Between Bandit and Betawi Hero: Si Pitung, Colonial Policing, and Popular Memory in Late Nineteenth-Century Batavia

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Abstract

This article reconstructs the historical career of Si Pitung and examines the transformation of a colonial fugitive into a Betawi folk hero. It draws primarily on eighteen newspaper entries of the Malay-language Hindia Olanda and the Dutch-language De Locomotief, De Telegraaf, and Java-Bode published between June 1892 and November 1893. The study applies the historical method used in the original research: heuristics, external and internal source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. A source-critical chronology distinguishes the date of an event from the later date on which it was reported, identifies inconsistencies in the source compilation, and separates contemporary evidence from subsequent oral elaboration. The newspapers establish Si Pitung as a historical actor associated with robbery, armed flight, an escape from Meester Cornelis prison, reported local assistance, and a fatal encounter with the police in October 1893. They do not, however, independently verify the later Robin Hood narrative or every detail of his religious and martial education. The article argues that Si Pitung occupied an unstable position between criminality and social resistance. Colonial reporting criminalized him while simultaneously publicizing his tactical skill, support from some residents, and refusal to submit. This tension offered material for later heroization. Reports of a guarded grave and Malay verse indicate early posthumous attention, without establishing when admiration became widespread. The article contributes a disciplined distinction between historical event, colonial framing, and collective memory.

Keywords: Si Pitung, Batavia, Betawi, social banditry, colonial press, jago, collective memory

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Introduction

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Batavia was at once the administrative centre of the Netherlands Indies and a fragmented colonial city whose legal, racial, and economic divisions extended far beyond its European core. The port, the old city, the expanding southern suburbs, and the surrounding Ommelanden formed an interconnected field of commerce, private estates, kampongs, roads, waterways, and markets. European officials and merchants occupied the most privileged positions. Chinese, Arab, and other intermediary communities held diverse economic roles, while most indigenous residents encountered the colonial order from materially weaker positions. The resulting urban society was not a simple opposition between rulers and ruled. It was a layered social formation in which access to land, policing, credit, and legal redress was unequally distributed.[1]

For Betawi communities in the city's margins, these inequalities were experienced locally. Private-land regimes allowed landlords and their agents substantial authority over tenants, while colonial administration depended on indigenous officials, village heads, informants, and police auxiliaries. Economic pressure did not mechanically produce rebellion, but it narrowed legitimate avenues through which grievances could be expressed. The history of Batavia therefore includes not only formal political institutions but also brokers, strongmen, religious teachers, martial networks, and mobile criminal groups that operated across the boundary between town and countryside.[2] Banditry belonged to this changing environment. It was shaped by the growth of a money economy, the availability of firearms, uneven police capacity, and the social geography of the Ommelanden.[3]

The jago occupied an especially ambiguous position within this world. A jago could be feared as an enforcer, employed by a landlord or local official, respected as a protector, or condemned as a criminal. These roles were not mutually exclusive. Their meaning depended on who exercised violence, for whom, and under what claim to legitimacy. Schulte Nordholt's account of the jago in colonial Java is useful precisely because it resists a fixed moral classification. The jago stood in the shadow of the state, sometimes reinforcing colonial order and sometimes exposing its limits.[4] This ambiguity is essential to understanding Si Pitung, whose historical trace is inseparable from the competing vocabularies used to describe him.

In Betawi oral tradition, Si Pitung became a devout Muslim, a skilled practitioner of silat, and a champion who robbed the wealthy and aided the poor. Colonial newspapers, by contrast, identified Pitoeng, Pitang, or Bitoeng as a robber, escaped prisoner, armed fugitive, and convicted murderer. Neither archive can

[1] Susan Abeyasekere, *Jakarta: A History* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), 15, 59–60.

[2] Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 130–38. See also M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 4th ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 164–65.

[3] Margreet van Till, *Banditry in West Java, 1869–1942*, trans. David McKay and Beverley Jackson (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 19–62.

[4] Henk Schulte Nordholt, "The Jago in the Shadow: Crime and 'Order' in the Colonial State in Java," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1991): 74–91, http://hdl.handle.net/1765/6327.

simply be accepted as transparent. Colonial reports were produced within a regime concerned with property, order, and official prestige. Oral accounts preserved community meanings but changed as they moved through storytelling, lenong, printed literature, film, and heritage institutions. The central historical problem is therefore not to choose one archive as wholly true and dismiss the other as false. It is to determine what each source can establish, what it leaves uncertain, and how the difference between them became historically consequential.

Margreet van Till's foundational study demonstrated that Si Pitung was not merely a fictional character. By comparing newspapers, administrative materials, and later traditions, she reconstructed a historical bandit whose public image was progressively transformed.[5] Her work remains the principal historiographical point of departure. Studies by Basoeki Koesasi and Palupi Damardini examined lenong and oral narrative, revealing the formal and cultural processes through which Pitung's story was transmitted.[6] Erwantoro and his collaborators later assembled numerous Betawi versions and analysed the figure's cultural functions, including the association of religious study, prayer, and silat.[7] Garadian and Bagas connected the historical narrative to the contested heritage of the so-called House of Si Pitung in Marunda.[8]

This scholarship has established the broad contrast between colonial criminal and popular hero. It has also created a risk of repetition. A new article cannot claim novelty merely by restating that Pitung was represented differently by colonizers and Betawi storytellers. The more productive gap lies in the organization and criticism of the newspaper corpus itself. The main text and appendix together document eighteen newspaper entries from Malay- and Dutch-language publications, although issue dates, event dates, captions, and retrospective accounts are sometimes conflated. Such conflation matters because it can turn a report published after an event into the event's date, or make a later reprint appear contemporary with an earlier episode. It also obscures the distinction between early posthumous attention and later heroization.

This article therefore makes a deliberately limited contribution. It does not claim to discover Si Pitung's historicity, which Van Till already established. It reconstructs the sequence from June 1892 to November 1893, distinguishes contemporary evidence from later biographical tradition, and compares what the newspapers recorded with the meanings later attributed to those records. Its novelty lies in showing that colonial reporting had a double effect. The press criminalized Pitung through the language of danger and public order, yet it repeatedly circulated evidence of his mobility, tactical intelligence, support from some residents, and

[5] Margreet van Till, "In Search of Si Pitung: The History of an Indonesian Legend," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 152, no. 3 (1996): 461–82, https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003007.

[6] Basoeki Koesasi, *Lenong and Si Pitung*, Working Paper 73 (Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1992). See also Palupi Damardini, "Cerita Si Pitung sebagai Sastra Lisan: Analisis terhadap Struktur Cerita" (Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Indonesia, 1993).

[7] Heru Erwantoro, Ria Intani Tresnasih, Lina Herlinawati, Tatang Suhenda, Oki Akbar, Tenny Rekawati, and Anas Azhar Nasihin, *Cerita 'Si Pitung': Tokoh Legendaris dalam Pandangan Masyarakat Betawi* (Bandung: Balai Pelestarian Nilai Budaya Bandung, 2013), 49–51, 64–75.

[8] Endi Aulia Garadian and Rafael Arya Bagas, *Mengenal Rumah Si Pitung*, 2nd ed. (Jakarta: Unit Pengelola Museum Kebaharian Jakarta, 2023).

defiance. These details supplied narrative materials from which a heroic memory could be made.

Two conceptual traditions guide the analysis without predetermining it. Hobsbawm's social-bandit model explains why an outlaw condemned by the state may be treated by a subordinate community as a defender.[9] Carlyle's Great Man theory, adopted in the original analysis, emphasizes individual agency and how collective aspirations are retrospectively embodied in a memorable figure.[10] Both require qualification. Hobsbawm's model can romanticize violence and assume redistribution that the sources do not prove. Carlyle's model can obscure the networks and structural conditions that enabled an individual to act. The evidence is strongest when these approaches are held in tension. Si Pitung mattered as an agent, but his historical significance arose through relationships among companions, villagers, informants, police, newspapers, and later storytellers.

The article asks three related questions. What can be established about Si Pitung's life from contemporary evidence? How did his activities interact with the social and policing environment of late nineteenth-century Batavia? How did colonial reporting contribute, intentionally or otherwise, to the earliest formation of his popular memory? The argument is that Si Pitung should be understood neither as an unblemished anticolonial hero nor as a common criminal whose later reputation is historically irrelevant. He was an armed outlaw produced within a specific colonial social order, protected by parts of the kampong world, pursued through informant-based policing, and transformed into a hero through the interaction of event, representation, and memory.

Method

The study uses the historical method employed in the original research, comprising heuristics, external and internal source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The sequence follows the standard Indonesian historical-research tradition described by Kuntowijoyo, Sulasman, and Sjamsuddin.[11] [12] [13] Heuristics identifies and collects evidence. Source criticism evaluates authenticity and credibility. Interpretation relates verified facts through analysis and synthesis. Historiography organizes the resulting explanation as a chronological and analytical account.

The primary corpus comprises newspaper entries assigned to June 1892–November 1893, with unresolved issue dates identified below. The Malay-language Hindia Olanda issues were consulted through the collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia. Dutch-language reports from De Locomotief, De Telegraaf, and Java-Bode were accessed in digitized form through Delpher. The corpus includes reports on house searches, robbery accusations, imprisonment, escape, rewards,

[9] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, rev. ed. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 13–23.

[10] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841), 1–28.

[11] Kuntowijoyo, *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2018), 64, 78.

[12] Sulasman, *Metodologi Penelitian Sejarah* (Bandung: Pustaka Setia, 2014), 93–107.

[13] Helius Sjamsuddin, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2012), 105, 185–89.

rumours, Dji-ih's arrest, violence against informants, the final police operation, burial, the guarded grave, and a posthumous Malay verse.[14] Secondary sources include historical works on Batavia, colonial banditry, the jago, Betawi folklore, and the formation of the Pitung legend.

Internal criticism evaluated what each report could reliably support. Reports were compared across titles and dates, and factual content was separated from evaluative language. Colonial terms such as bandiet, booswicht, misdadiger, and pendjahat were treated as evidence of official and editorial classification rather than neutral descriptions. Contradictions were retained when they disclosed the limits of the archive. For example, reports differed over whether Pitung's final request for palm wine and ice was granted. More importantly, the fatal encounter occurred on the Saturday preceding the reports of 18 and 19 October 1893. The preceding Saturday yields 14 October as the inferred event date, distinct from publication on 18 and 19 October. Source criticism in this sense is not an attempt to remove bias before using a source. It asks how bias shaped what could be seen and said.[15]

Interpretation proceeded through analysis and synthesis. Analysis disaggregated the record into event, actor, place, action, attribution, and rhetoric. Synthesis reconnected those elements into a chronology and related them to the social history of Batavia. Carlyle's emphasis on individual agency remains part of the interpretive framework, complemented by concepts already established in the research, including social banditry, jago culture, structural inequality, and collective memory. Historiography then organized the evidence into a narrative that moves from social setting to documented activity, death, and posthumous meaning.

The method also imposes evidentiary limits. A newspaper mention proves that a person identified as Pitung appeared within a contemporary report, not that every accusation was judicially established. A repeated oral motif demonstrates the durability of a community narrative, not necessarily the literal truth of the narrated event. Conversely, colonial silence does not prove that redistribution, religious instruction, or popular protection never occurred. The article consequently marks degrees of certainty. It uses "reported," "accused," or "attributed" when the evidence is an allegation, and reserves direct assertion for facts supported by converging evidence, with repeated or reprinted reports not counted as independent witnesses.[16]

[14] The primary corpus consists of *Hindia Olanda*, June 28, August 10 and 26, and November 22, 1892, and April 25, May 2 and 12, August 19, September 1 and 23, October 18 and 20, and November 14, 1893, consulted at Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia. The Delpher corpus consists of *De Locomotief*, April 25 and October 19, 1893, *De Telegraaf*, July 3 and November 17, 1893, and *Java-Bode*, August 15, 1893.

[15] Louis Gottschalk, *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia Press, 2006), 95. For the preceding Saturday as the inferred event date, see Hindia Olanda, October 18, 1893, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, and De Locomotief, October 19, 1893, 2, Delpher.

[16] Margreet van Till, "In Search of Si Pitung: The History of an Indonesian Legend," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 152, no. 3 (1996): 461–65, https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003007.

Results

Batavia's Unequal Social Landscape and the Jago

Late nineteenth-century Batavia combined a concentrated colonial centre with a broad peri-urban zone that was difficult to administer uniformly. Roads and railways connected markets and administrative nodes, while rivers, canals, gardens, rice fields, scrub, cemeteries, and kampongs produced a more porous landscape outside the European city. The Ommelanden's private estates created local jurisdictions in which landlords and their intermediaries exercised considerable economic and coercive power. Indigenous inhabitants did not face one undifferentiated colonial authority. They encountered a chain of landowners, demang, village heads, police agents, guards, creditors, and tax collectors whose interests could overlap or conflict.[17]

This structure created space for informal protectors and coercive specialists. The jago's authority rested less on official appointment than on reputation, physical capacity, social connections, and the ability to mediate danger. A jago might protect a kampong from outsiders or intimidate that same community. Religious instruction and silat could provide moral vocabularies through which force was distinguished from predation. Within Betawi cultural memory, the ideal jago was not simply the strongest man. He was expected to defend dignity, restrain violence, and remain connected to Islamic practice and community obligation.[18]

The newspaper evidence does not show Pitung leading a peasant revolt, organizing a political movement, or articulating a programme against Dutch rule. His actions were local, mobile, and clandestine. Yet they acquired political meaning because law and property were already embedded in colonial hierarchy. Evading police, impersonating authority, attacking an informant, or surviving a large manhunt could be read by officials as threats to order and by villagers as demonstrations that official power was not absolute. The political significance of Pitung's actions therefore lay less in a declared ideology than in their reception within an unequal field of authority.

The Historical Actor and the Layered Biography

The contemporary newspapers establish the existence of a man known by variant spellings of Pitung. They record a networked fugitive associated with Sukabumi in Kebayoran, Meester Cornelis, Tanah Abang, Kali Besar, Marunda, and other parts of Batavia's hinterland. They also name companions and associates, most prominently Dji-ih. This evidence is sufficient to reject the claim that Si Pitung was invented entirely by twentieth-century popular culture.

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[17] Susan Abeyasekere, *Jakarta: A History* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), 43, 68–70. See also Margreet van Till, *Banditry in West Java, 1869–1942*, trans. David McKay and Beverley Jackson (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 19–44.

[18] Moeflich Hasbullah, *Islam & Transformasi Masyarakat Nusantara: Kajian Sosiologis Sejarah Indonesia* (Bandung: Humaniora, 2017), 57–58, 74–76. See also Abdul Chaer, *Folklor Betawi: Kebudayaan dan Kehidupan Orang Betawi* (Jakarta: Masup Jakarta, 2012), 1–3.

It is less sufficient for the familiar childhood biography. Later Betawi traditions identify him as Salihoen, born around the 1860s in Rawa Belong or Pengumben, the son of Bang Piung and Mpok Pinah. They describe his study of Islam and silat under Haji Naipin and portray religious discipline as the moral foundation of his defence of the poor. These details are central to the cultural history of Si Pitung, but most are not independently documented in the newspaper reports used here. Van Till and Damardini show that they belong to a layered oral and literary tradition in which personal biography, ideal jago conduct, and Islamic legitimacy became mutually reinforcing.[19]

The distinction is not designed to diminish oral tradition. It clarifies its historical function. The newspapers offer a sparse biography of alleged acts and police encounters. Oral accounts supply motive, childhood formation, moral character, and supernatural capacity. The gap between the two is precisely where collective memory works. A fugitive described in fragments becomes a socially intelligible person through stories about family, teacher, prayer, silat, generosity, and invulnerability.

A Source-Critical Chronology, 1892–1893

The first phase of the documented record concerns searches and alleged robberies in 1892. Hindia Olanda reported on 28 June that the Tanah Abang police searched a house associated with a man whose name appeared as Bitoeng or Pitung in Sukabumi, Kebayoran. Among the items described were clothing and articles that could be used to imitate police appearance. The same report referred to alleged plans to use a black coat, hat, and companions dressed like police guards. The allegation suggests planned impersonation, without proving its execution. It points to a possible tactical use of colonial signs. Authority could be tactically borrowed by wearing its visible form.[20]

Reports of 10 and 26 August associated Pitung and his companions with robberies, including the house of Haji Sapiudin in Marunda. The 10 August report describes 125 guilders concealed beneath Pitung's house and attributes part to theft. It does not establish the money's later use or redistribution to the poor.[21] On 22 November, Hindia Olanda reported that police sought a man named Pitang for allegedly stealing clothing worth one hundred guilders from a boat at Kali Besar belonging to a woman named Sajoe. This accusation complicates any claim that every target was a colonial official or oppressive landlord.[22]

The second phase began with imprisonment and escape. The newspaper record and Van Till's later archival reconstruction indicate that Pitung and Dji-ih were among prisoners condemned in connection with a murder in Bekasi. Hindia Olanda reported

[19] Margreet van Till, "In Search of Si Pitung: The History of an Indonesian Legend," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 152, no. 3 (1996): 461–68, https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003007. See also Palupi Damardini, "Cerita Si Pitung sebagai Sastra Lisan: Analisis terhadap Struktur Cerita" (Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Indonesia, 1993).

[20] *Hindia Olanda*, June 28, 1892, 3, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

[21] *Hindia Olanda*, August 10, 1892, 2. See also *Hindia Olanda*, August 26, 1892, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

[22] *Hindia Olanda*, November 22, 1892, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

the escape by 25 April 1893; the date assigned to the related De Locomotief clipping is disputed. One account explained that they used a tool and the building's guttering or roof structure to climb over the wall. A reward of three hundred guilders was offered for their capture.[23] This episode gave the press material for Pitung's public reputation. The escape exposed weaknesses in surveillance and transformed a locally known robber into a fugitive whose mobility challenged police prestige.

The colonial response intensified during May. Hindia Olanda reported on 2 May that the reward for locating Pitung and Dji-ih had increased by one hundred guilders, making four hundred payable for locating either fugitive. A report of 12 May recorded rumours that Pitung intended to leave on a mail vessel while disguised as a woman. Police action based on uncertain sightings repeatedly failed. The reports reveal the limits of official knowledge. The state possessed coercive resources, but it depended on information drawn from communities in which silence, misinformation, or sympathy could frustrate a search.[24]

De Telegraaf gave the manhunt a memorable formulation on 3 July in an article headed "Een gevreesde bandiet," or "A Feared Bandit." Its opening phrase was more ambivalent than the title. Pitung might be feared or loved, the article suggested, and police searches had found baskets containing fresh food and money intended for him. It then described two armed European hunters accompanied by thirty spear-bearing drivers who encountered Pitung and a companion in the forest and collectively fled. The report was meant to convey danger, but it also described assistance and could magnify his prestige.[25]



Een gevreesde bandiet.

Hoe gevreesd of bemind Pitoeng, een der uit de gevangenis te Meester Cornelis ontsnapte ter dood veroordeelden, in het district Kebajoran is — men kan het op beide manieren uitleggen — bewijst het feit, dat de politie op hare speurtochten in de bosschen overal manden met versch voedsel en geld ten behoeve van den booswicht gevonden heeft. Niemand durft hem aan of wil hem aandurven. Twee met geweren gewapende Europeesche jagers, gevolgd door dertig lansdragende drijvers, die hem verleden week met zijn rotgezel in de rimboe aantroffen, gingen *en corps* voor Pitoeng aan den haal.

Figure 1 The article "Een gevreesde bandiet" in De Telegraaf, 3 July 1893.

The arrest of Dji-ih in August marked a reversal. Java-Bode reported that the demang of Kebayoran captured him and that the schout of Meester Cornelis assisted in transferring him to prison. The procession included kampong heads, with the

[23] *Hindia Olanda*, April 25, 1893, 3, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia. See also *De Locomotief*, April 25, 1893, 2.

[24] *Hindia Olanda*, May 2, 1893, 2. See also *Hindia Olanda*, May 12, 1893, 3, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

[25] "Een gevreesde bandiet," *De Telegraaf*, July 3, 1893, accessed through Delpher. Accessed May 16, 2025; original publication and later consultation are distinct.

demang and schout walking in front with drawn sabres. It attracted many spectators. Hindia Olanda's report added that kampong residents had assisted the fugitives and that Pitung was believed to receive similar help. The procession can therefore be read as more than transport. It can be interpreted as a public demonstration of colonial control; its reception is not independently documented.[26]

Table 1. Newspaper chronology of Si Pitung, 1892–1893

Issue date*	Source	Reported content	Evidentiary significance
28 Jun 1892	Hindia Olanda	Police search at a Sukabumi, Kebayoran house associated with Bitoeng/Pitung. Clothing and possible police disguise are reported.	Records a search and alleged plans for impersonation, not proof that each planned offence occurred.
10 Aug 1892	Hindia Olanda	Accuses Pitung of the Marunda robbery; reports 125 guilders beneath his house, partly attributed to theft.	Contemporary allegation. Victim profile complicates a simple anticolonial target pattern.
26 Aug 1892	Hindia Olanda	Reports arrests of Pitang and companions over a Marunda robbery in the preceding month.	Allegation and reported arrest, not proof of redistribution.
22 Nov 1892	Hindia Olanda	Police seek Pitang for clothing worth 100 guilders allegedly stolen from Sajoe's boat at Kali Besar.	Extends the alleged offences beyond armed house robbery.
25 Apr 1893	Hindia Olanda; De Locomotief date disputed	Escape already reported by this date; related Dutch clipping mentions a 300-guilder reward.	Not the escape date. De Locomotief is dated differently in the source inventory and appendix.
2 May 1893	Hindia Olanda	Reward rises to 400 guilders for locating either fugitive.	Measures official urgency and reliance on paid information.
12 May 1893	Hindia Olanda	Rumour that Pitung may flee on a mail vessel in female disguise.	Evidence of uncertainty and rumour, not proof that the disguise occurred.
3 Jul 1893	De Telegraaf	"Een gevreesde bandiet" reports food and money left	Criminalizes Pitung while describing

[26] *Java-Bode*, August 15, 1893, 2, accessed through Delpher. See also *Hindia Olanda*, August 19, 1893, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

		for Pitung and an armed European party fleeing an encounter.	assistance; admiration cannot be measured.
15 Aug 1893	Java-Bode	Dji-ih is captured and publicly escorted with drawn sabres.	Documents arrest and a visible performance of restored authority.
19 Aug 1893	Hindia Olanda	Report states that kampong residents aided fugitives and that Pitung also received help.	Reports local assistance, not unanimous community support.
1 Sep 1893	Hindia Olanda	Pitung allegedly shoots the juragan who helped capture Dji-ih.	Alleges retaliation; motive and timing require caution.
23 Sep 1893	Hindia Olanda	Sairin receives twelve years of forced labour for an attempted killing of informant Djaeran Latip with Pitung and Dji-ih.	Differently described attack; identity with the juragan incident is not established.
14 Oct 1893*	Event reported 18–19 Oct	Hinne's force and an informant pursue and shoot Pitung near the Chinese cemetery at Petodjo Oedik. He dies that evening.	*Event date inferred from the preceding Saturday, not an issue date.
20 Oct 1893	Hindia Olanda	Four guards reportedly watch the grave to prevent it becoming a keramat.	Contemporary evidence of official fear of posthumous veneration.
14 Nov 1893	Hindia Olanda	A Malay verse uses Pitung as a recognizable comparison.	Dates the verse's publication, not its composition or the onset of admiration.

Reports of violence against collaborators followed. Hindia Olanda reported on 1 September that Pitung shot a juragan who had helped capture Dji-ih after meeting him in an isolated place. On 23 September the newspaper reported that Sairin, identified as Pitung's brother, received twelve years of forced labour for participation with Pitung and Dji-ih in an attempted murder of the police informant Djaeran Latip. The reports concern differently described attacks and cannot be equated without further evidence. They suggest violence over loyalty alongside property crime, but publication order does not establish the sequence of the attacks.[27]

[27] *Hindia Olanda*, September 1, 1893, 2. See also *Hindia Olanda*, September 23, 1893, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

The reports place the fatal operation on the preceding Saturday, yielding 14 October 1893 as the inferred date. Hindia Olanda reported the death on 18 October and De Locomotief provided a detailed account on 19 October. According to the latter, the Tanah Abang schout, Hinne, used a spy to lure Pitung from Meester Cornelis toward Tanah Abang with a proposed amok venture. Police and the informant pursued him near the Chinese cemetery at Petodjo Oedik. After exchanges of fire, Pitung was struck in the arm and chest. When he continued to resist, an assistant shot him through the lower back, with the bullet exiting through the abdomen.[28]

The reports describe Pitung's transfer to the city hospital and death at approximately half past seven that evening. The newspapers added dramatic details. He allegedly answered the guards' taunts by singing and requested towak sama ijs, palm wine with ice. Reports disagreed over whether the request was granted. Similar wording recounts his preference for death over prison, but may reflect republication rather than independent testimony. These details cannot be verified independently, but their narrative function is clear. Even in an account hostile to him, Pitung was represented as physically defiant and emotionally composed at the threshold of death.

The body was buried in the Kampung Baru or Krekot area after relatives initially encountered difficulty obtaining it. The most revealing posthumous report appeared on 20 October. Hindia Olanda stated that four guards were stationed at the grave day and night to prevent it from becoming a keramat, a venerated site. The reported precaution suggests official concern about possible veneration. It does not establish the scale or actual onset of that practice.[29]

On 14 November, one month after the inferred death date, Hindia Olanda printed a Malay verse that used Pitung's fate as a recognizable comparison. Its presence suggests that readers could recognize his name, but establishes neither admiration nor when the verse was composed or first circulated.[30] The sequence thus documents early posthumous attention. Later lenong, film, literature, and heritage work developed heroic portrayals; the October and November reports offer possible antecedents without fixing the beginning of heroization.[31] [32]

Discussion

Crime, Redistribution, and the Limits of Social Banditry

Hobsbawm's social-bandit concept helps explain why legal classification and social reputation can diverge. The social bandit is an outlaw whom the state treats as criminal but whom a subordinate community interprets as a defender or avenger.[33] Si

[28] *De Locomotief*, October 19, 1893, 2, accessed through Delpher. See also *De Telegraaf*, November 17, 1893.

[29] *Hindia Olanda*, October 18, 1893, 2. See also *Hindia Olanda*, October 20, 1893, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

[30] *Hindia Olanda*, November 14, 1893, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

[31] Margreet van Till, *Banditry in West Java, 1869–1942*, trans. David McKay and Beverley Jackson (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 136–52.

[32] Basoeki Koesasi, *Lenong and Si Pitung*, Working Paper 73 (Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1992), 4–9.

[33] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, rev. ed. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 20–23.

Pitung fits part of this pattern. He operated outside formal politics, moved through agrarian and peri-urban space, reportedly received assistance from some residents, and became the subject of narratives that morally reclassified robbery as justice. The later heroic tradition shows that the colonial verdict did not monopolize memory.

The fit is incomplete. Contemporary reports describe alleged robbery proceeds, armed violence, escape, and attacks on collaborators. They do not directly document systematic redistribution to the poor. Van Till's broader study of Batavian banditry warns against interpreting every outlaw as an embryonic nationalist or peasant revolutionary.[34] The targets recorded in this corpus were not uniform. Haji Sapiudin was a wealthy Muslim merchant, while Sajoe's property was reportedly taken from a boat at Kali Besar. Neither case, on its own, proves a consciously anticolonial selection of victims.[35] The Robin Hood motif belongs primarily to the moral biography created around the events.

This does not reduce social banditry to fiction. It relocates the concept from motive to relationship. Pitung became socially intelligible as a defender because colonial inequality made such a reading plausible, because reports describe assistance from parts of the kampong world, and because the state's failure to capture him became a shared spectacle. The relevant question is not only whether he gave stolen money to poor villagers. It is why later storytellers and audiences found the image of redistributive justice convincing enough to preserve. The legend reveals a moral economy even where the transactions themselves cannot be reconstructed.

The violence also resists purification. The reported shooting of a juragan who facilitated Dji-ih's capture and attempted killing of Djaeran Latip suggest coercive discipline within Pitung's network. Such acts may have signalled resistance to colonial intelligence, but they also generated fear. Schulte Nordholt's jago is therefore a more precise regional comparison than an uncomplicated Robin Hood. The jago's authority was relational and ambivalent. Protection for one group could entail intimidation or death for another.[36] Calling Pitung a Betawi hero is historically meaningful when it identifies a community's memory. It becomes misleading if it erases the violent practices through which that memory was produced.

Agency, Networks, and the Colonial Information State

Carlyle's Great Man theory illuminates one feature of Pitung's afterlife. Collective memory concentrates diffuse grievances in a person whose courage appears to answer the needs of an age.[37] Pitung's small physical stature in colonial description, dramatic escape, repeated evasion, and final armed resistance made him

[34] Margreet van Till, *Banditry in West Java, 1869–1942*, trans. David McKay and Beverley Jackson (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 136–52, 186–91.

[35] *Hindia Olanda*, August 10, 1892, 2. See also *Hindia Olanda*, November 22, 1892, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

[36] Henk Schulte Nordholt, "The Jago in the Shadow: Crime and 'Order' in the Colonial State in Java," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1991): 74–91, http://hdl.handle.net/1765/6327.

[37] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841), 12–28.

narratively powerful. Later tradition completed the heroic form by supplying a religious teacher, martial discipline, generosity, and invulnerability. Through that process, structural injustice became a story with a recognizable agent.

Yet the Great Man framework is insufficient as historical explanation. The newspaper Pitung was never solitary. Dji-ih was his closest documented companion. Sairin, Rais, Abdoelrachman, Marais, Gering, and others appear in later reconstructions of the group. Villagers allegedly provided food, money, shelter, information, or silence.[38] [39] The escape from prison depended on material assistance. Evasion depended on movement across familiar territory. Pitung's agency was therefore networked. His reputation condensed collective action, but it did not replace it.

The same point applies to colonial power. The police did not prevail through superior weaponry alone. Reports repeatedly show dependence on demang, village heads, juragan, guards, and spies. Dji-ih's capture followed local information. The final pursuit succeeded after an informant penetrated the network and lured Pitung into a more controllable space. The reported reward of four hundred guilders was not simply evidence of official alarm. It was an attempt to convert social knowledge into a commodity and to break community protection through financial incentive.[40]

This contest over information helps explain the symbolic intensity of betrayal in the sources. A village intermediary who reported a fugitive crossed between community and state. For the police, he made rule possible. For the fugitive network, he endangered lives and violated loyalty. Violence against informants was therefore both strategic and communicative. It warned potential collaborators while exposing the weakness of policing that depended heavily on local intermediaries.

Religious and martial traditions later gave this network a moral centre in Haji Naipin. The historical existence and precise role of the teacher remain difficult to establish from the newspaper corpus, but the motif is not incidental. It places force under instruction and converts bodily skill into ethical responsibility. Stories of invulnerability perform a related function. They do not merely embellish combat. They assert that moral and spiritual power could offset the technological superiority of colonial firearms.[41] Source criticism should not report these claims as physical fact, but neither should it discard them. They are evidence of how Betawi memory domesticated violence within a religious moral order.

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[38] *De Telegraaf*, July 3, 1893. See also *Hindia Olanda*, August 19, 1893, 2, collection of Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

[39] Heru Erwantoro, Ria Intani Tresnasih, Lina Herlinawati, Tatang Suhenda, Oki Akbar, Tenny Rekawati, and Anas Azhar Nasihin, *Cerita 'Si Pitung': Tokoh Legendaris dalam Pandangan Masyarakat Betawi* (Bandung: Balai Pelestarian Nilai Budaya Bandung, 2013), 49–51. See also Margreet van Till, "In Search of Si Pitung: The History of an Indonesian Legend," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 152, no. 3 (1996): 462–69, https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003007.

[40] *Hindia Olanda*, September 1, 1893, 2. See also *De Locomotief*, October 19, 1893, 2.

[41] Palupi Damardini, "Cerita Si Pitung sebagai Sastra Lisan: Analisis terhadap Struktur Cerita" (Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Indonesia, 1993), 142–48. See also Heru Erwantoro, Ria Intani Tresnasih, Lina Herlinawati, Tatang Suhenda, Oki Akbar, Tenny Rekawati, and Anas Azhar Nasihin, *Cerita 'Si Pitung': Tokoh Legendaris dalam Pandangan Masyarakat Betawi* (Bandung: Balai Pelestarian Nilai Budaya Bandung, 2013), 55–60.

Colonial Framing and the Paradox of Heroization

The newspaper record demonstrates that colonial representation was not monolithic. Dutch-language papers commonly emphasized danger, police action, and the restoration of order. Hindia Olanda used Malay and often supplied vivid detail closer to the rhythms of local speech. Yet the decisive contrast is not simply Dutch condemnation versus Malay sympathy. De Telegraaf itself asked whether Pitung was feared or loved. Hindia Olanda called him a criminal while also recording support, official failure, burial disputes, and anxiety over the grave. Each paper participated in colonial print culture, but each produced fissures within the criminalizing narrative.

Reading these sources critically means attending to both statement and effect. Describing Pitung as a feared bandit was intended to define him as a threat. Reporting that armed Europeans and thirty followers fled from him made the threat heroic in scale. Advertising an exceptional reward communicated state determination, but also proclaimed that ordinary policing had failed. Narrating his songs and composure after being shot preserved an image of courage. Ann Laura Stoler's injunction to read colonial archives along their grain is relevant here. The archive reveals not only what the state knew about its object, but also its own anxieties, categories, and dependence.[42]

The posthumous reports suggest possible beginnings of heroization. Grave guards indicate concern about veneration, while the verse published on 14 November demonstrates a figurative use of Pitung's name, not necessarily praise.[43] Later legends did not emerge from an empty space. They feature themes also found in the press, though direct transmission is not established: disguise, escape, a large bounty, support in the forest, betrayal, a dramatic gunfight, refusal of prison, and official fear of posthumous veneration.

This finding refines the historiography. Van Till convincingly traced the transformation of a robber into a legend and showed how twentieth-century media widened his audience.[44] The present reconstruction places greater emphasis on the compressed interval between the fatal encounter and reports anticipating possible sacralization. Later heroization had possible antecedents in contemporary reports about the body, grave, and name. The evidence does not fix when veneration began or establish a continuous process linking those reports to later heroic traditions.

The resulting figure contains continuity and change. The historical Pitung remains visible in the dates, places, companions, robberies, weapons, prison escape, and police operation of 1892–1893. The legendary Pitung changes with the needs of audiences, acquiring a stable childhood, Islamic discipline, redistributive justice, magical protection, idealized appearance, and later cinematic form. These are not two unrelated persons. The latter is a cultural interpretation of the former, produced

[42] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 32–35. See also Margreet van Till, "In Search of Si Pitung: The History of an Indonesian Legend," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 152, no. 3 (1996): 473–82, https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003007.

[43] *Hindia Olanda*, October 20, 1893, 2. See also *Hindia Olanda*, November 14, 1893, 2.2

[44] Margreet van Till, "In Search of Si Pitung: The History of an Indonesian Legend," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 152, no. 3 (1996): 475–82, https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003007.

through selection and moral reordering. The historian's task is to preserve the connection without collapsing evidence into belief or belief into error.[45]

Conclusion

Si Pitung was a historical actor whose documented public career unfolded within the unequal and weakly integrated social landscape of late nineteenth-century Batavia. Contemporary newspapers associate him with robbery, armed companionship, imprisonment, escape, community assistance, retaliation against collaborators, and a fatal police operation inferred to have occurred on 14 October 1893. These sources confirm neither every colonial accusation nor every later heroic claim. They establish a mobile and violent fugitive whose significance cannot be separated from the networks that protected, pursued, represented, and remembered him.

The article's principal finding is that the opposition between criminal and hero was not created only by later folklore. It was already latent in the colonial record. Newspapers labelled Pitung a dangerous offender while preserving evidence of official frustration, assistance from some residents, strategic ingenuity, and physical defiance. Reports of grave guards and the verse published a month after his death indicate early posthumous attention, not the extent or exact onset of heroic acceptance. Colonial criminalization supplied themes that later heroic narratives could reinterpret, although direct transmission remains unproven.

This interpretation also clarifies the limits of the Great Man and social-bandit frameworks. Pitung's agency mattered, but it was networked rather than autonomous. His later heroic reception resembled social banditry, but the newspaper corpus does not prove systematic redistribution or a coherent anticolonial programme. His historical importance lies in the unstable position he occupied between predation and protection, fear and admiration, individual action and collective aspiration.[46]

The contribution and novelty of the study are consequently source-critical. By reconstructing the newspaper chronology, distinguishing event dates from issue dates, and separating contemporary evidence from later oral biography, the article offers a more precise account of how a Betawi outlaw became a hero. The traditions examined here preserve competing classifications of Si Pitung as criminal and champion. They show how later Betawi narratives reinterpreted colonial labels, without establishing a uniform community response or a precise starting date for that reinterpretation.

[45] Basoeki Koesasi, *Lenong and Si Pitung*, Working Paper 73 (Clayton, Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1992), 6–9. See also Margreet van Till, *Banditry in West Java, 1869–1942*, trans. David McKay and Beverley Jackson (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 136–52.

[46] W. F. Wertheim, *Indonesian Society in Transition: A Study of Social Change*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: W. van Hoeve, 1959), 135, 148–58. See also Sartono Kartodirdjo, *Protest Movements in Rural Java: A Study of Agrarian Unrest in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1973), 28–29, 67.

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