

Article

Spatial Reconfiguration in Traditional Architecture: Altered Spatial Practices in a Mbaru Niang Guest House (Niang Gena Maro)

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Abstract

Wae Rebo is one of the most famous cultural tourist destinations in East Nusa Tenggara. It is recognized for their traditional houses, Mbaru Niang, seven uniquely shaped houses with plenty of cultural and traditional values and often discussed in relation to vernacular form, function, and symbolic meaning. However, changes in habitation patterns, economic needs, and the growth of Wae Rebo as a cultural tourism destination have led some houses to function as guest accommodation rather than permanent dwellings. As traditional houses are spatially organized according to cultural norms and social meanings, such functional changes raise questions regarding how spatial practices and meanings are altered through this transformation.

This study examines how the transformation of a traditional Mbaru Niang house into guest accommodation alters spatial practices and reshapes the meaning of domestic space and its symbolic meaning. It will be focusing on Niang Gena Maro as a single case study. This study uses a qualitative method by conducting field observations and interviewing residents and architecture researchers to obtain information. Traditional spatial organization is presented as a conceptual baseline rather than as a comparative object.

The findings reveal significant alterations in spatial practice, particularly on the first floor, which is now fully dedicated to guest activities rather than being divided into three specific zones. Traditional spatial zoning is no longer applied, kitchen functions are relocated to separate areas, and domestic privacy is redefined through collective sleeping and dining arrangements. These changes indicate a shift from kinship-based domestic organization toward hospitality-oriented spatial use.

Keywords: *Living Heritage; Mbaru Niang; Spatial Practice; Vernacular Architecture*

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Introduction

Indonesia was one of the countries known for its cultural heritage and destination. From Sumatra to Papua, Indonesia that was known for its various and unique cultural hold many heritage and beauty to behold. One of them is Wae Rebo, a settlement that was widely known for its beauty and how it situated at the top of a mountain. Located at an elevation of approximately 1,200 meters above sea level, the village is accessible only on foot after several hours of trekking, rendering it not only geographically remote but also relatively isolated in cultural terms.

Wae Rebo is one of the only three settlements in Manggarai that still holds its old value and culture and still maintains its pristine authenticity (Dwi Putri, 2021). According to Yori Antar who have went and revitalized the settlement himself with his team, in this era of globalization, The people of Wae Rebo chose to separate themselves to prevent the erosion of their culture, to be precise, not to let their culture being fully influenced by the wave of modernization. They chose to live at the mountain area to protect the authenticity of their culture. This effort is what made their settlement managed to stay as they are and still recognized as a settlement that still has a distinct architectural style and strong culture of the people of Manggarai (Dwi Putri, 2021)

Wae Rebo Village is known for its heritage of seven traditional houses, which stand out because of their distinctive conical shape, fivelevel interior design, and construction using natural materials without nails. These traditional houses are called Mbaru Niang (Antar, 2010). Aside from serving as a dwelling, Mbaru Niang serves as a cultural space that reflects the traditional values and beliefs of the local community (Lon), this especially shown on the form and the space of the house itself.

Like most of traditional houses, the form of the house and space reflects the traditional values and beliefs. Wae Rebo has seven houses, one functioned as community settlement and one main house functioned as community's social structure and place to hold ritual ceremonies. In Manggarai culture, this house is called Gendang house. While other houses had no particular or specific use other than living settlement, other Niang Houses, like Gendang house, has particular division of their spatial spaces that separate each space that was used.

However Wae Rebo experienced declining during the early years of 1990s and was revitalized during the year 1997. This happened due to the needs of improving the economy condition of the village itself and the growth of the settlement. Wae Rebo began to be developed into a cultural tourism destination, and a revitalization project was initiated by architect Yori Antar and the Rumah Asuh Foundation to preserve local wisdom. This revitalization was carried out from 2008 to 2011, faithfully

reconstructing the buildings in the same form as their originals (Afifah & Kurniawan, 2022). Several houses were being repaired and to better functioned as cultural tourism destinations there are houses that went through several changes so that it could better functioned for the consumers one of them is Niang Gena Maro that functioned as a guest house.

Mbaru Niang as a dwelling place, traditionally functions in three ways: As a residential place, communal gathering hall, and sacred place. As a residential place, this house functioned as a place to live, to fulfil daily needs and as a physical and spiritual protection. The zoning consists of Lutur, Molang, and the bedrooms for each head family. Lutur was public place for gathering between the owner and the guests while Molang is the more private place for family only and where the kitchen resides in the middle of the room while bedrooms strictly for each family members. While as a sacred place, it was painted at the structure of the house in which it has five floors that showed the sacred structural beliefs of the community. (Lon & Widyawati, 2020)

As traditional houses are spatially organized according to cultural norms and social meanings, such functional changes raise questions regarding how spatial practices and meanings are altered through this transformation. What the community view as their everyday likely differs from what the visitors view as their everyday, thus changes and adaptations has to be made to ensure the comfort of the visitors however, doing so might slightly or even greatly changes the spatial structure of the house, despite the outside form remains the same, the change of the rooms and the placement of several places may change the function and spatial meanings according to cultural norms.

The central issue of this research examines how the transformation of a traditional Mbaru Niang house into guest accommodation alters spatial practices and reshapes the meaning of domestic space and its symbolic meaning. It will touched the angle of how the transformation of the house altered the spatial practices and reshapes the symbol and meaning of the house. This study will not only relevant within the local context of Wae Rebo but also provides broader discussion regarding reconfiguration of spatial practices and how it affect the symbolism of traditional housings.

This study focuses on Niang Gena Maro as a single case study to examine how the spatial meaning of a traditional Mbaru Niang house has been altered through its transformation into guest accommodation, with traditional spatial organization serving as a conceptual reference rather than a comparative object, in hope that the findings may provide knowledge how spatial practices can affect spatial meanings.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a single case study method focusing on Niang Gena Maro in Wae Rebo Village. The research was conducted through the following steps: first, obtaining primary data and relevant information through direct field observations in Wae Rebo. The data were collected through indepth observation of the research object, indepth interviews with local residents and customary leaders of Wae Rebo Village, as well as visual documentation in the form of technical drawings, field notes, and photographs.

The observation focused on spatial organization, spatial practices, and the use of domestic space in its function as guest accommodation. Traditional spatial organization of Mbaru Niang is used as a conceptual reference to understand spatial transformation rather than as a comparative object. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively to identify changes in spatial practices and spatial meanings.

Field observations were conducted during a site visit to Wae Rebo Village from July 2 to July 3, 2024. Data collection involved direct observation of the research object and its spatial use. The data were analysed using a thematic approach, with findings organized into the main aspect of spatial function and meaning.

Informants were selected based on their involvement and knowledge of the village, including house caretakers, and residents. In addition, several visiting tourists were interviewed to provide alternative perspectives and to reduce bias from solely communitybased interpretations. Data validity was ensured through triangulation by combining observations, interviews, and literature sources.

Results

The data was collected in Wae Rebo, the collected materials include: the photographs of the research object, visual documentations in form of technical drawings, and interview transcript. The photos and images obtained includes the condition of the object.



Figure 1. Niang Gena Maro

Interviews were conducted with several sources including two Wae Rebo residents and two visitors. The results revealed the spatial divisions and meaning also the symbolic meaning of the house itself and its function.

Respondents from Wae Rebo explained that originally all seven houses has the same divisions of spaces and room, however after the renovation project, Niang Gena Maro was used as a Guest House from outside visitors. For the purpose of visitor's comfort. Some arrangements were made including a very open house with no rooms and the kitchen were separated from the main house while originally the kitchen was in the middle of the main house as the smoke was used for the house's fumigation and that there were times the house was emptied for fumigation as Niang Gena Maro has no kitchen. Guests slept on the available beds given and the house has no separate bedrooms. While in other houses there exist rooms that was meant for each head members of the house and the kitchen was still put in the middle of the room by the main pillar of the house.

For Conceptual references, according to several literatures, Mbaru Niang Houses including Niang Gena Maro has 5 floors. Tenda, Lobo, Lentar, Lempa Rea, and Hekang Kode which has different functions. Tenda as the lowest floor was used for dwellings for the people, Lobo was used to storage foods, Lentar for keeping seeds, Lempa Rae was food storage in preparation for famine, and Hekang Kode, being the highest floor was to put offerings for the ancestor.

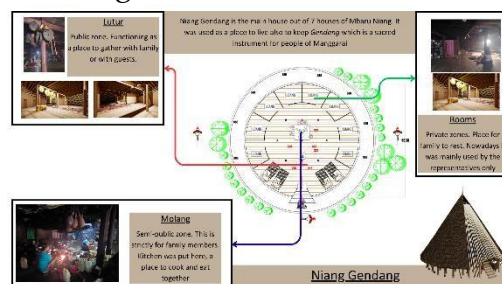


Figure 2. Zones in Mbaru Niang

For the spaces itself, the room was divided into 3 zones: Lutur, Molang, and Bedrooms. Lutur was used for public activities for example gatherings with other head families or for community purposes as Maggarai people has culture where they will sit together called Lonto Le'ok which is a cultured circle-based dining practice in which the guests will also participated in Niang Gena Maro.



Figure 3. Lonto Le'ok

Molang was the more private space strictly for the family including the kitchen that was placed at the heart of the house near the main pillar, and Bedrooms are the rooms used by each head families from each houses (Usually in Niang Gendang there are 8 families and in other houses there are 6).

Discussion

By what has been gathered, it was clear there is a clear difference between the original house and Niang Gena Maro which now has been functioned as the guest house. From Spatial Function alone, it was already differs as the original Mbaru Niang was meant to be a dwelling for the family while Niang Gena Maro was made to accommodate the guests that came outside of Wae Rebo. Originally, houses of Mbaru Niang has three zones which are Lutur, Molang, and Bedrooms for the family heads.

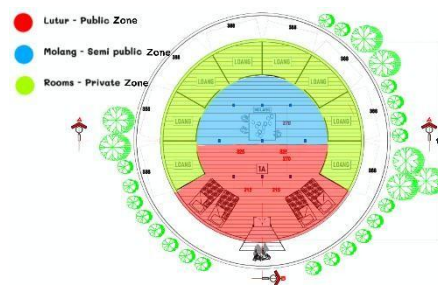


Figure 4. Mbaru Niang Zones

The divisions divide spaces that belongs to the community and to the families, also, the kitchen that being put at the center of the house symbolized harmony and the balance symbol of female and male respected roles of the house. It represent harmony and communities. The smoke from the fire was also used for fumigation of the house.

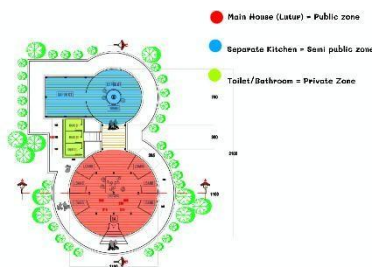


Figure 5. Niang Gena Maro Zones

For Niang Gena Maro the kitchen was removed from the centre of the house and a separate part of the house was created for a separate kitchen. This was in order to ensure the comfort of the guests as not everyone can handle smokes inside the house. This is functionally effective as a guest house but as a traditional house, this reconfiguration of spatial space diminishes the symbolic meaning of harmony and community of the house as the hearth is no longer placed at the heart of the house.

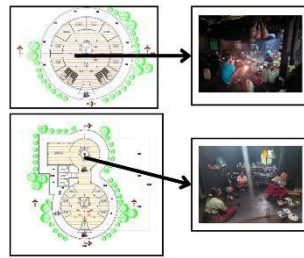


Figure 6. Kitchen in Mbaru Niang and Niang Gena Maro

It can also be seen that in Niang Gena Maro, there are no separate rooms for the guests. Guests sleep in a bed, separated only with partitions and thus completely removed the private space for the inhabitants. Which means in Niang Gena Maro, the traditional spaces of Lutur and Molang was mixed because there are no space that differentiate any activities as communal and private spaces are both being used for the same objectives for the guests.

Based on the analysis about our findings are:

Table 1. Analysis of Spatial Practices of Niang Gena Maro

	Spaces and Aspect	Mbaru Niang in General	Niang Gena Maro
1	Lutur	Communal places for gatherings	Communal places for gatherings but mainly for visitors
2	Molang	Semi Private place for the families	Mixed with Lutur
3	Bedrooms	Private place for each families	Completely removed
4	Spatial Function	Dwellings, residential place. Sacred place	Guest House for guests. Still sacred as the structure did not change
5	Spatial Meaning	Sacred, symbolizes harmony and communal	Guest accommodation, still held to the sacred meaning as the structure did not change

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the spatial reconfiguration of Niang Gena Maro has significantly altered both spatial practices and spatial meanings. The modification of the traditional three-zone organization has transformed the symbolic meaning of the house, which originally emphasized harmony and communal living. The relocation of the kitchen and hearth to a separate structure has reduced the role of the main house as a centre of domestic and social interaction.

In addition, the transformation of Niang Gena Maro from a residential dwelling into tourist accommodation has changed its spatial functions. Spaces that were previously used as family sleeping areas have been replaced by collective guest sleeping arrangements and temporary partitions, resulting in a shift from kinship-based domestic organization toward hospitality-oriented spatial use.

This study shows that the spatial reconfiguration of Niang Gena Maro has altered both spatial practices and spatial meanings. The modification of traditional spatial zoning and the relocation of the kitchen have reduced the role of the house as a communal domestic space. At the same time, the transformation into guest accommodation has changed the spatial function from a kinship-based dwelling into a hospitality-oriented space. These findings demonstrate how traditional architecture can adapt to tourism needs while undergoing significant changes in spatial meaning and domestic practices.

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