



# The Production of Homo Sacer in the Dutch East Indies Government: An Examination of *Cerita dari Digul* edited by Pramoedya Ananta Toer

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**ABSTRACT:** *Digul was an internment camp built to exile those who were considered involved or sympathetic to the 1926-1927 rebellion. Those who became victims can be called homo sacer because they were arrested and exiled without going through a court process. The events in the exile to Digul were later immortalized into literary works in the form of prose, and in 2001, collected and edited by Pramoedya Ananta Toer into a book entitled "Cerita dari Digul". This research aims to analyse how the Dutch East Indies government produced homo sacer in the book "Cerita dari Digul". This research uses a qualitative method. The data collection technique is carried out using the literature study method, namely by careful and thorough reading of the material object. The data that has been collected will then be analysed using Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer Theory. The conclusion of the research is: in Cerita from Digul, the Dutch East Indies Government produced homo sacer using a condition commonly referred to as state-of-exception. That is, a kind of state of emergency or critical situation, which in the name of this critical situation, the state in the name of safeguarding rights, then deprives rights. Those who were arrested, transported and exiled to Digul were not people who were considered dangerous, let alone had committed dangerous acts. They were arrested and exiled only because they had entered associations that were deemed dangerous to the public peace.*

**Keywords:** Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power, Bare Life, State of Exception

## 1. Introduction

In the trajectory of modern Indonesian history, there is a place that has been forgotten in the collective memory of the Indonesian people. That place is Boven Digul, an area located in the upper reaches of the Digul River in southern Papua. Boven Digul was a concentration camp (often referred to as a place of exile) for political prisoners (Mangunadikusumo et al, 1977). The decision to establish an internment camp in Boven Digul came at an extraordinary meeting of the Raad van Indie (Council of the Dutch East Indies) on November 18, 1926 (Hadler, 2010). The decision came only about a week after the communist uprising that began in West Java on November 12, 1926.

At that time the Boven Digul exile camp was established based on: First, the intensification of the radical (communist) movement in Indonesia in the period 1925-1927 which manifested itself in various labour strikes and rebellions. These activities were a threat that had to be stopped by the colonial government. Secondly, the Netherlands was a minor colonial power, compared to Spain, Portugal, France and Britain. This meant that only the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) had strategic significance for the continuation of colonialism. Therefore, it was more strategic to establish a place of exile for the movement within the Dutch East Indies rather than abroad (the Netherlands). Hence, the place (Boven Digoel) was chosen, which was very far from the centre of government in Batavia (Handoko, 2016, p. 91).

For the exiles, as described by (Toer, 2001, p. ix), living in Digul was a catastrophe. In addition to the harsh treatment they received, the forced labour of clearing the forest and opening up fields was an arduous task. From the first year of their arrival in 1927, various diseases began to strike: dysentery, beriberi, and three types of malaria. The most dangerous of these was black malaria; when the urine became black, it was a sign of death. Meanwhile, the area outside the camp was controlled by Papuan tribes of beheaders and people-eaters. What is ironic is that the Digul exile camp was built to exile those who were considered involved or sympathetic to the 1926-1927 rebellion, without going through a court decision. The authority to arrest and exile was based on *exorbitante rechten* (privileges of the Governor-General) which were handed down to the prefects whose territories were hit by rebellion in those years and the following ((Toer, 2001, p. xxi). During this dark period, the Dutch East Indies Government carried out various arrests under the motto "it is better to be wrongly arrested by a thousand people than to escape one". Official sources state that more than 13,000 people were arrested ((Toer, 200, p. xxii). Ewald Vanvugh in his work *Bloed Aan De Kamp*, as quoted by Pramoedya in the Preface to *Cerita dari Digul*, made the Digul exile camp part of the Dutch scandal abroad. This is easy to understand. The exiles were not convicts, nor had they even been tried.

Although it was first built to exile PKI people, in its later development, Boven Digoel was used as one of the dumping grounds for anti-colonial forces in a broad sense. Since 1932, many figures of Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI), Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI), Partai Indonesia (PARTINDO), Perhimpunan Muslim Indonesia (PERMI), Partai Sarikat Islam Indonesia (PSII), and several others were banished to Boven Digoel. Hatta and Sjahrir are two of the best-known examples. H. Agus Salim's younger brother, I. F. M. Salim—a journalist who was known to be quite vocal—was also sent to Boven Digoel (Handoko, 2016, p. 88).

In August 1935, Mohammad Husni Thamrin declared in the Volksraad that "the situation (in Digul Hulu/Tanah Merah) is inhuman", and strongly demanded "that the camp be abolished immediately" (Toer, 2001, p. ix). Sutan Sjahrir, an ex-Digulis, wrote that "it is almost unbelievable that the people in the camp are being persecuted without the persecutors realizing it, because they do not bother about the inner suffering of the exiles, not even to pay attention" (Toer, 2001, p. ix). The Digul incident, where people were exiled without first being brought to trial, was actually a violation of a primordial right called the "right to have rights"-a right that is acquired through membership in a

particular political community (Hardiman, 2007, p. 29). According to this view, indeed the most obvious example of where the "condition of no rights" emerges is from the concentration camps; a condition where people do not have the right to have rights (Hardiman, 2007, p. 32). This situation between rights and lack of rights is a grey situation, where the inherent nature of human rights itself is questioned: human beings are reduced to their fullness as human beings.

The events in Digul exile were later immortalized into literary works in prose. In 2001, Pramoedya Ananta Toer selected, collected, and edited writings about Digul in a book entitled *Cerita dari Digul*. The book contains five stories: (1) *Rustam Digulist* by D. E. Manu Turoe, (2) *Darah dan Air Mata di Boven Digul* by Oen Bo Tik, (3) *Pandu Anak Buangan* by Abdoe'Zarim M.s, (4) *Antara Hidup dan Mati or Buron dari Digul* by Wiranta, and (5) *Minggat dari Digul* by No Name (Toer, 2001). These writings, of course, can be seen as an attempt to link literary works with the real social world, which if traced back, goes back to Plato's theory of mimesis. According to Plato (in Faruk, 2019, p. 47), the world in literary works is an imitation of the world of reality, which is also an imitation of the world of ideas. As also classified by Abrams (Salam & Akmal, 2016), one of the functions of literary works is the mimetic function, which emphasizes the imitation and reflectivity of literary works to the context.

The condition without rights experienced by the exiles in Digul, reminds us of Giorgio Agamben's concept of Homo Sacer where political sovereignty based on violence and abandonment, ultimately produces humans without rights and legal existence. In this human being without rights and legal existence, "second-class citizens" are reflected, where law and the principles of justice are suspended. The law ignores its correlative relationship with justice and humanity, and even provides itself as a means of coercion. Violence, discrimination and persecution can occur at any time. Instead of controlling them, the state even officially sponsoring them.

As Agamben (1998, p. 51) said, the homo sacer are the outcasts. Killing them is not even considered a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice them, yet whoever kills him will not be punished for murder. From Agamben's perspective, homo sacer is indeed produced by sovereignty itself, in fact, the production of homo sacer is an original activity of sovereignty. Whatever decision the sovereign takes towards the homo sacer is the very existence of the sovereign. How the sovereign behaves towards the excluded shows how sovereign it is. In Agamben's view, homo sacer exists as the figure of a state of exception that is the condition of possibility for political practice itself. Agamben (1998, p. 55) said, "*For a long time, one of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide life and death.*"

It is on the basis of this fact that this research was conducted. The purpose of this research is to find out how the Dutch East Indies government produced homo sacer, but not in real historical reality, but in the stories collected in *Cerita dari Digul* edited by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. To achieve this goal, the author will use Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer Theory.



## Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer

Agamben's concept of homo sacer is closely related to his view on the concept of life. By adopting the Ancient Greek concept of life, Agamben argues that in the word "life", two different meanings can be found, namely: *zoe* and *bios* (Agamben, 1998, p. 1). The first meaning of the word indicates life "as it is," life to survive as it is done by living things in general, including plants and animals. *Bios*, on the other hand, denotes a proper way of life by individuals and groups, meaning public life as found in polis society. However, this is where the *bios-zoe* connection lies in relation to sovereignty; that it is precisely at this point that the status of human fullness (*bios*) can be removed, throwing them into a bare life that lives to fulfil their basic needs and whose lives can be taken away at any time (*zoe*). These moments of creation of bare human beings are the hidden foundation of sovereignty or in other words, what is called "sovereignty" is the process of creation of bare human beings (Prabowo, 2015, pp. 30-31).

The concept of homo sacer also builds on the concept of sacred man, and by quoting Pompeius Festus, a grammarian in the second century AD Roman Empire, Agamben wrote:

*The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that "if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide." This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.* (Agamben, 1998, p. 47)

In the word *sacred* itself, there is actually a double meaning, and as Agamben said, the word *sacer* as a derivative of the word *sacred*, refers to people or objects that one cannot touch without defiling oneself; hence the double meaning of "holy" or "cursed" (Agamben, 1998, p. 51)

Agamben (1998, 52) also mentioned that in the case of homo sacer, a person is simply placed outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law. The fact that killing is permitted implies that violence done to the homo sacer is not a crime. While it is forbidden to violate other sacred things, it is legitimate to kill the "sacred". Agamben said: *homo sacer belongs to God in the form of unsacrificability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed.*

However, although this homo sacer belongs to God, the state (sovereign power) also has a role in justifying someone as homo sacer. The sphere of the sovereign (the state) is one in which it is permitted to kill without committing murder and without celebrating sacrifice, and sacred life-that is, life that can be killed but not sacrificed-is life that has been captured in this sphere (Agamben, 1998, p. 53). In short, homo sacer are those whom the state permits to kill without committing homicide and life that may be killed but not sacrificed.



In Agamben's view, homo sacer exists as a figure of a state-of-exception that is a condition of possibility for political practice itself. This, according to Agamben (Agamben, 1998, p. 51), is related to the Latin word *sacer* which means: *sacer* is actually a curse; and *homo sacer* who is the target of this curse is an outcast, a forbidden person, a taboo person, a dangerous person. Because they are considered outcasts, forbidden, and dangerous, political sovereignty, which is based on violence, feels it has the power to give birth to human beings without rights and legal existence. In the face of people without legal existence, the law and the principles of justice suspend themselves. Law ignores its correlative relationship with justice and humanity and becomes a means of coercion. Violence, discrimination and persecution can occur at any time.

From this, we know that the killing of homo sacer is not murder. Therefore, there is no juridical-political order that protects them. The whole character of homo sacer shows that they are not in the land of the established juridical order, but go back to the pre-social period of life, i.e. being part of the primitive life of Indo-European society. They are regarded as bandits and criminals (Agamben, 1998, p. 63). Therefore, it is not a problem to finish them off. And of course, said Agamben (1998, p. 63.), the bandit can be killed, anyone can hurt them.

## 2. Method

This research uses qualitative methods. Qualitative method is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written words, and is analysed without using statistical techniques (Sangadji & Sopiah, 2010, p. 26). With qualitative methods, researchers will interpret and describe data using theory as an angle of view on the material object under study.

In this research, two stages of research will be done, namely the data collection and data analysis stages. The data referred to in this research is qualitative data in the form of words, sentences, paragraphs, and dialogs related to the Digulis in their position as homo sacer in Giorgio Agamben's theoretical framework. The smallest unit of data, therefore, is the words that relate to the Digulis as homo sacer.

Data collection is carried out using the literature study method, namely by careful and thorough reading of the material object, namely *Cerita dari Digul*. When finding expressions such as: arrest, exile, torture, murder, extermination, and similar expressions attached to Digulis in his position as homo sacer; researchers will record them as data. The data that has been collected will then be analysed using Agamben's Homo Sacer Theory.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1 Homo Sacer Production in *Cerita dari Digul*

The state's pretext for producing homo sacer in *Cerita dari Digul* is what is commonly referred to as a state-of-exception. That is, a kind of state of emergency or other critical situation that endangers the continuity of sovereignty itself. In the name of this state of emergency, the state, in the name of safeguarding rights, then deprives rights. In the

story, the benchmark for the state of emergency itself is not clear, it is not described in detail. However, the fact that the Digul exile camp was built to exile those who were considered involved in or sympathetic to the 1926-1927 rebellion without going through a court decision, is presented again in the story. Like the character Pandu in the story titled *Pandu Anak Buangan*, whose exile is described in this way:

*Tidak perlu dirinya yang dipandang berbahaya, cukup dengan alasan dia memasuki perhimpunan yang dipandang berbahaya buat ketenteraman umum. Itu alasan sudah cukup masa itu, buat menyingkirkan orang yang perlu disingkirkan.*

There is no need for him to be considered dangerous, it is enough that he enters a gathering that is considered dangerous for public order. That was enough reason at that time, to get rid of people who needed to be gotten rid of.

(Abdoe'IXarim M.s. in Toer, 2001, p. 99)

*Tapi lebih sayu lagi hatinya sebagian besar orang yang berada dalam itu kapal, yang sedang berlayar ke satu tempat bukan atas maunya sendiri, hanya atas paksa'annya orang yang berkuasa, berlalu dari segala apa yang ia orang cintai menuju ke itu tempat perasingan yang belum diketahui bagaimana keada'annya, oh belum tahu bagaimana jadinya.*

But even more sad are the hearts of most of the people on board the ship, who are sailing to one place not of their own accord, only under the compulsion of powerful people, leaving everything they love to that unknown place of exile. how it's going, oh I don't know how it's going to be.

(Oen Bo Tik in Toer, 2001, p. 31)

The excerpt of the story is also connected to the fact that the authority to arrest and exile to Digul was indeed carried out based on the *exorbitante rechten* (privileges of the Governor-General) which was handed down to residents whose territories were hit by rebellion (Toer, 2001, p. xxi). During this dark period, the Dutch East Indies Government made various arrests with the motto "it is better to misarrest a thousand people than to escape one". The number of people arrested was not small, one source states that more than 13,000 people were arrested (Toer, 2001, p. xxii).

There is a fairly clear description in the above quote that the state (sovereign power), has such a dominant role in labelling-and thus producing—a person as homo sacer. Agamben (1998, p. 55) describes this in a simple sentence that indeed, for a long time, one of the distinctive privileges of sovereign power was the right to decide on a person's life and death. The state itself allows homo sacer to be killed without the perpetrator being considered to have committed murder (Agamben, 1998, p. 53).

We then know that homo sacer had no juridical-political order available to protect them. The whole character of homo sacer suggests that they are not in an established juridical order, but return to a pre-social period of life, i.e. being part of the primitive life of Indo-European society. In *Cerita dari Digul*, this is really captured as a dominant element. The Digul exiles, they are placed in a very remote, very primitive



area, as if they were living on another earth. Politically they are left to die, and they are left to a nature that is inhospitable to life. We can see this in the following quote:

*Banyak pemimpin dan bukan pemimpin ditangkap dalam bulan November 1926, karena pemberontakan PKI. Di Betawi dan di Bantam, kemudian di Sumatera Barat. Karena itu pemerintah mengambil sikap mengasingkan orang-orang itu, ke satu pulau besar di Nieuw Guinea (Papua). Papua satu pulau besar yang diperintah oleh dua kerajaan. Sebelah barat oleh pemerintah Belanda dan sebelah timur oleh pemerintah Inggris. Di tengah-tengah Papua Belanda itu, yang masih diselimuti dengan rimba raya, yang tak pernah didiami oleh manusia sopan, yang dikelilingi oleh rawa-rawa luas, di situlah tanah perasingan itu didirikan.*

Many leaders and non-leaders were arrested in November 1926, because of the PKI rebellion. In Betawi and in Bantam, then in West Sumatra. Because of this, the government took the position of exiling these people to a large island in New Guinea (Papua). Papua is a large island ruled by two kingdoms. The west was by the Dutch government and the east by the British government. In the middle of Dutch Papua, which is still covered in jungle, which has never been inhabited by polite humans, which is surrounded by vast swamps, that is where the foreign land was founded.

(Abdoe'IXarim M.s. in Toer, 2001, p. 82)

By placing the exiles in the remote area of Digul, the state is actually placing homo sacer in the position of *zoe* life according to Agamben's concept. Separated from everything, as homo sacer, the Digulis are forced and conditioned to live only "as they are," living to survive like any other living creature does, a life that is no more than the life of plants and animals. At this point the fullness of human status is removed, they are banished to bare life to become bare humans who live to fulfil their basic needs and whose lives can be taken away at any time (*zoe*).

Boven Digoel is an ideal dumping ground because it is 100% isolated. The distance from the mouth of the Digoel River is 455 km upstream, inland. That's the same distance as Jakarta to Semarang, or from Amsterdam to Paris. The conditions at that time were all dense forests, swamps with many malaria mosquitoes, and in the river, there were many crocodiles. Moreover, at that time many of the original inhabitants were still head hunters, or still cannibals, still liked to eat people (Handoko, 2016). So as citizens, on the one hand, the Digul exiles were homo sacer who were outside the law in the sense that their rights were not protected by state law, the killing of them was not considered a criminal offense. On the other hand, their placement in the middle of a wilderness inhabited by cannibal tribes is the same as placing them in death itself. From both sides, the Digulis have been homo-sacerized from the beginning, placed in the "realm of death" by the Dutch East Indies government. About this, in *Cerita dari Digul* it is written:

*Penduduk asli dalam hutan itu, yang dinamakan Kayakaya masih biadab, masih suka memakan daging manusia yang bukan sekampung dengan dia.*

The native inhabitants of the forest, called Kayakaya, are still barbaric, still like to eat the flesh of humans who are not from their village.

(Abdoe'IXarim M.s. in Toer, 2001, p. 117)

*Cerita dari Digul* also describe how separate Digul's realm is from the human realm outside Digul. It is mentioned in the story of *Pandu Anak Buangan* that it is impossible to escape from Digul, so remote is the place. In fact, the escape from Digul is an escape that has never been solved by anyone in the world, be it the Russians in Siberia, the French in Duivel Eiland, the British in Australia, or the Portuguese on Timor Island. Compared to the escape of Napoleon Bonaparte from Elba Island, a French hero revered for his bravery, it is only a speck of fresh water in the sea, when compared to the courage of the escape from Digul (Abdoe'IXarim M.s in Toer, 2001, p. 132). Describing the distance the escape would have taken if it had been forced to be travelled:

*Perjalanan untuk sampai di pinggir laut, tak kurang dari 20 hari, itu pun bagi seorang yang tegap dan berbadan sehat.*

The journey to reach the seashore takes no less than 20 days, even for someone who is sturdy and healthy.

(Abdoe'IXarim M.s. in Toer, 2001, p. 117)

Basically, *Cerita dari Digul* presents how democratic principles were postponed, from the beginning of the arrest process to during the exiles' stay in Digul. This process of postponing the law and democratic principles is not illegal because it is carried out by an official state institution, namely the Dutch East Indies government. What was created then was a zone of contradiction between law and non-law, between order and lack of order. In this contradiction zone, violence became a necessity and the Digul people actually fell into the status of homo sacer: people who became objects of violence without protection and without mechanisms to defend themselves. The violence that occurred was not a criminal act so there were no consequences for the perpetrators, even if they were killed. Suffering both physically, and especially spiritually, is daily food for the Digulis. We can see this in the following quote:

*Tidak ada salah satu di antara mereka yang bikin gerakan ribut, karena satu persatu sedang terbenam dalam hatinya sendiri, sedang terkenang dengan apa yang ditinggal dan tidak ada harapan buat melihat kembali.*

None of them made any noisy movements, because one by one they were drowning in their own hearts, remembering what they had left behind and having no hope of seeing it again.

(Oen Bo Tik in Toer, 2001)

*“Ya, kita berduka lantaran kita bakal pergi ke satu tempat yang kita belum tahu keada'annya, dan terutama lantaran kita merasa diri kita ini pergi menjalani hukuman, dibuang, tidak merdeka, tidak boleh balik ke tempat sendiri buat melihat pula itu segala apa yang kita cinta di sana.*





"Yes, we grieve because we are going to a place where we don't know where we are, and especially because we feel like we are going to serve a sentence, exiled, not free, not allowed to return to our own place to see what happened. We love there.

(Oen Bo Tik in Toer, 2001, p. 37)

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Cerita dari Digul*, the Dutch East Indies Government produced homo sacer using a condition commonly referred to as state-of-exception. That is, a kind of state of emergency or critical situation, which in the name of this critical situation, the state in the name of safeguarding rights, then deprives rights. Those who were transported and banished to Digul did not need to be considered dangerous themselves, but it was enough that they had entered an association that was considered dangerous to the public peace. This reason was enough to homo-sacerize people, to get rid of people who needed to be gotten rid of. Without going through the courts, these people were produced into homo sacer by relying on the *exorbitante rechten* (privileges of the Governor-General) that were handed down to the prefects whose territories were plagued by rebellion. The state, thus, through the pretext of state-of-exception, labelled—and thus produced—a person as a homo sacer, and to launch the process, the Governor-General's privileges were used so that homo sacers were deprived of their rights without going through a legitimate legal process, namely the court.

Hence, homo sacer have no juridical-political order available to protect them. They are forcibly placed not in the juridical-political order, but as if returning to life in a primitive period. They are placed in a very remote area, separated from civilization, as if living on another earth. By placing the exiles in the remote area of Digul, the state is actually placing homo sacer in the position of living *zoe*. Separated from everything, the Digulis are forced and conditioned to live only "as they are," living to survive like any other living creature does, a life that is no more than the life of plants and animals. At this point the fullness of human status is removed, they are banished to bare life to become bare human beings who live to fulfil their basic needs and whose lives can be taken at any time without the perpetrator being considered a murderer.

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