

CONCEPT OF ORNAMENTATION BASED ON LOCAL WISDOM IN PUBLIC BUILDINGS IN THE URBAN AREA OF TAKENGON

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ABSTRACT

The Gayonese, an ethnic group indigenous to the highland regions of Aceh, are distinguished by their rich cultural heritage. Their cultural patrimony is characterized by a diversity of artistic expressions, including ornamental designs that embody the community's local wisdom and cultural identity. Takengon, the most vibrant town in Aceh's highland region, is home to numerous public buildings, including governmental, religious, educational, hospitality, and other service facilities, which incorporate ornamental elements as expressions of local wisdom. However, the application of these ornaments varies significantly by placement, symbolism, and color due to the absence of standardized guidelines for their implementation in public architecture. The main objectives of this research are twofold. Firstly, to examine the prevailing patterns of ornamentation in public buildings from a semiotic perspective. Secondly, grouping in local wisdom to develop a comprehensive framework for the systematic integration of ornamentation within Takengon's architectural landscape. This research employs a qualitative approach with semiotic analysis to interpret the visual symbols and meanings of ornamentation in public buildings, aiming to reveal the cultural and symbolic values embedded within. The methods of data collection employed involve the observation of ten public buildings, documenting, and interviewing informants. The informants in this research were government officials, cultural or community leaders, building consultants, and academics. The findings reveal the placement of ornamentation typically occurs in three main zones: the head, body, and base of the building. In terms of ornament typology, natural motifs are predominant, surpassing geometric and floral patterns, with no representations of fauna identified among the ten sampled buildings. Ornamentation in Takengon's public buildings primarily serves a decorative purpose, classified as applied ornamentation, rather than fulfilling structural or constructive functions. The contribution of this research lies in its enrichment of the discourse on cultural identity in the built environment, particularly in relation to ornamentation.

Keywords: Gayo, Local Wisdom, Ornamentation, Public Buildings

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is renowned for its cultural diversity, with the province of Aceh serving as a prominent example. Home to various ethnic groups, including the Acehnese, Alas, Gayo, and Jame. Aceh reflects the richness of Indonesia's intangible heritage (Mahara and Misgiya, 2020). Among these, Gayonese culture, from Central Aceh, is particularly distinguished by its artistic expressions, notably in the form of decorative ornamentation. These motifs, inspired by nature, such as flora, fauna, and abstract forms, symbolize the values and worldview of the Gayonese people (Sari, Pratama and Setiawan, 2020). In traditional Gayonese architecture, ornamentation is commonly integrated into architectural features like columns, walls, doors, windows, and layered spears in accordance with religious principles, propriety, and local wisdom.

Similar architectural expressions across Indonesia illustrate how ornamentation conveys culturally embedded meanings that transcend mere decoration. The Wringinlawang Gate in Lumajang, for instance, functions as a symbolic threshold signifying spiritual transition within a sacred Hindu temple complex. Its use of Majapahit-style red brick and protective motifs reflects local cosmological beliefs (Firmansyah, Rachmawati and Defiana, 2023). Likewise, repetitive geometric forms such as spirals and interlocking patterns express notions of infinity, harmony, and universal order (Sabatari, 2011), while carved symbols in Torajan architecture narrate ancestral veneration and metaphysical journeys (Tangirerung, 2017). These cases affirm the integral role of ornamentation in articulating regional identity through architectural form.

Following the 2004 tsunami and the subsequent reconstruction efforts, Aceh began to experience a decline in its distinct architectural character. In response, the Acehnese government enacted regulatory measures to reaffirm its cultural identity in line with its status as a special autonomous region (Dinas Kependudukan dan Pencatatan Sipil Kabupaten Aceh Tengah, 2022). Governor Regulation No. 13 of 2023 outlines the principles of culturally distinctive Acehnese architecture and serves as a reference for architectural practices aimed at preserving the region's heritage and identity (Pemerintah Aceh, 2023).

While such measures were formulated largely in response to the post-tsunami erosion of Acehnese architectural characteristics in coastal regions, the case of Central Aceh, particularly Takengon, differs significantly. The Gayonese region was not directly affected by the tsunami, yet it faces a parallel challenge: the absence of localized regulations specific to its architectural tradition. Thus, the issue in Takengon is not one of post-disaster reconstruction, but rather of ensuring that Gayonese ornamentation is applied with cultural fidelity amid contemporary development pressures. Clarifying this distinction underscores the necessity of establishing a Regent-level regulation that addresses the unique context of Gayo architecture, rather than relying solely on province-wide guidelines rooted in Acehnese coastal concerns.

In Takengon, the urban center of Central Aceh, numerous public buildings, including government offices, religious institutions, educational facilities, accommodations, and other service-oriented structures have incorporated ornamental elements as manifestations of local wisdom. However, despite the general reference

to the Aceh Governor's Regulation, there is a notable absence of localized regulatory instruments, such as a Regent Regulation, which would specifically govern the application of Gayonese ornamentation. Interviews with officials from the Central Aceh District Public Works Agency reveal confusion among practitioners regarding which motifs to use, where they should be placed (head, body, or base), and how to align their meanings with building functions. This absence of clear technical guidelines has led to the often-superficial use of ornamentation that risks eroding its cultural significance.

This study addresses the specific regulatory and implementation gap by providing a structured framework grounded in cultural and semiotic analysis for the application of Gayonese ornamentation in public architecture. As Mappajaya et al. (2019) asserts, architecture is not merely a functional entity but a medium for expressing collective memory and identity (Mappajaya, Nuffida and Rachmawati, 2019). The integration of traditional values into architectural and spatial planning also supports cultural sustainability, as demonstrated in the revitalization of heritage sites like Tindoi Fort in Wakatobi, where design harmonizes tradition and tourism (Jauhar, Setijanti and Hayati, 2020). These perspectives reinforce the interconnectedness of architecture, ornamentation, and identity.

Gayonese ornamentation remains a vital cultural marker, traditionally seen in ceremonial attire (*kerawang*) and vernacular Gayonese houses (*Umah Pitu Ruang*). Today, these motifs, such as *Puter Tali*, *Emun Mutumpuk*, *Emun Berkune*, *Sarak Opat*, and *Pucuk Rebung* have also applied to modern architectural components such as façades and roofs (Salihin, Juned and Dharsono, 2019). Field observations reveal their widespread yet inconsistent use across public buildings in Takengon. Differences in motif selection, color schemes, and placement suggest a lack of standardization and symbolic coherence.

Given that traditional ornaments embody profound philosophical concepts, such as social values, spiritual beliefs, and connections to the natural environment, their application should thoughtfully convey these meanings (Prijetomo, 1995). However, current practices demonstrate a fragmented approach. Interviews with local architects confirm the absence of reference materials or design guidelines to assist practitioners in applying Gayonese ornamentation with cultural fidelity. In this context, Rapoport's theory of spatial hierarchy—comprising the base, body, and head of a building—offers a useful analytical tool for interpreting the symbolic and functional placement of ornaments.

In response to these challenges, this study aims to analyze existing ornamentation patterns in public buildings through a semiotic lens and to develop a conceptual framework and practical guidelines for the appropriate use of Gayonese ornamentation in architectural design across Central Aceh. The research aspires to provide a culturally grounded design reference for architects, planners, and policymakers, supporting the integration of Gayonese identity into contemporary urban architecture and contributing to the preservation of local heritage within the built environment.

THEORY / RESEARCH METHODS

Symbolism and Ornamentation Theory

Symbolic meaning in architecture arises from the interaction between human activity and architectural media as a form of expression (Pirdaus and Anisa, 2021). Symbolism animates material elements, such as form, texture, and style to convey architectural ideas and identity, thus fostering meaningful interactions between humans and their environment (Cheris, Ramadhani and Masrul, 2022).

Etymologically, "ornament" derives from the Latin word *ornare*, meaning "to decorate." According to Gustami (2008), ornamentation serves as a complementary element in artworks, often carrying symbolic and spiritual values that reflect humanity's perception of the divine (Gustami, 2008; Sabatari, 2011). Motifs, as the core visual component, play aesthetic and symbolic roles. They may take geometric, non-geometric, figurative, or decorative forms (Warni, 2015), often functioning as markers of cultural identity (Haryanto, 2010).

Ornamentation in architecture also communicates stylistic character, influenced by the socioeconomic status of the building's owner. As noted by Rapoport (1969) and Soekiman (2000), artistic works achieve completeness through functional clarity, beauty, color harmony, and material appropriateness (Rapoport, 1969; Soekiman, 2000). Typically, ornaments are applied to three architectural zones—the head (roof), body (walls, columns, openings), and base (foundation), which reflect symbolic structures common in traditional architecture.

In Central Aceh, architectural expressions are rich with symbolic content conveyed through visual elements, though these are not always universally interpreted. A symbol links a signifier to its signified meaning through shared cultural understanding; for instance, the Indonesian flag's red and white signify courage and purity, but such meanings are not universally recognized (Tangirerung, 2017). Symbols thus serve as vehicles for conceptual messages, functioning through language, numbers, gestures, or visual motifs, and are interpreted through their broader contextual relationships.

Semiotic Perspective

The semiotic approach in architecture views ornamentation as part of a system of signs that communicates cultural, historical, and social meaning. Within this framework, ornaments act as symbolic representations of societal values rather than merely decorative components. Ferdinand de Saussure explained that a sign consists of a signifier and a signified, while Charles Sanders Peirce elaborated that a sign is formed through the relationship between representamen, object, and interpretant (Peirce, 1992; Saussure *et al.*, 2020). This approach enables a deeper analysis of architectural elements, going beyond physical form to include the meanings and relationships they embody (Handoko, 2024).

Eco (1986) extends semiotics beyond language, arguing that all forms of communication—including architectural form and space—carry semantic meaning. Buildings, in this sense, can be read like texts, where each element embodies messages

shaped by social and cultural contexts (Eco, 1986). Ornamentation thus becomes a symbolic construction that influences spatial experience and perception.

Studies have demonstrated that traditional ornamentation encodes cultural identity through symbolic forms transmitted across generations. Ding and Pintong (2022), in their study of Tongyang Old Street, revealed that architectural motifs preserve philosophical and communal values over time (Lulu and Pintong, 2024). This aligns with findings by Putra and Ekomadyo (2023), who explored how Acehese traditional architecture evolves while retaining its symbolic core through semiotic continuity (Putra and Ekomadyo, 2023).

Firmansyah et al. (2023) further emphasize that architectural features like *gapura* serve as symbolic expressions of spiritual and collective identity, beyond their physical functions (Firmansyah, Rachmawati and Defiana, 2023). The semiotic approach offers a conceptual lens to interpret such elements within spatial-cultural contexts, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of ornamentation as a form of non-verbal communication that reinforces local identity within the built environment.

Building Hierarchy Theory

Amos Rapoport, a key figure in cultural architecture studies, emphasizes that building form and spatial organization are primarily shaped by cultural values, symbols, and social systems, rather than solely by climate, technology, or functional needs. In *House Form and Culture* (1969), he explains that traditional architecture embodies a society's worldview, beliefs, and social structure, making every architectural element inherently meaningful within its cultural context.

One approach derived from Rapoport's ideas is the interpretation of vertical building hierarchy, commonly expressed as "head, body, and base." While this tripartite concept is especially prominent in Indonesian traditions, such as Balinese and Javanese architecture, it aligns with Rapoport's focus on symbolism in architectural form. Within this framework, the base symbolizes connection to the earth or community roots, the body facilitates human activity, and the head represents spiritual or ideological values, often manifested in the roof structure.

In this study, Rapoport's building hierarchy theory is adopted as an analytical framework to examine the application of traditional Gayo ornamentation in public buildings across the urban area of Takengon. This approach enables the identification of the placement and meaning of ornaments based on their location on the head, body, and base of the building. Understanding this hierarchy allows the researcher to uncover the relationship between the physical position of ornaments and the symbolic meanings embedded in Gayo culture. This framework is also expected to contribute to the formulation of a structured and meaningful concept for the application of local wisdom-based ornamentation in contemporary public architecture in Takengon.

Gayo Local Culture

Gayonese culture has evolved since the settlement of the Gayonese people and the establishment of the first Linge Kingdom in the 10th century AD, encompassing

kinship, governance, communication, agriculture, and the arts. A core aspect of this culture is customary law, guided by principles such as *Keramat Mupakat* and *Behu Berdedale*, which emphasize consensus, unity, and spiritual connection. These values are deeply rooted in the community and are expressed symbolically, notably through *kerawang* motifs that reflect the Gayonese worldview and social values.

A prominent example of Gayonese architectural heritage is the *Umah Pitu Ruang*, a traditional house that reflects historical continuity, customary wisdom, and regional identity. The *Umah Edet Reje Baluntara* illustrates the Gayonese people's connection to space, belief, and social order through its spatial layout and ornamentation (Yanti, Arafat and Wulandari, 2023). According to Zulfikri et al. (2023), its decorative elements are divided into three symbolic zones: the head (*pepir, lisplang*), the body (*bere bujur, suyen*, closure boards), and the base, marked by stairway ornaments (Zulfikri et al., 2023). This tripartite structure conveys core cosmological and sociocultural values of Gayo tradition.

Kerawang is a form of artistic craftsmanship in textile embroidery and wood carving that not only displays visual beauty but also conveys philosophies that reflect human behavior and values. The term "*kerawang*" is derived from two Gayo words: *ker*, meaning intellectual power, and *rawang*, meaning vision or foresight, together implying a visual projection of thought and life perspective (Dafrina et al., 2022). As decorative elements, *kerawang* motifs carry deep philosophical and symbolic meanings, often closely associated with the local and religious values of the Gayo community. Various types of *kerawang* motifs exist, each symbolizing different aspects of Gayo cultural identity (Table 1).

Table 1. Motifs of Gayo *Kerawang* Carvings in Traditional Gayo Houses

Motif Shape	Motif Name/ Meaning	Motif Shape	Motif Name/ Meaning
	<i>Emun Berangkat</i> (Moving Clouds)/Loyalty and solidarity		<i>Tekukur</i> (Dove)/Justice and wisdom in decision-making
	<i>Emun Beriring</i> (Lined Clouds)/Togetherness, unity, and cohesion		<i>Mata Ni Lo</i> (Sun)/Source of life, gratitude for blessings, patience in trials
	<i>Emun Berkune</i> (Branched Clouds)/ Democracy, responsibility, and guidance		<i>Sarak Opat</i> (The Four Councils)/The four leadership elements in deliberation
	<i>Emun Mupesir</i> (Scattered Clouds)/Migration, striving for a better life		<i>Nege</i> (Dragon)/Strength and power
	<i>Emun Mutumpuk</i> (Gathered Clouds)/Gathering, deliberation		<i>Iken</i> (Fish)/Loyalty of the royal guards

Motif Shape	Motif Name/ Meaning	Motif Shape	Motif Name/ Meaning
	<i>Puter Tali</i> (Double Twist)/Unity for strength		<i>Kurik</i> (Chicken)/Nobility and closeness to humans
	<i>Pucuk Rebun</i> (Bamboo Shoot Tip)/ Education, the younger generation		

Source: Salihin et al., 2019

Color also plays a significant symbolic role in enhancing the expressive power of *kerawang*. Typically, four dominant colors; yellow, green, white, and red, are used in combination with black as a base. These colors are not simply decorative but are chosen for their cultural resonance, forming a visual language that complements the motif designs. Each color conveys specific meanings: red (*ilang*) symbolizes courage and is associated with traditional leaders; white (*poteh*) represents purity and moral discernment, linked to religious figures; yellow (*koneng*) signifies authority and protection, reflecting the role of local rulers; green (*ijo*) denotes communal consensus and harmony; and black (*item*) serves as a grounding element, symbolizing the earth. In the context of *Umah Pitu Ruang*, this chromatic harmony reinforces the interconnectedness between human life, cultural expression, and the natural environment, forming a cohesive symbolic system within Gayonese architecture.

Data Collection Methods

This study employed a qualitative method with a cultural-symbolic approach based on ornamentation, which is appropriate for examining symbolic meanings within local cultural contexts (Sugiyono, 2013; Creswell and Poth, 2016). The research was conducted in the urban area of Takengon, Central Aceh Regency (Figure 1), a location rich in public buildings that reflect Gayonese cultural values through ornamentation, though currently facing a degradation of symbolic meaning. The subject of study is comprised of cultural symbols expressed through traditional Gayonese ornaments.



Figure 1. Research Location

Source: Adapted from Google Earth, 2023

The research objects consist of ten public buildings selected based on several considerations. These include the representation of major public functions (e.g., governmental, educational, religious, and community facilities), diversity in construction periods, and the degree of visibility of the buildings as architectural references within the urban context of Takengon. This purposive selection ensures that the sample reflects both functional diversity and temporal variation in the application of Gayonese ornamentation.

Data collection consisted of two types: primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through direct observation of ornamental elements in the head, body, and base of selected buildings, as well as through in-depth interviews with 11 purposively selected informants. These included four representatives from the Central Aceh Public Works Department, three cultural leaders or former regional officials, two local architectural consultants, and two academics specializing in culture and architecture. Each interview lasted between 45–90 minutes and was conducted using a semi-structured guide, providing both consistency and flexibility for deeper exploration. Secondary data was gathered through a comprehensive review of academic literature, official documents, and photographic archives. This integrative approach is well-suited for exploring the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional ornamentation as a representation of local architectural identity (Yin, 2017).

Data Analysis Methods

The collected data was analyzed using a semiotic approach to determine the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional Gayonese ornamentation on public buildings. Semiology, the study of signs and symbols, provides a robust framework for interpreting how visual elements such as shapes, colors, and patterns function as signifiers that convey deeper cultural meanings (Chandler, 2007). Based on Saussure's semiotic theory, the research findings were categorized into signifier and signified (Saussure *et al.*, 2020). The signifiers refer to the placement, patterns, and colors used in the ornamentation of the head, body, and base sections of selected public buildings. Meanwhile, the signified involve the interpretation of the symbolic meanings embedded in the ornaments of public buildings located in the urban area of Takengon.

The results of this analysis are examined alongside relevant literature to contextualize and validate the findings within existing theoretical and empirical frameworks, thereby providing a solid foundation for developing a well-structured conceptual recommendation for the application of Gayonese ornamentation in public buildings. In addition, interview data collected during the study served as supporting evidence to reinforce and validate the findings. The research flow can be seen in Figure 2.

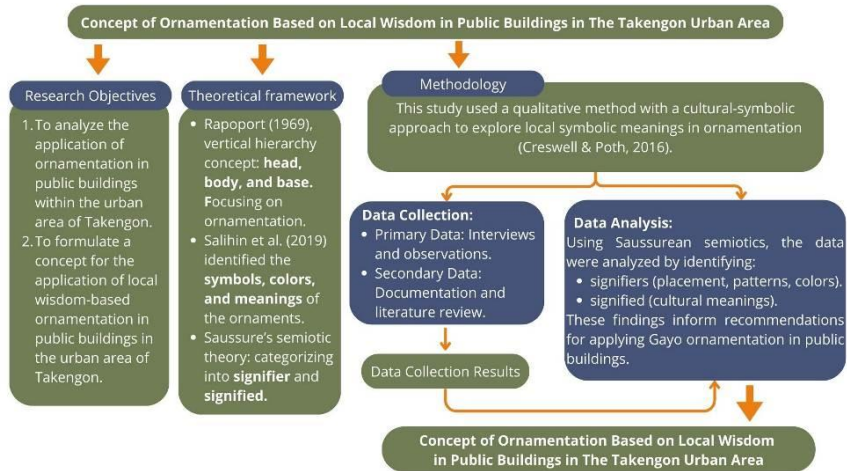


Figure 2. The Research Flow

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Overview of Public Buildings in the Urban Area of Takengon

This study concentrates on ten public buildings situated within the urban area of Takengon, which were selected and categorized based on their respective functions in accordance with the provisions of Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 28 of 2002, as depicted in Figure 3.

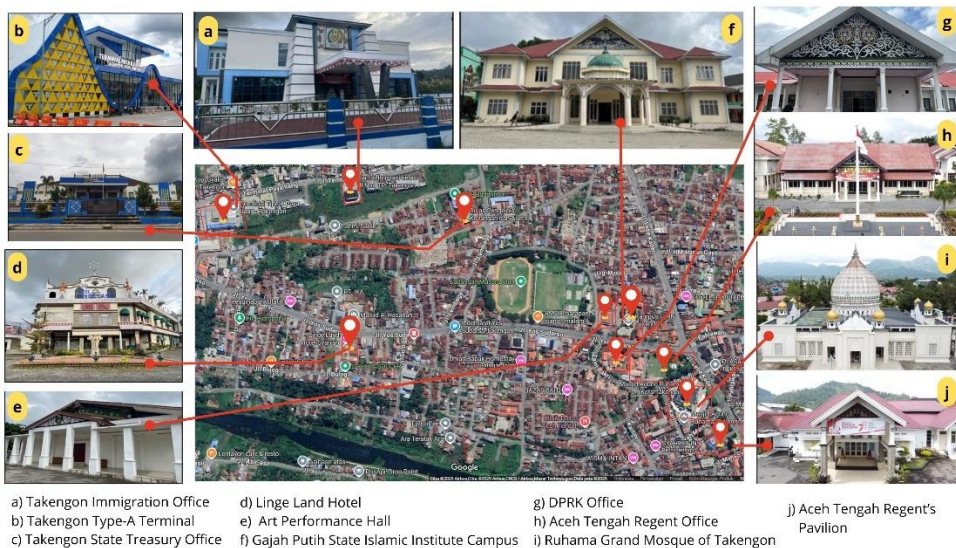


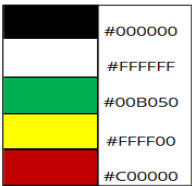
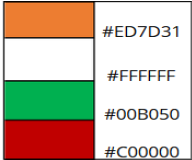
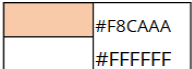
Figure 3. Location and Object of Research in the Urban Area of Takengon

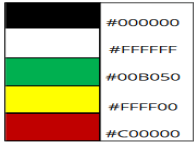
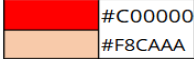
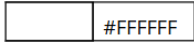
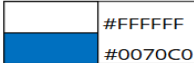
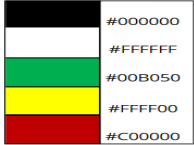
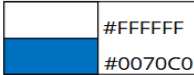
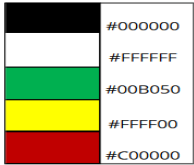
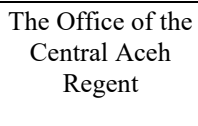
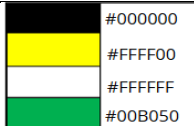
Source: Google Earth, 2023

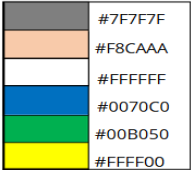
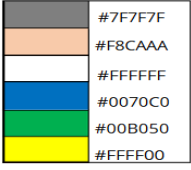
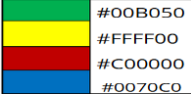
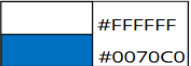
These buildings encompass a broad spectrum of societal roles, including residential, religious, educational, lodging, transportation, cultural and entertainment, and governmental functions. Each category has an essential component of Takengon's infrastructure that supports the everyday lives of its residents. Beyond their practical functions, these buildings play an important role in embodying and showcasing the region's cultural heritage. The selected buildings were chosen not only for their public utility but also for their architectural features, particularly the application of Gayonese ornamentation.

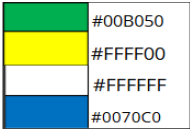
Signifier: Placement, Pattern, and Color Usage

The ornamentation observed in public buildings across Takengon exhibit a consistent signification manifested through three principal aspects: placement, pattern, and color application. To facilitate a structured analysis, these ornamental features are examined within the architectural framework of three spatial zones: the head, body, and base. Table 2 outlines the distribution of ornamentation across these zones, detailing the specific placement, recurring patterns, and color schemes employed in the public architecture of the urban area of Takengon.

Public Building	Placement of Ornamentation		Patterns of ornamentation	Colors Used
Pendopo of the Central Aceh Regent 	Head	√	<i>Emun Berangkat, Emun Mupesir, Emun Berkune, Cucuk Pengong, and Tekukur.</i>	
	Body	-	-	-
	Base	-	-	-
Ruhamah Grand Mosque 	Head	√	<i>Emun Berkune, Emun Beriring, and Puter Tali.</i>	
	Body	√	<i>Emun Berkune, Sarak Opat, Tekukur, Emun Beriring, and Pucuk Rebun.</i>	
	Base	-	-	-
IAIN Gajah Putih Campus	Head	√	<i>Emun Mupesir, and Emun Berangkat.</i>	

Public Building	Placement of Ornamentation	Patterns of ornamentation	Colors Used
	Body	√ <i>Emun Mutumpuk, Emun Beriring, Puter Tali, Tekukur, and Sarak Opat.</i>	
	Base	-	-
Linge Land Hotel 	Head	√ <i>Pucuk Rebung, Tekukur, and Sarak Opat.</i>	
	Body	√ <i>Emun Mutumpuk, Puter Tali, Mata Ni Lo, Emun Beriring, Pucuk Rebung, Terkukur, and Sarak Opat.</i>	
	Base	√ <i>Emun Mutumpuk, Emun Mupesir, Emun Beriring,</i>	
Terminal Type A Paya Ilang 	Head	√ <i>Pucok Rebung, and Emun Metumpuk.</i>	
	Body	√ <i>Puter Tali, Pucok Rebung, and Emun Metumpuk.</i>	
	Base	√ <i>Puter Tali.</i>	
The Arts Performance Hall 	Head	√ <i>Emun Mupesir, Emun Beriring, Puter Tali, Mata Ni Lo, Tekukur, and Sarak Opat.</i>	
	Body	-	-
	Base	-	-
The Office of the Central Aceh Regent 	Head	√ <i>Emun Mutumpuk, Cucok Pengong, Emun Beurangkat, Emun Berkune, Puter Tali,</i>	

Public Building	Placement of Ornamentation	Patterns of ornamentation	Colors Used
	Body	-	-
	Base	√ <i>Emun Berkune.</i>	 #000000 #FFFF00
The Central Aceh Regional House of Representatives Office 	Head	√ <i>Emun Beurangkat, Puter Tali, Emun Mupesir, Emun Berkune, and Mata Ni Lo.</i>	 #7F7F7F #F8CAAA #FFFFFF #0070C0 #00B050 #FFFF00
	Body	-	-
	Base	-	-
The Takengon Immigration Office 	Head	√ <i>Emun Mutumpuk, Emun Berkune, Tekukur, and Sarak Opat.</i>	 #7F7F7F #F8CAAA #FFFFFF #0070C0 #00B050 #FFFF00
	Body	√ <i>Emun Berangkat, and Emun Mutumpuk.</i>	 #00B050 #FFFF00 #C00000 #0070C0
	Base	√ <i>Emun Berangkat.</i>	 #FFFFFF #0070C0
Takengon State Treasury Service Office	Head	-	-
	Body	√ <i>Emun Berkune, Emun Mutumpuk, Emun Beriring, Emun Beurangkat, Puter Tali, Pucuk Rebung, Tekukur, and Sarak Opat.</i>	 #FFFFFF #0070C0 #C00000 #00B050 #FFFF00 #000000

Public Building	Placement of Ornamentation	Patterns of ornamentation	Colors Used
	Base	√ <i>Puter Tali, and Tekukur.</i>	 #00B050 #FFFF00 #FFFFFF #0070C0

Based on tabular data and visual analysis of ten major public buildings in Takengon, a consistent pattern emerges in the application of traditional ornamentation within contemporary architecture. The head zone is the most heavily adorned, with nine out of ten buildings featuring ornaments in this area. These decorative elements are typically positioned on the roof fascia, upper walls, or gable ends, reinforcing their symbolic function as the “crown” of the building. This observation aligns with the view of Zulfikri et al. (2023), who assert that the roof in Gayonese traditional architecture plays a critical role as a marker of identity (Zulfikri *et al.*, 2023). Theoretically, this is consistent with Rapoport’s (1969) argument that the most symbolically loaded architectural elements are often those most highly decorated. This is evident in The Office of the Central Aceh Regent, *Pendopo* of the Central Aceh Regent, and The Arts Performance Hall (Figure 4), where the motifs prominently and consistently embellish the uppermost parts of the structure.



Figure 4. Application of Ornamentation in the Head Section of Public Buildings

The body zone ranks second in frequency of ornamentation, appearing in six out of the ten buildings. In this zone, motifs are typically applied in the form of linear bands or repetitive patterns that extend along the façade, columns, or parapets. The Linge Land Hotel and Ruhama Mosque are exemplary in utilizing the building’s body as a canvas for visual cultural expression (Figure 5). In several instances, the ornamentation in this zone not only serves a decorative function but also reinforces institutional representation and regional identity.



Figure 5. Application of Ornamentation in the Body Section of Public Buildings

In contrast, the base zone is the least ornamented, appearing in only five out of the ten buildings, namely Terminal Type A Paya Ilang, The Office of the Central Aceh Regent, The Takengon Immigration Office, Takengon State Treasury Service Office, and the Linge Land Hotel (Figure 6). Despite its limited application, the ornamentation at the base maintains visual continuity with the head and body zones, often repeating the same motifs at different scales and placements to achieve an overall visual harmony.



Figure 6. Application of Ornamentation in the Base Section of Public Buildings

Based on an analysis of the signifier embedded in the ornamental motifs applied to public buildings in Takengon, a wide variety of decorative patterns are observed, ranging from single basic motifs to complex combinations involving up to seven elements. The standalone basic motifs include *Emun Berangkat*, applied to the *tolak angin* (roof ridge) of the Regent's Pavilion, *Emun Mutumpuk* and *Emun Berkune* on the upper parts of supporting buildings, as well as *Puter Tali*, which adorns the columns of the terminal. Combinations of two motifs are found on several key buildings in Takengon. For example, the roof of the IAIN Takengon building features a combination of *Emun Berkune* with *Cucok Pengong*, *Emun Mupesir* with *Tekukur*, and *Emun Mupesir* with *Emun Beurangkat*. Additionally, façade of the terminal building showcases a blend of *Emun Mutumpuk* with *Pucuk Rebung*. The application of both basic and combined motifs can be seen in Figure 7.



Figure 7. The Application of: a) Basic Motifs, b) Combinations of Two Motifs

Combinations of three basic motifs are applied to buildings with particularly strong symbolic significance, such as the dome of Ruhamah Mosque in Takengon, which features *Emun Berkune*, *Emun Beriring*, and *Puter Tali*. Other combinations include *Emun Berkune*, *Tekukur*, and *Sarak Opat*; *Emun Berkune*, *Emun Beriring*, *Pucuk Rebung*; as well as *Emun Mutumpuk*, *Puter Tali*, and *Mata Ni Lo* found on the balcony of the Linge Land Hotel. Four-motif combinations are seen in various architectural elements, such as the lower wall of the front façade of the Immigration Office, which incorporates *Emun Mutumpuk*, *Emun Berkune*, *Tekukur*, and *Sarak Opat*. Additional combinations include *Emun Beurangkat*, *Emun Beriring*, *Puter Tali*, and *Pucuk Rebung*; *Emun Beurangkat*, *Emun Berkune*, *Puter Tali*, and *Pucuk Rebung*; as well as *Emun Mutumpuk*, *Emun Mupesir*, *Puter Tali*, and *Emun Beriring*. Moreover, a five-motif combination can be found at the entrance of IAIN Takengon, particularly on the left and right sides of the main door, consisting of *Emun Mutumpuk*, *Emun Beriring*, *Puter Tali*, *Tekukur*, and *Sarak Opat*, representing values of deliberation, unity, and collective responsibility. The application of motif combinations involving three, four, and five elements can be seen in Figure 8.

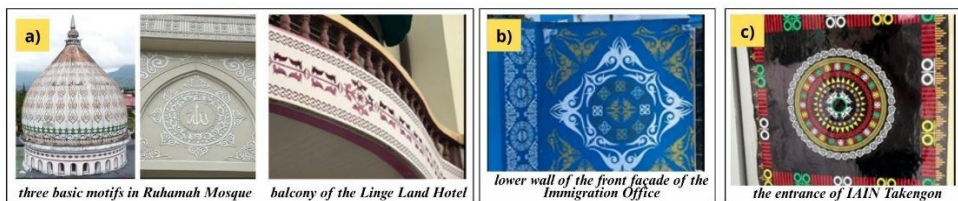


Figure 8. Ornamentation Combination: a) Three Motifs, b) Four Motifs, c) Five Motifs

Six-motif combinations are applied to various buildings, including the Performing Arts Center in Takengon and the DPRK (Regional House of Representatives) building, through the integration of *Emun Mupesir*, *Emun Beriring*, *Puter Tali*, *Mata Ni Lo*, *Tekukur*, and *Sarak Opat*. Other examples feature combinations of *Emun Mutumpuk*, *Emun Beriring*, *Puter Tali*, *Pucuk Rebung*, *Tekukur*, and *Sarak Opat*, which are used on the walls of the Immigration Office and in the interior of the Takengon Terminal. The highest level of complexity is represented by the seven-motif combination, comprising *Emun Beurangkat*, *Emun Berkune*, *Emun Mutumpuk*, *Puter Tali*, *Pucuk Rebung*, *Tekukur*, and *Sarak Opat*. This motif is applied to the body and front wall of the Immigration Office building, reflecting the deep cultural values of the Gayo community as articulated through

public architectural expression. The application of motif combinations involving six and seven elements can be seen in Figure 9.



Figure 9. The Application of a Combination: a) Six Motifs, b) Seven Motifs

The combination of basic ornamental motifs reflects a shift from symbolic meaning toward a more pronounced aesthetic function, with their placement carefully considering visual composition, rhythm, and formal balance across architectural elements such as columns, walls, and roofs. This integration enriches the visual appearance of buildings while creating a more dynamic decorative expression within the context of contemporary urban architecture in Takengon.

Three main compositional patterns were identified: linear, repetitive, and framed. Linear patterns typically adorn the edges of roofs or façades as continuous lines, emphasizing either the horizontal or vertical orientation of the building. Repetitive patterns dominate larger surfaces such as walls or parapets, generating a dynamic visual rhythm. Framed patterns, on the other hand, are more selectively applied to accentuate key architectural elements such as entrances, signage, or symbolic panels, often articulating the core values of the institution housed within.

In terms of color, a total of ten colors were identified in the ornamentation of these buildings: white, red, black, yellow, green, blue, brown, grey, orange, and cream (Figure 10). Traditional Gayonese colors; black, white, red, yellow, and green, remain foundational, aligning with Prijotomo's (1995) findings that although colors in traditional architecture hold philosophical meaning, their application in modern contexts tends to be more aesthetic (Prijotomo, 1995). According to Dafrina et al. (2022), the five core Gayonese colors carry deep cultural significance: white symbolizes purity, red represents courage, black denotes steadfastness, yellow signifies prosperity, and green stands for fertility. White is the most prevalent, appearing in all ten buildings, while green and red are used in nine, and yellow and black in eight.

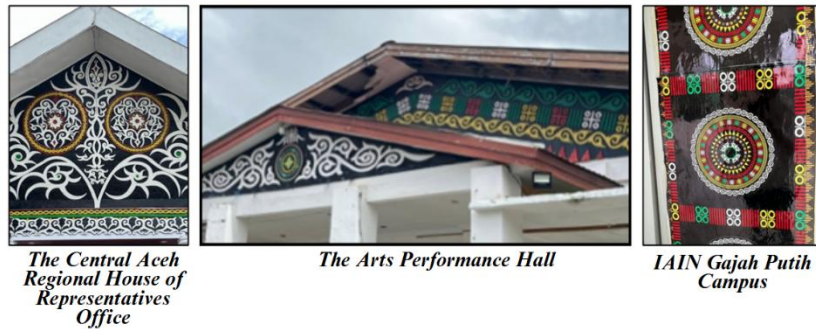


Figure 10. Use of the Five Traditional Gayo Colors in Public Buildings

Nonetheless, non-traditional Gayonese colors are also widely used in public architecture, such as blue (three buildings), brown (one building), grey (one building), orange (one building), and cream (three buildings). These colors are typically selected based on institutional identity or contemporary aesthetic preferences. For instance, the Takengon Immigration Office prominently displays blue, yellow, and white, directly referencing its institutional logo, as shown in Figure 11. This illustrates that, in contemporary public architecture, color choices are more often driven by representational and institutional functions rather than traditional philosophical meanings.



Figure 11. Logo and Facade of the Takengon Immigration Office

Source: google.com & researcher's documentation, 2023

This shift carries important implications for the transmission and preservation of cultural identity. Traditional Gayonese colors embody profound symbolic meanings rooted in philosophy and local values. However, the dominance of modern, institutionally oriented palettes risks diminishing community awareness of these symbolic dimensions. As a result, the role of ornamentation as a cultural symbol may gradually weaken, being overtaken by aesthetic and functional considerations.

This concern is echoed by a local academic interviewed in this study.

"In general, the Gayonese community, especially in Central Aceh, is very enthusiastic about using these ornamental motifs. They recognize them as part of their identity, both in terms of pattern and color, such as black, white, yellow, red, and green. However, they do not

necessarily understand the deeper meanings, philosophies, or even the names of the individual motifs” (Participant A, 2024).

This statement underscores that, while ornamentation and color remain vital expressions of cultural identity, their deeper philosophical understanding has diminished, particularly in the context of modern public architecture. This phenomenon resonates with Rapoport’s (1969) notion that architectural form functions as a system of non-verbal communication, yet the cultural message it conveys may weaken when traditional symbols are overshadowed by functional or institutional considerations.

In conclusion, the ornamentation of public buildings in the urban area of Takengon predominantly serves a decorative function, with limited reflection on the philosophical meanings inherent in traditional Gayonese motifs. The application of these motifs is largely concentrated in the head zone, featuring nature-inspired patterns such as *Emun Berkune*, *Emun Beriring*, and *Mata Ni Lo*. While traditional elements are retained in form and placement, their symbolic depth remains underutilized. The use of varied colors further reflects a visual adaptation that prioritizes aesthetics over cultural meaning.

Signified: The Meaning of Ornaments on Public Buildings

Architecture, particularly in the public realm, is not merely a physical construct but also a vessel of cultural narratives and identity. In the context of Takengon, public buildings serve as both functional spaces and canvases for the expression of Gayonese heritage, where ornamentation plays a vital role in mediating tradition and modernity. The use of ornamentation is thus not incidental, but a deliberate cultural act that communicates layers of meaning through visual and spatial design.

A local government official responsible for building permits in Takengon highlighted that the ornamentation found on public buildings often carries deep philosophical significance rooted in Gayonese traditions. Motifs such as *Puter Tali*, *Emun Berangkat*, *Emun Berkune*, and other symbolic patterns are not merely decorative elements, but also visual embodiments of the Gayonese worldview, which is intimately connected to the cosmos, natural environment, and social ethics embedded in daily life. These motifs are carefully integrated into architectural components such as roof ridges, columns, and walls to communicate meaning and reinforce collective identity, while also contributing to the sensory and emotional comfort of public spaces.

Rather than being arbitrary embellishments, these ornaments communicate in a language of symbols—a visual code that conveys philosophical principles and social values. For instance, the *Puter Tali* motif represents unity and interconnectedness among community members, while the various *Emun* motifs (such as *Emun Berangkat* and *Emun Berkune*) convey ideas of progress, balance, and sustainability within the socio-cultural context of Gayo life. Their spatial positioning also carries cultural weight: appearing prominently in architectural elements with high visibility and symbolic resonance, such as the *tolak angin* (roof ridge), vertical columns, and frontal wall panels.

Field observations indicate that while a diverse range of motifs are employed, including *Puter Tali*, *Emun Mutumpuk*, *Emun Beriring*, *Tekukur*, *Sarak Opat*, *Pucuk Rebung*, and others, their selection often reflects a deliberate effort to preserve and communicate cultural narratives. When analyzed through Prijotomo's (1995) framework, it becomes evident that naturalistic motifs dominate over geometric or floral patterns, reflecting the Gayonese community's profound connection to nature. The absence of fauna motifs in these public buildings further underscores a shift in symbolic preference, distinguishing these practices from other vernacular traditions where animal motifs are still prominent, as noted by Dafrina et al. (2022) in their study of *Umah Pitu Ruang*.

In addition to the dominant motifs, several others are also used selectively to emphasize particular values and aesthetic goals. Motifs such as *Mata Ni Lo*, inspired by the radiance of sunlight, symbolize the sun as a source of life and convey a philosophical message encouraging individuals to radiate goodness toward all living beings. Likewise, the *Emun Berkune* motif embodies principles of democracy, responsibility, and guidance, reinforcing moral direction through ornamentation. These motifs are strategically incorporated into architectural elements to enhance the narrative richness of the façade. Often, they are paired with more commonly used patterns to create a multi-layered visual structure that is both rhythmically balanced and compositionally coherent.

Furthermore, the spatial arrangement of certain motifs, such as *Pucuk Rebung* and *Tekukur*, are generally positioned on upper wall segments or fascia lines, adhering to an inherited visual logic that assigns symbolic weight to architectural hierarchy. This visual structure reinforces the ornamental grammar passed down through generations and contributes to a cohesive decorative system where each motif occupies a meaningful spatial role. The continued use of this compositional order in modern public buildings indicates not only an effort to beautify architecture but also a subtle assertion of cultural continuity.

More importantly, the use of such ornamentation regardless of whether it is applied ornamentally or structurally should be understood as a cultural act. It embodies a form of non-verbal communication, wherein each motif functions as a carrier of ancestral knowledge, moral guidance, and communal memory. As a Gayonese cultural expert affirms, the *kerawang* motifs are not mere aesthetic devices; they encapsulate *adat* (customary laws), ethical teachings, and social expectations that have been transmitted across generations. Consequently, the application of these motifs must not be driven solely by aesthetic trends or institutional branding, but should remain rooted in their original meanings, ensuring continuity between built form and cultural identity.

Concept of Ornamentation Application on Public Buildings

The discussion on ornamentation in Takengon's public buildings produces a structured application model that serves as a guiding principle in architectural design. Ornament placement is divided into three architectural zones, head, body, and base, each reflecting a symbolic hierarchy of cultural values. The head conveys the highest ideals, such as divinity, loyalty, unity, leadership, and the source of life. The body

represents intermediate values like harmony, collective effort, wisdom, and gratitude, while the base reflects strength, struggle, dignity, and the foundation of life experiences. As illustrated in Figure 12, this spatial logic ensures that each motif reinforces the building's symbolic narrative. Celestial or upper-natural motifs, such as *Emun Berkune*, *Emun Beriring*, *Emun Beurangkat*, and *Mata Ni Lo*, are placed on the head. The body is adorned with geometric patterns like *Tekukur*, *Sarak Opat*, and *Puter Tali*, while floral motifs such as *Pucuk Rebung*, which symbolize growth from the earth, are applied at the base.



Figure 12. Illustration of Ornament Placement (Head, Body, and Base)
Based on Symbolic Meaning

The second principle addresses the use of traditional color schemes in ornamentation (see Figure 13). For the head section, a black background is recommended, accompanied by white for cloud-related motifs and red for sun-related motifs. In Gayonese tradition, red symbolizes courage in upholding truth. The body is recommended to have a white background, with red used for *Tekukur* and *Sarak Opat*, and yellow for *Puter Tali*. For the base, a black background with green-colored *Pucuk Rebung* ornaments is suggested, symbolizing the bamboo shoot.

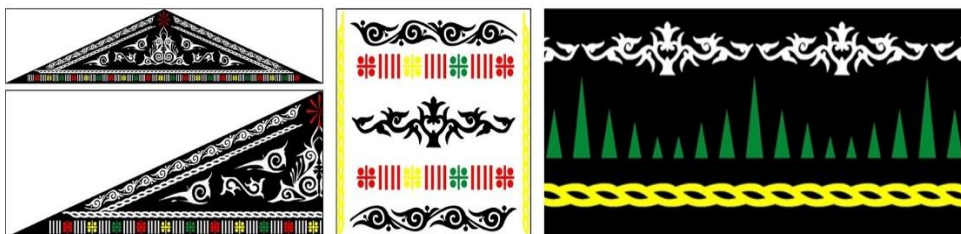


Figure 13. Application of Ornament Design Based on Traditional Color Scheme

This approach to ornamentation, which integrates symbolic meaning and traditional color, aims to reinforce cultural identity and achieve visual harmony in the architecture of public buildings. Conceptual illustrations of locally grounded ornamentation strategies in urban public buildings in Takengon are presented in Figure 14 and Figure 15.



Figure 14. Illustration of Guidelines for the Placement of Gayo Motifs and Colors on Public Buildings

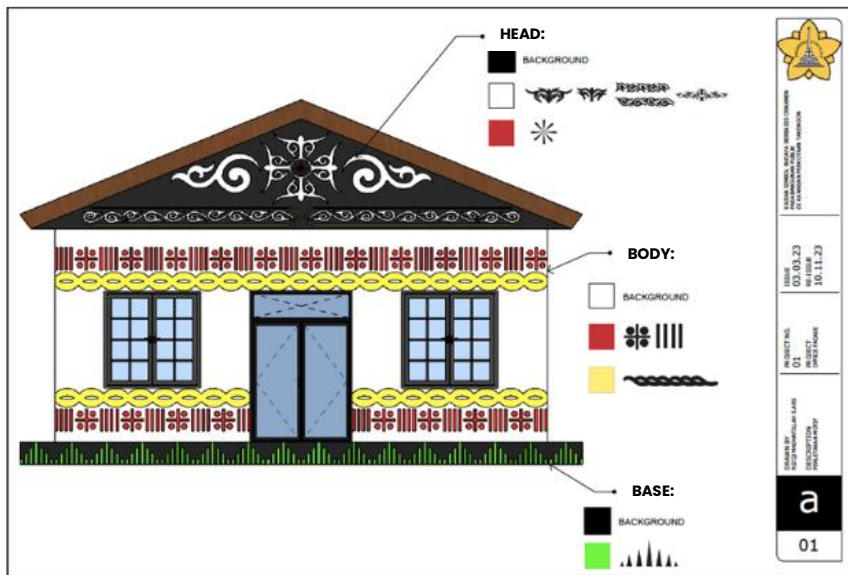


Figure 15. Illustration of Guidelines for the Placement of Culturally Based Gayo Ornamental Symbols on Public Buildings

CONCLUSIONS

The application of ornamentation on public buildings in the urban area of Takengon, in terms of placement, meaning, and color, demonstrates varying degrees of alignment with the ideal concept of culturally based ornamentation. Specifically, the analysis reveals that ornamentation is distributed across three architectural zones; head, body, and base, with a dominance of motifs placed on the upper (head) section. Frequently

used motifs are derived from natural and celestial elements, such as *Emun Berkune*, *Emun Beriring*, *Emun Mupesir*, *Emun Beurangkat*, *Emun Mutumpuk*, and *Mata Ni Lo*. Regarding color, traditional Gayonese tones such as black, white, red, yellow, and green are prominent, alongside additional colors like gray, orange, cream, and brown. While some elements are applied in accordance with traditional principles, many still function as purely decorative features without reflecting their underlying philosophical meanings.

To address this issue, the study proposes a conceptual framework in the form of illustrative guidelines that integrate symbolic meanings, spatial hierarchy (head, body, and base of the building), and traditional color schemes. These guidelines not only provide technical directions regarding the appropriate motifs for each architectural zone but also ensure that their application remains consistent with the cultural philosophy of the Gayo community. Accordingly, the primary contribution of this research is the provision of a culturally grounded design reference that can guide architects and planners in producing public buildings that are not only visually appealing but also authentically represent local identity.

The implications of this research extend to the preservation of cultural heritage. By re-establishing the philosophical meanings of ornamentation in public architecture, buildings can serve as cultural-educational media while simultaneously reinforcing community attachment to local identity. Furthermore, the proposed illustrative guidelines may serve as a foundation for local governments to develop official design standards. In this regard, the Central Aceh Public Works Office is expected to play an active role in formulating culturally informed technical regulations, thereby ensuring both the consistency of ornamentation practices and their contribution to the creation of a culturally distinctive urban environment. More broadly, this also underscores the importance of cultural continuity and the intergenerational transmission of local wisdom through architecture.

For future research, it is important to conduct in-depth studies on how local communities perceive and respond to ornamentation in public buildings, and to what extent these philosophical values are understood and internalized by younger generations. Additionally, further exploration of material choices and construction techniques is highly relevant to ensure that the application of traditional ornaments is not only symbolically meaningful but also technically and environmentally sustainable. Expanding the scope of this research in such directions may enable ornamentation practices in Takengon to serve as a model of cultural preservation that is applicable, contextual, and beneficial for the broader development of Nusantara architecture.

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