The Indonesianization of the Symbols of Modernity in Plaju (Palembang), 1930s–1960s

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Introduction

The process of decolonization, the transfer of power in a political or economic sense, is almost invariably accompanied by a change of symbols. When there is a transfer of power, it stands to reason that there will be a change in meaning of the symbols, which express the identity of the new party in control. Such symbolic changes help to communicate the political and economic changes to the society. The decolonization of Indonesia was accompanied by symbolic actions such as the Proclamation of the Independence of Indonesia in 1945, the displaying of the Indonesian flag all over Indonesia, and somewhat earlier, the ban on Dutch symbols during the Japanese occupation. The replacement of the symbols of the old regime by the new regime goes beyond the political and also embraces cultural symbols (Wertheim 1999:121).

As centres of political, economic and social activity, colonial cities produced colonial symbols on a large scale in Indonesia. Most colonial symbols were ‘decolonized’ following Independence in a process, which followed a similar pattern in almost all Indonesian cities. Most notable in this process was the destruction and replacement of the old colonial symbols, for example, statues commemorating a Dutch hero. These were typically destroyed and replaced by a monument commemorating heroes of the Independence struggle. This process of eradication was by no means complete, however, and not all colonial symbols were wiped out by the new regime (Colombijn 2006; Basundoro, this volume). Sometimes the new regime did nothing but attach a new, Indonesianized meaning to the old form. A good example is when a building of the former colonial state was allocated a new function by the Indonesian Republic, or when a street or urban quarter was simply given a new name. Therefore, if we want to understand the decolonization of colonial symbols, it is not sufficient to look at the creation of new symbolic objects; it is just as important to interpret the mutation in the meaning of existing symbols.

This interpretive approach to urban symbols is rooted in accepted theories of symbolism and signification. The locus of the symbolic meaning of an object always lies outside the object and is never inherent in the object itself. People can give new meanings to a ‘symbol-carrier’ (also called ‘signifiant’), even when the
symbol-carrier itself does not change (Nas 1993:14; Ahimsa Putra 2002:2; Dillistone 2002:19; Nas, Jaffe and Samuels 2006:3, 7). In principle all objects can become a symbol. Social anthropologists have taught us that people's behaviour and physical elements created by people have symbolic meanings, as long as they can be associated with life events. Symbolic meaning is also just not restricted to material objects, it can also be found in gestures and behaviour, texts, and, what is important in this chapter, a certain area or neighbourhood. An area can become identified with a certain ethnic or social group. Often such particular visual elements of an area as architectural details or perhaps one particular building become a symbol for the whole area and its people (Dillistone 2002:22; Taal 2003:26).

In this chapter I will analyse the changing symbolic meanings of one urban area, namely Plaju, an oil company town in South Sumatra. Plaju presents an interesting subject for research because it was an economic enclave, geographically proximate to but socially distant from the city of Palembang. Palembang stretches along both sides of the River Musi, but the main parts of town lie on the west bank (called the Hilir or Ilir side). Plaju is located on the east bank (called Hulu or Ulu), about ten kilometers and slightly downstream from the centre of Palembang, but still within easy reach by boat (Manurung et al., 1956:256).1 It was only some time after Independence, in 1965, that a bridge connected both banks, thereby opening overland transport between the city centre and Plaju. This raises the question of whether political changes, which were clearly felt in Palembang, the capital of the province of South Sumatra, reverberated in the company town, lying in relative isolation across the river.2

One particular question raised in this chapter is whether this company town lost some of its social exclusiveness as a result of decolonization.

Another interesting aspect of this question is that the decolonization of colonial symbols in Plaju was an unusually protracted process, as the Europeans who worked in the oil refinery continued to play a leading role after Independence. The Indonesianization of corporate enterprise (Lindblad 2008)

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1 Some confusion exists about whether Plaju was in fact part of Palembang at the turn of the century (Nas 1995:137; McGee 1967:55; Taal 2003:66). In a sketch of Palembang in 1667, which was a major power at the time, Plaju was part of the city (Hanafiah 1998:77). A nineteenth-century map of Palembang, however, places the urban boundary on the east bank of the River Musi at kampong 14 Ulu (De Clercq 1877:74), which excludes Plaju. Plaju was still not on the list of kampong names of the east bank (Seberang Ulu) of Palembang in 1934 (Hanafiah 1998:363).

2 A strong local symbol at the time was the name Sriwijaya. Sriwijaya referred to a once powerful ancient state, which had its centre near Palembang. After considerable debate, and pressure from President Sukarno, the local university and later a large fertilizer factory were named Sriwijaya (Vlekke 1959:27; Taal 2003:2; Fikiran Rakyat 3-6-1960, 13-6-1960, 20-8-1960).