

## Conference Paper

# Decoding Attempts at Conserving Cultural Heritage: Reading Texts of Semarang and Jakarta Citybooks

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### Abstract

As a part of *citybook.eu* project, the Flemish Dutch House *deBuren* regularly holds a two-week program where international authors and photographers resided in various cities. The goal of the program is to encourage these authors and photographers to write stories, essays, and poems about the cities. These writings were then uploaded to *citybooks.eu* in the forms of webtext, e-book, and 30-minute podcasts. In 2013 and 2015, citybooks about Semarang and Jakarta were published. The texts about these two cities generally discussed the cultural legacy of colonialism. Aiming to show the connection between space and attempts at conserving colonial cultural legacy, this research focuses on how cultural legacy is discussed by various texts in citybooks about Semarang and Jakarta. Aspects of space, issues of identity, and attempts at conserving cultural heritages in the text were analyzed. Based on the findings, it was concluded that Semarang and Jakarta were two cities which adopt different strategies in conserving cultural legacies of the colonial period.

**Keywords:** citybooks, deBuren, cultural conservation, city portrait, colonial cultural legacy

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## 1. Introduction

As a project by Flemish Dutch House *deBuren*, *Citybooks.eu*, invites the best international writers and photographers to a two-week event where they can live and observe a city. They will later be expected to tell the result of their observation in the forms of stories, essays, poems, and photos. The unique portrayals of the city are later published in many books about the observed city, and these portrayals are made a part of *citybook.eu*. This project started in 2010, and as many as 25 cities have been chosen as the sites of observation for writers and photographers from around the world.

The latest ongoing citybooks project is taking place in Haarlem in the Netherlands. Among the writers, Kristien Hammerechts, an established Dutch writer from the Flandria in Belgium, contributed a piece for the citybook. Spanish writer Andrés Barbar also

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participated in the same project. The Haarlem citybooks project started in 2017, and the writers will reside in the city for four years (<http://www.citybooks.eu/nl/steden>).

In Indonesia, Semarang and Jakarta were two cities chosen to be *citybook.eu*'s sites. The citybook about Semarang (2013) was born from the collaboration between writers from Netherland, Belgium, and Indonesia. Two years later, Jakarta citybook (2015) involved more writers from Netherland, Belgium, Suriname, and Indonesia. After examining the writings in both citybooks, colonialism seems to be the common thread that connects the pieces. Although many texts are intertwined with the heritage of colonial culture, throughout the two-week residency in both cities, non-Indonesian writers produced different portrayals of space.

This article is a summary of a research about foreign writers' perspectives on space in Semarang and Jakarta, particularly in relation to viewpoints on cultural heritage. This research also found that many texts of the project attempt to maintain colonial cultural heritage. The works of non-Indonesian writers are analyzed based on an assumption of existing different perspectives between Dutch writers and Belgian or Surinamese writers. The fact that Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch for around 350 years has created a circumstance where both countries have shared history and memory. Such context results in different interpretations of the same space. Therefore, works by Indonesian writers will not be investigated. The element of space in Semarang and Jakarta in citybooks is a worthy object of study as it gives perspectives about the cities. Such proposition aligns with deBuren, who argues that "every city has its own history, authentic stories, and unique future". This research focuses on two texts in Semarang citybook. The first text is *Meisje van vroeger*, which is written by the Belgian writer Bouke Billiet. The other text is *Negen brieven aan Maria M*, a work of the Dutch writer Gustaf Peek. In Jakarta citybook, two texts are also analyzed. The two texts are *Cultureel erfgoed: een onmisbare bron van waarde*, an essay by the Dutch author Bas Heijne; and *Wat doe ik hier*, a piece by a Surinamese writer Ruth San A Jong. While the two citybooks are available in Dutch and Indonesian. This research will specifically look into the Indonesian version of the writings.

## 2. Literature Review

Research on Semarang and Jakarta citybooks have been done by Mursidah (2017). By applying the approach of sociology of literature, Mursidah analyzes the portrayals of Semarang, Jakarta, and the people who reside in the two cities. Mursidah found that the portrayals of Semarang and Jakarta cannot entirely be separated from the past

that gives a new identity to both cities. In Semarang, ethnic groups play an important role in developing the cities. However, since the era of colonization, Jakarta has been struggling with urban problems.

Adams (2018) did a research about how some of deBuren's citybooks do not consider particular images of cities as metropolitan. The research looks into the element of sociability, which refers to intersubjective relation and interaction between characters. The focus of her research is representation-based longing or rejection. Adams also looks into social stratification and environmental issues described in the texts as a part of sociability. The concept of mediopolis becomes the main framework for Adams' research. By scrutinizing the representations of various cities, a city's sociability is examined using an approach proposed by Schmidt-Lauber. Based on the analysis on texts in the citybooks (for instance, the one which deals with post industrial cities such as Sheffield and Charleroi), it can be concluded that the portrayals of both cities are closely related to the writer's position. Images of cities that have been left behind as well as industrial status of the cities are depicted by the writers.

Meanwhile, Hamadeh (2019) wrote an essay titled *Talen beleven met citybooks*. Based on media research, Hamadeh found many writings that are published through citybooks. As a writer, musician, graphic artist, expert in Islamic studies, and linguist, he investigates many texts in citybooks and did research on the work of the famous Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom about the city of Venice. Hamadeh looks into Nooteboom's works about citybooks, then he divided the text into a smaller parts and mark words or groups of particular words. Hamadeh feels as if he found "Een moment thuis zijn in het buitenland, de klanken te voelen (...)" (=a moment at home while he is abroad, a moment to feel noises).

### 3. Research Method

This article is the summary of a research which analyzes writings of foreign writers in Semarang and Jakarta citybooks, both of which were published in 2013 and 2015 respectively. This research applies textual analysis, particularly the method of close reading. The method examines aspects of space, identity, and writers' positions on cultural heritage. Investigated using an approach proposed by Van Dorleijn & Gillis (2013), space itself refers to a condition that is "imagined" or "actualized" by an object or an activity (Longhurst, et. al., 2017). The word "space" refers to a place, an object, and a relation between objects inside the space. Issues of identity are linked to the relationship between objects in a space. Cultural heritage and its sustainability also deal

with existing objects in a space. Research on space will reveal the problems regarding identity and other aspects related to the preservation of cultural heritage.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The results of the research analysis are based on each citybook (Semarang and Jakarta citybooks), and representations of space are then compared to each examined text. The portrayal of space is described and elaborated in its relation with issues of identity and cultural heritage.

### 4.1. Portrayal of space in Semarang: From the burning palm leaves to personal letters

Billiet's text in Semarang citybook can be translated as *Palm Leaves and the Truth*. As a historian who is passionate about writing, Billiet wrote the history of Semarang. In the writing, space in Semarang is similar to those in other Southeast Asian countries, where difficulties of maintaining cultural heritage are omnipresent. Based on the historical framework, cultural heritage is related to other sources of information, such as inscriptions in palm leaves and old buildings of Semarang's old town. Climate and the government's negligence to heritage threatens colonial heritages. Billiet (2013:34) expresses the concern by saying, "If you want to cry, go to the old town. The dying buildings stand tall. They stare at their fates chin up until they fall and take a bow because of the burden of time (...). Thirty-four hectares of drama: Plants and bushes overgrown in pipes and windows, molds invading the walls, broken windowpane, and ruined walls – all these brought such unbearable melancholy which took control over me."

The space of Semarang is a space of "non-world" with many abandonment and broken promises which Billiet (2013: 35) summarizes in one impression, "In short: This is an incredible chaos". Billiet's perceives the space of Semarang as a dark space without any clear survivability of the colonial heritage as there is no attempt to maintain heritage. There is no important attention to the past. At the same time, Semarang nowadays is a space that inflicts confusion to its visitors. Semarang is a city that is full of chaos with its unbearable traffic. It is a busy city which at the same time is unable to invite visitors despite the fact that the old city has amazing classic buildings and incredible culinary destinations. In Billiet's explanation, there are connections between space, the existence of cultural heritage, and the obstacles in preserving it, yet there is no in-depth

discussion about cultural identity other than a glimpse of stories about Chinese groups in Semarang.

Through his work in citybook Semarang, Gustaf Peek (2013) captured *Nine Letters to Maria M.*, which portrays the city of Semarang through letters written by an “I” to his lover named Maria M. In the first letter, the investigation of space in Semarang started from *Simpang Lima* and night activities of youths on their rollerblades. As the pride of the city, *Kota Lama* (Old Town) is merely portrayed through the depiction of one old building, Blenduk Church. Inside the church, the contours of the buildings have brought Peek’s memory back to the body of a whale. His confusion in understanding Semarang when he first came was clear.

In the second letter, interaction with Semarang people is built in the character Jongkie Tio, a restaurant owner. In the second story also issues of identity starts emerging. Being in the space of Semarang, Peek invites the readers to understand his identity as a kid who was born out of interracial marriage of a woman from Solo and a Dutch man. The space of Semarang reminds him of his family from his mother side, and objects in Semarang are associated to Indo identity (Van Dorleijn and Gillis, 2013).

The third letter meticulously describes objects in the space of Semarang. There is a Chinatown where many things are sold: from bitter beans to black squids to raw chicken meat on which flies are buzzing. Peek’s perspective describes the panoramic view of the Chinatown, and such is a post-colonial point of view. The representation of space is similar to what was found in reports of Dutch people who visited Indonesia after the end of colonial era. Exoticism is found in the depiction of objects located in the space that he visited, but there is also an urge of “othering” described objects (Powel and Menendian, 2016). As the women labors in that market reminded him of his mother, once again a discussion regarding identity is revealed (Longhurst, et. al., 2017). In letter four, five, and six, the space in Semarang is depicted as a representation of space in Indonesia – a location where people come, stay, or go. In each letter, the mother character is involved, and thus readers gain more information about the women who came from Solo.

Different from letter 1-6, letter 7 contains a conversation between character I and G. There is no information about who the “I” is, but the G is known to be Gustaf Peek. This conversation mentions the existence of mixed-race writer, Vincent Mahieu and Multatuli. Both authors are categorized as writers of Dutch-Indies literature. In the conversation between I and G, there is also an interpersonal relation which mimics that of the Dutch society. In the eighth letter, the family patrilineal background is elaborated in 37 events in the spaces of the Netherlands and Indonesia. In the space of two countries that transcend cities, and in a period, which spans from the colonial era to 2000s, readers

may find out the history of Peek's family, and the description also contains issues of identity.

The last letter is an epilogue in which Peek said goodbye to Semarang, and stated that all the written depictions are a summary of the city. In brief, through the portrayals of Semarang, Peek's letters discuss issues of identity and cultural heritage, yet they shy away from the discussion regarding problems surrounding the conservation of colonial heritage.

#### **4.2. Portrait of Jakarta space: The connection between the past and the present**

The past is the main theme in Bas Heijne's work titled *The Past is A Strange Land*. In 2013, Heijne created a television documentary about Louis Couperus, a well-known and productive writer from Netherland. In order to make the film, Heijne went to Pasuruan, and he thought that Pasuruan was the setting of Couperus's *De Stille Kracht* (1900). The strange land, as written in Heijne's writing, refers to a space that Couperus described in his novel *De Stille Kracht*. The particular novel was translated in 2011 with the title "The Power of Silence". The novel takes place in a fictional city, Labuwangi. It tells the story of a "tragic collision among the east and the west, the colonized and the colonizer" (Heijne, 2015:39). Through this work, Heijne examines spaces and objects that are discussed in Couperus' novel. He also pays attention to the writer's details when he explains Labuwangi as he thought that Couperus' version of the Dutch Indies is a foreign territory.

In Heijne's writing, cultural heritage is revealed through not only the look of an old building in Pasuruan, but also a cultural product in the form of a novel written by Couperus. The changes of function in the old building and the translation of Couperus' novel can be understood as a way to conserve the cultural heritage. Practices of conserving the colonial legacy in Indonesian space is manifested when an old teacher acted in front of Heijne's camera and read the first chapter in Couperus's novel, which was translated into Indonesian. It takes one century and a decade to wait for the Indonesian version of that novel. "That the fragment, more than a hundred years after it was written, is read loudly in his own language by a man whose grandfather and great grandfather may have bent their knees in front of Van Oudijck [the man character in the novel, sic] who actually does exist, is a heartwarming moment which perfected this story for me" (Billiet, 2015:41).

Heijne also compares his position with what Van Oudijck had gone through, “It has been a long time since we – while forced and compelled – woke up from our colonial dream. We have walked far from understandings and beliefs that kept that the dream alive longer than we expected. (...) Indonesia has chosen its own way; surely, there is only a little longing to feel nostalgic by looking back into the colonial era – anyway, as in every country that goes through spectacular growth, people like looking forward. The now and then has already been sufficiently exciting.” (Heijne, 2015: 42).

For Heijne, the shared historical journey and cultural heritage are meant to be a life lesson (Longhurst, et. al., 2017). Cultural heritage is a part of the history which is needed to revive the past, to understand the tradition of a strange country, and to accept current identity. This is in line with Longhurst’s proposition (277) which states that a particular cultural group’s understanding of a space is a way of defining an identity of the cultural group itself.

Surinamese writer Ruth San A Jong also contributed a writing for Citybook Jakarta in a form of a short story titled *What Am I Doing Here?* The father character is a Javanese, and he went on a journey to Indonesia/Jakarta when he was seventy-one years old. It was a journey to look for one’s roots that was silently planned without his two daughters knowing. When the father disappeared, both of his daughters filed a missing person reports in Suriname police station and uploaded the news in the social media. People condemned and questioned what they did to their father. Actually, they no longer have a family in Indonesia although their grandfather was born in Semarang. After he migrated to Suriname, there was no deep relationship with Indonesia other than admiration to the Indonesian celebrity and singer Didi Kempot.

The journey to Jakarta is an answer to the longing of visiting Indonesia. For decades, the father character is described as drowning in his works to fulfill his responsibility as the breadwinner of his family and his two daughters. In fact, he only left Suriname once to visit the Netherlands (Jong, 2015: 182-183). It is understandable that when he was in Jakarta, he savored every moment. Drowning in the spaces in Jakarta and its clamoring spectacles, he denied all the noise of the city that made his head spin his heart race. He did not care about his belly’s growth caused by the food he consumed. He forgot his sensitive ulcer and even blamed the hotel where he stayed as the hotel offered him many foods that his body could no longer tolerate.

His plan to continue his journey to Semarang is cancelled as his calculation of life expenses in Jakarta was entirely wrong. Jakarta is an expensive city, and to live comfortably, the father needs more than 800 US dollar. Being in Jakarta challenges the father to try new dangerous activities, such as riding a motorcycle to immerse in the

city traffic. Exhaust discharges and the wind of Jakarta tightened his chest (Jong, 2015: 188).

In the space of Jakarta, the father did not find what he was looking for. "It is not him. It is because he was looking for the deepest feeling in his heart, a sense of identity, which actually belongs to Suriname. He was disappointed as he could not find or feel as if he was going home. He felt but estranged in Jakarta; and he was treated that way even though he looks like everybody else (...). He does not have a house in here, no family, and he will soon be kicked out of the hotel. (...) He will not stay here for long." (Jong, 2015: 189)

## 5. Conclusion

The spaces of Semarang and Jakarta according to Dutch writers, Peek and Heijne, are portrayed as a space where the Dutch and Indonesians share a history, memory, and cultural heritage. For Peek, who is a mixed-race writer, Netherland is the *vaderland* while Indonesia is the *moederland*. Problems regarding identity in Peeks' works portrayed how the two spaces are shared. In Heijne's work, the shared state of the spaces cannot eliminate the strange feeling about spaces in both Indonesia's past and present. As the past is shaped by the present, Indonesia's past and present and every object inside have made the present Netherlands the way that it is now. The shared history, memory, and cultural heritage also appear in Jong's writing. Javanese-Surinamese groups cannot be separated from their ancestors and where they came from. The need to find the roots is closely tangled with the strong sense of identity. Even though at the end it appears that the roots are actually stronger in Suriname, Jakarta provides a space for the father character to find himself. On the other hand, Billiet's work does not focus on the surfacing issue of identity, but rather cultural heritage and its sustainability. Billiet's text appears to criticize the abandonment of the cultural heritage found in the space of Semarang.

It is important to note that both Heijne's and Jong's texts continuously deal with the theme of "becoming estranged in the place you inhabit". For both writers, the space in Jakarta is portrayed as a strange place. Meanwhile, the texts' representation of space in Semarang displays no such feeling of strangeness. These findings open up new opportunities for later research to look into the possibilities of the relationship between Jakarta's being as a metropolitan city and an urban space and a triggered sense of alienation among its visitors or newcomers.



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