

Wacana Vol. 14 No. 2 (October 2012): 429–454

The urban anthropologist as *flâneur*

The symbolic pattern of Indonesian cities

PETER J.M. NAS

ABSTRACT

Cities are places full of symbols. In the past decades, Indonesian cities have become the cradle of urban symbolism studies. In this article, the author presents the results of these studies. The cities researched differ tremendously, ranging from the national capital to provincial capitals and small towns; some of them, such as Jakarta, are purely colonial in origin, while others are more or less traditional in character. Some of them have a top-down symbolic structure, largely the product of government activities, while others have symbolic configurations which have a more grassroots character and are based in the religious domain. The methodological aspect of urban symbolism fieldwork is explored by the introduction of the concept of *flâneur*.

KEYWORDS

Anthropology, urban, cities, symbolism, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

As the variety of their symbols and symbol carriers is abundant, very different configurations of symbols or symbolic patterns can be found in cities. These symbol carriers can be as diverse as layout, statues, monuments, landmarks, street names, murals, graffiti, rituals, festivities and so on. However, the dominant carriers and configurations of symbols in a particular city are generally as yet still unknown before research is commenced. Students of urban symbolism must be ready to expose themselves to the complex urban environment and learn from their informants what the latter think about place and space and which symbol carriers they believe are present. After an initial familiarization, including elaborate memorizing and photographing, the combination of mental and narrative mapping and extensive interviewing are the principal tools which can be used to unlock the most important symbol

PETER J.M. NAS is professor emeritus at Leiden University. He is editor of numerous publications, amongst others: *The past in the present*; *Architecture in Indonesia* (2007, with Martien de Vletter; Leiden: KITLV Press, Rotterdam: NAI Press). He is President of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES). Peter Nas may be contacted at: nas@ziggo.nl.

© 2012 Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia