

Semiotic Analysis of Lepo in Hewokloang Village

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ABSTRACT

Semiotics in traditional architecture is a symbolic language that conveys meaning through specific forms. These symbols are central to communicating meaning, allowing traditional buildings to reflect cultural values beyond their physical appearance. This study explores the semiotic meanings embedded in *lepo*, the traditional houses of the *Hewokloang* community. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews with indigenous stakeholders and direct observations at the study site. The findings reveal four main types of *lepo* in *Hewokloang* Village: *Lepo Kirek*, *Lepo Hobat*, *Lepo Tana*, and *Lepo Musidole*. Each *lepo* contains distinct symbolic elements expressed through its form, structure, and decorative details. These features are not merely aesthetic but are deeply rooted in the community's cultural values. *Lepo Musidole* features a carved figure of a man on its door leaf, symbolizing the individual who built the house. An umbrella-shaped roof ridge distinguishes *Lepo Hobat*, symbolizing its role as a place to prepare ceremonial materials. Meanwhile, *Lepo Tana*, constructed higher than the others, represents strength and authority. This study concludes that the symbolic elements of *Hewokloang's* traditional houses are integral to understanding the community's identity, beliefs, and social structure, demonstrating how architecture can serve as a cultural text that communicates meaning across generations.

Keywords: Hewokloang Culture, Semiotics, Social Structure, Traditional Architecture



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INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is the scientific study of signs and their meanings [1], [2]. In *semiotic* research, social realities within society and culture are considered indicative signs that reflect more profound meanings [3]–[5]. This discipline explores the rules and conventions that allow signs to convey meaning and includes the analysis of *symbols*, *indices*, and *icons* [6]. Artistic media such as literature, design, and film serve as platforms for these signs to manifest [7], [8]. Based on logic and reasoning, signs function as tools to think, relate, and interpret the world [9]. An *icon* is a sign whose form resembles its object; an *index* is causally linked to its referent, and a *symbol* is defined by conventional association.

Several scholars have contributed relevant research. [10] studied the mirror-tile artwork decoration in Iranian-Islamic architecture. The study finds that there is a role for building figures in presenting the expression of his power to a building or living environment in the colonial era, that is, representing Tjong A Fie [11]. Similarly, [12] In Semiotic Approach to the Façade of Commercial Buildings in Makassar, " it was revealed that semiotics effectively conveys architectural messages through façade design.

This study focuses on the *lepo*, the traditional stilt house of the Sikka Krowe ethnic group in Hewokloang. The community comprises four main *Lepo* groups: *Lepo Kirek*, *Lepo Tanah*, *Lepo Hobat*, and *Lepo Musidola*. Using traditional tools and techniques, these houses are built with natural materials—jackfruit wood, bamboo, and reed leaves. Each house rests on pillars placed over stones rather than buried in the ground. The number of pillars varies with the house's size. The *lepo* serves both functional and ceremonial purposes. Specific spaces like *ulu higon* are reserved for sacred objects like *watu mahan* (ancestral stones) and *utan beke* (a mystical traditional sarong).

The architectural structure of *lepo* reflects the *tri angga* concept: head (upper part), body (middle), and foot (lower part). The upper part symbolizes spiritual radiance and human dignity; the middle represents internal conflict and desire; and the lower stands for grounding strength against worldly challenges. These interpretations illustrate how *semiotic* meaning is embedded in traditional architecture's structure and symbolism.

This research was undertaken to observe, understand, and explain the *semiotic* meanings and cultural values embedded in the architecture of *Lepo*. The study focuses on symbols, forms, number of doors, roof structures, materials used, and their interpretative significance within the Hewokloang tradition.

The findings of this study affirm the crucial role of semiotic interpretation in understanding the symbolic dimensions of traditional architecture. [13]–[15]. In the case of the *Lepo* house of the Hewokloang community, each architectural element—ranging from the orientation and spatial divisions to the decorative motifs—functions as a sign that encapsulates the community's cosmology, kinship structure, and ecological wisdom [16], [17]. The front and back orientation of the *Lepo* house, for example, is not merely a physical design choice but represents a dichotomy between life and death, social openness and spiritual introspection. This symbolic reading underscores the architectural space as a cultural text, reflecting the community's worldview and normative order. [18].

Moreover, the socio-religious values embedded in the structure demonstrate the performative aspect of architecture [17], [19]. The use of shared living space (*lepo*) reinforces communal identity. It serves as a site for ritual performance, intergenerational transmission of values, and social regulation—functions identified by anthropologists in their analyses of sacred space. The wooden posts, carvings, and thatched roofing are not arbitrary aesthetic features but are semiotic carriers of cultural memory and environmental adaptation [16], [20], [21]. These elements represent indigenous knowledge encoded materially and spatially, serving symbolic and ecological functions. Such findings confirm the relevance of architectural semiotics as a method for interpreting the deeper layers of meaning in vernacular design, and suggest that preserving traditional houses like the *Lepo* is tantamount to safeguarding a community's intangible heritage.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, which is appropriate for exploring and analyzing the symbolic meanings embedded in the architectural features of *Lepo*, the traditional house of the Hewokloang community. A descriptive qualitative design enables

researchers to describe, interpret, and understand phenomena within their natural and cultural contexts [22]–[24].

Data collection techniques included observation, documentation, and interviews. We conducted direct observation in Hewokloang Village, concentrating on the physical structure and symbolic elements of the *Lepo* houses. This method allowed the researcher to closely examine spatial arrangements, construction details, and ornamentation that reflect cultural meanings. Documentation was a complementary technique to gather visual data through photographs, field notes, and relevant archival materials.

The instruments used for data collection consisted of an observation checklist, a documentation sheet, and a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were conducted with local community members and traditional leaders to obtain in-depth insights into the symbolic interpretations and cultural functions of various architectural components of the *Lepo*. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility while ensuring the consistency of key themes across participants.

We analyzed the collected data using qualitative data analysis techniques, which involved data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing [23], [25]. Data were organized into thematic units, interpreted, and synthesized to uncover patterns and cultural meanings inherent in the traditional architecture. This field research was carried out over one month, from March to April 2024.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explores the symbolic meanings embedded within the architectural elements of the *Lepo Hewokloang* traditional house. Through detailed observations and field documentation at various *lepo*—including *lepo kirek*, *lepo musidole*, *lepo hobat*, and *lepo land*—this research reveals how structure, form, motifs, and material choices serve not only aesthetic purposes but also function as carriers of ancestral philosophy, values, and local wisdom.

Interpretation of Symbols in Lepo Kirek

The *lepo kirek* (Figure 1) exhibits distinct characteristics through its structure and decorative elements. A key symbolic feature is the dragon carving found on the door leaf. In this context, the dragon represents a *sacred guardian*, a mystical creature believed to protect the inhabitants of the *lepo kirek*. According to Yoswara (2011), the dragon imagery often stems from dynastic relics and appears with a long, snake-like body and facial features such as beards or antennae on either side of the mouth. The dragon's sacredness in indigenous cosmology symbolizes power, mystery, and divine protection.



Figure 1. Lepo Kirek

The bamboo tree motif is another symbolic carving on the pavilion walls, representing leadership succession. See Figure 2. The imagery reflects the cultural narrative that a tribal head who has passed will be replaced by a new generation, ensuring the continuity of guidance and wisdom. Bamboo, a fast-growing and resilient plant, symbolizes growth, renewal, and adaptability (values highly regarded in traditional societies).



Figure 2. Bamboo

The roof of the lepo kirek takes the shape of a twin trapezoid with a central ridge resembling a boat sail. This feature carries ancestral memory: it symbolizes the maritime journey of the community's forebears from the Malay archipelago. The ridge becomes a tribute, a symbolic reenactment of their voyage, reaffirming their origins and migratory identity.

Decorative symbols such as elephant and buffalo ivory are also integral to the meaning of *lepo kirek*. Buffalo symbolizes fertility and spiritual significance. In agrarian societies, buffaloes are essential for plowing fields and sustaining food production. They are also featured in ritual practices, emphasizing their sacredness. Ivory, on the other hand, denotes wealth and status. These symbols embody strength, abundance, and protective qualities projected onto the house and its inhabitants.

Furthermore, yellow (used on dragon and buffalo motifs) signifies *cheerfulness, friendliness, and happiness*. In color psychology, yellow is linked to optimism and energy, which aligns with the desired emotional environment within the home. Structurally, the supporting pillars of the *lepo kirek* are made of triangular cement forms, symbolizing creativity and strategic thinking. According to oral accounts, this shape alludes to the community's tactical ingenuity during resistance against colonial forces, embedding historical memory within architectural form.

Interpretation of Symbols in Lepo Musidole

The *Lepo musidole* displays distinct symbolism, particularly with the presence of human and dog carvings. See Figure 3. The human figure signifies the *house's founder or ancestor, anchoring the household's identity* to its originator. This person is respected not only as a biological ancestor but as a cultural founder and spiritual protector.

The dog carving has a significant *military or hunting connotation*. Endowed with extraordinary spiritual power, dogs were believed to be capable of tracking down hidden enemies. This aligns with the role of *lepo musidole* as a home associated with warriors or elite hunters, whose duties included protecting the community from threats.

The roof of the Lepo musidole is saddle-shaped, a form that emphasizes strength and balance. The wall panels, which form a prominent part of its exterior, are designed not just for insulation or separation, but to enhance the house's aesthetic and symbolic integrity. The choice of brown coloration reflects a *connection with nature*. Earth tones suggest humility, grounding, and familiarity with the natural world. In the indigenous worldview, brown signifies a life of harmony (*humans must live in balance with their environment*).



Figure 3. Human Figure

The stairs leading to *the Lepo Musidole* are arranged in three parts: two on either side of the pavilion, and one at the rear leading to the kitchen. This structure implies symbolic balance and division of spaces—possibly signifying division of roles or *ceremonial access*. As with many traditional architectural features, even mundane elements carry layered meanings.

Carvings of humans, dogs, and forest elements on the door leaf reinforce the central narrative of *the Lepo Musidole* as a *hunter's house*. The forest represents the domain of activity, while dogs and humans work symbiotically within it. This imagery preserves the collective memory of tribal roles, valor, and identity.

Interpretation of Symbols in Lepo Hobat

The *lepo hobat* features a cone-shaped roof, symbolizing protection and unity among *lepo* groups. As a shape, the cone is often associated with spiritual ascent, suggesting a connection between the terrestrial and the celestial. The walls of the *lepo hobat* are crafted from woven bamboo, featuring rhombus or star shapes. These motifs symbolize unity, light, and divine guidance. Stars, in particular, are interpreted as spiritual guides—beacons in both physical and moral darkness.



Figure 4. Lepo Hobat

The pavilion areas within the house have square-shaped layouts, denoting order, preparation, and ceremonial readiness. In this context, the square represents structure and capability; the household's ability to host rituals and provide essential offerings for ancestral ceremonies.

Interpretation of Symbols in Lepo Land

The *lepo land* (or *land lepo*) is marked by a limas-shaped roof, symbolizing power and sovereignty. This form signifies the house's ability to *withstand disasters* and provide shelter

and leadership during crises. The *Lima's structure is often found in royal or elite dwellings, suggesting that the Lima land functions as a central or authoritative home.*



Figure 5. Land lepo

The walls are also made of woven bamboo, decorated with star-shaped patterns, which convey meanings of illumination, spiritual benefit, and public service. The house is not only a private space but also seen as a *source of light*—a metaphor for wisdom or guidance for the wider community.

CONCLUSION

Semiotics in traditional buildings is a symbolic language that provides information to the observer through certain forms. The symbols serve as the primary means of conveying meaning. *Lepo Kirek has a twin trapezoid-shaped roof with elevated ridges resembling boats, which means that their ancestors sailed from Malaysia to catch catfish in the past.* Ivory means wealth, buffalo means strength, and naga means sacred animals to worship. The roof of *Lepo Hobat* resembles an umbrella, signifying its role as a location for the preparation of ceremonial materials.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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