



The Function and Symbolic Meaning of Pinar Uloni Horbo, the Bolon House of the Simalungun Batak Ethnic Group: A Semiotic Study

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ABSTRACT

Rumah Bolon Pematang Purba is a traditional house that is a legacy of the Simalungun kingdom that keeps the cultural values and philosophy of its people's lives. One of the most prominent elements in this building is the uluni horbo ornament, which is an ornament that resembles a buffalo head or horn located on the ridge of the roof of the house. This ornament not only functions as a decorative element, but also loaded with symbolic meanings that reflect the belief system and view of life of the Simalungun people. This research aims to examine the function and meaning of uluni horbo ornaments in the Bolon Pematang Purba House by using a semiotic approach. The research method used is qualitative descriptive through field observation, interviews with traditional figures, visual documentation, and literature analysis related to architecture and Simalungun cultural symbols. Research results show that uluni horbo ornaments have a social and religious function, namely as a symbol of power and king status, protection against the influence of evil spirits, as well as a representation of the value of courage, strength, and human harmony with nature and ancestors. In the framework of semiotics, uluni horbo plays a role as a visual sign (marker) that has a sign in the form of the meaning of power, legitimacy, and cultural identity. This study confirms that the ornaments in the Simalungun traditional house cannot be separated from the symbolic system of its community, because every shape and position has a meaning that connects aesthetic, spiritual, and social aspects. Thus, the preservation of ornaments such as uluni horbo becomes important to maintain the continuity of cultural values and ethnic identity of Simalungun.

Keywords: pinar uloni horbo, bolon house, semiotics

Fungsi dan Makna Simbolis Pinar Uloni Horbo Rumah Bolon Etnik Batak Simalungun: Kajian Semiotika

ABSTRAK

Rumah Bolon Pematang Purba merupakan rumah adat peninggalan kerajaan Simalungun yang menyimpan nilai-nilai budaya dan filosofi kehidupan masyarakatnya. Salah satu unsur paling menonjol dalam bangunan ini adalah ornamen *uluni horbo*, yakni hiasan menyerupai kepala atau tanduk kerbau yang terletak pada bubungan atap rumah. Ornamen ini tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai elemen dekoratif, tetapi juga sarat dengan makna simbolik yang mencerminkan sistem kepercayaan dan pandangan hidup masyarakat Simalungun. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji fungsi dan makna ornamen *uluni horbo* pada Rumah Bolon Pematang Purba dengan menggunakan pendekatan semiotika. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif melalui observasi lapangan, wawancara dengan tokoh adat, dokumentasi visual, serta analisis literatur terkait arsitektur dan simbol budaya Simalungun. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ornamen *uluni horbo* memiliki fungsi sosial dan religius, yakni sebagai simbol kekuasaan dan status raja, perlindungan terhadap pengaruh roh jahat, serta representasi nilai keberanian, kekuatan, dan keharmonisan manusia dengan alam serta leluhur. Dalam kerangka semiotika, *uluni horbo* berperan sebagai tanda visual (penanda) yang memiliki petanda berupa makna kekuasaan, legitimasi, dan identitas budaya. Kajian ini menegaskan bahwa ornamen pada rumah adat Simalungun tidak dapat dilepaskan dari sistem simbolik masyarakatnya, sebab setiap bentuk dan posisi memiliki makna yang menghubungkan aspek estetika, spiritual, dan sosial. Dengan demikian, pelestarian ornamen seperti *uluni horbo* menjadi penting untuk menjaga kesinambungan nilai budaya dan identitas etnik Simalungun.

Kata kunci: uluni horbo, rumah bolon, semiotika.

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INTRODUCTION

The cultural heritage of the Indonesian people is preserved not only in language, dance, and traditional ceremonies, but also in traditional architecture rich with symbolic meaning (Indrawati & Sari, 2024). Traditional houses reflect a community's perspective on nature, social life, and spiritual beliefs (Gilang Ramadhan et al., 2025). For the Simalungun people of North Sumatra, the traditional house, known as the Rumah Bolon, is a manifestation of cultural values, philosophy, and collective identity passed down through generations (Regita, 2018). This house serves not only as a residence but also as a symbol of honor, a center of traditional government, and a manifestation of the community's social order.

One important element of the Rumah Bolon is the presence of ornaments or decorative motifs carved into various parts of the building, particularly on the roof and walls (Nabila & Harnum, 2024). These ornaments have deep meaning, reflecting the community's perspective on the relationship between humans and God, nature, and each other. One prominent ornament is the uluni horbo, or "buffalo head," which is typically placed on the roof ridge of a house. Its shape resembles a buffalo's head or horns and is a hallmark of traditional Simalungun architecture. Locals view this ornament not only as decoration but also as a symbolic role closely linked to the beliefs and cultural values prevalent within the community.

In Simalungun culture, the buffalo holds a special place, considered a symbol of strength, steadfastness, and prosperity (Winra et al., 2023). The presence of this symbol in traditional houses demonstrates respect for the animal, which plays a vital role in the community's agrarian life. Furthermore, the uluni horbo is also interpreted as a symbol of power and courage, reflecting the homeowner's position as a respected figure. Thus, this ornament serves a dual function: aesthetic and spiritual, as it is believed to provide protection from evil spirits and maintain balance between the human world and the supernatural.

The study of the uluni horbo is interesting because each of its forms and positions contains a system of symbols that represent Simalungun culture. In the context of semiotics, every visual element in a traditional house can be viewed as a sign, consisting of a physical signifier and a culturally derived meaning. Using this approach, the uluni horbo ornament can be interpreted as a symbol conveying cultural messages, moral values, and the cosmological perspectives of the Simalungun people (Simbolon et al., 2025).

This research was conducted to analyze the function and meaning of the uluni horbo ornaments in the Simalungun Bolon House based on semiotics. The primary focus of the research is to interpret how these ornaments function as visual symbols that not only enhance the building's beauty but also convey cultural, social, and religious values. Furthermore, this research seeks to understand how these meanings are maintained, inherited, and reinterpreted by contemporary society (Rajagukguk & Sinulingga, 2021).

The purpose of this research is to explain the function and meaning of the uluni horbo ornaments within the architectural and cultural context of the Simalungun people. Using a semiotic approach, this research is expected to uncover the hidden meanings behind the visual symbols found in traditional houses and demonstrate their connection to the community's value systems and social structures.

The benefits of this research are twofold. Academically, the results of this study can enrich the body of research on traditional Indonesian architecture, particularly from a cultural semiotic perspective. This research also provides a new understanding that traditional ornaments are not merely decorative forms but also symbolic communication media that convey cultural and spiritual messages. Practically, this research is expected to raise public awareness to better appreciate and preserve local cultural heritage, particularly the Simalungun traditional house and all its ornamental elements (Sibarani et al., 2024).



Therefore, this research on the function and meaning of the uluni horbo aims not only to understand its form and symbolism, but also to uncover the cultural values ??it embodies as part of the Simalungun people's intellectual heritage. Through a semiotic approach, the uluni horbo can be viewed as a window into how the Simalungun people express their identity, beliefs, and spiritual connections through meaningful traditional architectural works.

Several previous studies also support this position. (Sibarani et al., 2024) examined the roof structure of the Toba Batak Bolon House and found that each element has a semiotic function related to customary legitimacy. (Winra et al., 2023) explained that the symbols in Simalungun traditional houses not only enhance beauty but also affirm ethnic identity. Meanwhile (Nabila & Harnum, 2024) shows that local architecture in North Sumatra contains a sign system that reflects the value of harmony between humans, nature, and spirituality.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method focused on exploring the meaning and function of the uluni horbo ornament in the ancient Pematang Bolon House through a semiotic study (Yayuk & Sugiyono, 2019; Fraenkel et al., 2012; Razak, 2017):

- 1) Location and object of research: The ancient Pematang Bolon House, Simalungun Regency, which still maintains its original traditional architectural form.
- 2) Data collection techniques: direct observation, interviews with traditional leaders and site managers, and visual documentation.
- 3) Data analysis: conducted using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory by interpreting the relationship between the signifier (ornamental form) and the signified

(symbolic meaning).

The analysis was conducted interpretively to understand the cultural values ??and social functions behind the uluni horbo symbol, by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and literature.

RESULTS

1. Function of the Uluni Horbo Ornament

Based on field observations of the Pematang Purba Bolon House and visual documentation, it was found that the uluni horbo ornament is located on the roof ridge facing the sunrise. This position is the most prominent location of the entire roof structure. The research results indicate four main functions of the uluni horbo:

- a) As a symbol of power and social status. Observational data indicates that this ornament is positioned as a symbol of a king's house. Information from traditional sources confirms that the horns or heads of buffaloes placed on the roof ridge represent the number of reigning kings. Thus, the uluni horbo serves as a visual marker that the Bolon House is the center of customary power, not the home of ordinary people.
- b) As protection from the influence of evil spirits. Interviews with traditional leaders revealed that the Simalungun people believe that buffalo horns possess magical powers to ward off evil spirits. Therefore, the placement of uluni horbo on the roof aims to provide spiritual protection for the home's occupants.
- c) As a symbol of strength, courage, and the connection between humans and ancestors. Literature and observational data indicate that the buffalo is considered a symbol of strength and steadfastness in Simalungun agrarian culture. The uluni horbo ornament represents the ethical values ??a leader should possess: steadfastness, courage, and connection with ancestors.
- d) As an element of aesthetics and cultural identity. Visual documentation shows that the

uluni horbo is part of the aesthetic system of traditional houses, along with gorga and other decorative elements. This ornament reinforces Simalungun cultural identity through the combination of red, white, and black.

DISCUSSION

The following discussion outlines the research findings using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach, analyzing the relationship between the signifier (ornamental form) and the signified (cultural meaning). The discussion also links field findings to theory and previous research.

First, Uluni Horbo as a Sign of Power and Legitimacy. Semiotically, the shape of the buffalo head/horns functions as an icon, as it visually resembles the real animal. However, in the Simalungun cultural system, it functions as a symbol, as it conveys the meaning of the king's legitimacy. Its placement on the roof ridge is a visual strategy to ensure the sign is easily seen and understood as a center of authority.

This finding aligns with Sibarani et al. (2024), who found that buffalo horns in Toba Batak architecture serve as markers of authority. Thus, the uluni horbo ornament can be interpreted as a "visual language" of power.

Second, Uluni Horbo as a Repellent to Evil Spirits. In Simalungun culture, the buffalo is viewed as an animal with magical powers. The placement of the horns at the highest point of a building aims to block negative energy from outside. From a semiotic approach, this function falls into the category of myth, namely cultural meanings passed down from generation to generation and become collective beliefs.

The results of this study support the study by Winra et al. (2023) which states that the horn element in traditional houses represents the relationship between the human world and the spirit world.

Third, Symbols of Courage and Human-Ancestral Relations. In the Simalungun cultural value system, courage and resilience are important char-

acteristics of traditional leaders. The buffalo, as a strong work animal, serves as a moral symbol, symbolized by the uluni horbo ornament for the homeowner. Within Barthes' framework, this meaning is considered a "connotative meaning" constructed by culture.

This finding demonstrates that ornaments are not merely decorative, but also convey an ethical message for the community.

Fourth, Uluni Horbo in Aesthetic Systems and Identity. Simalungun decorative motifs consistently incorporate the colors red, black, and white. These colors semiotically represent courage, assertiveness, and purity. The uluni horbo, as the main element of the roof, strengthens the visual identity of the traditional house, distinguishing Simalungun architecture from other Batak ethnic groups.

This interpretation is relevant to the findings of Nabila & Harnum (2024), who stated that the aesthetics of traditional houses constitute a collective sign system within the community. Through semiotic analysis, this discussion confirms that the uluni horbo is not merely an ornament, but a sign structure that conveys messages of power, spiritual protection, moral values, and cultural identity. This interpretation of meaning demonstrates that traditional Simalungun architecture is a rich cultural text that deserves preservation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research and discussion of the uluni horbo ornament on the Pematang Purba Bolon House, it can be concluded that this ornament is an architectural element with multidimensional functions and deep symbolic meaning in Simalungun culture. Structurally, the uluni horbo serves not only as a decoration on the roof ridge, but also as a visual sign that affirms the community's identity, values, and belief system.

First, the uluni horbo serves as a symbol of the king's power and legitimacy. Its placement at the highest point of the house makes this orna-



ment a marker of the owner's social status and strengthens the Bolon House's position as the center of traditional authority. Second, this ornament also has a spiritual function as protection from the influence of evil spirits, reflecting the Simalungun people's belief that buffalo horns possess magical powers to maintain balance between humans and the supernatural world.

Third, the uluni horbo represents ethical and moral values such as courage, steadfastness, and the relationship between humans and their ancestors. This meaning is closely related to the agrarian way of life, which reveres the buffalo as a symbol of strength and prosperity. Fourth, from an aesthetic and identity perspective, this ornament reinforces the distinctive characteristics of Simalungun architecture through its shape, position, and color combination.

Through semiotic analysis, the uluni horbo has been shown to contain a sign system reflecting multiple layers of meaning—iconic, symbolic, and mythological. This ornament serves as a medium of cultural communication, conveying messages about social order, spiritual beliefs, and ethnic identity. Therefore, preserving the Rumah Bolon is crucial not only for preserving its physical form but also for the symbolic values embodied within the ornament. By understanding the meaning of the uluni horbo, we can see how the Simalungun people express the cosmological relationship between humans, nature, and ancestors through the visual language of traditional architecture.

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