

# Goats on Graves

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There is the Muslim Cemetery, the Christian Cemetery, and the Chinese Cemetery. From what I've been able to figure out, the Christian cemetery was built first. After the Japanese occupied Jakarta during the Second World War, they needed somewhere to bury all of the Dutch bodies. They lined them up in neat rows with white crosses at their heads, and surrounded the space in a tall, black metal fence. The dead Chinese were put on the other side of the road, and the Muslims a little further away—"segregated in death as in life," a friend of mine once said about the burial practice.

It also means the ghosts are different. I was spending time in the Chinese graveyard working on a story about Islam and urban politics in Jakarta. There is a neighbourhood of proud scavengers—people who discuss with enthusiastic vigour the crucial functions of their marginality in the metabolism of Jakarta. They call their home Scavenger Village. It is in the middle of the cemetery, woven through the tombstones and cenotaphs. There are coups for racing pigeon and a roving band of goats that keep the grass on the graves cut. While the people are rarely recognized and often abused by city authorities, they are the ones who keep the streets and canals clean.

One night I was talking about ghosts with Ashoy and Rizal in the club house-activist centre-school in Scavenger Village. It seemed certain to me that living in a graveyard would bring lots of ghost stories, especially in a part of the world where secularism has little appeal, and

ghostly presences are a way of keeping the past alive, in conversation with the present. But Rizal, a recent high-school graduate who now cleans expensive hotels, and had lived on the edge of a nearby river before his eviction and the destruction of his neighbourhood, had told me that there weren't that many ghosts around the graveyard. The ones that people saw were late at night and quite commonplace. There were the ones that showed up in trees, a flicker of light up in the canopy and it would turn out to be someone stuck between worlds. They could be beautiful women, and also good luck, but sometimes they were just scary. There were also the baby-like figures that snuck around rich people's neighbourhoods and stole money. If you met a shaman or black magician, they could get you one, and you wouldn't have to work; the baby-like body would go out and steal money for you. He and Ashoy showed me videos on YouTube: a sneaking baby caught walking very slowly in front of a security camera. But, they told me, no one in Scavenger Village had one of these. I asked if there were ever any ghosts from the forlorn and forgotten Chinese graves that were everywhere. People would sit on their headstones and drink coffee. Kids would run on top of them flying kites. A rotten couch sat beside a tombstone from the 1950s. "It's not our culture," Ashoy said, "Indonesians don't see them. Every year though," he continued, "the families come down and put offerings on the graves for their ghosts and ancestors. Sometimes people in

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Scavenger Village go out and take the offerings because there's meat and the food is good. If you want to see Indonesian ghosts, you need to go to the Islamic cemetery."

Chinese migration to Indonesia predates the arrival of Islam by perhaps as long as a half-millennium (it's tough to know for sure), and there is plausible speculation that Chinese traders were some of the first to bring Islam with them to Java along with Arabs in the tenth century. But their graveyards are still separate, and so are their ghosts. No doubt, the much more recent history of nationalism and the ethnic politics of the Chinese in Indonesia in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have a lot to do with this. The identity of Indonesianness is located in a fictional Native—an identity that was produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Dutch colonial scholars when they sought to liberalise their regime. They undertook a project of defining the Native and their customs in the hopes of discovering something consistent amongst their diversity, and protecting them against the ravages of modernisation. This Nateness became the template for the national Indonesian subject that would unite around the post-colonial struggle and then later build the nation in the 1940s. The category of the Chinese has been at the porous edge of this Native identity, both inside and out of it, ghostly, in that it is only partly present, appears in an instant, flairs up at crucial moments of crises. During the Suharto regime in the 1970s people with Chinese names were encouraged to change them to more Native-sounding names so they could assimilate. Many kept internal, private, family names, and added society-facing, Indonesian names. The hope was to disappear, but then when the Suharto regime was in its death throes, Chinese businesses and people were targeted with vicious physical violence; they became the symptom of everything wrong with the regime. Disappearance, reappearance, the edge comes back into view.

The strange thing is that the scavengers themselves are also ghostly. Many don't have papers. They don't have land rights. The government tries to evict them periodically. And they work with garbage—picking, sorting, and selling the waste that the city doesn't want to deal with. But in their shared marginality they still don't share ghosts, the scavengers still want to be Indonesian, they insist—they are Indonesian even if the state won't recognize them. This is because the idea of belonging to a people and the fusing of that people with a religion (Islam) overrides all the other marginalities, in life as in death.

Or, it is something else? That these identities are temporary positions which people occupy dynamically, shifting amongst them as is strategically necessary? To be a Muslim brings social advantages in a Muslim-majority society; it brings access to jobs and the social networks of mosques, but unless they are fanatics, there is a lot of space to manoeuvre in that identity. Ashoy is openly queer, but also married to a very pregnant wife; he both fits the norm of a Muslim and escapes it. To be both, and therefore to be neither, has the advantage of freedom—but it also means having to navigate who knows which identity and when, when particular positions are occupied and proper names signed



on the dotted line. It means having to know when and how to disappear when the going gets tough and people want you to stick to an identity.

There was a fire a few weeks ago in the Scavenger Village. I began to suspect they had burnt it down themselves to collect money from a donor. Times were getting tough and they knew they could rely on a rich local Muslim who regularly helped out the village with cash. What he got in return was never clear, but his donation coincided with the village supporting a Muslim mayoral candidate in a controversial city election that pitted a Muslim against an ethnic Chinese and Christian candidate. Burning it down would bring some temporary cash relief and allow them to build new homes. There were a few things that tipped me off to this dynamic, but one of them was a photo Ashoy showed me of him sunbathing in the burnt-out ruins of the village, followed by a photo of the nameless donor handing him a fat wad of bills, also in the burnt-out ruins. The expendability of their architecture and the fact that they don't own anything means that rebuilding is only a week or so of work. They can also claim their plight to the media, who see it as the vulnerability of the city's marginal people and which in turn pressurizes the already tense political situation around creating affordable housing in the city. This is the fragile, freedom-ridden, and dangerous social position of the marginal Scavenger, who's both there and not there: the hope that their position can be one from which to make demands but from which there is no

guarantee they will be met. Strings are always attached, but they are also always shifting their place. Perhaps one day Rizal and Ashoy will meet a Chinese ghost.