# 5. Policing Death: Indonesian Death Metal music and alleged or apparent criminality

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## Abstract

The rapid growth of Indonesian Heavy Metal music, especially the Death Metal subgenre, since around the turn of the millennium, has been quite remarkable. Indonesia is now numerically the largest scene in the world. Man, the vocalist of Jasad, told the author that the provincial West Javanese city of Bandung had 128 active Death Metal bands as at February 2011. This chapter will discuss the cancellation of an April 2012 music festival held in the Bandung hinterland by police halfway through the festival, and explain how and why it took place. Police became nervous and worried about Heavy Metal shows following the deaths of eleven concertgoers, due to a crowd crush, at a Beside album launch in Bandung in 2008. The chapter analyses the “maternal rage” of a band member’s mother (also a policewoman at the scene) from the perspective of grounded gendered cosmopolitanism. Lastly, a short case study of Sickles, a young band from the religiously-conservative Madura Island, shows the problems that young bands experience plus the type of global underground support which they can attract.

## Introduction

In his article on East Jakarta band Siksa Kubur, Dennis William Lee (2017) notes that both punk and Heavy Metal music were labeled as the music of working-class youth and social outcasts during the Soeharto era. A key event was the riot following a Metallica concert in Jakarta in 1993. This viewpoint is probably still widespread today. The focus of most of this chapter is the Death Metal community of Bandung, West Java (a provincial, mountainous city of 2.5 million people located 115 kilometres south-east of Jakarta). The Bandung scene, hegemonic throughout Indonesia, including remote East Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Sumatra, is recognized widely as the largest scene in the world. Man, the vocalist of Jasad, told the author that the city had 128 active Death Metal bands as at 24 February 2011. This is even more remarkable as Death Metal is the most musically-extreme subgenre, and is only one of a number of subgenres within Heavy Metal music. Other important subgenres include Black Metal, deathcore, grindcore, goregrind, hardcore, metalcore, Power Metal, Thrash Metal, and traditional Heavy Metal.

The peak years of the Bandung Death Metal scene were arguably 2009-13. The scene has fragmented and matured in recent years as older musicians become progressively less active and younger musicians and fans either choose more modern subgenres or continue without strong connections to the pioneers. There has also been a notable shift towards dedicated Islamic religious devotion among musicians and fans alike. Teguh Prasetyo, of the bands Interfectorment and Digging Up, told the author how around half of fans from the scene’s peak years, have left the scene for religious reasons, while one-quarter (i.e. one-half of the one-half) no longer listen to any Death Metal in their personal lives.

## History of Bandung Death Metal scene

The Bandung Death Metal scene[[1]](#footnote-1) is known, throughout Indonesia and overseas, for its size; dedication and commitment (to the Death Metal subgenre in particular); extreme self-confidence; professionalism; hierarchical nature; strong and cohesive networks of merchandise shops, road crews, recording studios, record labels, artists, and tattoo stores; large number of talented and motivated underground musicians; and high levels of organization (Baulch, 2007; Hutabarat & Kusumah, n.d.; James & Walsh, 2015, 2019; Prasetyo, 2017; Wallach, 2008). It is associated with a lower middle-class / working-class district in the outer-eastern suburbs called Ujung Berung (or informally “Ujungbronx”) where most of the foundation bands originated from in the 1990s. Hutabarat and Kusumah (n.d., p. 3) write that “Ujungberung is the symbol of underground movement in Indonesia,” and, generally, this statement would be acknowledged as valid by metalheads throughout Indonesia. The Ujung Berung community’s marketing and self-confidence generated unparalleled momentum and these forces worked in tandem with the obvious artistic talent of the leading early bands. The legendary Ujung Berung bands were formed in the following years: Jasad: 1990, Forgotten: 1994, Burgerkill: 1995, Injected Sufferage: 1995, Disinfected: 1997, Jihad: 1999, Undergod: 2004, Bleeding Corpse: 2006, and Turbidity: 2008. The famous underground festival *Bandung Berisik* 1 was first held in 1995 (Prasetyo, 2017, p. 196). According to Teguh Prasetyo (no relation to the music scholar Frans Ari Prasetyo), bassist of Interfectorment and Digging Up, the peak years of the Bandung Death Metal scene were 2009-13.

Andy Bennett (2002) explored the Canterbury Sound concept whereby certain bands which emerged out of Canterbury, England 30 or 40 years ago are now venerated by online enthusiasts from around the world who try to link the sound with the city of Canterbury and myths of “pastoral Englishness.” Unlike other sounds, such as Motown, the Philadelphia Sound, and the Seattle Sound, these bands had little in common sonically, and the sound had no real link to the city. However, in recent years, CD promoters and record shops in Canterbury have joined together with online enthusiasts to fuel the myth of the importance of the sound and its city links and context. Bandung Death Metal is a similar myth or mythscape (Bennett, 2002, p. 89), with Ujung Berung being a mythical locality of underground values, known and revered throughout all of Indonesia’s metal scenes including those of remote East Kalimantan and Sumatra. Similarly, Ujung Berung is associated with a particular sound (the Suffocation-Disgorge USA Brutal Death Metal style of scene pioneers Jasad). Other pioneer bands play in Brutal Death Metal style too, such as Forgotten and Jihad, with only minor sonic variations. The myth of Ujung Berung allows Bandung bands to headline in other Indonesian cities, almost as a matter of course, but non-Bandung bands rarely receive the same treatment when they play in Bandung.[[2]](#footnote-2) This has fed into creating some resentment towards the Bandung scene from other cities. The myth of Bandung as a centre for arts and culture in Indonesia, dating back decades, has fed into the Ujung Berung myth but only in a way similar to how English punks took advantage of, but also subverted (and reinvigorated), earlier English rock, glam, and mod traditions.

Ujung Berung, the bands and the community, “tap into familiar local imagery and mobilise existing loyalties within new frameworks and settings” (Hatley, 2012, p. 28), as we hope that this part-chapter on the Ujung Berung Death Metal community will demonstrate.

## Indonesian Death Metal music and criminality

In this section I will explore alleged connections existing in the minds of Indonesian police and elite persons about the alleged connections between Death Metal fandom and criminality. In Bandung a major event in the history of the scene occurred in 2008 when eleven fans were crushed to death at an album launch held by the Bandung metalcore band Beside. The reasons for the sad deaths were failings in building design and construction, to allow for proper exits, and the carelessness of the staff managing the venue on the night. However, the local police assigned blame to Death Metal music and to the band itself. As a result, Beside was perceived to be a “dangerous band,” along with Death Metal act, Jihad (because its lyrics explore Islamic theology), and hip-hop group Homicide (source for the “dangerous band” comment: Agrog, ex-Beside vocalist, interview with author, 18 May 2018). It became very difficult for a number of years to hold shows and festivals in Bandung City proper, and, for the band Beside, it was yet more difficult again. More and more shows were held in remote countryside areas in private houses and garages. I attended one such show when the young Bandung band Bloodgush headlined at a Sunday afternoon show at Cililin, three hours’ drive out from Bandung, on 27 February 2011. The audience was around 150 to 200 teenagers (about 10-15% being female fans), who appeared at and departed from the idyllic rural setting mostly via motorbike. The bands played in an enclosed garage, owned by a private house, approximately 15 metres long by 7 metres wide. About 10 metres from the garage was the house itself. Attendees were able to enter the house one by one to use the toilet and the members of Bloodgush were able to relax for an hour after their set in the living room of the family’s home.

On another occasion, on 1 April 2012, there was a one-day festival in the countryside outside Bandung. Approximately ten bands were scheduled to appear with the first beginning around noon and the last beginning around 8:00 p.m. It was a mixed-genre show with most bands being Death Metal but there were also one or two punk and hardcore bands. Because of the mix of bands, about 20% of the attendees wore punk regalia, while the remainder wore Death Metal merchandise. The crowd was around 200 to 300. In mid-afternoon, around 4:00 p.m., a group of about 30 policemen arrived and went into the venue to tell the Event Organizer (EO) that they were cancelling the festival. I can recall the fans of Bandung hardcore band, Outright, pouring out of the door with disappointment and shock etched upon their teenaged faces. The police then retreated to one far, rear corner of the carpark and watched the crowd disperse. There was no violence or even physical contact. The police allowed the metalheads to maintain their own “face” and self-respect by allowing them to leave the compound at their own pace. The metalheads acted out their role in the drama by ignoring the police and “pretending” that they were all leaving voluntarily. In Indonesia, with its history of police brutality, it is always wisest to humbly accept the setbacks of the moment and live to fight another day. Later on, Man of Jasad told us that he believed that if he had been there he would have been able to resolve the problems with the police. (His band had been due to headline but he had not been at the venue when the police arrived.) Bobby Rock, the tall and genial vocalist of Bleeding Corpse, was cool in the crisis and spent time cheerfully chatting with young fans at the venue that afternoon until the last possible moment. The car containing Bobby, Bobby’s wife, and me was the last to depart the compound. It was a blessing in disguise for these fans as, in normal circumstances; they may not have had the chance to chat casually with Bobby.

Maila Stivens (2018) focuses on the gendering of the contemporary social movement in Australia which aims to assist and advocate for asylum seekers. She effectively contrasts the militarized perspective and actions of the Australian government, backed up by its chosen ideology of national security, with the women who attempt to show hospitality to asylum seekers through motherly and feminine images and support. Stivens emphasizes the women-inspired groups’ “affective and embodied politics,” which includes “intense feelings of protective maternal rage at the Australian state’s asylum regime,” and argues that this politics is “instrumental in producing spaces of cosmopolitan hospitality” (Fitzgerald & Stivens, 2018, p. 82) as a “situated ethical cosmopolitanism” (Stivens, 2018, p. 92).

As another example of maternal rage or maternal depression, at the April 2012 festival mentioned above, the promising young Bandung band Humiliation was due to play but was prevented from doing so by the police interruption. One of the police personnel was a policewoman who was also the mother of 21-year-old Adam, vocalist of Humiliation. When most of the attendees had left or were in the process of leaving the compound, we discovered Adam’s mother – she had been sitting crying in her car. She had had no power to change the police’s decision to cancel the festival. At that moment her motherly pride in hoping to watch her son perform dominated over or outweighed her policewoman role – she was torn apart by maternal rage and disappointment. Perhaps because of her gender in a patriarchal society, none of the other police personnel seemed bothered by her distress, which she was probably trying to hide from them by sitting in her car. Perhaps the very act of sitting in her car was her personal rebellion. In my experience, in Indonesia, parental pride over children’s achievements and efforts is the dominant parental attitude towards Heavy Metal musicians whereas, by contrast, religious, political, and community leaders, with no “skin in the game,” often show apathy or hostility.

A famous example of police persecution of Heavy Metal people was the case of the owner of a “distro” (merchandise store) selling Heavy Metal recordings and merchandise inside the Blok M shopping complex in suburban South Jakarta (Anonymous, 2016; Coconuts Jakarta, 2016; Vallecillo, 2016; Wijaya, 2016). The communist sickle-and-hammer symbol is still an illegal symbol in Indonesia and the nation’s political leaders have never apologized over the murder of about one million Indonesian communists in 1965-66. The shop was selling, amongst other merchandise, a T-shirt depicting the logo of German Thrash Metal band Kreator and a hammer-and-sickle. The offending image had been downloaded by the store-owner and sent to a factory in Bandung to produce 60 T-shirts, i.e. this was not official licensed band merchandise (but the design did come from Kreator). This T-shirt attracted the attention of the police and they paraded the “offensive” shirt in front of the media. The arrest can be interpreted as “moral panic” and an attempt to scapegoat the store-owner and make an example of him for others (although the local police chief later backtracked and admitted that it was just a band T-shirt and not incitement to treason). What is interesting and important is that Kreator is only vaguely left-wing in terms of being environmentalist and pro-Third World empowerment and dissent in the face of corrupt regimes. The band has never been communist and it has never had pro-communist lyrics. Note that this was not a major music chain - it was a small operation set up by a local fan. The police attention for him was the stuff of nightmares. The popularity of this German band in Indonesia (bypassing the hegemonic UK-US axis) also showcases the “grounded” and “rooted” cosmopolitanism (Araujo, 2018; Dyer, 2018; Fitzgerald & Stivens, 2018; Pardy, 2018; Stivens, 2018) evident in Indonesian metal scenes.

Recently in Iran, a Death Metal band, Arsames (est. 2002), faced government persecution for allegedly playing “satanic music” and for being allegedly against the Islamic government (Pasbani, 2020). The band made bail and was subject to the threat of 15 years’ imprisonment. In updated news it was later revealed that the band members had fled the country. The Indonesian metal communities are fortunate that their difficulties have never been quite this extreme.

## Globalization and discontinuities – the case of Sickles from Madura Island

The case of Sickles raises a lot of important issues connected to contemporary globalization and identity formation. It also allows us to see how “grounded” and “rooted” cosmopolitanism (which is not bourgeois or corporate) operates in the global Death Metal Underground, and has done since the days of tape-trading in the 1980s (Mudrian, 2004; Kahn-Harris, 2007). It also highlights the impact of neo-colonialism, which positions young Indonesian men and women at the bottom of a global hierarchy. They sometimes need to and/or want to leave their home cities in search of employment, which means that bands are frequently disrupted, put on-hold, declared inactive or split up. This has adverse implications for the cohesion and mood of the scene and the scene is forced to adapt from within to respond to temporary setbacks. Usually scenes eventually recover as younger people rise up to take the place of departed musicians.

Madura Island is a quiet, socially- and politically-conservative island off the coast of East Java. It is reached via a causeway bridge from the cosmopolitan mega-city of Surabaya, which has a large and well-established metal scene rivaling that of Bandung for size, reach, and sophistication.[[3]](#footnote-3) Unlike Bandung, where the Death Metal genre is hegemonic, Surabaya’s scene has a good mix of genres but the main genre is Power Metal, which is a variant of traditional Heavy Metal with its sung, rather than growled or screamed, vocals, and musical virtuosity. Heavy Metal’s roots in Surabaya, according to Valerian guitarist Dimas Bramantyo (in conversation with the author), can be traced to the hard-rock music which visiting servicemen and tourists brought to the East Javanese port-city from the 1950s through to the 1980s.

The Madura town adjacent to Surabaya is Bangkalan (population 95,000), and the Madura Heavy Metal community is centered in Bangkalan although there are bands based in other cities too. Madura Island is a very religious Islamic place with a number of Islamic schools and colleges being located there. Nearly all girls and women wear the *hijab*, which is not the case in Surabaya. It maintains an identity and feeling very different from Surabaya, although the awareness of cosmopolitan and potentially corrupting Surabaya, just over the bridge, never goes away. It is difficult to obtain alcohol in Madura and in my two trips there I stuck to non-alcoholic drinks. Members of the Surabaya metal community sometimes visit Bangkalan, usually on day-trips, and they encourage and mentor the younger Madura bands. The scene in Madura probably numbered no more than 50 active members as at December 2014 (most of whom were band members in one or more bands) and their ages were very young with most members being aged late-teens to early-twenties. As at December 2014, Madura had seven or eight active bands across all genres, including Ant Killers (deathcore), Bull Race (hardcore), Kremasi (metalcore), Mutilation Aggression (Death Metal, from Kamal), Rajam (War Metal), Sickles (Death Metal), and Tyrannical Mirror (deathcore).

Given Madura’s religious and conservative culture, it is interesting to note that the Madura metal scene members are also relatively careful, restrained, polite, and cautious. They do not have long hair; they rarely wear band T-shirts featuring artwork of gore, blood, and murder; and they do not wear jackets with band patches on them (referred to as “battle jackets”). They need to adapt to their surroundings and fit in socially so as to go to college and high-school, secure employment and/or find marriage partners. They are very aware that only part of their life is lived within the scene (Kahn-Harris, 2007), and the rest is lived outside of it. The large proportion of bands playing more modern (post-2000) styles of metal music, including metalcore and deathcore, reflects the youthfulness of the band members and the lack of scene numbers and infrastructure (which precludes mini-scenes being created for each subgenre).

The band Sickles (pronounced “Sick-less”) was formed in 2012 by brothers Arie (guitar) and Rony (bass). The band released a seven-track EP *Series Elite Disaster* in March 2014 (limited to 500 copies). Its style of technically intricate Brutal Death Metal, with lyrics about traditional Maduranese history, and a couple of innovative video-clips, began to win underground attention throughout Indonesia and overseas. Haidir was the drummer (still in high-school) and Irsyad was on vocals. Arie was about 21-years-old and Rony about 18 in 2014. The underground music promoter and Death Metal aficionado, Andrew Talbot aka Andrew Sick of Sick Reviews, Canada, began promoting and supporting Sickles through social-media and did a review of the band’s EP. The band members - Rony (bass), Irsyad (vocals), Haiidir (drums), and Arie (guitar) - were overjoyed to get respect and validation from an aficionado from a faraway Western country.

I first visited the house in Bangkalan where Arie and Rony live with their mother in January 2014. One room is reserved for a small merchandise shop which sells band T-shirts and CDs. The two brothers had told their mother that an author/journalist was coming to visit them from Australia. Their mother refused to believe them until I arrived on their doorstep, accompanied by several members of the Surabaya scene, including a man and woman who acted as interpreter for me in band interviews. Again we saw maternal pride as Arie and Rony’s mother was amazed that a white-foreigner would come to their remote town to visit her sons. This was like a validation for their musical efforts, and the support from Andrew Sick, although only ever virtual, was just as meaningful and appreciated. Andrew Sick had to face racism and Islamaphobia by promoting an Indonesian band to his Canadian and global audience, but he stick to his convictions and ethical beliefs and refused to back down in his support of Sickles. He encountered the common attitudes of “what good can come from such a global backwater?” and “how can religious people from a Muslim country play such a rebellious and countercultural type of music?” Andrew Sick, as mentioned, never gave up in his support for Sickles and other Indonesian bands online even in the face of entrenched and consistent racism, Islamaphobia, indifference, and apathy. The validation from Canada and Australia raised Sickles’ subcultural capital (Kahn-Harris, 2007; Thornton, 1995) significantly within Indonesian underground scenes and put the whole Madura scene on the map. Although veteran War Metal band, Rajam, had a large underground cult following throughout Indonesia, it was the younger Sickles which had broken through to international audiences. And Yayak, mastermind of Rajam, in humble manner, was very quick to acknowledge and support Sickles too rather than being beset by jealousy.

However, in September 2016, Irsyad found work on an international cruise-ship. His Facebook page showed pictures of this smiling Indonesian side-by-side with his workmates, dressed in light-blue overalls, either on board ship or at various overseas destinations. Sickles was badly affected - it only played occasional shows thereafter, with a guest vocalist (the vocalist of Ant Killers), and no new recordings have been released (source: Metal Archives). Rony joined forces with Ghofur Al Hikam (guitarist) in a new Death Metal venture, Decaying Flesh (source: author’s interview with Rony of Decaying Flesh, 3 April 2017). He also plays bass in Unscarred with guitarist Dhidit Ratt (ex-Jagal) and this band has a dual Madura-Surabaya identity (source: author’s interview with Dhidit Ratt of Unscarred, 12 September 2018). This example shows Irsyad’s desire or need to get a job which would take him away from Madura and the negative impact this had on his band and his local scene. Rony “graduated” to forming a band with a leading Surabaya guitarist and has found his own form of success there. With support from Swallow Vomit Productions of Thailand, Rony continues to operate at an international level. Both Decaying Flesh and Unscarred have released one studio album apiece.

The Sickles’ page on Metal Archives lists the band as “active” and lists the classic line-up of Arie, Rony, Irsyad, and Haidir as still the current line-up. Rony told me on 23 October 2020 that the band is presently preparing a new single. “Killed by a Cruise-ship” (a play on the Motörhead song “Killed by Death”) is an appropriate summary headline for the whole Sickles’ saga.

## Conclusion

This chapter has revealed how vast, diverse, sophisticated, and well-developed the Heavy Metal scenes of Bandung and Surabaya are (although in the latter case it has been asserted rather than demonstrated due to space constraints). Police and politicians fail to understand the nature of the musical communities or the subcultural discourses and practices involved, because they are so full of myth-making and symbolism, and are essentially a movement imported from the West, but adapted to suit local needs, inclinations, and preferences. The persecution of the South Jakarta shop-owner looks ludicrous to outside observers and the governments need to reflect on why they still fear a symbol which lost its power in world politics 30 to 40 years ago. Their lack of knowledge is also evident given that they are unaware that Kreator is only vaguely left-wing in the sense of vaguely supporting Third World liberation movements and street-based activism in the face of (generally unnamed) oppressive regimes. The Indonesian police fell into the beginner’s trap of conforming to Kreator’s prior expectations of Third World police-states rather than proving the band wrong through tolerance and benevolence.

However, the festival cancelled in April 2012 does at least show the police being willing to allow the crowd to leave at its own speed in a way which allowed for face-saving. Despite this, the festival posed no moral danger to anyone in the audience and deprived many young local teenagers of some harmless enjoyment and social interaction. It may be taking a step too far to say that the attendees were “criminalized,” as no-one was arrested, and it was more a matter of the local police wanting to save their own face and demonstrate their own importance. Youth-based subcultural movements of foreign origin were viewed as suspicious and nerve-wracking. However, for Adam’s mother, she was depressed not to see her son in action onstage – her maternal role dominated her policewoman’s role, at that precise moment, and this theme is common throughout Indonesian musical scenes. Parental pride in a child’s achievements trumps generalized and impersonal “moral’ or “religious” panics.

The discussion of Sickles shows that the Madura scene is careful, restrained, polite, and low-profile as reflecting an isolated, religious, and socially-conservative island community, which perceives itself as continually under threat from cosmopolitan and hedonistic Surabaya over the causeway. The Madura metalheads are very young and there are few fans that don’t actually play in bands. They are shorthaired, wear plain black T-shirts minus gruesome artwork, and avoid patched battle-jackets (at least in 2014 this was the case). They want to fly under-the-radar so that they can focus on their craft and continue to function in the non-metal world where they need to attend schools and colleges, hold down jobs, and/or find girlfriends and future wives.

The case of Sickles shows the importance of global underground networks, and we see a grounded and rooted working-class cosmopolitanism in action. But Sickles is active in name only now and the band is forced to wait for Irsyad to become available again. Meanwhile Rony joins forces with Surabaya musicians and he has “graduated” from the Bangkslan milieu, whilst retaining his roots in the Bangkalan community. The support received from the day-tripping Surabaya metalheads has been vitally important in building up and nurturing the Madura scene, as vital in its own way as the Canadian Sick Reviews connection. Surabaya musicians, such as Dimas Bramantyo, Daniel Natjaard, Verrel Valerian, Dwi Yudha, and Ms Dhinie (ex-Valerian) deserve respect and gratitude for their continued efforts to mentor and support the Bangkalan scene members. Sickles’ achievements were and are formidable for a young band fighting the odds in such a remote and conservative place. Death Metal is a subculture which encourages youth to aim for musical proficiency, as part of a local scene of enduring bonds and which connects, through individuals, shops, studios, radio DJs, travelers, and touring bands, to a network of scenes which spans the country and beyond. No-one is ever really alone.

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1. . Death Metal and Death Metal people remain hegemonic in the Bandung metal scene in terms of their domination of institutions, discourses, and practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Two established Surabaya-based musicians, Dimas Bramantyo of Valerian and Endro Wibowo of Jagal, expressed their frustration about this situation to the author on 8 December 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . The 5.4 kilometre long Suramadu Bridge (Indonesian: *Jembatan Suramadu*), also known as the Surabaya-Madura Bridge, connects Bangkalan to the mainland of Java. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)