

Unmasking Premanism: Representation of Institutional Violence in Sukatani's Song “Bayar Bayar Bayar”

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ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis representasi premanisme dalam lagu “Bayar Bayar Bayar” karya Sukatani dengan menggunakan pendekatan semiotika Roland Barthes dan teori representasi Stuart Hall. Lagu ini dipilih karena secara eksplisit menyuarakan kritik terhadap praktik pungli dan kekuasaan informal yang dilakukan oleh aparat kepolisian, khususnya dalam konteks pelayanan publik di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik analisis semiotika data milik Roland Barthes berupa pembacaan denotatif, konotatif, dan mitologis terhadap lirik lagu. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa lagu “Bayar Bayar Bayar” berupaya mengkritisi sebuah lembaga penegak hukum yang sudah mulai terkikis kepercayaannya di mata masyarakat, yakni Polisi. Tiga mitos utama yang diangkat dalam penelitian ini adalah: (1) Polisi sebagai pengayom masyarakat; (2) Premanisme dimanjakan oleh Neo-Institusionalisme; serta (3) Hidup dalam (ilusi) kebebasan berekspresi. Lagu “Bayar Bayar Bayar” ditampilkan sebagai bentuk komunikasi dari para seniman untuk menyampaikan kritik sosial-politik melalui lirik lagu yang dipopulerkan di platform streaming manapun, serta menjadi perlawanan simbolik terhadap ketidakadilan yang dilegitimasi oleh negara.

Kata kunci: premanisme, polisi, representasi, semiotika, Sukatani

ABSTRACT: This study seeks to examine how premanism (gangsterism) is represented in the song “Bayar Bayar Bayar” by Sukatani, using Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework alongside Stuart Hall’s theory of representation. The song was selected due to its explicit critique of illegal levies and informal power exercised by members of the police force—particularly within the realm of public service in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research analyzes the lyrics through denotative, connotative, and mythological readings. The findings suggest that “Bayar Bayar Bayar” functions as a critical commentary on the police as a legal institution whose public trust has been steadily eroding. The study identifies three dominant myths embedded in the lyrics: (1) the police as guardians of the people; (2) the cultivation of premanism through neo-institutional mechanisms; and (3) the illusion of freedom of expression. Ultimately, the song emerges as a vehicle for artistic resistance—communicating socio-political criticism through widely accessible musical platforms and offering a symbolic challenge to injustices sanctioned by the state.

Keywords: Indonesian police, premanism, representation, semiotic, Sukatani

INTRODUCTION

Music is one of the most powerful forms of mass communication. Its ability to reach wide and diverse audiences allows it to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, conveying complex emotional, ideological, and social messages in ways that traditional media often cannot. Mendes (2023) emphasizes that music helps construct both individual and collective identities, serving as a means of connection during moments of cultural or political uncertainty. Likewise, Cross (2014) describes music as an interactive and participatory medium, rich in intentionality, rhythm, and emotional resonance—enabling it to operate similarly to conventional news or broadcast communication.

In various cultural contexts, music has long played a dual role: it serves as entertainment, but also as a tool of critique and symbolic resistance. Ajose (2022) shows how gospel music in particular can express eschatological hope while simultaneously critiquing present-day economic and political despair. In Indonesia, this critical potential is not new. From Iwan Fals' protest ballads during the New Order era to more recent viral tracks like "Negeriku" by Efek Rumah Kaca, musicians have consistently voiced public frustrations when institutional discourse failed to do so. This tradition is now being revitalized by independent and underground musicians who, unrestricted by mainstream media, engage with controversial social issues and directly challenge state authority.

One notable example is the punk band Sukatani, whose 2023 song "Bayar Bayar Bayar" boldly criticizes police misconduct. The lyrics describe incidents where citizens are coerced into paying bribes to law enforcement officers in everyday situations—such as obtaining a driver's license or resolving minor legal matters. These lyrics starkly contrast the constitutional role of the Indonesian National Police, as outlined in Law No. 2 of 2002, which mandates them to serve and protect the public. Instead, the song highlights how this mandate is routinely undermined by extortion and abuse of power.

The issue raised in the song is closely tied to the broader phenomenon of premanisme—a term used to describe coercive, gangster-like behavior that historically referred to non-state

actors but now increasingly applies to those within the state apparatus. Scholars such as Wilson (2015) and Santoso (2010) note that in the Indonesian context, the boundary between formal and informal authority is often blurred. Preman-like behaviors have been adopted and institutionalized within state practices, especially within law enforcement. This hybridization of authority has given rise to what might be termed institutionalized premanism—a shadow governance that combines formal legitimacy with extrajudicial coercion.

The controversy surrounding Sukatani's song further underscores the fragile condition of freedom of expression in Indonesia. Following public backlash from police officials, the song was taken down from digital streaming platforms, and the band was pressured into issuing a public apology. While the authorities maintained that they were not against criticism, the action raised serious questions: Is artistic critique truly protected? Or is it only tolerated when it avoids offending institutional sensitivities? The viral hashtag #KamiBersamaSukatani ("We Stand With Sukatani") and the outpouring of public support indicate that many citizens interpreted the song not as provocation, but as a necessary form of protest.

This study explores how the song "Bayar Bayar Bayar" functions as a site of cultural resistance and ideological struggle. By applying Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, the analysis examines how signs within the lyrics produce layered meanings—denotative, connotative, and mythological. Furthermore, using Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the study investigates how the song challenges dominant meanings and offers counter-narratives that reframe the police not as guardians of justice, but as actors complicit in systemic extortion.

Thus, this research treats the song not simply as art, but as a communicative text—one that engages audiences in a collective act of decoding and ideological negotiation. In doing so, it highlights the critical role that music can play in representing injustice, shaping public discourse, and expanding the democratic imagination in a society grappling with institutional mistrust.

The study focuses on this research question: How does the song represent police behavior and institutional power?

Ultimately, this article argues that music—especially from grassroots or independent creators—is not only an expressive outlet but also a counter-hegemonic force, illuminating the everyday struggles of those silenced by formal mechanisms of control.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Music as Mass Communication

Music functions not only as an aesthetic and emotional outlet but as a robust medium of mass communication. It has the capacity to shape ideologies, challenge power structures, and influence public perception on a broad scale. In the digital era, this communicative power is amplified as artists can now reach audiences without relying on conventional gatekeepers like mainstream media or record labels (Resmadi et al., 2020). Through platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and social media, musicians have direct access to listeners, enabling a decentralized model of cultural production.

The emotional immediacy of music enhances its persuasive potential. Cross (2014) argues that musical elements such as rhythm, repetition, and melody contribute to its mnemonic power—making its messages more memorable and emotionally resonant. This is particularly important when songs carry political or social critiques, as emotional resonance often succeeds where rational argument fails. In the case of “Bayar Bayar Bayar,” Sukatani capitalizes on this function: their repeated phrase “bayar polisi” operates similarly to a mass media slogan, reinforcing a collective recognition of institutional corruption. In this sense, the song not only entertains but informs and mobilizes, bridging art and public discourse.

Popular Culture and Resistance

Popular culture is not a neutral space; it is a terrain of ideological struggle. Storey (2018) asserts that popular culture serves as both a site of hegemonic reinforcement and a space where resistance can take root. Stuart Hall (2013) similarly emphasizes that cultural texts—films, television shows, music—function within “contested terrains,” where

meaning is negotiated and power is challenged. In authoritarian or post-authoritarian societies, popular culture often becomes a symbolic battlefield for those whose voices are excluded from mainstream political discourse.

In this context, Sukatani’s song can be understood as a form of “cultural resistance”—a subversive practice that uses art to confront state authority and expose institutional failings. Their punk aesthetic, non-mainstream distribution, and bold lyrical content all situate the band within calls “hidden transcripts”—resistant narratives expressed outside of official channels. Furthermore, Jenkins (2006) introduces the notion of participatory culture, where audiences are not passive recipients but active co-creators of meaning. The viral reception of “Bayar Bayar Bayar” and the proliferation of public commentary show how audiences collectively extend the song’s critique, reinforcing its function as a counter-hegemonic artifact.

Premanism and State Complicity

Premanism—often translated as gangsterism—has a long-standing and complex history in Indonesia. It is not merely a subcultural or criminal phenomenon; it is deeply entangled with state-building, political patronage, and informal governance. Historically, local strongmen or “jawara” were often co-opted by colonial and postcolonial regimes to enforce order or intimidate political opponents (Wilson, 2015). Santoso (2010) similarly explains that during the New Order regime, preman figures played dual roles as both community protectors and tools of state repression.

In the post-reformasi era, this dynamic has not disappeared—it has simply evolved. Scholars such as Nugroho (2020) and Lubis (2017) point out that premanism has become embedded within the very institutions meant to oppose it. Police officers, for instance, may engage in extortion or coercion under the guise of official authority, blurring the lines between legality and criminality. This duality allows them to occupy both roles: law enforcer and lawbreaker. The lyrics of “Bayar Bayar Bayar” articulate this ambiguity by portraying the police not as protectors of justice but as actors within a transactional system of informal rule. The

song thereby confronts a myth that continues to legitimize institutional violence under the rhetoric of public service.

Representation Theory: Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall's theory of representation posits that meaning is not inherent in objects or texts but constructed through language, symbols, and discourse. According to Hall (2013), representation is not a mirror but a constitutive practice—one that produces meaning and circulates ideology. His encoding/decoding model further suggests that cultural producers encode messages into media texts based on their ideological positioning, while audiences decode them based on their own social context and experience.

In the case of Sukatani's "Bayar Bayar Bayar," the encoding is explicitly critical of the police, portraying them as complicit in corruption and informal power structures. However, how this message is received—or decoded—varies. Some listeners may interpret it as satire, others as slander, and still others as truth. These multiple readings reflect Hall's insight that meaning is never fixed but polysemic, always open to negotiation and reinterpretation. Importantly, the very act of state response—removing the song from platforms and demanding an apology—illustrates how contested meanings can provoke ideological conflict, reinforcing the song's significance as a site of cultural resistance.

Semiotics: Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes' semiotics offers a powerful analytical tool for unpacking how cultural texts produce and reproduce ideology. His model breaks meaning into three levels: denotation (the literal), connotation (the associated), and myth (the naturalized ideology) (Barthes, 1972). These layers help explain how seemingly simple expressions—like the lyric "bayar polisi"—can carry complex social critiques.

Denotatively, "bayar polisi" refers to the act of bribing a police officer. Connotatively, it reflects a societal norm: that public service requires payment beyond legal fees. At the level of myth,

it naturalizes the idea that such bribery is simply "the way things work"—concealing the power structures that enable it. Barthes warns that myths serve to make ideology invisible by presenting social constructs as natural, inevitable, or common sense. Sukatani's song works against this process by breaking the myth open—by making visible what is typically obscured. In doing so, the band uses semiotic resistance to challenge the legitimacy of state power and reframe public discourse on justice and institutional failure.

Intertextuality and Cultural Codes

Meaning does not emerge in isolation; it is constructed through an intertextual web of cultural references. As Sobur (2016) explains, intertextuality refers to the way in which texts borrow from and respond to other texts, codes, and discourses. Sukatani's "Bayar Bayar Bayar" exists within a lineage of protest music, both globally and locally. It echoes the defiant tone of N.W.A's "F*ck tha Police," but it also resonates with Indonesian songs such as "Negeriku" by Efek Rumah Kaca or Slank's "Kamu Harus Pulang"—each of which critiques corruption and state violence.

These intertextual layers amplify the song's cultural resonance. Listeners familiar with these earlier works are more likely to interpret Sukatani's lyrics as part of a broader discourse on resistance. The song thus operates not only as a standalone critique but as a node in a larger semiotic system of civil disobedience, one that spans decades and genres. By tapping into shared cultural codes—punk aesthetics, street slang, political satire—Sukatani mobilizes a form of communication that is at once affective, political, and familiar.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze how the theme of premanism is represented in the song lyrics of "Bayar Bayar Bayar" by the punk band Sukatani. The study is grounded in textual analysis, a method well-suited for investigating cultural artifacts such as music, where language, symbolism, and representation intersect.

The analysis is informed by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Roland Barthes' semiotics and Stuart Hall's theory of representation. These perspectives facilitate a layered interpretation of meaning, enabling the researcher to decode not only the literal content of the lyrics but also their cultural resonance and ideological implications.

Barthes' model, which divides signification into denotation, connotation, and myth, is employed to examine how certain words and phrases—such as the recurring line “bayar polisi”—function beyond their surface meaning. Denotation refers to the literal or dictionary-level meaning; connotation captures emotional, cultural, and historical associations; and myth reveals how those associations become naturalized as common sense or dominant ideology. This framework is especially pertinent in examining lyrics that reflect socio-political realities, such as extortion and abuse of authority.

Hall's theory of representation complements this analysis by focusing on how media and cultural texts produce meaning and contest dominant narratives. His encoding/decoding model provides a means to analyze how Sukatani encodes their critique into the lyrics, and how audiences—based on their social and ideological positions—may decode those messages in various ways: as subversion, satire, or criminal defamation. Together, these theories allow the researcher to treat the song not merely as artistic expression, but as an ideological text situated in a larger sociocultural discourse.

The primary data source for this study is the official lyrics of “Bayar Bayar Bayar,” which were publicly released in July 2023 before being withdrawn from major streaming platforms. This moment of censorship is itself part of the text's socio-political significance. To enhance analytical depth and contextual validity, the study incorporates a range of secondary data, including news reports, press releases, and official statements related to police corruption, as well as public responses found in online comment sections (such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter). Additionally, formal legal frameworks—such as Indonesian Law No. 2/2002 on the Police and Law No. 31/1999 on the Eradication of Corruption—are consulted to provide a normative benchmark against which the

song's critique can be situated.

The process of analysis unfolds in three distinct but interconnected stages:

1. Denotative Reading

This step involves identifying the surface-level or literal meanings of the lyrics. For example, lines like “bayar polisi” are taken at face value to signify acts of bribery or informal payment.

2. Connotative Reading

Here, the focus shifts to the cultural and emotional meanings behind the lyrics. The study considers how everyday experiences of extortion are captured and recontextualized through music, and how this might resonate with listeners who have encountered similar injustices.

3. Myth Analysis

The final stage explores how the lyrics contribute to or contest dominant myths—such as the myth of the police as public guardians. This stage examines how social norms and power structures are encoded into the song and how those ideologies are either reinforced or challenged through artistic critique.

Each of these interpretive levels is applied to segmented lyric clusters organized by thematic relevance: for instance, clusters dealing with bribery, legal manipulation, and transactional norms in law enforcement. These thematic units are then triangulated with journalistic accounts, legal texts, and audience reception to reveal broader discursive patterns. By combining rigorous textual analysis with institutional critique, this methodology allows the study to situate Sukatani's work within the broader context of symbolic resistance and public consciousness. The song is not treated as an isolated artifact, but as part of an ongoing cultural dialogue about justice, authority, and civic expression in contemporary Indonesia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the semiotic analysis of Sukatani's song “Bayar Bayar Bayar,” guided by Roland Barthes' theory of myth and

Stuart Hall's theory of representation. The analysis focuses on how the lyrics articulate a critique of institutional corruption, particularly in relation to law enforcement practices in Indonesia. Each section explores a dominant myth that emerges from the text—myths that construct, reproduce, or challenge dominant ideologies surrounding the role of the police, the prevalence of premanism, and the limits of civic freedom. These findings are not only drawn from the lyrics themselves but are reinforced through intertextuality with public reactions, socio-legal frameworks, and historical patterns of informal power.

Through this lens, the song is treated as a communicative artifact that encapsulates everyday experiences of injustice while simultaneously resisting the institutional narratives that obscure them. What follows is a breakdown of thematic interpretations based on denotation, connotation, and mythological analysis, organized according to the key forms of institutional premanism represented in the song.

Premanism in Public Service Extortion

The lyric "bayar polisi" is repeated in multiple parts of Sukatani's song and stands out as a linguistic marker of extortion masked under the guise of public service. At the denotative level, it plainly refers to the act of paying police officers—an exchange that should not occur under lawful procedures. This includes, for example, transactions related to driver's license applications or traffic stops. However, on the connotative level, this lyric unveils a cynical social commentary: public service has become commodified, and the state's supposed protectors have turned into informal gatekeepers who monetize their authority (Putsanra, 2025).

This recurring phrase operates as a cultural shorthand for everyday corruption, normalizing the idea that citizens must always "pay" to access their basic rights. As Sobur (2016) explains through Barthes' lens, such repetitions evolve into myths—socially accepted truths that obscure their ideological construction. Here, the myth is that bribery is not only inevitable but an unspoken requirement of bureaucratic survival. The song critiques this through sharp, satirical delivery,

mirroring public disillusionment with institutional integrity.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation adds another interpretive layer. The lyric encodes resistance against state hypocrisy, representing police officers not as neutral enforcers of justice but as participants in a system of informal coercion. In public discourse, such encoding is often decoded by audiences in a negotiated or oppositional mode, particularly among those whose lived experiences align with the song's depiction. The widespread sharing of the song before its takedown signals a collective decoding process—where audiences reframe the police not as protectors but as extortionists.

This portrayal resonates with what Wilson (2015) describes as "institutionalized premanism," where formal and informal powers merge. Although the police are legally bound to act in accordance with democratic law (UU No. 2 Tahun 2002), their everyday practices often reflect the informal, coercive behaviors more typically associated with street-level preman. This convergence of state authority with gangster-like tactics undermines the legitimacy of legal structures and fosters public cynicism.

The lyric "bayar polisi" thus functions on multiple levels: as a statement of fact, a critique of moral collapse, and a symbol of institutional failure. Its presence in the song exposes a fundamental contradiction between law and justice, formal structure and informal practice, legality and illegitimacy. Within the framework of semiotics, Sukatani's work not only reflects a social condition but actively challenges the ideology that sustains it.

Collusion and Transactional Culture

The lyric "mau korupsi, bayar polisi" presents a sharp accusation against the collusive relationship between law enforcement and corrupt actors. On the surface, the denotative reading implies a transactional arrangement in which individuals seeking to commit corruption must pay police for protection or silence. Connotatively, it reflects the public perception that the police are not merely negligent but are actively involved in sustaining systems of corruption. This lyric points to a broader

socio-political dynamic where state institutions no longer serve as a barrier to illegality but rather as its enabler.

Barthes' semiotic model helps reveal how this normalization of collusion transforms into a myth—that corruption is part of how things are done in Indonesia. As Sobur (2016) notes, myths often work to depoliticize history, making structural dysfunction appear as natural. The lyric subtly critiques this fatalism. Rather than accepting corruption as a cultural trait, the song presents it as a product of institutional decay.

Stuart Hall's theory also illuminates the ideological terrain in which this meaning is encoded and decoded. The phrase challenges dominant narratives of police impartiality, presenting instead a counter-image of law enforcement as a broker of illegality. This aligns with Wilson's (2015) concept of "coercive capital," where institutional actors leverage their authority not to uphold law but to extract value. By making this system visible, Sukatani invites oppositional readings that resist the myth of state neutrality.

This critique is also reflected in real-world discourse. Numerous reports and investigations, such as those by Kompas and Tirto.id, have documented instances where police officers were implicated in shielding corrupt officials or receiving kickbacks from illegal operations. The lyric thus reflects not only perception but verifiable patterns of abuse, reinforcing the credibility of the song's protest message.

Symbolic Power and Legitimacy

In another section of the lyrics, Sukatani refers to police officers as "dewa penolong," a sarcastic invocation of divine protector imagery. Denotatively, the phrase implies that police possess heroic or semi-divine attributes. However, in context, this is laced with irony. Connotatively, the lyric undermines the legitimacy of that power by exposing the discrepancy between idealized authority and the lived experience of fear, distrust, and exploitation.

Drawing on Barthes' concept of myth, this lyric reflects how institutions maintain their legitimacy through symbolic language and ceremonial narratives. Uniforms, titles, and

slogans like "Melayani, Melindungi, Mengayomi" become tools of symbolic violence—mechanisms that mask oppressive practices behind the facade of service (Bourdieu, as cited in Sobur, 2016). Sukatani's sarcastic tone thus punctures this myth, revealing how such symbols can serve to legitimize premanism in uniform.

Hall's encoding/decoding model further frames this as an ideological struggle. The dominant reading—police as noble and professional—is challenged by an oppositional code embedded in the lyrics. Sukatani re-signifies symbols of state power, not to uphold their meaning but to expose their hollowness. This is a form of semiotic subversion: reassigning meaning to destabilize institutional narratives.

Empirical studies by Santoso (2010) and Nugroho (2020) show how this symbolic power is often leveraged to demand compliance from the public, particularly in rural and lower-income urban communities. The lyric becomes a cultural response to this top-down legitimacy—a moment where the public reclaims the right to reinterpret authority through satire and critique.

Resistance and Collective Awareness

Despite the risk of censorship, the song "Bayar Bayar Bayar" gained traction on social media, supported by a wave of comments echoing its sentiments. This public response illustrates the final thematic layer: resistance and collective awareness. The song functions not only as an individual act of defiance but as a catalyst for shared recognition of injustice.

Denotatively, this resistance is expressed through the production and circulation of the song. Connotatively, it signals a broader cultural awakening—where the veil of institutional mythology begins to lift. Sukatani's lyrical strategy aligns with what Hall (2013) describes as the creation of "counter-hegemonic discourses," which challenge and reinterpret dominant meanings.

Through Barthes' semiotic lens, this resistance can also be viewed as a disruption of myth. The act of publicizing the song—even after takedown—reclaims narrative space that is typically controlled by formal institutions. It creates a rupture in the communicative hierarchy, allowing citizens to speak back to power in their own cultural language.

The song's brief removal from streaming platforms and the subsequent apology issued by the band only amplified its message. As Putsanra (2025) observes, censorship often has the paradoxical effect of legitimizing the very critique it seeks to suppress. In this case, the attempted silencing of Sukatani became further evidence of the institutional fragility the song critiqued.

This section ultimately shows that the public's response—its decoding of the song as truth rather than offense—marks a significant shift. Sukatani's protest becomes a medium of collective semiotic negotiation, a form of symbolic resistance that exposes institutional contradictions while strengthening communal consciousness.

Myth 1: The Police as Public Guardians? A Myth of Institutional Protection

In Indonesian public discourse, the police institution is commonly framed as the front line of public safety—a guardian force tasked with upholding justice, maintaining order, and serving society. This ideal is enshrined in formal narratives such as the *Tribrata*, which emphasizes the values of honesty, integrity, and protection of the weak. However, Sukatani's "Bayar Bayar Bayar" challenges this foundational myth by presenting a starkly different image: one in which the police are not protectors, but gatekeepers of transactional power.

Drawing from Roland Barthes' theory of myth, the image of the police as guardians functions as a secondary signification layered atop their symbolic authority. At the denotative level, uniforms, badges, and legal mandates suggest legitimacy and duty. Yet at the mythological level, these signs are used to naturalize the idea that authority equates to righteousness. Sukatani's critique strips away this veil, revealing the tension between official doctrine and lived experience. The repeated lyric "bayar polisi" is not merely about money changing hands—it is a symbolic disruption of the trust that institutions require to function.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation further explains how this disruption occurs through ideological struggle. The police, as a signifier, are polysemic: while the state encodes them with meaning (order, protection, legitimacy), social

realities enable oppositional readings. Sukatani's lyrics act as a form of re-encoding, challenging the dominant representation with a grounded alternative—one shaped by encounters with bribery, coercion, and abuse of power. The song thus facilitates what Hall would call "oppositional decoding," where marginalized voices reinterpret dominant symbols in resistance to state-sponsored narratives.

The myth of the police as public guardians is not only challenged in lyrics but also in public sentiment and media reports. Studies such as those by Wilson (2015) and Santoso (2010) have long noted that in Indonesia, law enforcement often exists in a liminal space—simultaneously upholding and undermining legal frameworks. Reports from institutions like Komnas HAM and citizen watchdog groups consistently document cases of police extortion, abuse, and dereliction of duty. These realities resonate with what Barthes (1972) describes as the function of myth: to mask history and ideology behind the illusion of natural order.

Furthermore, Sukatani's choice to satirize this myth through repetition and simplicity reflects a form of cultural pedagogy. By embedding critique in accessible punk lyrics, the song mobilizes everyday language as a weapon against institutional abstraction. It enables listeners—especially those outside elite circles—to engage in myth-breaking, using personal experience as a counterweight to formal propaganda.

Ultimately, this first myth deconstructs the ideal of the police as benevolent agents of the state. Instead, it repositions them as actors within a transactional ecosystem of informal power. This shift is not only representational—it is epistemological. It changes how legitimacy is understood and how state symbols are read. Sukatani's lyrics become a site of mythic rupture, where the fantasy of protection collapses under the weight of systemic betrayal.

Myth 2: Neo-Institutional Premanism: Systemic Informal Power

In Indonesian political history, the image of the "preman" has often been associated with non-state actors—thugs, street enforcers, or vigilantes operating outside the law. However, this

conventional framing conceals a deeper institutional entanglement. The lyrics of “Bayar Bayar Bayar” suggest that premanism is no longer an external threat to the state, but a mechanism embedded within its operations. This inversion is key to understanding the second myth: that violence, coercion, and exploitation are anomalies committed by rogue actors. Instead, the song unveils how such practices are maintained through systemic and institutional routines.

Drawing from neo-institutional theory, particularly the work of Mungiu-Pippidi (2015), corruption and informal coercion persist not due to isolated individual deviance but through the internalization of informal norms within formal structures. Institutions such as the police are not failing; they are functioning as expected within a different logic—one where personal benefit and organizational loyalty outweigh accountability to law and public service. This view resonates with Wilson’s (2015) analysis of “coercive capital” in post-New Order Indonesia, where institutional actors blend state legitimacy with premanistic methods to sustain their influence.

Barthes’ semiotic lens is also critical here. The lyric “touring motor gede, bayar polisi” might appear trivial, referencing the protection money paid during VIP motorcycle convoys. But its mythological reading reveals the normalization of extortion as part of public spectacle and elite entitlement. These acts are not seen as corruption; they are coded as order, security, and standard procedure—making myth a form of ideological laundering. As Sobur (2016) explains, myths often conceal contradictions by presenting historically contingent practices as natural and necessary.

Stuart Hall’s theory of representation helps dissect how these meanings are contested. The police are encoded as symbols of state rationality, but Sukatani’s lyrics force a decoding that unveils their complicity in informal rule. The song reframes the police not merely as facilitators of public order but as brokers of illicit arrangements—protecting corruption, enabling illegal enterprises, and enforcing loyalty through fear. This double role erodes the distinction between preman and petugas (officer), between the street and the state.

This dynamic also manifests in civilian forms of premanism that mirror state-sanctioned

violence. For example, cases of mass intimidation during evictions or the use of ormas (civil organizations) to suppress protests reflect how coercion is outsourced or institutionalized. Santoso (2010) notes that these actors often operate with tacit or explicit support from state officials, further blurring institutional boundaries. Thus, premanism becomes not a fringe behavior but an internalized practice—a shadow system that supports the formal state.

The myth, then, is not simply that premanism is bad or illegal, but that it is external to the state. In reality, as depicted in the song, it is deeply intertwined with the logic of governance, particularly in spaces where formal regulation is weak or corrupted by elite interests. Sukatani’s critique does not just expose moral failure—it interrogates institutional design. In doing so, the song reveals a society governed as much by informal control as by formal law.

Myth 3: The Illusion of Freedom of Expression: Repression by Symbolic Violence

In post-reform Indonesia, freedom of expression is constitutionally protected and culturally celebrated as a hallmark of democratic progress. Yet, in practice, this right is often conditional—especially when it threatens institutional power. Sukatani’s “Bayar Bayar Bayar” dramatizes this contradiction through its own fate: after the song was released and went viral, it was abruptly removed from streaming platforms following pressure allegedly from police authorities. The band later issued a public apology, a move that reflects not reconciliation but coercion through symbolic violence. This incident becomes the basis for the third myth: that Indonesians live in a society where dissent is protected.

At the denotative level, the act of deleting the song and issuing an apology may seem like conflict resolution or accountability. Connotatively, however, it exposes the fragile conditions under which artistic critique can survive. Roland Barthes’ concept of myth helps us see how freedom of expression is rebranded as a privilege rather than a right—something that may be revoked when power feels threatened. As Sobur (2016) notes, myth works ideologically by disguising constructed relations of

dominance as common sense. Here, the idea that “freedom has its limits” is weaponized to justify censorship, rather than examined as a warning against authoritarian regression.

The state's role in shaping acceptable expression is further explained through Hall's representation theory. Sukatani encoded their protest as an urgent critique of injustice; the state and its apparatuses (police, media regulators, possibly streaming platforms) sought to reframe that encoding as slander or disrespect. This is not simply a clash of interpretation—it is a battle over legitimacy. Hall (2013) reminds us that meaning is never neutral. In this case, the dominant code seeks to erase resistance by re-signifying it as a threat to order.

Despite this suppression, the public's response revealed a counter-hegemonic reading. Online discourse surrounding the takedown included accusations of police censorship, praise for the song's courage, and renewed calls for institutional accountability. This pattern confirms what Putsanra (2025) observed in similar cases: censorship often backfires, fueling greater engagement and politicization. In this sense, the removal of the song ironically amplified its message, transforming a punk protest into a symbolic struggle over who gets to define truth.

Moreover, the illusion of freedom of expression is deeply connected to the legacy of New Order surveillance and cultural control. Although political structures have liberalized since 1998, institutional habits of silencing dissent remain. Artists, journalists, and activists are routinely subject to defamation charges, digital harassment, or “soft” censorship through platform moderation. Sukatani's case is not isolated—it is emblematic of a broader cultural climate where critique is tolerated only within invisible thresholds of comfort for those in power.

This final myth, therefore, touches on the core contradiction of democratic Indonesia: that symbolic liberties exist in law but not always in practice. The song's trajectory—from creation to censorship to resurgence—mirrors the trajectory of public trust in freedom itself. As Barthes might argue, what appears to be freedom is, in fact, a ritualized performance of tolerance, carefully policed and selectively enforced.

In challenging this myth, Sukatani does more than protest. They expose the ideological scaffolding that supports institutional fragility: a system where critique is feared because it reveals too much. Through this act, the band reclaims narrative agency—not through confrontation, but through creation. Their work becomes a testament to the possibility of expression under constraint, and the resilience of resistance when myths begin to fracture.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore how premanism is represented and constructed through the lyrics of “Bayar Bayar Bayar” by Sukatani. Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotics and Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the findings reveal that the song is not merely an aesthetic expression, but a powerful medium of social communication that raises public awareness of ongoing misconduct within police institutions. Through bold and repetitive lyrics, Sukatani voices a sharp critique of the informal power wielded by state apparatuses—particularly the police—who are supposed to symbolize justice and public protection.

The findings indicate that the idealized construction of the police institution, embodied in slogans such as “to serve and protect,” often amounts to little more than hollow symbolism. Within Barthes' framework, such myths obscure power relations and political interests by presenting them as natural and unproblematic. Sukatani's lyrics unmask this illusion, exposing the irony of uniformed officials who exhibit preman-like behavior within a legal system ostensibly grounded in justice. Through assertive and satirical narratives, the song dismantles the image of the police as enforcers of justice and introduces a counter-narrative drawn from lived realities: experiences of extortion, intimidation, and veiled violence legitimized by formal authority.

More deeply, the lyrics go beyond criticizing individual actors and target the legal system itself, which has been infiltrated by the logic of transactional power. Sukatani distills public anxiety through an artistic medium that not

only exposes the rot within bureaucracy but also expresses the urgency of structural reform in law enforcement. Their satire crystallizes a collective sense of frustration toward the perpetuation of injustice. In this context, the song serves not merely as a personal expression, but as a cultural counter-narrative—a challenge to state hegemony wrapped in musical aesthetics. It becomes a meeting point between art and politics, between individual critique and collective resistance. The song reminds us that when official discourse becomes too suppressive, the people's voice will still find its way—even through melody and verse.

The issue of freedom of expression emerges as a critical dimension in the song's representational power. It reflects a form of cultural resistance that not only critiques individual actors but exposes the asymmetrical power relations between the state and its citizens. When a band like Sukatani faces pressure or restrictions for articulating criticism through art, we are confronted with the reality that constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression is not yet fully secure. Censorship is often disguised as an effort to maintain order or protect institutional dignity, but in essence, it functions as discourse control. Thus, the myth of freedom of speech—long celebrated in democratic rhetoric—enters a state of crisis when exposed to institutional sensitivity to cultural critique.

Overall, the findings of this study affirm that “Bayar Bayar Bayar” is not merely a song, but a symbolic articulation of resistance against institutionalized premanism. The song becomes a medium for the public to reflect on truths often concealed by official narratives. It also demonstrates the potent role of music as a vehicle for mass communication—one that voices social critique, shapes collective opinion, and provides an alternative channel for political expression. In a social reality riddled with inequality—from restricted citizen mobility to contested spaces and unequal access to justice—there is always a price to be paid, both literally and symbolically, to those who should be protecting the public. Through this song, a crucial fact is revealed: in a system overshadowed by institutional premanism, justice is no longer an inherent right, but a commodity

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