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Toponymy Of Water Elements As Linguistic And Cultural Identity Of Kupang City Community

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Abstract

Indonesia as an archipelagic country with an extraordinary diversity of languages, provides a very fertile toponymy research field. The purpose of this study is to examine the toponymy of urban villages containing water elements in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, with a socio-onomastic approach. This research method uses a literature research approach and field research. Data was obtained through Google Maps digital map search and field interviews with informants who mastered local linguistic and historical knowledge (speakers of Helong, Dawan, Rote, and Kupang Malay). The results of the research based on map tracing and interviews found fourteen villages whose names are composed of water elements, most of them are lexical elements oe- and namo- 'water or port'. The name of the village has four types of toponymy based on the meaning of its constituent parts, namely (i) water toponymy with topographic elements, (ii) water toponymy with artifact or container elements, (iii) water toponymy with water properties or quality elements, and (iv) water toponymy with human elements. Some villages have more than one version of the origin of the name that lives in the community. From a socio-onomastic perspective, the diversity of these versions is a natural phenomenon because place names have diverse characteristics and are influenced by the preferences of the people who speak them.

Keywords: Kupang City, Meaning, Socio-Onomastic, Toponymy, Water Element.

INTRODUCTION

There is a story behind the naming of a place. A name does not come about by chance, but rather is given by a person or a group of people at a specific time and for a specific reason.

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Sometimes the name survives across generations, sometimes it changes, shifts, or coexists with other names. The origin of place names is studied in the field of toponymy, which is a branch of onomastics that traces the history of naming and provides explanations for the names of terrestrial elements. Through toponymy, a place name can be read as an unwritten archive that records the relationship of humans with the space they live in.

Indonesia, as an archipelagic country with an extraordinary diversity of languages, provides a very fertile field of toponymy research. One of the interesting areas to study is Kupang City, the capital of East Nusa Tenggara Province. The city is the meeting point of a number of ethnic and regional languages, including Helong, Dawan (Uab Meto), Rote, and Kupang Malay, each of which leaves its mark on the names of the villages. Not a few village names in Kupang City begin with the lexical element oe- which in Tamil and Rote means 'water', or namo- which means 'beach/port'. The frequency of water elements in this naming indicates how important the existence of water sources is for the formation of settlements in areas with a relatively dry climate.

Toponymic research on place names with natural elements in Indonesia has been carried out by a number of researchers. Filia (2024) studied the toponymy of beach names in Belitung with a socio-onomastic approach and found four naming patterns based on terrain elements, flora, fauna, and sound. Zulfa and Hendrokumoro (2026), in a study on the naming of water-based villages in Demak Regency, showed that water element markers such as water, river, tlogo, and kedung reflect the ecological conditions and social experiences of the local community. In the East Nusa Tenggara region itself, language studies on behalf of places are still limited; Gigy (2020), for example, has just studied the historical value of street names in Batupil Village, Kupang City. A socio-onomastic approach to place names in Indonesia has also been applied in depth by Erikha and Lauder (2022) in a study of street name change in the city of Yogyakarta. Thus, the study of toponymy on behalf of water-based villages in Kupang City is still wide open and has not been worked on specifically.

Based on initial observations, the number of names of water-based villages in Kupang City raises the question: why is the water element so dominant in the naming of urban villages in this city, and what elements of meaning accompany it? This problem is interesting because these names not only mark the existence of water, but also record topography, cultural artifacts, the nature of water, and even the social relations of the people who speak it. It is not uncommon for one village to have more than one version of the origin story of the name that coexists in the community.

This study aims to explain the names of water-based villages in Kupang City along with the

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origin and meaning of their constituent constituents, as well as to map their patterns or toponymic types. The approach used is socio-onomastic, which is the study of names through a sociolinguistic perspective that not only traces the meaning of the words that make up the name, but also the explanation of community members about their origins. The name of the village is recorded based on Google Maps/Google Earth digital maps, then confirmed to local residents who are resource persons and informants through several questions. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of toponymy and socio-onomastic studies in Indonesia, especially for the East Nusa Tenggara region which is still rarely researched. In addition, the documentation of the origin of the name of the water-based village is useful as an effort to preserve local linguistic and historical knowledge, most of which is still oral and vulnerable to extinction with the change of generations.

RESEARCH METHODS

Toponymy research can basically be done in two ways. The first way concentrates on the etymology, meaning, and origin of toponyms (micro level); The second way focuses on the toponyms of a region and observes the patterns of those various names (macro level). This study utilizes both methods, namely examining the etymology, meaning, and origin of water-based village names in Kupang City as well as mapping their naming patterns.

This study uses literature research methods and field research. Literature research uses Google Maps/Google Earth digital maps to capture the names and locations of villages. Field research was conducted through interviews with resource persons, namely community leaders and traditional elders who are considered to have mastered local linguistic and historical knowledge, as well as residents around the village. Interviews are recorded, transcribed and tabulated. In this study, each village name was confirmed to several informants to record the diversity of versions of the origin of the names that developed in the community.

The interview used a questionnaire instrument that asked (1) the informant's knowledge of the name of the village, (2) the existence or absence of other names, (3) the length of stay of the informant in the area, (4) the meaning of the village name, and (5) the origin of the village name. From the source of literature data and recording transcription, data was collected in the form of the name of the village with water elements along with etymological information, origin, and meaning. The meaning of the name was obtained mainly from the results of interviews with the source. Furthermore, the data were analyzed using socio-onomastic theory as an analysis knife, then classified into toponymic types based on the meaning of their constituent constituents,

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following the classification model of Filia (2024) on the constituent elements of the name (water element + element X).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on map tracing and field interviews, thirteen villages in Kupang City were found whose names were composed of water elements. Most of the names are lexical in terms of oe- (Timorese/Rote 'water') or namo- (Rote 'beach/port'). The following table 1 summarizes the name of the village, the meaning of the provisional allegation, and the summary of the informant's statement. Furthermore, the names are classified into four types based on the elements of meaning that accompany the water element, following the constituent arrangement model of Filia (2024).

Table 1. Summary of the Names of Water Villages in Kupang City Based on the Interview Results

Village	Lexical Elements	Meaning (Provisional Suspicion)	Summary of Informant Statements
Namosain	*namo 'beach/harbour' + sain 'high sea'*	Beach/port of call facing the open sea	Rote language. The place from which King Helong crossed to Semau Island; Beautiful beach where the stopover faces the open sea.
Penkase-Oeleta	*oe 'water' + leta 'height/person's name'*	Water that drips from a height / well belonging to a person named Leta	The two villages were merged. Oeleta: water dripping from a tall tree or well belonging to a person named Leta. Previously it was named Kuan Pene (Dawan) 'kampung tinggi' to lurk the arrival of foreigners.
Oesapa, West Oesapa, South Oesapa	*oe 'water' + sapa 'water container from palm leaves'*	Water in a sapa container (haik)	Timorese/Rote Language. The water that is collected/taken uses sapa, a container made of palm leaves.

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Village	Lexical Elements	Meaning (Provisional Suspicion)	Summary of Informant Statements
Squirrelly	*Water + Miss 'Young Woman'*	Spring bathing of the king's daughter	Kupang Malay. Well where the princess/lady of the king of Kupang baths. It used to be known as Oelusapi ('water from the kosambi tree') and Oelbinon ('water of young women').
Tears	*Water + Eyes*	The springs are shaped like eyes, clear	Kupang Malay from Dawan *oelamatan* (*oel* 'water' + matan 'eye'). Eye-shaped clear springs; The form of Tears was chosen because of the influence of Solor speakers.
Nefonaek	*Nefo 'Lake/Flood' + Naek 'Big/High'*	Large lakes	Tawan language. Named after a large lake on the island of Timor; The topography of the village is in the form of a large basin similar to a lake.
Oeba	*oe 'air' + ba 'besar'*	Water/large well	Rote language. A large well or spring where residents take water.
Oepura	*oe 'water' + pura 'spray'*	Water gushing from the ground/rocks	Timorese/Helong Language. Spraying water swells out of the soil or rocks. The old form of uibobon/maspapurak.
Liliba	*lili 'river/rushing/fearful' + ba 'big/flowing'*	A large river flows rapidly	Helong/Rote language. Large and deep rivers that flow rapidly during the rainy season; It is also interpreted as 'afraid of seeing a strong current'.
Oebobo	*oe 'water' + bobo 'smell'*	Smelly water	Dawan/Rote language. Spring water near guava trees; The fruit falls into the well so that the water smells unpleasant.

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Village	Lexical Elements	Meaning (Provisional Suspicion)	Summary of Informant Statements
Oebufu	*oe 'water' + bufu 'rocky/thorn tree/beetle'*	Water coming out of rocky areas	Rote language. Water comes out of the rock/under the tree. The initial form of oebubu then becomes oebufu.
O'Neill	*oe 'air' + tete 'menetes'*	Dripping water	Timorese/Rote Language. Water dripping from stalactite caves that are the source of water for the community; Some attribute it to tears.

Referring to the constituent preparation model of Filia (2024), the names of water-based villages in Kupang City can be classified into four types, namely (i) water toponymy with topographic elements, (ii) water toponymy with artifacts/container elements, (iii) water toponymy with water properties/quality elements, and (iv) water toponymy with human elements. The discussion of each type is presented in the following subsection, accompanied by Google Maps images per village as an overview of the geographical condition of the area.

Water Toponymy with Topographic Elements

The first type combines water elements with topographic or terrestrial elements. The names that belong to this type are Penkase-Oeleta, Nefonaek, Oepura, Liliba, and Oebufu. In these five names, water is understood through the position or shape of the land where the water is located—heights, basins, bursts from the ground, rivers, and rocky areas.

Penkase-Oeleta

Penkase-Oeleta Village is a combination of two villages. The element of Oeleta comes from the Timorese/Rote language, *oe* 'water' and *leta* 'height' or 'above a tall tree', so it is interpreted as 'water that drips from the height of a tree'. Other informants associate leta with people's names, so Oeleta means 'water source or well belonging to a person named Leta'. The Penkase is associated with the activity of spying on the arrival of foreigners (Dutch/Portuguese) from high places; previously this village was named Kuan Pene (Dawan) 'high village'. The water element

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here is attached to the description of altitude so that it is classified as a water toponymy with topographic elements. This village has two names because it comes from two different villages and the indigenous people of each village do not want to change the name of their village. Therefore, the name of this village still retains the two village names, namely Penkase-Oeleta.



Figure 1. Image of Penkase-Oeleta Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Nefonaek

The name of Nefonaek Village comes from the Dawan language, *nefo* 'lake' (also 'flood/river') and *naek* 'big/high', so it means 'big lake'. According to the informant, this name is taken from the name of a large lake on the island of Timor because the topography of the village is in the form of a large basin that resembles a lake and used to be often flooded with high floods when the rainy season hit. The water element (lake or puddle) here is compounded with a concave land shape so that it is classified as a water toponymy with topographic elements.

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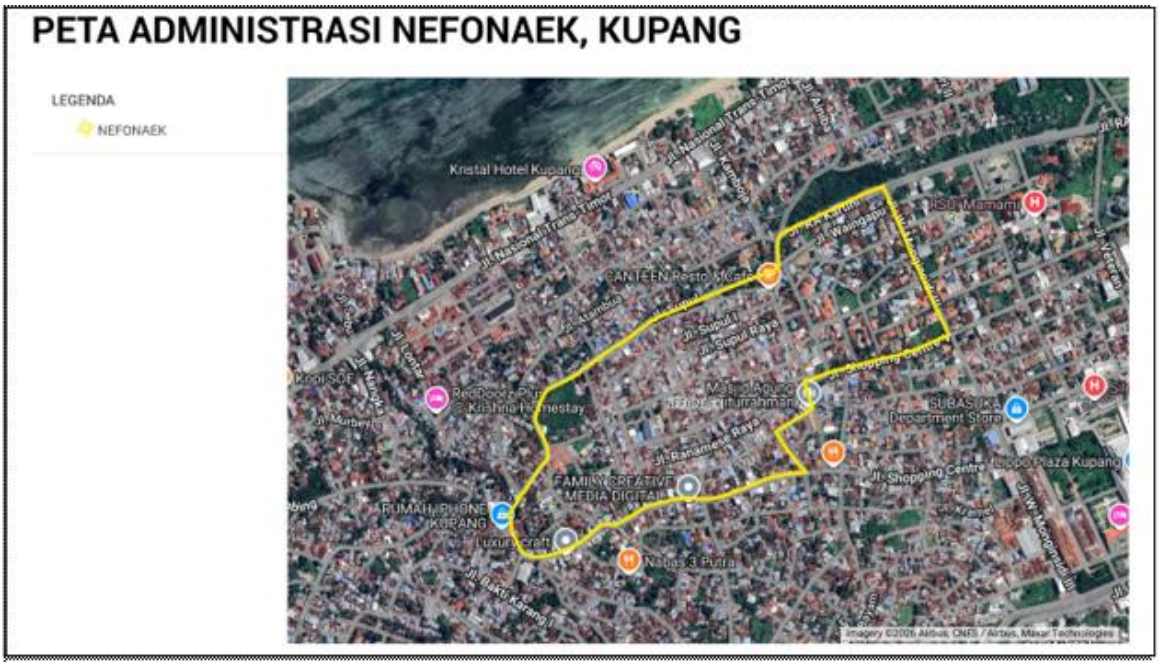


Figure 2. Image of Nefonaek Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Oepura

Oepura comes from *oe* 'water' and *pura* 'to spray or spray' so it means 'water that sprays out of the ground or rock'. Some informants linked it to the Helong language (maspapurak 'spewing spray-destruction'). Because this water element is understood through the way it comes out of soil or rock formations, this name is classified as water toponymy with topographic elements.

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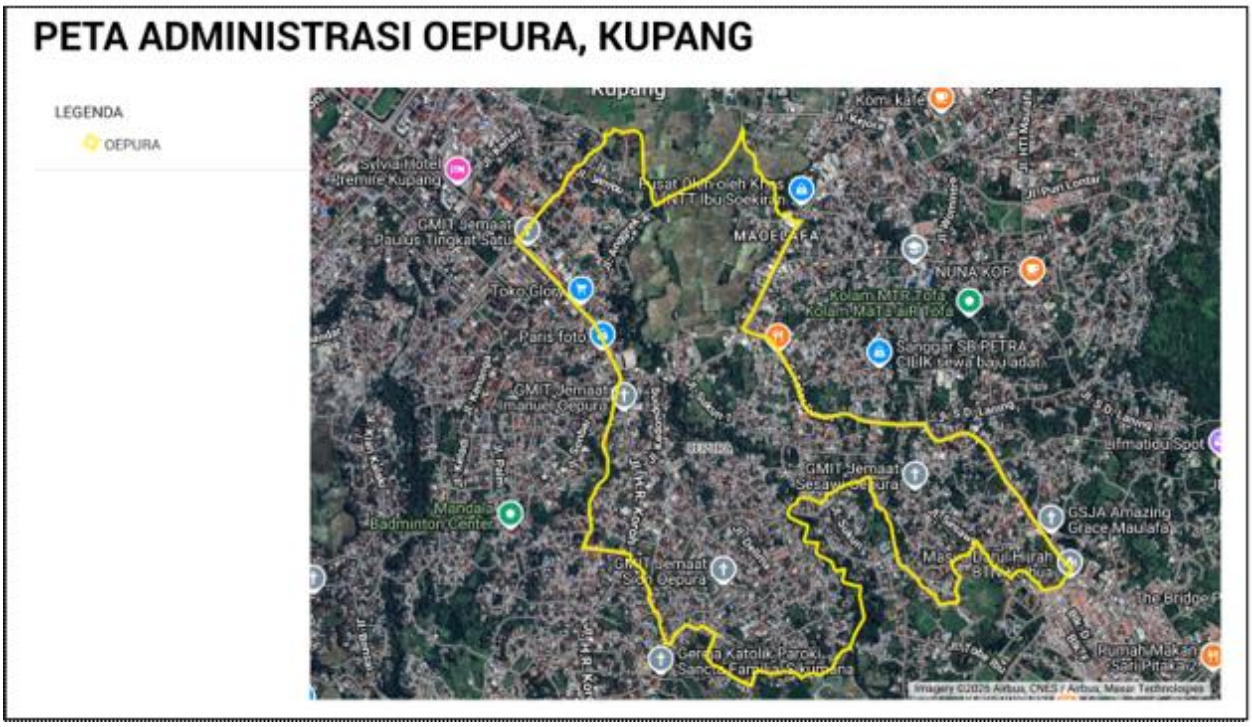


Figure 3. Image of Oepura Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Liliba

The name of Liliba Village comes from the Helong/Rote language, *lili* 'river/river' (also 'rapid') and *ba* 'big/flowing', so it means 'a large and deep river that flows very heavily in the rainy season'. Another version interprets the lilies as 'fear', referring to the worries of the king's entourage when crossing a rushing river. Water elements in the form of flowing rivers place this name on the water toponymy type with topographic elements.

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Figure 4. Image of Liliba Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Oebufu

The name Oebufu comes from *oe* 'water' and *bufu* which has various meanings: 'rocky area', 'thorny tree', or 'beetle'. The most common meaning is 'water coming out of rocky areas or from rocks'. The original form was called oebubu, which later changed to oebufu. Because the water element is understood through the rock formation from which the water comes out, this name is classified as water toponymy with topographic elements.

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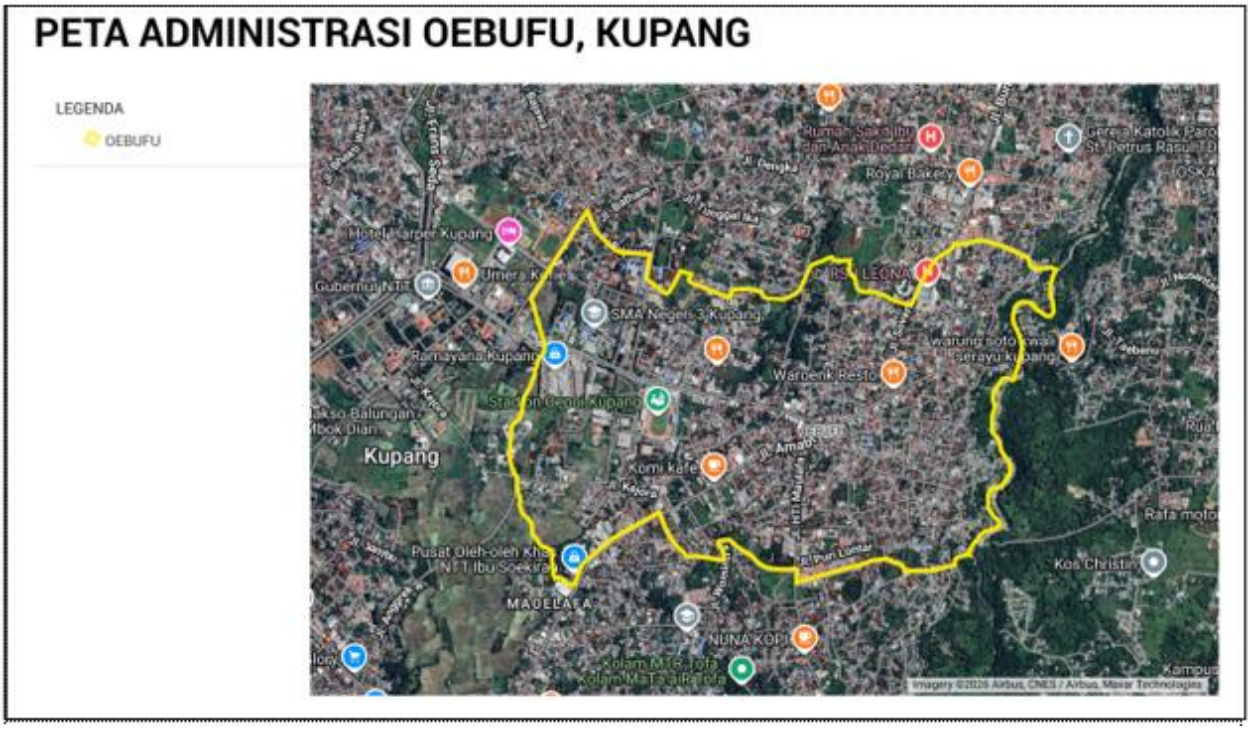


Figure 5. Image of Oebufu Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Water Toponymy with Artifacts/Container Elements

The second type combines the water element with the artifact element or water storage container. The names that belong to this type are found in two village names, namely Oesapa and Oeba. In this type, water is understood through the way it is stored or retrieved which reflects the traditional technology of water management made from throwtar.

Oesapa

Oesapa Village, which was later expanded into three regions, namely (1) Oesapa, (2) West Oesapa, and (3) South Oesapa, comes from the Timorese/Rote language, *oe* 'water' and *sapa*, which is a water container made of palm leaves, in Kupang is also known as haik. This name means 'water that is collected or taken using a greeting container'. The element of *the artifact of greeting* puts this name on the type of water toponymy with the element of artifacts or containers.

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Figure 6. Image of Oesapa Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).



Figure 7. Image of West Oesapa Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

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Figure 8. Image of South Oesapa Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Oeba

The name Oeba Village comes from the Rote language, *oe* 'water' and *ba* 'big' so it literally means 'big water'. According to the informant, this name refers to a large well or spring where residents draw water. Since the focus of the naming lies in the existence of large wells (artificial water sources or reservoirs), this name is approximated to the water toponymy type with the artifact or container element, although the 'large' size element makes it bordering on the topographic type.

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Figure 9. Image of Oeba Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Water toponymy with Water Properties/Quality Elements

The third type combines water elements with the observed properties or qualities of water, both in terms of shape, motion, and aroma. The names of villages that belong to this type are Airlage, Oebobo, and Oetete.

Tears

The name of Air Mata Village comes from the Dawan language, which is *oelamatan*. The word *oel* means 'water' and *matan* which is 'eye' which is then absorbed into the Kupang Malay language into Tears. This name means 'a clear spring shaped like an eye'. The Malay form of Tears was chosen, among other things, because of the influence of Solor speakers who lived in the area. Because the naming highlights the nature of clear and eye-shaped water, this name is classified as a water toponymy with elements of nature or quality.

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Figure 10. Image of Tear Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Oebobo

The name Oebobo Village comes from *oe* 'water' and *bobo* 'smell' (in Dawan it is also associated with 'noni') so it means 'smelly water'. According to the informant, there is a spring that is used as a well near the guava tree, some say noni trees; Fruit that falls into the well makes the smell of water unpleasant. The prominence of the aroma of water puts this name on the toponymy type of water with elements of nature/quality.

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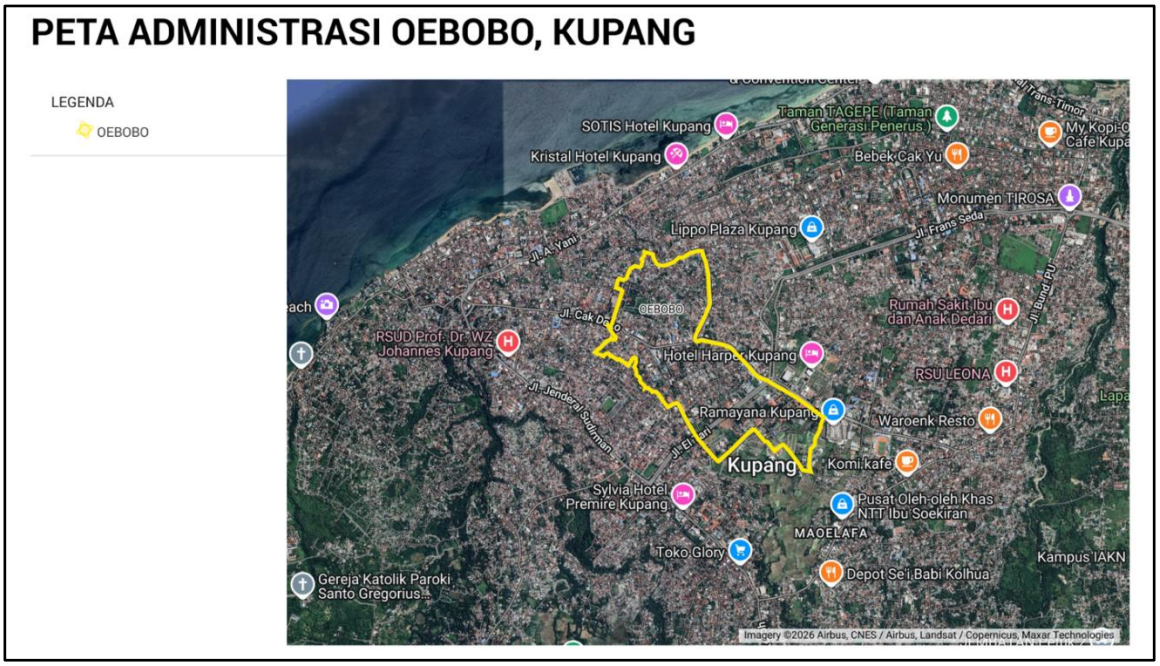


Figure 11. Image of Oebobo Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Squirrel

The name Oetete Village comes from *oe* 'water' and *tete* 'dripping so it means 'dripping water'. The informant explained the existence of a stalactite cave (Oetete Cave) in which there is dripping water and is a source of water for the surrounding community; Some versions associate it with tears. Because the naming highlights the movement of dripping water, this name is classified as a water toponymy with elements of nature or quality.

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Figure 12. Image of Oetete Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Water Toponymy with Human Elements

The fourth type combines water elements with human elements, either in the form of activities, actors, or certain social references. The names of the villages that belong to this type are Air Nona and Namosain.

Squirrelly

The name of this village is very unique, namely Air Nona. The name of this village uses the Kupang Malay language, water and nona 'young woman' so that it means 'spring where the ladies or women bath'. According to the informant, this village used to be a well where the princess of Kupang bathed, and only the ladies / women were allowed to take water in this area. The area is also known by the old names Oelusapi ('water from the kosambi tree') and Oelbinon ('young woman's water'). Because the naming links water with actors/social relations (king's daughter, woman), this name is classified as the toponymy of water with human elements.

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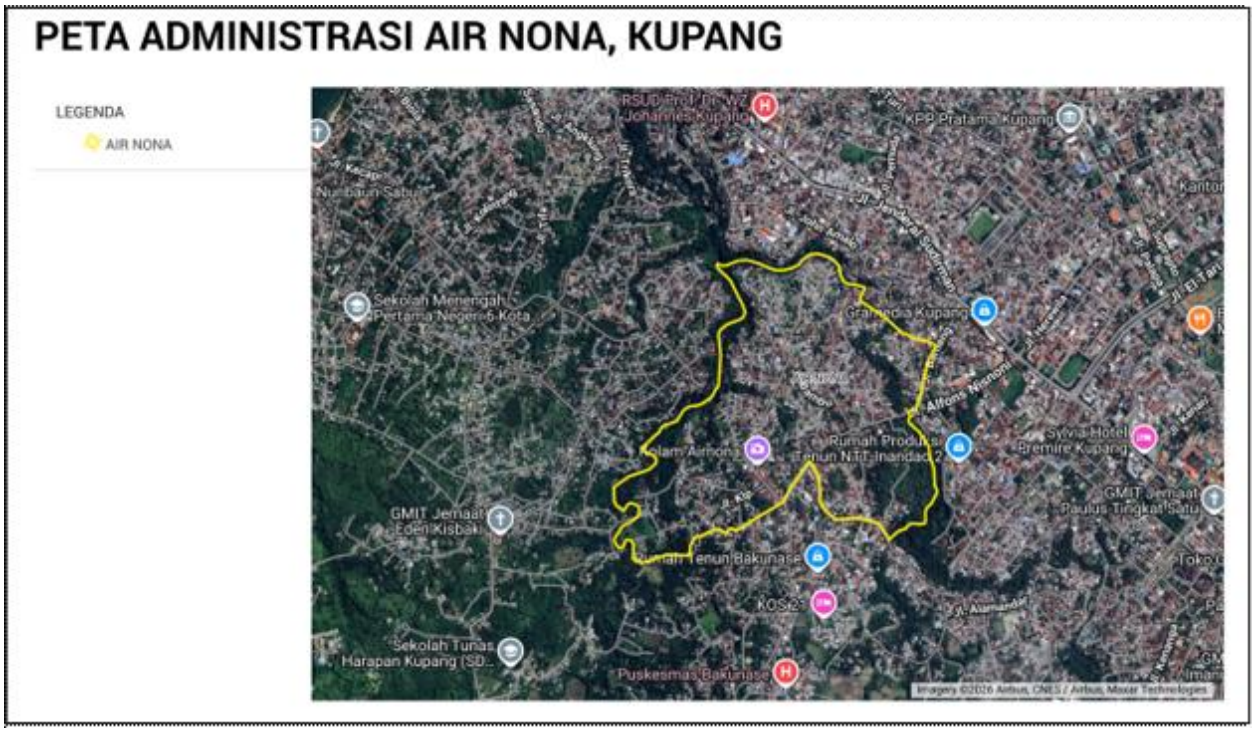


Figure 13. Image of Airnona Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Namosain

Namosain Village is located close to Tenau Port. The name of this village comes from the Rote language, namo 'beach/port' and sain 'high sea or large sea' so it means 'beach or port of stopover facing the open sea'. According to the informant, this place is the point when King Helong used to cross to Semau Island so that the name is attached to historical events and actors. Because the water element (beach, port, sea) is linked to activities and community leaders, this name is closer to the toponymic type of water with the human element, with the note that the 'open sea' element of science makes it bordering on the topographic type.

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Figure 14. Image of Namosain Village (Source: Google Earth, accessed [May 28, 2026]).

Discussion: Socio-onomastic Perspective

A number of villages have more than one version of the origin of the name that coexists. Liliba, for example, is interpreted as 'a great river with a strong current' as well as 'fear' crossing the current; Oeleta is interpreted as 'water from height' as well as 'a well belonging to a person named Leta'; while Air Nona is also known as Oelusapi and Oelbinon. From a socio-onomastic perspective, this version of diversity is not a mistake, but the reality of people's views that needs to be recorded as it is. As Ainiala and Östman (2017) emphasize, socio-onomastics actually pays attention to the use, function, and change in the use of names in their social and historical context. There are also symptoms of absorption and adjustment of the form between languages: oelamatan (Dawan) becomes Tears (Kupang Malay), and oebubu turns into oebufu. People's preferences determine which form is sustainable, such as the choice of the Malay form of Tears due to the influence of Solor speakers. This phenomenon is in line with the findings of Filia (2024) that the interaction of naming with the community makes a place can have several names and undergo a name change, a phenomenon that in toponymic studies is known as toponymic attachment.

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Toponymic Chart of Water Village Names

A summary of the toponymic classification of water-based village names in Kupang City is presented in the following chart. This chart shows the four types of toponymy and the villages that are included in each type.

Table 2. Toponymy of Villages With Water Elements in Kupang City

Air + Topography	Air + Artefak/Wadah	Water + Properties/Quality	Water + Humans
1. Penkase-Oeleta	1. Oesapa	1. Tears	1. Squirrelly
2. Nefonaek	2. West Oesapa	2. Oebobo	2. Namosain
3. Oepura	3. South Oesapa	3. O'Neill	
4. Liliba	4. Oeba		
5. Oebufu			

CONCLUSION

The name of a water-based village in Kupang City has four types of toponymy based on the meaning of its constituent constituents. First, water toponymy with topographic elements, found in five villages of Penkase-Oeleta, Nefonaek, Oepura, Liliba, and Oebufu. Second, water toponymy with artifacts/container elements, found in four villages, namely Oesapa (and its expansion, namely Oesapa, West Oesapa and South Oesapa) and Oeba. Third, water toponymy with water properties/quality elements, found in three urban villages, namely Waterlaur, Oebobo, and Oetete. Fourth, water toponymy with human elements, found in two sub-districts, Air Nona and Namosain. There are 14 out of 51 villages in Kupang City that have toponymy, village meaning the element of water in it.

Linguistically, most names are composed of the lexical elements *oe-* 'water' (Timorese/Rote) and *namo-* 'beach/port' (Rote), which are combined with the noun or adjective pewatas to form a unit of phrase. The dominance of *the oe-* element emphasizes that the existence of water sources—springs, wells, rivers, and water that gush and drip—is an important marker in the formation of settlements in Kupang City. From a socio-onomastic perspective, the presence of more than one version of the origin of the name as well as the adjustment of interlinguistic forms (Dawan, Helong, Rote, and Kupang Malay) is a natural phenomenon. This diversity shows the rich culture and history of the multiethnic people of Kupang while emphasizing that the names of the places where they live, are used, and chosen by the people who speak them. Thus, the toponymy

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of the name of the water-based village in Kupang City is not just a marker of location, but a record of human, water, and space relations that are inherited across generations.

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