Bandits, Vigilantes, and the Rabble: Criminals in Dutch East Indies Cinema

Christopher A. Woodrich

Biodata: Christopher A. Woodrich is a doctoral student at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, with an interest in Indonesian cinema, Indonesian literature, and the intersection between them. His publications include "Between the Village and the City: Representing Colonial Indonesia in the Films of Saeroen" (Social Transformations, 2015), "Sexual Bodies, Sensual Bodies: Depictions of Women in Suharto-Era Indonesian Film Flyers (1966–1998)" (International Feminist Journal, 2016), and "Inside Gazes, Outside Gazes: The Influence of Ethnicity on the Filmmakers of the Dutch East Indies (1926–1936)" (Plaridel, 2015), as well as the book Ekranisasi Awal: Adapting Novels to the Silver Screen in the Dutch East Indies (Gadjah Mada University Press, 2017). He is conducting his doctoral research on the history of the practice of adapting films from novels in the Indonesian archipelago. chris_woodrich@hotmail.com

Abstract

Crime was an integral part of the cinema of the Dutch East Indies (modern Indonesia), representing more than twenty of the hundred-odd films produced domestically between 1926 and 1942. Using secondary sources, this article maps filmic depictions of crime and criminals in Indies cinema. It argues that two types of criminals were given the greatest prominence: the bandit and the vigilante. The former, adapted from various media, appeared in three films in the late 1920s and 1930s: Si Tjonat (1929), Si Ronda (1930), and Si Pitung (1931). The latter, meanwhile, was more common in 1939–1941 and featured prominently in such films as Gagak Item (1939), Kedok Ketawa (1940), and Srigala Item (1941). They were joined by a range of fraudsters, murderers, smugglers, thieves, and thugs. Aside from the vigilantes, whose fight for justice remained unpunished, almost all were ultimately caught and punished, either at the hands of the police, or—more regularly—at the hands of the civilian protagonists.

Introduction

Feature film production in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) can be traced to 1926, when the silent film Loetoeng Kasaroeng (‘The Mystical Lutung’) received limited distribution in Bandung. Over the next sixteen years, before the Dutch colonial government capitulated to invading Japanese forces in March 1942, more than a hundred feature films—101, according to a list compiled by Biran (2009)—were produced in the archipelago. These covered a broad range of genres, including legends, dramas, thrillers, fantasy, literary adaptations, and action-heavy adventure stories and crime fiction. This article focuses on the latter two genres.

The earliest Indies film featuring crime as its core conflict was Setangan Berloemoer Darah (‘A Blood-Caked Glove’, 1928), which revolved around two murders. In 1930, with the Indies film industry only four years old, one newspaper complained that ‘the film corporations in Java, which have begun to grow like mushrooms, now only create stories of robbery, murder, women being dragged away, and so on’ (quoted in Kwee, 1930b). Crime remained prominent in Indies cinema, either as the films’ focus or secondary plot element, until the colony’s fall. Of the
films listed by Biran (2009), more than twenty have stories that center around crime, with dozens more featuring criminal elements as part of their plots.

Owing to this prominence, colonial films featuring crime were an integral—if relatively little researched1—part of the development of crime fiction in Indonesia. This article maps how crime and criminals were depicted and thus lays the foundation for further examination of crime cinema in the Indies. It gives particular focus to two common character types, the jago bandit and the masked vigilante, before touching on the various criminals that populated Indies crime cinema as well as the punishments (or lack thereof) they faced. It then draws several conclusions based on the mapping conducted.

Although some scholars (i.e. Heider, 1991) have written that all of the films produced in the Dutch East Indies are lost, this is belied by such extant films as Pareh (‘Rice’, 1936) in the Netherlands and Singa Laoet (‘Sea Lion’, 1941) in Sinematik Indonesia. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the majority of Indies films are no longer available for viewing. As such, this article draws on existing secondary documentation from contemporary magazines, newspapers, and novelizations, as well as plot summaries from other research into the cinema. This, it is argued, is sufficient to provide an understanding of how criminals and crime were depicted in films produced in the Indies.

Crime in Indies Cinema: An Overview

Crime was found in various aspects of Indies popular culture, including much of its oral and traditional written literature (babad, hikayat, etc.). When western-style prose gained traction in the 19th century, crime fiction was integral to this new medium. Numerous translations of foreign works were produced, and several authors wrote their own stories. Production increased significantly with the rise of the madjalah roman (‘novel magazines’) in the 1920s, and writers drew regular audiences to their stories of detectives (indigenous2 and otherwise), bandits, and gangs. Crime persisted in literature, despite attempts by the Dutch colonial government to marginalize it, into the 1940s and beyond (Jedamski, 1995).

As noted above, depictions of crime also emerged early in the history of Indies cinema. In 1928, a mere two years after the Indies’ first domestic feature film production, a murder- and revenge-centered film titled Setangan Berloemoer Darah was released. Though production of crime fiction films never reached the level of crime fiction novels—as the filmic production of the Indies never approached literary production in quantity3—over the following fourteen years crime was a frequent feature and selling point of domestic films. Bandit films such as Si Tjonat (1929), Si Ronda (1930), and Si Pitung (1931) and vigilante films such as Gagak Item (‘Black Crow’, 1939), Kedok Ketawa (‘Laughing Mask’, 1940), and Srigala Item (‘Black Wolf’, 1941) were joined on the silver screen by a range of conmen, murderers, smugglers, thieves, and thugs.

Such films were predominantly directed and produced by ethnic Chinese directors and producers, who made up the majority of filmmakers. Ethnic European filmmakers were little

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1 Jedamski (1995) gives some attention to the role of crime fiction in early Indies cinema. However, her focus is on the genres of crime fiction found in the Indies and modern Indonesia rather than colonial crime cinema.
2 The term “indigenous” is used here to refer to prihumi, ethnic groups that consider the Indonesian archipelago their ancestral land. It excludes persons of European, Chinese, Arabic, Indian, etc. descent.
3 Biran (2009: 379–386) records 101 feature films as being produced in the Dutch East Indies. Meanwhile, the state publisher Balai Poestaka (established 1917) was on series number 1426 when it published the short story collection Kawan Bergeloet (‘Playmate’) in 1941.
involved in the production of films featuring crime, and though some indigenous men were credited as directors (such as Bachtiar Effendi, linked to the 1932 sound film *Njai Dasima*) their involvement in the creative process was limited (Said, 1982). These filmmakers tended to produce films that, despite drawing on tropes common in the Indies, were also heavily influenced by American cinema (Sen, 1994). Kristanto (2007), for instance, cites *The Mask of Zorro* (1940) as inspiring *Srigala Item* (1941), while Said (1982) identifies *Kedok Ketawa* ('The Laughing Mask', 1940) as drawing on the cinematic tradition of the *Dracula* movies.

In the first decade of film production in the Indies, films were targeted at audiences of different ethnicities. Films such as *Setangan Berloemoer Darah* (1928) and *Si Tjonat* (1929) appear intended mainly for ethnic Chinese audiences, as they featured ethnic Chinese protagonists rescuing ethnic Chinese women. Films such as *Njai Dasima* ('Mistress Dasima', 1929) and *Nancy Bikin Pembalesan* ('Nancy Takes Revenge', 1931), meanwhile, were produced with indigenous audiences in mind, inspired by stories popular with indigenes, and had indigenous protagonists and indigenous antagonists. In later decades, particularly following the success of the indigenous-oriented *Terang Boelan* ('Full Moon', 1937), films in the Indies—including crime films—were almost all targeted at indigenous audiences.  

In terms of content, crime films in the Indies differed in several aspects from their novel counterparts. Unlike contemporary crime novels, in which protagonists (and thus crime) 'travel throughout the archipelago and even to far away countries' (Jedamski, 1995: 181), films featuring crime were mostly set in western Java, particularly Priangan (Banten), as in *Si Tjonat* (1929) and *Poesaka Terpendam* ('Buried Heirloom', 1941), and the colonial capital of Batavia, as in *Njai Dasima* (1929) and *Ajah Berdosa* ('Father Sins', 1941). As most production houses were located in the Bandung or Batavia area, this makes both logistic and economic sense. It was far easier and cheaper—and thus more profitable—for filmmakers to produce films locally or on soundstages than to film on-location.

Also unlike contemporary crime novels, films produced in the Indies tended not to feature private detectives; the film Biran (2009) describes as the Indies' first detective film, *Pah Wongso Pendekar Boediman* ('Pah Wongso the Cultured Warrior', 1941), was only released in 1941. Instead, the protagonists in films featuring crime were frequently persons—generally indigenous, but sometimes ethnic Chinese—with personal stakes in the matters they were investigating. These included men trying to rescue kidnapped women (as in *Si Tjonat* [1929] and *Poesaka Terpendam* [1941]) or revenge-seeking children of murder victims (as in *Nancy Bikin Pembalesan* [1931] and *Rentjong Atjeh* ['Rencong from Aceh', 1940]). The police, though sometimes featured, were never the main characters.

Fighting was often emphasized in marketing materials. As early as February 1930, an image of men fighting was used with the breathless urge to 'See POEWASA fighting with 4 officers who are trying to catch him... exciting and amazing' to advertise *Njai Dasima* ('Njai Dasima II advertisement'). *Kedok Ketawa* (1940) was branded an 'Indonesian cocktail of violent actions ... and sweet romance' ('Kedok Ketawa advertisement'), while an advertisement for *Poesaka Terpendam* (1941) proclaimed it had 'Great fights!' ('Poesaka terpendam advertisement'). The latter extended its emphasis on violence to its illustrations; the upper left corner depicted a bandit trying to stab the protagonist (see Figure 1).

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4 For an overview of the role of producer, director, and audience ethnicity in Indies cinema, see Woodrich (2016).
As in crime novels published domestically, films in the Indies featured a range of fraudsters, murderers, smugglers, thieves, and thugs, as well as bandits and vigilantes. Most were of an indigenous ethnic background, though ethnic Chinese criminals featured in *Setangan Berloemoer Darah* (1928). The remainder of this article maps the different types of criminals featured in Indies crime films, as well as their influences and their interactions with the protagonists and the law.

**The Jago Bandits**

Between 1928 and 1931, three of the eighteen feature films produced in the Indies (Biran, 2009) prominently featured bandits in their plots and titles. These films—*Si Tjonat* (1929), *Si Ronda* (1930), and *Si Pitoeng* (1931)—shared several similarities. All featured bandits that were actively involved in robberies, linked to killings, and led groups that terrorized their regions. All were set in the western part of Java: Tjonat travelled from the Bandung area to Batavia and later Preanger, while Ronda and Pitoeng were both active in the area around Batavia. Also, as with many other elements of the early Indies cinema (Biran, 2009), they were based on existing character types and adapted from other media.

Tjonat, Ronda, and Pitoeng shared roots in the historical *jago* (literally 'fighting cock'). These indigenous leaders and bandits used their fighting prowess and perceived magical powers to draw respect and fear (van Till, 1996). Taking advantage of the weak law enforcement in the rural Indies, they offered civilian leaders their protection (through physical action or diplomacy) in exchange for money and/or benefits such as freedom from taxation. At the same time, they readily committed crimes against persons not under the protection of them or an allied *jago*; van Till (1996) writes that they 'constituted the main source of crime in the Javanese countryside' (p. 478). Generally, the victims of their crimes were small farmers who lacked the protections enjoyed by the upper classes and the European population.

As with literary depictions of the *jago*, the bandits in these films were attributed extraordinary strength and fighting abilities. They likewise commanded the respect and fear of the people they faced. However, they bore several distinctions. First, available documentation
suggests that all were shown purely as bandits rather than as protectors or even the Robin Hood figures of popular oral tradition. Tjonat of *Si Tjonat* (1929), for example, was a criminal since youth and exhibited no remorse (Kwee, 1930b). Second, likely owing to these works being produced by ethnic Chinese filmmakers, the bandits were not depicted as stereotypically indigenous. Kwee (1930b) described Tjonat's flowered costume in *Si Tjonat* as better suited for a character in a Chinese kungfu play (*wajang kungfu*) than an indigenous bandit chief, while Pitoeng of *Si Pitoeng* (1931) was portrayed by an ethnic Chinese actor rather than an indigenous Betawi man as in oral tradition (van Till, 1996).5

All three bandits were based on characters already popular among the theater-going public. Tjonat was reportedly a historical figure who became part of oral tradition (Jedamski, 1995). His story was popularly concretized, especially among the ethnic Chinese community in FDJ. Pangemanann’s novel *Tjerita Si Tjonat* (*The Story of Tjonat*; 1900), first published as a serial in the daily *Pembrita Betawi* (Kwee, 1930b). This book followed Tjonat as he grew from a young Sundanese boy into a bandit chief and depicted the titular character murdering, stealing, and kidnapping his way through western Java until being defeated by his victim’s fiancé. Owing to similarities in plotting and characterization,6 this novel appears to have been the basis for the 1929 film.

Ronda may have also been based on a historical figure (Van Till, 2011), though scholarship on a historical bandit by this name is lacking. Said to have been active in the coastal village Marunda, Ronda was frequently depicted as a Robin Hood figure, stealing from the rich to give to the poor (van Till, 1996). He was common in Batavian oral literature, featuring in several publications, including *Sair Tjerita Rampok Si Ronda* (*The Story-Poem of Si Ronda’s Thievery*, n.d.) by an author known only as 'Si Kantjil' (van Till, 2011). Owing to a lack of documentation regarding the plot of *Si Ronda*, it is unclear which of the numerous stories featuring the bandit inspired the film. However, given the characterization of Tjonat and Pitoeng in their respective films, this Ronda was likely depicted purely as a criminal.

Pitoeng, the titular bandit of *Si Pitoeng*, was based on a historical bandit of the same name who had been active in Batavia and western Java in the 1890s. He was described as a colorful and violent figure who wore police uniforms to rob his targets, murdered suspected spies, and readily used firearms in committing his crimes (van Till 1996). Shortly after he was killed in a shootout with the police, Pitoeng’s grave became a pilgrimage site. Works of literature about or referring to him, including a *pantun* in the Malay-language newspaper *Hindia Olanda* (cited in van Till, 1996), were published. As with the *Si Ronda* film, a lack of sources discussing the film’s plot means it is unclear which version of the Pitoeng story inspired the film. However, van Till (1996)—citing the recollections of unnamed viewers—mentions that it portrayed Pitoeng as a 'real bandit', as opposed to the 'loyal friend, a pious Muslim, and a campaigner against social inequality' of later versions (p. 468).

These well-known bandit tales, when paired with American-style cinematography, were a recipe for success (Sen, 1994), and such films were prominent in contemporary discourse on Indies films. However, by the mid-1930s production of bandit films had ceased. Jedamski (1996:

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5 Films had been made with indigenous casts since *Loetoeng Kasaroeng* in 1926, and the earlier film *Njai Dasima* (1929) had used its indigenous cast in marketing material as a selling point ("Njai Dasima advertisement"). As the story of Si Pitoeng was already popular in *lenong* (a type of Betawi stage play); actors familiar with the character and his abilities were available.

6 Compare Pangemanann (1982) and Kwee (1930b).
attributes this mainly to censorship, quoting a 1926 regulation that states, 'no burglary, murder, poisoning, hanging and other ways of killing may be displayed in movies'. This appears overly facile, as the genre developed between 1929 and 1931 even with these limitations. Economic factors likely had a role as well. The Great Depression led to increased financial burdens on filmmakers in the early 1930s, as film and film equipment became increasingly expensive. By 1933, all but one of the Indies' domestic film production houses had closed shop, including both companies that had produced bandit films.

**Masked Vigilantes**

Towards the end of the 1930s, as the Indies film industry began to diversify, several new genres were introduced. Among the productions in these genres were three films, released to popular success by three studios, that centered around masked vigilantes and their fight against more stereotypical criminals: *Gagak Item* ('The Black Raven', 1939), *Kedok Ketawa* ('The Laughing Mask', 1940), and *Srigala Item* ('The Black Wolf', 1941).

Little documentation on the plot of *Gagak Item* (1939) has been found. Though Biran (2009) writes that it was novelized by the Yogyakarta-based publisher Koff-Buning, such a book has not been acquired. The film is also recorded as being stored at Sinematek Indonesia, but is in incomplete condition. However, film stills accessed at Sinematek Indonesia suggest that, in general terms, it is similar to later films of this genre: it featured a masked vigilante named Gagak Item who defeated a gang of criminals and rescued a young woman from them.

More is available regarding *Kedok Ketawa* (1940). In this film, an artist named Bachtiar rescued a young woman from a group of bandits. The two began to fall in love, but their romance was disturbed when a group of thugs, hired by a rich man smitten with her, kidnapped Minarsih. On his own Bachtiar was unsuccessful in rescuing her. However, with the support of the vigilante Kedok Ketawa he was reunited with his love.

*Srigala Item* (1941) featured a similar plot. After Djoekri forcefully took over his brother’s plantation and beat his nephew, Mochtar, the plantation was targeted by the masked vigilante Srigala Item. This vigilante interfered in Djoekri’s activities and foiled attempts by Djoekri’s son to steal the attentions of a young woman named Soehaemi. The story climaxed with a battle between Srigala Item and Djoekri, after which the vigilante was revealed to be Mochtar ('Sampoerna-theater: Srigala Item'). A copy of this film is stored at Sinematek Indonesia, but has been damaged by acid and excised (Sembiring, 2009).

In all of these films, the central masked vigilante did not face legal consequences for actions undertaken in the course of asserting justice. Acts of assault, trespassing, etc. were not prosecuted. Rather, in striking contrast with the *jago* bandits above, these characters were shown as heroes. They fought for the downtrodden, for those who faced injustice at the hands of criminals. They acted to bring justice in a way that colonial police were incapable of—indeed, none of the documentation consulted suggests that formal law enforcement played a role in these films.7

Two of the vigilantes mentioned above, Gagak Item and Srigala Item, have been noted as being inspired by the character Zorro (Said, 1982; Biran, 2009). Created by Johnston McCulley, Zorro had a following in the Indies since at least 1924, when *The Mark of Zorro* (1920)

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7 This suggests that criticism of colonial law enforcement may have been intended. However, lacking sufficient material for a full plot analysis, this must presently remain conjecture.
presented Douglas Fairbanks’ iconic portrayal to colonial audiences (‘Het Brandmerk von Zorro advertisement’). As with Zorro—whose name is Spanish for ‘fox’—both Gagak Item and Srigala Item were named for animals, respectively a raven and wolf. Also like Zorro, both characters dressed entirely in black and wore a flowing black cape. Srigala Item, as with some incarnations of Zorro, brandished a whip.

Figure 2: Gagak Item (left) and Srigala Item

The identities of Gagak Item and Srigala Item were hidden differently, however. Where Zorro wore a wide-brimmed hat and a mask that covered his eyes but not his mouth, Gagak Item wore a full-face mask and fedora, while Srigala Item wore a mask with wolf-like ears (Figure 2). Although the titular vigilantes’ costumes followed the pattern established by Zorro, other characters were clothed in indigenous garb: kebaya and batik sarongs for women and, in Srigala Item, sarongs and various pieces of headgear for men. Further localization could be found in the sets and props. They were decidedly not the Californian ones of Zorro, but forest settings. Stills from Gagak Item indicate that it included Kris Beer, a brand not featured in any Zorro film.

The third masked vigilante character, Kedok Ketawa, has been cited as inspired by the Dracula film series (Said, 1982). Though no evidence for this claim has been presented, from a survey of the literature it is clear that Kedok Ketawa was more distanced from Zorro than the previously vigilantes. He did not style himself after an animal, instead taking a name that meant ‘the Laughing Mask’. Likewise, he did gain—nor fight for—the romantic attention of the female lead, instead acting only to support another man in his efforts to free her.

These vigilante films were produced at a rate of one per year between 1939 and 1941, and capable of maintaining their popularity even in the face of imported films and diverse domestic productions. However, the fall of the Indies to the Empire of Japan in March 1942 marked the end of these domestic vigilantes. All film production houses except for one were shut down. As such, the studios that produced these works—Tan’s Film (Gagak Item), Union Films (Kedok Ketawa), and Java Industrial Film (Srigala Item)—were dissolved. Films produced during the Japanese occupation did not resurrect the character, and it remained uncommon in subsequent decades.
The Rabble: From Embezzlers to Smugglers

As noted above, together with banditry and vigilantism films in the Indies featured a broad range of crimes. One of the earliest—and most common—was murder. The search for a murderer began *Setangan Berlumur Darah* (1928) (Nio, 1962), and the murder of a young boy marked Tjonat's descent into crime in *Si Tjonat* (1931) (Kwee, 1930). In the three adaptations of the Njai Dasima story (*Njai Dasima* [1929], *Njai Dasima* [1932], and *Dasima* [1940]), the titular character Dasima was murdered by her husband, Samioen (Kwee, 1930a: 1554; 'Sampoerna: Dasima').

Further examples could be found in *Pah Wongso Pendekar Boediman* (1941) ('Sampoerna: Pah Wongso Pendekar Boediman'), *Singa Laoet* ('Sea Lion', 1941), and *Siti Noerbaia* (1941) (Kristanto, 2007: 10), while the prevention of an attempted murder was the climax of *Matula* (1941) ('Sampoerna: Matula').

Brigands and bandits were also common. Aside from the *jago* bandits above, these included bandits created for the silver screen who acted solely as foils for heroic protagonists. This banditry was found throughout the vigilante films of the early 1940s, as well as in titles such as *Poesaka Terpendam* (1941), in which bandits sought buried treasure ('Sampoerna: Poesaka Terpendam'); *Elang Darat* ('Land Eagle', 1941), in which the bandit chief was the protagonist’s half-brother (Kristanto, 2007: 10); and *Air Mata Iboe* ('Mother’s Tears', 1941), in which an innocent man went to prison for robberies committed by his father ('Air Mata Iboe'). In *Rentjong Atjeh* (1940) and *Singa Laoet* (1941), meanwhile, these bandits took the form pirates that roamed the seas, stealing and killing until they were ultimately defeated by persons they had wronged (Kristanto, 2007). An advertisement for *Rentjong Atjeh* (Figure 3) showed these pirates as men who wore bandannas and commanded a massive wooden ship.

Kidnapping and attempted kidnapping, mostly targeting women, featured in several films. Starting with *Si Tjonat* (1929), this often occurred together with acts of banditry. In *Kedok Ketawa* (1940), for instance, a gang of hired thugs captured the protagonist's fiancée ('Kedok ketawa'), while in *Poesaka Terpendam* (1941) a group of bandits kidnapped two sisters who were later rescued by their suitors ('Sampoerna: Poesaka Terpendam'). In at least one case kidnapping was attempted out of lust: in *Sorga Ka Toedjoe* (1940), the son of a rich landlord tried to kidnap a woman he desired (L., 1940).

Smuggling, meanwhile, featured in two films. In the first, *Terang Boelan* ('Full Moon', 1937), a smuggler was unwittingly chosen as a young woman's fiancée; existing documentation

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8 Kwee (1930a: 1554) writes that the scene was censored, although he is not clear to what extent.
suggests that his smuggling was mentioned rather than shown (Biran, 2009). Meanwhile, in *Asmara Moerni* ('True Love', 1941), a pedicab driver was arrested after being hired to transport a parcel that, unknown to him, contained illegal drugs being brought into the Indies by an international opium and morphine smuggling ring (Saeroen, 1941).

![Figure 4](image.jpg)

_Figure 4: The strongman (center) and his gang in Harta Berdarah (1940)_

Fraud was found in one film, *Harta Berdarah* (1940), in which a strongman tricks a rich hajji into putting his seal on a contract granting him 'all goods, rice fields, dry fields, and grazing lands belonging to [him] as well as the home' (Saeroen, 1940: 59). This fraud is perpetrated in conjunction with other, more violent acts: the strongman and his gang (Figure 4) used physical violence in evicting renters and reinforcing his claim on the hajji's goods.

Most of the films produced in the Indies presented criminals as unsympathetic and one-dimensional. Criminals were shown entirely negatively, with their criminality dominating their characterization. They showed neither regret nor repentance for their actions. They frequently resorted to physical violence in their crimes, often collaborating with other criminals against the protagonist. This often led to extensive fight sequences that were later used in advertisements.

An outlier was _Ajah Berdosa* (1941), which depicted crime as coming not from a hardened criminal, but a 'fallen man' of sorts. It followed Mardiman, a young commoner who, through hard work and perseverance, gained an office position but turned to embezzling to woo a sophisticated, 'modern' city woman despite already being married and having a son. Soon imprisoned, upon his release he turned to bootlegging after being unable to find work. After being injured in a police raid, he was reunited with his wife and son in the hospital, where they had become a nurse and doctor ('Sampoerna-theatre: 'Ajah Berdosa'). In this story, Mardiman was sympathetic and motivated not by greed. When caught, he underwent his punishment and repented. His crime, it would appear, served as a didactic example of the depths to which one can fall by becoming enamored with a material modernity.

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9 The trope of a "modern" woman stealing the attentions of a married or betrothed man is relatively common in Indies cinema. Further examples can be found in *Siti Akbari* (1940), *Asmara Moerni* (1941), and *Djantoeng Hati* ('Heart and Soul', 1941).
As can be seen from the discussion above, personal greed was the most common motive for crime in these films. In the *Njai Dasima* films, the titular character's murder was meant to guarantee control over stolen wealth that had belonged to her master (*Njai Dasima* [1929/1932]) (Kwee, 1930a) or husband (*Dasima* [1940]) ('Sampoerna: Dasima'). The fraud in *Harta Berdarah* (1940) was undertaken in a bid to gain control over wealth and land (Saeroen, 1940), while the antagonist of *Srigala Item* (1941) used violence to gain his brother's wealth ('Sampoerna-theatre 'Srigala Item').

Some films did offer alternative motives. *Pah Wongso Pendekar Boediman* (1941) showed not only a desire for financial resources, but also for love, as the motive for theft and murder ('Sampoerna: Pah Wongso Pendekar Boediman'). A similar motive was behind the attempted kidnapping in *Sorga ka Toedjoe* (1940) (L., 1940). Meanwhile, the supernatural adventure film *Matula* (1941) presented an antagonist who attempted murder so a *dukun* (shaman) would grant him physical attractiveness ('Sampoerna: Matula'). Such motives, however, were relatively uncommon.

**Punishment**

Aside from vigilantes, criminals in these films were generally punished for their crimes. On occasion, punishment was meted out by law enforcement officials. It was the police who arrested Samioen for murder in *Njai Dasima* (1929) and punished him with exile (Kwee, 1930a), as well as in the modern reimagining *Dasima* (1940) ('Sampoerna: Dasima'). In *Ajah Berdosa* (1941), the police arrested the main character for embezzlement ('Sampoerna-theatre: Ajah Berdosa'). Further police involvement can be seen in the source material for *Si Tjonat* (1929), where law enforcement captured the bandit and executed him (Pangemanann, 1982); available contemporary documentation does not indicate whether this fate befell the filmic Tjonat.

![Figure 5: An innocent man imprisoned in *Air Mata Iboe* (1941)](image)

Ultimately, however, police appeared in these films not as main protagonists, but solely as punishers of criminals. Often those arrested were guilty, and their detentions benefited society and the protagonists, as in *Ajah Berdosa* (1941) ('Sampoerna-theatre: 'Ajah Berdosa'). However, in several cases the police arrested an innocent man. In *Air Mata Iboe* (1941), a young man was arrested after claiming to have perpetrated robberies actually committed by his father (Figure 5); in *Asmara Moerni* (1941), a *becak* driver was arrested for drug trafficking and held without trial for eighteen months before being released because 'his guilt wasn’t shown, and indeed he wasn’t guilty' (Saeroen, 1941: 56).
Mostly it was private citizens depicted as taking an active role in resolving crime, generally because they had personal stakes. Protagonists tracked kidnapped women, often lovers, in Si Tjonat (1929), Kedok Ketawa (1940), Sorga Ka Toedjoe (1940), and Poesaka Terpendam (1941). Meanwhile, the pirates of Rentjong Atjeh (1940) and Singa Laoet (1941) were defeated by the children of people they had killed (Kristanto, 2007). Revenge similarly featured in Nancy Bikin Pembalesan (1930), where a daughter sought her mother’s killers (Kwee, 1930c), and Harta Berdarah (1940), where a man acted to avenge his mother’s death (Saeroen, 1940). Clearing the name of the innocent was sometimes involved: the character Pah Wongso attempted to solve two crimes in as many films, first to save his young protégé (Pah Wongso Pendekar Boediman, 1941) and later himself (Pah Wongso Tersangka, 1942).

Though protagonists often took an active role in stopping or investigating crime, they generally did not deliver the killing blow (when criminals were killed). In some works, criminals were executed after the protagonist was directly involved in their capture, as in the source novels of both Setangan Berlumur Darah (1928) and Si Tjonat (1929). In the former, the murderer was captured and executed by the police following a joint investigation by the protagonist and the letnan Cina of Semarang (Nio, 1962). Meanwhile, in the latter, Tjonat was defeated in combat by his victim’s fiancé, but arrested and executed by the police (Pangemanann, 1982).

In other films, criminals' deaths were caused by their own negligence or actions, as triggered or exacerbated by the protagonists. As such, criminals were defeated without the protagonists committing murder. This was realized in two ways in Nancy Bikin Pembalesan (1930), the sequel to the above-mentioned Njai Dasima (1929). In this film, Dasima's ghost asked her daughter, Nancy, to avenge her death when her killer Samioen and his wife Hajati were released from prison. When Nancy was pursuing Samioen, the murderer fell to his death through a hole in a bridge. Meanwhile, Hajati drove her blade into her chest after being startled by a vision of Dasima during an attempt to kill Nancy (Kwee, 1930c).

A similar case was found in Harta Berdarah (1940), in which the antagonist was decapitated by a passing train after his foot was caught under a railroad tie when he attempted to retrieve his knife during a knife fight. This death was not attributed to the protagonist; instead, the criminal was said to have 'received his punishment, in kind, from the Almighty' (Saeroen, 1940: 60). Acts of crime by the protagonist, such as assault, Asmadi received no punishment.

This excusing of protagonists' vigilantism and fighting was common in domestic films. In Sorga Ka Toedjoe (1940), a man uses violence to rescue a woman from two men who intended to kidnap her and force her into marriage; the remainder of the film focuses on their courtship (L., 1940). In Kedok Ketawa (1940), an artist attacked a gang with the help of the titular vigilante to rescue his beloved and, when successful, lived in peace with her ('Kedok Ketawa'). Meanwhile, in Poesaka Terpendam (1941), after the main characters fought a gang of bandits to rescue kidnapped sisters, they were rewarded with marriage and treasure ('Sampoerna:

10 The novels have been consulted here because existing documentation does not indicate the films' climaxes. For example, the review by Kwee (1930: 9–11) is only for the first half of this two-part film, up until Tjonat’s kidnapping of Lie Gouw Nio; no review for the second half of the story has been found. Meanwhile, no reviews of Setangan Berlumur Darah detailing the film's plot have been found.
'Poesaka terpendam'). The masked vigilantes of films such as _Kedok Ketawa_ and _Srigala Item_ (1940) similarly escaped any punishment.

In cases such as these, fighting was shown not as a crime, but as an exciting exhibition of the protagonist’s martial prowess. Legal consequences for actions undertaken during rescues or as part of a righteous revenge were ignored. Audiences were instead given visually interesting battles in which the lawful vanquished the outlaw and good and order triumphed over evil and disorder.

**Conclusion**

Drawing on surviving secondary documentation, this article has mapped a broad range of crimes and criminals found in the cinema of the Dutch East Indies. It has shown that two character types, the bandit and the vigilante, drew on popular tropes, both domestic ones linked to the _jago_ figure and imported ones from Hollywood, to gain mainstream—but short-lived—popularity. Within the corpus of Indies cinema, these characters coexisted with a range of embezzlers, smugglers, murderers, and other criminals, most of whom were of an indigenous background and committed crimes against other indigenous characters. Except for vigilantes, these criminals were generally punished for their crimes, either at the hands of the police or (more commonly) at the hands of the films' protagonists.

Two points are worth noting for further exploration. First, protagonists were almost never depicted as criminals and, conversely, criminals were almost never positioned as protagonists. This was particularly true when the crimes depicted involved conscious acts of violence intended purely for personal gain: the criminal was nothing but a criminal. Conversely, in cases where violence was perpetrated in self-defense, defense of others, or to right a wrong, the perpetrator was positioned as a hero rather than a criminal. In the sole exception, _Ajah Berdosa_ (1941), the criminal-cum-protagonist committed embezzlement rather than violent crime, and this only after he was waylaid. It is, however, unclear to what extent this tendency was shaped by colonial censorship/hegemonic powers and to what extent it was shaped by audience tastes.

Second, despite censorship regulations stipulating that 'no burglary, murder, poisoning, hanging and other ways of killing may be displayed in movies' (Jedamski, 1996: 185), violent crimes such as banditry, thievery, and murder were the most common in Indies cinema. Available documentation indicates that these crimes were presented as involving extended fight sequences set against exotic or visually stunning settings. This use of visual spectacle, reinforced by an emphasis on violence in advertisements, indicates that filmmakers used physical conflict and other action sequences predominantly to draw audiences. Several approaches to realizing this goal are hinted at above. However, further research is required to have a better understanding of how issues of censorship were sidestepped in the pursuit of potential audiences.

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