

## Letting the Spirits Rest: Reconciling Indonesia's Past through Unseen Realms

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### ABSTRACT

The presentation and historical interpretation of the events of post-Sukarno 1965 are often shrouded in fear and silence. Despite the efforts of NGOs, human rights groups and academics, attempts at reinterpretation or revising Indonesia's past have often met with fierce opposition. Groups which are religiously- or militarily-affiliated often brand any such attempt at revising the history of 1965 as being a conspiracy to raise the flag of communism on Indonesia's soil. Fringe groups such as the *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front) and the *Front Anti Komunis Indonesia* (Anti-Communist Front) have been at the forefront of violently disruptive actions against exhibitions, movie screenings, or even discussions about that specific period. These groups often brand revisionist retellings of 1965 as arising from an ethereal *bahaya laten* (latent danger) or *komunisme gaya baru* (new-style communism).

This discourse bears an uncanny resemblance to the *Orde Baru* (New Order) regime's paranoiac fears of *organisasi tanpa bentuk* (formless organisations) subverting the state from within. Using opaque language and taking advantage of a "ghostly lexicon" that have already existed within Indonesia, the New Order regime was able to create an atmosphere of fear and foreboding. Nonetheless, despite the overthrow of Suharto's New Order regime, Indonesia continues to live amongst the shadows and phantasms which have yet to be exorcised even after nearly 20 years of democratic transition. This paper investigates the ghostly phenomena arising from the taboo-like nature of the events of 1965. I will specifically look at how spaces of past violence have been transformed into informal memorials testifying to Indonesia's "silenced past." I will also be investigating rumors and ghost stories hypothesizing that these elements represent a way in which the past expresses itself even as fringe factions and groups continue to maintain an "enforced silence" on the events of 1965. Through the investigation

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of these events and by presenting them as symbolic tropes, we can gain a deeper understanding of how nations and societies reconcile with their pasts in transitional contexts.

**Keywords: History, Indonesia, Human Rights, Memory, 1965, ghosts**

## 讓靈魂安息：通過看不見的領域和印尼的過去和解

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### 摘要

印尼社會對 1965 事件的歷史解釋和呈現，時常籠罩在恐懼和沈默中。儘管印尼的非政府組織、人權組織以及學術界，嘗試重新解釋或修正這段過去的歷史，但卻經常遭到宗教或和軍方有關的組織強烈抨擊。他們將這段歷史描繪為共產主義在印尼土地的陰謀。伊斯蘭捍衛者前線（Front Pembela Islam）或反共陣線（Front Anti Komunis Indonesia）等邊緣組織使用暴力方式，企圖阻止有關 1965 事件的展覽、電影播放甚至是討論，並將修正主義（Revisionism）標籤化為隱性的危險或是新形式共產主義。此種說法與新秩序（Orde Baru）政權時期，不斷恐嚇人民會有無形組織顛覆國家的論述，極為相似。利用模糊的語言和幽靈般的詞彙，新秩序政權成功營造出讓人民恐懼的氛圍。儘管蘇哈托政權已被推翻，印尼經歷二十年的民主轉型，印尼人民仍生活在恐懼的陰影中。本文旨在探究因 1965 事件的禁忌性質引起的幽靈現象。我將聚焦在研究過去曾發生過暴力的空間，如何被轉化為證明印尼「沉默的過去」的非官方紀念場址。我也檢視傳聞和鬼故事，並假定這些傳聞和鬼故事是這些事件曾發生過的證據，即使前述的宗教和軍方有關的邊緣團體，持續透過許多方式想讓 1965 事件不被印尼民眾知道或討論。但透過將這些傳聞和鬼故事視為是象徵性比喻的研究，我們可更深入瞭解國家和社會，如何在轉型脈絡下與其過去的歷史和解。

關鍵詞：歷史，印尼，人權，記憶，1965，鬼魂

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## Beginnings

The mass killings of between 500,000 to 1 million individuals allegedly affiliated or accused of being members of the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (“PKI”; Communist Party of Indonesia) in 1965 brought about immense socio-political consequences which continue to reverberate through Indonesian society. This event lies at the very foundation of the monumental changes which occurred when Sukarno’s “old order” transitioned into Suharto’s New Order, ushering in a nearly three-decade long authoritarian regime. However, even 20 years after the *reformasi* (reformation) demonstrations which brought down Suharto’s government, the state continues to deny that there were indeed mass killings in 1965.<sup>1</sup> State ministers continue to warn Indonesians of the latent threat and danger which communism poses to the Indonesian body politic.<sup>2</sup>

The ideological superstructure of Suharto’s New Order state was dependent on an assumption that communism was, and is, the willful enemy of the state, seeking to destroy Indonesia’s unitary structure. According to Yosef Djakababa, the anti-communist purges from the period of September 30<sup>th</sup> 1965 until 1966 were perhaps one of the most extensive in the world and that the elimination of the PKI was “total” (Djakababa 2013). From its ashes rose the New Order, which proceeded to consolidate its power through the use of the armed forces who were deemed to be “saviours” after rescuing the nation from the PKI’s alleged coup attempt.

At its height, the New Order tasked the military not only with external defense but also with the maintenance of internal security. This was the brainchild of Suharto’s chief ideologue, Ali Moertopo, who sought out a *dwi-fungsi* (dual function) role for the military, especially the army (Moertopo 1981). The military placed *kodam* (military command posts) in residential areas, working hand in hand with neighborhood watch groups to ensure peace and security. The state’s “governmentality” thus extended deep into the Indonesian landscape and into the lives of ordinary Indonesians.

The presence of ideology and military doctrine sowing hatred against the PKI is not novel. During Sukarno’s Guided Democracy era, his administration deftly balanced the simmering tensions between the nationalists, communists, and Islamists, as each vied for influence in

Indonesia's chaotic political landscape. Referred to as the "year of living dangerously" by Sukarno, the relations between the different factions and their associated social groups imploded in 1965. By blaming the PKI for the coup, Suharto sealed not only the party's fate at a political level but, also at a socio-cultural level. Many cadres were arrested, disappeared, and placed in prisons throughout Indonesia. Numerous intellectuals, artists, and writers suspected of being associated with the PKI were "neutralized," leaving a gap in Indonesia's cultural landscape.<sup>3</sup>

As ideological and political influences had also seeped into the village-level, events took a nightmarish turn when neighbor turned against neighbor. Geoffrey Robinson's survey of the 1965 killings in Bali, along with Hermawan Sulistyio's study of social relations in the verdant plains of East Java, shows how through the encouragement of the military, ordinary Indonesians became complicit in the capture, torture, and murder of their "atheist," "anti-religious," and "communist" fellow villagers (Robinson 1995; Sulistyio 2000). The "banal" nature of the mass killings of 1965-1966 became even more apparent when Joshua Oppenheimer and Robert Lemelson released popular documentaries that pointed to the strength of this "pact of forgetting" which has for so long enveloped Indonesians.

In a recent study of contemporary attitudes Indonesians have on the PKI, a group of researchers surmised that a certain number of their respondents continue to believe in the statist narrative that the banned party was populated by god-less heathens intent on destroying Indonesia's religious diversity<sup>4</sup> (Putra et al. 2019). Thus, Katherine McGregor notes that Indonesians continue to be "implicated." Using Tessa Morris-Suzuki's theory (2005), McGregor claims that because Indonesians continue to live in the system designed and built by the New Order, they remain part of the system. She states:

All Indonesians who experienced the New Order period could be described as sharing a connection to or implication in the violence of 1965-1968 in that their lives in contemporary Indonesia have been shaped by their situation in the military anti-communist regime that arose from this violence. They were also subject to continuing propaganda which fueled prejudices against former members of the PKI and / or affiliated organisations (McGregor 2012: 352).

Therefore, in my research, I ask "How does the 1965 incident continue to feature in the

imaginations of Indonesians ‘implicated’ in the mass killings?” While I have found people who were willing to talk about the incident, Andrew M. Conroe (2017) notes that there continues to be harassment, stigmatization, and fear amongst the aged former political detainees.

In such an environment, how do contemporary Indonesians continue to share a “connection to or implication in the violence of 1965-1968” (McGregor 2012: 352)? A younger, more connected generation, has begun to use the internet to connect to the past on a website, *ingat 65* (remember 65; <https://medium.com/ingat-65>). The website has served as an “archive” of stories in which the post-*reformasi* generation is beginning to question the “gaps” in the New Order past. Thus, to a certain extent, the internet has provided an alternative platform for the younger generation to try to comprehend that tumultuous period in Indonesian history as a “reality” still held hostage by political conservatism and censorship.<sup>5</sup>

## Trace as Method

Throughout the course of the Suharto administration, enforced disappearances and mass human rights violations became part of the New Order “state terrorism” method.<sup>6</sup> While there has been much literature detailing the disappearances, murders, and torture, along with analyses of the events leading up to and after the 1965 incident, much less has been written on its “afterlife” (Cribb 1990; Kammen and McGregor 2012; Robinson 2018; Roosa 2006; Setiawan 2004; Toer 1999; Wardaya 2013). I posit that the term “afterlife” encompasses the “...effects of major events such as revolutions, more especially with their impact on structures...” but it also refers to a “...founding event that shapes later ones...” and which thus produces “...a transition from one structure or set of structures (political, mental and so on) to another” (Burke 2015: 264).

My research is based on several sites in central Java. Shuttling between these places, often passing many sites related to the New Order’s campaign of violence, I was always told of the “energy” contained within. These sites, though empty and unmarked, nonetheless were inhabited by other worldly beings which could affect the physical world. As I began to delve deeper, I found that by focusing on the spectral, the ghostly,<sup>7</sup> people would be more open to discussions of the killings. I contend that these sites are part of a greater topography of violence

made up of specific sites which carry with them the “residues.” Pushed into the fringes of society by larger narratives (state ideologies, etc.), these residues act to resist “...symbolic representations and social institutions...,” and “...continue to work from within the societies...,” which often manifesting as “...savage spirits, or wild entities inhabiting forest and springs, forces which may attack the individuals or social order” (Corin 2020: 441). These residues can be revealed through the spectral tales told by the people living around these locales. More importantly, by focusing on the residues, which in this paper include both tales of the supernatural and physical sites, I reveal not only how memories of past violence and trauma remain alive but are transformed into a form of “spiritual reconciliation.” Indonesia, I posit, continues to be haunted not only by the 1965 killings but also by various other instances of mass human rights violations throughout Suharto’s New Order period.<sup>8</sup> The novelty of this approach allows us a deeper understanding of how gaps and silences are understood and how Indonesians cope with such “residues.” While literatures on the killings of 1965 seek to provide evidence that it did happen, and that scholars even created a publication, *International People’s Tribunal*,<sup>9</sup> my approach is to investigate its fringes, or rather, the “haunting effect,” which can provide us with an alternative lexicon to understand the killings in light of the state’s denial of the event.

My methodology therefore locate within the larger ambit of Avery Gordon’s conception of “ghostly matters” where she states “...haunting is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront ghostly aspects of it” (Gordon 1997: 7). Thus, by looking at how people interact with these sites, I reveal a “mirror” reflecting a parallel reality. This mirror then allows us to understand how traumatic events of the past are remembered and reworked. Other scholars who–have employed this approach include Heonik Kwon (2008) and Mai Lan Gustaffson (2009), and on the ghostly effects of the Vietnam War, Caroline Bennett (2018) and Anne Guillou on Cambodia (2016). Perhaps a more apt example is Byron J. Good’s investigation of the spectral landscape arising from the 2001 Aceh tsunami where he asks “...why do ghosts appear when and where they do? Why at some moments do they step out of their graves and reenter history, sometimes in large numbers and in ways that trouble the living...?” (Good 2020: 412). In addition to Good’s research, I add that ghosts and specters have come to occupy a space typified as “absence.” This paper will discuss

such a theoretical outlook and address how “...these specters...is part of our responsibility to the generations of the past and future, those who appear as ghosts demanding justice and those future generations who will be affected by our responses to these ghosts” (Good 2020: 419).

My reliance on “ghost stories” for the research is akin to Tommy Christomy’s method of *makan bubur panas* (eating hot porridge) where he “...started eating as it were, from the edge, beginning with peripheral and marginal issues and proceeding gradually to the crucial...” (Christomy 2008: 3). While they may be few, my interviewees carry with them themes which are common to those within their “in-group.” Since not all people I approached were willing to speak to me, I chose key individuals who are “spokespersons” or those who were willing to speak more openly. I use in-depth interviews in the locale in which these individuals live, to enable them to relate directly to the sites in question.

## In the Beginning

While the 1965 incident continues to be contentious in Indonesia, the literature largely fails to explain fully the “spell” it has cast. The power of the event lies in its “inexplicability” and its enigmatic nature. Until now, there is still much speculation over the nature of the coup plotters who were said to have wanted to kill then president Suharto and, by extension, the life of the Indonesian republic itself, leading to the killing of so many. However, this myth of the New Order’s founding was partly torn asunder when US-based documentary filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer’s two documentaries<sup>10</sup> brought the images of killers and their lives into the light of day. By revealing these killers, the “nameless” perpetrator was given a human face, shattering the myth that they were patriots, and that they instead were coldblooded killers. The nonchalant narrations by the murderers showcased to a wide audience both within and outside of Indonesia that these were mere *premans* (thugs) in the service of the state.<sup>11</sup> The movie was not only banned from cinemas in Indonesia but private screenings were forcibly stopped by “patriotic” and “religious” groups such as *Fron-Anti Komunis Indonesia* (Indonesian Anti-Communist Front) as well as the *Fron Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front).<sup>12</sup> The ripple effects from these documentaries forced both the state and Indonesian citizens to reassess the role that the state played as well as the uncomfortable realization that ordinary Indonesians

themselves were complicit in the killing of their fellow citizens.

One of the largest gaps in the understanding of this event, however, is not due to the lack of witnesses or even the locating of perpetrators. The killings of 1965 have essentially been a “victimless” crime due to the lack of the remains of many of the murdered. These victims are still “at large” and thus have not yet been officially declared “dead.” It was only in April of 2016 following a national symposium consisting of government officials, non-governmental organisations, and victims that Indonesian president Joko Widodo suggested a search for the killing fields.<sup>13</sup> Historian Adrian Vickers describes the killings as being, “...marked by an absence. People had to act as if the killings had never occurred, despite the fact that millions of people were affected as political prisoners, family of victims, witnesses and perpetrators...” (Vickers 2010: 46), leading to difficulty in locating the sites.

The New Order regime, Vickers explains, was built on an ideological foundation inimical to the PKI, which ensured that all organisations and / or individuals associated with it would be “disappeared” to eradicate Sukarno’s inept, corrupt, and chaotic “old order” and usher in the New Order regime. According to Vickers, “...for the period that [Suharto] remained president, from 1967 to 1998, public discussion of the killings were forbidden, and state agencies actively intervened to censor any mention of the killings in public documents” (ibid.: 46). He adds that while there are attempts at undoing the New Order’s meta-narrative, its remnants remain resistant to any form of revisionism. Aside from the now aging former political prisoners, evidence of the killings remains elusive. Indonesianist Robert Cribb alludes to this in his discussion of the pattern of “guesstimation” of the 1965 killings. He states that efforts to ascertain the total number of those murdered from statistics alone is impossible given the imprecise nature of the Indonesian census in the period before 1965. Moreover, Cribb adds, that the failure to look at demographic information in the study of the event is rooted in the fact that “...the commonly accepted overall death rate, 500,000 out of a population of 100 million is too small to show up...” (Cribb 2001: 86). With such a large population in a vast country, the killings might only appear as some sort of blip in the nation’s statistical imagination. The imprecise nature of these statistics may also be a result of the “politics of statistics” arising from the “incomprehensibility” of the sheer number murdered. Cribb states that “...the political significance stems...from the fact that the numbers we discuss are truly beyond

comprehension: most of us have no more conception of a million deaths than we have of a million dollars or a million kilometers.... precisely because the statistics of mass deaths are so detached from reality, many people feel a freedom to choose the figure which suits their political tastes...” (ibid.: 83).

In light of this absence of “facts” and “comprehensibility,” the killings of 1965 then become malleable through a set of “rhetorical strategies” employed by the New Order state (Vickers 2010: 45). One example is the use of visual media to reinforce the state’s version of events. With backing from the state, in 1984, director Arifin Noer released a highly dramatized account of events blaming the abortive coup attempt on the G30S group and the PKI. The four-hour long production entitled the *Pengkhianatan G30S / PKI* (Treachery of the G30S / Communists) has been called a highly effective piece of propaganda. Indonesian school children were forced to watch it until 1997. In this production, the “...New Order regime deliberately depicted violence and torture in the film to elicit public fear of communism. The effects of these propaganda movies remain etched in the minds of both army personnel and members of the public (Dhani et al. 2015: 28). As such, Arifin’s production was designed to implant in the public a fear of specters and phantasms (Paramaditha 2013: 44). This “latent fear” was designed to heighten the sense of fear and to show that the Indonesian body politic was vulnerable to a communist infection.

Another one of these rhetorical strategies finds form in the Sacred Pancasila Monument located in Jakarta. While Arifin’s film created fear through cinema, the Sacred Pancasila Museum provides the “irrefutable” evidence of the crimes committed against the Indonesian state. According to historian Katherine McGregor, the museum became a potent symbol “... of the fate that might have befallen others had the communists not been stopped...it was preserved as physical “evidence” of the necessity of the killing of communists” (McGregor 2007: 70).

## Open Secrets

In Annie Pohlman’s account of her fieldwork in Java, she engages with informants who work in an organisation that actively seeks the location of mass graves (Pohlman 2020). She was informed that following their execution, the victims would be thrown off cliffs or dumped

in large sinkholes, which Pohlman's informants would refer to as "appropriate sites" as they were isolated areas that provided secrecy. After a given time however, these mass graves became, "...as told through the testimonies of survivors and victims' relatives... 'uncanny' sites (*angker*): they are effective places where the dead are felt as a 'seething presence' amongst the living" (ibid.: 62). These are akin to Clifford Geertz' description of Javanese mysticism with its "...unconnected visual metaphors giving form to vague and otherwise incomprehensible experiences" (Geertz 1960: 17).

The memories of these sites have taken on a ghostly presence. As Vickers states, "...for those who remembered the killings and were involved, as participants, family, or witnesses, these are landscapes littered with bones peopled by spirit beings who can visit misfortune on the living...these ghosts themselves thus constitute unacknowledged facts in the public culture of the Indonesian state" (Vickers 2010: 57). These sites and the ghostly specters which inhabit them created the dark underside of the New Order's national myth of the PKI's culpability in crimes against Indonesia. The lack of evidence and the hidden way in which the victims were "neutralized," along with the silencing of any attempt to discuss the event, meant that the memory of the event has been buried. Whenever nations, countries, or societies are unable to account for their pasts, especially relating to violence, a gap emerges and in them appears the fantastical and the phantasmagorical. As ghosts and spirits feature prominently in Indonesia's cultural landscape, these supernatural elements naturally emerge as way to plug the gaps in this seemingly incomprehensible event.<sup>14</sup>

## Researching Sites

I conducted my fieldwork at three sites, one located in the city of Jogjakarta and two in central Java. These were introduced to me through my contact with human rights groups and a former political detainees support group. Two of the most active groups I have come across include the *Kiprah Perempuan* (Women's Activities; "Kipper") and Sekretariat Bersama 1965 (Alliance with 65 Secretariat; "Sekber 65").<sup>15</sup> Working alongside these organisations also alerted me to the scale of the pogroms carried out in the central Javanese city of Jogjakarta, once considered a "red stronghold," together with the area surrounding Semarang. Jogjakarta

had several sites that were “processing centres” for dissidents and suspected communists before they were sent to larger detention centres. It was by chance that I came across a site located in the middle of a busy street in the city centre. Friends at the organisations informed me that one of the torture sites in the city centre was “haunted,” ostensibly with the screams and cries of victims. My other research sites are reputed to be mass graves filled with powerful spirits, some of which can even provide winning lottery numbers.

These sites, I posit, are “symbols” which appear to present a “counter-narrative” to the dominant New Order discourse. While there are no official documents which can prove what these sites were used for, they have become focal points that serve as an alternative “archive” or *lieux de memoire* (Nora 1989). I believe that a discussion of “ghosts,” “spirits,” and “hauntings” in the context of trauma and through “haunted” sites can establish a perspective for researchers to understand just how memories of mass violence are mediated. This is demonstrated in research conducted in Bali, Aceh, as well as by the sighting of ninjas and the killing of witches in East Java (Good 2014; Herriman 2016; Suryawan 2007). These studies highlight the ways in which Indonesians use local religious-cultural elements to “deal” with their environment.<sup>16</sup>

## **An Edifice from the Past**

*Gedung Jefferson* (Jefferson Building) stands at the centre of bustling Jogjakarta and was home to a library run by the United States Information Service. It closed in 1964 due to the heightening tensions between the United States and the fervently anti-colonial / western Indonesian president Sukarno. Such libraries were later sacked by communist “inspired” mobs, and these actions alarmed the more conservative elements within the armed forces and the religious establishment in the 1960s. *Gedung Jefferson* remains in its abandoned state, giving the locals nearby the impression that the building is inhabited by ghosts.

Over the years, the function of the building has changed from being a military base, to a local branch of the traffic police, and to a distribution office of a local daily. The paint on this three-story building is slowly peeling and it seems that it had been long since anyone decided to renovate it. The building place was filled with an aura of foreboding, given its abandoned

unrenovated condition. In the absence of life, at least within Javanese lore, uninhabited buildings begin to fill with beings from the nether realms. The condition of the building stood in absolute contrast to its surroundings on the busy Diponegoro Road, where there is a raucous wet market. The adjacent area is also laden with tourists frequenting the many hotels and restaurants lining the street. To encounter the silent building amongst so much commercial life is jarring.

Occasionally, the owner of a small mobile cart in front of the building would sweep its surroundings attempting to keep it clean. She would also serve as a caretaker, sleeping within the compound. When asked if she had ever experienced any hauntings, Wasinem stated that she often did. She adds however that “what is truly terrifying are the mosquitoes, there are a lot of them at night” (Zakaria 2017). It is also claimed that occasionally sounds of screams, and moans of pain can be heard from the building even when no one else is there. For many, the building's past is muddled and unclear, its true identity shifting from one epoch to another. For others, the Jefferson Building and memories of the building's past continue to haunt them. For instance, former political detainee Hartiti's meeting with her husband at the building was the last time she ever saw him. Both were involved with groups associated with the PKI and on this pretense both were arrested. But only her husband Simin was held and interrogated there. Just before her own incarceration, Hartiti brought food and clothing for her husband there, and never saw him again. She herself could hear screams as she left the place back in 1965 and even now, she shudders every time she passes the building (ibid.).

The Jefferson Building is but one of the symbols of how Hartiti's life and those of many other ex-Tapol were irreversibly changed by the events of 1965. In a report published by a human rights organisation, many more women were revealed to have been victimised during their “screening” session, often by military personnel (Yuniar and Easton 2015). After being arrested in the middle of the night, Endang Lestari was stripped by interrogators insisted on finding a “hammer and sickle” brand. “I told them already, I was not Gerwani. They said we all had to be examined for this brand. They took everything off, but they did not touch us. Just stripped naked.” (ibid.: 35) This experience was similar to those of other female political detainees, who were also made to “exhibit” signs of being a member of the PKI. Most of the time this was accompanied by torture in the form of beatings, electrocution, and having burning

cigarettes pressed on their flesh. They would then be transferred to different facilities for longer periods of incarceration. This had the effect of breaking the social bonds these women held with their families, given the stigma of not having come from a “clean environment.” Shunned and continuously kept under close watch by the state as a potential threat, many of these women found it difficult to eke out a living as they moved to a bigger “prison.” For these women, these sites of detention were indeed the stuff of nightmares, which marked their transformation from young women to enemies of the state. However, for ordinary Indonesians passing by the building during its time as an interrogation centre, the screams of those detained must have been heard clearly. Thus, this place was clearly to be avoided and over the decades, the screams continue to be heard even after the fall of the New Order regime. Buildings, sites, spaces, and dwellings are for the Javanese, “...living with others...” and “...every place has its own spirit and is not restricted to the visible but it also comprises the invisible. According to Javanese belief, places are containers (*wadah*) and the spirits are the contents (*isi*)” (Wiryomartono 2016: 100). Wiryomartono further adds that such places, given their *isi*, can become “meaningful,” thus establishing a certain kind of collective memory. Since the Jefferson Building was once used as a torture centre replete with violence, abuse, and death, it is natural for its “contents” to be made up of terrifying ghosts, spirits, and nightmares. This in turn inspires traumatic memories amongst its former detainees and an inexplicable fear for those living near it.

## Of Ruins

*Gedung Jefferson* had undergone several incarnations and, hence, had different layers of meaning: library, interrogation centre, boutique, newspaper office, and now, abandoned shell. For those incarcerated and tortured there, it would serve as a reminder of pain and trauma. For those who are not directly associated with *Gedung Jefferson* but are aware of its dark past, it is “taboo” and / or “unknowable.” The building, being unmaintained and foreboding, remains locked up and thus “unapproachable” despite its centrality in a vibrant city. Such places point to a past “...where things fall apart, because they are transient...the ghosts of this past rear up in the ruin, they are the debris of unprecedented material destruction...” and even of neglect (Edensor 2001: 43). Though I focused on *Gedung Jefferson*, Indonesia is replete with other

such sites that also reflect this ambivalence. Among them are the former Jakarta headquarters of the PKI which has been left derelict and has a reputation of being *angker* (foreboding).<sup>17</sup> Burnt down by anti-PKI mobs after the events of September 1965, its function has also changed over the years. It was an army barracks at one point and then a government office. Now the building stands in a state of disuse and abandon. Located in the Salemba neighborhood of Jakarta, the edifice is said to also have its fair share of spirits which can “possess” passersby. The building also hosts an even more interesting anecdote. During the New Order period, the Tourism Minister Ave Joop refused to have his office there for less than a few months as he was afraid of being choked by the angry spirits of former PKI members (Jo 2017).

Such ruins, I posit, are markers of an incomplete history, resisting incorporation into the greater narrative and thereby allowing themselves to be inhabited by ghosts of the vengeful spirits of the post-1965 killings that continue to roam.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Kwon's war ghosts and the dead of the Cambodian genocide (Bennett 2018; Kwon 2008), the “wandering ghosts” demand to be given a “home” as a reflection of the massive displacement caused by widescale violence in these two settings. These ghosts have agency and can enact as much of their will on the living as with the cases of Vietnam and Cambodia. How is this done and what are their demands? In the next section, I will highlight a situated case study in which spirits become active agents in re-humanizing themselves.

## **Bringing Things into the Light**

After being elected Indonesia's fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid's reconciliatory tone towards ethnic minorities as well as political detainees signaled the beginning of a democratic transition in Indonesia. During the period of his short but tumultuous presidency, reformers believed that the nation could finally face up to its past, whether it be on the issue of 1965 or other unresolved cases of human rights violations. Riding this wave of optimism were groups such as the *Yayasan Penelitian Korban Pembunuhan 1965* (Foundation for Research on Murder Victims of 1965, “YPKP”), which in November 2000 exhumed a mass grave in central Java (McGregor 2012). While most of the identified remains were returned to the families of the victims, the rest were then transported to a hospital in Jogjakarta for safekeeping.

When the hospital was no longer able to provide that function, a former political detainee donated land for a proper burial. Despite having the blessing of the local religious leader and the police, a group of religious extremists put a stop to the reburial, attacking the people involved and desecrating the remains. There has since been no other serious attempts at exhuming such graves, but civil society organisations continue in their efforts to document places suspected of containing mass burials. In May 2016, YPKP submitted a report detailing the location of 122 mass graves located in Java and Sumatra to the Office of the Coordinating Political, Legal and Security Affairs Minister, hoping that the attorney-general's office as well as *Komnasham* (Indonesian Human Rights Commission) would act on the evidence. According to Indonesianist Katherine McGregor, the intense aversion to the exhumation and reburial of these remains is due to the fact that religious groups such as Nahdlatul Ulama and factions within the military perceive such acts as attempts at valorizing the PKI. By doing so, the YPKP was "...making the representation that these victims deserved respectful burials with religious endorsement..." and at the same time directly challenging the "...official New Order construction of communists as atheists" (ibid.: 250).

In Bali, where there were an estimated 100,000 victims of the 1965 incident, these ghosts and spirits have allegedly taken to attacking and possessing people. Nyoman, who had witnessed the killings in 1965, now in his 60s, claims that he was possessed by spirits who had wanted to turn him into member of the PKI. Researchers interviewed him and stated that he would often wear a helmet and a military jacket to protect himself. According to them, he suffered from this condition after having witnessed his fellow villagers being hacked to death and therefore, these spirits, for him at least, are very real (Lemelson and Suryani 2006).

Another example from Bali recounts the spirits of the victims returning in the dreams of their loved ones, asking for funerary rites to be carried out. To have these rites done is to have, as Hobart states, a way for the spirits to be "...reintegrated into the social and genealogical order whereby historical continuity is ensured" (Hobart 2014: 322).

In my fieldwork, I was mindful in choosing the Indonesian words to describe the deceased. The victims were not to be referred to as *hantu* (ghosts) but rather *arwah* (souls). *Arwah* denotes what these souls had been in the past, human, and therefore not mere phantasms haunting the landscape. In the traditions of the eastern part of Timor, such spirits have as much space in the

earthly realm as living inhabitants. According to anthropologist David Hicks, those who die naturally are accorded a place in the afterlife with the proper rites. Those who die unnaturally, on the other hand, often require a different set of rituals due to the suddenness of their passing and the circumstances of their death. Such ghosts or malevolent beings need to be appeased as they usually impact the lives of others negatively (Hicks 2004).

An apt example is the spirits of those who died during the Khmer Rouge regime. According to Anne Guillou (2016), the lost souls of those buried in mass graves have the capacity to affect the landscape and thus “coerce” fearful villagers into erecting makeshift shrines to honor their memory. Failure to do so would anger the spirits and possibly bring about calamity to the living. I will highlight in the following section an example from my research where the spirits from a specific site also exhibit “agentic” qualities.

## **Introducing a Small Village**

I first found out about Plumbon from a contact who had been working with political detainees for a long time. It was through him that I learnt of the efforts of a small group of human rights activists – Mas Ady and his friends – in Semarang who had discovered a mass grave outside of the city's limits in late 2015 and had placed a memorial there. Located in the jungle, it seemed that the site was also a favorite “haunt” amongst those seeking assistance in finding “winning” numbers. The actions of Mas Ady and his friends may be unprecedented, as it appears that such informal memorialization may be the first in Indonesia.

The site has also piqued the interest of other researchers, each with his / her own interpretations and perspectives, imbuing the site with a Rashomon-like character. One stated that the site had been used as a mass grave for several members of the PKI but there was one particularly interesting individual buried within which gave it special power. According to Martijn Eickhoff et al. (2017), the site was the final resting place of a *sindhen* (female singer in a shadow puppet troupe) who became the victim of slander by the jealous wife of the troupe master whom she suspected was having an affair with. Another researcher, Saskia Wieringa (2019), added further details about how some had died. Allegedly during the execution, the individuals had to be shot several times on specific places in their body before they died. In

addition to this, an eyewitness also stated that when asked of their last wishes, one began to recite verses from the al-Qur'an. This final act of religiosity broke the stereotype that the communists were god-less atheists threatening Indonesia's religious fabric. Such an unjustified death, then, made the spirits of the victims even more *sakti* (potent).

## In the Midst of It All

Plumbon is located 20km west of Semarang. Located next to a thick teak forest, it was only recently that the village began to expand into the woods. Given its semi-urban and agricultural setting, the PKI had a presence there as Semarang was a hotbed of the party's activities. Painted by the authorities as a "red area," the repressive actions taken in this area were more heavy-handed, lasting for four years.<sup>19</sup> Active PKI members and cadres were rounded up, processed, and then sent to penal colonies. For others, army death squads were given the task of eliminating them in the thick forests. According to oral accounts, these hidden places were ideal for executions. Victims were thrown into deep pits dug for them. Usually done at night, this method ensured secrecy. Such sites naturally play into the Javanese conception of *angker* where many believe that these woods are home to vicious spirits inhabiting equally forbidden landscapes.

Most of those I had spoken with revealed that the group allegedly buried near Plumbon consisted of high-ranking cadres of the PKI. Depending on the time of day, a group of people can sometimes be heard singing *genjer-genjer*, a folk song associated with the PKI. Delving into the history and stories of such sites allows scholars and researchers to unlock different interpretations. During the course of my research, Mas Ady introduced me to one of the main actors in the memorialisation, a respected village elder Mbah Kelik who was instrumental in relating the story of the site to Mas Ady and his friends.<sup>20</sup> According to Mbah Kelik, none of the villagers were directly involved in the killing.

When Ady and his friends came here, they were asking where the grave was and some of the people in the village told him to come and see at the local coffee shop. It was there he was told to come and to speak to me. (Mbah Kelik, personal communication, October 2018)

Before he retired, Mbah Kelik was a teacher and was considered one of the more eloquent elders in the village. According to Mas Ady, Mbah Kelik was instrumental in not only socializing the memorialisation amongst the villagers but also amongst “interested” parties. When asked who they were, Mbah Kelik responded by saying:

Wow! When Mas Ady was still conducting his “reconnaissance” the *intel* (intelligence agents) from Kodam, Kodim, and the Koramil were all here.<sup>21</sup> They were interested to also know if the people in the village were alright with what was going on. They wanted to know if the local population was wary over what was going on or if they were worried about the memorialisation. But after the memorialisation they were no longer around. (Mbah Kelik, personal communication, October 2018)

The memorialisation itself became a centre of attention where representatives from the local government, the forestry department, family members, the security forces and even *ormas* (mass organisations) were present. What was obvious was that the act had the support of the village due to what Mbah Kelik refers to as a sense of “humanity.”

This could possibly be the only place in all of central Java where this could be done. And it was done with agreement of the local people who believe that this was a grave for human beings who were executed and who just happened to be members of the PKI. That's all. But they are still human beings. We don't know how large or small their crimes were. They are still human beings. (Mbah Kelik, personal communication, October 2018)

A burgeoning literature on a sub-field within memory studies concentrating on “sites of memory” provides an illuminating insight into the Plumbon mass grave. Anthropologists Francisco Ferrandiz and Antonius Robben state that sites with a history of violence have the capacity to also become a “memoryscape” interacting actively with individuals, communities, nations, and even the international community (Ferrandiz and Robben 2015). Their research revealed the “humanizing” effect the disinterred remains from Spanish mass graves had on the “disappeared,” their families, and the larger society, as the dead are laid to rest within a “cultural context.” In Plumbon, a simple memorial with the individuals' names etched on it has also created a similar effect.

Another village elder, Sugiyono, who had previously served as the neighborhood watch head, stated that the act of memorialisation was the most basic thing which could have been

done for those executed there:

The way they (the remains) were left there was as if they were animals. These were people who had been executed during that event. There doesn't need to be an explanation as to who was right or wrong. The problem is that there is also a need for the families to know that there is this site. There is where the humanitarian necessity arises. In the past people didn't dare to visit the site but now that there has been a memorialisation, the family can also come visit. (Sugiyono, personal communication, October 2018)

The site, he added, also provided a place the souls of those buried could be given a *slametan*, where in Javanese funerary rituals, the practice involves offerings of flowers and prayers to the dead, thereby “completing” the process.

Prayers for them have benefits. The prayers do good for them as it also does good for those praying for them. It's like the Javanese saying, “those who come we receive and to those who leave we send them off,” to do this would only be human. (Sugiyono, personal communication, October 2018)

Another interviewee, Pak Mochran, was intimately connected to the Plumbon mass graves. After years in detention for being an active PKI cadre, he was “reformed” and chose to return to Plumbon. His story, like those of many other former political detainees, is one of deprivation and stigmatization after his release.

Upon returning here I became a driver but at the same time I also had to borrow money from this friend of mine to survive. It was then I heard about this place where I could ask for lottery numbers so I tried...and to my surprise I won! I then proceeded to return the money to my friend, and to also buy meat for my neighbours to share with them. (Mochran, personal communication, January 2019)

It was only much later that he learnt of an uncle, also an active PKI cadre, who was suspected to be buried there.

I go there often. During *lebaran* (Eid celebration), I would bring all kinds of food there which would include *lontong* (rice cakes) and I would also bring a chicken there. During the fasting month I would also go but I would only bring the usual offerings. (Mochran, personal communication, January 2019)

Family visits to graves of deceased relatives during the fasting month and especially the subsequent *Idulfitri* (Eid celebration) is considered an essential part of Javanese Islamic practice. Therefore, when asked if the remains in the grave should be exhumed and moved, Pak Mochran was staunchly against such moves.

I don't agree at all. Even without my uncle being there I would disagree. This place is a monument to our struggle, to memorialize our struggle. If these remains were to be moved to individual places, the history and the spirit would be lost. (Mochran, personal communication, January 2019)

The site / memorial serves as a powerful nodal point weaving together different “worlds,” providing family members a way to “re-connect” with lost relatives and also to provide former political detainees such as Pak Mochran a “continuation” of his story in light of state's violent disruption of his youth and ideals. For those “implicated” in the cases of Mbah Kelik and Sugiyono, the site serves as a catalyst providing space and eliciting discussions about the ideas of reconciliation and justice albeit in a spiritual way.

## Resting Place

Further out west of Semarang, my field guide Ady brought me in search of another site. It was located deeper in the teak forest and when we reached the site, there was almost no indication that it was a mass grave. However, there were several curious-looking objects on the ground – flowers, incense, candles, and young coconuts – which were typically used in prayer rituals or grave visitations. This isolated area was an ideal place to commit atrocities. Here, I met Pak Supar, a self-styled *juru kunci* (caretaker). When asked how he had come across the grave, he replied that his friends had told him and that he went there “in search of numbers.” Pak Supar himself a former political detainee.

When asked who he thought had been buried in these graves, Pak Supar could not readily identify them except to say that they had been compatriots. I learnt from my interviews with these ex-detainees that their incarceration meant to displace and to disconnect them from where they had lived. Upon their return, they would then suffer from the indignity of being constantly monitored by the authorities and neighbours who were distrustful of them. Having been denied

work, they were only able to become manual laborers. Thus, for these survivors, such sites “re-orientate” them to a centre when their world had been turned upside down. When asked why he had become the *juru kunci*, Pak Supar merely stated that it was based on a sense of “humanitarianism,” and that “these were my comrades.” He added that he had obtained a winning number from the spirit of a woman who had been dumped into the pit with her child.

According to Pak Supar, the spirits there would only speak to him and no one else. “There were once some people who had asked me to take them to another site to ask for numbers, but they were chased away by them,” he said. This, he added, was attributed to the fact that the spirits only communicate through him. “There was this one time when I brought some people over to another spot and they “assaulted” some of the people who wanted to ask through me what lottery numbers they could bet on.” Not being accosted by the spirits was something he attributed to him being their comrade.

“If you do not go with me to this place, there is also a chance that these angry spirits will possess you. But if you don’t want to be you need to go with me and listen to what I tell you to bring and do,” Pak Supar added.

The *juru kunci* within the context of Javanese beliefs refers to individuals serving as “middle-men” between the spirits inhabiting a site – often a grave or a place where individuals of spiritual importance have visited – and the living who visit with earthly requests. The tales of Wali Songo or the nine saints of Java attest to this in that many of Java’s Muslims visit their graves as way of procuring spiritual “wealth.” The suspected massacre sites fill the needs of those seeking to meet their material desires through mediations by people like Pak Supar. Beyond those seeking winning numbers, such sites – with *juru kunci* acting as go-betweens – also serve as “hidden transcripts” where instances of mass violence and, more importantly, memories of martyred comrades, continue to live on.

## **In Absence There is Presence**

The legacy of 1965 has seeped deep into the Indonesian imaginary given that the meta-narrative of the New Order was so prevalent in the lives of Indonesian citizens. Thus, in a sense, gaps that existed during Suharto’s three-decade long rule continue into the post-*reformasi*

landscape. There has yet to be any official investigation to bring these issues to light. The last major attempt was when a law was passed to create a commission to shed light on Indonesia's past human rights abuses. A constitutional court decision, alas, brought this to a grinding halt.<sup>22</sup> Attempting to bring these issues to light could possibly, in the minds of certain politicians, unravel the Indonesian state as it is, given that its modern foundations are so intertwined with 1965, the New Order, and Suharto.

This is, however, not to say that there is inaction, that communities in Indonesia remained static and imprisoned by the ghosts of 1965. In my discussion earlier on *Gedung Jefferson*, I showed that as long as Indonesians are unable to, allegorically, find the keys to the building, it will continue to house ghosts that create fear amongst the general populace. The gap, or what I shall refer to here as the "absence" in Indonesia's self-narrative, is jarringly so, not only because of the inexplicability of urban places such as *Gedung Jefferson*, but also due to the many rural sinkholes and caves in which one can ostensibly be sucked into. With these gaps, Indonesia cannot remain silent and hope to find solace from the hauntings that inhabit these places. Here I posit that in the "absence" of countervailing accounts of the events of 1965, or other such human rights violations during the period of the New Order, the state was allowed to craft a unifying form of ideology. At the heart of this ideology was the emphasis on state-defined development, and anything inimical to its core was to be labeled as "demonic" as it had a capacity to undermine the state-building process. That 500,000 or even a million had to be "sacrificed," "disappeared," and forcibly moved from one point to another in the New Order's topography of violence, was but a small price to pay for the soul of a nation with more than 200 million people in 1965.

These sites are the pockmarks of a topography of violence of the Indonesian state, where according to Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul, "...a national history is the biography of a spatial identity" (Winichakul 2003: 9). I posit that this topography is filled with gaps and "holes" of which the state is unable / unwilling to fill. Such "interstitial" spaces, then, invite ghosts, specters, phantasms, zombies, and beautiful female spirits to inhabit them. For ex-detainees, their families and other victims of state violence, these gaps provide the necessary space through which, in the absence of the state's interventions, they are able to situate their stories.

Since there is an “absence” in these places (i.e. bereft of any kind of enforced narrative), people are free to inhabit them with otherworldly stories. Another fascinating theoretical perspective is the concept of absences. Scholars using this perspective aim “...to situate absences in everyday practice, by investigating how absences are important social, political, and cultural phenomena that impinge on people’s lives” ( Bille et al. 2010: 7). But how does “absence” materialize as observable social scientific data?

Scholars in Latin America and Spain have in the past two decades been conducting research on the exhumation of executed dissidents from mass graves. The re-materialisation of these remains in the public domain have forced many of these countries to re-consider the role of the state, not so much as guardian, but rather as a perpetrator of human rights violations. Literally rising from the dead, those murdered have been effectively brought back from the underworld to the human realm.

Forensic anthropologist Victoria Sanford, during the excavation of Guatemalan mass graves, describes that “...as an exhumation begins, the site of a mass grave containing the remains of massacre victims (often the actual site of a massacre itself) becomes a community space for local healing and a site for the reconstructions of larger social relations. A space for the physical exhumation of bones and artifacts, as well as the excavation of individuals and collective memory” (Sanford 2003: 17). The remains of murdered dissidents in Latin America, when returned to their families, allowed their loved ones to grieve for them, ending their nebulous state of being the “disappeared.” Alas, such exhumations are still unheard of in Indonesia.

It is precisely this absence of the state’s recognition of its violent past that provides power to the spirits of these Indonesian places. In sites like Plumbon, these phantasms exert their presence, demanding offerings, interacting, singing, and even providing winning numbers to punters. Like many murdered dissidents in other national settings, the “ghostlike” state of Indonesia’s disappeared “...is created by, in part, their lack of temporal incorporation into the world of the dead by passing through funerary ritual instead...they resided in a circumscribed zone that was walled off from both the living and the dead” (Crossland 2002: 124). Their remains continue to lie in nondescript places marked only by trees and offerings left by supplicants. Nonetheless, they continue to “connect” with the *juru kunci* at these sites. These

caretakers remain engaged with the spirits of the dead serving as unofficial “mnemonic catalysts” which keep their memories alive. I use this term to refer to the active engagement of these ritual specialists with the otherworldly as a way to navigate current political realities which continue to silence the past. In essence, they provide an “afterlife” for the violence whilst at the same time providing contemporary utility to groups such as gamblers.

Similarly, the Argentinian human rights group, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, “retain” their disappeared children as “phantasms” as a constant reminder of state sponsored atrocities committed during the country’s so-called Dirty War. Touted as mad by certain quarters in Argentina, the Mothers resisted attempts at exhumation, preferring instead to retain these murder sites as “ghostly memorials” to the state’s culpability. In doing so, these groups insist that their children continue to “live,” justifying their continued activism. Their efforts also point to a more salient issue of how these mothers continue to retain the emotional and familial ties with their disappeared children. To exhume the bodies and burying them would be laying their children to “rest,” thus ending the narrative. Therefore, maintaining their children as “phantasms” ensures that the issue of justice continues to metaphorically “haunt” the Argentinian psyche.

## **Against Absence, Bringing back the Spirits**

Wading into the events of 1965, anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes the wanton violence that occurred because of the immense tension between differing forces competing for the hearts and minds of a diverse population spread across a vast archipelagic nation. It would be difficult for communism, Islam, or any other ideological scheme to overwhelm another, given the nation’s multi-cultural makeup, its numerous belief systems, and the many competing “realities” they harbour, he argues. Thus, only a major violent event could make Indonesia “gel.” Nonetheless, Geertz offers a caveat by stating that, “...however great a disruptive force the massacres may (or may not) have been, the conceptual matrix within which the country has been moving cannot have changed radically, if only because it is deeply embedded in the realities of Indonesian social and economic structure...” (Geertz 1973: 324-325).

Geertz then goes on to make an interesting observation in which he states that despite the

widespread knowledge of the atrocities, Indonesia's differing cultural "matrices" remained, "... and that the half-suppressed of the memory of the events will perpetuate and infinitely widen the gulf between the processes of the government and the struggle for the real" (ibid.: 325). It is here that I posit that these matrices provide the key for a "language" malleable and amorphous enough to allow those victimised by the state to re-orientate themselves vis-à-vis the grander politico-religious forces at play in Indonesia. I contend that the language of the politics of "nothingness" or "absence" with all its ghosts, spirits, and hauntings are examples of this conceptual matrix "struggling for the real."

As I have shown in the earlier parts of this paper, my interlocutors' attempts at communicating with spirits in their ongoing "conversations" are but a way of re-instituting broken ties and mending the sense of community between the living and the dead. But these conversations are also taking place with an Indonesia where the possibility of rehabilitation for these former political detainees remains a mere pipe dream, despite Indonesia's democratic progress and reforms. The state remains reticent in recognising that the killings were indeed a genocide and continues to ban material allegedly associated with communism as well as any efforts to "proselytize" the ideology. We need therefore to remember that the basis for the killings took place within an environment thick with intense ideological tensions between the army, the Islamic mass organisations, and those with ties to the PKI. Exacerbated by the Cold War, it was for all intents and purposes a clash of civilisations. Throughout my conversations with my interlocutors, they described the *politik* of 1965 almost as it was something "uncontrollable" and that they were somehow swept along, regardless of their level of participation. But from my own observations, especially amongst the former political prisoners who had been targeted in the past, the presence of New Order apparatchiks alongside the increasing influence of (un)civil Islam, remain as constant reminders of the possibility of this violence recurring. This is due to the fact that New Order rituals continue to exist alongside "mnemonic" markers as part of the state's repertoire.

To bring in a comparative perspective, we turn to one of Indonesia's Southeast Asian neighbours, Thailand. In the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial crisis, many of its ambitious development projects were brought to a screeching halt. This was nowhere more obvious than in the new suburbs sprouting throughout the outskirts of metropolitan Bangkok. Many of these

projects became abandoned when the fortunes of the new Thai middle class fell as the Thai baht declined, leaving them haunted (Johnson 2013). The ghosts which haunt these abandoned buildings became ethereal remnants and fearful testaments to the destructive forces of globalisation, which the larger Thai population had no control over. Similarly, in Jogjakarta, places with connections to the events of 1965 or of history even before present an anomaly, a quandary representing a time in which ideology and intense politicisation brought about disastrous consequences, leaving behind ghosts and stories ghosts best hidden. But for some communities and former political detainees, these ghosts must be dealt with and given a place, a spot, a point in which to be remembered, a peace to be given. While communism, militarism, and Suharto's New Order have been emasculated, a resurgent Islamism remains the only other Leviathan left standing in Indonesia's political space. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse Islamism in Indonesia, but it suffices to say that there are elements within the Indonesian political establishment riding on an Islamist wave and taking advantage of the specter of the 1965 killings. Therefore, many of my interlocutors remain suspicious of these actors on Indonesia's political stage. However, these marginal communities continue to sculpt how the past is remembered through memorialisation, carving meaning into empty space to hold on to memories and to reclaim a lost identity.

In a fascinating ethno-historical study, Margaret J. Wiener recounts tales of magical *keris* (a form of Malay dagger) and invisible soldiers as human retainers of the Kingdom of Klungkung in Bali hurled themselves into a hail of bullets fired by Dutch colonial troops. Described as a *puputan*, this ritual act of sacrifice brought the last independent Kingdom of Bali to an end. While the *puputan* has been claimed by the Indonesian state as a form of national resistance and by the Dutch as an act of "...impotence..." carried out by "...Oriental despots..." Wiener focuses on the indigenous viewpoint explaining the course of action the king and his retinue took (Wiener 1995: 4). Bali, Wiener states, is divided between the realms of *niskala*, the seen, and *siskala*, the unseen. In her ethno-historical analysis, Wiener (1995) engages heavily with her local informants, immersing herself into an invisible world seemingly fantastical to outsiders, but which had deep resonance within Bali's belief system. In the eyes of her informants, the *puputan* was related to Wiener as a sacrificial attempt by the king and his subjects to allow his retinue to reincarnate and return with Hindu deities to overwhelm their Dutch colonial adversaries to retain the grandeur of Bali. Wiener is careful not to misrepresent

the “native’s” perspective, arguing that the local interpretation of the *puputan* had long been ignored by both the Dutch and the Indonesian state. To her local informants, these magical elements of the *puputan* tale were reality set in an environment conducive to the “living memory” of its people. Bali’s hidden realms with its ritual practices, temples, and distinct form of Hinduism allows the past to retain a life in the present.

The violent events of the *puputan* were twice “colonized,” first by the Dutch and then by the new Indonesian state. The Balinese’ memory of the *puputan* was overshadowed to fulfill the needs of the Dutch orientalist discourse and post-independence Indonesia’s nationalist narrative. Nevertheless, Bali’s hidden realms became an archival record of how the Balinese thought of the event. In the same vein, the events of 1965 had also been “used” by the state for its own propagandistic purposes. Similarly, the lingering spirits of those killed during massacres of 1965 in Java, remain part of a “hidden realm” made up of execution sites and detention facilities. If there continues to be groups and communities commemorating these places, socially shared memory spaces independent of the state will thrive.

I see the caretakers in Java as fulfilling this role. By communicating with the spirits and in providing punters with winning numbers, they retain the “presence” of their disappeared comrades. This form of continued solidarity also connects them to their struggle, signaling that it continues and that the lives of the disappeared were not in vain. Ultimately, the caretakers ensure that these spirits continue to reach out from the past to influence the present. The pattern of murders, disappearances, and subsequent sequestering of political detainees from the general population was a form of “cleansing” which entailed the massive restructuring of society. Social and relational ties were broken, and for those individuals forcibly displaced and disappeared, this was a way to break the chain of communist “infection.” What the caretakers of these sites are doing is to piece together again the ties torn asunder, and to respond to these spirits reaching out from the nether realm. The absence of those disappeared, I posit, serves as a powerful impetus for marginalised groups such as these former political detainees to “continue,” just as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. The act of remembering, of reconnecting the past with the present is in itself an act of resistance and power. As Zoë Crossland states, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo believe that attempts at exhumation would “normalize” these grave sites, thereby allowing for “...its gradual reincorporation back into the landscape...rids the

place of its ghosts and take away its power as place which may haunt those responsible and remind people that those who should answer for their violent actions still walk free” (Crossland 2002: 129). This is what I believe is taking place in Indonesia: through a continued form of “absence,” these sites are achieving exactly what the state is incapable of doing. They provide a mnemonic connection where the *juru kunci* reconnect with their past but also prevents history from melting away. In short, when we look at how these spirits become agentic and empowered, it is also a process of re-humanisation. Anthropologist Engseng Ho’s study of graves amongst the Hadramaut diaspora shows that, “...graves are signs whose silent presence marks an absence” (Ho 2006: 3). These graves and their attendant sites are important indicators of a genealogy connecting descendants in the present with ancestors who came long before them. For the former political detainees in Indonesia, similarly, these grave sites indicate their genealogy in relation to those executed in these sites. These sites are thus subversive in nature, providing what Paul Connerton calls “subordinated groups” to invert the chronological narrative of a given society and its structures. He states that such subordinated groups have a culture “...in which the life histories of its members have a rhythm and that this rhythm is not patterned by the individual’s intervention in the working of the dominant institutions” (Connerton 1989: 19). In fact, as Connerton states, their rhythm is “cyclical” with a logic of its own. States, such as Indonesia, cordon off anything not fitting their linear narrative, but the cyclical nature of those so deeply affected by the violence of 1965, whether directly or indirectly, circumambulates between the present and an invisible past.

Thus, their story continues and even in death, their comrades reach out. My current study looks only at a limited number of such execution sites in a country littered with them. Future research can pinpoint a larger network. Such an expanded topography may give us a better idea of how Indonesians contend with these “unspeakable” pasts.

## Conclusion

In her ethnography, Doreen Lee (2016) points to how former anti-New Order activists were campaigning against what they referred to as *momok* Suharto or Suharto’s ghost in the 2014 Indonesian general elections. The smiling face of the former dictator was featured

alongside that of prominent ex-general Wiranto in a poster mockingly asking the “common people” *jaman ku enak toh*, meaning “my times were good, weren’t they?” Even in one of my research trips to the city of Jogjakarta, on the busy shopping arcade, his visage appears, asking the same question on printed t-shirts. His ghost remains prominently in the imaginations of many of his fellow countrymen almost as if holding Indonesia in the thrall of a national collective “Stockholm Syndrome.” Bolstered by the fact that Suharto is often considered Indonesia’s father of development, the country’s modern façade contains his spirit, his traces.

In this paper, I have presented alternative places and sites which host an otherworldly realm comprising a different set of traces, one which points to the more violent, traumatic aspects of New Order Indonesia. This spectral realm, therefore, is “... about specific kinds of social and political and even economic practices that are themselves imbued with tension and contestation...” and more importantly operate “...on the margins of what is generally considered traditional politics. Traditional politics is the state apparatus, the rational and the visible. The specter disrupts this notion of visibility, because it is by nature invisible through traditional means” (Auchter 2014: 19). Its “invisible nature” is the element which has allowed for a politics to arise out of it, one which not only includes Suharto’s *momok* (a form of haunting spirit) but also that of the regime’s countless victims. The presence of memorials and of course, of caretakers, has allowed for former victims to regain their agency, reconnecting themselves with the past and reconstituting their sense of self in an environment which continues to vilify them. Thus, my work shows not only how certain groups live with the past but also how they overcome many of its burdens. I have also brought in examples of similar phenomena occurring in other contexts signifying that this is, to a certain extent universal. We can also surmise that such marginalised groups, acting as living archives of a hidden past, can bring to the fore a more localized and nuanced approach to “reconciliation.” In the absence of the state’s involvement, perhaps this is the only way these spirits can achieve peace.

## Notes

1. President Abdurrahman Wahid apologized on behalf of the Nahdlatul Ulama who alleged to be instrumental in “assisting” the army in the identification of suspected communists. He was later removed as president. Efforts to form a truth commission also failed and only in 2016 was a “forum” allowed in which former political prisoners and select members of the government were present to acknowledge the massacres of 1965, even as right-wing religious groups were demonstrating outside. The event continues to have political currency, especially as a weapon to be wielded even against the president, when Joko Widodo was accused of being a communist during his re-election campaign.
2. See Hakim (2019).
3. Njoto, the founder of the left-leaning cultural organisation Lekra was “disappeared” soon after the events of September 30 1965. For more information, see Tempo (2010). Another casualty in the “culture wars” between forces of the left and the right was Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the foremost writer of his generation, who spent more than a decade in the penal colony of Buru where he penned his famed *Buru Quartet* as well as his biography, see Toer (1999).
4. This narrative has taken on greater currency given the increasing use of Islam in political discourse. Even Indonesian president Joko Widodo was not immune to this, as he was accused of having come from an “unclean environment” and his family were suspected of having ties to the PKI. One study found that many of their respondents in Jogjakarta, when asked to rank the most important events in Indonesia, put the attempted G30S / PKI putsch at number 2. The New Order regime was put at number 10. This is significant as it shows how these events continue to live in the minds of Indonesians. For further information see Hakim et al. (2015).
5. See Leong (2020).
6. See Heryanto (2006).
7. Java's different ghosts and spirits have been well categorized in writings concerning Java, see Geertz (1960) and Koentjaraningrat (1990).

8. During the early 1980s, a spate of extra-judicial killings were committed against alleged criminals in what was referred to as the *petrus* or mysterious shootings. For details, please refer to Barker (1998) and Siegel (1998).
9. For more information, see Wieringa, Melvin, and Pohlman (2019).
10. See Oppenheimer (2012) and (2014).
11. *Preman*, originated from the Dutch word “vrij man” (freeman), refers to gangsters and organized criminals often employed to intimidate or threaten.
12. See Idhom (2014).
13. See BBC News Indonesia (2016).
14. On the island of Bali, elaborate Hindu rituals often demarcate the division of the reality between seen and unseen realms. While humans occupy the seen realms, the unseen realms often include spirits, demons, and angels. For more information see Eiseman (2009).
15. See Pohlman (2013) and Wardaya (2004).
16. Sasanka Perera also writes in his fascinating study of a villager in Sri Lanka affected by the civil war who becomes “possessed” by the spirit of a local god demanding to know the whereabouts of her husband who was allegedly kidnapped by state agents, see Perera (2001).
17. For more information see Kuwado (2016).
18. Despite being labelled as the “Isle of the Gods,” Indonesia’s Bali Island is also inhabited by its fair share of “angry spirits.” Nearly 50 years after the killings of 1965, villagers in Batuangung exhumed those thought to have been murdered and provided the deceased with proper burial rites. This was only done after sightings of headless ghosts, possessions, and hauntings distressed local villagers. Ghosts and spirits, especially of those who had died “unnaturally,” have the capacity to act as agents pressing on the imaginaries of the living. See Topsfield and Rosa (2015).
19. The “sweeping” actions in East Java were just as devastating. The armed forces recruited local religious organisations to eliminate supposed “atheists,” see Hearman (2018). For

another comprehensive work on Central and East Java during this period, see May (1978).

20. In Javanese, younger people usually refer to elder males as Mas. In addition, older males aged 60 and above or who already have grand children often have mbah (grandfather) added to their names when being greeted.
21. Kodam, Koramil, and Kodim refers to different command levels the military operates at different locales.
22. For a detailed description of official efforts to remedy past human rights violations in the immediate post-Suharto environment, see the International Center for Transitional Justice (2011).

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