



Cultural identity, sacred space, and architectural authenticity: Symbolism in *Kadaton Ici* neo-vernacular design

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ABSTRACT

Background: Neo-vernacular architecture represents a design approach that integrates traditional values with contemporary needs as a strategy for preserving local cultural identity. Within the context of the Sultanate of Ternate, *Kadaton Ici* serves as an important representation of the relationship between cultural heritage, architectural symbolism, and the concept of sacred space. This study aims to examine the symbolism embedded in the neo-vernacular architecture of *Kadaton Ici* and to analyze its role in representing the cultural identity of the Ternate community. **Methods:** The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through field observations, documentation, literature review, and interviews with informants knowledgeable about the history and culture of the Sultanate of Ternate. Data were analyzed interpretively by examining the relationships among the building's physical elements, spatial organization, ornamental features, and the cultural values underlying them. **Findings:** The findings reveal that the architecture of *Kadaton Ici* embodies cultural symbols expressed through building orientation, spatial hierarchy, architectural forms, and decorative elements that represent the historical, spiritual, and social values of the Ternate people. Sacred spaces within *Kadaton Ici* are structured through a zoning system and spatial arrangement that reflect the interconnected relationships among human beings, authority, nature, and transcendental dimensions. The application of neo-vernacular principles in *Kadaton Ici* functions as a strategy for preserving traditional architecture while simultaneously maintaining cultural identity amid the dynamics of modernization. **Conclusion:** This study confirms that architectural symbolism and sacred space play a vital role in sustaining the cultural values of the Sultanate of Ternate while reinforcing the historical and cultural significance of the building as a living cultural heritage. Furthermore, the research contributes to expanding scholarly discourse and advancing a deeper understanding of vernacular architecture and the preservation of traditional built environments in Eastern Indonesia. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This study integrates semiotic and neo-vernacular perspectives to demonstrate how the Sultanate of Ternate's customary law shapes the architectural form and spatial organization of *Kadaton Ici*.

Keywords: architectural symbolism; cultural identity; neo-vernacular architecture; sacred space; Sultanate of Ternate.

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1. Introduction

Vernacular architecture represents one of the most significant manifestations of the relationship between humans, the environment, and the cultural systems that evolve within a society (Matondang & Sani, 2021; Nursanty et al., 2023; Prihatiningrum, 2020). From a global perspective, vernacular buildings are understood not merely as responses to local geographical and climatic conditions but also as representations of social values, cosmological beliefs, religious traditions, and cultural identities that have been transmitted across generations (Ineru et al., 2024; Pawestri et al., 2024). Numerous studies have demonstrated that traditional architectural spaces and forms function as repositories of collective memory and as instruments for the intergenerational transmission of cultural values (Guan et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Consequently, the preservation of vernacular architecture has become a critical issue within global cultural heritage discourse, particularly in the face of modernization, urbanization, and globalization, which may gradually erode the local character of a region (Hao & Shinohara, 2026).

Within the Indonesian context, sultanate architecture constitutes a form of cultural heritage characterized by a high degree of symbolic complexity, integrating political, social, cultural, and religious dimensions within the built environment. Palace buildings, commonly known as *kadaton*, function not only as centers of traditional governance but also as visual representations of power structures, societal value systems, and cosmological concepts that have developed within a kingdom (Kuncoro et al., 2024; Kusuma & Subroto, 2023). The existence of sultanate buildings throughout the Indonesian archipelago demonstrates how architectural spaces have been utilized to articulate the relationships among human beings, nature, and the spiritual realm (Berenschot, 2019; Allerton, 2009).

In Eastern Indonesia, particularly in North Maluku, the Sultanate of Ternate possesses a distinctive architectural heritage rich in cultural significance. One of the most prominent structures representing this heritage is *Kadaton Ici*. As an integral component of the cultural landscape of the Sultanate of Ternate, *Kadaton Ici* embodies not only historical value but also a complex system of spatial symbolism associated with local cosmology, Islamic values, customary law, and the social structure of the Ternate community (Hasim et al., 2023; Muhammad & Agustina, 2017). Architecturally, the building exhibits neo-vernacular characteristics by adapting traditional forms to contemporary contexts while preserving the cultural identity upon which they are founded (Aziz & Kharomen, 2025; Rahim, 2022). Architectural elements such as the *Dopolo* roof structure, spatial orientation, the division between sacred and profane zones, and the building's relationship with the landscape of Mount Gamalama reflect a complex system of meanings that continues to be maintained and interpreted today.

In Eastern Indonesia, particularly in North Maluku, the Sultanate of Ternate possesses a distinctive architectural heritage characterized by profound cultural significance. Among the most prominent manifestations of this heritage is *Kadaton Ici*, a royal palace that embodies the historical continuity and cultural identity of the Ternate Sultanate. As an integral component of the sultanate's cultural landscape, *Kadaton Ici* encompasses not only historical importance but also a complex system of spatial symbolism rooted in local cosmology, Islamic values, customary law, and the social structure of the Ternate community (Hasim et al., 2023). Architecturally, the building demonstrates neo-vernacular characteristics through its adaptation of traditional forms and spatial concepts to contemporary conditions while maintaining the cultural principles that underpin its existence (Aziz & Kharomen, 2025; Rahim, 2022). Elements such as the *Dopolo* roof structure, spatial orientation, the delineation of sacred and profane zones, and the building's relationship with the landscape of Mount Gamalama collectively reflect a multilayered system of meanings that continues to be preserved and interpreted within contemporary cultural practices.

Despite its cultural and architectural importance, scholarly investigations of the Sultanate of Ternate's architectural heritage, particularly *Kadaton Ici*, remain limited. Research on Indonesian vernacular architecture has predominantly focused on regions

such as Java, Bali, Sumatra, and Sulawesi, while traditional architecture in North Maluku has received comparatively little scholarly attention (Khamdevi, 2023; Lake et al., 2021; Ratodi et al., 2025; Safar & Raman, 2025). Existing studies have generally concentrated on historical narratives, architectural morphology, or the physical documentation of heritage structures (Lake et al., 2021; Safar & Raman, 2025). Meanwhile, research specifically examining the symbolism of sacred space, the relationship between local cosmology and spatial organization, and the role of customary law as a formative principle in architectural design remains scarce. This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how the cultural identity of the Sultanate of Ternate is materialized through spatial arrangements and architectural symbolism within *Kadaton Ici*.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore in depth the phenomena of cultural identity and the symbolism of sacred–profane spaces embedded within the neo-vernacular architecture of *Kadaton Ici*. The selection of this approach was theoretically justified by the need to examine the sociocultural and spiritual meanings embedded in architectural artifacts, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. A qualitative framework enables the investigation of architecture not merely as a physical object but also as a cultural text through which values, beliefs, and collective identities are expressed and transmitted. Through descriptive and interpretive inquiry, the spatial organization, architectural forms, and symbolic articulations of *Kadaton Ici* were analyzed within their cultural and historical contexts, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between architectural elements and the cultural meanings they embody.

Research data were collected through three primary techniques: Observation, In-depth interviews and FGD (Focus Group Discussion). Direct observations were conducted to examine the spatial organization, ornamental elements, ritual practices, and everyday activities taking place within the *Kadaton Ici* complex. This approach enabled the researchers to document the interaction between architectural spaces and cultural practices as they occurred in their natural setting. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select key informants possessing extensive authority and knowledge regarding the cultural and historical context of the Sultanate of Ternate. These informants included the Sultan or representatives of the Sultanate, traditional leaders (*Bobato Nyawa*), local cultural experts, and community representatives residing in the Fatcey area. Structured group discussions were organized with customary leaders and academic experts to establish a shared understanding of the cosmological meanings embedded within the spatial hierarchy of *Kadaton Ici*, ranging from sacred spaces such as the *Ruang Puji* to profane spaces such as the *Haho* (underfloor space).

2.2 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted through two integrated stages. First, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing were carried out following the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles et al., (2014) This process facilitated the systematic organization and interpretation of empirical findings derived from observations, interviews, and documentary sources. Second, semiotic analysis was employed to examine the relationship between architectural signifiers and their associated cultural signifieds. In this framework, the physical components of the building were interpreted as signifiers, while the philosophical concepts embedded within Ternate cultural traditions, such as *Bobaso Se Rasai* and *Cara Se Ngale*, were analyzed as signified meanings. This analytical approach enabled a deeper understanding of how architectural forms communicate cultural values, social norms, and spiritual beliefs.

2.3 Trustworthiness

The credibility and trustworthiness of the findings were ensured through the application of both source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from different informants, whereas methodological triangulation was achieved by cross-validating interview data with field observations and historical documents. Furthermore, member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary interpretations and findings to customary leaders and cultural authorities. This procedure ensured that the researchers' interpretations accurately reflected the cultural realities, values, and meanings recognized within the Sultanate of Ternate.

2.4 Study area

This study was conducted at *Kadaton Ici*, which is administratively located in Fatcey Village, North Ternate District, Ternate City, North Maluku Province, Indonesia. The site was selected purposively because *Kadaton Ici* represents a significant example of contemporary architecture that reinterprets the traditional values of the Sultanate of Ternate through a neo-vernacular approach. Its existence provides a unique opportunity to examine how cultural identity, architectural symbolism, and sacred spatial concepts are maintained and negotiated within the context of urban modernization.

3. Findings and Discussion

A microscopic analysis of the physical structure of *Kadaton Ici* reveals a consistent adherence to the cosmological principles commonly found in Nusantara architecture, where spatial manifestations are articulated through an anthropomorphic metaphor. Within traditional Ternate society, a building is not perceived merely as a structural enclosure that provides protection from environmental conditions. Rather, it is understood as a living organism endowed with spirit, vitality, and an intrinsic connection to the broader cosmic order. This worldview positions architecture as an intermediary between the human realm and the macrocosm, embedding cultural, spiritual, and philosophical meanings within the physical fabric of the built environment.

3.1 Findings: Vertical spatial symbolism as human body metaphor

3.1.1 Exterior Kadaton Ici (atap Dopolo & facade)

Architecturally, the exterior façade of *Kadaton Ici* demonstrates a neo-vernacular expression that adopts the essential structural characteristics of the traditional royal architecture of Ternate. The dominant visual feature is the tiered *Dopolo* roof structure, characterized by steep slopes that reflect the architectural typology of the Nusantara tradition and its adaptation to a humid tropical climate. The façade is further defined by a series of symmetrical columns along the veranda, creating a sense of monumentality and structural stability while facilitating the linear distribution of structural loads.

From a semiotic perspective, the *Dopolo* roof configuration functions as a signifier of the cosmological order and spiritual hierarchy embedded within the cultural traditions of the Sultanate of Ternate. The continued use of traditional roof forms through contemporary materials and neo-vernacular construction techniques signifies an effort to preserve and reinterpret cultural identity within a modern architectural context. Rather than serving as a mere replication or pastiche of historical forms, the exterior architecture of *Kadaton Ici* represents a process of cultural translation in which traditional symbols are rearticulated to meet contemporary needs while retaining their original cultural significance.

The findings indicate that the exterior façade of *Kadaton Ici* functions as more than an architectural envelope. It serves as a symbolic medium through which collective memory,

historical continuity, and cultural identity are expressed and sustained. Through the reinterpretation of traditional architectural forms, the building reinforces the continuity of indigenous cultural values while responding to the ongoing processes of urban modernization in Ternate.

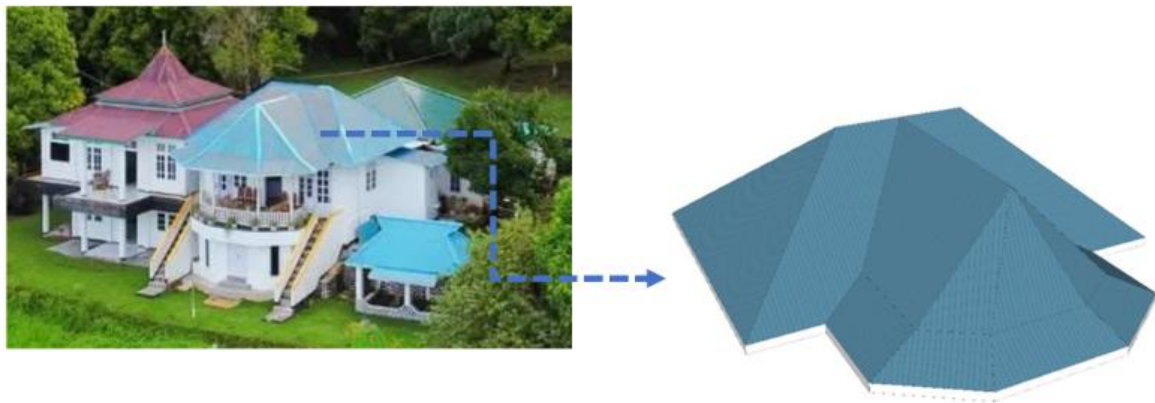


Fig. 1. Exterior façade of *Kadaton Ici* displaying the traditional *Dopolo* roof structure.

3.1.2 Entrance staircase (*Kore Mie/Kore Sara*) and its spatial orientation

The entrance staircase of *Kadaton Ici* was designed according to a strict spatial orientation system grounded in Ternate cosmology. Based on the traditional spatial order of Ternate society, this architectural element represents the division of space according to the principal cardinal directions and monsoon winds, namely *Kore Mie* (North) and *Kore Sara* (South). The staircase incorporates a specific number of steps and a carefully defined geometric configuration that guides the bodily movement of visitors through a ritualized transition from the profane exterior realm toward the more sacred spaces within the *kadaton*. From a semiotic perspective, the staircase functions as a liminal space that mediates the relationship between human beings, customary authority, and the spiritual realm. Rather than serving solely as a circulation element, it operates as a symbolic threshold through which visitors experience a gradual transformation in spatial status and cultural meaning.



Fig. 2 Orientation of the entrance staircase (*Kore Mie/Kore Sara*) at *Kadaton Ici*.

The act of ascending the staircase embodies a process of passage from everyday life into a domain governed by customary values, ceremonial protocols, and sacred traditions. Within the framework of neo-vernacular architectural theory, the alignment of the staircase with local circulation axes demonstrates that non-physical dimensions of spatial organization, such as cosmological beliefs, cultural values, and symbolic meanings, are prioritized alongside functional and aesthetic considerations. The findings indicate that the

placement and orientation of *Kore Mie* and *Kore Sara* serve to anchor the building's spatial axis within the broader micro-spatial circulation system of the surrounding settlement. At the same time, they preserve the ritual principles of respect, hierarchy, and cultural etiquette that continue to regulate the experience of entering a traditional Ternate royal residence.

3.1.3 *Pandopo* and *balakun*: Their function as communal gathering spaces

The *Pandopo* area of *Kadaton Ici* represents an open communal space characterized by the absence of massive partition walls and the presence of exposed structural columns (*tiang soki*) supporting the roof. This transparent and semi-open architectural configuration facilitates natural cross-ventilation while providing a high degree of spatial flexibility for accommodating a wide range of social and community activities. Such spatial characteristics reflect the adaptive qualities of traditional Nusantara architecture, where environmental responsiveness is integrated with sociocultural functions. From the perspective of social semiotics, the *Pandopo* functions as a symbol of inclusivity and openness, representing the willingness of customary authorities to engage with the broader community. It also serves as a space for deliberation and consensus-building (*Tari Nyawa*), reinforcing its role as an arena for social interaction and collective decision-making. The symbolic significance of the *Pandopo* extends beyond its physical form, embodying cultural values related to participation, communal harmony, and social cohesion within Ternate society.

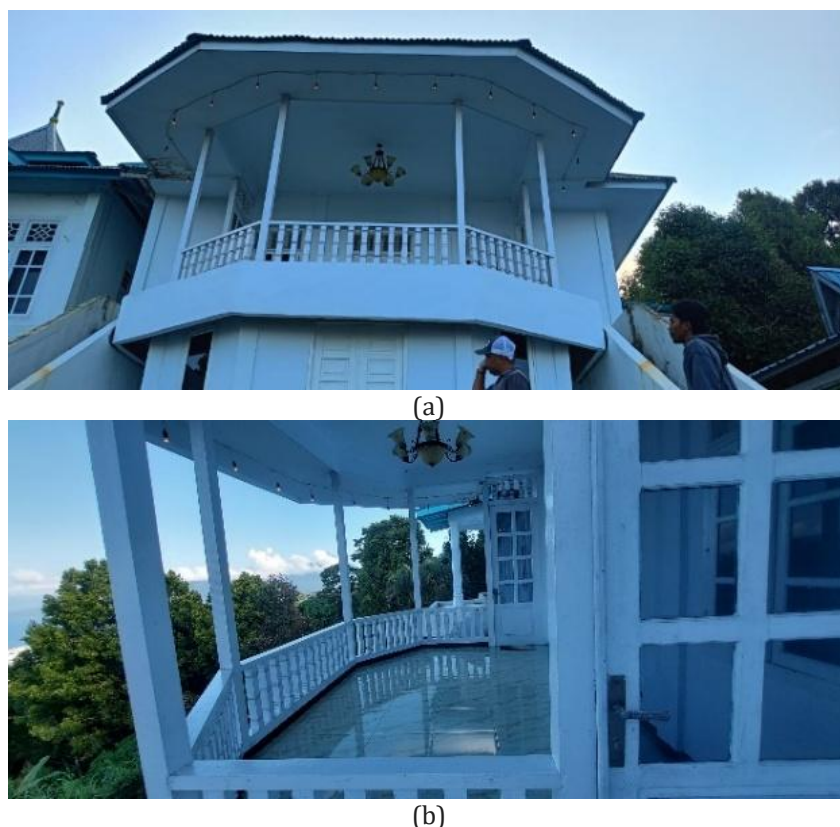


Fig. 3. Open structural configuration of the *Pandopo* and *Balakun*, functioning as communal gathering spaces within *Kadaton Ici*.

The neo-vernacular character of the *Pandopo* is evident in the preservation of its traditional spatial functions, such as hosting customary inaugurations, ceremonial gatherings, and communal meetings, while incorporating contemporary materials and structural technologies. This architectural approach demonstrates how traditional spatial concepts can be sustained and reinterpreted within modern contexts without diminishing their cultural significance.

The findings indicate that the *Pandopo* successfully maintains the qualities of a sacred space within a functional and contemporary setting. Rather than existing as a purely ceremonial environment, it operates as a dynamic point of intersection between the formal structures of customary authority and the secular activities of the community. Consequently, the *Pandopo* serves as a vital cultural arena through which social relationships are negotiated, collective memory is reinforced, and the intangible cultural heritage of the Sultanate of Ternate is continuously preserved and transmitted across generations.

This cosmological conception is materialized through the vertical zoning of the building, which is distinctly organized into three principal levels: the roof (*Dopolo*), the central body (*Badan*), and the underfloor space (*Haho*). This tripartite configuration symbolizes both the three realms of the universe and the three anatomical components of the human body, head, body, and feet. Such an arrangement reflects a fundamental cosmological principle in which architecture serves as a microcosm of the broader cosmic order. The spatial organization of *Kadaton Ici* is further shaped by the syncretic interaction between the Islamic worldview of the Sultanate of Ternate and indigenous belief systems. This cultural and spiritual synthesis is embedded throughout the building's vertical hierarchy, giving rise to a sacred spatial order that regulates human behavior, spatial orientation, and patterns of movement within the architectural environment. Consequently, the building functions not merely as a physical structure but as a symbolic framework through which cosmological values, social norms, and spiritual principles are continuously expressed and reproduced.

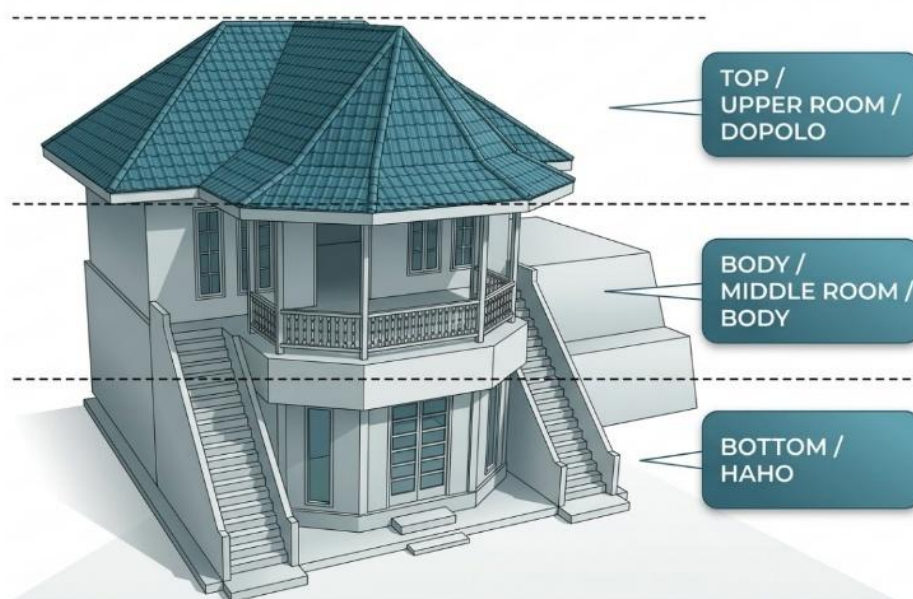


Fig. 4. Symbolism and vertical spatial structure of the building.

Figure 4 illustrates the vertical spatial organization of the building, which is structured into three principal zones: the upper section (*Atas/Dopolo*), the middle section (*Badan*), and the lower section (*Haho*). This tripartite arrangement reflects not only functional architectural considerations but also the cultural values and cosmological worldview that underpin the spatial order of traditional Ternate architecture. Each zone embodies a distinct symbolic meaning, collectively forming a spatial hierarchy that regulates the relationship between the physical environment, social life, and the spiritual realm.

The upper section, known as *Dopolo*, functions both as a protective architectural element and as a symbol of humanity's connection to spiritual and transcendental dimensions. The tiered roof structure is unequivocally regarded as the "head" of the building. Within the Islamic-Sufi cosmology of Ternate, the head symbolizes the upper

world (*Goa*), a realm associated with spiritual purity, divine knowledge, and sacred transcendence. As a visual signifier, the steep inclination of the *Dopolo* roof reinforces the symbolic orientation toward verticality and the divine. A particularly significant aspect of Ternate architectural tradition is the existence of a strict customary prohibition (*bobaso*) against the use of clay roof tiles in residential or royal buildings. Clay, originating from the earth, is culturally associated with death, decay, and the realm of the grave beneath the ground. Placing earthen material above the heads of the living is considered a reversal of the proper cosmological order, disrupting the flow of spiritual energy and potentially inviting misfortune upon the inhabitants (Muhammad et al., 2020). Consequently, the neo-vernacular design of *Kadaton Ici* preserves this principle by employing non-earth-based roofing materials, such as traditional wooden shingles or lightweight contemporary materials, including metal roofing, which do not carry the symbolic connotation of an earthly burden (Suantika, 2006).

The middle zone, referred to as *badan* (body), serves as the center of social, cultural, and domestic life. It functions as the primary setting for interpersonal interaction, communal deliberation, and everyday household activities. Its central position symbolizes the human role as an intermediary between the upper and lower worlds. Within Ternate cosmology, this middle realm corresponds to the *mesocosm*, the sphere in which human existence unfolds. Anatomically, the *Badan* represents the chest and abdomen, the location of the heart and soul within the human body. This symbolism is manifested architecturally through the placement of the *Kamar Puji* (family prayer and contemplation room) at the innermost core of the building. The *Kamar Puji* functions as the highest sacred space, the “center of the center”, within *Kadaton Ici*. Its position as the symbolic heart of the building affirms that all secular activities of the household should remain oriented toward divine values and spiritual consciousness. The surrounding spatial partitions are organized according to levels of privacy and kinship hierarchy, generating circulation patterns characterized by gradual movement, respect, and controlled access. In this way, spatial organization becomes a medium through which social order, religious devotion, and cultural values are continuously reinforced.

The lowest section of the building consists of the underfloor space known as *Haho*, which metaphorically represents the “feet” of the structure. Within the vertical cosmological hierarchy, *Haho* occupies the lowest position and maintains direct contact with the earth. As a result, this zone is associated with profane and utilitarian functions rather than sacred activities. Architecturally, it is designated for practical purposes such as the storage of agricultural tools, service functions, or the facilitation of air circulation beneath the building. The supporting columns within the *Haho* are intentionally left exposed to emphasize the boundary separating the lower, impure realm from the cleaner and more culturally significant middle zone. Despite its association with the lowest hierarchical position, *Haho* remains tectonically indispensable, serving as the primary structural foundation that supports the entire building above. From a conservation perspective, this tripartite spatial organization carries important implications for future restoration and adaptive reuse efforts. Any physical intervention within neo-vernacular structures such as *Kadaton Ici* should preserve the integrity of this vertical zoning system. In particular, the underfloor space should not be arbitrarily transformed into a primary sacred area, as such modifications would disrupt the collective memory, cosmological logic, and theological foundations embedded within the architectural traditions of the Ternate community.

3.2 Cosmological axis: Connecting sacred landscape to sacred architecture

The study found that the geographical location and physical siting of *Kadaton Ici* are organized according to an imaginary linear axis that forms a broader cosmological framework within the cultural landscape of Ternate. This sacred axis extends spatially from Mount Gamalama in the upstream region, passes through *Kadaton Ici* on the middle slopes, continues toward the Main Palace (*Kadaton Utama*) across the communal open space of

Ngara Lamo, and ultimately terminates at the sacred spring of *Ake Santosa* in the downstream area near the coastal zone of Dodoku Ali. Such an orientation reflects the community's profound understanding of the harmonious relationship between the macrocosm, the universe and natural environment, and the microcosm embodied in human-made architecture.

From a cultural and spatial perspective, this cosmological alignment demonstrates that the placement of *Kadaton Ici* was not determined solely by practical or environmental considerations. Rather, it was guided by a symbolic spatial order that integrates natural landmarks, sacred sites, and sociopolitical centers into a unified cosmological system. Within this framework, Mount Gamalama functions as a representation of the upper realm and spiritual origin, while *Ake Santosa* symbolizes the life-giving source of water and continuity. Positioned between these two sacred points, *Kadaton Ici* occupies a mediating role that connects natural, social, and spiritual domains. The findings therefore indicate that the spatial organization of *Kadaton Ici* embodies a cosmological worldview in which architecture operates as a cultural instrument for maintaining balance between humanity, nature, and the transcendental order.

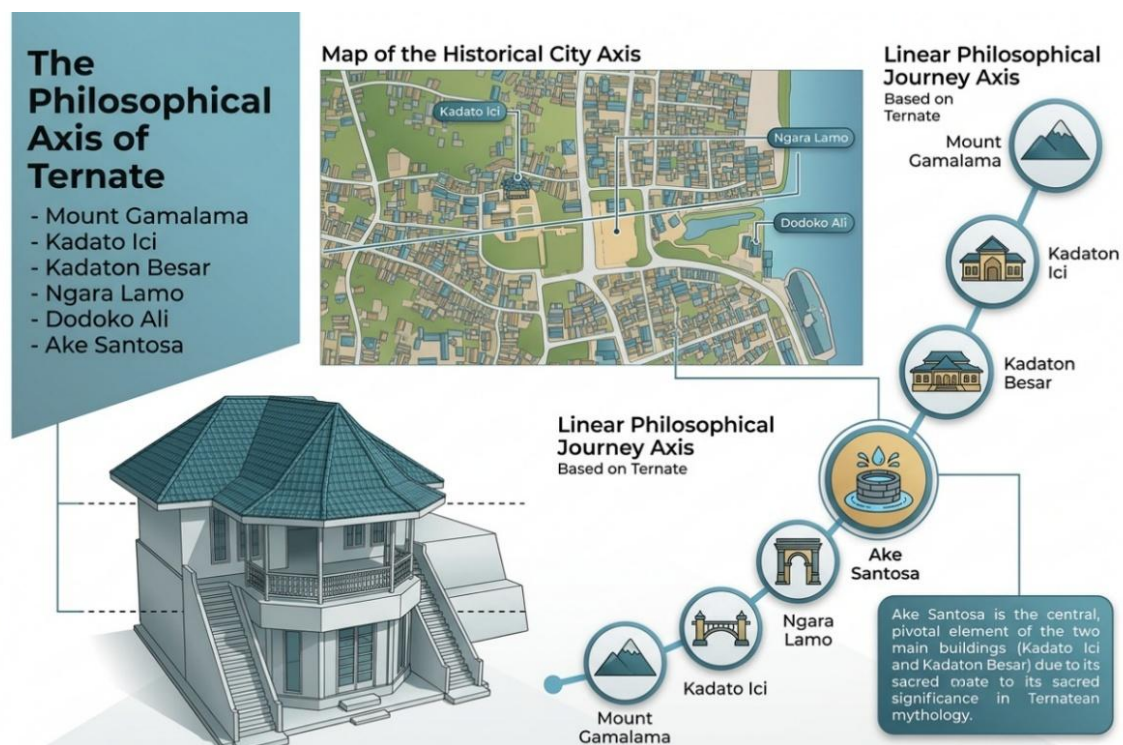


Fig. 5. Diagram of the cosmological axis connecting Mount Gamalama, *Kadaton Ici*, and the main palace (*Kadaton Utama*).

Mount Gamalama occupies the upstream orientation and is regarded as the most sacred element within the cosmological axis connecting Mount Gamalama, *Kadaton Ici*, *Ngara Lamo*, and *Ake Santosa*. In the oral traditions and Islamic-Sufi cosmology of Ternate, the summit of Gamalama is understood not merely as a volcanic landform but as a sacred realm inhabited by ancestral spirits, saints (*wali*), and holy figures (*auliya*) believed to safeguard the island. In semiotic terms, the mountain functions as a physical signifier of the *Axis Mundi*, the cosmic axis that connects the earthly realm with the heavens and mediates the relationship between humanity and the transcendental world. At the opposite end of this sacred axis lies *Ake Santosa*, a sacred spring that symbolizes the lower realm, the element of water, ritual purification, and the source of life and prosperity flowing toward the sea. The linear relationship between the mountain, representing fire and the celestial realm, and the spring, representing water and the earthly realm, is spatially mediated by the presence of *Kadaton Ici*, strategically positioned on elevated terrain between these two sacred poles.

The placement of *Kadaton Ici* within this intermediate position serves a dual function: as a point of visual-topographical control and as an instrument of cultural mediation. From a semiotic perspective, the building acts as a balancing element within the cosmological system, mediating the dynamic relationship between the supernatural power associated with the mountain and the life-sustaining forces embodied by water and the earth in the downstream landscape. Its elevated location reinforces both political and spiritual legitimacy, symbolically affirming the role of the palace inhabitants as representatives of a divinely sanctioned authority responsible for maintaining cosmic balance. Before reaching the sacred water source, the axis traverses *Ngara Lamo*, a communal open square that functions as a profane-public space where interactions between the Sultan and the people traditionally take place. The presence of *Ngara Lamo* further emphasizes a graduated spatial transition, moving from the realm of sacred transcendence toward the domain of social and civic life.

This concept of a linear cosmological axis reinforces broader architectural scholarship concerning the *Axis Mundi* and the cosmological foundations of Islamic traditions in the Indonesian archipelago, where traditional centers of power, such as Javanese royal palaces and Malukan sultanate compounds, are frequently anchored to sacred natural landmarks. The findings demonstrate that traditional Indonesian architecture cannot be understood as an isolated physical artifact; rather, it forms an integral component of a larger ecological and cultural landscape. The conservation implications of this finding are particularly significant. Preservation efforts for *Kadaton Ici* should not be limited to the protection of the building itself or its immediate physical boundaries. Instead, conservation strategies should adopt a cultural landscape approach, recognizing the broader cosmological corridor that connects Mount Gamalama, *Kadaton Ici*, and *Ake Santosa*. The visual corridors and symbolic alignments linking these sacred sites should therefore be safeguarded through urban planning regulations that prevent high-rise developments and other modern interventions from obstructing or distorting the integrity and sacred significance of this cosmological axis.

3.3 Customary law as architectural generator

One of the most original findings of this study demonstrates that the physical form, spatial organization, and aesthetic expression of *Kadaton Ici* are not determined by the individual preferences of architects or builders. Instead, they are fundamentally governed by *Cariore*, the customary law system of the Sultanate of Ternate. This communal legal framework functions as a form of “collective architect,” translating social norms, cultural values, and customary obligations into highly structured architectural decisions. Consequently, the architectural configuration of *Kadaton Ici* should be understood not merely as the outcome of technical design processes but as the material manifestation of a normative system that regulates the relationship between people, space, authority, and spirituality.

The findings reveal that *Cariore* exerts a direct influence on multiple architectural dimensions, including spatial hierarchy, building orientation, circulation patterns, material selection, and the symbolic articulation of sacred and profane spaces. Through this mechanism, customary law operates as a generative framework that shapes both the tangible and intangible aspects of the built environment. This perspective expands conventional understandings of neo-vernacular architecture by demonstrating that cultural continuity is preserved not only through the adaptation of traditional forms but also through the persistence of customary legal principles that continue to guide architectural production and spatial practices.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings suggest that customary law should be recognized as an active architectural agent rather than merely a cultural background factor. In the case of *Kadaton Ici*, *Cariore* functions as a regulatory system that transforms collective cultural knowledge into spatial order, thereby ensuring the continuity of Ternate’s cultural identity across generations. The causal relationships between the pillars of customary law and the architectural elements of *Kadaton Ici* are summarized in Table 1.

The principle of *Galib Se Lakudii*, which emphasizes adherence to natural customs and the established order of nature, functions as an ethical framework governing material selection. This customary principle discourages the use of materials that may disrupt environmental harmony or violate local taboos. Its architectural manifestation is evident in the rejection of clay roof tiles and the preference for locally sourced timber harvested according to customary calendrical calculations and traditional ecological knowledge. Through this process, building materials are believed to possess a “living energy” that remains harmoniously aligned with the spirit of the site and its surrounding environment. Consequently, materiality in *Kadaton Ici* is not merely a technical consideration but also a cultural and spiritual expression of human–nature relationships.

Table 1. Matrix of causal relationships between the pillars of customary law (*Cariore*) and architectural elements in *Kadaton Ici*

Pillars of Ternate Customary Law	Traditional/Philosophical Meaning	Architectural Manifestation/Design Decision in <i>Kadaton Ici</i>
<i>Galib Se Lakudii</i>	Adherence to customary practices and harmony with the natural order	Selection of non-earth-based roofing materials; use of locally sourced timber chosen according to traditional principles related to tree growth orientation.
<i>Cara Se Ngale</i>	Deliberation, consensus-building, and mutual cooperation	Spacious <i>Pandopo</i> area without enclosing walls; modular structural system that facilitates collective participation and communal activities.
<i>Cing Se Cingari</i>	Beauty emerging from moral truth and ethical order	Precise façade symmetry; balanced geometric proportions between the building’s height, width, and length.
<i>Bobaso Se Rasai</i>	Prohibitions, taboos, and profound respect for customary norms	Separate staircase configuration (<i>Kore Mie</i> and <i>Kore Sara</i>); restricted physical access to the <i>Ruang Puji</i> (prayer room).

The principle of *Cara Se Ngale* (consensus and collective deliberation) directly informs spatial decision-making, particularly in the design of the *Pandopo*. This communal space is intentionally designed as an open structure without massive enclosing walls, allowing it to accommodate customary deliberations, ceremonial gatherings, and collective community activities without social barriers. The absence of rigid spatial divisions symbolizes inclusiveness, equality, and collective participation. In this sense, the *Pandopo* functions not only as a communal gathering space but also as a physical representation of political transparency and participatory governance within the traditions of the Sultanate of Ternate. In the realm of aesthetics, the principle of *Cing Se Cingari* (moral beauty) regulates the composition of architectural forms, ornamentation, and massing. Beauty within the architectural tradition of *Kadaton Ici* is not understood as excessive decoration or superficial embellishment. Rather, it is expressed through structural honesty, proportional balance, and geometric symmetry. Architectural harmony is therefore regarded as a reflection of ethical integrity and social order. Conversely, visual imbalance may be interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of moral imperfection. This perspective demonstrates that aesthetic values within Ternate architecture are inseparable from broader ethical and philosophical principles.

Finally, the principle of *Bobaso Se Rasai* (prohibition, taboo, and respect) generates a highly regulated circulation system within the building. Its influence is particularly evident in the physical separation of entrance staircases according to gender or customary status through the *Kore Mie* (North) and *Kore Sara* (South) systems. These staircases function as more than vertical circulation elements; they serve as architectural signifiers of behavioral transition rituals. The spatial sequence requires visitors to regulate their bodily movements, adopt appropriate conduct, and symbolically lower themselves before entering the inner spaces of the building. In this way, circulation becomes a cultural mechanism through which respect, hierarchy, and customary values are enacted and reinforced. Table 1 presents a

structured matrix illustrating the relationships between the customary legal principles of *Cariore* and the architectural elements of *Kadaton Ici*. The matrix demonstrates how the pillars of Ternate customary law operate as generative forces that influence architectural form, spatial organization, circulation systems, and material choices. Rather than functioning merely as cultural background values, these customary principles actively shape the production of architectural space, thereby transforming social norms and collective beliefs into tangible architectural expressions.

Table 2. Matrix of relationships between customary law principles and architectural elements of *Kadaton Ici*

Pillars of Ternate Customary Law	Traditional Philosophy and Meaning	Resulting Architectural Element	Semiotic Interpretation (Signifier and Signified)	Practical Implications/Design Decisions
1. <i>Galib Se Lakudii</i> (Adherence to Natural Law)	Principle of obedience to divine natural order (<i>sunnatullah</i>), ecological balance, and local environmental wisdom in North Maluku.	<i>Dopolo</i> Roof Structure and Material Selection	Signifier: Steeply pitched roof form without clay-based roofing materials. Signified: Cosmic harmony and the rejection of symbols associated with death above the human head.	Prohibits the use of clay roof tiles, which are symbolically associated with burial grounds and mortality. Roofing materials consist of wooden shingles or lightweight metal. Timber harvesting follows traditional principles based on the natural growth orientation of trees.
2. <i>Cara Se Ngale</i> (Consensus and Mutual Cooperation)	Spirit of collectivism (<i>Tari Nyawa</i>), social transparency, and communal justice.	<i>Pandopo</i> (Communal Gathering Space)	Signifier: Open-plan spatial layout without massive enclosing walls. Signified: Inclusiveness, openness, and accessibility between customary authorities and the community.	The space is designed as a modular and transparent environment to accommodate customary assemblies and deliberative processes. Exposed structural columns (<i>tiang soki</i>) symbolize the collective sharing of responsibilities and social obligations.
3. <i>Cing Se Cingari</i> (Beauty Through Truth)	Aesthetic values derived from moral integrity, proportional justice, and balanced living.	Building Façade and Architectural Massing	Signifier: Perfectly symmetrical façade geometry and balanced architectural composition. Signified: Harmonious leadership, ethical order, and the moral integrity of the occupants.	Avoids excessive decorative additions or superficial ornamentation. Architectural beauty is achieved through structural honesty, tectonic clarity, and balanced proportions between building height, width, and length.
4. <i>Bobaso Se Rasai</i> (Taboo, Regulation, and Respect)	Moral restrictions, customary etiquette, preservation of sacredness, and	Entrance Staircases (<i>Kore Mie</i> and <i>Kore Sara</i>) and the <i>Ruang</i>	Signifier: Separation of northern and southern staircases and layered spatial	Visitors are required to regulate their bodily movements and posture while ascending the staircase. Access to

	respect for hierarchy.	<i>Puji</i> (praying room)	boundaries leading to the interior sacred space. Signified: Ritual transition from the profane to the sacred realm and respect for gender and social status distinctions.	the <i>Kamar Puji</i> , the sacred core of the building, is physically and ritually restricted.
5. <i>Sehe Se Tofopo</i> (Justice and Social Wisdom)	Equitable distribution of rights, protection of vulnerable groups, and responsible stewardship.	Vertical Zoning System (<i>Dopolo</i> , <i>Badan</i> , and <i>Haho</i>)	Signifier: Vertical floor elevations and the hierarchical organization extending from the underfloor space to the roof crown. Signified: An ordered structure of life in which different domains maintain distinct roles while remaining mutually supportive.	Functional zoning is distributed according to cosmological hierarchy: <i>Haho</i> serves utilitarian and communal purposes, <i>Badan</i> functions as the principal living and social space, and <i>Dopolo</i> provides symbolic spiritual protection.

3.4 Relationship between customary law and architectural elements

The matrix presented above demonstrates that the neo-vernacular architecture of *Kadaton Ici* is not the product of individual aesthetic intuition or personal design preferences. Rather, it constitutes a physical manifestation of the communal legal framework that governs social, cultural, and spiritual life within the Sultanate of Ternate. In this context, customary law functions as a form of “collective architect,” directing architectural decisions through a shared system of values and norms that transcends individual agency. Architectural form, spatial organization, circulation patterns, and material selection are therefore shaped by collectively accepted principles rather than by subjective design choices.

From a semiotic perspective, the customary law principles embodied in *Cariore* operate as a system of cultural codes that translate abstract concepts into tangible architectural expressions. These codes function as rules that transform cultural values, ethical principles, and cosmological beliefs into physical spaces that can be perceived, interpreted, and experienced by users. As a result, architecture becomes a communicative medium through which social norms and cultural meanings are continuously reproduced (Michael et al., 2025; Schumacher, 2025). The relationship between signifier and signified is not confined to individual architectural elements but extends to the broader spatial system, where forms, materials, and circulation patterns collectively convey the philosophical foundations of Ternate society (Khan, 2024; Li et al., 2025).

The findings provide rare empirical evidence that an unwritten communal legal system can operate in a manner comparable to highly structured modern building codes (Hao & Shinohara, 2026; Love et al., 2023). Rather than relying on formal technical regulations, the architectural production of *Kadaton Ici* is guided by customary principles that establish clear rules regarding material usage, spatial hierarchy, circulation, symbolism, and social conduct. This phenomenon offers a significant theoretical contribution to the development of neo-vernacular architectural theory in Indonesia by demonstrating that the continuity of

vernacular architecture depends not solely on the preservation or replication of visual forms and morphological characteristics, but also on the sustained application of customary law as a generator of space and a framework for procedural design rules.

The conservation implications of this finding are particularly important. Preservation strategies that focus exclusively on the restoration of tangible architectural components are unlikely to ensure the long-term sustainability of vernacular heritage (Fan, 2026; Xu & Chen, 2026). Instead, conservation efforts must be accompanied by the revitalization of customary institutions and cultural practices that sustain the underlying normative system. In other words, safeguarding *Kadaton Ici* requires the preservation not only of the physical structure but also of the intangible cultural mechanisms that continue to transmit and enforce the customary principles embedded within its architecture (Hildayanti, 2017). Such an approach aligns with contemporary perspectives on living heritage conservation, which emphasize the inseparable relationship between physical heritage, cultural practices, collective memory, and community-based governance (Castelain et al., 2026; Castor, 2026).

3.5 Sacred-profane spatial hierarchy and cultural hybridity

Analysis of the spatial distribution pattern within *Kadaton Ici* reveals a clearly defined hierarchy of sacred and profane spaces, while simultaneously demonstrating a complex phenomenon of cultural hybridity. Rather than existing as a rigid binary opposition, the relationship between sacred and profane domains is expressed through a gradual spatial continuum that mediates between pre-Islamic spiritual traditions, rooted in local animistic and dynamistic beliefs, and the theological values introduced through Islam. This spatial gradation reflects a process of cultural negotiation and synthesis in which diverse belief systems coexist and are integrated within a unified architectural framework.

The findings indicate that sacredness within *Kadaton Ici* is not confined to a single space but is distributed across a hierarchical sequence of interconnected zones, each characterized by different degrees of symbolic meaning, accessibility, and ritual significance. As individuals move through the building, they encounter a progressive transition from publicly accessible and socially oriented spaces toward increasingly restricted and spiritually charged environments. This spatial organization establishes a layered experience of sacredness, in which architectural boundaries, circulation patterns, and spatial hierarchies guide both physical movement and symbolic transformation.

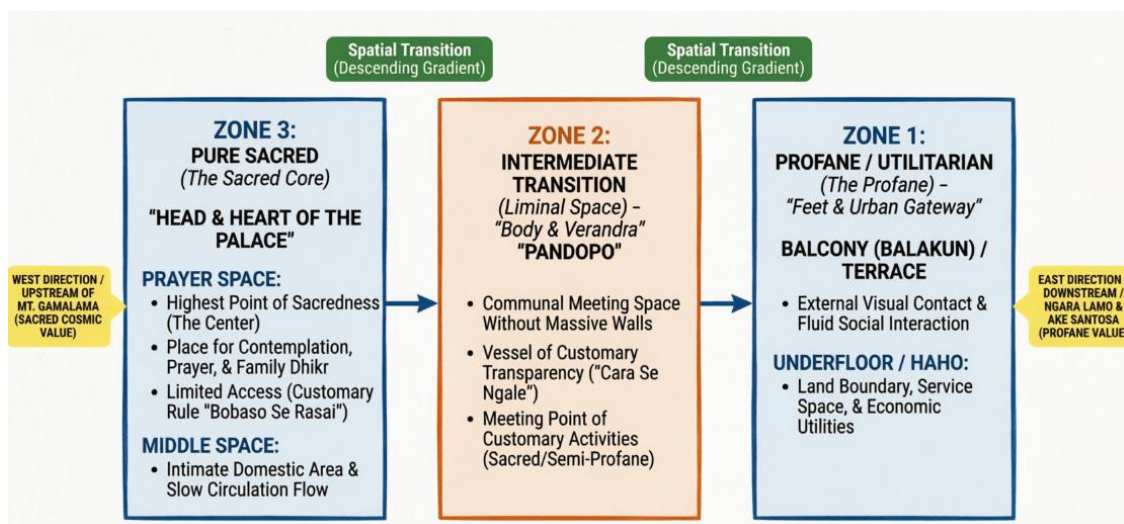


Fig. 6. Sacred-profane spatial gradient diagram of *Kadaton Ici*.

From the perspective of cultural hybridity, the sacred-profane gradient embodied in *Kadaton Ici* illustrates the dynamic interaction between indigenous cosmological traditions and Islamic theological principles (Bernadette et al., 2025). Rather than replacing earlier belief systems, Islamic values were selectively incorporated into an existing spatial and

cultural framework, producing a distinctive architectural expression that reflects the historical evolution of Ternate society. The resulting spatial order serves as a tangible manifestation of cultural continuity and adaptation, demonstrating how architecture functions as a medium through which multiple layers of religious, cultural, and historical meanings are negotiated and preserved (Hao & Shinohara, 2026; Kutlu et al., 2025). This sacred–profane gradation is illustrated in the diagram of *Kadaton Ici*'s spatial hierarchy presented below.

To complement the spatial gradient diagram presented above, Table 3 summarizes the semiotic parameters and spatial generators that govern the organization of sacred and profane spaces within *Kadaton Ici*. The table demonstrates that spatial hierarchy is not determined solely by functional considerations but is systematically structured through a combination of access regulations, symbolic markers, and culturally embedded meanings. Each spatial zone is distinguished by a specific degree of sacredness, which is expressed through architectural configurations, circulation controls, and semiotic signifiers that communicate the underlying cosmological values of Ternate society.

Table 3. Spatial gradient parameters (diagram explanation)

Degree of Sacredness	Spatial Component	Access Regulations (Circulation)	Semiotic Signifier	Signified Meaning
SACRED (Pure)	<i>Ruang Puji</i> /praying room and Inner Core Spaces	Highly restricted; accessible only to core family members or designated customary authorities following ritual purification procedures.	Layered spatial partitions, minimal direct window openings, and strict orientation toward the qibla.	Proximity to the Divine, Sufi spiritual realization (ma'rifa), and the sacred microcosm of the human body.
TRANSITIONAL (Intermediate)	<i>Pandopo</i> /Customary Hall (Bangsal Adat)	Limited openness; accessible to the public and members of the Sultanate during customary ceremonies and communal gatherings.	Open-plan layout, exposed structural columns (tiang soki), and the absence of massive enclosing walls.	Inclusiveness, communal deliberation, and social equality under customary law.
PROFANE (Utilitarian)	Underfloor Space (Haho) and Outer Balcony (Balakun)	Open and publicly accessible; accommodates daily circulation, service activities, and economic functions.	Exposed supporting columns directly connected to the ground and visible within the public urban realm.	Material and worldly life, the physical boundary of the earth, and the pragmatic functions of the building.

As illustrated in the spatial gradient diagram, the spatial organization of *Kadaton Ici* does not separate sacred and profane realms through a rigid dichotomy. Instead, these domains are structured through a subtle and continuous spatial gradient. Movement from the downstream zones associated with profane functions (*Haho* and exterior spaces) toward the upstream sacred core (*Ruang Puji*) corresponds directly to increasing restrictions on physical access and a progressively stronger concentration of transcendental symbolism rooted in the traditions of Islam Nusantara. This gradual

transition allows architectural space to function as a medium through which individuals experience a symbolic journey from worldly activities toward spiritual contemplation.

The interior zoning of *Kadaton Ici* is organized according to different degrees of sacredness. The *Kamar Puji* (*Ruang Puji*) and the inner core spaces constitute the realm of the sacred, whereas the underfloor space (*Haho*), exterior veranda, and balconies represent the realm of the profane. Drawing upon Mircea Eliade's (1959) theory of sacred space, the *Ruang Puji* may be interpreted as a form of *hierophany*, a manifestation of the sacred within the physical world. Within this space, secular time is symbolically suspended, and spatial arrangements are dedicated exclusively to communication with the Divine through prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and spiritual contemplation. Access to the *Ruang Puji* is regulated through layered architectural boundaries and strict customary rules, creating a clear separation between the sacred interior and the profane world beyond. By contrast, balconies and underfloor spaces are intentionally designed with a high degree of openness, facilitating everyday activities, visual engagement with the surrounding urban environment, and more fluid forms of social interaction.

The cultural hybridity embedded within this spatial organization is evident in the way pre-Islamic spatial structures have been preserved and harmoniously integrated into an Islamic worldview. The spatial pattern centered upon a sacred or symbolically empty core reflects earlier Nusantara cosmological concepts based on the relationship between the microcosm and macrocosm, where ancestral spirits were believed to occupy the center of the dwelling. Under the Sultanate of Ternate, however, this sacred center was no longer associated with animistic symbols or ancestral worship. Instead, its function was transformed into the praying room, a space dedicated to prayer, *dhikr*, and Qur'anic recitation. This process of cultural adaptation and reinterpretation produced a distinctive form of vernacular Islamic architecture in Indonesia. Rather than replacing or dismantling existing spatial traditions, Islam was incorporated into an established architectural framework, infusing traditional spatial structures with the principles of *tawhid* while preserving the cultural logic of local architectural practices. The result is a unique architectural synthesis in which indigenous cosmological traditions and Islamic theological values coexist within a coherent spatial system, as illustrated in the figure below.

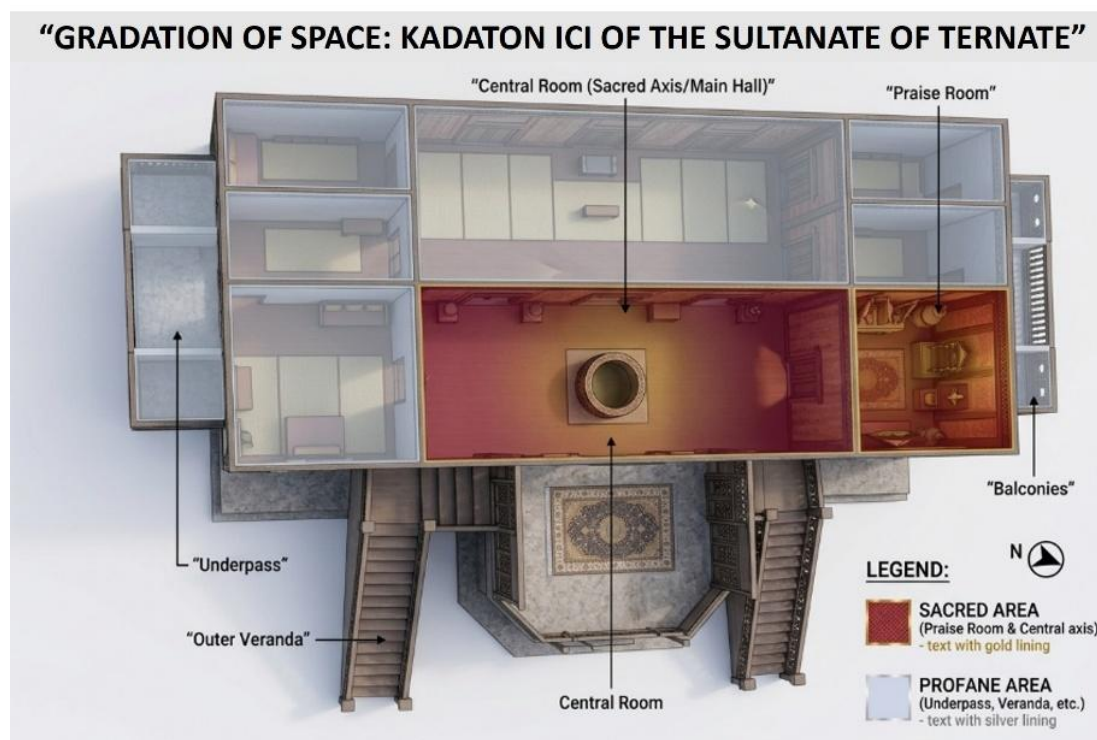


Fig. 7. Sacred–profane spatial division within *Kadaton Ici*.

From a semiotic perspective, this phenomenon of cultural hybridity can be interpreted through the ambivalent meanings embedded within the building's visual elements. On the one hand, the roof form and supporting columns evoke pre-Islamic local memories associated with the Tree of Life and traditional reverence for the spiritual guardians of the mountain. On the other hand, Islamic calligraphy, the precise orientation toward the *qibla*, and the absence of figurative representations of living beings serve as clear markers of the Islamic identity of the Sultanate of Ternate. These architectural elements collectively demonstrate how multiple cultural and religious traditions are encoded within a single built form, creating a layered system of meanings that reflects the historical evolution of Ternate society. Rather than existing in opposition, indigenous cosmological traditions and Islamic values are spatially and symbolically intertwined throughout *Kadaton Ici*. This coexistence produces a distinctive architectural language in which local cultural memory is preserved while simultaneously being reinterpreted through an Islamic theological framework. The building therefore functions as a material archive of cultural transformation, recording successive layers of belief, identity, and social practice without erasing earlier traditions. Such a condition exemplifies what scholars of cultural hybridity describe as a negotiated cultural space, where continuity and change operate simultaneously within a shared architectural framework.

The conservation implications of this finding are particularly significant. Any effort to preserve *Kadaton Ici* must acknowledge and respect the hybrid nature of its architectural identity. Conservation practitioners should avoid attempts at architectural "purification," whether by removing local elements perceived as insufficiently Islamic or by eliminating Islamic features in pursuit of an imagined pre-Islamic authenticity (Khairil et al., 2025; Madandola et al., 2026). Both approaches would distort the historical reality embodied in the building and undermine the cultural significance of its layered identity (Liu et al., 2025). The authenticity and historical value of *Kadaton Ici* reside precisely in its capacity to accommodate, record, and reconcile multiple cultural traditions within a coherent spatial system. Accordingly, the preservation of *Kadaton Ici* should be guided by an integrated heritage approach that recognizes hybridity as a defining characteristic rather than a deviation from authenticity. The building's significance lies not in representing a single cultural moment, but in embodying a continuous process of cultural adaptation and dialogue. Its architectural spaces provide tangible evidence of how indigenous cosmological traditions and Islamic values have coexisted, interacted, and mutually enriched one another over time. This capacity to sustain cultural continuity through adaptation constitutes one of the most important dimensions of *Kadaton Ici* as a living cultural heritage site.

3.6 The symbolic relationship between vertical space organization and the conception of the human body

The findings indicate that the vertical structure of *Kadaton Ici* is organized according to a human body metaphor manifested through the spatial division of *Dopolo* (head), *Badan* (body), and *Haho* (feet). This concept underscores that architecture is understood not merely as a physical object but also as a cosmological representation that mediates relationships among human beings, nature, and the spiritual realm (Michael et al., 2025). The tripartite arrangement demonstrates a close connection between spatial organization and the belief system of the Ternate community, which integrates Islamic values with indigenous cosmological traditions. Consequently, the building functions as a material expression of a worldview that prioritizes balance among transcendental, social, and ecological dimensions in the production of space. The correspondence between the philosophy of the human body and spatial structure further reflects a form of sustainable bioclimatic adaptation that is characteristic of vernacular architecture in island environments (Bosch & Rodríguez, 2026; García-Germán, 2025). Similar observations have been reported in studies of the *Folajiku Sarabi* traditional house, where structural elements such as *jaro* and *hang* symbolize the interconnectedness between human beings, the Creator, and the earth as the foundation of life (Fuentes, 2023; Rahim et al., 2023). Such

architectural coherence consistently reflects the efforts of indigenous communities to align everyday life with ecological conditions and deeply rooted cultural beliefs (Contreras et al., 2026; Lu, 2026; Thi et al., 2026).

These findings support the view that traditional architectural forms are cultural products that embody the value systems and belief structures of a society (Alnaim, 2025; Owoicho et al., 2024; Üner & Özbayraktar, 2024). They also reinforce studies suggesting that Nusantara architecture commonly employs a tripartite cosmological framework consisting of the upper world, middle world, and lower world, each represented through specific architectural components (Haq & Subroto, 2025; Wardani et al., 2020). Comparable patterns have been identified by Lake et al., (2021) in their study of Tamkesi vernacular architecture, where vertical spatial divisions function as symbolic instruments representing relationships between humans, ancestors, and supernatural forces. In this regard, *Kadaton Ici* exhibits a cosmological pattern deeply rooted in the broader traditions of Indonesian vernacular architecture. Furthermore, the incorporation of the human body as a fundamental organizing principle has also been documented in Bugis and Tidore vernacular architecture, highlighting the widespread use of anthropomorphic concepts in residential spatial arrangements as manifestations of local wisdom (Naing & Hadi, 2020; Rahim et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the findings of this study reveal characteristics that distinguish *Kadaton Ici* from several previously documented cases. Research by Kuncoro et al. (2024) on the sacred spaces of the Yogyakarta Palace demonstrates that spatial symbolism is primarily articulated through horizontal axes and ritual orientation. In contrast, the symbolism of *Kadaton Ici* is expressed predominantly through the vertical hierarchy of the building. This difference suggests that cosmological expression in Indonesian traditional architecture is not homogeneous but is instead shaped by specific cultural, geographical, and religious contexts. Such variation is consistent with Amos Rapoport's theoretical perspective, which argues that the spatial organization of traditional architecture is influenced more profoundly by cultural values and social systems than by environmental determinism or purely functional requirements (Mardhatillah et al., 2025). Moreover, the integration of cosmological principles and local wisdom into traditional dwelling design reflects a harmonious relationship between human beings and their environment, as similarly observed in the settlement patterns of Kampung Bunisakti.

The presence of the *Kamar Puji* as the spiritual center located within the core of the *Badan* zone further illustrates a process of Islamization that did not eradicate pre-existing cosmological structures but rather transformed them through the incorporation of *tawhid*-based values. This finding strengthens the argument advanced by (Madandola et al., 2026; Ongar et al., 2026) regarding the capacity of vernacular Islamic architecture to accommodate local identities while maintaining theological coherence. Accordingly, the vertical symbolism embodied in *Kadaton Ici* can be interpreted as a form of cultural hybridity that simultaneously reflects the continuity of indigenous traditions and the adaptation of Islamic values. This synthesis has produced a distinctive and contextually grounded neo-vernacular architectural identity within the Sultanate of Ternate. The successful integration of local cosmology and religious principles demonstrates that vernacular architecture serves not only as a means of physical shelter but also as a medium for transmitting cultural knowledge, ecological wisdom, and spiritual values across generations.

3.7 The role of customary law as a generative basis in the realization of vernacular architecture

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Ternate customary legal system (*Cariore*) functions not merely as a normative framework regulating social behavior but also as a primary generator in shaping the form, spatial organization, materiality, and circulation system of *Kadaton Ici*. In other words, the architecture of *Kadaton Ici* emerges through a process in which cultural values are translated into concrete design decisions. This finding

reinforces the view that traditional architecture is fundamentally a culture-specific product, where social structures, belief systems, and cultural values exert a more profound influence on architectural form than purely technical considerations (Alnaim, 2024; Novianto et al., 2024). Within the context of *Kadaton Ici*, the principles of *Galib Se Lakudii*, *Cara Se Ngale*, *Cing Se Cingari*, and *Bobaso Se Rasai* constitute the underlying framework governing material selection, spatial configuration, architectural aesthetics, and patterns of accessibility to sacred spaces. The integration of these philosophical principles demonstrates that architecture should be understood not merely as a physical entity but as a manifestation of collective creativity through which communities respond to historical narratives and express cultural identity (Muktiono, 2024). This relationship further confirms architecture as a complex cultural system in which *mentifacts* function as philosophical foundations, *sociofacts* operate as institutional mechanisms, and *artifacts* materialize these values in built form. Epistemologically, the interaction among these three dimensions, *mentifact*, *sociofact*, and *artifact*, creates a comprehensive framework that bridges cultural ideals and architectural reality (Farid et al., 2025; Nazaruddin et al., 2025).

These findings are consistent with the work of Lake et al., (2021), who demonstrated that the spatial organization of Tamkesi vernacular architecture is shaped by cultural structures and locally transmitted systems of knowledge. Similar patterns have been identified in studies of the Luwu Palace, where spatial arrangements and architectural forms embody the social values and cultural philosophy of Bugis society (Dwiasta et al., 2025). Likewise, Aziz & Kharomen (2025) argue that the sustainability of vernacular Islamic architecture depends largely on a community's capacity to preserve the social and spiritual values that underpin spatial formation. Collectively, these studies support the proposition that the persistence of vernacular architecture is inseparable from the continuity of the cultural systems that generate and sustain it.

Nevertheless, the findings presented here differ from many contemporary neo-vernacular studies that treat culture primarily as a source of visual inspiration. Rahim (2022), for example, emphasizes bioclimatic adaptation and environmental sustainability in Ternate vernacular architecture without extensively examining the role of customary law in the production of space. This difference suggests that approaches focusing exclusively on physical characteristics risk overlooking the cultural dimensions that constitute the primary source of architectural form. Consequently, a more integrated perspective that combines phenomenological understanding with sociological realities is required so that vernacular architecture is not viewed as a static artifact but rather as a living entity reflecting the identity of its community (Asadpour, 2020; Nursanty et al., 2023). Such an approach aligns with contemporary efforts to preserve local distinctiveness through adaptive strategies that retain traditional philosophical meanings while responding to technological advancement and changing social conditions (Hao & Shinohara, 2026; Raccomandato & Radermecker, 2026; Shi et al., 2026). Furthermore, previous studies have demonstrated that the innovative integration of local materials and traditional construction systems with contemporary technologies can simultaneously strengthen cultural identity and enhance environmental sustainability (Adetoro & Gambo, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025).

From a critical perspective, this study proposes a new interpretation of customary law as a form of indigenous building code that operated effectively long before the emergence of modern architectural regulations (Kar et al., 2026). This conceptualization represents one of the principal theoretical contributions of the research. It suggests that the sustainability of neo-vernacular architecture cannot be achieved solely through the preservation of physical forms but must also involve the revitalization of the customary institutions that provide spatial legitimacy, cultural meaning, and regulatory authority. The case of *Kadaton Ici* provides compelling empirical evidence that the relationship between customary law and architecture is fundamentally structural: culture is not merely represented through architecture but actively shapes, regulates, and reproduces the processes through which architecture is conceived and maintained. This perspective resonates with broader understandings of vernacular architecture as an efficient and adaptive response emerging from the interaction between community needs, locally

available materials, and environmental knowledge (Gönül & Hasgöl, 2026; Rana et al., 2025). Such synergy further demonstrates that tradition serves as a crucial mechanism through which human behavior can be aligned with ecological limits, thereby contributing to the mitigation of environmental degradation and unsustainable resource exploitation (Adom & Awuah-Nyamekye, 2026; Goyal & Garg, 2026).

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Kadaton Ici* of the Sultanate of Ternate represents a distinctive form of neo-vernacular architecture that functions not only as a setting for social and cultural activities but also as a medium through which cultural identity is expressed, negotiated, and sustained. The integration of traditional architectural principles with contemporary needs reflects an adaptive approach to preserving local values while ensuring the continued relevance of vernacular heritage in the context of modernization.

The findings reveal that the architectural symbolism embedded within *Kadaton Ici*, including its spatial organization, building orientation, architectural form, and decorative elements, embodies philosophical meanings closely associated with the historical narratives, cosmological worldview, social structure, and cultural values of the Sultanate of Ternate. These symbolic elements function as mechanisms for the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge while simultaneously reinforcing collective identity and cultural continuity within the community.

The study further demonstrates that the sacred spaces of *Kadaton Ici* are organized through a clearly defined spatial hierarchy that reflects the interconnected relationships among human beings, political authority, nature, and the spiritual realm. The sacred–profane gradient is materialized through spatial zoning, circulation control, and symbolic markers that regulate access and define different levels of sacredness. In this regard, sacred space should be understood not merely as a physical entity but as a cultural construct through which religious values, historical memory, and social order are continuously reproduced.

A significant contribution of this research lies in demonstrating that the customary legal system of Ternate (*Cariore*) functions as an active architectural generator. Rather than serving solely as a social regulatory framework, customary law directly influences architectural form, material selection, spatial hierarchy, circulation systems, and symbolic expression. This finding extends existing discussions of neo-vernacular architecture by suggesting that the continuity of vernacular traditions depends not only on the preservation of visual forms and morphological characteristics but also on the persistence of customary institutions and cultural regulations that govern the production of space. In this sense, *Cariore* may be understood as a form of indigenous building code that predates and, in many respects, parallels the regulatory functions of modern architectural standards.

Overall, the study confirms that the neo-vernacular architecture of *Kadaton Ici* plays a strategic role in sustaining the cultural identity of the Sultanate of Ternate amid ongoing social and urban transformation. Consequently, conservation initiatives should move beyond the preservation of physical structures and adopt a broader cultural landscape approach that safeguards both tangible and intangible heritage values. Future conservation and development strategies should therefore recognize the importance of maintaining customary institutions, cultural practices, and cosmological meanings that continue to give significance to the architectural environment. Further research may explore how these cultural values are transformed and reinterpreted within contemporary architectural development and cultural tourism, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of cultural sustainability through architecture.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. Each author actively participated in all stages of the research process and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

All data used in this study were obtained from open-access repositories and analyzed using RStudio software. Additional information regarding the data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration on the Use of Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language refinement, grammar correction, academic writing style enhancement, and sentence restructuring to improve readability. Following the use of this tool, the authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all content as necessary and assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the published work.

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