

# Old house, new meaning: The change and persistence of *ume kbubu* in Oinlasi, South Amanatun, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia

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**Abstracts** - While the state plays important role in actively transforming the communities into a condition that they imagined as developed, some persistences are taking place at the micro level. Our short ethnographic observation among the Dawan at the village of Oinlasi, South Amanatun, East Nusa Tenggara revealed the dynamics of *ume kbubu*, the traditional house of the Timorese, that has experienced some changes as consequence of the introduction of healthful housing program commenced by the Ministry of Health some fifty years ago. We examined that this program, along with other development packages, have changed the traditional life of the communities there; however we also witnessed that communities were actually response to the changes. These traditional houses are in some cases built with modern materials, equipped with electricity, and used only as a kitchen while the family live in a modern-healthful housing nearby. It is our conclusion that the *ume kbubu* as we seen today is neither traditional or modern house but a hybrid configuration of knowledge that show friction in the process of development.

**Index Terms** - *Ume kbubu*, traditional house, Timor, Indonesia, development, change and persistence, hybrid knowledge

## I. INTRODUCTION

Housing has been one of anthropologist interest since it is not only a shelter for human being but also an expression of cultural knowledge [17]. Explains that “the study of inhabited space, its construction, and daily use, can provide a ‘way in’ to a whole culture and its ideas”. It means that culture has an important role to understand why particular houses are built, how is their shape, what kinds of material they made of, and for what purposed they constructed.

Beside the materials used to build houses, its function and meaning have also changed. Traditional houses with their unique function and meaning have in some cases replaced by modern houses. Describes how *ume kbubu* as an example of traditional house has to compete with the trend of *rumah sehat* or healthful house that introduced by Indonesia government [18].

Studies on the dynamics of housing and residential in Indonesia, as in other former European colony, can not actually be separated by the colonialist policy to control power. Shows that British and Dutch policies on housing might be related to political interest which is to control the native [7]. These arrangement, as [3] indicates, has ended a

residential compound with poor facilities. In the case of the transformation of traditional houses, the colonial policies that continue by the Indonesian government has somewhat similarity that is to enhance life quality by building a more healthful houses. This healthful standard is derived from the code developed by US expert in public health [19]. He stated a four-principles for building ideal house which has to fulfill fundamental physiological needs, fundamental psychological needs, protection against contagion, and protection against accidents. The discourse on healthful housing was started in the XI century Europe [8].

In Indonesia, the idea has continued by the government by building massive healthful houses in the 1950's. Unfortunately, many kinds of traditional houses such as *honai* in Papua and the Dayak long house in Kalimantan, just fit to the definition of unhealthy house. The limited air circulation caused by biomass indoor burning and lack of ventilation was accused as the cause of “...the second biggest environmental pollutant contributor to ill health in the world” in a research conducted in Wamena, Papua [13]. While in Kalimantan, malaria has been growing fast and abundant in the longhouse [9]. The government has issued a ministerial decree to regulate and to guide the community to build healthful houses namely Decree by Minister of Health No. 829, Year 1999 on the Conditions to Healthful Houses.

In Oinlasi, the healthful houses, according to the Head of Subdistrict at Oinlasi, justified by the outbreak of tuberculosis in the 1980s. He said that malaria is endemic in Oinlasi and that mosquito bites have to be avoided. *Ume kbubu*, which lacking of ventilation, is believed to be a favourable place for the mosquito to live therefore staying inside it might be too risky. The government is maintaining the program for promoting healthful houses and its benefits for health [12].

Giving the series of *ume kbubu* and other traditional houses were not seen as healthful houses and therefore pushed by the government not to become a model for a new house, it is a question then why we still find them today. As [12] has explained about the continuity of *ume kbubu*, our intention is to explain more on the discourse of development. We would like to argue that the continuity of using *ume kbubu* among the Dawan in Oinlasi has indicated the performance of development, through the concept of modernity, but at the same time show us the dynamic of local institutions to survive.

## II. METHODS

Data collected from a short ethnographic observation in Oinlasi Village, in southern part of So'e the capital city of Timor Tengah Selatan Regency. The researchers lived-in with the community for two months in 2016 and another one month in 2017. Some depth interviews conducted to key informants to include community leaders, health practitioners, teachers, farmers, and religion and customary figures.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The traditional house of *ume kbubu* has a round shape in the upper part of the house. The materials used to build the house can be found from the natural surroundings [4]. The roof of *ume kbubu* was cursory like a hair that was rounded and tapered at the top. Dawan people regard it as a symbol of women, especially a mother. Apparently, *ume kbubu* is also referred to as *ume bife* which means house of woman where various activities ranging from cooking, weaving, to childbirth are done there. A recent study reveals that the function of *ume kbubu* as food storage reveals why it is still maintained in the community today [15].

Another special part of *ume kbubu* is the door, which only has about one meter in size so that the adults entering the *ume kbubu* must bow. The short door is made so that the smoke for corn preservation does not come out of the house. Besides having a practical function, the short-made *ume kbubu* door aims to keep the person who enters into it bending. Bowing symbolically means respecting the ingredients stored in them, especially corn.

By understanding the functions given by *ume kbubu* to the people of Timor, we can know how important the role of *ume kbubu* is to them, both practical and symbolic. According to the Head of Subdistrict of South Amanatun, modernization has changed the Timorese communities, especially in the form of dwellings. As stated earlier, Timorese only had *ume kbubu* to do all their activities, including sleeping, receiving guests, gathering with family, cooking, weaving, storing corn, and mother's birthplace. However, after the modernization, dating back in the eighties, Timorese only used *ume kbubu* as a place to cook and store corn. A place to sleep or get together with family is in a big modern house that consider as healthful house.

We noticed that those people who live in *ume kbubu*, actually also own their modern houses. Beside they also consume electricity and electronic devices as the sign of modern living. The case of renovated *ume kbubu* below may serve another explanation.

Mrs. Yohanna of Oinlasi own a square shape *ume kbubu* as the kitchen and to store corn. The square shape of her *ume kbubu* is composed of upright wood. It also has small gaps between the arrangement of wood as ventilation, so that people who stays inside can breathe the air from the outside. In addition, the kitchen door is also made of a size higher than the height of normal adults, so that people who enter into it do not have to bend. For the endurance of corn stored in it, she said that the age of corn that is stored becomes shorter than that stored in original *ume kbubu*. Hers can only survive

around two years compare to others stored in *ume kbubu* that may last for three years. However, she said that it does not matter because her corn is not too much and will be consumed quickly by his family. Mrs Yohanna's kitchen has also been illuminated by an incandescent lamp. *Ume kbubu* is usually only illuminated by a kerosene lamp, which does not help too much lighting in the room.

The Yohanna's case shows an attempt to perform functional adaptation as one of the processes towards modernization. The kitchen roofing material that already uses zinc plates, instead of grass, illustrates a form of renewal process. In addition, the kitchen structure has also begun to meet the basic principles of a healthful house, which is ventilated and good enough for lighting because it has been using incandescent lamps as illumination.

As a concept, modernization is a kind of development, that in most cases initiated by the state. [10] emphasize the role of state in facilitating the development and at the end play a central role on the process. State are manifest in its apparatus who is perceived themselves as 'the modern sector' or 'center' that are seen as agents, activists and are aggressive. While conventionally can be perceive as improvements in well-being, living standars, and opportunities [6], development may "...refer to historical processes of commodification, industrialization, modernization, or globalization. It can be legitimizing strategy for states, and its ambiguity lends itself to discourses of citizen entitlement as well as state control".

[2] Has shown interesting view on the role of state and colonialist. When the process of colonialization took place, the times when Europeans led the world-traders, their troops, missionaries, and government administrators, altogether transformed the subject of their colonization, which is the non-Europeans, with varying degrees of violence toward a modern stage. These subjects however are not passive. Several historical reports have noted how the encounter between the Europeans and the indigenous peoples has spawned several actions, such as resistance, adaptation, co-operation, and how they try to reinvent their lives that fall apart after colonization. The condition also, [2] continues, illustrates the emergence of new schemes, namely new forms of power, work, and knowledge. It can also be interpreted that the imperial dominance of the Europeans is not merely a form of temporary repression against non-European societies, but as an irrevocable process of transmutation. From the colonization by the Europeans, a discourse of hegemony called progress arose (Bowler 1989; Asad 2002: 133) and suggested a dichotomy of developed and underdeveloped, as well as traditional and modern.

So how we explain the Yohana who maintain her *ume kbubu* with some additional and modification features? The idea or concept of modernization can not explain well about the case of Yohana. Perhaps, her case is seen as an anomaly in modernization. However, many residents in the Oinlasi Village have both modern houses and *ume kbubu*. Is such a case still considered an anomalous form?

[2006] once writes, "...contemporary societies within the South-East Asia Pacific Region still maintain a distinctively

Austronesian cultural perspective on the land and territory". The word 'distinctive [ly]' refers to a unique "land" relationship of land and territory because there is a meeting between the traditional system and the administrative system of a modern nationstates. This unique relationship is created by the influx of external influences brought by the current globalization. Yohana's case also shows that the practice and knowledge of building houses in Oinlasi is now mix between their own perspective and standard of modern and healthful house. This is a kind of hybrid knowldege that form a hybrid forms of houses [1].

As an effort to explain the nexus among civilization reflected in a house, [11] has came to a hybridization of many Indonesia traditional houses. It mixture between the incoming influence from other civilization can be traced back from the Hindu, Islam, China, and European periods. They were coloured the style, function, materials used and other elements to forms a unique configuration of a house. Yet, Nas has not given enough attention on why and how the traditional form of a house is maintained in the contemporary community. Our ume kbubu case shows that those influence of civilization has formed a neither modern or traditional style of a house. Instead it provides exceptional features of strange combination between tratched roof, wooden wall, poorly lit and stifling room due to lacking of ventilation, and the use of incandescent lamps, sound of radio transistor, and the weaving production for market.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The case of Yohana illustrates that what she experience is not as simple as attaching a 'modern' or 'traditional' label to a community. The Oinlasi people are not unaware of government regulations on healthful houses, modernity, and other development programs. They do aware of them. However, there are other important things they can not ignore and just leave to go to a more modern life such as by building a healthful house to replace ume kbubu. As we described above, in addition to having a practical function as a place to store corn, cooking, childbirth, ume kbubu also has a symbolic function that can not be replaced by healthful house. In the midst of sticking to their traditional label, in this case related to where they live, the people of Oinlasi are also doing appropriations that are actualized in their housing. While they adopted electronic goods, lighting ume kbubu with lamps, and giving birth in a health center, it will be inaccurarte to consider them doing functional adaptations to a modern. They are constracting their own definition by carefully choosing and selecting a new items in their nexus with modernity, and prudently incorporating them in their new and dynamic cultural configuration.

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