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VISUAL SIGNS ON MEGALITHIC STONES IN UMA BARA VILLAGE, IN EASTERN SUMBA, INDONESIA: A CULTURAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This paper explores the meaning of visual signs on megalithic stones in *Uma Bara* Village. Employing the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure on semiotics, the paper focused on the cultural semiotic analysis of visual signs. It is a descriptive qualitative study of cultural semiotics. The data was obtained from megalithic stones and a *Wunangu* 'a cultural practitioner' through observation and interview. The data analysis shows that there are 16 visual signs on megalithic stones in *Uma Bara* village. Each visual sign represents a Sumbanese cultural symbol. For example, the *Njara Pakaliti* statue 'a statue of a horse ridden by its owner', represents *unity*. Thus, the meanings of the visual signs found in *Uma Bara* village have a close relationship with the socio-cultural of the Sumba people, especially in *Uma Bara* village.
***Keywords*: Cultural semiotic; Megalithic stones; Visual signs; Uma Bara village**

INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is the science of signs. It is a science that studies a wide range of objects and all of the culture's events formed from social conventions (Sobur, 2009, p. 95). Language and culture codes are needed to interpret signs so they can be formed and used in communication. Signs will form meanings that refer to each other, resulting from organized social conventions through the relation between signs (Barker, 2000, p. 27). One of Indonesia's most prominent and well-known cultures is the megalithic or boulder culture. Megalithic culture etymologically comes from the word *mega* 'big' and *lithos* 'stone'. This culture is not an era that develops independently but one of the cultural outcomes that arose in the Neolithic era and developed rapidly in the metal age. Every building that is created by the community already has a clear function. Megalithic culture itself leads to the worship of ancestral spirits (Soejono, 1984, p. 205).

Megalithic tradition is one of the cultural representations of the Sumba tribe in East Nusa Tenggara as a cultural identity found in the traditional village from west to east of Sumba. There are various forms (e.g., gravestones, reliefs, menhirs, statues, gateway). People of Sumba believe that megalithic stones do not only contain esthetic values but also have many interpretations related to their socio-cultural life. One of the traditional villages that maintain the megalithic tradition is Uma Bara village in East Sumba Regency. This village is known as one of the traditional villages with many megalithic stones with various carves, poles, and ornaments (Solihin, 2013, p. 8).

This paper is aimed to describe the visual signs found on megalithic stones in Uma Bara village and the meanings conveyed by the signs. The signs are analyzed following the theory of Ferdinand de Saussure on semiotics. Saussure in Torres (2015, p. 241) states that Semiotics consists of two elements: signifier and signified. *Signifier* is the material aspect of the language (sounds and images), and *signified* is the concept of something represented by the sign. Cultural semiotics explicitly examines the sign system that applies to specific cultures. Society as social beings has certain cultural systems passed down from generation to generation, maintained and respected. Therefore, culture in society uses certain signs that distinguish it from other communities (Pateda, 2001, p. 29).

METHODS

The research is qualitative. The data was collected by observing the visual signs on megalithic stones, taking pictures, and then interviewing a *Wunangu* "a cultural practitioner" to find out the meaning of each visual sign. The main focus of this research is the visual signs on megalithic stones, such as carvings, reliefs, and statues, and their meanings. The analysis is based on semiotic analysis by Ferdinand de Saussure, who classified the two main elements: signifier and signified.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are 16 visual signs found on megalithic stones. The signs were from the gate and gravestones of the kings in Uma Bara village, as shown in picture 1.

Picture 1: Megalithic Stones in Uma Bara Village

The visual signs represent the knowledge, culture, beliefs, nature, and social systems of the Sumba community, which are still being maintained. Each of the signs and their meaning is discussed separately below.

1. *Hamayangu* ‘two-person praying' carving.

The signifier of the carving is two *Ratu* 'priests' performing the *Hamayangu* 'ancestor worship' ritual, as presented in Picture 2. The signified of this carving is gratitude, respect, and hope in god. *Hamayangu* is a ritual of worshiping the ancestral spirits of the Sumbanese people called *Marapu*. This ritual, in particular, can only be led by the *Ratu* 'priest'. Through the *Hamayangu* ritual, the *Ratu* conveyed respect to the ancestors by presenting offerings in the form of betel nuts.

Picture 2: *Hamayangu* 'two-person praying' carving

There are three fundamental factors of ancestor worship in Sumbanese culture: worship for humans, homes, and food. *Hamayangu* devotion to humans includes two things: the custom of life and the custom of death. Customs of life relate to marriage customs. When the people of Sumba get married, they carry out the *Hamayangu* tradition to ask for the ancestors' blessing so that the married household lives in peace and is always blessed. In contrast, the death custom covers all ceremonies or traditional processions of the death of the Sumba people. The *hamayangu* tradition is carried out when the people of Sumba die. This is a form of respect and begging for forgiveness for those who died so they can live in peace with their ancestors in *Parai Marapu* 'heaven'.
The *hamayangu* ceremony is held specifically for harvesting crops and building houses. When the people of Sumba harvest their fields, they carry out the *hamayangu* ritual. This is a form of gratitude to the gods for the blessings that have been given. The *hamayangu* ceremony, which is carried out specifically for the house, is everything related to the process of building a house. This ceremony is carried out when the people of Sumba want to cut construction wood and when building a house. This ceremony is a manifestation of a request to the ancestors so that the entire house construction process runs smoothly and the request that the house be sheltered is always peaceful for its inhabitants.

2. *Manu Wulu* 'rooster' carving

The signifier of *manu wulu* 'rooster' carving in Picture 3 is the figure of a rooster. Literally, *manu wulu* means 'rooster'. The signified of this carving is the greatness of the human soul. For the people of Sumba, the rooster symbolizes the greatness of the human soul. This is found in the Sumba language fairy, namely, *manu wulu-njara mini, talu ndewa-jangga ura*, which means 'rooster-Roman, victorious spirit-high soul'. This

proverb is said to represent the spirit of the Sumbanese ancestors as a sign of the greatness of the soul.

Picture 3: *Manu Wulu* 'rooster' carving

3. *Paraingu* 'traditional village' carving

The signifier of the visual sign in Picture 4. is a traditional village in which there are houses of *Marapu*. The signified or connotative meanings of this carving are the center to conduct the traditional ceremonies and describe the greatness of the Sumba people. *Paraingu* is the center where all the traditional processions of the Sumbanese are conducted.

Picture 4: *Paraingu* 'traditional village' carving

This definition is found in the Sumba proverb, namely *Nyiapa Tanggelungu Nana Ulu Wei-Nyiapa Kalenggaru Nana Tara Manu*, which means 'The place where the pig's tusks fall - the place where the chicken spurs fall'. The pig and the chicken referred to in the proverb are sacrificial animals that will be offered to the ancestors. The *Paraingu* has a *Marapu* house where all the tools for worshiping the ancestral spirits are kept. Each clan of the Sumba community has its own *Marapu* house. Within the *Paraingu*, a clan group deliberates for consensus to regulate the procedures for carrying out rituals, the economy, marriage affairs, and kinship relations with other *kabihu* 'clans'. Thus, *Paraingu* describes the existence or dignity of the Sumba people.

4. *Kara- Wuya* 'Turtle and Crocodile' carving

The signifier of the visual sign in Picture 5 is a cub of a moon rubber turtle and a red crocodile cub, while the signified of this carving is a term used to indicate the class of nobles/kings. Therefore, this sign depicts the class of nobles/kings, power, and leadership.

Picture 5: *Kara- Wuya* 'Turtle and Crocodile' carving

The people of Sumba symbolize the power and leadership of the kings/nobles in the figures of turtles and crocodiles because there are characteristics that can be taken, namely being firm, polite, and gentle. This definition is stated in the Sumbanese proverb *Ana Kara Wulangu-Ana Wuya Rara*, which means 'kids of the moon rubber turtle-cubs of red crocodiles'. Specifically, the power and leadership possessed by kings/nobles must be presented with love, which is beautiful and gentle, like a cub of a moon rubber turtle and respected like a red crocodile cub that does not pounce. Thus, the *kara-wuya* carving is a title for the aristocratic group (kings/nobles) and describes harmonious power and leadership.

5. *Mamuli* 'earring' carving

The signifier of the visual sign in Picture 6 is a pair of heirloom earrings worn by Sumba women. The signified or connotative meanings of this *Mamuli* carving are respected for women's existence, fertility, dowry, and heirlooms for *Marapu* worship.

Picture 6: *Mamuli* 'earring' carving

Mamuli is essential in carrying out all kinds of Sumbanese cultural processions. It can be seen from its function that this object is very multifunctional. This object can be in the

form of jewelry, earrings, and also as a dowry that must be given by the groom to the family of the woman who will be borrowed. *Mamuli* is a symbol of respect for the position of women. This can be seen from its shape that the Mamuli resembles a woman's womb as a fertility or source of life. *Mamuli* is also one of the *Tanggu Marapu* 'sacred objects' for worshiping ancestral spirits. This object is placed above the *Uma Marapu* 'house of worship' attic, which is a place for the *Marapu* 'ancestors'. *Mamuli* represents the *Marapu* which are not arbitrarily removed; only *Ratu* (priest) can bring it down from the attic for the *Hamayangu* 'ancestral worship' ritual.

6. *Kaka* 'cockatoo' carving

The signifier of *Kaka* 'cockatoo' carving in Picture 7 is a cockatoo figure. The sign signifies deliberation and unity. The cockatoo figure depicts the distinctive characteristics of the Sumba people, who always prioritize consensus, deliberation and unity when making decisions in preparing all kinds of cultural processions. The consensus deliberation is like cockatoos that often flock when perched. This term is found in the Sumbanese proverb *Kaka Makanguhuru-Pirihu Pauli* which means 'gathering cockatoos and gathering parrots'.

Picture 7: *Kaka* 'cockatoo' carving

7. *Andungu* 'skull Monument' carving

The signifier of this visual sign in Picture 8 is a tree of life on which to hang the skulls of the captives who died on the battlefield. The signified or connotative meanings are victory, courage, and heroism. The word *Andungu* means 'skull monument'.

Picture 8: *Andungu* 'skull Monument' carving

For the Sumba people, *Andungu* symbolizes victory with courage and a spirit of heroism. In ancient times, *Andungu* was placed in the middle of the *Paraingu* 'traditional village', especially in front of *Uma Andungu* 'house where ancestors worship to ask for victory in war'. The function of this object is a monument to hang the head of the enemy brought from the battlefield with the intention of being respected by other clans. It means that there is a heroic spirit of the Sumba people to defend their existence.

8. *Pai Palonda Lima* 'dance hand in hand' statue

The eighth visual sign in Picture 9 is *Pai Palonda Lima* Statue. The signifier of this visual sign is three people performing a traditional dance. This statue's signified or connotative meanings are repentance of sins and apologies. The word *Pai Palonda Lima* means 'dance hand in hand'.

Picture 9: *Pai Palonda Lima* 'dance hand in hand' statue

This traditional dance is a tradition that is almost extinct. However, it is demonstrated in funeral ceremonies when the people of Sumba want to build a traditional house and other traditional ceremonies related to worshiping ancestral spirits. This dance is a movement of holding each other's shoulders and holding hands. The *pai palonda lima* dance is led by a Ratu 'priest'. In this dance, he will sing a song of regret, namely *Riu Hala* 'song of regret'. The song of regret contains the journey of human life from the beginning, when it fell into sin, to the current state of human greed. In this song, the Ratu also asks for forgiveness from the creator for human speech acts that are not pleasing to the will of God.

9. *Papanggangu* 'mourner' carving

The signifier of *Papanggangu* 'mourner' carving in Picture 10 is the atmosphere of a king's burial by showing a group of people escorting the *Ngara Hunga* 'servant/the lowest class in the social strata of Sumba community' on horseback to the grave. The signified or connotative meaning of this sign is a symbol of nobility and a mediator to the ancestors who exist in the afterlife.

Picture 10: *Papanggangu* 'mourner' carving.

Papanggangu is part of a burial ceremony that can only be carried out by the kings/nobles of Sumba. The *papanggangu* serve as mediators who will deliver the corpse's spirits to *PraiMarapu*. When the corpse is delivered to the grave, the *Papanggang* usually faints for a few minutes. The people of Sumba believe that the spirits of the *Papanggangu* also go to *Prai Marapu* to guard the spirit of the buried king.

10. *Ruha* ‘deer’ carving

The signifier of *Ruha* ‘deer’ carving in Picture 11 is the figure of a stag with majestic and tall horns. The signified of this *ruha* carving is a wild and frightened person. The word *ruha* means 'deer'. This definition is found in the Sumba proverb, namely *Ruha Padangu Matamba Yaula-Manu Tata Kanjeku Reku,* which means ‘a very wild deer-a limping jungle fowl’. This proverb describes a person who runs away looking so scared that he gets into an accident or disaster. This proverb can also be translated straight to mention the savage.

Picture 11: *Ruha* ‘deer’ carving

11. *Ninggu Harama* ‘traditional dance’ carving

The signifier of this *ninggu harama* carving in Picture 12 is the performing of Sumbanese traditional dance by holding a spear and a shield like people at war. The signified of this sign is a welcoming spirit and heroism.

Picture 12: *Ninggu Harama* 'traditional dance' carving

The *Ninggu Harama* dance symbolizes the spirit in every activity and work of the Sumba community. This is found in the Sumbanese proverb *Pawunda Maharamanya-Pajaraku Maninggunya* which means 'Acting like a fight and holding up like a dance'. Men with swords wear spears and shieldlike they are fighting in a war. This traditional dance is usually performed to welcome heroes who have returned from the battlefield. The *ninggu harama* dance is also often used to welcome dignitaries who visit. The spirit exhibited in this dance inspires the Sumbanese to work enthusiastically.

12. *Karambua* 'buffalo' statue

The signifier of *the Karambua* 'buffalo' statue in Picture 13 is the figure of a buffalo with long horns. The signified is a form of dowry, as an offering and provisions that the spirit of a corpse will bring to the *Parai Marapu* 'heaven of the ancestor'. This visual sign is also terminology intended for a communicator of both parties in conflict to be wise in finding the best solution. The word *Karambua* means 'buffalo'. It is a significant animal for the people of Sumba. In the custom of marriage, buffalo is used as a dowry that will be given by the groom to the family of the bride. In the death ceremony, the buffalo is a sacrificial animal to be slaughtered. The people of Sumba believe that buffalo meat will be provided for the spirits of the bodies buried while on the way to *Prai Marapu* 'heaven'.

Picture 13: *Karambua* 'buffalo' statue

The buffalo can also be represented as an intermediary who must be able to find the best solution for the two conflicting parties. This definition is found in the Sumbanese proverb *Na Karambua Kahanga Ruku-Na Njara Beringu Tungga*, which means 'Buffalo with branches footstep and Horse with divided manes'. This expression becomes the terminology for an intermediary who is obliged to find the best way to communicate so that conflicts between both parties can be resolved peacefully.

13. *Wulangu-Lodu* 'moon and sun' carving

The signifier of the visual sign in Picture 14 is the figures of the shining sun and moon. The signified of the engraving is a terminology for the aristocrats (kings/nobles). This visual sign was a symbol depicted for the aristocrats. This definition is found in the Sumbanese proverb *Ana Lodu Ana Wulangu; Ana Awanggu Paliti* means 'child of the sun and moon, child of the sky and sea'. This terminology is used for nobles whose ancestors are considered to have come from the sky. This visual sign is also used as terminology for young men and women. This terminology is found in the Sumbanese proverb *Wula Bidi Jiliku-Lodu Bidi Niniru* 'the newly rising moon and the newly rising sun'.

Picture 14: *Wulangu-Lodu* 'moon and sun' carving

14. *Kurangu* 'shrimp' carving

The fourteenth visual sign is *Kurangu* carving in Picture 15. It represents a figure of shrimp. The signified is reincarnation, dishonest person, and the terminology of an ideal

that must be achieved. The word *Kurangu* means ‘shrimp’. *Kurangu* has various meanings for the life of the Sumba community. Sumbanese places the *Kurangu* as a symbol of reincarnation. This definition is found in the Sumba proverb *Kura Hilu Mbiu-Kambuku Hilu Mbita*, which means 'shrimp that change shells and cork that change scales'. This expression describes the people of Sumba, especially *Marapu* believers, that there will be a new life after death. This expression is a prayer of hope for different and eternal life.

Picture 15: *Kurangu* ‘shrimp’ carving

The shrimp figure is also the terminology for humans whose words and actions do not match. This term is stated in the Sumba proverb *Kura Laku Dalungu-Kambuku Lindi Dita*, which means 'shrimp goes under and cork climbs on top'. The statement heard is different from the conscience inside. This sign is also used as terminology for an ideal to be achieved. This definition is stated in the Sumba proverb *Na Kurangu Pawuku-Na Karanggi Pamanyarangu*, which literally means ‘desired shrimp-crab wanted’. The term is stated when a man or community conveys the intent and purpose to be achieved, for example, a man who proposes to his girlfriend.

15. *Njara Pakaliti* ‘horse ridden by the owner’s statue'.

The signifier of the visual sign in Picture 16 is the figure of a horse being ridden by its owner. The signified of this sign is a symbol of tycoon, mighty, and dowry. The figure of *Njara* is also believed as a means of transportation for the dead to *Prai Marapu* ‘heaven for the ancestors of the Sumbanese’. For the people of Sumba, *Njrara* is also a symbol of heroism. This understanding is stated in the Sumbanese fairy pattern *Na Ahu Miti Lama-Na Njara Ndindi Kiku*, which means 'a dog with a black tongue-a horse with a taut tail'. This terminology defines a hero who has agility and advantages.

Picture 16: *Njara Pakaliti* ‘horse ridden by the owner’s statue’

The word *Njara* means ‘horse’. A horse is one of the crucial roles for the people of Sumba. Horse figures a rich person. A person with many horses will be known as a tycoon because the measure of Sumbanese wealth is seen from how many animals they have and not how much money they have. The horse is also known as a symbol of the mighty. This understanding is seen from the expertise of Sumbanese men in horseback riding, for example, when hunting in the fields. Horses are inseparable from the life of the Sumbanese people. In Sumba culture, a man has an obligation to keep pets such as horses, buffalo, and cows. In Marapu belief, a horse is a means of transporting the spirits of the dead to the *Prai Marapu* ‘heaven of the ancestor’. This can be seen in the *Papanggangu* tradition ‘tradition of herding horses to the grave' during the burial ceremony. During the burial ceremony, the horse is also one of the animals sacrificed. The people of Sumba believe that the horse's spirit will go to *Prai Marapu* ‘heaven’ to accompany the spirit of its master/owner.

16. *Manu-Wei* ‘rooster and pig’ statue

The last visual sign in Picture 17 is the *Manu-Wei* carving. It is a figure of a rooster and a pig. The signified of this statue is a terminology used to state a majestic and prosperous country and offering to the creator. Literally, the word *manu* means ‘chicken’ and *wei* means ‘pig’. For the Sumba community, these animals describe a large and prosperous Paraingu ‘traditional village’. This understanding is stated in the Sumba proverb *Paraingu Tara Manu-Paraingu Ulu Wei* 'the land of chicken spurs-the land of pork fangs'. The proverb defines a large village where large ceremonies are performed, where the fanged pigs and chickens with spur are served as sacrifices to the *Marapu* 'ancestors and Creator'.

Picture 17: *Manu-Wei* 'rooster and pig' statue

Figures of chickens and pigs are animals that are offered to the ancestors. This understanding is found in the Sumbanese proverb *Manu Ndewa-Wei Marapu* 'Chicken of God-Pig of *Marapu*'. This terminology defines chicken and pig that were explicitly consecrated to offer to the Creator through the *Marapu* 'ancestor'. Therefore, when the *Marapu* believers carry out the *Hamayangu* ritual, these animals are slaughtered to be offered to their *Marapu* 'ancestors'. Chickens and pigs are extraordinary because there are internal organs of the animal, such as blood, liver, and navel which are believed to provide answers to the prophecies that have been conveyed to the ancestors.

CONCLUSION

Visual signs are an essential part of Sumba culture. There are 16 visual signs found on megalithic stones in Uma Bara village. Animal figures dominate the visual signs. The people of Sumba describe their existence and behavior through the characters possessed by animals, for example, the *Kara-Wuya* 'turtle & crocodile' carving, which represents wisdom and leadership. Based on the semiotics theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, each sign represents a special meaning rooted in the vibrant life of the Sumba community. For example, the *Njara* 'horse' carving is believed to be the spirit of a vehicle. The meaning of each sign describes the conception of the relationship between the Sumba people with socio-cultural, nature, ancestors, and the Creator.

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