

## GENDERED SPACE IN WEST SUMBA TRADITIONAL HOUSES

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### ABSTRACT

Rendell stated that gender representation underlined the production of space in architecture both symbolically and functionally in certain cultures (Rendell et al. 2000). Thus, an exploration on the spatial functionality of traditional houses could show how cultural gender rules and roles generate the spatial arrangements. This empirical research explored the traditional houses in two kampongs: *Tarung* and *Ratenggaro* of West Sumba, Indonesia, which spaces are divided into two distinct spaces: male's space and female's space, each with its own entrance. This firm division leads to the questions on its relation with the traditional gender roles are represented inside the house. Interestingly, the spatial arrangement is not intended to create separation between men and women inside the house or to pose that the status and roles of men are higher than those of women. The research found that the space separation actually is a manifestation of the dynamic roles of male and female members of the house and the circular arrangement of the space around the fireplace at the centre of the house follows the dynamic of gender duality in Sumba culture.

**Keywords:** Gender; space; West Sumba; traditional houses.

### INTRODUCTION

The general discussion on gender is a talk about the equality between men and women, particularly on its opportunities and roles in society, such as in politics, economics, socio and culture. Gender terminology doesn't specifically refer to men and women, but according to Rendell, gender is a belief in sexual equality and a commitment to eradicate sexual domination and transform society (Rendell, et al, 2000). While Hanson describe gender as the perceived differences between women and men and to the unequal power relations, the processes that defined gender can be inflected by ethnicity, physical ability, and other perceived differences, developed through everyday practices in place (Hanson, 2010). Hanson's research about gender are based on mobility, how mobility shapes gender and furthermore define how geography, social and cultural context influence both gender and mobility.

Gender is a sensitive yet interesting topic to debate and discuss and there are few discussion about gender in architecture that are not only related to architect as an occupation but also related to architecture and its elements such as space, place, and form. Studies about gender mostly addresses gender from the point of view of geography, anthropology, and social sciences. So, why should we study gender in architecture? Unconsciously, architecture mate-

rialise gender in their elements as expressed in how people called architecture as "a man-made environment". The use of the word "man" can lead to the dominance of a particular gender (Rendell, et al, 2000). That leads to the objective of this paper on discussing gender and architecture in traditional architecture. Architectural theory, especially theory about space and place, are mostly constructed by western or based on western perception. While people in other region, like in Indonesia, perceive and understand space in different ways. Space in western perception is generally understood as a static and limited physical entity enclosed by what Ching (2007) has referred as floor, walls and roofs; or by Meiss (1990) as architectural attributes and order. Whereas place is described as the spirit of the space that defines human habitat as a socio-cultural rhizome, a genius loci that holds an intangible quality of a site (Markevičienė, 2012).

How space and gender are related can be seen in Massey and Rendell. According to Massey (2001), space and place reflect and affect the way which gender is constructed and understood. Spatiality and identity of the space were related to the culturally specific distinction between public and private. As an illustration, there is an attempt to put women to domestic sphere while men to public sphere. According to Rendell (2000), space is produced as gendered through representation and production. The

gendered space can be seen in the words and images that are assigned to the architectural elements, those words and images usually have a cultural associations with particular genders to invoke comparisons of their biological body or to place them in their rightful cosmic position.

The questions arisen in this research are how gender rules and roles affected the house and whether gender equality is presented in the architecture of traditional house of West Sumba. These two questions will be discussed in this paper, as well as the gender positioning in the spatial arrangement and its meanings in West Sumba traditional houses. The research aim to obtain an understanding of gender position in the traditional culture and its architectural representation as an empathy for women and their position in the patriarchal society.

In order to gain a different perspective with the patriarchal point of view, this research tried to read the spatial arrangements of the traditional houses through its primordial means: how activities and daily movement of both sexes contribute to the house's spatial arrangement. Rendell revealed that the modern space is gendered through men and women seek of pleasures in everyday activities. (Rendell, 1998) Traditionally, these seek of pleasure is fulfilled when men and women take comfort in their daily activities. In the traditional Sumba context, it is all about living economically in a dualism of a surrealist world of Marapu that supports the realist world of an agricultural culture as explored in Vel's work. (Vel, 1994)

## RESEARCH METHODS

Empirical research through field observation is conducted in order to get a clear description about the architectural form and the space arrangement of the West Sumba houses, focusing on the elements related to the roles of men and women in the houses. The data are collected through visual documentations and interviews. The visual documentations include photo documentation and redrawing of the house plan. Interviews were conducted by collecting information from the elders and the chief of the kampong. The data collected includes the space arrangement, naming and attributes of the space, the dimension of the space, and the occupant's activities.

The case study are the houses in two kampongs in West Sumba area, Tarung and Ratenggaro. In spite of the fact of the different geographic condition of these two kampong, they are both of the same tribe, and both maintain their agricultural culture and their ancient belief of Marapu. Hence it is expected that their built environment is based on the same gender

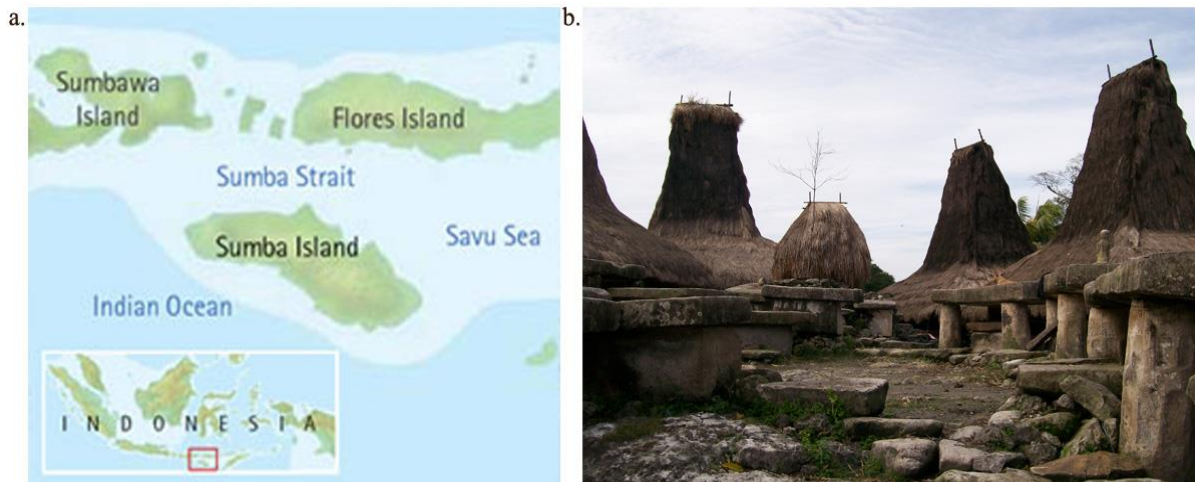
rules and roles. Tarung kampong lies on the hills which contours are steep; while Ratenggaro kampong lies along the island's sea shore facing the Pacific Ocean where the contours are mostly flat. The case study in kampong Tarung is an old house that was a self-built house by the local community many years ago. Whereas, the house in Ratenggaro is a relatively new house, which was funded by Tirta Group Foundation to replace the old houses which were shattered in a fire disaster. Although the house in Ratenggaro is considered as a new house, the house was also a community-built house based on their traditional culture with the similar form, scale, proportion, and space arrangement with the old ones.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### West Sumba Traditional Houses

Sumba is an island located at the southern part of East Nusa Tenggara province, Indonesia. Sumba island location is close to Australia thus the nature and climate of Sumba are dry with savanna and rocky plains (Fig.1.a). Geographically, Sumba Island can be divided into West and East region. Local people who inhabit Sumba Island are called as Sumba people. Sumba people consist of two main tribes that resides in two main territories in the island, Meiwewa in the west side of the island and Kambera in the east side. Each tribe has different sub-tribes such as Loli, Kodi, Anakalang, Wanokaka in the West and Manggikina, Manggarikuna, Kambera in the East. All of Sumba sub-tribes shares similar culture but each sub-tribe has a specific tradition and culture, like sacred ceremony, linguistic structure and traditional houses. Sumba traditional houses are similar in form but different in details, the details are specific according to the sub-tribes and the village location (Winandari, 2006). Sub-tribes who live in East Sumba have different social and political structure from West Sumba, therefore the architectural expression of traditional houses in East Sumba are different from West Sumba.

Sumba is widely known to have strong megalithic culture which can be seen to this day through the relics, such as stone tomb or sarcophagus, dolmen and menhir. The characteristic of settlement in Sumba village are the arranging of traditional houses in circular pattern surrounding the open space. In the open space, which is called as *talora*, Sumba people place the cemetery in form of sarcophagus then erect a dolmen on it as offering table (Fig.1.b.). Sumba people place the cemetery in the settlement open spaces because of their belief on *Marapu*, the spirit of ancestor and the dead. They believe that when a



Source of Fig.1.a.: <http://v2.garudamagazine.com/features.php?id=14>

**Figure 1.** a. Map of Sumba Island; b. Sumba settlement at Tarung Kampong, a settlement with a sacred open space

people die, their spirit will not go anywhere but remain among the live. The open space is also functioned as ceremonial place, like *wula podu*, annual sacred ceremony which being held for a month to celebrate harvesting season. Thus the open space is sacred place for Sumba people, a place to perform sacred ceremony, a place for Marapu, a place for the dead.

The meaning of space and place of traditional Sumba houses are deep, multi-layered and metaphysical. There is no space that doesn't have meaning; even the space under the house platform has a meaning. Sumba houses are heavily laden by symbolism from the understanding of macrocosm, microcosm and myth which are rooted in the belief of Marapu.

### Men and Women in West Sumba Tradition

Kinship in Sumba embrace patrilineal system in which group of paternal relatives are called as *kabihu* or *kabizu*. When a woman gets married, she will enter into her husband's clan and so will their future children, consequently it will left a void of her position in her initial family. The displacement system bring the *belis* system to fill the void in the woman's family by providing valuable objects, such as gold, silver, copper, fabrics (fabrics for men called as *hinggi*, while for woman called as *lau*), scarves (*tera*), ivory (*nggedingu*), or buffalos, horses and pigs. Those valuable objects consider as a substitution for the bride's role in her former family (Melalatoa, 1995).

The role separation between men and women in Sumba assign men as the head of the family, as a leader in sacred ceremonies, and as an heir, not only

in the family but also in the society. However, it doesn't mean that women place is lower than man. As told by the elder, women play important role in sustaining life. In sacred ceremony, women will dance sacred dancing while men lead the prayer. In daily life, men are head of the family but women are the one who give birth the offspring. Women are also ensuring life of the family by providing food and cloths, and woman also work together with men in planting and harvesting crops.

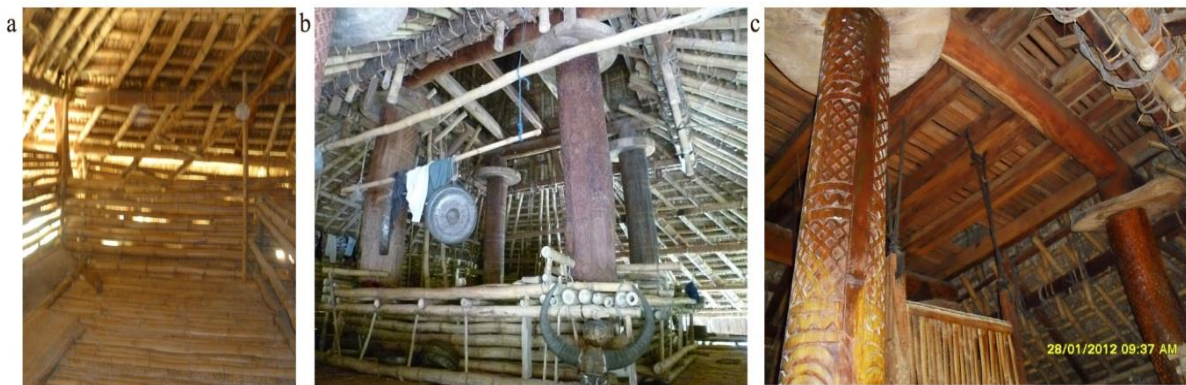
The equal role and position of men and women in Sumba can be seen in daily artefact, such as jewellery, motif of woven fabrics, wood and stone carving, and also in the house structure (Fig.2). Ornamentation and carving that are found on stone, wood craft, and also house poles have similar shape, usually in triangle, square, oval, circular and curved lines. Triangular and square shape symbolise male, masculinity which is described as sharp and bold. While oval, circular or curved line symbolise women, femininity, which is described as soft and lenient

### Gendered Space and Place

Physical space in Sumba traditional houses is enclosed by floor, wall and roof, and there are also non-physical attributes that form the space. The most influential intangible aspect that forms space and place in Sumba houses is Marapu. Marapu materialized and manifested in the form of sacred place in the house, called as *Mata Marapu*. Mata Marapu is an empty space in Sumba house that is considered as a dwelling place for Marapu. There are 2 (two) places of Mata Marapu in the house, one is located under the roof tower and the other is at the



**Figure 2.**a. Ornatmentation on house posts; b. Women jewellery, symbolise fertility; c. Small statue, found at the base of dolmen, formed man figure



**Figure 3.**a. Mata Marapu, an empty space in the house corner; b. Mata Marapu under the roof tower, uncovered condition; c. Covered with wood platform

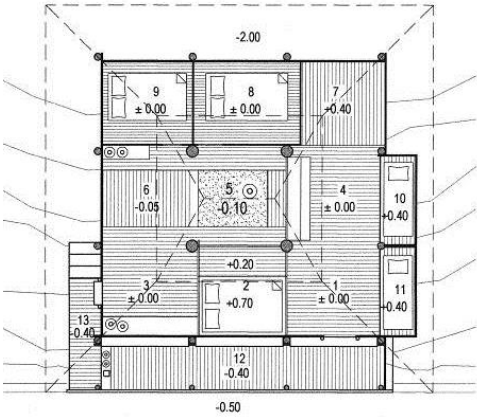
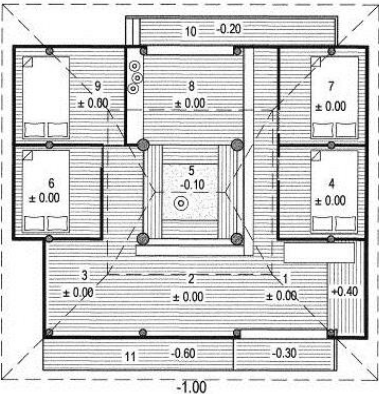
house corner<sup>1</sup>. Women, especially adult and married women, are forbid to enter the room, only men who gain the access into the room. It is a strict rule, but the interesting fact is Sumba people never ask why, they accept the rule as an expression of respect and gratitude to Marapu. They believe that Marapu will guide and protect their life. Thus, it can be said that even though Mata Marapu is physically empty, it is a place which richly loaded with meaning. It is a sacred place and a strongly gendered one as it is considered as a male part of the house (Fig.3).

<sup>1</sup> Mata marapu place in the houses is differ, each kampong has different placement. In Tarung, Mata Marapu is located at the backside of the house, while in Ratenggaro at the frontside. The similarity of Mata Marapu in every Sumba houses are the space is empty, functioned only for sacred ceremony; Men should wait in the Mara Marapu place when the *Rato* (high priest and kampong leader) pray during the ceremony.

Gender separation in Sumba traditional houses is strict and firm according to customary law and taboo, forbidden because of their held beliefs and tradition. One example is the separation of house entrance for men and women, where the adult men shall enter the house from front door while the adult women are forbidden in doing so; the women shall enter the house from another door, usually at the left or back side of the house. The front verandah and the front door are the male's section, while the back or left verandah and the rear door are the female's section. Men and women spend their daily activities in their respective area. Therefore, gendered space in Sumba traditional houses can be defined as follows:

- Male: living room, Mata Marapu, sleeping chamber for boys, and front verandah.
- Female: sleeping chamber for girls, kitchen and side verandah.
- Male-female: parents' chamber, fireplace or hearth.

**Table 1.** Spatial Arrangement in West Sumba Houses

Floor Plans	Description
 <p style="text-align: center;">TARUNG HOUSE PLAN</p>	<p>Spatial arrangement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 &amp; 4: living room (front area)</li> <li>2 &amp; 9: sleeping chamber for girls</li> <li>3 &amp; 6: kitchen</li> <li>5: hearth</li> <li>7: Mata Marapu</li> <li>8: parent's chamber</li> <li>10 &amp; 11: sleeping chamber for boys</li> <li>12: front verandah (male)</li> <li>13: side verandah (female)</li> </ul> <p>The spatial arrangement can be slightly different in other houses in Tarung, but the configuration is similar, female section is generally located at the left and back side while male section is located at the right and front side.</p> <p>Tarung is located on the hill in Waikabubak city, the topography is sharp and with steep slope. Therefore, side door is located near the front door to avoid high steps.</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">RATENGGARO HOUSE PLAN</p>	<p>Spatial arrangement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 &amp; 2: living room (front area)</li> <li>3: Mata Marapu</li> <li>4 &amp; 7: sleeping chamber for boys</li> <li>5: hearth</li> <li>6: sleeping chamber for girls</li> <li>8: kitchen</li> <li>9: parent's chamber</li> <li>10: rear verandah (female)</li> <li>11: front verandah (male)</li> </ul> <p>Ratenggaro is located near the river delta and seashore with flat land, therefore female door can be located at the side or rear of the house.</p>

Fireplace or hearth has a role as a symbolization of heart of the house, a place which performs and sustains life, a place to warm up the house in the night, and a place to cook their meals. A wooden cabinet is hung above the hearth to store food supply for the resident. The hearth which location is at the center of the house play important role to preserve the house construction. Smoke and cinder from hearth will preserve the roof construction since bamboo and thatch are vulnerable to termites attack. As a gendered space, hearth is defined by male and female posts. There are 4 (four) posts that are erected and have a role as structure core of the house. These four posts are consist of 2 (two) male posts and 2 (two) female posts which are placed facing each other. The arrangement of male and female posts are vary, it can be placed facing male-female in diagonal or grid configuration.

The posts which symbolize male and female show how gender is equal in Sumba traditional houses. Whereas the hearth is the melting point where gender is inseparable; symbolize the unification of men and woman in the sacred life (Nurdiah, et al, 2014). It is sacred because it is located beneath the roof tower and Marapu space.

Gender separation in West Sumba houses are not only defined by scared and prone, but also defined by domestic activity which is conducted in the house. Men spend most of their times and activities outside the house, their activities which held inside the house are the activities related to his status and role in the kampong, such as conducting a kampong meeting to decide when to start the Marapu ceremony. While women spend most of their times to do domestic activities, such as cooking, weaving and making utensils from bamboo or leaves. Women also have to

go to the paddy field to cultivate, but their domestic role in their family has to be done inside the house. Therefore, male spaces have less attributes than female spaces and tend to be empty without furniture, while female spaces are denser and cramped with utensils.

The gendered space in West Sumba houses is generated from the gender separation which established by customary law, and defined by architectural attributes. Male spaces generally open and have no vertical elements or walls, i.e. sleeping chamber for boys, the chamber in several houses in Tarung and Ratenggaro have no walls, it is only defined by floor level. While female spaces have a strong boundaries, especially the sleeping chamber. The chambers have walls and the door openings are covered with cloth or fabrics to keep the privacy. Thus it can be said that male spaces are considered as public while female spaces are private. Beside define gendered spaces, physical appearance and activities which occur in West Sumba houses also defines the public and private zone.

Thus, gendered space in West Sumba traditional houses are formed by tangible (physical) and intangible features. The tangible features such as floor levelling, walls, posts, ornamentation and other attributes define the spaces, while intangible features such as activities, customary law and taboos, and Marapu, give meaning to the spaces and define the place. Moreover, the gendered spaces in West Sumba houses also create and define sacred-profane and public-private zones with a central balance axis that also act as the centre of the “universe” located in the hearth.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, gendered space in West Sumba traditional houses are firmly divided into male and female spaces; the inhabitants oblige to obey the gender separation in the houses as a representation of their respect to Marapu and tradition. Both men and women respect other respective spaces and maintain appropriate boundaries in harmony with customary law. Representations of gendered spaces are adjusted to men and women role in culture that embraces patriarchy system. Male spaces are considered sacred, as it shows in the space in the house called Mata Marapu, and it also considered as public as it shows in the functionality of their living room. Meanwhile, female spaces are considered profane and related to domestic activities such as kitchen, and it also considered as private because some spaces have restricted access or located in the backside of the

house. Despite the spatial arrangement result on gender separation, it does not mean that men and women are contesting their space and position; men are not considered to have superior position than women. On the other hand, it shows the equity of men and women roles in domestic life and also becomes the meaning of place in its architecture.

Based on the description of gendered space in West Sumba houses, it can be seen that space and place are formed by tangible and intangible features, which the beliefs of Marapu become the most influential and it gives meaning and spirit to the place. A space in the house can appear as a simple and empty room, but it is dense with meaning; space can be perceived and understood as a physical object and also as a non-physical object that can be touched, sensed, and dwelled.

Studies on gendered space and place should be elaborated and deepened through empirical and theoretical studies from architecture point of view. Discussion on gender, space and place in traditional houses is a very rich and lavish subject because each region, tribes and sub-tribes, has different point of view which is based on local culture and tradition. Moreover, space and place in traditional houses have a deep meaning which cannot be bounded by physical elements of space. Theory of gender, space and place which base on local culture and wisdom will greatly enrich the theory of architecture, thus in the future, architect should not only concern about aesthetic and function when design a building, but they also have to pay attention to the people and the local culture. It is the aim of empathic architecture, an architecture which not only focus on beauty, stand strong against external forces, well functioned, but also embrace human behaviour, culture, and local wisdom.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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