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Transformation of Social Identity Among Former Thugs in Surakarta City: Self-Navigation within Religious Communities

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Abstract
This article examines the transformation of the social identity of former gangsters (*preman*) in the city of Solo who seek to rebuild their religious identity through the process of *hijrah* and active participation in religious communities such as Juba Rescue and *Ekspreso*. The study employs the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner) and the Stigma and Identity Management Theory (Erving Goffman) to understand the dynamics of self-transformation and the strategies used to manage a spoiled identity. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and field documentation conducted between 2023 and 2024. The findings reveal that the transformation of former gangsters' social identity unfolds across five main dimensions: (1) Social Identity Repositioning — from Gangster to Respected Muslim; (2) Symbolic Representation and Self-Presentation; (3) Spiritual Process and Moral Transition; (4) Ideological and Social Loyalty Shifts; and (5) Economic Reorientation and the Emergence of a New Work Ethic. This process illustrates a continuous negotiation between a deviant past and the construction of a renewed religious self, highlighting the success of stigma management in shaping a new social identity within the urban public sphere.

Keywords: Social Identity, Stigma, Thuggery, *Hijrah*, Social Transformation

Introduction

After the Reform era of 21 May 1998, Indonesia's social landscape underwent significant changes, including shifts in the dynamics of informal groups such as street toughs (*preman*). *Preman*—previously known as the dominant actors in informal public spaces who relied on violence, intimidation, and social control to gain influence and economic resources—began to shift their orientation (Jati, 2012a). The emergence of Islamist groups and their paramilitary wings in the city has displaced *preman* from their control over public spaces (Warsito, 2018a). As the old authorities weakened and religious expression strengthened, many former *preman* began to join religious communities. They are now actively involved in securing *Tabligh Akbar* events, attending *Haul* and *Manakib* gatherings, participating in religious demonstrations, and engaging in mosque-based activities (Warsito & Zainuddin, 2023). This phenomenon illustrates a process of social identity conversion, in which a former *preman* who once relied on physical power now seeks to build new forms of social legitimacy through religiosity (I. D. Wilson, 2003). This shift is not merely a behavioral change; it also entails the transformation of self-meaning and social position. Former *preman* construct a more positive front-stage self-presentation by appearing more orderly, polite, and religious.

Solo City provides a relevant context for understanding this phenomenon. The city is known as a base for Islamist groups and sharia-inspired movements that dominate public spaces through religious outreach and social actions. The shift in public-space dominance from *preman* to religious groups creates social pressure for *preman* to adapt. Some eventually choose to convert their identity by joining religious communities as *ikhwan*, members of *Laskar*, or *hijrah* communities (Warsito, 2018a). This process is referred to in this study as self-navigation within social interactions.

To analyse this phenomenon, the study employs two main theoretical frameworks: the Social Identity Theory of Henri Tajfel and John Turner, and Erving Goffman's Theory of Stigma and Identity Management. According to Tajfel and Turner, social identity is formed through an individual's awareness of belonging to a particular group (the in-group) and of differentiating that group from others (the out-group). Individuals derive self-esteem and a sense of meaning from their membership in a group. When a person moves from one group to another—such as a former *preman* joining a religious group—they must undergo a reidentification process, rebuilding their self-meaning within a new system of values and norms. This process involves social negotiation to gain recognition and acceptance from the new group (Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C., 1979).

However, this process does not always proceed smoothly. Former *preman* carry a social stigma due to their past associations with violence and criminality. This is where Goffman's theory becomes relevant (Goffman, 1956). Goffman views social interaction as a theatrical performance: individuals play roles on the front stage to present an image that meets societal expectations, while in the backstage they express a more authentic self (Goffman, 1990). Former *preman* with spoiled identities attempt to manage impressions on the front stage through religious behaviour, new lifestyles, and social involvement to erase their past stigma. This effort constitutes identity management—a social strategy to regain public acceptance (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Through these two frameworks, it becomes clear that the identity transformation of a former *preman* is not merely an individual decision, but the result of complex social interactions involving the need for acceptance, social pressure, and strategic self-presentation in public spaces. The present study aims to address two main questions: (1)How do former *preman* convert their social identity into a religious identity through involvement in religious groups? (2) How do they navigate stigma and manage self-presentation to gain acceptance in social interactions within society?

Literature Review

Studies on the transformation of gangsters' identities into compliant, religious, or morally upright citizens have proliferated in Indonesian socio-political scholarship. Broadly, these studies can be grouped into two central tendencies: (1) works that emphasize economic factors and power relations, and (2) works that link the identity conversion of gangsters to religious dynamics, radicalism, and vigilante movements.

The first tendency views the identity change of gangsters as a response to shifts in the political and economic structure. Douglas Wilson (2006), in his article "As long as it's halal": Islamic *Preman* in Jakarta, demonstrates how Jakarta's gangsters experienced a shift from functioning as instruments of the New Order regime to becoming actively involved in Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Betawi Rempug Forum (FBR). This transformation was not merely ideological but represented an adaptive strategy to maintain their positions and access to economic resources in the post-reform public sphere. Wilson's findings align with Wasisto Raharjo's (Jati, 2012b) study in *Kuasa dan Kekerasan*: *Kelembagaan*

Premanisme Yogyakarta Paska Reformasi, which illustrates how gangsters in Yogyakarta consolidated themselves through *paguyuban* as a form of institutional strengthening. These associations enabled gangsters to transform into providers of security services, thereby gaining social legitimacy and relatively stable income sources.

Nur Kafid (2016) offers a similar perspective, which traces the shifting orientation of several members of the Islamic Youth Front of Surakarta (FPIS). In his article "From Islamists to '*Premanism*"', Kafid shows how some members of this militia moved away from ideological agendas—such as *amar makruf nahi mungkar*—toward becoming actors who controlled local economic resources. His findings demonstrate that the shifting identities of both gangsters and militia groups cannot be separated from the political and economic dynamics of decentralization.

The second tendency in the literature links gangster conversion to processes of religiosity characterized by militancy or radicalism. Muzayyin Ahyar, through his studies on radical Islamic movements in Solo, notes the involvement of former gangsters in Hisbah teams and moral enforcement–oriented *da'wah* groups (Ahyar, 2015). Wilson also associates this phenomenon with the rise of religion-based violence, particularly when former gangsters joined the FPI (I. Wilson, 2019, pp. 29–35). Edward adds that similar forms of violence appeared within the activities of the Youth Movement of the Kaaba (GPK), which blended religious identity with vigilante practices (Pahlevi et al., 2020).

This approach is further reinforced by Yudi Setianto's findings in "The Transformation of *Abangan* Groups toward Radical Religious Movements", which explains the emergence of radical *santri* groups within *abangan* communities in Solo. Setianto demonstrates that some individuals of *abangan* background—including former gangsters—underwent identity transformation toward religious vigilante movements as a response to social change and the search for moral legitimacy (Setianto, 2022). However, few studies have examined how former *preman* navigate their identities and manage stigma in everyday social interactions, particularly through religiosity and engagement in religious communities.

Results and Discussion

Premanism in Solo City

Premanism in Solo City is not merely a criminal phenomenon but a complex dynamic of social identity. It is shaped by economic marginality, develops through group solidarity, and is sustained through social stigma (Bakker, 2021). However, in the context of post-Reform social change, some *preman* have attempted to navigate themselves toward building new, more socially accepted identities through political and religious pathways (Warsito, 2018). Thus, social identity theory and stigma theory provide a strong framework for understanding how the "*preman* identity" is not static but continuously negotiated within spaces of social interaction.

Premanism in Solo City cannot be separated from the socio-economic processes that produce marginalized urban youth groups. Most of them arrive in the city without skills and eventually fail to secure formal employment (Harahap, 2013). In the context of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C., 1979), this condition encourages individuals to undergo social categorization—that is, to locate themselves within a particular social group—to gain a sense of belonging and self-esteem. In marginal situations, these young men form an ingroup called *preman*, which gives them a new identity as "strong men," "feared figures," and "street rulers" (Pribadi, 2015). This group identity becomes a form of compensation for their social and economic

marginalization. As Wilson notes, premen are lower-class urban actors who use their frightening reputation as a source of social power (Douglas Wilson, 2006).

Preman groups such as *Gondhez's*, *Gojeck*, and *Bronx* essentially grew out of the need to build a sense of togetherness and protection (Kurniawan, 2020). Through social identification, members assert their identity as part of a strong, loyal, and self-governing group. This solidarity is reinforced by emotional bonding, informal economic networks (such as gambling businesses), and patronage ties with local political elites (Bakker, 2021). Within Tajfel's framework, this loyalty strengthens ingroup identity relative to the outgroup—namely, the general public and law enforcement. *Preman* interprets this distinction positively: perceiving themselves as braver, more masculine, and more loyal than ordinary people, whom they view as weak and hypocritical. This process aligns with the concept of social comparison, in which *preman* assert the superiority of their group to maintain collective self-esteem.

However, this social identity is inextricably linked to stigma. In Goffman's Stigma Theory, a *preman* possesses a spoiled identity, one that is tarnished in the eyes of society due to their association with violence, criminality, and moral transgression (Goffman, 1990). Social labels such as "criminal," "extortionist," and "bad person" (KBBI, 2008) illustrate how society positions *preman* as a morally and socially marginalized group. This stigma restricts their mobility in formal public spaces, yet it also strengthens their internal group bonds. *Preman* interprets the stigma as a sign of courage and power rather than disgrace. In Goffman's view, they operate within a backstage sphere where they can freely express behaviors rejected by society, while still constructing a front-stage image that displays group strength and solidarity.

During the Reform era, some *preman* groups began employing identity management strategies (Goffman, 1990). They sought to change their old image through involvement in practical politics, social activities, or even religious engagement. For example, the *Gondhez* group actively supported gubernatorial and mayoral candidates from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) by mobilizing thousands of members for campaign events (Setiyowati, 2010). This involvement can be understood as an attempt to manage identity and gain new social and political recognition. Through their role as "political volunteers," *preman* shift from a criminal identity to that of "mass mobilizers" or "people's fighters." In the framework of social identity theory, this reflects recategorization—the act of joining a higher-status social group to elevate the collective self-image of that group.

Slum areas in Solo, such as Semanggi, railway-side neighborhoods, and the banks of the Bengawan Solo river, serve as social spaces for reproducing *preman* identity (Saputro, 2020). Weak social control, permissive parenting, and the absence of moral-education spaces lead young people to imitate the behavior of local "tough guys." From Tajfel's perspective, this is a process of social identity internalization, where new individuals adopt the group identity perceived as dominant or powerful in their environment. Meanwhile, in Goffman's framework, this process illustrates how social stigma is inherited and normalized within the backstage of urban communities.

The rise of *dakwah* groups and *hijrah* communities in Solo during the post-Reform period provided new spaces for former *preman* to navigate their self-identity. By joining religious groups, they seek to shed their spoiled identities and adopt a new identity as *ikhwan*, or "moral fighters." Within Goffman's identity management framework, this transformation represents a form of identity repair—an effort to reconstruct self-image to be accepted in broader social spaces. From a Tajfelian perspective, it is a process of re-categorization, moving from a low-status group (*preman*) to a higher-status group (religious activists).

The Contestation of Public Space Between Islamist Groups and *Preman*: Identity Conflict and the Reconstruction of Social Status

As a city with a long history stretching from the era of kingdoms to the Reform era, Solo has become an urban destination for both domestic and international migrants, making it a multiethnic city. The three major ethnic groups inhabiting the city—Javanese, Chinese, and Arab—alongside smaller ethnic groups, contribute to Solo's susceptibility to conflict (Wildan, 2013). Urban youth who are unable to secure employment to meet their basic needs often produce fear as a means to extract money from victims. Thus, urban residents unable to balance their income and needs give rise to practices of *premanism* (Harahap, 2013). In addition to producing *premanism*, they also create slums, densely populated settlements occupying government land along railway tracks and riverbanks of the Bengawan Solo (Saputro, 2020).

Public space in Solo serves as a symbolic arena where various social groups interact, negotiate, and compete for social recognition and symbolic dominance (Noor, 2016). Before the 1998 Reform, *preman* groups were the dominant non-formal actors in public spaces. They controlled various informal economic sectors such as parking, security, and nightlife through patronage relationships with political elites and state officials. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, this situation demonstrates the formation of a strong ingroup in which *preman* possessed exclusive social status and cultivated a collective self-image as a respected street ruler. This group identity provided them with positive social identity, meaning self-esteem and pride derived from being part of a high-status group in their environment (Tajfel, 1978).

Premanism has existed since the colonial era. It emerged due to weak security control by authorities in peripheral areas. *Premanism* also emerged as an informal force, capitalizing on the absence of government regulation. At times, *preman* were even utilized by rulers to maintain public obedience. In colonial Java, *preman* involved in theft and murder sometimes acted on behalf of the authorities to control and pressure peasants (Siegel, 2000). Others engaged in criminal acts as forms of social resistance against rulers and plantation owners who exploited land and peasant labor (Pranoto, 2010). In the contemporary period, many scholars argue that *premanism* is a product of urbanization, where rural youth arriving in cities without skills often fail to secure employment that could improve their economic situation (Jati, 2012a).

After the Reform era, Islamist political groups and *Laskar* emerged, claiming moral authority over public spaces. Their presence challenged the long-standing dominance of *preman* and introduced new value frameworks based on religion and morality (Warsito, 2020). Through the lens of Social Identity Theory, the emergence of Islamist groups produced intergroup conflict rooted in status and value differences. For *preman*, the presence of *Laskar* threatened their ingroup status. For Islamist groups, the contestation of public space was a struggle to establish a "new social identity" that was more moral and ideologically legitimate. This contestation was not merely about economic interests (such as parking, entertainment businesses, and gambling), but also a struggle over meaning and the legitimacy of social identities in Solo's public spaces (Ahyar, 2015).

Competition between the *preman* and the *Laskar* directly affected the *preman* groups' economic and symbolic resources. First, control of parking areas began to be taken over by *Laskar*, who rejected official auction systems and used moral legitimacy to claim authority (S. Eks, personal communication, 4 April 2023). Second, business owners who previously paid security fees to *preman* shifted to seeking protection from Islamist *Laskar*. Areas such as the Iron Market in Kusumodilagan exemplified this shift in patronage from *preman* power to the moral authority of *Laskar* (E. Napiter, personal communication, 28 April 2023). Third, gambling operations and

alcohol sales faced severe pressure from both *Laskar* activism and the national anti-gambling policies of 2005 (Kurniawan, 2024). In Tajfel's framework, these developments represent a decline in group status (social mobility failure). *Preman*, who lost resources and social influence, experienced an identity crisis because they no longer possessed the positive distinctiveness that previously defined their place in public space.

Physical clashes between *preman* and *Laskar* (2005, 2008, 2012) reflect symbolic resistance to the loss of social status. In Social Identity Theory, group violence often becomes a means of defending honor and reasserting ingroup identity when threatened by an outgroup. For *preman*, violence was a way to demonstrate that they remained "strong" and "fearless"; for *Laskar*, violence was perceived as an act of ideological obedience to religious values (Sumbulah, 2006). Thus, clashes between these two groups were not merely rooted in economic interests but also constituted social identity conflicts between worldly power and moral authority. As Islamist moral authority came to dominate public spaces, the identity of *preman* increasingly lost social legitimacy and turned into a stigmatized identity (spoiled identity). This stigma applied not only to individuals but also to the social networks and symbols of *premanism*, such as tattoos, speech styles, and gathering spots. Under this growing pressure, some *preman* adopted identity management strategies (Goffman, 1990), attempting to align themselves with new moral norms to reduce the impact of stigma. They began approaching *Laskar* or religious communities as a form of identity repair and self-protection. One informant stated that he "joined religious study groups to stay safe from *Laskar* pursuit" (E. Tobat, personal communication, June 13, 2024), indicating that their identity conversion was not merely spiritual but also a social strategy to cope with pressure and stigmatization.

The contestation of public space between *preman* and Islamist groups ultimately produced a symbolic reconstruction of who is entitled to control social spaces. If in the past power was measured through physical strength and economic networks, it is now measured through moral authority and religious identity. Theoretically, this phenomenon illustrates the following: According to Tajfel & Turner, the process represents social re-categorization, where individuals move from an old, lower-status group (*preman*) to a new, higher-status group (*Laskar*) to regain a positive identity. According to Goffman, it represents an identity transformation, in which individuals negotiate their self-presentation to gain acceptance in a new religious social order. Public space in Solo thus becomes an arena for the negotiation of identities, symbolic conversion, and shifts in social power from stigmatized groups to those possessing moral legitimacy.

The contestation of public space between *preman* and Islamist groups is therefore not merely a horizontal or economic conflict, but a symbolic struggle between social identities. *Preman* fights to defend their old status based on power and political patronage, whereas Islamist groups assert moral authority grounded in religion. The social defeat of *preman* in this contest marks a shift from a stigmatized identity toward efforts to navigate and reconstruct a new identity through integration into religious groups. Thus, social identity theory and stigma theory help explain how conflicts over public space become processes of social identity transformation in post-Reform Solo.

Self-Navigation of Former Gangsters in Solo: An Analysis Based on Social Identity Theory and Stigma Management

1. Repositioning Social Identity: From Gangster to Respected Muslim

Field findings indicate that the identity transformation of former gangsters in Solo began with the loss of their public-space dominance following the rise of Islamist groups. Before the

Reformasi period, gangsters controlled informal economic sectors such as parking lots, security services, and gambling operations. However, with the emergence of Islamic militia groups, they gradually lost access to financial resources and political protection. This shift in social position prompted some former gangsters to seek more socially acceptable identities. Based on interviews with several informants, many of them chose to join Islamic study groups or Islamic militia organizations to gain security and new moral recognition.

One form of identity repositioning is the change in personal address or nickname. This shift is visible externally (*ẓāhir*) in their daily lives as new Muslims. Gangsters were often addressed by their peers with derogatory nicknames referring to physical traits or labels considered blameworthy in Islam. Such nicknames included "black" (for someone with dark skin), "*nonong*" (for someone with a protruding upper forehead), "*botak*" (meaning bald), or "*pece*" (for someone with a damaged eye). Others created these nicknames, and although the individuals did not object, they eventually became part of their identity.

The shift to respectful forms of address reflects the Qur'anic command to call others by good names, as names carry prayers and meaning. Allah says in Surah Al-Ḥujurāt verse 11:
"Do not defame one another, nor call each other by offensive nicknames. How evil is a bad nickname after one has believed. And whoever does not repent—then it is they who are the wrongdoers." This verse was first revealed when the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ arrived in Madinah and found that people often had two or three nicknames. Some would become angry when called by specific names, prompting the revelation that prohibited negative labeling among the Companions (Ibnu Katsir, 1997).

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C., 1979), this action reflects individual mobility—the pursuit of a higher-status group to regain self-esteem and positive identity. According to Goffman (1990), this process is a form of stigma management in which individuals seek to erase the negative social label of "gangster" by presenting themselves as "repentant individuals."

2. Symbolic Representation and Self-Presentation

The identity transformation of former gangsters is also reflected in symbolic changes and physical appearance. They begin wearing *gamis*, vests bearing *tawhid* inscriptions, and religious accessories such as prayer beads and agate rings. This shift in clothing is not merely aesthetic; it serves as a symbolic strategy to affirm their membership in religious communities.

In Goffman's framework, such appearances function as a presentation of self, an effort to display a new identity to the public and gain social acceptance. From the standpoint of Social Identity Theory, these religious symbols act as ingroup markers that distinguish them from their former gangster group and strengthen internal solidarity within *hijrah* communities. One informant noted that changes in clothing and lifestyle gave him a sense of safety and acceptance in his new environment:

"In the past people feared me because I was a gangster. Now they respect me because I attend religious study groups."

This statement highlights the effectiveness of identity repair through religious performance in social contexts.

3. Spiritual Process and Moral Transition

The spiritual transformation of former gangsters does not occur instantly. Based on interviews, most experience a prolonged moral crisis marked by guilt, a search for meaning in life, and a desire for social acceptance. In Goffman's terms, this journey constitutes the moral career of the stigmatized—a long process of managing shame and constructing a morally acceptable identity. From the viewpoint of Tajfel & Turner, this change reflects the internalization of new values as part of their effort to establish a positive social identity. Several informants described how participating in religious activities—such as study circles, street preaching, and social work—served as a means of demonstrating their transformation to the community. These spiritual activities function as rituals of social redemption, providing moral validation that they have genuinely changed and deserve respect.

4. Ideological Shift and Social Loyalty

Beyond spiritual dimensions, the study also found changes in ideological orientation and social loyalty. Previously, gangster groups were oriented toward values of power, bravery, and horizontal solidarity among peers. After joining Islamist communities, dominant values shifted to obedience, piety, and loyalty to religious authority.

In Social Identity Theory, this transition signifies a shift in the value system that underlies the formation of a new ingroup. For Goffman, the new ideology acts as a framework of justification—a moral narrative used to legitimize their identity change. However, the patterns of change are not uniform. Groups such as Juba Rescue emphasize social and humanitarian work (integrative strategies), while groups like *Ekspreso* highlight moral militancy (resistive strategy). These differences illustrate varied approaches to managing stigma and pursuing social legitimacy.

5. Economic Reorientation and New Work Ethic

Identity transformation also affects economic orientation. Many former gang members transition to lawful occupations, such as trading, working as security guards, or running small businesses. These economic activities are understood not merely as livelihood strategies but as moral proof of genuine repentance. Within the framework, these economic choices reflect the negotiation of stigma in everyday life: they aim to survive without returning to activities considered illicit. In Social Identity Theory, lawful work becomes a symbol of moral membership—a marker of belonging to a respectable, religious social group.

One informant stated that he always set aside part of his earnings for charity:

"Money from gambling used to disappear fast. Now I feel more at ease because my income is lawful."

This practice signifies the creation of a new moral economy oriented toward purity rather than power.

6. Theoretical Synthesis: Self-Navigation as Reconstruction of Social Identity

Overall, the findings suggest that self-navigating former gang members in Solo is a complex process involving psychological, social, and moral dimensions. The loss of power in public spaces compelled them to reposition their identities through membership in Islamist communities. In Social Identity Theory, this process illustrates how individuals strive to regain self-esteem by affiliating with groups that hold a higher moral status. Meanwhile, from Goffman's perspective, the change is a form of identity management through which they negotiate social

stigma and reclaim honor in the eyes of society. Thus, the self-navigating of former gangsters is not merely a spiritual journey but also a strategic social effort to erase stigma, gain moral legitimacy, and reconstruct a positive social identity in Solo City's public sphere.

Conclusion

Social acceptance and positive evaluation from the surrounding environment are fundamental human needs for achieving self-worth and recognition of identity. For individuals with a deviant past, such as former gangsters (*preman*) in the city of Solo, these needs become a primary motivation for undertaking self-transformation. From the perspective of Goffman's Stigma and Identity Management Theory, these former gangsters experience a spoiled identity, namely an identity tainted by a history of violence and criminality. However, they do not remain passive in the face of such stigma. Instead, they pursue various identity-management strategies through symbolic and social actions aimed at restoring their self-image in the eyes of society.

One of their main strategies is self-navigation through religious communities. By joining *dakwah* groups or Islamic vigilante organizations, former gangsters gain a new social space in which they can display an alternative identity that is more moral and socially accepted. This process reflects the mechanisms described in Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory, in which individuals recategorize themselves (from "gangster" to "*ikhwan*"), internalize the values of their new group (social identification), and compare the new group with the old one to obtain a sense of positive self-esteem (social comparison).

Thus, the transformation of former gangsters in Solo is not merely an individual moral change but also a collective social process in which their tainted past identities are renegotiated through interactions with a new group that possesses high moral legitimacy. This process demonstrates that social identity is dynamic and can be reconstructed through stigma management strategies, religious symbols, and group solidarity.

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