



# Contesting the imagined preman

Andy Fuller

Some six months into the Covid pandemic, I took up a digital subscription with *Kompas*, a national Indonesian newspaper. I realized that there was little chance for fieldwork in the near future, and thus that I should be more disciplined in my reading of Indonesian-language media. The newspaper's imagery and reportage contrasted greatly with my immediate surroundings, a practically Covid-free Melbourne. Instead, *Kompas* documented hospitals at capacity, the deaths of health workers, the rapidly filling graveyards in Jakarta, and the sudden need to build more on the city's fringes. Such a stress on everyday urban needs spoke volumes against the relative vagueness of the nation's statistics on Covid cases and deaths. But, of course, there were many similarities to my situation in Melbourne: the need to 'flatten the curve', the constant press-conferences from local politicians stating that everything was under control, the implementation of lockdowns, and the exhortations for everyone to wash their hands and to practice social distancing.

Something else, however, soon caught my eye. The Indonesian Chief of Police, the *Kepala Polri*, had devised the tactic of 'embracing' *preman* in the service of implementing lockdowns and holding people to account for contravening Covid protocols. Immediately, national newspapers, *Kompas* and *Tempo*, picked up on this gripping and controversial development. *Preman*, I feel, has no apparent direct translation. It indicates a broad spectrum of personas, ranging from noble bandit to outright criminal who gains his wealth from extorting others and propagating his macho and violent reputation. A kind-hearted renegade at best, a nasty thug who does the dirty work of politicians at worst. *Preman* is a term that has strong resonance in the national imagination. The ubiquity and ambiguity of the figure of the 'preman' lends itself easily to the imagination of a city riddled with crime, violence, and an indistinct but influential underworld.

*Preman* are routinely the targets of police operations aimed at 'eradication' (*pemberantasan*). So, it may seem strange to see reporting that they have been 'embraced' by the police. But it reflects an ongoing tension between contesting and being co-operative in the extension of state authority. This ambivalent position of *preman* also relates to their contested position in cultural products and discourses: literature, film, mass media. It is for this reason that

I turn to the arts as a means to further our understanding of who is a *preman* and what makes up *premanisme*.

The various ways in which *preman* are represented, for me, provokes memories of relying on 'informal street workers' who have provided me with impromptu information or directions while making my way through Jakarta's streets. Security guards (*satpam*), motorcycle taxi drivers (*tukang ojek*), parking attendants, and others are vital resources

of street-level knowledge in Jakarta. They are also sometimes implicated in so-called *preman* activities. Wilson, writing on the Forum Betawi Rempug (FBR), points to their role as protection racket, where FBR members take up jobs in enforcing local security.<sup>1</sup> The post-Authoritarian era has seen a proliferation of *preman*-like organisations, some adopting Islamic accoutrements.

I have started working with various cultural products to counter my Covid-imposed

separation from Jakarta and the difficulty of doing 'on-the-ground' fieldwork, and also to structure a kind of cultural genealogy of the (imagined) *preman*. I relate the effort of 'making do' through a variety of means of gathering data to the practice of 'patchwork methodology'.<sup>2</sup> Below, I highlight some selected imaginings of *preman* and *premanisme*. I use a few case studies to explore how the idea of *preman* is a 'floating signifier' with meanings which change over time and space, in accordance with changing social and political conditions.

Ryter (1998, p.49-51) traces the trajectory of the term to the Dutch *vrijman* – referring to a freed slave.<sup>3</sup> The term's early meanings also take in a sense of 'being off duty', or, 'civvies' (*berbaju preman*). A policeman could become a *preman* through the change of clothing, adopting a new identity and role. The contested nature of the term *preman* is also evident through the presence of terms with similar meanings such as *gali* and *jago*. *Gali-gali* (in its plural form) means 'roving gangs', while *jago* refers to a kind of rural bandit, sometimes in the guise of a Robin Hood-esque figure. In the late 1990s, the term *preman* took on the connotation of *gali-gali*, which was more common during the 1980s – particularly at the height of the Petrus – *penembak misterius* (mysterious killings)– campaign. Ryter points out, however, that *preman* could more easily stand as 'a lone figure' as well as having



Fig. 1 (above): Market alley in Jakarta, Indonesia. Image reproduced courtesy of [Anthoni Askaria](#) on Unsplash.

Fig. 2 (left): Poster for the 1954 film *Lewat Djam Malam*.

a 'quasi-official ring'. Being a *preman* as such meant having established a degree of authority and respect, which may have not been afforded to the *gali-gali*, violent but disorganised thugs.

### The disciplined *preman*

Lewat *Djam Malam (After the Curfew)*, a 1954 film by Usmar Ismail set during the Revolutionary Era (1945-1949), depicts the fate of ex-guerrilla fighter Iskandar as he attempts to settle back into urban life in Bandung, having left the nearby mountains where he was fighting against the Dutch. Iskandar continues to suffer the trauma of the violence and his role in unwittingly killing civilians. Upon returning to civilian life, he attempts to resume his relationship with his fiancé. He is aided in finding a job in the governor's office, yet finds himself ostracized. He quickly alienates himself through resorting to violence to solve his disputes with fellow government officials.<sup>4</sup>

Iskandar is in turn feted for his bravery and condemned for his reputation for violence. Back in Bandung, he takes revenge against his commander, who used the loot of war to fund his post-independence businesses. Iskandar is both heroic and flawed. He is unable to settle down to respectability or to continue as a mercenary gun for hire. His violence needs to be motivated by a moral reasoning. An old fellow-fighter, who has transitioned into the formal police, however, asks him jealously, "Are you happy, living the good life of a *preman*?" He sees only Iskandar's detachment and independence, rather than his trauma and inability to move on from his past.

While Iskandar's fiancé and friends enjoy parties, the fruits of emerging middle-class consumption, and respectability in the newly independent nation, Iskandar finds himself dislocated from those around him. He can't enjoy these urban pleasures. His cohort are those who have also not found comfort in the transition from the contested to newly realized nation. After taking his revenge on his commander and trying to escape from possible capture, Iskandar is caught for breaking the curfew (*avondklok*). In his attempt to avoid arrest, he is shot and lies dying on the steps of his fiancé's house. The 'good life' of the *preman* is short lived. Iskandar's *premanisme* is subjected to the disciplining and ordering forces of the newly independent nation. As is echoed in recent statements from Idham Azis, the head of the national police, 'the state cannot be defeated by *preman*'.<sup>5</sup>

### Literary *preman* and ethical interventions

Newspapers have long facilitated the emergence and structures of Indonesian language literature. The rise of a national literature is inseparable from the role

of newspapers in Jakarta and other cities throughout Indonesia. Newspapers have proven to be one of the most fundamental elements of Indonesian literary infrastructure: providing space for short stories, poetry, critical reviews, and advertisements of events. Sunday editions of newspapers such as *Kompas*, *Republika*, *Suara Pembaruan*, *Jawa Pos*, and *Koran Tempo* have long featured short stories of notable and emerging writers. Having one's stories published in various newspapers is a vital step for authors to establish their credentials and reputations in the literary scene. Some have described Indonesian literature as being synonymous with *sastra koran* (newspaper literature) – a literature, that is, with narratives, settings and contexts that relate immediately to contemporary events. With their urban bases, these stories have a largely urban focus, often relegating rural, peripheral, and non-Jakarta/non-Javanese life to a kind of quaint afterthought.

The close connection between newspapers and literary production also saw a number of stories dealing with both the state-orchestrated killings of *gali-gali/preman* and the rise of *preman*-like literary figures. Seno Gumira Ajidarma (b.1958), who started work as a journalist in Jakarta during the early 1980s, having come from Yogyakarta, was one of the first authors to rise to prominence on the back of *sastra koran* and to directly engage with chronicling the various forms of state violence of the Suharto-led New Order regime. Seno's 1993 collection, *Penembak Misterius*,<sup>6</sup> based on stories written during the 1980s, depicts multilayered urban fears which are directed towards the practice of roaming thugs and the violence of the state. The *preman* is an ambivalent figure: capable of perpetuating violence towards other members of the urban poor, while also claiming to mediate the threat of violence and oppression from the state. Writing in the context of Latin American literature, Dabove speaks of the tendency of elite literature to offer a more sympathetic reading of the figure of the 'social bandit'.<sup>7</sup> Seno's writing, emblematic of literary fiction, also adopts a sympathetic reading of the *preman* as a contemporary outlaw.

Seno's story, 'The Perempuan Preman' ('The Female Preman'),<sup>8</sup> is one such story that not only offers a heroic imagining of the *preman* but also explores the problematic of urban order and authority. Almost universally regarded as a male figure, Seno's female character is used to explore the complexities of urban ordering, violence, and policing. The figure of the female *preman* 'works' in the district of Melawai in south Jakarta, near the entertainment district of Blok M.<sup>9</sup> Like any *preman* worth her salt, the titular *Perempuan Preman* has a reputation for violence which has become part of the local mythology. Her legendary acts of violence and intervention are the subject of songs sung by the local street

Fig. 3 (right): A police box (*pondok polisi*) at the entrance to Merdeka Square, Jakarta, Indonesia. Image reproduced courtesy of CÉphoto, Uwe Aranas on WikiCommons.

Fig. 4 (below): The urban sprawl of Jakarta, Indonesia. Image reproduced courtesy of Voicu Horațiu on Unsplash.



buskers (*pengamen*). The character evokes the mythology of the social bandit (as devised by Hobsbawm<sup>10</sup>): a vigilante, operating outside of the law and creating their own sense of justice. Seno's story shows how the state has lost its monopoly on violence. The female *preman* not only fights against the extortionate acts of male *preman*, but also against the police who violate the rights and lives of local women. The *preman*, in this case, is viewed sympathetically, as a crusader for social justice, who is capable of circumventing police authority.

Writing during a kind of heyday of *premanisme* and a concerted campaign against suspected *preman*,<sup>11</sup> Seno's works represent *preman* as both victims of state violence as well as perpetrators of everyday low-level criminality and extortion. The targeted killings of accused *preman* between 1982-1985 in various Indonesian cities formed the context for Seno's 'Bunyi Hujan di Atas Genting' ('The Sound of Rain on Roof Tiles'). Here, Sawitri, a former-prostitute waits in a constant state of fear, realising that her partner (a local *preman*) has become a victim of the 'mysterious killings'. After each rain storm passes, she looks out of her window onto a narrow alley to see a corpse splayed out. The corpse is tattooed, and her neighbours crowd around, celebrating the killing of another *preman*: 'now he knows how it feels', they celebrate. Sawitri feels that the killers targeted the victims' tattoos; disfiguring them deliberately. This materiality of the tattooed body identifies the victim irrevocably as a *preman* and in turn a potential target of the state's campaign.

Although the portrayal from Seno is sympathetic to the partner who is left behind, the *preman* is shown to be an outcaste and extortionist rather than a benevolent Robin Hood-esque brigand. Pamuji, as a *preman*, is imagined in the sense of a 'professional'; it is his 'line of work'. The *preman* may also stand for the 'underclass': he is a part of the same world as those he intimidates. As Ryter states, "preman, having nothing to sell but their own muscles, have a right to be cut in on the take

give given the lack of economic alternatives. Extortion is, in effect, their line of work".<sup>12</sup> This sympathetic portrayal of the urban underclass is consistent throughout Seno's writings, where he frequently depicts the agency of the urban poor in shaping their own livelihoods.

### Contesting the imagined *preman*

The *preman* is a contested figure with origins in earlier iconic figures like the brigand and bandit. The *preman*, characterised as a vigilante, operating 'outside of the law' (*di luar pemerintahan*), is nonetheless frequently co-opted and embraced by the state. Such an embrace is fleeting and tenuous: as is evident through state campaigns to draw on their authority, while, at other times, seeking to have them wiped out (*dibasmi*) and to almost seasonally launch programs of eradication (*pemberantasan*). As such, I argue that the *preman* is an entangled and ambivalent figure: created through nationalist mythology and a variety of textual discourses, enabled through the conditions of Indonesia's urbanism. The *preman* proves to be adaptable: becoming reconfigured at each moment of crisis, whether it be the time of the Revolution, the Massacre of the alleged communists from 1965-66, the *reformasi* movement and more frequently in the post-Authoritarian era, and the current Covid pandemic. Literary works by Seno Gumira Ajidarma, amongst others, provide a vital resource for understanding how *preman* are imagined and contested.

Andy Fuller is a member of the SACRASEC research project and the SoSCo research group of the Cultural Anthropology Department at Utrecht University. He also co-founded Reading Sideways Press. [a.c.s.fuller@uu.nl](mailto:a.c.s.fuller@uu.nl)

#### Notes

- 1 Wilson, Ian Douglas. 2008. "As long as its halal: Islamic *preman* in Jakarta" in Greg Fealy and Sally White (eds.), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, pp.192-210.
- 2 See: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography> and <https://entanglementsjournal.org/the-case-for-letting-anthropology-be-quarantined-covid-and-the-end-of-ethnographic-presence/>
- 3 Ryter, Loren. 1998. "Pemuda Pancasila: The Last Loyalist Free Men of Suharto's Order?" *Indonesia* 66: 43-68.
- 4 The plight of ex-fighters is also explored in the 1952 film *Embun (Dew)*, by D.Djajakusuma, also produced by Perfini.
- 5 Azis served as Chief of the Indonesian National Police between 2019-2021.
- 6 Ajidarma, Seno Gumira. 1993. *Penembak Misterius*, Yogyakarta: Galang Press.
- 7 Dabove, Juan Pablo. 2007. *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Banditry and Literature in Latin America, 1816-1929*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- 8 Ajidarma, Seno Gumira. 2001. *Dunia Sukab*, Kompas: Jakarta.
- 9 Seno tells me the story is based on a real encounter. "I did see her passing by the *gudeg* stall in Melawai."
- 10 Hobsbawm, Eric, *Bandits*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969.
- 11 This was known as *Petrus*: mysterious killings, from the *tembak misterius*.
- 12 Ryter 1998, p. 49.

