefamenanu Kabupaten Timor Tengah Utara, Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur*. Jakarta: Direktorat Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan YME.
- 12) Muhadjir, N. (1995). *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif: Telaah Positivistik, Rasionalistik, Phenomenologik, Realisme Metaphisik*. Yogyakarta: Rake Sarasin.
- 13) Piliang, A. Y. (2005). *Hipersemiotika, Tafsir Cultural Studies atas Matinya Makna*. Yogyakarta: Jalasutra.
- 14) Piliang, A. Y. (2011). *Dunia yang Dilipat: Tamasya Melampaui Batas-batas Kebudayaan*. Bandung: Matahari.
- 15) Prasodjo, R. et al. (2015). “Advocate program for healthy traditional houses, Ume Kbbubu, in a Timor Community: preserving traditional behavior and promoting improved health outcomes”. *Journal of Health Communication, Philadelphia*, Vol. 20, pp. 10-19, 2015. Suplemento 1.
- 16) Situmeang, V. S. N. (2013). “Ume Kbbubu: household granary and food security in Timor Tengah Selatan”. 2013. *Dissertação (Mestrado em International Studies) - University of Oregon, Eugene*.
- 17) Sobur, A. (2004). *Semiotika Komunikasi*. Bandung: Humaniora Utama Press.
- 18) Spradley, J. P. (1997). *Metode Etnografi*. Diterjemahkan oleh Misbah Zulfa Elizabeth. Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana Yogya.
- 19) Sudikan, S. Y. (2001). *Metode Penelitian Kebudayaan*. Surabaya: Unesa Unipress bekerjasama dengan Citra Wacana.
- 20) Windi, Y. K., Whittaker, A. (2012). “Indigenous round houses versus “healthy houses”: health, place and identity among the Dawan of West Timor, Indonesia. *Health & Place, Exford*, Volume 18, Number 5, pp. 1153-1161, 2012.
- 21) Waterson, R. (1990). *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia*. Singapura: Oxford University Press.
- 22) Zoest, A. (1993). *Semiotika: Tentang Tanda, Cara Kerjanya dan Apa yang Kita Lakukan dengannya*. Jakarta: Yayasan Sumber Agung.
- 23) Zoest, A. & Sudjiman. (1991). *Serba-serbi Semiotika*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka.