

## WHEN NAMES SPEAK: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF STREET TOPONYMY IN KUPANG CITY, EAST NUSA TENGGARA-INDONESIA

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### Abstract

Street toponymy represents a form of naming that encapsulates social, political, and cultural memory within public spaces. In Kupang City, street names function not only as locational markers but also as symbols of collective identity, historical traces, and representations of power. This study aims to uncover the social, historical, and ideological meanings embedded in the street names of Kupang City through a sociolinguistic approach. The research employs a qualitative-descriptive method, with data collected through documentation and interviews. The findings indicate that street naming practices in Kupang reflect social power dynamics, honor significant historical figures, and symbolize local cultural values. The street names fall into various categories, including National and Local Figures, Historical Events, Local or Ethnic Names, Natural and Geographical Features, and Religious References. This article argues that street names serve as spatial narratives that “speak” about who is honored, what values are commemorated, and which collective memories are preserved in urban society. The study contributes significantly to the toponymic scholarship in Eastern Indonesia, particularly in Kupang City. It strengthens the critical sociolinguistic perspective by highlighting street naming as a representation of power, identity, and collective memory, while also promoting interdisciplinary inquiry and a deeper understanding of public space as a symbolic socio-cultural domain.

**Keywords:** *toponymy; sociolinguistics; street names; Kupang City; collective memory*

### INTRODUCTION

Toponymy, the study of the origins and meanings of place names, has gained increasing scholarly attention over the past few decades. This field not only focuses on linguistic aspects but also uncovers the social, historical, cultural, and political dynamics underlying the naming of geographic spaces (Blair & Tent 2021; Gin & Cacciafoco, 2021). Amid rapid globalization and urbanization, street naming plays a vital role in the construction of local identity, symbolic representation of power, collective memory, and intergroup relations within society.

In the Indonesian context, toponymic studies remain relatively limited, particularly those examining the sociolinguistic dimensions of street naming practices in Eastern Indonesia. Most previous research has emphasized etymological or philological aspects (Ansah & Mireku-Gyimah 2021; Afandi & Juanda, 2024; Rustinar & Kusmiarti, 2021). To date, only one known study has addressed toponymy in Kupang City, conducted by Gigy, which examined the historical value of alley (gang) names in *Batuplat* subdistrict, *Alak* District, Kupang City (Gigy, 2020). However, this study did not address broader issues such as the construction of local identity,

symbolic representation of power, collective memory, or social group relations that are central to the present research.

Within the framework of critical sociolinguistics, place naming, including street naming, is understood as a discursive practice that is inherently non-neutral. Each assigned name is not merely a geographic label but conveys deep and complex meanings (Gin & Cacciafoco 2021; Janggo & Uran 2023; Rennick et al., 1985). Toponymy reflects the power structures embedded within society, the ideological production of space, and the construction of collective identity (Azaryahu 1996; Shang & Yang 2023; Woodman 2014). The names selected for streets often embody prevailing social values and norms and can serve as instruments for reinforcing or contesting dominant authority.

In the context of street naming, names are frequently drawn from historically significant or renowned figures. These names not only provide spatial identity but also construct and transmit historical narratives to future generations (Amniar et al., 2018; Province and Language, 2015; Woodman, 2014). For example, streets named after national heroes serve not only to honor their individual contributions but also to construct a collective identity, positioning such figures as symbols of struggle and national valor.

Studies on street toponymy such as: Azaryahu (1996) and Rose-Redwood et al. (2010) show that name selection is closely tied to dominant discourses and strategies of social legitimation. In many cases, street names function as tools to legitimize political or social power (Azaryahu 1996; Shang & Yang 2023; Yeh, 2013). In countries such as Indonesia, the renaming of colonial street names to those of local or national figures has often been undertaken as an act of symbolic resistance to colonialism and as a means of strengthening national identity. This reflects the ideological dimension of street naming, which plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of history and identity.

This research seeks to explore the practice of street naming in Kupang City by addressing three key questions: What are the categories of street names found in Kupang? How do power dynamics influence the processes of naming streets? And what role does toponymy play in shaping the collective memory and identity of the city's residents? By addressing these questions, the study aims to fill gaps in previous research by examining how street names function as cultural texts that reflect social, political, and historical narratives, while also serving as symbolic spaces for expressing identity and preserving collective memory within Timorese communities.

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach by combining sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, and spatial analysis, to examine street toponymy. Focusing on Kupang, a linguistically and ethnically diverse city in eastern Indonesia, this study addresses the lack of localized research on urban toponymy in the region. Kupang's population consists of various ethnic groups from across East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), making it a unique site for examining the intersection of language, identity, and place. By presenting the sociolinguistic context of the city, this study provides readers with essential background to understand how street names are not only derived from prominent figures, but also reflect the multilingual reality of the area, drawing from local languages such as Uab Meto and Rotenese. It reconceptualizes street naming as symbolic actions that convey cultural identity, historical memory, and power dynamics in public spaces. By doing so, it enriches Indonesian toponymy and offers a critical sociolinguistic framework for exploring

complex interactions among language, culture, and politics in contemporary urban environments..

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive design to provide an in-depth account of street toponymic practices in the city of Kupang (Creswell, 2013). Data for this study were obtained from five official documents, including city street maps, municipal decrees, and archived records from the Department of Transportation. These documents provided formal references on the designation and naming of streets in Kupang. In addition, 9 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals aged between 35 and 70 years. The interviewees included community leaders, local administrative officials, and residents who possess cultural and historical knowledge related to street names, offering valuable insights into the sociolinguistic and symbolic meanings behind them.

The data analysis involved classifying street names based on themes: figures, places, events, and their social and historical meanings. An interpretive approach was applied to understand street names as symbols of cultural identity, collective memory, and power dynamics in Kupang's public spaces (Blommaert, 2015).

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the findings on street naming practices in Kupang, a multiethnic and multilingual city. The analysis identifies five thematic categories of names that reflect cultural values, history, and identity. In addition, the discussion highlights how naming practices are influenced by power dynamics and how toponymy functions as a tool for shaping collective memory and reinforcing social narratives in public space.

### **1. Categories of Street Names**

From a total of 3,612 street names collected in Kupang, 361 names (10%) were analyzed in detail. These names were classified into five categories: (1) names of national and local figures (124 names), (2) names related to historical events (43), (3) names derived from local languages such as Uab Meto and Rotenese (96), (4) names with religious or spiritual meanings (57), and (5) names reflecting natural and geographical features (41). This classification highlights how street toponymy embodies collective memory, local identity, and sociocultural values.

#### **1.1. National and Local Figures**

Street names derived from national and local figures, such as *Jalan Soekarno*, *Jalan Piet A. Tallo*, and *Jalan El Tari*, function as forms of tribute to individuals who have made significant contributions to the nation and the region. For example, *Jalan Soekarno* does not merely reference Indonesia's first president; it also serves as a symbol of the independence struggle and an ideology that continues to inspire many. The embedding of patriotic values through such names not only strengthens national identity but also acts as a reminder to future generations of the importance of these individuals' dedication and struggle (Puti et al., 2022 & Woodman, 2014)

Moreover, by naming streets after local figures like Piet A. Tallo and El Tari, the people of Kupang express pride in their regional history and culture, while encouraging younger generations to recognize and value their inherited legacy.

## **1.2. Historical Events**

This category refers to street names inspired by significant historical events, both at the national and local levels (Puti et al., 2022). Examples in this category include *Jalan Gua Jepang*, *Jalan Perjuangan*, and *Jalan Veteran*. These names not only indicate physical locations but also carry powerful and meaningful historical narratives.

*Jalan Gua Jepang*, for instance, may refer to remnants of the Japanese occupation period, which hold considerable historical value. Meanwhile, *Jalan Perjuangan* and *Jalan Veteran* are closely associated with the era of independence struggles and the sacrifices of national heroes. The naming of such streets serves to commemorate the collective memory of the community regarding pivotal moments in Indonesia's historical journey.

The function of these street names is twofold: as a tribute to the past and as an educational and reflective tool for current and future generations. Society is encouraged not to forget history but to draw inspiration and lessons from it. In this context, a street name is not merely a directional or locational marker; it also functions as a symbol of collective identity, historical consciousness, and respect for the struggles that have shaped contemporary social and cultural life.

## **1.3. Local/Ethnic Names**

Street names such as *Jalan Amanuban*, *Jalan Sasando*, *Jalan Kiu Le'u*, and *Jalan Haumeni* reflect the rich and diverse local identity of Kupang, deeply rooted in the culture, traditions, and language of the Timorese people. These names function not only as geographical markers but also as profound representations of cultural values and indigenous wisdom.

*Jalan Amanuban* refers to the Amanuban ethnic group, one of the communities native to Timor. This naming signifies pride in ethnic origin and cultural heritage, serving as a reminder of the importance of preserving and respecting ancestral traditions. *Sasando*, a Rotenese traditional musical instrument well known in East Nusa Tenggara, lends its name to *Jalan Sasando*, highlighting the significance of preserving local arts and culture. *The sasando* symbolizes not only musical expression but also the unique creativity of the Rotenese people in crafting an instrument imbued with deep social and cultural meaning. This street name thus functions to introduce and promote local cultural heritage and to honor the ingenuity of Rotenese society.

*Jalan Kiu Le'u*, which in the Uab Meto language means "Sacred Tamarind," illustrates strong symbolic and spiritual values embedded in Timorese culture. The name reminds the community of the importance of respecting and protecting sacred objects or places within their traditions, and fosters awareness of the spiritual values that continue to inform daily life. Similarly, *Jalan Haumeni*, meaning "Sandalwood" in Uab Meto, refers to a tree highly valued in the Timor region for its aromatic oil used in traditional products and ceremonial practices. This name reflects an appreciation for local natural resources and cultural identity, while also highlighting the need to preserve economically and spiritually valuable natural heritage (Fox, 1997).

By assigning street names rooted in local language and culture, the people of Kupang strive to preserve and revitalize their cultural legacy amid the pressures of modernity. These names serve as an invitation to younger generations to learn about and appreciate their heritage, instilling pride in a unique and valuable local identity. In this way, the practice of naming streets based on local and ethnic elements illustrates how language and culture act as bridges between past and present, strengthening social bonds and safeguarding the cultural diversity that enriches the city of Kupang.

#### **1.4. Natural and Geographical Names**

Street naming in Kupang, particularly those based on natural and geographical elements such as *Jalan Air Nona* (girl's water), *Jalan Air Mata* (natural spring), *Jalan Lontar* (palm tree), and *Jalan Cendana* (sandalwood), reflects a profound connection between the local community and their environment. From a sociolinguistic perspective, street names are not merely tools for marking or mapping space, but are social processes that construct meaning and collective identity for the community.

Street names that incorporate elements of nature, such as *Jalan Air Nona* (which refers to a natural spring), *Jalan Lontar* (palm tree), and *Jalan Cendana* (sandalwood), function as markers of cultural identity that are closely tied to the ecological and cultural values of the local population. These names, more than simple geographic labels, preserve the collective memory of the significance of natural elements in community life.

In this regard, toponymy becomes a medium for transmitting local knowledge (local wisdom) to future generations. *Jalan Lontar*, for example, not only recalls the lontar plant with its economic and cultural value, but also refers to traditional practices of utilizing natural resources. This creates a form of collective "mental mapping" that helps the community remember and appreciate the surrounding natural heritage.

From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), such names reinforce the community's relationship with their environment. *Jalan Air Nona* and *Jalan Air Mata* refer not only to vital physical water sources but also hold spiritual and symbolic meanings that shape local identity. Through these place names, the people of Kupang construct an awareness of the importance of environmental sustainability in supporting their social and cultural life.

Overall, the naming of streets based on natural and geographical elements in Kupang illustrates the role of language in shaping, preserving, and transmitting social and cultural identities. Through these toponyms, the local community communicates its ecological, cultural, and historical values to the wider world while simultaneously strengthening its bond with the land and natural resources that have shaped its way of life for generations.

#### **1.5. Religious Names**

Religious names refer to names that are derived from or associated with religious beliefs, spiritual meanings, religious names or figures. Street names in Kupang such as *Jalan Nazaret*, *Jalan Syalom*, and *Jalan Imanuel* carry profound religious and spiritual significance for the local community. Each of these names embodies strong religious symbolism, reflecting the values upheld by the people of

Kupang. In a deeply religious society, street names do more than denote geographic locations; they serve as collective reminders of the spiritual teachings and traditions woven into everyday life.

*Jalan Nazaret*, referring to the hometown of Jesus Christ, conveys theological depth by evoking values of love, sacrifice, and hope central to Christian doctrine. Similarly, *Jalan Syalom*, derived from the Hebrew word for “peace” or “well-being”, expresses the community’s aspiration for harmony both within the individual and among neighbors, mirroring the peace principles taught in religious texts.

*Jalan Imanuel*, meaning “God with us,” symbolizes the divine presence in the lives of believers. This name reinforces the conviction that God accompanies the faithful in every life journey, providing security and protection. As such, *Jalan Imanuel* functions as a spiritual prompt for residents to rely on divine guidance in all aspects of daily life.

These religiously influenced street names illustrate the prominence of ecclesiastical institutions in Kupang’s social and public spheres. In a context where faith permeates public life, these thoroughfares become more than transport routes; they transform into spaces of spiritual reflection, where religious values are internalized and enacted. Moreover, they shape a public realm rich in symbolic meaning, reinforcing community religious identity and demonstrating how sacred concepts interact with urban environments.

Overall, names like *Jalan Nazaret*, *Jalan Syalom*, *Jalan Claret*, and *Jalan Imanuel* remind us that Kupang’s public spaces are not merely physical infrastructures but are imbued with spiritual values and moral reflection. These toponyms mirror the collective identity of a community strong in faith and tradition, while also enriching the city’s historical and cultural memory.

## **2. Power Dynamics in Naming Practices**

Street naming is a semiotic and social practice rich with meaning, serving functions beyond mere spatial markers or directional signs. From a sociolinguistic and identity studies perspective, street names reflect the prevailing configurations of power within society. This practice is frequently employed as a symbolic instrument by authorities to shape, reproduce, and legitimize historical narratives, collective identities, and desired value systems (Alkatiri, 2017).

In many instances, the naming or renaming of streets serves as a strategic means to commemorate certain figures considered worthy or to represent particular values promoted by those in power. This process is rarely value-neutral; rather, it is closely tied to ideological, historical, and even political considerations—including decisions about who is deemed worthy of remembrance and within what context.

A concrete example can be observed in the context of Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara. The decision to rename *Jalan W.J. Lamentik*, originally named after the first governor of East Nusa Tenggara Province, to *Jalan Brigjen Imam Budiman* reflects a shift in recognition toward figures perceived as relevant to current narratives. This change not only signals a preference for military figures within the discourse of development but also illustrates how local governments utilize public space to assert symbolic authority over history and collective memory.

Another example is the renaming of *Jalan Perintis Kemerdekaan*, also known as *Jalan Bundaran PU*, to *Jalan Frans Lebu Raya*. Frans Lebu Raya served as the Governor of East Nusa Tenggara for two terms and was renowned for development

programs with broad impacts, including infrastructure and rural community empowerment. Naming a main road in the provincial capital after him symbolizes the government's effort to immortalize his political legacy in public space. This change reflects how streets become sites of honor for local figures deemed to have significant influence in the region's contemporary history.

From the perspective of symbolic politics theory, as articulated by Azaryahu (1996), the process of street renaming is part of spatial re-ideologization, whereby the ruling regime removes symbols from the past that no longer align with new ideological orientations or political agendas (Azaryahu, 1996). This can also be interpreted as a mechanism of erasure and memory replacement, phenomena often observed during governmental transitions or political shifts.

However, this dynamic does not always proceed without resistance. In many cases, top-down decisions made without public participation can provoke opposition, especially when the community holds emotional attachments to the original names or does not feel represented by the new ones. Protests against street name changes have also occurred in Kupang, demonstrating that the public is not passive toward these symbolic practices but actively interprets and questions the meanings behind each change (Tribun Kupang, 2023).

Overall, the naming and renaming of streets reflect power relations, identity negotiations, and ongoing reframing of history. Street names are not merely linguistic texts in public spaces but articulations of values, collective memory, and dynamic socio-political relations. Understanding this complexity reveals that toponymic practices are a form of cultural power representation in everyday life.

### **3. The Role of Toponymy in Collective Memory**

Interviews conducted with residents of Kupang reveal that they do not merely recognize street names but also grasp the deeper values embedded within them. Toponymy, the study of place names, plays a significant role in shaping the collective memory of a community. Street names in Kupang function not only as spatial markers but also as representations of rich local identity and history. For example, *Jalan Eltari*, named after the first Governor of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), holds profound meaning for the local community. To them, this name is not simply a geographic label but a symbol of pride and respect for Eltari's struggles and contributions to regional development. In interviews, several residents expressed that every time they pass along this street, they are reminded of the history of struggle and sacrifice made by regional leaders, which in turn evokes a strong sense of love and belonging to their city.

The importance of toponymy in collective memory is also evident in other street names in Kupang. For instance, *Jalan Soekarno-Hatta*; this street name is derived from the names of two national figures, Indonesia's first president and vice president who are also known as the nation's independence proclaimers (Bapak Proklamator). It commemorates the contributions of Indonesia's independence proclaimers. This name not only invites residents to remember the nation's struggle for independence but also fosters nationalism and solidarity among the community. In this context, street names serve as a bridge connecting younger generations with history, enabling them to understand and appreciate the legacy left by their predecessors.

The transition from one street name to another also reflects the historical journey and social changes experienced by the people of Kupang. For instance,

certain street names have been altered in line with shifts in leadership or transformations in social values. This indicates that toponymy is not static but dynamic, evolving continuously alongside societal development. Changes in street names can serve as reflections of shifting collective identities, where communities strive to construct new narratives that resonate more closely with current conditions.

A deeper analysis of toponymy's role in collective memory also reveals that street names can influence how people perceive space and place. These names do not merely provide identity to locations but also shape how residents experience their relationship with their surrounding environment. When residents recognize and appreciate existing street names, they tend to feel more connected to their community. This fosters a sense of belonging and responsibility to preserve and uphold the values embedded within those names.

Toponymy plays a crucial role in shaping the collective memory of Kupang's society. Street names are not merely spatial markers but also symbols of identity, history, and the values upheld by the community. Through a profound understanding of toponymy, residents can appreciate their cultural and historical heritage while simultaneously cultivating pride and solidarity among one another. Thus, toponymy functions not only as a geographic communication tool but also as a means to reinforce social bonds and collective identity within the community.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Conclusion**

This paper examines how street naming in Kupang serves as a reflection of the city's diverse sociocultural identity. The findings demonstrate that street names are systematically categorized into five groups: names of national and local figures, historical events, local or ethnic elements, natural and geographical references, and religious terms. Each category reveals how language, memory, and identity intersect in public spaces.

The use of indigenous languages like Uab Meto and Rotenese in street names reflects efforts to preserve local heritage, while names related to historical events and religious concepts indicate how the past and spirituality continue to shape collective consciousness. Furthermore, the analysis uncovers the politics of naming, showing how street names are influenced by shifts in power and serve as symbolic tools for legitimizing certain ideologies.

Ultimately, the study affirms that street toponymy in Kupang is not merely functional but deeply embedded in cultural memory, social meaning, and identity formation, offering insight into how space is actively shaped by language and power.

This study not only contributes to the academic discourse on local toponymy in East Nusa Tenggara but also provides valuable insights for urban governance and cultural policy. The analysis of street naming practices in Kupang underscores the need for inclusive urban planning that respects and reflects the cultural, historical, and linguistic diversity of local communities. Place names, as symbolic markers, should be approached as tools for cultural recognition, not merely functional labels.

For policymakers and urban planners, these findings suggest that toponymic decisions should involve community consultation to ensure that naming practices align with local identity and memory. Such participatory approaches can foster social cohesion and a deeper sense of belonging among residents. In terms of cultural heritage preservation, the study highlights the importance of protecting names

derived from indigenous languages and local traditions, which are increasingly threatened by modernization and linguistic shift.

In the field of education, the findings can inform curriculum development that connects language, space, and identity, encouraging students to engage critically with their environment. Ultimately, this research advocates for a more culturally responsive and historically aware approach to public space planning—one that treats toponymy as a living archive of collective experience.

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