

# Symbolic Meaning of Typical Minahasanese House Construction in Cultural Context of Tondano Javanese Society in Tondano-Minahasa

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## Symbolic Meaning of Typical Minahasanese House Construction in Cultural Context of Tondano Javanese Society in Tondano-Minahasa

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### ABSTRACT

The explanation of symbolic meaning would differ from one cultural group to another. In the view of Tondano Javanese people, the symbolic meaning has a very close meaning in the construction of the houses they are living in, start from the stage of preparation/pre-construction to post-construction. This is something that motivates the conduction of special study about the relation of the symbolic meaning of Minahasanese traditional house within the cultural context of Tondano Javanese society. The method of this research was a case study where the data collection was carried out in triangulation and the analysis was carried out descriptively. The meaning interpretation referred to Sassure and Barthes. Result of the study shows that the construction process which starts from the preparation process up to post-construction contains symbolic meaning marked by physical and non-physical forms. Its denotative meaning is more of the consideration of power/strength shown in joints and the placement of pillars and beams. Its connotative meaning is more on the expectation for prosperity, happiness, and safety both in the world and the after-life which is symbolized by the norms of building, while the myth refers to a belief where the truth is embraced based on the experience which is symbolized by the position of the main pillar, the position of the king pillar (the pillars' stance) and some other ritual following the construction process.

Keywords : Meaning, Symbolic, Construction, Tondano Javanese People

### I. INTRODUCTION

The people of Tondano Javanese (Jaton) is a community established from a historical event of Diponegoro war which caused Kyai Modjo and his followers from Java was evacuated to Tondano (Minahasa). The marriage from Javanese ethnicity and Minahasanese (Tondano) ethnicity in Tondano brought new sub-ethnicity which recently was known as "Jatonese." As a society produced from the Javanese and Tondanese (Minahasa) acculturation, it could not be denied that the possibility of this sub-ethnicity would bring typicality of one of its origin

ethnicity and it would color its new culture which then would be implied in its behavior towards its house construction. Their houses could be separated from the architecture of the typical house of Minahasanese in the past [1]. Therefore, even though such house model was inhabited by Jatonese, until currently, the people of Jaton call it as Minahasanese typical house model. Therefore, in this research, it is called a typical Minahasanese house in the interpretation of Tondano Javanese people.

Typical house of Minahasa as mentioned in Graafland is a house built after an earthquake hit Minahasa in

1945. After such an event, the Dutch government and Christian priests suggested that the houses in Minahasa should be replaced by smaller houses and should be equipped with more pillars and beams. The objective of such a suggestion is to make the house stronger [2]. Even though physically the construction of Minahasanese house was born as an adaptation to anticipate an earthquake, yet the process of manifestation of its form could be separated from their belief which always based on religious values. Different believes among Minahasanese and Jatonesse people brought some differences in the interpretation especially in terms of the construction of the house. Cultural difference highly contributes to different interpretation in the construction process. Lawrence confirmed that similar phenomena/architecture was interpreted differently by a different group of people/culture [3]. It could not be denied, however, as a community born from the combination of two cultures that encountered acculturation, so that on some construction elements there could happen common interpretation.

All cultural meanings are created using symbols, meaning could only be stored in a symbol. A symbol is an object or any event referring to something. The symbol includes what could be felt or experienced [4], in this case, religion influences the system of belief as well as the practice of life. On the contrary, culture could also influence religion, especially in how religion is interpreted/how the rituals should be practiced. No religion could be free from the influence of culture and what is called by The Divine would not obtain firm humane meaning without cultural mediation. Among Indonesian society, religion and culture which influences each other could be felt very strongly.

Based on the explanation described, this paper would discuss: "Symbolic meaning of construction of the house of the people of Tondano Javenese". The objective of this paper is to reveal the relationship between culture and architecture to recognize that

each cultural group has its way, in this case, the similar form/construction is interpreted differently by a different cultural group.

### 1.1 Sign as the Symbol Language

Marinet traced down the origin of the word symbol from two conceptions. Both are based on the existing correspondence between the two objects. This refers to the etymology of the word symbol back in Ancient Greek age. Symbol, at its early finding, is an object divided into two pieces, each party holds one which then was passed down to their children. Should those pieces were united, then both are used to make the holders acknowledge each other and proved the friendship that once was established [5].

According to Whitehead in Dillistone, human thoughts function symbolically if some of its experience components arouse awareness, believe, feeling and description about other experience components. Furthermore, it was said that the previous component set is "symbol" and such component set then formed the word "the meaning" of a symbol [6]. An organic function that causes the transition from a symbol into meaning would be called reference. According to Danesy, symbol represents the source of reference in a conventional way. Words are generally symbols. Yet, any signifier, an object, a sound, a figure, and so on, could be symbolic [7]. A form of the cross could represent the concept of Christianity religion, symbol V created from the pointing and middle finger could represent peace, the color white represents cleanliness, purity, innocence and the color dark represents dirty, stained, disgraceful and the list goes on. These meanings are built through social agreement or a channel in the form of historical tradition.

Norberg-Schulz stated that symbolization is not limited to spoken or written language. Symbolization also includes sign motion and other behavioral types, symbolic objects such as figures and more abstract

concepts. Humane products could be said as a symbol or a tool that could have an objective of delivering meaning to a certain relation between humane and their environments. Nonverbal behavior depends on the symbol system is arranged just like verbal behavior [8].

## 1.2 Semiology Approach in Reading Meaning

To understand the phenomena of the signs, we must look closer into the definition of 'sign' in architecture. There is some classification of signs. Sassure sees language as a system of symbols. According to Sassure, each symbol must be seen as two entities: "Signifier" is a physical form of signs, something that can be seen, heard, touched or felt (sound, figure, or equal to graphic) and "Signified" is a mental description, i.e. thoughts or concept of mental aspect from a language (concept or meaning). Two entities from this symbol are united by social contact. They were tied up by cultural context and historical convention. Each symbol in a system has meaning by the base of difference from other symbols [9].

In a symbolic approach according to Rapoport, traditional elements are used in solving this mystery of high-style architecture and vernacular environment. There are two problems in this case i.e. between sign and symbol. Sign tends more to become univocal i.e. having a detail definition about what is expected since it has direct and open connections. On the other hand, methodologically, a symbol has a definition for some definitions [10]. In many cases, what is called as symbolism could be understood through sensing figures and their meaning? Rapoport has an opinion that "one could see environmental signs and analyze their meanings without entirely enter the sufficiently abstract issue of symbol [10]. A physical element could code meaning (forms, sizes, scale, height, color, material, texture, detail, decoration, space, etc.) According to Norberg Schulz, the task of a building depends on its cultural, location and political background. Architecture is a visual

language that could communicate through its mass figure [8].

According to Lechte in Sobur (2009), semiotics is a theory about signs and signification. Further explained, semiotics according to Serger in Sobur (2009) is a discipline that investigates all forms of communication occurring with the facility of "signs" and based on the sign system (code) [11]. Semiotics has three main fields of study, they are: 1) That sign itself. It consists of study over various signs, the way those various signs deliver their meanings, and the way those signs related to the people use them; 2) Code or system organizing the signs. This study covers the way various codes are developed to fulfill the need of a certain society or culture to exploit the available communication channel to transmit it; 3) Culture is a place where codes and signs work. This, in its turn, depends on the use of those codes and signs for its availability and forms [12].

According to Barthes, semiology would study how humanity interprets things. Barthes sees significance as a total process with a structured arrangement. Barthes considers social life as a significance. In other words, social life, no matter what their forms are, is a distinguished system of the sign. As what Sassure sees, Barthes also believes that the relationship between a marker and a sign is not formed naturally, but arbitrary. If Sassure only emphasizes on the signification in denotative level, then Ronald Barthes refines Sassure's semiology by developing marking system in connotative level [13]. Barthes also sees another aspect of signification, i.e. "myth" which signifies a society. The myth appears on the level of the mental concept of a sign [14].

Roland Barthes made a systematic model in analyzing the meaning of signs. Barthes's focus of attention is more on the ideas of two order of signification [11]. This two order of signification consists of: a) Denotation: denotation is an order of Sassure's first signification groundwork. This order describes a

relation between a marker and a sign within a sign, and between the sign and its reference in external reality. Barthes states this order as a denotation. This refers to a general consideration that the meaning explains about a sign. The denotation is also used to be called as a dictionary meaning of a word or terminology or an object [15]; b) Connotation: connotation is cultural meanings attached to a terminology. In a term used by Barthes, a connotation is used to explain one of three ways a sign works in the second marker order. Connotation describes when a sign meets a feeling or an emotion of their uses within their cultural values. This occurs when the meaning moves to subjective or at least inter-subjective. The word connotation involves symbol, history, and things related to emotion [16]. Sometimes connotation of a word is common to almost everyone, sometimes it only relates to one's experience, or more frequently with a certain small individual group [4]. The connotative meaning of a word is influenced and determined by two environments, textual and cultural environment [17]; c) Myth. Myth is a story used by a culture to clarify or to understand some aspects from reality or nature. For Barthes, myth is a way of a culture about something, a way to conceptualize or to understand something. Barthes considers a myth as a chain from the related concept. If the connotation is an interpretation of the second-order of a sign, myth is an interpretation of second-order of a signification.

## II. METHODS AND MATERIAL

In this research, to study the nature of an existence of a sign in construction using semiotics approach by Sassure and categorization of meaning in the sign using the method of Rolland Barthes. The objective of the semiotic analysis is to try to find the meaning of a sign including items hidden behind a sign. As explained by Sassure, that a sign is not only a physical sign, but also audible, and could be sensed. Data collection is carried out through observation on the artifact in the field to obtain a signifier while signified

through an interview, and referent as social and cultural reality implication obtained through in-depth interview and the document tracking. In-depth interview is carried out by religious figure, historians, and bas (house expertise). This house is a historical house so that to obtain accurate data, the analysis and data collection are carried out in a triangulation way [18]. The method of the meaning interpretation as an effort to identify a sign or signification is revealed through interpretation based on literature and in-depth interview. The transition from symbol/sign towards the meaning would identification through denotative, connotative, and myth. The discussion is carried out descriptively and the result of the discussion is summed up in a table 1.

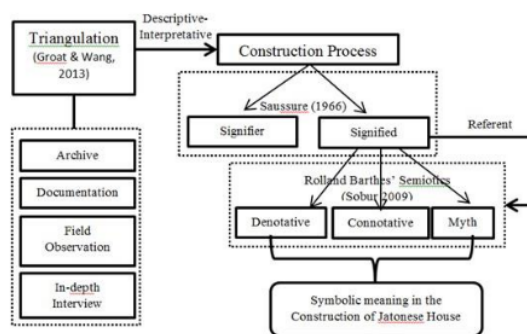


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Typical house of Minahanese as stated in Graafland [1] structurally is described by Wolukow that typical house of Minahasanese is in the form of a stage [18]. The pillars (pangririan) are erected on a sufficiently huge block, which was placed on a stone (watulinei). The relationship between the pillars and the beams is very rigid even without nails. The main material of the building is wood, while the kitchen is made of bamboo. The material of the roof is katuk (rumbia leaves) [19]. Apart from such physical feature, the people of Tondano Javanese and Minahasanese people interpret the meaning of their house differently.



Figure 2: Typical Minahasanese House (Supit, 1986)



Figure 3: Jatonese House (Field Observation, 2018)

As the last people born from the mix of two cultures, acculturation occurred, even though Javenese Tondano people are at all different in terms of belief (religion) to Minahasanese people. Therefore, some symbolic meaning which is manifested in the form of a house of Javenese Tondano people is based on the values of Islam. Various norms (panaktulan) influenced by culture and religion also influences the process of the building start from preparation, construction up to the post-construction (occupancy/ceremonial). Further, the elements involved within the process of building is categorized based on the characteristics of the activities, they are physical activities such as the placement of structural elements, placement manner, the first stone placement, length and width measurement, etc.), non-physical activities such as praying before and after the process of construction.

### 3.1 Preparation (Pre-construction)

Building a house is started by logging, taken from the woods surrounding where they are about to live. The time they would do the logging should see the position of the moon in the sky (black moon). Even though based on Islam teaching all day is a good day, but Jatonese people believe that there are certain days/times when one may not start some works. Tuesday and Saturday are considered to be bad luck days. According to elder people of Jaton when the moon is in the sky, the earth heat rises that causes bugs/termites causing wood rotten/weathered also rise to the surface of the soil, therefore it must be avoided. At the time of logging, one should also see the field, it is supposed to be to the direction of a cliff so that it will not damage other trees. The trees which

have once been crushed by another tree may not be used as the material to build a house. The trees logged must see the age and the quality of the wood. The next step is continued with the loading of natural stones/mountain stop that would be used as umpak (mountings the beams to 'tolan).

### 3.2 Construction Process

The construction process is started by determining the points that become the main pillars to place the supporting stones/umpak which is carried out by following the requirements determined by tonaas (Minahasanese = shaman). For Tondano Javenese people Tonaas must be a very religious person. In this stage, Tonaas would determine the distance of the main pillar from the street even though it is still conditional. The distance of the pillar from the street is estimated based on the footstep of the family leader. The estimation falls on an odd number where the number of steps is taken over the direction of the tonaas. The ritual process following the process of construction is carried out by preparing a white and brown porridge, a needle, and a coin (made of copper or brass) with a hole in the middle, and gold (If any). These items are planted in the four corners of the house, and before placing the natural stone as an umpak/ foundation at four holes in four corners of the house. The planting of the items in those four corners of the house is considered as 4 natural elements consisting of land, water, wind and fire. The four natural elements play a role as symbols of guardians of the 4 natural elements that have the power to cause disasters. These rituals are symbolized as the kinsman of the 4 natural elements. Square formed house (formed by the four pillars of the corners) symbolized Ka'batullah/Masjidilharam (Pulukadang, U., 1976). The white and brown porridge as a symbol of blood and bones on the humane body, while for metal as the symbol of strength, and gold as the symbol of fortune.

This procession is eventually closed by a prayer led by the Imam or parents who understand religion, to

expect the blessing given by Allah, it is expected that Allah protect the house and its content from the disaster that may be caused by the four natural elements (wind, fire, water, soil) and continuously provide much fortune for the people living in the house. To complete this process, it uses kemenyan to spread good smell. In Islam, using perfume is very recommended, so throw away a thought that kemenyan is considered to copy Hinduism and Buddhism.

The next step is installing to'tolan (massive sized beams, lengthwise and transverse placed upon the natural stones/umpak (watulinei). The meaning of the word To'tolan (Jatones language) is "to release." One unity between watulinei and to'tolan forms a strength as the foundation of Jatones house. Therefore, the readiness of to'tolan provides a belief to release a house (pillars and other structural components) since its strong foundation. The joints of such beams do not use nails, instead, it uses a method of crocodile-mouth joint (tinoleon), a hole was made at its top to put a pillar.

The way to install those beams of to'tolan is to turn it counterclockwise start from behind or from the right side, where the end of the wood should always meet with the other end. If its installation starts from behind; then the end of the wood should be placed in the rear part, so that other end faces forwards, then back to the right side to place the end of the wood to meet the other end extending from the rear to the front, and so forth in turn, as the position of the hands after Takbiratul Ihram. The installation of to'tolan beams from the right to the left is like someone who is doing a tawaf.

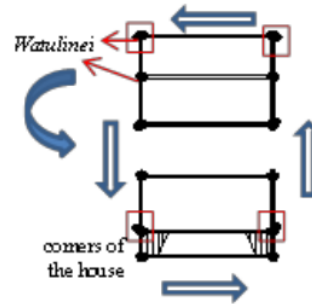


Figure 4 : Stage installing To'tolan beams as a symbol of tawaf

The motivation of tawaf is the same as Takbiratul Ihram, i.e. a symbol of human activities, not only our thoughts of devotion but also our practical lives. Our actions and efforts should always contain a belief of Allah SWT Almighty as the center; no matter how rich, poor, white, black, noble is all "have the same feeling" before God the Almighty.

The installation of wood material of boards or pillars should pay attention to the direction of the wood fiber; its installation should be in a direction of the growth of the wood fiber (the base in the bottom and the tip is on top). Logically, this reason is more on the consideration of strength. The installation of wood with this way is like a married couple in a family, each has his/her strengths and weaknesses so that family must have each others' back. Over the pillar, the beams called kinambar (lower kinambar and upper kinambar) are installed.

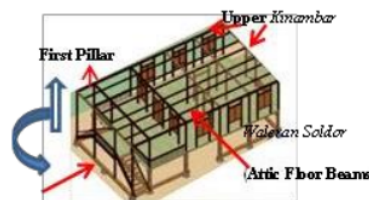


Figure 5: Structure and Construction of beams-pillars and determining the First Pillar

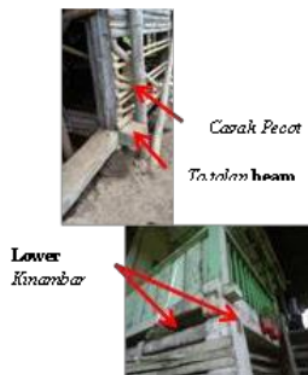


Figure 6: Construction detail of To'tolan and Kinambar Beams

The height of the pillar from the to'tolan beam to the floor is  $\pm 2,50\text{m}$ . The next step is to make a hole to stand cagak pecot (wind weir pillar) beside the four corner pillars, this cagak pecot is then tied to the four corner pillars. The installation of cagak pecot is carried out after the erection of the corner's pillars before the roofing, but sometimes, it is installed later in October, to anticipate heavy wind that blows in October-December. Cagak pecot is made of bamboo taki' (Javanese bamboo) taken from the bamboo tree planted around the house.



Figure 7: Cagak Pecot (bamboo pillar to strengthen)

Another thing that has also become the concern of bas (workers) on the process of construction, is the placement of tiang raja (the main pillars of roof structure) is not allowed to be fallen right in the middle of the door frame (front/back door or split the

room in a half. According to elder people it is considered as "Posan" (taboo), so that it must be shifted a little even though it is only for 1 cm. According to the respondent that the tonaas and their ancestors believe that if it is not obeyed, it would cause the residents of the house to experience unwanted events or brings bad luck.

The dimension of the house measurement is commonly 6 m x 12 m, where the length and width of the house measured by the hand of the resident's wife or husband. The length or the width of the house are divided into three,  $2/3$  (two-third) divided by 8. These eight parts is a symbol (blessing, bad luck, good luck, loss, reproduce, death, fortune, burnt). To calculate it in a circle from right to left, and the counting should end in good things. While the number of stairs should be odd. According to the belief of Jatonese people, Allah prefers odd numbers. This is the understanding of elder people of Jaton that the prayer to Allah is followed by I'tibar (metaphor) as the elder people interpreted it with things. The prayer is carried out orally and interpreted it with objects. Therefore, prayer and these objects are a symbol that has meanings. Such a manner is called Tonaas.

The placement of window and ventilation should be in one axis in pair/face to face and directly connected to the outer part of the house. There is no reason metaphysically whatsoever underlying such placement except as the form of adaptation towards the nature to obtain sufficient lights and air. Purportedly, it is different with Minahanese' believe that spirits go straight forwards, so that with such opening arrangement, so that the spirits that accidentally "pass by" enter the house through one of the openings, would directly go away through another opening facing the one they have entered. This reason is also frequently expressed to explain the background of placing the stairs facing the front part of the setup (porch) of the traditional Minahanese house [20]. This is different from the people of



Tondano Javanese. For them, the entrance door and exit door which is in one line should be avoided (there must be at least 1 cm gap). According to the belief of their ancestors, it is to prevent the fortune that comes does not directly go out of the house, instead, it could stop at the house, and the lower level of the kitchen floor is like a symbol of fortune. It goes the same with the stairs that face each other in the porch to differentiate the circulation of those who go up and down since it is frequently used to have ceremonial rituals. Therefore, according to them such form of stairs at the same time is considered as the symbol of transparency of Tondano Javanese people to receive visits from close or far relative to maintain their hospitality to establish a good relationship among all people of Tondano Javanese through festivities in the actualization of traditional ceremonies. The same form is differently interpreted by different culture or group of people [3].

### 3.3 Post Construction

Once the house has been built, it is time to carry out the procession of "nae rumah baru" (entering the new house) which could not also be apart from the symbolic meaning. Before the praying which is led by an Imam, the hosts over the direction of someone who becomes the tonaas of the house provides a broomstick, rica (chili), tomato, garlic's leaves, and many other spice and mix them in the circle stoned bumbunan (nyiru) and rice which spills out of the pan (entered to the house) and provide a pair of chicken tied in the space under the rear part of the house, within the expectation that this pair of chicken would produce a lot of eggs, as what married couple would receive abundantly of blessings. Further, the praying is led by an Imam. After the praying, ambeng was released, one ambeng is for five (wong limo). The

number five is a symbol of the pillars of Islam. After the occasion, all guests attending the event would be given a charity in the form of traditional cakes wrapped by leaves called berkat, as the expression of gratitude.

The people of Tondano Javanese believe that house is "the World's Grave" so that starting from the preparation to the post-construction must follow the way (panaktulan) that has been determined by tonaas. Therefore, for Jatonese people tonaas must be a very religious person. According to Pulukadang, such motivation is small things that could easily be missed from the concern and get out of control. But precisely those "small" things are objects that are far more valuable in sharpening the forces of self-control [21].

In the table 1 shows that people use various signs that are made to be the symbol of construction process either for the sign with physical or non-physical appearance. Physical manifestation is in the form of construction material addressed to the position of pillars and beams, while the physical manifestation of non-construction material in the form of brown and white porridge, metal, spices, etc.) are material as the requirements of the construction process as a cultural convention. Non-physical material related to the value/norm applied in the construction process.

As other traditional houses, Tondano Javanese uses various kinds of rule or calculation in the building a house (panaktulan) such as the ceremony of the first stone placement, ceremony to express gratitude, the good day selection, the direction of the house, the selection of building material, etc. Such signification aims as an expectation to bring safety, peacefully, and life harmony in a family.

Table 1 : Identification of Symbolic Meaning In The Process of Construction of Jatonese House

Signifier	Signified			Referent
	Denotative	Connotative	Myth	
Preparation (Pre-Construction)				
Tuesday and Saturday			Bad luck	Based on the experience believed by

			day	them that the truth would cause disaster
Moon in the sky		The strength of the wood		When the moon is in the sky, termites from the earth would go up and cause the wood to rotten.
Construction Process				
The placement of the main pillar		Blessing		Related to Blessing and Protection
Measurement of length and width		Suffering and happiness		Suffering and happiness as the result of human's choice.
The objects planted in 4 pillars Corner:				The kinsman of 4 naturals unsure that have power to cause some disaster.
Metal		Strength/Rich	Cause disaster/ bad luck if not done	
White porridge		Bones in humans		
Brown porridge		Blood in humans		
The four corner pillars are symbolized with wind, water, fire, and soil	Strength	Wind, Water, Fire, Soil		Four naturals unsure that frequently cause disasters (heavy wind./storm, flood, fire, and landslide/earthquake.
Spin from right to left		Tawaf walking around the Ka'bah		Humans are all the same before facing the gap.
The meeting of both ends	The strength of structure	The harmony of a family		The harmony of a family to cover each others' back in their ups and downs.
The meeting of both ends of to'tolan beams		Takbiratul ihram		Always remember the objective of the creation of human on earth
Cagak pecot	Strengthening structure of pillars	Pillar resembles a whip		Pecot (whip) is a term which has a connotation meaning to strengthen, while the function provide strength.
The position of tiang raja (the main pillar of roof structure)		Prosperity	Bala/ Bad luck, weather	It is believed to bring prosperity, health, and harmony in a family, it should be bala' if there is any violation.
Post Construction				
Incense	Aromatize the room			Allah loves beauty, and fragrances
Spices, a pair of chicken, and ambeng-ambengan		Fortune		A hope to have an abundant blessing to the hosts.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Symbolic meaning of the house of Jatonese people does not only emphasize physical aspect as a signifier, but also a conception of the house of the people of Jatonese which emphasizes on the process of its establishment that correlated with rites, religion and beliefs. Physical appearance formed is an environmental outcome. Religion as a reference in establishing the concept of ethics, family as its container, and its symbolization is manifested in the process of construction. The symbol in construction is signifier either physically or non-physically. The signified is carried out in a denotative way and connotative way and myth. Denotative meaning is more on the consideration of strength. Connotative direct is more to the expectation of prosperity, happiness, and safety. The meaning of myth directs to some rituals which are believed the truth based on the experience that if it is not manifested then a disaster would certainly occur. Therefore, religious believes, and nature correlates each other in the manifestation of the living house of Tondano Javanese Java. Location selection as well as building material selection, determining a time to enter the building including all kinds of the rituals, instead, it is more important than the physical appearance of the building itself. Therefore, Tondano Javanese people tend to call their houses as the world-afterlife architectural conception. Hence, the house is built not only to shelter but also to obtain harmony with nature, social environment, and the divine.

Even though typical houses of Minahasanese almost extinct, for the people of Tondano Javanese, some aspects of symbolic are still applied in the process of construction in modern houses, even though the new generation does not understand the essence of the meaning. Through this paper, it is expected to be able to become a reference to understand deeper the values in the construction process so that it is not merely ritual, but understand the meaning and

become the motivation to preserve the existing value that is still adaptable to the moving world. Therefore the culture that has become the core would remain to exist no matter how the change takes place.

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