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*by* Lite Journal

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**Submission date:** 27-Feb-2024 10:57AM (UTC+0700)

**Submission ID:** 2297205163

**File name:** 6\_Helmi.pdf (538.22K)

**Word count:** 4945

**Character count:** 27300

## Analysis of Functions and Semiotic Meanings of Traditional Acehese House Ornaments

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### Article History

Submitted date:  
2023-08-27  
Accepted date:  
2023-09-27  
Published date:  
2023-09-30

### Keywords:

semiotics; traditional house of Aceh; Peirce semiotic; house ornament semiotic

### Abstract

Aceh has a unique and distinct cultural heritage as one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia. This study attempts to analyze the functions and meanings of signs and symbols in Aceh houses (*Rumoh Aceh*) using the triangle theory proposed by Peirce. The research method used in this study involves interpreting field and literature data obtained. The interpretation process was based on local references derived from the social and cultural values prevalent in Acehese society. The data were collected through documentation and several previous scientific publications. They were then analyzed using a Peircean semiotic approach. The research findings indicate that the signs present in *Rumoh Aceh* are closely related to religious elements, positioned in buildings oriented from east to west (facing the *qibla*), rooms divided into three spaces serving as private and non-private areas, and demarcating spaces between men and women. The architectural design and elevation of the building from the ground carry the meaning of protection from natural elements such as wild animals and flood. Ornamental motifs of flora and fauna are employed to preserve nature and coexist with living creatures, both animals and plants. Religious motifs aim to remember and draw closer to the divine. A variety of colors symbolize the characteristics and culture of Acehese society. The use of various carved motifs signifies the homeowner's social strata.

### Kata Kunci:

semiotika; rumah adat Aceh; semiotika Peirce; semiotika ornament rumah

### Abstrak

#### Analisis Fungsi dan Makna Semiotik Ornamen Rumah Adat Aceh

Aceh memiliki warisan budaya yang unik dan khas sebagai salah satu etnis di Indonesia. Penelitian ini mencoba menganalisis fungsi dan makna pada tanda maupun simbol *Rumoh Aceh* menggunakan teori segitiga yang digagas oleh Peirce. Metode penelitian yang dilakukan melalui penafsiran terhadap data lapangan dan kepustakaan yang diperoleh. Proses penafsiran didasarkan pada referensi-referensi lokal yang berasal dari nilai-nilai sosial dan budaya yang berlaku pada masyarakat Aceh. Data dikumpulkan dengan melakukan dokumentasi dan beberapa hasil publikasi karya ilmiah sebelumnya. Data kemudian dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan semiotik Peirce. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tanda-tanda yang ada pada *Rumoh Aceh* erat kaitannya dengan unsur keagamaan yang terletak pada bangunan yang membujur dari timur ke barat (menghadap kiblat), ruangan yang terbagi ke dalam 3 ruang berfungsi sebagai ruang privat dan nonprivat serta membatasi ruang antara pria dan wanita, bentuk panggung dan ketinggian bangunan dari tanah bermakna perlindungan dari alam seperti binatang buas dan banjir, ragam hias motif flora dan fauna sebagai upaya melestarikan alam dan hidup berdampingan dengan makhluk hidup baik hewan dan tumbuhan, ragam hias motif agama yang bertujuan untuk mengingat dan mendekatkan diri kepada Tuhan, ragam warna melambangkan sifat dan kebudayaan masyarakat Aceh, dan penggunaan berbagai motif ukiran menunjukkan strata sosial pemilik rumah.

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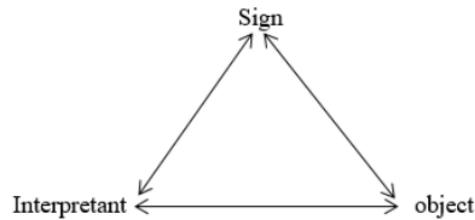
## 1 Introduction

Aceh as one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia has its own cultural artifacts. One of them is the *Rumoh Aceh* (Acehnese house). *Rumoh Aceh* serves as both a residence and a shelter for the Acehnese society (Kafri et al., 2023). This house is distinct from regular houses. Its elongated and rectangular appearance gives it the name "*rumah panggung*" or stilt house. When examined in terms of architectural form, this house conveys its own messages through the existing signs. According to Fiske, a sign is defined as a human creation that can only be understood by those who use it (Fiske, 2010). To analyze the architecture of *Rumoh Aceh* based on the existing signs, a semiotic approach is employed. Etymologically, the term semiotics originates from the Greek word *semeion* which means 'sign'. A sign itself is defined as something based on previously established social conventions which can be considered to represent something else. Terminologically, semiotics can be defined as the science that studies a wide range of objects, events, and entire cultures as signs (Bouissac, 2007). A clearer limitation presented by (Preminger, 2021) states that semiotics is the science of signs. This science considers that social phenomena/society and culture are signs. Semiotics studies the systems, rules, and conventions that enable these signs to have meaning.

Pateda in (Shalika, 2020) divides semiotics into 9 types: Analytical Semiotics, Descriptive Semiotics, Faunal Semiotics, Cultural Semiotics, Narrative Semiotics, Natural Semiotics, Normative Semiotics, Social Semiotics, and Structural Semiotics. This article will focus on Analytical Semiotics and Cultural Semiotics. Analytical Semiotics is the type of semiotics that analyzes sign systems (Aston & Savona, 2013). Pierce states that semiotics concerns sign and analyzes them through ideas, objects, and meanings (Gorlée, 2022; Noviana, 2020; Saifudin & Noviana, 2023). Ideas can be considered symbols, while meaning is the significance contained within a symbol that refers to a specific object. Cultural Semiotics is the type of semiotics that specifically examines the sign systems prevalent within the culture of a particular society. It is known that societies, as social beings, possess specific cultural systems that have been inherited and respected across generations. Culture, which is also a part of the societal system, employs specific signs that differentiate it from other societies. The study of *Rumoh Aceh* has been conducted by Hasbi (2017), Haikal and Syam (2019), Putra and Ekomadyo (2015, 2023), Sabila and Rinawati (2014), Yudanti et al. (2022), Maulana et al. (2018), Saputra et al. (2022), Charlo et al. (2022), Widosari (2010), Sahputra and Edytia (2021), Meutia et al. (2021), Hairumini et al. (2017), Arif (2018), Kevin et al. (2021), Rizky et al. (2018), Hamzah (2018), Hendra (2022), Rizky (2021), Ridwan and Alifa (2022), Nursaniah et al. (2023), Aiyub (2017), Ulfahmi et al. (2018), Sahputra et al. (2022), Azzahra (2023), Ruliani et al. (2019), and Febriyanto and Widodo (2021). Through all the analyses of written works discussing *Rumoh Aceh*, a study delving into the functions and semiotic meanings contained within the ornaments of *Rumoh Aceh* has not been found. This research aims to reveal and ascertain the underlying significance contained within *Rumoh Aceh* by applying Pierce's theory.

The theory referred to in this research is Pierce's theory (Hoopes, 2014). This theory is used to analyze meaning in signs in the form of a triangle of meaning. This consists of the sign, object, and interpretant. According to Pierce, one form of a sign is a word. The object is something that the sign refers to. Meanwhile, the interpretant is the sign that exists in someone's mind regarding the object that a sign refers to. When these three elements of meaning interact in someone's mind, meaning about something represented by that sign emerges. The meaning triangle theory delves into the issue of how meaning arises from a sign when that sign is used by people during communication. The relationship of Pierce's meaning triangle is commonly depicted Figure 1:

**Figure 1. Pierce's Elements of Meaning**  
[Source: (Fiske, 2010)]



## 2 Method

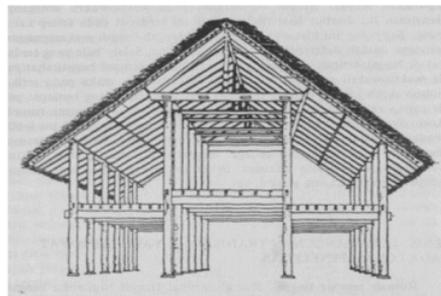
The explorative method applied in this research involved interpreting field data (Mikkelsen, 2011) and acquired literary references (Masayu Rosyidah & Rafiq Fijra, 2021). The process of interpretation was guided by local references stemming from the prevailing social and cultural values in Acehese society. The data were collected through documentation and by tracing several outcomes of previous scholarly works. Subsequently, the data were analyzed using a Peircean semiotic approach. The presentation of research findings was conveyed using ordinary words.

## 3 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Results

The term '*Rumoh Aceh*' refers to the houses of village residents, now also known as traditional houses. *Rumoh Aceh* is a building raised on sturdy, tall, round pillars made from strong wooden trunks, elevated about two and a half meters from the ground. This design aims to provide protection against wild animal attacks and floods. These pillars are called '*tameh*.' The number of these pillars varies, with some having 18, 20, or 24 pieces, each with a diameter of approximately 30 cm. The building's height up to the floor level is roughly two and a half meters, while the overall height of the structure is around five meters.

**Figure 2. Traditional House Framework Seen from the Front**  
[Source: *Arsitektur Tradisional Provinsi Daerah Istimewa Aceh*, 1981 page 26]



The lower part of the building beneath the floor is an open space, as it lacks walls. This space, known as the '*kolong*,' serves various purposes such as pounding rice, weaving, putting children to sleep, and storing agricultural tools. The upper part of the house, supported by the pillars, is divided into three rooms: '*Seuramo Keu*' (front porch), '*Seuramo Likoot*' (back porch), and '*Rumoh Inong*' (main house). When illustrated, the layout of these rooms appears as in Figure 3 and 4.

Figure 3. Illustration of the Vertical Layout of an Acehese House

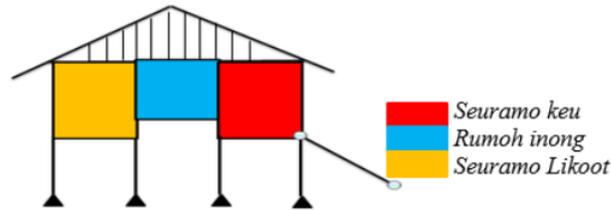


Figure 4. Front and Side View of Rumoh Aceh  
[Source: Documentation of Oja, 2023]



*Seuramo Keu* (front porch) is located at the front, where an odd number of stairs are leaned against. Inside this room, there are also stairs, and their count must also be odd. This is because Acehese people believe that God, Allah, loves odd numbers, as mentioned in the hadith of Bukhari Muslim: 'Verily, Allah is odd and He loves odd numbers.' The orientation of *Rumoh Aceh* faces either east or west (toward the *qibla*). This positioning has a purpose according to the words of the elders (*ureueng tuha*); there is wisdom in it. When a guest arrives from afar without asking the host, they already know the direction of the *qibla*. This porch also serves as a place to receive male guests, while also serving as their sleeping and dining area. Sacred events such as religious gatherings and weddings also take place in this front porch.

Figure 5. *Seuramo Keu* (Front Porch)  
[Source: Documentation of Oja, 2023]



*Rumoh Inong* (main house) is situated between *Seuramo Keu* and *Seuramo Likoot* and is slightly elevated. This space is characterized by privacy and seclusion. The elevation of this room is higher, with the floor of the central room raised about 50 cm higher than the front and back porches. *Rumoh Inong* is divided into two 'kama' (bedrooms), separated by a 'rambat' (corridor) connecting the front and back porches. The room on the west side is called *Rumoh Inong*, while the room on the east side is called *Anjong*. Typically, *Rumoh Inong* is occupied by the head of the household, namely the parents. If a daughter gets married, she will move to *Rumoh Inong*, while the parents occupy *Anjong*. The daughters who were initially in *Anjong* move to the western end.

**Figure 6. A Rambat (Corridor) Connecting the Front Porch and Back Porch**  
[Source: Documentation of Oja, 2023]



*Seuramo Likoot* (back porch) is almost similar to the front porch but is more open in nature. There are no partitions within this space. This area serves as a storage place for household items, and approximately one-third of the back porch is utilized as a kitchen. It also functions as a space to receive female guests and simultaneously serves as a dedicated sleeping or dining area for women.

**Figure 7. Seuramo Likoot (Back Porch)**  
[Source: Documentation of Oja, 2023]



Surrounding the room are the walls of the house. The entrance door is located in the middle of the front wall. Nowadays, the location of the entrance door is sometimes at the left end of the front room, precisely on the left wall. Windows, known as 'tingkap,' are found on the left and right walls of each room. The roof of an Acehese house is a single steeply pitched roof that extends from the left side to the right side. This roof is made from woven *rumbia* palm leaves. Additionally, there is a water jug near the stairs to ascend the Rumoh Aceh. Before entering the house, it is advised to perform ablution, as the Acehese house is clean and used as a place of worship. This practice aligns with the command of the Prophet to be in a state of purity, as a clean body reflects a pure heart.

**Figure 8. Water Jug of Rumoh Aceh**  
[Source: Documentation of Oja, 2023]



In addition to the three mentioned rooms, aesthetic carvings can also be found on *Rumoh Aceh*. The intricate motifs of *Rumoh Aceh*, rich in aesthetic values, are also intriguing to explore. There are two types of carving motifs found in *Rumoh Aceh*: pierced carving motifs and non-pierced carving motifs. Pierced carving motifs not only serve as adornments for the house but also aid in air circulation. The motifs found on *Rumoh Aceh* are diverse, encompassing floral patterns, Islamic motifs, natural themes, and even rare fauna motifs rarely seen in traditional house carvings. These motifs are seen adorning various parts of their homes, including the *tulak angen* (roof cover), *rinyeun* (stairs), *binteh* (walls), and even the interior walls, adorned with ornamental carvings. The floral motifs can be observed on the wall illustrations. The Aceh society's love for nature is evident in the beautifully carved depictions of flowers and leaves on the house walls. Aceh motifs like *bungong seulanga*, *bungong kupula*, *bungong kipah*, *pucok rebong*, on *cirih*, *awan si on*, and many more are prominently displayed in the carvings of *Rumoh Aceh*.

Acehnese motifs hold meaning for the Aceh society, one of which is the '*pucok reubong*' motif that symbolizes undergoing a process. '*Pucok reubong*' refers to bamboo shoots, metaphorically representing the early stages of life experiencing growth. As the Aceh society is inherently artistic, they take pleasure in adorning their homes with these motifs, each carrying its own significance in life. However, the placement of motifs on *Rumoh Aceh* does not hold specific intentions or meanings. It is purely intended to embellish the house. The motifs on the '*tulak angen*' of each house vary, they combine a fusion of fauna and flora motifs. The fauna motif present on this house is a stylized depiction of a bird, namely a chicken. Chickens are livestock favored by the Aceh society. In addition to the chicken motif, there are also bird motifs. Islamic motifs are placed above the entrance of the house or on the upper parts of the house walls. The placement of these motifs is carefully done as they consist of verses from the Quran. Typically, calligraphic representations of Quranic verses are applied to places of worship like mosques. One common Islamic symbol motif used on *Rumoh Aceh* is the crescent and star motif. Natural motifs like the moon and stars are also symbols of Islam and fall within the category of Islamic motifs.

The decorative patterns on several *Rumoh Aceh* houses also appear captivating with distinct Aceh colors. For instance, the ornamentation on this house showcases shades of yellow, red, green, white, and black. These colors hold specific meanings for the Aceh (Hadjad et al., 1984). Some colors reflect cultural values, such as the colors of the ceremonial cloth, consisting of red, green, and yellow. Green symbolizes the Islamic community, similar to banners or flags, while yellow signifies greatness and honor, formerly worn by the kings of the ancient Aceh kingdom. These color symbols are still utilized today when receiving guests from outside the region or abroad. The color red signifies courage in warfare and defending the truth. Each house has different motifs; there are *Rumoh Aceh* houses adorned with a wide variety of decorations, while others have fewer

adornments. The diversity of decorations on *Rumoh Aceh* houses reflects the social strata of the homeowners, much like fashion – the better the design, the higher the cost. This illustrates that the array of decorations present on *Rumoh Aceh* houses becomes more extensive and intricate as the social status of the owner rises. Therefore, it can be confirmed that homeowners with abundant decorations belong to the middle to upper classes. Based on the comprehensive explanation regarding the elements of *Rumoh Aceh*, encompassing its form, carving motifs, and colors, the signs present will be outlined according to the meaning theory proposed by Pierce in Table 1.

**Table 1. Semiotic Significance Analysis of Symbols in *Rumoh Aceh***

Sign	Object	Interpretant
A building that stretches from east to west (facing the <i>qibla</i> )	<i>Rumoh Aceh</i>	manifestation of Islam in daily life
A room divided into 3 spaces	<i>Seuramo keu</i> (front porch), <i>Seuramo Likoot</i> (back porch), and <i>Rumoh Inong</i> (main house)	functions of private and non-private spaces and the segregation of spaces between men and women
Stage like structure and elevated from the ground	<i>Rumoh Aceh</i>	protection from nature such as wild animals and floods
Central room is higher	<i>Rumoh inong</i> (main house)	form of respect to the homeowner and creating highly private space functions
Stairs have an odd number	stairs <i>Rumoh Aceh</i>	effort to draw closer to Allah (The Almighty God)
Water jar in front of the stairs leading to the house	water jar	as a practice of purification ( <i>taharah</i> ) in Islam
Variety of decorative motifs of flora and fauna	carving motifs	effort to preserve nature and coexist
Variety of decorative motifs of religious themes	carving motifs	to remember and draw closer to God
Variety of colours	red, yellow, green	symbolizing the nature and culture of Acehese society
Various other motifs	on walls, stairs, house windows	indicating the social strata of the homeowner

### 3.2 Discussion

Amid the realm of Acehese architecture, the conventional embellishments adorning their abodes hold profound semiotic and cultural implications. These ornamental accents, far from serving merely superficial aesthetics, carry profound cultural tenets, values, and societal hierarchies. The investigation thus dives into the multifaceted realm of their functionality and semiotic nuances. Fundamental to this discourse is the pivotal role these traditional Acehese house ornaments play in amplifying the inherent aesthetic allure of their dwellings. Intricate carvings, elaborate motifs, and vibrant palettes frequently grace sundry facets of these homes, from the outer walls to the doorframes and windows. These embellishments foster an expanse of visual splendor in the architectural fabric, instilling sentiments of reverence and fascination. Their paramount significance is the symbolic resonance these ornaments carry, serving as embodiments of the Acehese cultural identity. They often interweave motifs inspired by the natural world, mythology, and indigenous symbols. Through these artful elements, Acehese domiciles metamorphose into visual odes to the region's opulent heritage and historical narrative. The very motifs they embrace can signal lineage, trade affiliations, or one's standing in society, thereby forging a resolute bond between architectural design and cultural ethos. Imparting dimensions beyond the decorative, Acehese house ornaments are veritable markers of social stratification and stature within the communal milieu. The meticulous intricacy and choice of materials dictating these embellishments serve as markers of varying social strata. Residences affiliated with prominent individuals or families often boast ornate and opulent embellishments, spotlighting their elevated social standing.

The ornaments subsequently transcend ornamental functions to embody insignias of prestige and societal rank. Their message extends beyond economic opulence, delving into the broader realm of influence and significance within the community. A direct correlation between the ornateness and precision of these embellishments and the perceived societal echelon of the residents is observable. Many of these Acehese house embellishments harbor spiritual and symbolic layers. Inherent in their designs are motifs bearing religious resonance, often incorporating geometric patterns reminiscent of Islamic artistry. These allegorical symbols mirror the devout convictions and cultural principles of the inhabitants, fusing spirituality and aesthetic elegance. The spiritual symbols ensconced within these embellishments are believed to extend protective and sanctifying influences to the household, serving as guardians against adversarial forces and conduits of concord and prosperity for the family unit. The ramifications are profound, as these embellishments resonate with significations surpassing mere visual attraction, contributing holistically to the occupants' well-being. Thus, the traditional embellishments that grace Acehese domiciles enact myriad roles and bear layered semiotic meanings. In melding aesthetics with cultural identity, signaling social stratification, and embodying spiritual and symbolic emblems, these embellishments transcend their ornamental essence, assuming roles intrinsic to comprehending the comprehensive tapestry of Acehese architecture and cultural heritage.

#### 4 Conclusion

The signs present in *Rumoh Aceh* are closely related to religious (Islamic) elements, evident from the culture of the society that consistently upholds Islamic values in daily life. Islam has been ingrained as a culture by the Acehese people, influencing every aspect of their daily lives. The second aspect pertains to the role of women within *Rumoh Aceh*. Women are highly protected, leading to spaces that serve their needs more. Efforts to protect women have become norms and customs in Acehese society. The directive to safeguard and respect women is also an integral part of Islamic teachings. Moreover, Acehese community life is intertwined with natural elements, including flora and fauna, which are implemented within the culture of *Rumoh Aceh*.

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