

## **BOAT SYMBOLISM AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE SOUTHEAST MOLLUCAS**

**Marlon NR Ririmasse\***

*Balai Arkeologi Ambon, Jalan Namalatu/Latulihat Kecamatan Nusaniwe, Ambon  
Telepon/ facsimile +62 911 323382/ 323374*

*Artikel masuk pada 30 Juli 2010*

*Artikel selesai disunting pada 29 September 2010*

**Abstrak. SIMBOLISME PERAHU DAN IDENTITAS SOSIAL DI MALUKU TENGGARA.** Bagi masyarakat di Maluku Tenggara, perahu memiliki arti lebih daripada sekedar moda transportasi air. Perahu adalah kata kunci untuk menggambarkan tema dominan dalam merekayasa beragam benda budaya di Maluku Tenggara. Tulisan ini membahas fenomena dari perspektif konstruksi dan materialisasi identitas sosial. Perahu telah menjadi medium komunikasi non-verbal bagi masyarakat sebagai sarana untuk menegosiasikan dan mengkomunikasikan identitas sosial mereka. Dengan demikian, simbolisme perahu telah diadopsi sebagai cetak biru untuk membangun cara penyelenggaraan masyarakat di Maluku Tenggara.

Kata kunci: perahu, simbolisme, identitas sosial, Maluku Tenggara, komunikasi, cetak biru

**Abstract.** *For the people of the Southeast Moluccas, a boat has always been more than just a seagoing vessel. The boat is the key word to describe the dominant theme in engineering diverse cultural property in the Southeast Moluccas. This article discusses the phenomenon from the perspective of construction and materialization of social identity. The boat has become a medium of non-verbal communication as a means for the people to negotiate and communicate their social identity. Hence, the boat symbolism has been adopted as the blue print to construct the way society is organized in the Southeast Moluccas.*

*Keywords: boat, symbolism, social identity, Southeast Moluccas, communication, blueprint*

### **A. Introduction**

The region of Southeast Asia is known as an epicenter for a diversity of maritime communities. The large number of islands that scattered all over the region has patterned the lives of generations of maritime communities. As a result, the cultural characteristics and social diversity of the local

communities of people in this region is as notable as the sea that surrounds them (Fox 2000). This geographic and cultural characteristic has given the boat a central role in the culture history of many ethnic groups in the Southeast Asia islands. In general, for people in this region, the boat has always been more than just a seagoing vessel. Its presence

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\* Penulis adalah staf peneliti pada Balai Arkeologi Ambon, email: ririmasse@yahoo.com

in various representations that has created a symbolic complex to which expressions of the group identity and communal unity can be related (Ballard *et.al.*, 2003).

This article focused on the use of boat as symbol in the region of Southeast Moluccas. Two main aspects will be discussed here. The first is related to the material representations of this symbolism with particular focus on the stoneboat monuments. The second aspect concerns with the cultural-historical background of this practice. As the representation of boat symbolism has served materially as the cultural-mark, this article will also discuss on how this practice has been actively involved in representing the social identity of the people in this region.

### **B. Social Identity: the Basic Concept**

Identity is a simple word that carries many meanings. It can be something unique that we have to ourselves or a way of defining oneself. To some extent it could be something we share with others: a group like 'ethnic identity' or 'religious identity'. Indeed, 'identity' is a term that may seem self-explanatory as it is used in a number of ways (Diaz-Andreu and Sam Lucy 2005, 1). The word identity itself has been widely used in contemporary social sciences, cutting across psychology, political science, sociology, history, and archaeology. In this wide usage of the term identity, beliefs a considerable variety in both its conceptual meanings and its theoretical role. Even when consideration is restricted to particular studies such as sociology, variation is still considerable (Stryker and Burke 2000,1). This is acknowledged by the anthropologists Bernard and Spencer (1996, 292 in Diaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005, 1), who explained that anthropological uses of

"identity" are ambiguous as they can refer both to individual identity (as in 'self identity') and to group identity. Indeed, when dealing with concepts of identity, scholars have to be aware of the nature of the term. As James (2002) stated:

*"The concept of identity is fascinating but deeply problematic... because of its abstract quality, because of its definitional imprecision, and because of its potentially all-encompassing scope".*

Stryker and Burke (2000, 1), mentioned that there are three usages of identity. Some use identity in essence to refer to the culture of people; where they often draw no distinction between identity, and other terms such as ethnicity. Hence, they obscure the theoretical purpose of its introduction. Others use identity to refer to a common identification with a collectivity of social category as in social identity theory (Stryker and Burke 2000, 1.). The last, some use the term as reference to parts of a "self compose", a meaning that a person attaches to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies.

The basic idea of the social identity theory defines social identity as a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Stets and Burke 2000, 225). Therefore, a social group can be identified as a set of individuals who holds a common social identification, or view themselves as a members of the same social category. By using the process of social comparison, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled as the in-group, while those who are different from the self are categorized as the out-group (Stets and Burke 2000, 225.). The consequence of this social comparison process is the selective application of the accentuation effect,

primarily to those dimensions that will result in self enhancing outcomes for the self. Specifically one's self esteem enhanced by evaluating the in-group and the out-group, lead the in-group to be judged positively and the out-group to be judged negatively (Stets and Burke 2000, 225).

Therefore, many of the social identity theory deals with two main aspects. The first is the inter group relations that focused on how people come to see themselves as member of one group or member of the in-group in comparison with others as the out-group. Second, are the consequences of this categorization such as ethnocentrism (Stets and Burke 2000, 226). Hence, having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective (*Ibid.*). Here in lies the uniformity of perception and action among group members as a basis of a social identity.

### **C. Social Identity, Memory, and Material Culture**

Asmann (1995, 125) argues that this specific character that a person derives from belonging to a distinct society and culture, does not seem to maintain itself for generations as a result of phylogenetic evolution, but rather as a result of socialization and customs. The "survival of the type", in the sense of a cultural psudeo-species, is a function of what he calls *the cultural memory*.

He also argues that for the context of cultural memory as objectified culture, a close connection to groups and their identity exists with several characteristics. The first is the "concretion of identity" or the relation to the group (Asmann 1995, 128). In this relation process, cultural memory preserves the store

of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. These objective manifestations of cultural memory are defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive ("we are this") or in a negative ("that's our opposite") (Asmann 1995, 130). By using these sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not, the supply of knowledge in the cultural memory is characterized.

The second characteristic is related to the capacity of cultural memory to reconstruct. Asmann argues that since no memory can preserve the past, what remains is only that 'which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference'. There by, cultural memory works by reconstructing it in the context that always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation (Asmann, 1995: 130). Every contemporary context will relate to this memory differently, one which relates by appropriation, another by criticism, preservation, or by transformation. Hence, cultural memory exists in the form of accumulated archives of the past and the actuality of a contemporary context.

The third characteristic of the cultural memory is the formation. Here, he argues, the objectification of collectively shared knowledge is the prerequisite of its transmission *in the culturally institutionalized heritage of a society*. The formation itself is not dependent on a single medium such as writing, since another form of material, such as pictorial images, is functioned in the same way. In these characteristics, together with others characteristics, cultural memory has its fixed point where one horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural

formation in the various forms of the texts, objects, and practices (Asmann 1999, 129). In this sense, objectified culture has the structure of memory.

A similar idea has been suggested by Tilley (1999) who discussed the way by which material culture acts as a form of concrete metaphor. In this sense, it is the physical immediacy of material culture that is significant: "material metaphors have a quality of density in that every aspect of an artifact contributes continuously to its meanings and is interdependently significant" (Tilley 1999, 24; Jones 2007, 3). It is due to this physical appearance that material culture serves its potent of metaphors for the experience of memory. Indeed, it is precisely because of the physical immediacy of material culture that artifacts provide the perfect inter subjective medium for modeling the experience of memory. Artifacts are a medium available to all which simultaneously allows people to speak of both personal and collective experiences of memory (Jones 2007, 43). Its presence provides the ground for connecting individual and collective remembrance, which makes material culture critical to the maintenance and performance of tradition as one of the key aspects in the concept of identity (Jones 2007, 46).

In this sense, material culture, which includes object such as monuments, exists as a means of history as suggested by Rowlands and Tilley (2006, 500). These objects provide stability and permanence through the collective remembering of an event or person around which public rites can be organized (Rowlands and Tilley 2006, 500). Their presence emphasizes their duplicitous character that is materially experienced memorially through the visual and other senses, while simultaneously functioning as

social symbols (Johnson 2004, 317 in Rowlands and Tilley 2006, 500 ). They are powerful because they appear to be permanent markers of memory and history and they can evoke feelings through their materiality and form as well as symbolize social narratives of events. Therefore, Rowlands and Tilley argue that this is a very straight forward understanding of why tangible heritage of objects exists in order to make us believe in the permanence of identity.

It's been argued in this article that a similar process had been applied materially in the Southeast Moluccas. It has been representing in the particular way that visually observable. The general concept of culture as the reflection of people identity has been materialized, symbolically, in the way that is reflected in the idea of similarity and uniformity as the basis of in group relationship; through the representation of boat as a symbol.

#### **D. Boat Symbolism in the Southeast Mollucas**

The Southeast Moluccas is one of the regions in Southeast Asia where the boat as a symbol is widely used in various forms. Similar to the other parts of Southeast Asia, the image of the boat also has become a central concept to the history and cultural character of the people of this islands. It is not only represented in the form of real boats in a nautical tradition, but also by applying such forms in various representations on the material culture in the past. The geographical profile of the region has led the boat to become more than just a means of transport. It has become a complex symbol in the local culture. In general, images of boat-symbolism were represented in three different forms. Firstly, they were visually represented at rock

art site in the region. Secondly, they were represented in the form of stone boat monuments in the traditional settlements. Thirdly, the boat symbolism is used as a principle of spatial ordering in the traditional settlements. In this article I will focus on the symbolic representation of boat as the stone monument in the Southeast Moluccas.

### **1. The Stone Boat Monument**

One category of symbolic images of boats in the Southeast Moluccas is represented by the ritual centers in many traditional villages which are marked by stone monuments. Although such concepts have been relatively widely used throughout the region in the past, their presence are mostly visible in the Tanimbar islands. The Tanimbar group is an archipelago of more than 60 islands located in the southeastern part of the Moluccas and included several main islands such as Yamdena, Fordata, Selaru, and Tanimbar Kei. The stone boat monuments that have been discussed here are located in Yamdena, the largest island of the archipelago.

Most villages of this islands, had the stone ritual center (called *didalan* in the Fordatan language and *natar* in the Yamdenan language) which were represented in the form of regular stone structures. Only in some particular villages they had been represented very realistically in the form of stone boats in the center of the village. These stone boat structures consist of a circle of stones about fifteen feet in diameter and fills with earth to form a platform raised one of two feet above the ground (Drabbe 1940, 50; McKinnon 1991, 68). These structures in the shape of a boat (*natar sori*) were also endowed with a finely wrought prow and stern boards (*kora ulu* and *kora mur*) of carved stones (McKinnon 1991). This kind of monuments can be found in the

villages such as Sangliat Dol and Arui, that will be the focus for the stone boat monument discussion in this article.

Sangliat Dol and Arui villages are located in the eastern coast of Yamdena island. Both of these villages have represented their ritual center in a very realistic shape of a boat. They consist of a boat-shaped elevation, surrounded by a small wall of stacked stones. In Sangliat Dol, the physical dimension of the monument is shown by the scale of 18 m long and 9,8 m wide (at the center of the monument). The elevation of the monument is varied between the prow and the stern which is 1,64 m high for the prow and 1,15 m for the latter. Stones that were used to construct the monument have been shaped similarly in size, approximately 50 cm in general.

On the end of both sides there are sometimes high stones, which due to their shape and fine masonry, represents the prows and sterns of a ceremonial boat. The stone boat of the village of Sangliat Dol has a beautifully tooled prow, on which fish are depicted between the spiral motifs. Towards the bow of the stone boat, which faces seawards, there stood the post and the sacrificial stone which formed the main altar of the supreme deity. Landward, toward the stern of the boat, were the stone seats of the main ritual officials of the community including among others, the sacrificer, the herald, and the 'owner' of the village. Bird motif also beautifully depicted at the stern of the monument.

The stone boat monument in Sangliat Dol is located at the center of the village. At certain ceremonies the dignitaries occupied the stone seats reserved for them in the stone boat. The prow has his seat near the prow of the boat, which was situated at the side facing the sea. Viewed from here,

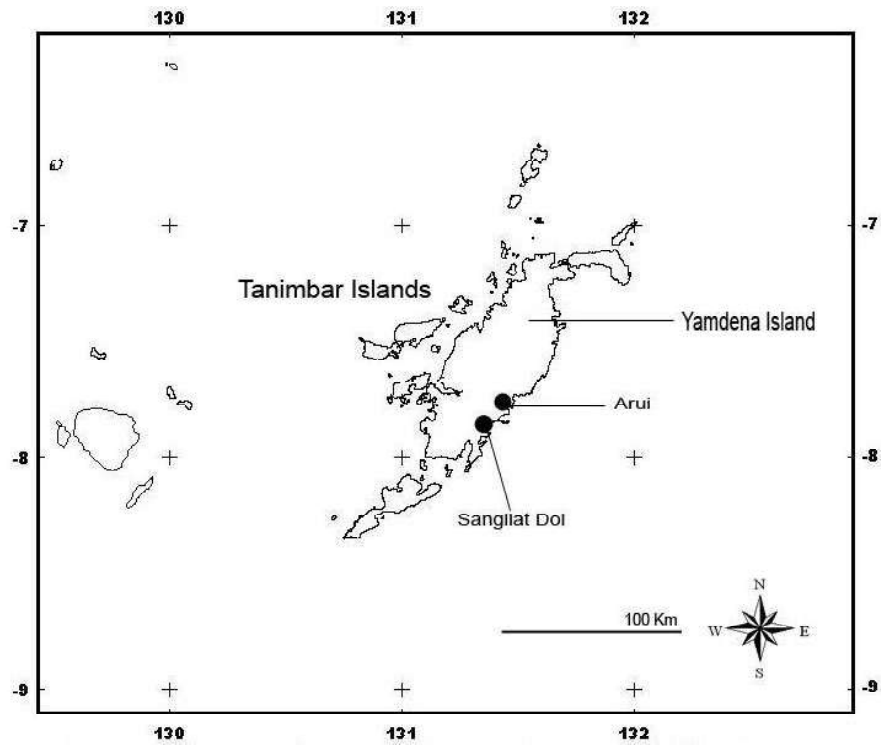


Figure 1. Map of Tanimbar Islands



Figure 2. The prow oa a stone boat monument at Sangliat Dol

somewhat to the rear, the village owner had a seat on the left and the sacrificer sat on the



Figure 3. The stern of a stone boat monument at Sangliat Dol

right. The place of the herald was at the far end, to the left. Also at the rear, to the right, was the seat of the speaker, the person who had to speak in the name of the village.

This central stone boat was the place where the villagers gathered to discuss matters of community interest, and where they danced, worshipped, and made sacrifice to the ancestors and supreme deity. At this point, the stone boat represents two different aspects. First, it marked the presence of the ancestors, who were the founders of the village, and second, it symbolizes the social organization of the village, which refers to the functions of a crew on an actual ship. Hence, the dualism of past and present exists and symbolize by the presence of the stone boat<sup>1</sup>.

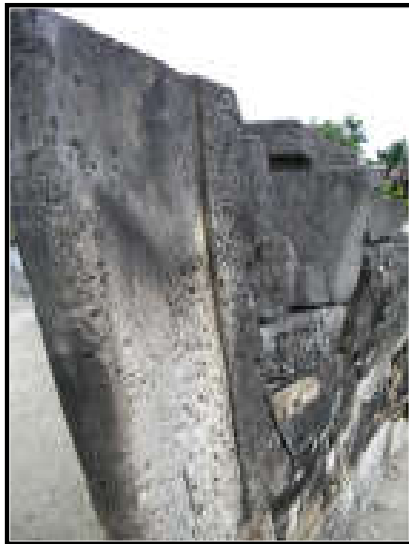


Figure 4 (left) and 5 (right). Decoration on the left and right side of the prow of stone boat monument at Sangliat Dol

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<sup>1</sup> Temporal context for these monuments is still unclear since there is no direct dating for such sites. Ethnohistorical records have provided information that most of these monuments were built in the late 19th centuries following the pacification policy of the Netherlands Indies Government that include the removal of hill-top settlements to coastal areas. Therefore, it is possible to make an assumption that monuments (if they still exist) from previous settlements on hill-top locations is much older.

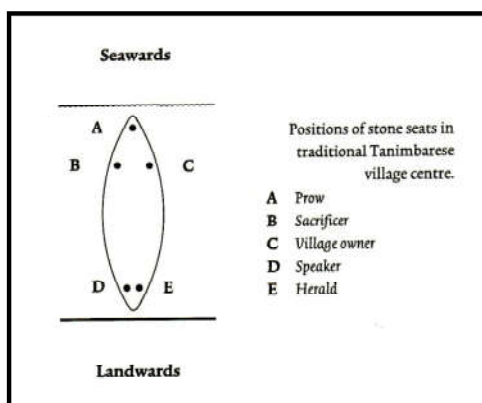


Figure 6. Position of stone seats on the stone boat of Sangliat Dol, Tanimbar (De Jonge and van Dijk 1995)

## 2. Social Memory and Monument

In the Southeast Moluccas, ethnohistoric resources provided data to explain possible cultural-historical setting behind this symbolism which can be related to the manner in which the villages were founded. Since the ritual centre is an essential part in the village design, the nature of the village has to be understood as the nature of this element itself. By exploring the manner in which the village and its ritual center were founded, it will become clear how this symbolism was constructed.

The local histories of the people in the Tanimbar region (including Sangliat Dol and Arui villages on Yamdena island) usually start by the period of migrations when the population scattered across the landscape in isolated groups that occupied temporary forest settlements. People described this time as a period of great insecurity, when each group was vulnerable to attacks of others and warfare was always a potential threat. Yet out of this state of fragmentation and instability a new process of consolidation and stabilization began to take place (McKinnon 1991)

This process is generally thought to have been initiated when the members of a particular house found a hospitable spot in which to settle. Such a place was usually located atop a cliff on a cape surrounded by the sea on three sides, with a good harbor and plenty of fresh water. This community may have settled there alone or with other named and unnamed groups with whom they were associated as the “elder-younger brothers” of a single house complex (*rahan ralan*) in the surrounding forests, there would be other isolated groups settled alone or in association with their “elder-younger brothers” (McKinnon 1991).

This first settlers would then decide whether or not they should gather all these dispersed groups together, in order to form one united village. The reason for these isolated groups coming together to form common settlements is usually encouraged by their desire of protection in what was otherwise a perilous world of danger and enmity. Since conflicts, warfare, and headhunting practices were a common phenomenon, good security would always be a priority for settlements. To unite with another group is the best option in constructing such settlements, since resources have always been a main consideration in developing this kind of settlement. Another reason for a group to join the common settlement was the main group’s possession of fame and valuables as the evidence for their status, their connection to otherworldly powers and their weight. Due to this formation process, the first settlers usually went around, and called all the dispersed groups together. If the dispersed groups joined the first settlers, they would usually will be given a portion from the latter, of the ritual office and a “stone” in the ritual center of this newly created village. When they had



assembled, the various ritual offices of the village were bestowed upon specific named houses and, with this division of ritual offices, the village was founded.

The founding of a village out of the whirlwind of migrations and warfare is represented by the consolidation of dispersed groups into a community with a single ritual centre. For most places in Tanimbar, this ritual center is neither a place of origin nor a place prior to the unity, but rather the point where diverse, unrelated groups, came together and created a new unity. This recomposed ritual unity had, as its center and place, a stone platform located in the middle of this new village. Here, the stone platform anchored the new cultural order in two ways: by providing an immobilized and weighty center that countered the effects of ungrounded mobility outside the village enclosures, and by providing an altar that made direct access to *Uabilaá* and the transcendent powers represented by the deity possible (McKinnon 1991).

A unique phenomenon here is the condition that these stone platforms were conceived as boats. Although only several villages, such as Sangliat Dol and Arui, have actually constructed their ritual center in the shape of a real boat as has been described above. Since this stone boat serves as a center place for village elders to discuss community matters, their presence on the monument have been marked symbolically by the crew of an actual ship. Here, as traditionally practiced in the Tanimbarese village, ritual offices are incorporated as refer to the functions of an actual ship crew such as: pilot, helmsman, bailer boy, and harpooner. Three other, very important crew members of the village are the herald, who is the “father” of the village, that is

to say the leader in all community affairs in former days (mainly war issues); the sacrificer, the “mother” of the village, who fulfills an important function on the land when others are at sea, and finally the “village owner”, who is the descendant and the family heir of the village founder. The latter is in many cases also the herald, thus the “father” of the village. He can also, simultaneously, be the “prow”, the person who take lead in all activities.

#### **E. The Representation of Social Identity: Boat As A Symbol**

The ethnohistoric reference that had been discussed above might reflected the way boat as a symbol had been practiced socially in the particular region. It shows a fact that it is a commonplace for the nautical themes, such as boat, to be adopted as symbols and materialized in various ways. Austin (2001, 16) noted that this practice is found in architecture and it is notable that many example can be found in the Asia Pacific region. The boat as a symbol has been represented in buildings in various ways. Interestingly, even among those who no longer have a nautical tradition such as the Toraja of Sulawesi or the people of Easter Island. Lewcock and Brans claim that village layout in West Flores, neighboring region of Southeast Moluccas, is based on the boat. The Maori political grouping called *waka* in New Zealand consists of precisely the descendants of the origin canoes. Naturally all origin myths in the Pacific involve boats. In the origin myths in Polynesia, the boat and the house are linked in various ways so that sometimes the boat is a house and vice versa.

Such concept can also be identified in the Southeast Moluccas, where boat has been adopted as the symbol for people in this region to express their identity materially.

However, following the arguments above, knowing what social identity, memory, and their representation in the material culture, does not explicate how it is constructed in practice. Hence, the main question left is, how is this boat theme as a symbol worked to represent the construction of social identity and materially transmitted across generations, as we found in the case of boat as symbol in the Southeast Moluccas?

The theoretical answer for this question might be found implicitly in its relation to ideology. Eagleton (1991: 41-59) suggests that there is a nexus between ideology and the construction of social identity. He has distilled six main strategies by which ideology operates which are consist of unification, action-orientation, rationalization, legitimation, universalization, and naturalization. As in the case with essential definitions with ideology, although it is possible for ideology to operate via all of these strategies, it is not reducible to any one of them, and many permutations are possible. Different strategies maybe used successfully over time by the same group of people, or the same strategy may be employed by completely different and separate groups. In this paper, I have particularly focused on the idea of Eagleton on the unification as suggested by Burke and Paynter (1999):

*"Unification: The process of unification strives to create a sense of community that may lend coherence to an otherwise internally differentiated society. Two examples are, creating a sense of national identity through patriotism or heritage... Yet however, much ideology are used to homogenize, Eagleton points out that they are themselves rarely homogenous. Instead, they are usually internally complex, with conflicts between their various elements that must be continually renegotiated or resolved. The perception of dominant ideologies as unifying in particular*

*contain an implicit paradox. A dominant ideology only exists in relation to other ideologies; therefore, it has to continually negotiate with these ideologies and cannot as a result achieve any kind of pure self-identity."* (Burke and Paynter, 1999: 17).

Here, identity can be understood as a central facet of ideology. It is a crucial aspect in allowing it to make at least minimal sense of people position in the world, and thus their day to day life experience. It is also expressed, sometimes deliberately, mostly unknowingly, and often materially. The idea on how ideology is being materialized has been suggested by DeMarrais (1996, 15)

*"Materialization is the transformation of ideas, values, stories, myths, and the like into a physical reality that can take the form of ceremonial events, symbolic objects, monuments, and writing systems."* (De Marrais et.al., 1996, 16).

She argues that ideology was represented in concrete form in order to be part of the human culture that is broadly shared by members of society. This process of materialization makes it possible to control, manipulate and extend ideology beyond the local group. Hence, ideology is as much the material means to communicate and manipulate ideas as it is the idea itself.

De Marrais approached ideology differently by recognizing it as a central element of a cultural system. Using this approach, the direction she pursued is to understand ideology as a source of social power. In her perspective, ideology as a power strategy is most successful when the aggregate of beliefs and images being conveyed, defines and appears to satisfy the collective aspirations, objectives, and ideals of whole societies (see also Giddens 1979, 103-96).The basic premise for her argument

lies on the idea that ideology has been articulated to have both a material and a symbolic component. Since symbols are material objects, their distributions and associations, preserved in the archaeological record, reflect broader patterns of social, political, and economic activity. These symbols include icons, rituals, monuments, and written texts, and all convey and transmit information and meaning to their viewers.

Similar situation can be identified in the Southeast Moluccas, where boat, as a symbol, has been presented materially for groups of people in this region to express their social identity. In this perspective, boat as a symbol works in several ways. Firstly, it has been used as a medium to express different social status materially as has been shown through the particular arrangements on the stone boats. As a house societies, people in the Southeast Moluccas have adopted boat symbolism, and expressed the concept materially, to differentiate social groups which in turn relate to different social roles in the society.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, on the other side, the boat has been adopted as a symbol of unity between smaller social groups in the societies. In this term, it works as a medium to express particular social structure that control the social life of society as a whole. Hence, following this perspective, boat as a symbol works as material medium to maintain the sense unity of the entire community.

## **F. Conclusion**

Within archaeology the representation of symbol in the material culture is applied both to the particular individual signs and collective various forms of objects (Handsman and Leone, 1989; Thomas and Tilley, 1993). This representation might be viewed as a component of non-verbal communication, which communicates information about aspects of identity. It works as an identification as a means by which people negotiate and communicate their social identity. It serves as a reference that represents identity (of a group) through particular pattern or shape. In other words, it becomes symbolic of group by serving as a material marker of identity, and continually implicated by the process which people construct their social identity.

Indeed, boat symbolism has been adopted as the blue print to construct the way society organized in the Southeast Moluccas. The physical presence of this symbolism has concretized the present social order as viewed by its function and meaning in the society. By its physically and materially presence, it serves as a marker to create boundaries within society where the continually process of identification and its maintenance as a group regularly take place. Here, the idea of boat as a symbol has been viewed as a physical expression of notions relative identity through which group are identified, related, (maintained) and incorporated.

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly to many other societies in Indonesia, Southeast Moluccan society can be typified as a 'house society' in which the house forms one of the most important social units<sup>2</sup>. In the past, a single large house built on poles, with smaller annexes, could constitute a whole village, although of course, there were also larger scale village complexes with a great number of houses. During the former days most of the villages were situated on the hilltops and headlands,<sup>2</sup> as isolated and easily-defendable locations that were surrounded by thick walls. Frequent conflicts and violent wars were the main reasons for these societies to seek protection by occupying these strategic positions. However, during the colonial period, the village peoples were required to settle in new and more easily controllable villages along the coast.

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