

GHOSTS IN YOGYAKARTA, INDONESIA: REFLECTIONS FROM A SEMI-URBAN FIELD, A CITY IN TRANSITION.

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Doing research on the Indonesian martial art and national sport *Pencak Silat*¹⁴, my research focus is not primarily on ghost stories and paranormal phenomena. However, martial arts in general are closely tied to war magic and warrior religion (Farrer 2014), and the Javanese are well known for their mystical tradition and prevailing beliefs in supernatural forces, spirits, and the like (Mulder 1998). Furthermore, Javanese people love stories and representations of supernatural and extraordinary feats, about ghosts, spirits, witches and heroes with great martial prowess – narratives that are often referred to as *cerita silat* – “silat stories”. So during the twelve months of fieldwork I spent in Yogyakarta and Java (2015-16), I often came across peoples’ accounts of uncanny experiences and successful coping strategies. The role and function of *Pencak Silat* experts in such matters, and the *Pencak Silat* audience of corresponding media contents will not be covered further here. It has recently been addressed within the context of narrative traditions and social implications of ghost movies in Southeast Asia (Keilbart 2016). Yet in this short essay, encounters with and stories about ghosts in the environment of the quickly developing city of Yogyakarta (Central Java) will be reflected upon. Gentrification processes and big construction projects, as well as smaller, individual building projects provide good examples of how ghosts’ agency functions in emerging (semi-)urban modernities.

Right at the very beginning of my research in Yogyakarta, I was immediately confronted with belief in ghosts and ghosts’ agency. Looking for a place to stay, I visited a homestay (*rumah kost*) in the north-eastern part of Yogyakarta that had been recommended to me by a friend as “green *kost*”. The owner and manager of the homestay (host mother – *ibu kost*) was an In-

donesian lady married to a Dutch man, who lived with him and their children next door. She showed me around and I was glad the recommendation proved justified; the *kost* was located slightly outside of the city center, it was partly surrounded by bamboo and other trees, and promised a pleasant living and working atmosphere. The *ibu kost* and I sat down in the in-house cafeteria and talked about available rooms. She explained to me that currently the last free room was positioned at the far edge of the building, adjacent to the small bamboo grove. Therefore, she could not rent the room to Indonesians, because at night, when the wind rustled through the leaves, they were afraid of ghosts that were believed to live there. I told her I was not afraid of ghosts, and that I liked the sound of wind rustling through bamboo leaves. She laughed at my answer, but then became serious again and added that later, in case it troubled me, I could probably change to another room. Then she told me about her own experiences with the ghost in her house, who was said to reside in the big tree next to the building. Ten years before, when she and her husband had bought the property and started to build their house, the local people and neighbors had warned her about the ghost. She never saw it, but when the house was finished and her husband was away on business, every night she heard strange noises, voices or footsteps, and could not sleep well. This kept happening, she told me, until one night she climbed onto the roof of the house and screamed into the night, addressing the ghost: “Okay, I’m sorry I built my house here and disturbed you. You were here first, long before me. I don’t want to upset you. Maybe we can both live here without disturbing each other?! I beg you, please give me a chance!” From that night on, the *ibu kost* told me in a solemn voice, she had never heard anything from the ghost again.

The next day, I moved in at the homestay and took the reputedly haunted room. Explanatory approaches for the ghost stories my *ibu kost* told me evolved during the year I lived there. Before the homestay was built, the neighborhood was a small-scale industrial area (rather than a tourist or student area), with a stonemason’s business, a chicken-processing factory,

¹⁴ In my PhD thesis, I analyse education of the senses in *Pencak Silat* schools compared to the informal acquisition of media knowledge and the impact of media technologies on ratios of sense perception.

and fish farming. A small river, riverside woodlands, and rice fields characterized the landscape. Lately, urban planning and expanding infrastructure, development of the tourist sector and expansion of the local universities – and therefore of the student home business – had influenced the character of the neighborhood. After the homestay of my *ibu kost* and her husband was finished, other high-standard student residences (so-called *kost eksklusif*) followed, a bit closer to the town and the universities. Students from different parts of Indonesia and foreign people (like me) came to the area. Students discovered the riverside and the main bridge as suitable places to meet and for leisure-time activities, especially in the evening. Some of the long-established residents of the area were not pleased with these developments. One of the *Pencak Silat* masters who lived nearby told me that in former times the river was used for *kungkum*. This is a form of meditation in which the practitioner sits in the flowing water up to his neck, for several hours during night time, in order to achieve a certain kind of openness to divine guidance or mystical insights (cf. Maliszewski 1996: 83f.). Today, the *Pencak Silat* group uses another river for *kungkum* in the mountain area of the volcano Merapi, because the river nearby was “polluted”, as the master told me. Similar expressions of dissatisfaction or implicit rejection of the local development could be found amongst the fish farmers and stone workers, always in relation to the river and the unwelcome (foreign) students there. Since my *ibu kost* told me that her husband, and she herself as well, with their extensive building project, had a hard time becoming accepted by the neighborhood, I assumed there was probably a rational explanation for her encounters with the “ghost” in their house. Although there never was any proof of a break-in or burglary, it appeared likely that some of the neighbors – who had warned her about the ghost – entered the *ibu kost*’s property at night to incite fear and to convince her that higher powers opposed her building project. In the first few months when I was staying at the *kost*, one of the domestic servants told me that resistance from local residents against the homestay eased off when my *ibu kost* and her husband contributed a significant amount of money for the reconstruction of the old bridge over the

river nearby. This confirmed my conviction that neighbors working in the small-scale industries were behind the nightly disturbances at my *ibu kost*’s home. The fact that she and her husband contributed to infrastructural improvements of the area probably had more to do with the pacification than her nightly apology and plea for reconciliation at the rooftop had.

Another personal account of ghost encounters showed a comparable development and similar structures. A Catholic *Pencak Silat* practitioner and masters student, with whom I worked (at university and for my research) and made friends with, reported continuing challenges at his home. Things went missing, broke, or stopped working. My friend assumed a *tuyul* or a *genderuwo* was at work – both supernatural creatures of the Javanese folklore, and two of the “more conventional” Indonesian ghosts (cf. Bubandt 2015: 214). A *tuyul* is characterized by the childlike appearance of a human toddler; it can cause havoc in a household and can be used by its ‘owner’ to secretly get into other peoples’ houses and steal money or valuables from them (Quinn 2009: 33). In Javanese mythology, a *genderuwo* is known as a giant water demon who disturbs peoples’ sleep by throwing pebbles stones at their house, or haunts women for sexual intercourse (Suryono 2007: 58). The reasons why my friend assumed a *tuyul* or *genderuwo* was wreaking havoc in his house were that things went missing, he had sleeping problems, and water damage occurred repeatedly. To counter the ghost threat, my friend visited the “Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” at Ganjuran, about 15 kilometres south of Yogyakarta, he prayed and meditated, and he collected some water from the sacred spring there (as many pilgrims do). Using the holy water from Ganjuran, he wished to fight off the ghost of whatever kind and to expel it from his house. After some weeks, when I asked him about the state of affairs, my friend told me that he still suffered from sleeping disorders, but that the sacred water had at least kept the *tuyul* or *genderuwo* from further damaging the house.

In this case, too, rational explanatory approaches for the disturbances in my friend’s house evolved during my one-year stay in Yogyakarta.

My friend is a young adult Catholic, married, with no children yet. He studied in Australia, is now doing his masters degree (in cultural and religious studies) and also works as a freelance translator. He has several large tattoos, owns two dogs, and every now and then drinks alcohol (traditional fermented beverages) with his fellows from a local tattoo community in Yogyakarta. My friend told me several times that he did not get along with his neighbors very well. His liking for tattoos, dogs, and alcohol might be perceived as negative contribution to the uneasy relationship in the mixed Muslim and Christian Catholic neighborhood. I have never investigated further, but my friend's *Pencak Silat* master told me in an interview that some of the Muslim residents of the area were rejecting or even hostile towards their Christian neighbors. Particularly recently, an increasing influence of groups rejecting foreign "Western" life styles could be observed in Yogyakarta, visible, for example, in the sales ban on beer in local supermarkets (cf. Yulisman and Harsaputra 2015). Violent enforcement of this sales ban by Muslim youth groups were reported several times during my research year in Yogyakarta. This confirmed my conviction that, similarly to the nightly disturbances at my *ibu kost's* home, probably some of my friend's dismissive neighbors were behind the occurrences in his house. My friend's wife instead simply kept the two dogs responsible for the damage inside the house.

It is not only small, individual building projects or houses – and private conflicts – that set the stage for ghost stories and ghosts' agency. Gentrification processes and big construction projects in Yogyakarta also became occasions for expressions of disquiet about consequences, both mundane and supernatural. During the year I spent in Yogyakarta, four big shopping malls were opened in the provincial capital. The "Hartono Mall", which was then under construction (it was opened in November 2015), is now claimed to be the biggest shopping center in the province of Yogyakarta. In connection with the building process, the following ghost story was circulating among citizens of Yogyakarta:

At the beginning of the building process, a *waringin* tree (*Ficus benjamina*) was standing in the way. Local construction workers refused to fell the tree, because it was believed to host a powerful ghost. The foreign investor and construction management insisted that it be felled, so woodcutters tried to cut down and remove the obstructive tree. In the attempt, one of the woodcutters had an accident and died. For many people it was obvious that the ghost in the tree had protected its home and caused the fatal accident in order to prevent the felling of the tree. On the strength of the incident, and under pressure from the construction workers, the investor and construction management agreed to relocate the tree instead of felling it. Thus, the tree was uprooted and replanted, and the construction process could be continued. Unfortunately, the *waringin* tree did not survive its relocation, and died shortly afterwards. Just a week later, part of the scaffolding at the construction site collapsed and 12 workers died. For many people it was absolutely clear that the ghost had taken revenge on the workers for the death of its host tree. People say it haunts the new shopping mall to this day.

During my research year in Indonesia, I came across a number of further, similar ghost stories in which problems and conflicts were addressed. Rational explanatory approaches for the ghost stories I heard usually evolved over time. From the standpoint of a scholar, I concluded that the reason for ghost stories and the mediating agency of ghosts lay in "a corresponding element in the attitudes of the Javanese, which is to avoid at all costs controversy in public" (Koentjaraningrat 2009: 44). Nobody wanted to criticize others directly, publicly, so ghosts functioned as mediators, and ghost stories implicitly communicated criticism among the people. Controversial gentrification processes and big construction projects, as well as smaller, individual building projects and related private conflicts were handled that way.

However, for ghost stories of a different kind, about good-natured, helpful and supportive ghosts or spirits, these explanations appeared to be inappropriate. My experiences in the course of participatory observation and appren-

ticeship in *Pencak Silat* schools, in the so-called *aspek mental-spiritual*, added another dimension to the ghost stories and “urban legends”. Meditation and training of the senses is an intrinsic part of *Pencak Silat* mental-and-spiritual education. In traditional Javanese conceptions, this entails the chance and the risk for practitioners to become more open towards the spirit world. After a few months of training, meditation late in the evening, usually before I went to bed, became part of my daily routine. On the 16th November 2015, I wrote in my research diary:

“Last night I met my *ibu kost*’s ghost! I came home from training quite late, so I did my meditation shortly before midnight. When I went to bed afterwards, I felt very relaxed and calm. I heard the wind softly rustling in the bamboo in front of the window. Just before falling asleep, in the intermediate state between being awake and asleep, suddenly I had the feeling I was not alone in my room. I felt a presence and had the vague impression it wanted something from me, but I didn’t know what it was. A moment later, I had the feeling someone was lightly touching my face. Immediately I was fully awake again. Yet I found myself alone, everything was quiet – besides the bamboo leaves rustling in the wind and light rain that had begun tapping on the window. The ghost was gone, and so was my feeling of being an “object of desire”, the feeling that someone wanted something from me. What a strange, but not really unpleasant experience. I’m curious about the reactions and assessments of my *ibu kost* and my *Pencak Silat* friends.”

More stories about good-natured, helpful and supportive ghosts or spirits, as well as reflections on *Pencak Silat* education of the senses and the *mental-spiritual* will be provided in my dissertation.

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