

## Simbolisme Identitas: Signifikansi Budaya di Monumen Tobong dan Hotel Balairung

### Identity Symbolism: Cultural Significance in Tobong Monument and Balairung Hotel

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#### Abstrak

Persepsi romantis terhadap arsitektur vernakular, sering kali berakar dalam nostalgia, secara signifikan memengaruhi cara penggunaannya sebagai simbol identitas budaya. Mengacu pada karya-karya Paul Oliver dan Robert Redfield tentang vernakular, menggali romantisme dan sikap terhadap bangunan vernakular serta perbedaan antara keduanya. Tobong, struktur menara untuk membakar bata dan Hotel Balairung di Jakarta adalah contoh dua bangunan yang terkait arsitektur vernakular yang bisa melambangkan budaya dan masyarakat dan romantisme tentang masa lalu. Berakar pada tradisi produksi lokal, Tobong melampaui tujuan fungsionalnya untuk menjadi simbol warisan budaya dan signifikansi arsitektur vernakular sampai saat ini. Demikian pula, Hotel Balairung mewakili adaptasi arsitektur vernakular dan budaya Sumatera Barat, yang mampu melambangkan kebanggaan daerah dan pembangunan ekonomi. Bagaimana struktur vernakular seperti Tobong yang dijadikan monumen dan Hotel Balairung mewakili signifikansi budaya dan adaptabilitas arsitektur vernakular, argumentasi saya adalah kedua bangunan arsitektur vernakular, tobong yang dijadikan monumen di Godean Yogyakarta dan arsitektur sumatera barat yang dipakai menjadi hotel di Jakarta menunjukkan variasi dari signifikansi dan adaptabilitas arsitektur vernakular di masa kini. Melalui metode perbandingan akan diperlihatkan kaitan bangunan vernakular dan identitas budayanya.

**Kata Kunci:** sentimen, arsitektur vernakular, monumen, budaya, identitas

#### Abstract

The romantic perception of vernacular architecture, often rooted in nostalgia, significantly influences its use as a symbol of cultural identity. Referring to the works of Paul Oliver and Robert Redfield on vernacular architecture, exploring romanticism and attitudes towards vernacular buildings as well as the differences between them. Tobong, a tower structure for brick burning, and Hotel Balairung in Jakarta are examples of two buildings related to vernacular architecture that can symbolize culture and society and the romance of the past. Rooted in local production traditions, Tobong transcends its functional purpose to become a symbol of cultural heritage and the significance of vernacular architecture to this day. Similarly, Hotel Balairung illustrates the adaption of West Sumatra's vernacular architecture and culture, which can symbolize regional pride and economic growth. How vernacular structures like Tobong being made into monuments and Hotel Balairung represent the cultural significance and adaptability of vernacular architecture, my argument is that both vernacular architecture buildings, Tobong being made into a monument in Godean Yogyakarta and West Sumatra architecture being used as a hotel in Jakarta, show variations of the significance and adaptability of vernacular architecture in the present era. The comparative method will show the relationship between vernacular buildings and their cultural identity.

**Keywords:** sentiment, vernacular architecture, monument, culture, identity

## Introduction

In his book 'Built to Meet Needs', Paul Oliver says "There is a romantic interest in traditional buildings which is antiquarian, and sometimes, purely nostalgic" (Oliver, 2006). When we look at vernacular architecture, we often admire and appreciate traditional vernacular buildings for their historical significance, cultural heritage, or aesthetic appeal. These buildings can evoke a sense of nostalgia for a bygone era and can symbolize continuity with the past. Traditional vernacular buildings are typically constructed using local materials and traditional building techniques, reflecting their regions' cultural and environmental context. When it comes to architecture, we often focus on the sleek, professional designs created by architects. But there is a realm of vernacular architecture that tends to get overlooked. Basically, it's about the buildings and structures created by regular people, not necessarily by architects. These traditional buildings, like those in vernacular architecture, are admired for their history, culture, and looks. They're often made with local materials and techniques, showing off the area's culture and environment. While we usually pay attention to fancy buildings made by architects, Oliver suggest that we should also appreciate the simpler ones made by regular folks.

In a statement by Paul Oliver, "sentimental in its emotional source, is the 'low culture' attitude which idealizes popular and folk culture at the expense of 'high culture.' Resentment at the values placed on sophisticated and complex art and architecture, which appear to esteem the intellect at the expense of feeling, encourages a neoprimitivist view" (Oliver, 2006). Low culture architecture is often seen as not really desirable and is only there to support a livelihood, which is more of a functionalist aspect. But this functionality makes them so important for the folk and makes connections and growing sentiments among the 'low culture' people. Some people have sentimental ties to "low culture," which values folk and popular practices over more complex works of art and architecture. This sentiment is a result of the perception that intellect is valued more highly than emotion in high culture. As a result, a neoprimitivist viewpoint that values authenticity and simplicity is increasingly common. Low culture in architecture usually refers to economically driven, practical buildings rather than beautiful ones. Still, these practical structures are essential for promoting attachments and emotions amongst groups, particularly among the "low culture" group.



**Figure 1.** A house wall painted with animal motifs. National Museum of Handicrafts, Delhi, which includes a collection of Indian indigenous building traditions.  
(Source: Paul Oliver's 'Built to meet needs')

Oliver describes a sentiment that involves a resentment towards the values associated with sophisticated and complex art and architecture, which may prioritize intellect over emotion. Those who hold this sentiment might feel that high culture places too much emphasis on intellectual pursuits and overlooks the importance of emotional connection and sentimentality. Neoprimitivism refers to a movement or perspective that idealizes or seeks to emulate the simplicity, authenticity, and perceived purity of earlier or "primitive" cultures. This built-in and continuing contrast between high and low culture shapes our understanding of and appreciation for various types of expression. Low culture places a greater emphasis on tradition, emotion, and practicality while high culture frequently praises intellectualism and beauty. With each providing a distinct perspective on the human experience and creative process, these contrasting viewpoints add to a rich tapestry of cultural expression.

When it comes to traditional vernacular architecture, this could mean romanticising older, more traditional methods of construction and living because someone perceives them to be more real or authentic than the artificiality or complexity of high culture or modern architecture. The tobong and minangkabau house, which we will discuss later, allow us to examine how and why each building was constructed differently. The tobong, being a practical structure, belonged to the low culture, while the Minang house, being one of the most highly valued examples of Minangkabau architecture, belongs to the kind of high culture.

The Balairung hotel is a formal building that acts as a symbol for the government of West Sumatera with a hint of high culture because it's a hotel, while tobong monument is a symbol of local community of Godean Yogyakarta. In his book *The Vernacular and the Monumental*, Paul Stangl says, "Symbolism may be attributed to particular vernacular landscapes, types of vernacular space, or paradigms for planning vernacular environments, but the connections are usually tenuous. Thus, interpretations of the vernacular which reduce these complex environments to their symbolic content, as though they were memorials, are often without merit" (Stangl, 2008). Symbolism can be found in various aspects of vernacular landscapes, such as specific landscapes, types of space, planning approaches, etc. However, these symbolic connections are often weak or not clearly defined. Therefore, interpretations of vernacular environments that oversimplify them by focusing solely on their symbolic aspects, as if they were memorials, are often inaccurate and only superficially imitate true vernacular characteristics.



**Figure 2.** Tourist accommodation in Corfu, Greece, with forms designed to accord with concepts of the vernacular architecture of the island (Source: Paul Oliver's 'Built to meet needs')

Traditional vernacular buildings, constructed by local communities using locally available materials and techniques, embody manifestations of peasant or vernacular architecture within the context of coexisting high cultures, contrasting with primitive architecture's potential isolation from external influences. As such, they are replenished and influenced by high culture because the communities that build them are aware of it. Vernacular architecture can become part of high culture when people consciously decide to elevate it, often because of changes in society, the economy, or culture. For example, old-fashioned adobe houses, which are vernacular, might get restored and upgraded to become fancy homes for wealthy people. Also, old factories might get turned into cool apartments, showing how everyday buildings can become symbols of city living. These changes from low to high culture show how vernacular architecture can be influenced by and influence what people value and want in their communities.

Tobong, found all over Java, is a staple structure for crafting bricks and roof tiles, embodying the essence of vernacular architecture which is a structure that is made locally. Built by the locals themselves, Tobong integrates with its built environment. Indonesians, especially Javanese folks, know *tobong* well—it's named after the Javanese words for brick (*boto*) and burn (*obong*). Although it started out as a brick-burning hub, Tobong has evolved to handle other materials like lime, earthenware, and roof tiles in different parts of the region. While Minangkabau house is a traditional architectural style from West Sumatera, Indonesia, characterized by its distinctive roof shape resembling buffalo horns. Constructed with traditional materials such as timber and bamboo, these houses promote airflow and communal living, embodying the cultural identity and values of the Minangkabau people while symbolizing strength and prosperity.

The two buildings, *tobong* and Minangkabau House represent vernacular architecture in different contexts, reflecting each cultural identity and values. *Tobong*, built as a functional structure used for brick and roof tile production, embodying the simplicity and tradition of vernacular architecture. Its significance lies in its practicality and its role as a cultural symbol deeply rooted in the local community. In contrast, the Minangkabau House represents a monumental architectural and high Minangkabau culture appropriated for modern building. Establishments like the Balairung Hotel demonstrate how vernacular architecture can be adapted to represent cultural identity while meeting modern contemporary needs. Both *tobong* and Balairung hotel highlight the enduring relevance of vernacular architecture in shaping cultural landscapes, fostering a sense of belonging among communities and adaptability.

### Methodology

The methodology for this paper involves conducting a thorough literature review to understand the concepts of vernacular architecture, cultural symbolism, and identity. Case studies using *Tobong* monument in Jogja and the Balairung hotel featuring Minangkabau House from West Sumatera, are selected for their representation of different aspects of vernacular architecture and cultural significance. Primary data is collected through field visits and interviews with the artisan of *tobong*, complemented by secondary sources from academic literature and online resources on both these 2 subjects. Drawing theoretical framework and concepts from scholars like Nezar Al Sayyad, Robert Brown, and Daniel Maudlin, to analyze the architectural features, cultural symbolism, and community relationships of *Tobong* and the Minangkabau House. Information gathered from literature review, site visits, and limited selective interviews will be analyzed through qualitative methods to identify

similarities and differences between the case studies and their reflection of broader cultural identities. The findings are discussed in relation to the established theoretical framework, leading to conclusions about the significance of Tobong and the Minangkabau House within the context of vernacular architecture and cultural identity in Indonesia.

### Discussion and Analysis

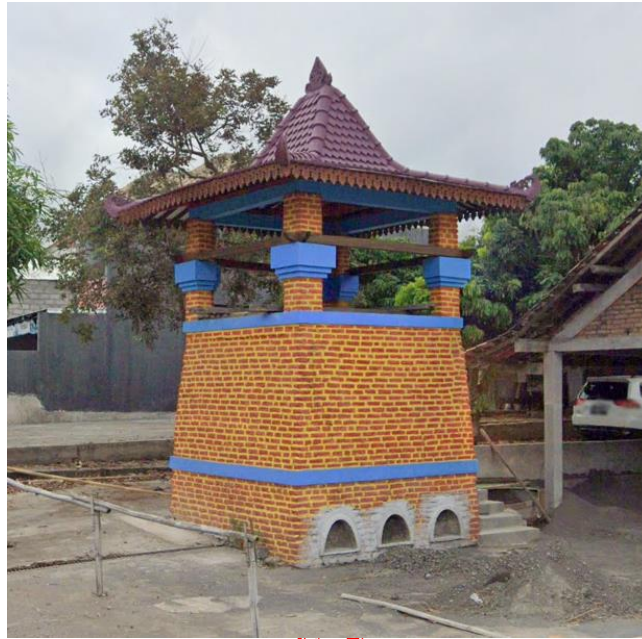
Tobong, a vernacular structure used for making bricks and roof tiles, plays a vital role in the local roof tile industry in Java. Built by the community, Tobong reflects the region's unique identity and connection to nature. According to Nezar Al Sayyad (2006) he observed that: 'for anything to be considered vernacular, it has always been assumed that it must be native or unique to a specific place, produced without the need for imported components and processes. These structures, often overlooked by mainstream architects, serve as cultural symbols and inspire architectural forms. Tobong as a structure didn't really have any novelty beside it's production capability if people are to be pragmatic, but from that usage capability that is popular with the 'low culture' folks that tobong is special. Tobong as a structure was made while coexisting with the Dutch colonial buildings and the royal Sultanate of Yogyakarta, who played a big part on why there are Tobong as a structure to make bricks and roof tiles in the first place as it was used for the construction effort for both Dutch colonials and the Sultanate.



Figure 3. Tobong Photo in Godean, Yogyakarta

Tobong, a vernacular building designed purely for functionality to meet the needs of the local community, has evolved into a symbol of cultural significance within its surroundings. Drawing from Robert Brown and Daniel Maudlin's Concept of Vernacular Architecture, the Tobong exemplifies the essence of the primitive hut, representing purity and responsiveness to inhabitants' needs without imposed design conventions. According to Paul Walker in the SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory, national governments often adopt vernacular-building traditions to bolster their political agendas and foster national identity. Thus, Tobong serves as more than just a structure for tile production; it encapsulates the traditions, values, and aspirations of the community. Its preservation and recognition as a cultural symbol contribute to the

broader discourse on vernacular architecture and national identity-building initiatives. The people of Godean, Yogyakarta, have always lived side by side with Tobong as an integral part of their economy and production alongside other well known side in Godean such as their cuisine in eels. Tobong serves not only as a functional structure for brick and roof tile manufacturing but also as a symbol of cultural heritage and continuity.



**Figure 4.** Tobong Monument in Godean, Yogyakarta  
(Source: Google Maps)

Tobong's significance cannot be overlooked, from the old roof tile factory in Sokka, Kebumen, established during the Dutch colonial period, reflects the history of the tile industry, which began around 1920 and evolved due to the Dutch government's recognition of local clay craftsmanship, leading to the production of AB Sokka tiles widely used in Java until the 1980s. Beyond its practical function, Tobong stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of Godean's people and their intimate relationship with the land. Its presence serves as a reminder of the intrinsic value found in simplicity and tradition, challenging prevailing notions of sophistication and complexity in architecture and culture. While debates over its symbolic weight may persist, Tobong continues to command reverence and admiration as a quintessential expression of vernacular identity and resilience in the face of modernization.

Other vernacular architecture that is recognized as a monument in Indonesia is the Minangkabau House from West Sumatera and Negeri Sembilan. The Minangkabau house can be considered a monument or symbol due to its architectural features and cultural significance. Constructed using simple methods and local materials like timber, the house exemplifies sustainable building practices and low environmental impact. Internally, it serves not only as a personal shelter but also as a communal gathering space, reflecting the social and cultural values of the Minangkabau people. The open interior design, with no definite boundaries between spaces, fosters a sense of openness and connectivity. The carvings and motifs on the house, influenced by animistic beliefs and Islamic teachings, add to its cultural richness. The house's compliance with tropical climate requirements, such as natural cross ventilation and

incorporation of air vents, demonstrates its adaptability to environmental conditions. Minangkabau house represents a blend of cultural heritage, sustainable practices, and environmental awareness, making it a significant symbol of the Minangkabau culture and society.

Within their respective contexts, the Tobong and Hotel Balairung are both very important cultural and historical landmarks. In addition to being a functional building used to make bricks and roof tiles, the Tobong represents the ongoing cultural legacy and vibrant community of Godean, Yogyakarta. On the other hand, the Hotel Balairung serves as an official symbol of West Sumatra's government and represents modernity and institutional power in the area. Its function goes beyond simple hospitality; it presents West Sumatra's economic development and modernization, especially in the hospitality industry, emphasizing the area's advancement and economic integration with the country. Also, both the Tobong and the Hotel Balairung show adaptability, though in different ways. Originally created for practical uses in the construction of bricks and roof tiles, the tobong has developed into a cultural icon that is still important and in use in the Godean, Yogyakarta community. Its adaptability and perseverance as a vernacular architectural form is highlighted by its capacity to retain relevance in the face of modernization. On the other hand, as a modern accommodation facility, the Hotel Balairung is a prime example of adaptability. The hotel successfully serves an array of customers, including foreign tourists and government officials, while having a more formal architectural style than the Tobong.

Tobong and Gadang House share similarities and differences in function, materials, and symbolism. Both structures serve functional purposes within their communities: Tobong is primarily used for brick and roof tile manufacturing in Java, while Gadang House is a communal gathering space in West Sumatera. They also utilize local materials and construction techniques, with Tobong made from locally available clay and Gadang House constructed using timber. Symbolically, Tobong represents the vernacular identity and resilience of the Javanese community, embodying simplicity and tradition, while Gadang House embodies the cultural richness and communal values of the Minangkabau people, reflecting animistic beliefs and Islamic teachings. Despite their differences, both structures contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and reinforce the connection between architecture, identity, and community in Indonesia.



**Figure 5.** Minangkabau House  
(Source: Michael J. Lowe Wikimedia)

The Balairung Hotel stands as another example of how vernacular architecture is utilized to represent cultural identity and values. Inspired by the architectural style of the Minangkabau House, Hotel Balairung embraces monumentalism while incorporating modern amenities. Positioned as an Ethnic Moslem Friendly Hotel, it caters to both cultural and religious preferences, reflecting the inclusive nature of the Minangkabau culture. As a *Badan Usaha Milik Daerah* (BUMD) or regional-owned enterprise owned by the Provincial Government of West Sumatera, the hotel serves as a symbol of regional pride and economic development. Its construction and design pay homage to the vernacular traditions while meeting the contemporary needs of guests. By adopting vernacular-building traditions, Hotel Balairung contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and reinforces the connection between architecture, identity, and community. Like the Minangkabau House, it embodies the eternal need for symbols and the quest for new monumentality, emphasizing the enduring relevance of vernacular architecture in shaping cultural landscapes and fostering a sense of belonging.



Figure 6. Balairung Hotel  
(Source: katasumbar)

## Conclusion

Vernacular architecture holds profound cultural and practical significance. Rooted in local identity and tradition, these buildings symbolize resilience, simplicity, and communal values. Tobong structure in Godean, Yogyakarta, serves as an example of vernacular architecture that transcends its functional purpose to become a symbol of cultural heritage and continuity. Rooted in the local economy and production traditions, Tobong reflects the region's unique identity and deep connection to nature. Drawing from Robert Redfield's distinction between primitive and vernacular cultures, Tobong exemplifies the latter by existing in symbiosis with both Dutch colonial buildings and the royal Sultanate of Yogyakarta as the tobong roof tile and brick industry was a valuable production resource for both parties. Despite being pragmatic in its functionality, Tobong holds sentimental value for the local community, embodying popular and folk culture ideals.

In Indonesia, other vernacular architectures like the Minangkabau House also serve as monuments due to their architectural features, cultural significance, and sustainable building practices. Similarly, establishments like the Balairung Hotel



exemplify how vernacular architecture can be adapted to represent cultural identity while meeting contemporary needs. Together, these examples underscore the timeless appeal and adaptability of vernacular architecture in shaping cultural landscapes and fostering a sense of belonging among communities.

As Paul Oliver notes, there is often a romantic interest in traditional buildings driven by nostalgia, yet Tobong's importance goes beyond mere sentimentality. Its preservation and recognition as a symbol of cultural heritage contribute to the broader discourse on vernacular architecture and its role in shaping cultural identities. However, it's essential to acknowledge Paul Stangl's caution against oversimplifying interpretations of vernacular environments as mere memorials. While Tobong holds symbolic value, reducing vernacular structures to their symbolic content overlooks their complex nature and functional significance. Nonetheless, Tobong remains a testament to the enduring relevance of vernacular architecture in embodying cultural values and fostering a sense of belonging within communities.

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