

# Bandits

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Bandits and heroes sometimes fuse in evolution.<sup>1</sup>

In Indonesia we are familiar with the story of Ken Arok. In Australia people know the tale of Ned Kelly. In the Javanese *Pararaton*, written in 1481, Ken Arok is depicted as a man who started out with his life derided: “of bad behavior, severing the ties of morality, disturbing the mystical Divine,” *lumaku tan rahayu amegati apusira pinakapamañcananing hyan Suksma*. With his ruthless ambition for power, he killed anyone in his way. And he did indeed rule and become the founder of the Singasari Kingdom in the fourteenth century.

He himself was murdered, but gradually an evolution occurred: he became a hero who never disappeared. In the twentieth century, both Muhammad Yamin and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, in their works of fiction, built Arok into a heroic figure.

In Australia in the nineteenth century, Ned Kelly entered history as a robber, murderer, and eternal enemy of the police. But while he began as someone criticized, he ended up as a fascinating figure of the Australian imagination. The famous painter Sidney Nolan depicted him in a series of wonderful paintings: Ned Kelly in his armor, wearing the mysterious square helmet. Since the early 1900s, many films have been made about him, including one starring Mick Jagger and Heath Ledger.

The list of bandits is long. In Mexico in the early twentieth century, Pancho Villa; in India in our century, Phoolan Devi; among the Turkish Cypriots, Hassanpoulia, the hero who died in 1896.

In the United States, there is the better-known figure of Billy the Kid. After he was shot in 1881, he was reborn as a fascinating criminal, even though his banditry was actually never particularly spectacular. Michael Ondaatje wrote a poetic novel in 1970 that he called *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems*. Before this, various films were made, including one by Sam Peckinpah with music by Bob Dylan.

And earlier, the bandit had even made it to the mainstream in a ballet by Aaron Copland in 1938.

In Italy there was Salvatore Giuliano, a criminal from a poor village in Sicily. He started out smuggling small household foodstuffs on the black market when the south of Italy was under the threat of famine following World War II. But he soon became a legend, even before he was killed in 1950.

The story goes that, one day in 1944, the handsome bandit Giuliano robbed the home of a duchess from Pratomeno. Giuliano and his gang stole into the *duchessa's* residence. Then, gallantly and respectfully, Giuliano kissed the *duchessa's* hand—but asked her to hand over her gold and diamonds. When she refused, he threatened to kidnap the children. The *duchessa* gave in. Giuliano left with his booty having taken the rings off the *duchessa's* fingers, one by one, and also borrowing a book by John Steinbeck from her library—a book he returned a week later.

Francesco Rosi made a documentary in neorealist style about Giuliano in 1962, using stories like this. And it is not surprising that the famous Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm in his book *Bandits*, refers to Giuliano as an example of a “Robin Hood” type bandit. Giuliano once shot dead a post office official who stole parcels sent to Italian villagers from their relatives in America, and he also shot profiteering shop owners.

Of course, evolution from bandit to hero is not an event of history. Usually it is more a process of encounters with social imagination. It comes about when people feel that Justice (with a capital J) exists, but it cannot be exhibited in a climate of Injustice; there is a Savior, but unseen.

In all kinds of folk tales based on real-life figures like Ken Arok or Pancho Villa, the transgressor of the law is an expression that the law has lost its aura. Or, more precisely: the loss of its power to deceive. The bandit becomes “hero” by emphasizing the word “rebel”; he or she shatters illusions and shows that law formulated by legislators and state officials is actually a theft of rights—namely the right to determine what is just.

In Indonesia, laws are called *undang-undang*, from the word *undang*, meaning to invite or to call. Like an invitation (*undangan*), the law calls people and informs them. It seems that the link is tight between the law and language: in law—which is formulated in words—is the assurance of communicating. And like language, laws (*undang-undang*) are a convention, a publicly accepted guide that at the same time is inseparable from all the different dialects and accents of a certain time, a certain place.

In other words, interpretation; this is the determining process. Interpretation is the way of accommodating the tendency towards the particular within the construction of law that aims to be universal. So there are no laws that are not interpreted, even when interpretation is declared forbidden.

Interpretation is the way of making Justice (with capital J) manifest in daily life. But it is always unfinished. It is always futile. In history, Justice often motivates the birth of the law, but law is never the same as Justice.

So law will be merely an idol when those in power do not want to admit that even when laws are as just as they can possibly be, still the law only echoes Justice, which is forever someplace else. Derrida once said that “Justice” is always only about to come, “*a-venir*,” but I think not. Justice is manifest now but always only for a moment and is always eventually elusive.

In that moment, revolution occurs, protest erupts, and there is anger. And sometimes there are bandits, there are heroes.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Original publication details: Goenawan Mohamad, “Bandit.” *Tempo* October 5, 2014; English translation by Jennifer Lindsay originally published under the title “Bandits,” *Tempo* (English), October 5, 2014.

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