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Ghosts and Religiosities of Housing in Urban Indonesia: Emptiness, the Uncanny, Alienation

Wednesday, 4 March 2026, 16:45 - 18:15

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna

Universitätsstraße 7 (NIG), 4th floor, 1010 Vienna, Lecture Room A (Hörsaal A)

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Martin Slama is a researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. He graduated from the University of Vienna's anthropology department with a doctoral thesis on the online practices of young internet users in

*Indonesia. His anthropological studies of Islam in Indonesia comprise projects on diaspora communities of Hadhrami Arab descent, as well as more recent work on the varied Islamic uses of social media and religious manifestations of inequality. His latest publications include "Conspicuous Pilgrimages and the Politics of Public/Private: Social Media Representations of Indonesia's Muslim Middle Class", in: Millie, Julian (ed.), *The 'Crossed-Out God' in the Asia-Pacific: Religious Efficacy of Public Spheres* (2023), and "Social Media and the Question of Change in Indonesia's Field of Islam", *Indonesia* 119 (2025).*



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 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. Ethnographically, the paper examines an example of 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 readings of Weberian and Marxian approaches that link religious and economic phenomena.