

A Semiotic Analysis of The Ornaments of The Traditional House "Siwaluh Jabu" in The Cultural Village of Lingga, North Sumatra

Erica Restividya Purba ^{1*}, Hafniati Lubis ²

¹ Universitas Negeri Medan; email : ericavidya25@gmail.com

² Universitas Negeri Medan; email : afni73@yahoo.com

* Author : Erica Restividya Purba

Abstract: The objective of this investigation is to describe the semiotics of the ornaments found on the traditional Karo house known as Siwaluh Jabu in the cultural village of Lingga. A descriptive-qualitative method was employed in this study. The theoretical framework was based on the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce. The data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The primary data consist of ornaments located on the exterior parts of the Siwaluh Jabu house. The investigation was conducted in the cultural village of Lingga, located in the Karo Regency, North Sumatra. The findings reveal the presence of various ornaments on the Siwaluh Jabu house, including: (1) buffalo horn, (2) Kudin Taneh, (3) Lumut-Lumut Lawit, (4) Ipen-ipen, (5) Pengret-ret, (6) Pantil Manggis, (7) Bunga Bincole, (8) Pucuk Merbung, (9) Embun Sikawiten, (10) Bindu Matagah, (11) Tapak Raja Sulaiman, (12) Cimba Lau Tutup Dadu, (13) Bindu Matogoh, (14) Teger Tudung, (15) Dapur-dapur, (16) Cuping-cuping, and (17) Taruk-taruk. Each ornament is imbued with symbolic meaning, which is closely connected to the culture, religion, and social structure of the Karo community.

Keywords: Semiotics, Traditional Ornaments, Siwaluh Jabu, Charles Sanders Peirce, Cultural Village of Lingga

Received: June 02, 2025

Revised: June 15, 2025

Accepted: July 12, 2025

Online Available: July 20, 2025

Curr. Ver.: July 20, 2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.

Submitted for possible open

access publication under the

terms and conditions of the

Creative Commons Attribution

(CC BY SA) license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

1. Introduction

Indonesia is composed of numerous islands and is widely recognized for its cultural diversity. Thousands of islands and numerous ethnic groups are found within the country, each of which has passed down its own cultural traditions—particularly in the realm of traditional architecture. This richness of cultures represents a significant heritage and reflects Indonesia's identity as a nation with a deeply rooted cultural background. However, due to the rapid pace of globalization, local cultures are at risk of gradual transformation or even the loss of their original meanings, especially when foreign influences become dominant.

Each ethnic group in Indonesia possesses its own traditional house, distinguished by specific characteristics. These traditional houses vary in shape and meaning according to ethnic origin. In addition to their physical structure, traditional houses also convey symbolic and philosophical values. One such example is the *Siwaluh Jabu* house, which belongs to the Karo community and is located in the Cultural Village of Lingga, in Karo Regency, North Sumatra. This house not only serves as a place of residence, but also reflects the social structure, traditional values, and way of life of the Karo people.

The Cultural Village of Lingga is a culturally significant destination situated in the Simpang Empat District, Karo Regency, North Sumatra Province, approximately 15 kilometers from the city of Berastagi. As one of the oldest villages in the region, Lingga is rich in cultural traditions, customs, and valuable historical legacies. This cultural diversity makes the village a key symbol of the cultural heritage of the Karo community and offers great potential for further development as a culture-based tourism destination.

Among the most striking cultural heritages in Lingga is the traditional Karo house, which has existed for hundreds of years and remains structurally sound to this day. It serves as the main attraction of the region. In addition to the traditional house, the village also has a museum that preserves various historical artifacts from the Karo community. This strengthens Lingga's role as a center for preserving traditional Karo culture.

The *Simaluh Jabu* traditional house is known for its distinctive architectural style, characteristic features, and deep cultural values. Traditionally, this house is inhabited by eight families belonging to the *Rakut Sitelu* kinship system—namely *kalimbubu*, *senina*, and *anak baru*. This classification reflects the complex social system of the Karo people, in which interpersonal relations are governed by firmly established traditional values and a strong kinship network. The uniqueness of this traditional house lies not only in its structure but also in the traditional ornaments that adorn the building and carry profound symbolic meanings.

These ornaments serve not only as aesthetic components but also as a form of cultural communication that represents the ethnic identity, social structure, and spiritual beliefs of the Karo community. Through these ornaments, the Karo people express their worldview, including the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, communal social interactions, and belief in spiritual values and traditional customs. For example, ornaments with geometric or natural motifs symbolize harmony with the universe, while others reflect the social or spiritual status of the house owner.

Each ornament holds a specific symbolic function and is used in various cultural contexts, including traditional ceremonies such as weddings, births, and religious rituals. Therefore, the analysis of the ornaments found in the *Simaluh Jabu* traditional house is essential to understanding how the Karo community has constructed and preserved its identity and values across generations.

The Cultural Village of Lingga was selected as the research site because it is one of the few villages in North Sumatra where the traditional Karo house remains intact in its original form. The presence of the *Simaluh Jabu* house in this village makes it an important cultural site for research, particularly for understanding the symbolic practices that are still alive and maintained within the Karo community today.

In this context, a semiotic approach is considered an appropriate analytical tool for exploring the meanings embedded in the ornaments of the *Simaluh Jabu* traditional house. Semiotics, as the science of signs and symbols, provides a theoretical framework for understanding how the Karo community engages in cultural communication through ornamental expressions.

2. Review of Literature

Several previous studies have laid the foundation for the present research on semiotics and traditional architecture. Syafindra et al. (2019) conducted a study on the semiotic meanings found in the roof structures of the Karo traditional house *Simaluh Jabu*. Their research concluded that these architectural elements contain profound symbolic meanings related to the Karo people's belief systems, particularly in relation to cosmology and social hierarchy.

Koentjaraningrat (1971), as a foundational scholar of Indonesian culture, emphasized the importance of understanding traditional artifacts as carriers of cultural values. His views provide the philosophical framework for considering architecture as a form of material culture embedded with meaning.

Sobur (2001) and Pateda (2001) both explored semiotics as a tool to decode the messages embedded in language and cultural artifacts. While Sobur emphasized the communicative function of signs, Pateda elaborated on the classification of signs, which is essential for analytical work like this study.

Fiske (2007) and Berger (2003) contributed to the understanding of how signs function within a cultural system. Their perspectives are particularly relevant when analyzing signs that operate outside of verbal language—such as architectural motifs and decorations.

Additionally, the work of Nöth (1995) provided a comprehensive overview of semiotic theory and its application in various disciplines. His emphasis on the integration of semiotics with visual and material culture supports the methodological approach used in this study.

These studies collectively support the idea that traditional architectural ornaments are not merely artistic expressions, but are signs that encode, preserve, and communicate cultural meanings. However, none of the existing literature offers a comprehensive Peircean analysis

of all 17 ornamental signs in the *Sivalub Jabu* house, which marks the novelty of this current research.

3. Method

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore the meanings of traditional ornaments. The data sources consisted of primary data obtained from field observations, interviews with cultural experts, and documentation through photographs. The focus was on the external and internal ornamental elements of the traditional house *Sivalub Jabu* in the Lingga Cultural Village.

Observational data were collected by directly examining the structure and decorations of the house. Photographic evidence was gathered to support the analysis. Interviews were conducted with tour guides, cultural historians, and elders from the Karo community who possess knowledge about the traditional symbols and their meanings.

Documentation included literature from books and previous studies that discuss the symbolic significance of the Karo ornaments. The data analysis technique used was the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Triangulation, particularly time triangulation, was used to ensure data validity by collecting information at different times.

The ornaments were then analyzed using Peirce's semiotic theory. Each ornament was examined in terms of its *representamen* (visual form), *object* (referent), and *interpretant* (meaning). This analytical method enabled the researcher to decode the embedded meanings within each ornament, revealing the cultural codes and values of the Karo society.

4. Results & Discussion

Seventeen ornaments were identified and analyzed:

1. Tanduk – A buffalo horn symbolizing strength and ancestral protection.
2. Kudin Taneh – Represents spiritual balance and earthly grounding.
3. Lumut-Lumut Lawit – Represents defense, harmony, and persistence, inspired by moss.
4. Ipen-ipen – Associated with hospitality and respect for *kalimbubu*.
5. Pengret-ret – A mythical gecko symbolizing magical protection and spiritual guidance.
6. Pantil Manggis – Inspired by mangosteen fruit, symbolizing resilience.
7. Bunga Bincole – A floral motif representing beauty and purity.
8. Pucuk Merbung – A hibiscus motif symbolizing growth and renewal.
9. Embun Sikawiten – Represents social harmony and spiritual purity.
10. Bindu Matagah – A symbol of strength and community protection.
11. Tapak Raja Sulaiman – Associated with wisdom and protection from evil spirits.
12. Cimba Lau Tutup Dadu – Symbolizes prayers for rain and purification.
13. Bindu Matogoh – Reflects unity, marital harmony, and ancestral values.
14. Teger Tudung – Symbol of male authority and spiritual integrity.
15. Dapur-dapur – Related to family and domestic life.
16. Cuping-cuping – Ornament used to symbolize humility and harmony.
17. Taruk-taruk – Symbolizes agricultural fertility and family togetherness.

Each ornament was analyzed based on the triadic model. For example, *Pengret-ret* as a *representamen* is a gecko figure, the object is spiritual protection, and the interpretant is the understanding that it wards off evil forces. Likewise, *Tapak Raja Sulaiman* is interpreted as a symbol of divine wisdom and power.

The analysis revealed that the ornaments are not merely decorative but act as complex semiotic systems. They communicate cosmological concepts such as the relationship between humans and nature (*rakut siteli*), respect for ancestry (*kalimbubu*), and societal roles (*anak bern*). Their placement on the house is also symbolic: kitchen-related ornaments such as *Tapak Raja Sulaiman* and *Embun Sikawiten* are located in areas associated with life sustenance and ritual purity.

The symbolic meanings are supported by oral traditions and rituals, such as in the case of *Cimba Lau*, which is used during ceremonial cleansing. These meanings are socially constructed and passed down through generations, affirming the semiotic function of architecture in preserving cultural identity.

Discussion

The analysis of the ornaments found on the traditional Karo house Siwaluh Jabu reveals a rich symbolic system that is deeply embedded within the socio-cultural and spiritual fabric of the Karo community. Utilizing Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework—comprising the triadic relationship of representamen, object, and interpretant—each ornament can be interpreted as a cultural sign that conveys meaning beyond its visual appearance.

For instance, the buffalo horn, prominently displayed on the rooftop, functions as a representamen symbolizing strength, masculinity, and leadership. The object it refers to is the power and status of the household, while the interpretant is the community's respect for traditional authority and ancestral heritage. This aligns with Eco's [10] and Geertz's [12] assertions that symbols in traditional architecture are not merely decorative but function as carriers of cosmological narratives.

Similarly, the Bindu Matagah ornament, with its circular pattern, symbolizes unity and balance in the cosmos. Interpreted through Peirce's lens, the ornament becomes a visual cue (representamen) referring to the object (cosmic order), which generates the interpretant (belief in harmony between humans and nature). This belief is essential to the Karo worldview, as reflected in their social practices and rituals [2], [4].

The Pucuk Merbung, an upward-pointing motif resembling a sprout, symbolizes growth and fertility, both in agricultural and social contexts. In semiotic terms, it represents the community's aspiration for prosperity and continuation of lineage. As Chandler [11] notes, such organic motifs often signify renewal and continuity in indigenous traditions.

From a methodological standpoint, the use of descriptive qualitative analysis enabled a thorough exploration of meaning, emphasizing the importance of cultural context in interpreting signs [5], [14]. Interviews with traditional leaders and cultural experts further affirmed that the ornaments are not randomly placed but follow a strict cultural logic and spatial orientation, affirming Koentjaraningrat's [2] argument on the integral relationship between space and culture in Indonesian ethnic groups.

The ornament Tapak Raja Sulaiman, often associated with protection, functions as an apotropaic sign, intended to ward off evil spirits. This function shows the intersection of symbolism with spiritual beliefs—a dimension supported by Pateda [6] and Simatupang [13], who emphasize the layered meanings in architectural semiotics.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that the Siwaluh Jabu is not only a dwelling but also a semiotic system—a medium through which the Karo people communicate their values, beliefs, hierarchy, and worldview. This supports the view of Nöth [4] and Berger [8], who argue that traditional artifacts can be read like texts when approached through a semiotic perspective.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the seventeen ornaments of *Siwaluh Jabu* function as semiotic signs within the Karo cultural context. Through Peirce's triadic model, each ornament was revealed to encode layers of meaning related to spirituality, social order, cosmology, and collective memory. The analysis confirmed that traditional houses such as *Siwaluh Jabu* are not just physical shelters but also cultural texts that communicate values, beliefs, and historical narratives. These ornaments serve as a visual language that reinforces social cohesion and cultural continuity. Efforts to preserve and document these ornaments are essential for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. As the symbols become endangered due to modernization, semiotic research can play a key role in revitalizing cultural knowledge and raising awareness among younger generations.

Referensi

- [1] A. Sobur, *Semiotika Komunikasi*, Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2001.
- [2] Koentjaraningrat, *Manusia dan Kebudayaan di Indonesia*, Jakarta: Djambatan, 1971.
- [3] J. Lechte, *50 Filsuf Kontemporer: Dari Strukturalisme sampai Posmodernitas*, Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2001.
- [4] W. Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- [5] M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, California: SAGE Publications, 1994.
- [6] M. Pateda, *Semiotik dalam Ilmu Bahasa*, Jakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2001.

-
- [7] J. Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, New York: Routledge, 2007.
- [8] A. A. Berger, *Media Analysis Techniques*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003.
- [9] M. Syafindra, B. C. Nurhaliza, I. Waruwu, and D. Syahfitri, "Makna Semiotik Atap Rumah Adat Karo Siwaluh Jabu," *Jurnal Basataka (JBT)*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 33–39, 2019.
- [10] U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.
- [11] D. Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, London: Routledge, 2007.
- [12] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- [13] J. Simatupang, "Simbol-Simbol Budaya dalam Rumah Adat Karo: Studi Semiotika Budaya," *Jurnal Ilmiah Sosiologi*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 55–64, 2014.
- [14] S. Nasution, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*, Jakarta: Bumi Aksara, 2003.
- [15] M. R. Sitepu, "Nilai Budaya dalam Arsitektur Tradisional Rumah Siwaluh Jabu di Tanah Karo," *Jurnal Arsitektur Lansekap*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 78–85, 2016.