

# Iconography of *Sonaf Nis None* Traditional House in East Nusa Tenggara

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**Abstract.** The Atoni tribe is a native of Timor, inhabiting the western and central parts of Timor Island. Its traditional house function as a place for dwellings and for performing certain rituals. The form of the house is unique and contains rich meanings that could be studied. There are some Atoni traditional houses that are still maintained in Maslete Village, North Central Timor Regency in East Nusa Tenggara. There are four types of Atoni traditional houses namely, *Sonaf*, *Ume Kbbubu*, *Lopo* and *Ume Knat/Kanaf*. This research will focus on studying *Sonaf Nis None*, the house with the highest hierarchy in Maslete Village. It is a qualitative research with the method of descriptive analysis and using Panofsky's approach of Iconography that was conducted through two stages. The first stage was Pre iconography stage which was conducted to obtain the textual meaning and the second was the Iconography stage, performed to discover the contextual meaning. Findings reveal that the traditional house of the Atoni Tribe has a rich meaning, conveying life values. The house was a manifestation of the outlook and philosophy of a harmonious life, articulated through the form of the house and its surrounding environment as a microcosm in accordance with the rules of the universe or and the wider world (macrocosm), by using a double pattern (pairs) in the architecture and interiors of the traditional house. The set of pairs as a whole is represented by the masculine and feminine nature of the fetomone couple (female-male), that have two opposing qualities but complement and enliven each other. These meanings have been the sources of inspiration for the design of today's homes. Their form and appearance may be modern, but the concept of the value presented is the continuity of Atoni's preserved cultural values.

**Keywords:** Atoni, Iconography, Meaning, Traditional House

## 1 Introduction

Traditional houses are the cultural product of an area whose existence must be maintained in order to be sustainable. Traditional houses not only have interesting forms but are also full of meaning. The form and meaning can be analogized into an inseparable entity between the body and soul that complement each other.

The traditional house of the Atoni tribe has begun to decrease in number in East Nusa Tenggara, and hence ought to be preserved. The Atoni people are ethnic Timorese who inhabit the western and central parts of Timor Island. The traditional house of the Atoni Tribe functions as a place of residence and to perform certain rituals. The traditional house of the Atoni Tribe that still exists and is preserved today is in Maslete Village, North

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Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara. The traditional house of the Atoni tribe has four types of buildings namely *Sonaf* Nis None, *Ume Kbbubu*, *Lopo* and *Ume Kbat / Kanaf*.



**Fig. 1.** Forms of Atoni tribe's traditional houses: *Sonaf*, *Ume Kbbubu*, *Lopo*, *Ume Kbat/Kanaf*<sup>[1]</sup>.

Their functions are different from one another, their shapes are unique and full of meaning. Hence, they must be studied, to maintain inspiration for the preservation process today. In order to ensure the sustainability of preserving traditional houses, we must not only focus on maintaining the building artefacts, but also the meaningful philosophical values of the building so that they do not depart away from the viewpoints and behaviour of the unique people.

## 2 Panofsky's Iconography Method

This research focusses on the study of meaning of the architectural and interior forms (exterior-interior) of traditional Atoni houses. The meaning was obtained using the Panofsky's iconographic method<sup>[2]</sup>. In the first stage: the pre iconographic stage, the object of Atoni's house was described factually and expressively to produce textual meaning. The next stage was the iconographic stage in which the object of Atoni's house was analysed interpretatively to produce contextual meaning. The contextual meaning relate to philosophical values, which must be preserved so as to prevent its shifting from the perspective and cultural behaviour of the people.

Data collection was performed through field observations and visual documentation of the physical data of Atoni's house. Meanwhile, historical data on the formation of traditional houses, the development of building forms and socio-cultural developments along with various cultural values and community trust were obtained through the exploration of literature and interviews with experts who mastered local cultural values, especially the local ritual and cultural leaders.

## 3 Atoni Tribe's Traditional House

Traditional Atoni houses are generally divided into: palace / king's house (*Sonaf*) round house (*Ume Kbbubu*), and granary (*Lopo*) as well as residential house (*Ume Kbat*)<sup>[1]</sup>. *Sonaf* is the dwelling place of the holy and sacred king. A *Sonaf* in a kingdom (village) can be more than one in number. *Sonaf* symbolizes the universe and the embracing or unifying of tribes<sup>[3]</sup>. *Sonaf* is usually located in the highest area and the people's houses are on the lower hillside. This represents a form of worship and protection to the king, who is the visible "Lord"<sup>[4]</sup>.

*Ume Kbbubu* means round house and is a place for ordinary people to live. *Ume Kbbubu* is also called *Ume Bife* (women's home) and is a feminine symbol, because it is often used by women in carrying out domestic activities such as cooking, weaving, managing harvests,

giving birth, and so on. *Ume Kbat* also functions as certain ritual places such as birth and marriage ceremonies.

*Ume Kbat/Kanaf* *Ume Kbat / Kanaf* is a tribal house or clan that was built as a sign of bond and unity of all members of the tribe or clan. *Ume Kbat / Kanaf* is square in shape and has two openings (front and rear doors).

In this research, only the *Sonaf Nis None* type building will be examined, which is the highest hierarchical building in the Atoni tribal system and is the largest traditional building in Maslete Village, the former administrative center of the Bikomi kingdom and one of the largest Atoni tribal kingdoms. *Sonaf Nis None*, which is the residence of the king, has two functions, namely a practical function as a residence and a religious function as a place for traditional rituals. Aside from being the dwelling place of the holy and sacred King Bikomi, *Sonaf Nis None* is also an expression of the philosophy and way of life of the Atoni tribe, which is reflected in its dwelling patterns, architectural and interior forms.

#### 4 Iconography of Atoni Tribe's Dwelling Patterns in Maslete Traditional Village

The traditional village settlement of Maslete is located in a hilly area. *Sonaf Nis None* is located in the highest area (the easternmost) and is surrounded by *ume kbubu* (ordinary people's houses) and *lopo* (granary) in a clustered pattern. The east is believed to be the place where their ancestors first settled. This is where strength and blessings for the Maslete community descend. The location of the *sonaf* as the royal palace in the rear and highest area is a sign of protection, respect and worship of the people to the king. In addition, the east is considered the head of the settlement that is considered sacred while the west is the leg of the settlement that is profane <sup>[5]</sup>. The person who lives in the easternmost area, *usif* (king), is considered superior.

To enter the head of the settlement (*sonaf* area) one must go through a staircase with a total of seven steps. The number seven in the Atoni tribe is considered a perfect number intended for *Uis Neno / Creator* <sup>[6]</sup>. The seventh day is the day when plants first appeared from the arms and hands of the sister *Sonba'i* who was sacrificed by *Neonbasu*, 2011. The position of *usif* or the in Maslete Village was not only as a political leader but also as a religious leader. The king is the link between humans and *Uis Neno*. The king is the visible "God" <sup>[4]</sup>.

In the front yard of the *sonaf*, there is a *hau monef* pillar which is commonly used as a place to offer harvested crops as symbol of gratitude. This pillar consists of three branches of different lengths, a symbol of the Atoni's belief in the three life-regulating forces namely *Uis Neno* (God or sky god), *Uis Pah* (earth god) and *be'i nai* (ancestral spirit) <sup>[7]</sup>. These three forces are believed to be the creators, organizers, protectors, keepers and blessers of the Atoni tribe. According to *Usif Nimrod Nasu Senak*, this branch symbolizes God, Father and Mother. This is because there has been an acculturation of local beliefs with Catholicism and Christianity.

The orientation of *Sonaf Nis None* leads to the west, where there is Mount *Mutis*. Meanwhile, behind the *sonaf* that faces the east, there are Mounts *Laka* and *Ramelau*. These three mountains are historical connections of the origins of the Atoni ancestors. Mount *Mutis* itself is believed to be the preserver of those who are able to provide prosperity, abundance, and strength. From this mountain, water as their source of life flows.

The west as the direction of sunset is a symbol of *feto* (female). The orientation of *Sonaf Nis None*, which leads to the west, reflects the figure of the user, *usif* / king who is in charge as the ruler. According to Timorese custom, the ruler is expected to rest, eat, drink and sleep in his palace, which is why he is called *atupas* (he who sleeps). The task of

*atupas* is carrying out rituals and storing sacred objects. He has the authority to lead (*mone/male*), but is more often silent and passive so that the figure who is stronger than him is the *feto/female* [7] [8]. *Sonaf Nis None* which means "one with silver teeth" [7], from its name also shows a feminine nature, in which silver is a symbol of the *feto*.

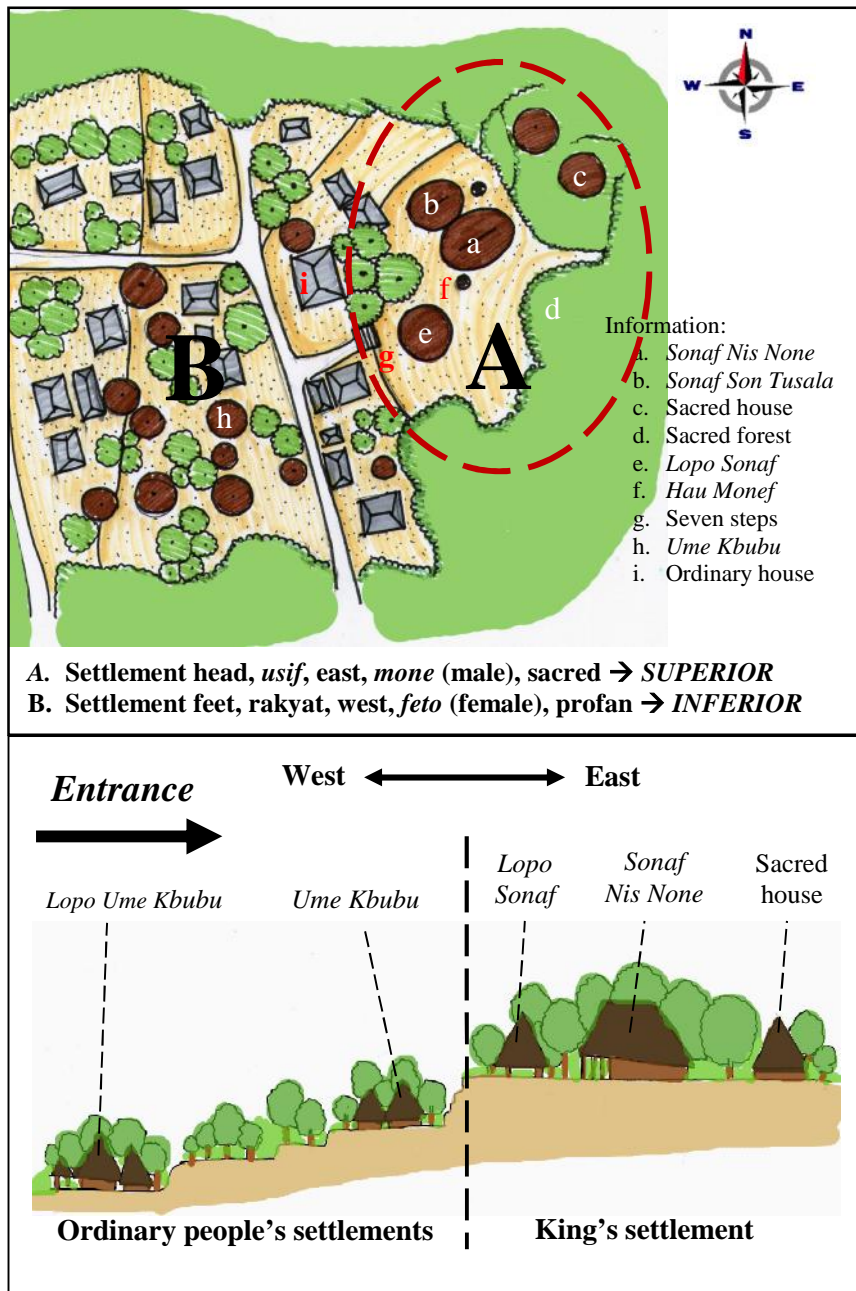
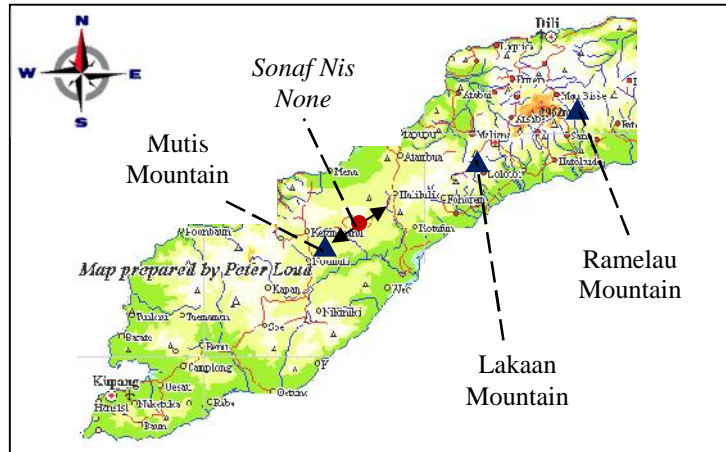


Fig. 2. Maslete village traditional settlement (layout and section)



**Fig. 3.** Left: Seven steps to *Sonaf Nis None*. Right: Three branches in *hau monef* (personal documentation, 2019)



**Fig. 4.** Orientation of *Sonaf* towards Mount *Mutis*, Mount *Laka* and Mount *Ramelau*

## 5 Iconography of *Sonaf Nis None*'s Architectural Form

The architecture of *Sonaf Nis None* is a type of non-stilted building which directly stands on the ground. *Sonaf Nis None* has a circular shape with an elliptical floor plan covered with a tall inverted boat-shaped roof. The *Sonaf* form is a reflection of the reaction to the surrounding natural conditions, which are in the mountains where the air temperature at night is very cold.



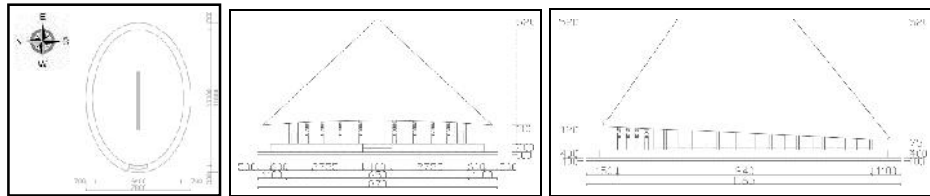
**Fig. 5.** Form of *Sonaf Nis None* in Maslete Village (personal documentation, 2019)

The front facade of *Sonaf Nis None* consists of rectangles and triangles, while the side view consists of rectangles and trapezoidal shapes. Its main entrance is only located in the front in the form of an opening in the middle of the *sonaf* body with a width and height of about one meters. The low main entrance requires that anyone who enters has to bow, which symbolizes the modesty and humility of the Atoni tribe towards *Uis Neno* (God), and as a form of respect for homeowners.

From the side view of *Sonaf Nis None*, it appears that the eaves of the front of the roof are higher than the rear. The higher front line represents the Atoni ranking system which

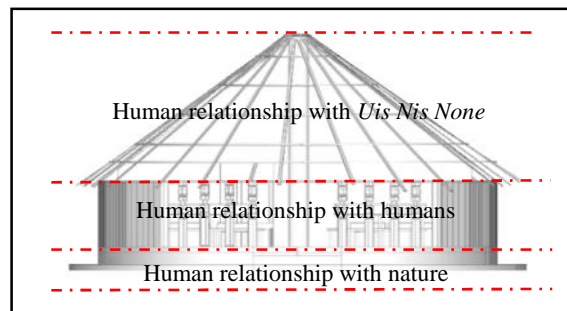
considers the *mone* (male) to have a higher position than the *feto* (female), because the front of the *sonaf* where there is *si'u* (terrace) is a symbol of the *mone* (male), while the part behind the *sonaf* (*nanan*) is a symbol of the *feto* (woman).

*Sonaf Nis None* is the largest traditional building in the village of Maslete with a width of 8.7 meters, a length of 11.6 meters and a height of 5.2 meters. This reflects the status of the user of the *Sonaf Nis None*, the *usif* (king) which is the highest group in the Atoni tribe. The *Sonaf* as the king's residence is considered as a building that unites the tribes and a source of strength for the Atoni tribe.

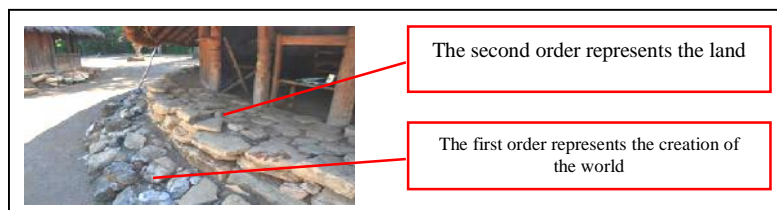


**Fig. 6.** Top, front and side views of *Sonaf Nis None*

The architectural form of *Sonaf Nis None* consists of three parts namely the *sonaf* foundation, *sonaf* body and *sonaf* roof. The *sonaf* foundation is represented in the form of a line (border) of flat stones arranged tightly to prevent animals from entering the house. The *sonaf* body is in the form of poles and boards of red wood, while the *sonaf* roof is represented through reeds that dangles almost to the ground. The three parts of the *sonaf* are a reflection of the philosophy of the Atoni people about harmony. The *sonaf* foundation which is directly related to the earth symbolizes the relationship between humans and nature. The *sonaf* body, the place where human activities are generally carried out, symbolizes the relationship between humans with other humans. The large and tall *sonaf* roof symbolizes the relationship between humans and *Uis Neno*.



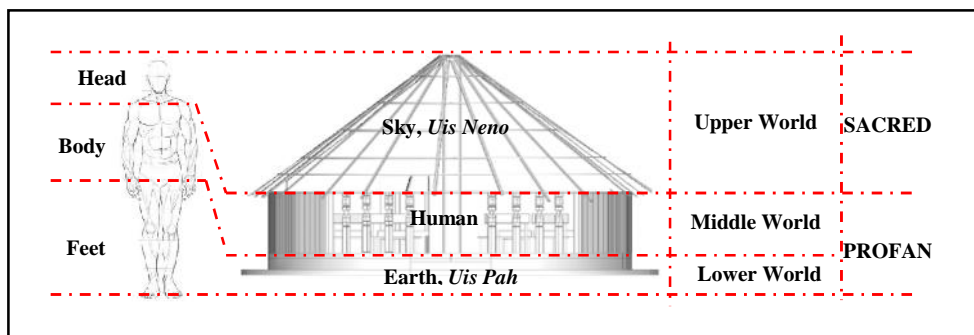
**Fig. 7.** Three parts of *Sonaf Nis None* as a symbol of life harmony



**Fig. 8.** *Sonaf Nis None* Foundation

The high and dominating roof shape of *sonaf* functions as a shelter that adapts to the environment and climate of Timor's humid tropics <sup>[9]</sup>. This roof formation also depicts a universe that embraces and unifies tribes <sup>[3]</sup>, like the sky that surrounds the earth. The basic flat stone structure on the foundation symbolizes the first moment *Uis Neno* created the world, and the flat stone structure above it symbolizes land. It is on this land that all human activities are carried out, encompassed by the sky.

The three parts of the *sonaf* also describe the cosmological view of the Atoni tribe in a macro way, where the world is divided into three parts, namely the upper world (sky), the middle world (human) and the underworld (earth). The sky where *Uis Neno* and the spirits of the ancestors lived provides rain. The land on earth symbolizes as a place for plants and humans to grow and enable the plants to live. Plants can live if there is a marriage between heaven and earth, and hence the Atoni tribe believes that there is a relationship between the different worlds. The heaven as *Uis Neno* (the Lord of the heavens in high) which represents a male figure, fertilizes the *Uis Pah* (the Lord of the low heavens / the god of the earth) who represents the women on earth, through the rain, that are likened to the sperm <sup>[7]</sup>. The roof as a symbol of the sky where *Uis Neno* and the spirits of the ancestors lived is considered sacred, while the foundation and body of the *sonaf* which symbolize the earth or the place of human habitation, is considered "dirty" (profane).



**Fig. 9.** *Sonaf Nis None* as a reflection of the Atoni Tribe's cosmology

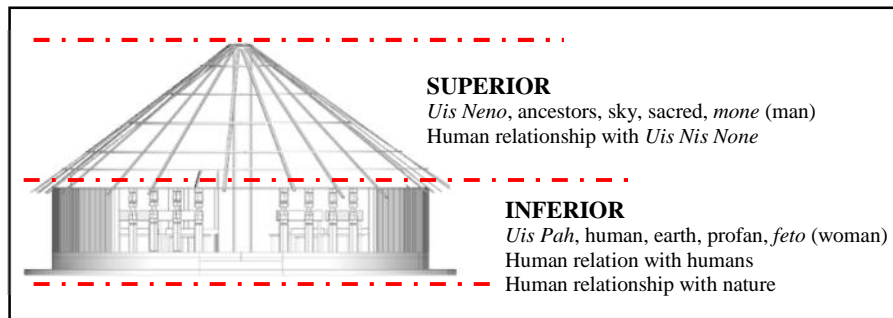
Microcosmally, *Sonaf Nis None* is also described as a human body, consisting of six elements as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Relationship between the *Sonaf Nis None* architectural elements and the parts of human body <sup>[8]</sup>

<b><i>Sonaf Nis None</i> Element</b>	<b>Parts of Human Body</b>
Foundation and Floor	Legs
Wall ( <i>niki</i> )	Body
Ceiling and roof	Head
Reeds ( <i>hun</i> )	Hair
Roof Pole ( <i>ni ainaf</i> )	Heart and soul
Fireplace ( <i>tunaf</i> )	Heart, first place of life

The size comparison in the *sonaf* section is also a reflection of the hierarchical/ranking system. In the Atoni tribe there is no equality between people, but each person simultaneously has his own place that can be considered superior or inferior <sup>[7]</sup>. The *sonaf* roof is a symbol of heaven, where *Uis Neno* and ancestral spirits live, who are sacred and hence are considered higher/superior to the *sonaf* body and foundation, as symbols of the earth and profane humans. Earth as a symbol of *Uis Pah* (earth god) is considered to be

inferior to *Uis Neno* (Lord of the high heavens). The dominant roof form also symbolizes the position of men in a position that is higher and more active than women. It also describes the relationship between humans and *Uis Neno* that is considered more sacred and higher (superior) compared to the relationships with fellow humans and nature.



**Fig. 10.** *Sonaf Nis None* as an articulation of a hierarchical system

The materials used to build *Sonaf Nis None* starting from the foundation to the roof all originate from the surrounding environment and are left unfinished/rustic. The *sonaf* foundation uses flat stones, the *sonaf* roof uses reeds while the *sonaf* body uses red wood which is believed to last for decades. Before gathering these materials from nature, the Atoni people would ask permission from the gods and forest beasts through certain rituals. The use of local materials is a form of achieving harmony with the natural surroundings.

From the results of the analysis and discussion above, the architectural form of *Sonaf Nis None* contains the textual meaning drawn from the pre-iconographic stage and the contextual meaning acquired from the iconographic stage as follows:

**Table 2.** Summary of results and discussion

Research Aspects	Textual Meaning	Contextual Meaning
Dwelling pattern	It is the largest building and is located in the upper (East) area of Maslete village.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sonaf</i> as the residence of <i>usif</i> (king), the ruler. He is a living God.</li> <li>• <i>East</i> as head of settlement, the most sacred area.</li> </ul>
Architectural Form	Rounded shape non-stilt house with elliptical floor plan covered with an upside down boat-like roof.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Symbol of the universe uniting the Atoni tribes, just like the sky covering the earth.</li> <li>• Demonstrate the wholeness and greatness of the Creator (<i>Neno Uis</i>).</li> </ul>
	Consists of three parts: the foundation, body and the roof.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expression of the three relationships of the Atoni, namely with God (<i>Uis Neno</i>), with humans and with nature.</li> <li>• Cosmological description of three worlds namely the upper world (sky), the middle world (human) and the underworld (earth).</li> <li>• A reflection of the hierarchy / ranking system. The roof (sky, <i>Uis Neno</i>, male) is higher (superior) than the body and foundation (earth,</li> </ul>



Research Aspects	Textual Meaning	Contextual Meaning
		Uis Pah, human, female).
	Orientation towards the west	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It symbolizes the house users, <i>usif</i> who although (<i>atupas</i>).</li> <li>• Leads to Mount <i>Mutis</i>, the origin and source of life of the Atoni tribe.</li> </ul>

## 6 Conclusion

The architectural form of *Sonaf Nis None* as a traditional house of the Atoni tribe is not based on the purpose of beauty and pleasure of the eye but contains deep meaning related to the Atoni Tribe's cultural wisdom, as follows:

### A. The symbol of macrocosm and microcosm.

The whole universe (macrocosm) which has the power of life and contains a set of rules governed in the *Sonaf Nis None* (microcosm). Macrocosmic symbol can be seen in the architectural form of the house consisting of three parts that symbolize the world above, the middle world and the underworld. The symbol of the microcosm can be seen from each of the house structures that represent parts of the human body.

### B. Atoni expression of the universe.

The Atoni see the polarity of nature and deduces that everything is an opposing pair which is then represented by a figure of *feto-mone* (female-male), in which both have opposing qualities but complement, fill and activate each other. The symbols of opposition pairs such as *Uis Neno-Uis Pah*, sky-earth, East-West, South-North, sea-land are represented by *feto-mone* figures applied in the architectural form of *Sonaf Nis None*.

### C. A description of the Atoni tribal hierarchy system.

The Atoni tribe believe that there is no equality between people but each person has a certain position which can simultaneously be superior (superior) or lower (inferior). In their society the position of men is more dominant, important, and active (superior) than *feto* (women). But women as givers of life and the soul in a home (family) and hence are highly honoured and respected.

These points are a form of expression of the Atoni Tribe's philosophy and life outlook on a particular issue, which is harmony. The Atoni Tribe believes that there is no good life without harmony. Hence, their concept of harmony is applied in their neighbourhoods and homes, one of which is the *Sonaf Nis None*.

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