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The Spatial Core of *Nusantara* Dwellings: Women, Fire and *Pawon*

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Abstract

According to Nusantara culture, women have very important positions in life. The society believes that women are the bearers of the seeds of life. The existence and presence of women are expressed through the placement of safe and tight spaces in traditional dwellings. Meanwhile, in the life of Nusantara people, fire is not only understood physically as part of the cooking process, it is also a non-physical element that has the power to revive. Besides the physical role, fire also has a non-physical role, namely spirituality. Spiritually, fire is a power capable of burning, a symbol of purification and cleansing. The Nusantara people have special beliefs about fire. Fire is the essence of human spiritual life, giving life, warmth and purification. Additionally, *pawon* or the traditional fireplace is a supporting means of fire, the supporter of family life. Although the *pawon* is a physical means, its existence is essential and cannot be separated from fire and women. Hence, women, fire, and *pawon* are three elements that are inseparable parts of the Nusantara people's lives. Fire always interacts with the *pawon* and women in every dwelling, because fire is a symbol of women's chastity. The correlation of these three elements forms a spatial core that is always present in Nusantara dwellings, that originated from these three elements. The structure of this spatial core can be divided into two patterns: centralized and linear. This paper is a qualitative research that aims to discover and understand the spatial core of Nusantara Dwellings in relation to women, fire and *pawon*. Data collection was conducted using ethnography, a method used to understand the mindset of a specified community through direct presence of researchers in the community and being united with them in their daily life to obtain implied data. Data analysis was carried out using a comparative study approach of several samples. Findings reveal that for the Nusantara people, women, fire and *pawon* are inseparable parts of a dwelling, and even become the core of physical and spiritual life which have very important roles. These three elements are the foundation of the spatial core in the interiors of Nusantara dwellings.

Keywords: *Core, Fire, Women, Pawon, Dwelling, Nusantara*

Introduction

This paper is the result of research funded by the Government of the Republic of Indonesia through the Tertiary Education Basic Research Excellence Program in 2021. *Nusantara* is a term used to describe a periodization in Indonesia. This term is specifically used to refer to Indonesia from the first century to before the 18th century AD (Prijetomo, 2018). The term will be used to distinguish the era that occurred before the arrival of European influence in Indonesia. The use of the term is to describe the originality of *Nusantara* way of thinking. The people of *Nusantara* are the people who live in the Indonesian archipelago. Currently there are 1,340 tribes inhabiting the islands throughout the region. Each tribe has its

own culture and customs that are different from one another, yet they share the same perspectives and way of thinking. In viewing their natural surroundings, they possess a primordial cosmology which expresses their basic thoughts, particularly in the concept of dualism (Sumardjo, 2002). The main principle of this dualism cosmology is the contradiction of two opposing elements to achieve harmony. This premise is a very universal idea, that illustrates that the world is composed of conflicting elements such as right and left, front and back, up and down, sacred and profane, present and past, etc. This mindset is expressed in the spatial pattern. They separate spaces according to these opposing elements such as the male and female areas, the sacred and the profane areas, and so on (Tuan, 2001).

This cosmology will be used as the basis to analyses this case study research. The topic of discussion will examine the basic way of thinking, the relation between women, fire and *pawon*, and the spatial patterns that have been expressed in architecture and interiors of Nusantara dwellings. The main principle of this concept is to unite the two opposing characters of male and female to achieve harmony. Contradictions are not regarded as elements that must be separated; they must be united in order to achieve harmony. Harmony is the essence of thought to yield fertility, prosperity and happiness. This concept is the main goal of life according to the Nusantara society.

The opposing elements between male and female characteristics to achieve harmony is also expressed in the Javanese Hindu culture through the balance of the *lingga* and *yonis*. These two elements contradict each other, but they combine and produce harmony together. Harmony is the ultimate goal to produce fertility, prosperity and happiness. Hence the male and female are two opposites that must be combined to produce harmony, because harmony generates extraordinary strength. This is the reason why Nusantara people always heed marriage as it is considered a form of harmony between the two elements. Harmony as their ultimate goal is hence the essence of life perspectives and this can be achieved through supporting the harmony between men and women, sacred and profane, self and nature, and so on (Sunoto, 2017).

These two characteristics are interdependent on each other and mutually influence the nature of their freedom. Men and women will not be perfect when they are separated. Each will complement each other when they become one. Their unity will produce harmony. Although women are considered to have the main and important roles, they require men to achieve harmony. This concept is reflected in the architectural and spatial pattern of Nusantara residential dwellings

In dealing with nature and the environment, they have a principle of harmony. The people of the archipelago view nature as an ecosystem where humans live in it. Nature is not a threat to be hostile to. Nature is part of the ecosystem of life to achieve harmony or balance. Nature must be integrated into human life. The expression of the dwellings and lifestyle of the Nusantara people is expressed in its architectural form. The use of material and the dwelling's boundaries do not separate itself from nature and this is an expression of harmony with nature.

This way of thinking is truly interesting to explore. Hence, this research aims to explore the relationship between women, fire and *pawon* as the foundation of the core of the Nusantara dwelling space. It compares several dwelling samples of the Sasak people in West Nusa Tenggara Province, the people in Bena, the people of Sumba and Wae Rebo in the Province of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

Research Method

The main topic of this research focuses on the spatial core of Nusantara dwellings that is formed by the relationship between women, fire and *pawon*. This research is a qualitative research with a comparative study approach (Dick Urban Vestbrol, 2005). Comparative studies were done by comparing four dwellings with different characteristics of spatial patterns. The samples taken as case studies include community settlements in the cultural village of Ende, Lombok; the traditional village of Prainatang in Sumba; the traditional village of Wae Rebo in Flores; and the traditional village of Bena in Flores. The criteria for determining the samples is the current status of the cultural village that must still be used for both

shelter and rituals. Data exploration was carried out using ethnographic approaches. This approach was used to reveal implied data that has not been generally revealed. The step taken was by staying within the sample community for a determined duration of time (Groat, L. & Wang, D, 2002). Interviews and documentation were used to explore existing physical data in the field and from previous researches. The analysis was carried out with a comparative study approach, comparing one sample to another to obtain research findings. Through this comparison approach, researchers would be able to draw a common thread that occurs between one object and another. The final conclusion is discovering the relationship between women, fire and *pawon* as elements that form the spatial core of Nusantara dwellings.

The Concept of Women, Fire and *Pawon*

Women are very important and valuable figures in the life of the Nusantara people so women must be protected and placed in a special are. This position can be traced through the spatial structure of dwellings both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally means to give an indication that women's areas are in the places that are most difficult to reach with physical and non-physical barriers. Physical barriers can be in the form of a fence or space. Non-physical boundaries are norms that are based on culture. Cultural norms are considered rigid and strong as they have the power of law to impose severe penalties for their violators.

There are many legends about important and highly respected female figures such as the rice goddess, the goddess of the sea lords, and also other goddesses. These legends reflect the outlook on the position of women in the society. They show that women are very respected figures as they are instrumental in continuing their descendants and support the life of the entire family.

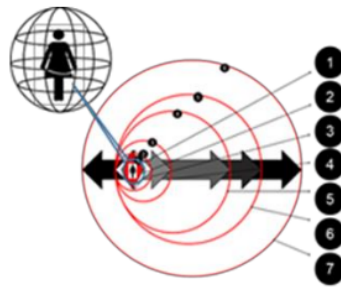


Fig. 1: The level of privacy of the Nusantara people consists of 7 levels
Source: Tulistyantoro (2020)

Privacy is the demand for individuals, groups or institutions to determine for themselves when, how and to what extent they will communicate information to others. Privacy means the voluntary and temporary withdrawal of a person from the general public by physical or psychological means, whether in solitude, in small groups or intimacy, when in larger groups, or in conditions of anonymity or urgency (Hall in Caan, 2011). The privacy of each culture has different distance limits (Indah Kartika Sari, 2019). The principle of privacy generally divides the privacy distance into four parts, intimate, personal, social and public. Each has its own distance limit: intimate is within 0-45 cm, private can be up to 120 cm, social is up to 370 cm and public can be up to 760 cm. The people of Nusantara have their own thoughts about privacy. According to Tulistyantoro (2020), taking a sample from the Madurese community, privacy is determined by gender, and kinship. Privacy according to Nusantara culture is determined more by the prevailing cultural norms. Privacy is divided into 7 levels, from intimate to public (fig.1). This principle is different from Hall's theory above.

Fire has been understood by the Nusantara people as something that is very essential. The Nusantara society believes in the cosmology of four elements: fire, water, air and earth. These four elements are essential elements of life according to the Nusantara people. Fire has

played an important role in every aspect of people's lives. It is a symbol of life and means spiritual purification of humans. These are reflected in the ornamental symbols in many areas of Nusantara buildings. In a sacred place, fire is presented as a symbol of life and purification. For example, in the heirloom room, a place of worship or some other ritual place, fire is always present and should not be extinguished as it is a symbol of life. Fire is a spiritual power that appears in every ritual. This means that without fire it is impossible for humans to live. Fire can provide benefits, but it can also be a devastating threat.

Pawon is a Javanese term which means a fireplace that is used for cooking. It is an important element, inseparable from women's life. Every dwelling community of Nusantara will always have it. *Pawon* is an important part of a dwelling and is the life support for a family even till the present day. The people of *Nusantara* have many terms and forms as well as variations of the materials used for the *pawon*. *Pawon* is also called *tungku*, *tomang*, *au*, etc. The variety of fireplaces in *Nusantara* varies greatly, from firewood piles, stone arrangements to table shapes. The form of a fireplace that uses firewood can be placed on a dugout (Dani people in Wamena), on a pile of stones (Yali people in Yalimo and Asmat), a row of stones (Batak Karo people, Sasak people in Segenter and Matabesi), and resembling a table (Toraja people, Kampung Naga, Bali and Tengger) (Dewi, 2017).

The Spatial Core

The understanding of a woman's position in a dwelling gives us an idea of the status of women according to the Nusantara culture. The general notion of women as weak creatures, having an unfortunate position do not apply in the Nusantara people's view of life. They regard women as very important and place them in main positions that must be protected. Many case studies in Nusantara show that women are always positioned in a place that is very valuable, and enclosed. This position gives recognition that women are very precious in the society.

Referring to the cosmological view of the Madurese community which emphasizes that the boundaries of non-physical privacy have more important roles than physical boundaries, one of the non-physical limitations is the norm. Cultural norms are more valuable than physical limits. Norms have such a devastating effect that punishment for violation of norms can even end in death. Women have a position that must be protected by men, both in space and in applicable norms. Norms have a very rigid force in their implementation. Operationally, norms have the power that can result in very heavy sanctions (Tulistiantoro, 2020)

The existence of women is deemed very important. This can be seen through both horizontal and vertical spatial planning of dwellings. Horizontal pattern of boundary implementation can be seen from the arrangement of the Osing tribe's house, that places women's rooms in the rear position. Norms are upheld in society and binding. The male and female areas can only be entered by the same sex. Although there is access to the room to enter the fireplace, it does not mean that the room can be entered by men. The area is a closed area and exclusively for women. The spatial character becomes closed because of the prevailing norms and its position of the room has a very important pattern. The women's room comes first. In terms of privacy, women are placed in the most private area. In order to reach this space, several boundaries must be passed, starting from public to semi-public. The room has very strict norm boundaries and not everyone can enter the area.

The Madurese residence clearly illustrates how the boundaries of the area for men and women show clear limits. The role of men is as enclosure for women to be protected. To reach the women's room there are several layers of space leading to the private space (figure 01). The expression in everyday life show how men use the space as having very strong and strict surveillance system.

Women, Fire and *Pawon* as the Foundation of Nusantara Dwelling's Spatial Core

Traditional architecture expresses the strong relationship between humans, God and the natural surroundings. Living space is manifested by cosmology, way of life, hierarchy, symbols, ornaments, and architectural forms. A house is not just a place to live in but also a

place of origin, rituals and inheritance. Given the closeness of the house to the ancestors, the house is considered sacred and strong such that it almost resembles a temple (Waterson, 1997).

The main elements that make up the core of a Nusantara dwelling can be distinguished by the pattern of the residential space. There are two types of spatial core patterns: centralized and linear. In the centralized spatial pattern, the spatial core is the center of orientation. Meanwhile in the linear pattern is, the spatial core has a position as a suffix. Dwellings with the central core pattern, can be analysed in the settlements of the Sumba and Wae Rebo communities. Both have the same spatial pattern even though the building forms are different. The position of women, fire and *pawon* are the center of spatial orientation. The spatial core apart from being an orientation is also the center of activity. Dwellings with a linear core pattern can be analysed in the settlements of the Bena and Sasak people. Both are single dwellings, have similarities in treating women, placing fire and *pawon* in their spatial patterns. The location of the women's area is at the end as a suffix of the whole dwelling.

The Wae Rebo community dwelling is communal in form with a round plan and a stilt structure. There is only one entrance to this building. The spatial pattern of the house is centered in the middle functioning as well as the center of orientation. Apart from being a center of orientation, it is also the center for women's and spiritual activities. The position of *pawon*, fire and all women's activities are placed and performed in this area. Fire is the source of life that supports the whole family. The rituals are carried out at the center of the dwelling which is the most sacred area. There are two spatial patterns in this dwelling, horizontal and vertical. In the horizontal pattern, the place is divided for all daily human activities. The vertical pattern puts forward layered and rigid spiritual values. Hence, in terms of spatial value of the dwelling, the higher the value, the more sacred the space will be. The spatial pattern for the male and female areas is very clear. The men's area is in front near the entrance, with an open space, without cover or partition. This place is used by men without rigid borders. Meanwhile, the women's area is closed, with rigid enclosures and formal doors. Each room is private, belonging to one family. The difference between outside and inside is clearly visible in this residence. 'Outside men' can enter and become 'inner men' through a ritual process carried out by traditional elders. The Wae Rebo community dwelling is enclosed and has only one door. This space is private, closed, and sacred. The specialty of this place is the open control over women and their activities. This can be seen from the very massive enclosure of the women's space by the men's space. Hence the men function as the enclosure of the spatial core (women's space) of the dwelling.

The house of the Sumba community is a communal house (extended family) consisting of many families. Like the Wae Rebo community house, it has a center of spatial orientation located in the middle of the dwelling. It is rectangular in shape with a stilt structure and a central spatial pattern. This central spatial core is the center of all women's daily activities, from childbirth to cooking, preparing for rituals to death. All rituals also commence from this place. The spatial pattern forms a horizontal and vertical structure. Horizontal is more directed towards profane activity. Vertical pattern tends to be for spiritual purposes; the higher the layer of space, the more sacred it is considered. The life at the bottom is represented as the human life and there are seven layers for spiritual life. The center of the residence is divided into two areas, men and women. Both areas are bordered by transparent bamboo dividers. The middle area is the area for cooking. Male and female areas are separated from one another. The house entrance is clearly separated between the male and female doors. Spiritual activities are centered in the middle of the building.

Sasak women have a special place in their dwellings. The spatial pattern is linear. The women's area was too difficult for outsiders to enter. The residence of the Sasak people has a hierarchy, with differences in floor height. The spatial characters are closed, private, dark and can only be entered through one door at the front. The height of the core floor ranges from 80-100 cm from the transitional room, with stairs reaching 50 cm. The steps are too high and uncomfortable for a normal person. This fact reflects that the dwelling is special and limited. It articulates a non-verbal expression to others through its interior arrangement. This place is used

by women to live and perform daily activities including cooking. Hence, the core of the dwelling belongs to the female, consisting of fire and *pawon*. The nature of this space is sacred, it is used as a place to store family heirlooms, wealth, and the place where women and children's beds are located. The place for men is outside, and their activities can even be performed outside the building. Men, both guests and families, can only enter the dwelling at most at this transitional place. To reach this place, one has to pass several physical barriers such as a transition place or a physical barrier in the form of a fence. An intermediate place is used for family gatherings, as well as a barrier for the core. Physical barriers include walls, sturdy doors with locks and high floors with stairs that are uncomfortable to use.

The Bena people clearly treat women as valuable and highly protected figures. The Sasak and Bena peoples have similarities in the way they treat women. The position of the floor at the core of the room is quite high, difficult to reach from the outside. This fact shows that this place is special and closed. The ground structure that sits on a slope creates a safe place for women in the building. The main place for women, is surrounded by rooms, and has only one entrance. The high position of the floor becomes an obstacle as well as a barrier for other parties. This place is equipped with a fireplace and *pawon*, and functions as a place for sleeping and women's activities such as cooking as well as a place to store war equipment. This indicates that the place is precious and sacred. The nature of the spatial core is private and closed. Men are confined to the open transitional space and the owner of spatial core are the women. Women have the duty to guard the heirloom, become intermediaries that are considered sacred, and hence they are positioned at the most sacred, closed and safe place. The cultural presence of a fireplace strengthens the space, rendering it as a place of holiness and life.

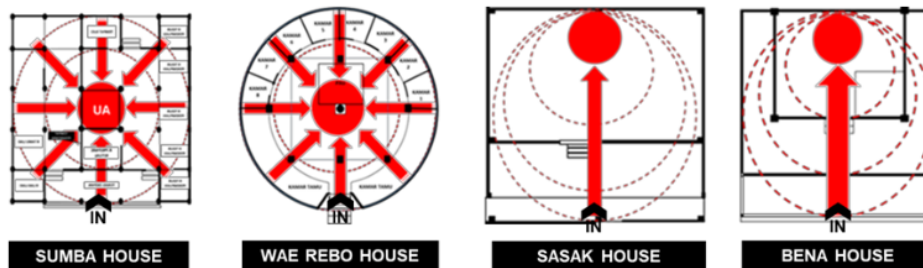


Fig. 02. Centralized and linear hierarchical patterns

Source: Author

Through analyzing the spatial patterns of women's spatial core of the four types of Nusantara dwellings as illustrated in the figure 2, the Nusantara society arrange their dwelling places according to characters and functions. Women, fire and *pawon* in Wae Rebo and Sumba community dwellings have a centralize pattern, in which the spatial core is located at the center and having a central spatial orientation. Meanwhile, Bena and Sasak community dwellings show linear pattern of dwellings, with the spatial core functioning as the suffix. Women, fire and *pawon* are the essence of life. The patterns in the figure above shows clearly how important it is for women to be protected. In non-verbal language, this structure shows that women are very valuable or honorable figures according the Nusantara society.

Conclusion

The spatial core in the interiors of Nusantara dwellings have two structural patterns namely: the centralize pattern with the spatial core located in the middle of dwelling, and the linear pattern, in which the spatial core acts as the suffix. The spatial core is a very precious and sacred place. Women, fire and *pawon* are three basic elements that form the spatial core of Nusantara dwellings. All the dwelling samples observed in this research place women at the center and this shows that women are considered important and valuable. The spatial arrangement of Nusantara dwellings is hence constructed based on three elements, namely

women, fire and *pawon*, in which the spatial core is a closed space functioning as places of storage for heirlooms. This place is made difficult to access and acts as the suffix to the whole linear dwelling pattern.

Women, fire, *pawon* are hence three elements that cannot be separated in Nusantara way of thinking in relation to a dwelling. From the above analysis, apart from women as owners of privacy, women also have a very important and respectful position. The women's space is always located in a special and safe position. Fire is an object of purification that has a very important role as it can enliven and purify. Fire is a symbol of purity. *Pawon* is part of the media for fire and women. Hence, it has a very important role in optimizing the fire and supporting the role of women in supporting the family. Both fire and *pawon* are elements that strengthen the role of women to be important, sacred and valuable. These three elements are thus essential part of the Nusantara people's daily life and support the formation of the spatial core in their dwellings.

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