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Spirits of the Real Estate Sector: Religiosities and Inequalities in Uncanny Indonesian Settings

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“The paper starts with an observation of a phenomenon in urban Indonesia that one can describe as the production of empty spaces: warehouses, apartment towers, housing estates have been built on an increasing scale, but at least some and sometimes many of them remain empty due to speculation, legal issues, economic crises etc. These empty or partly empty buildings bear witness to the uneven distribution of living space in Indonesian cities and to economic inequalities more broadly. The paper asks how this empty (but for most people unachievable) space is charged with meaning by Indonesians of different class backgrounds, which leads the paper to consider encounters with ghosts and how religious specialists deal with them as part of a larger complex of the religiosity of housing in Indonesia.

Part of the latter are spiritual economies and contestations between Islamic figures that represent different currents in Indonesia's religious landscape. The paper is thus interested in how the real estate sector generates a particular religious economy that is informed by ideological struggles in the religious field at large. It also discusses examples from Indonesia's popular culture, such as ghost movies and social media platforms that are occupied with the theme of haunted buildings. Ethnographically, the paper examines an example of such uncanny encounters between ghosts and humans in an apartment complex in Jakarta. It relates this case study from Indonesia to recent works on ghosts and the uncanny in Buddhist Southeast Asian contexts. Theoretically, it engages with Freud's notion of the uncanny as well as with anthropological re-readings of Weberian and Marxian approaches that link religious and economic phenomena. Locating religious phenomena in one of the most booming sectors of today's economy, it aims to go beyond the often recycled “disenchantment” and “false consciousness” theses and to develop an understanding of how contemporary inequalities are spiritually constructed in a predominantly Islamic urban setting.”

LOCATION: South Asia Institute, Lecture Hall (010.01.05), 1st Floor