

Sacred Ground, Contested Space: Deathscapes in the Aftermath of an Environmental Disaster in East Java, Indonesia

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Received: 25 October 2024 / Accepted: 12 October 2025 / Published: 7 January 2026

Novenanto, A. (2026). Sacred Ground, Contested Space: Deathscapes in the Aftermath of an Environmental Disaster in East Java, Indonesia. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 19(1), B1-B13.

This study explores the sociocultural, economic, and symbolic significance of graveyards – conceptualized as deathscapes – among survivors of the Lapindo mudflow disaster in Sidoarjo, East Java. Drawing on ethnographic engagement and qualitative interviews, the research reveals how graveyards serve not only as burial sites but also as spaces of memory, resistance, and identity. Survivors attach multifaceted values to these spaces: functional (as burial grounds), economic (as assets negotiated through purchasing power), and symbolic (as sites of cultural resilience and protest). In some cases, deathscapes can transform into enduring symbols of resistance against displacement and contested compensation policies. By applying David Graeber’s anthropological theory of value, the study demonstrates that space is never singular in meaning but constantly redefined through socio-political and cultural practices. These findings contribute to urban political ecology and the anthropology of value by highlighting how disaster survivors negotiate socio-spatial justice through the preservation and reinterpretation of sacred spaces.

Keywords: Anthropology of Value; Cultural Identity; Deathscape; Lapindo Mudflow; Socio-spatial Justice



INTRODUCTION

On May 29, 2006, a mud volcano erupted in Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia,¹ submerging 15 villages and displacing thousands of residents. Among the inundated areas were graveyards as sacred sites imbued with profound cultural and spiritual significance for the affected communities. This paper explores how these *deathscapes* – defined as “places associated with death and for the dead” (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2016, p. 4) – have evolved into sites of memory, resistance, and cultural identity for the survivors of the Lapindo mudflow disaster. While the

¹ Geologists have identified it as the highest eruption rate for a mud volcano on Earth, with no clear indication of when it might cease (Davies et al., 2008, 2011). There are competing theories about what triggered the birth of this mud volcano: a company’s drilling activity (Davies et al., 2007, 2008), an earthquake (Mazzini et al., 2007), or a combination of both drilling and an earthquake. Geologists agree that the Porong district in Sidoarjo is an ideal location for the formation of a mud volcano. The main vent was a gaping hole up to 50 meters in diameter, with five major eruption sites located to the northeast and southwest of it.

physical destruction caused by the mudflow has been widely documented (McMichael, 2009; Novenanto, 2016, 2019a; Schiller et al., 2008), the fate of these submerged and relocated graveyards has received far less attention, despite their central role in shaping survivors' sense of continuity, belonging, and justice.

Previous studies have highlighted the complex human-space relationships in the context of the Lapindo mudflow, emphasizing that affected communities attribute not only economic value but also social and cultural meanings to their physical environments (Hamdi, 2015; Novenanto, 2018; Novenanto & Suyadnya, 2025). Other studies have examined the politics of disaster representation in Indonesia (Drake, 2017; Novenanto, 2013). However, the symbolic and sociopolitical significance of graveyards within displaced communities remains underexplored. Graveyards are not merely physical sites for burial; they are embedded in networks of memory, spirituality, and social relations that extend across generations. When these spaces are disrupted or submerged, it is not only the dead who are displaced but also the living, whose connections to ancestry and identity are challenged.

This study addresses that gap by examining the values attached to deathscapes and their implications for urban political ecology and disaster studies. It offers a nuanced understanding of how disaster survivors negotiate cultural identity and socio-spatial justice through the preservation and remembrance of these sacred spaces. To conceptualize these dynamics, the paper draws on David Graeber's (2001, 2013) anthropological theory of value, which distinguishes between sociological, economic, and symbolic dimensions of value. This framework highlights how even seemingly marginal spaces, such as cemeteries, are enmeshed in multiple systems of meaning and exchange. By doing so, the article also addresses broader debates about land commodification, urban planning, and the politics of space in rapidly urbanizing societies like Indonesia, illustrating how even sites for the dead become entangled in struggles over territory and development.

Political ecology research in Indonesia has traditionally focused on rural and agricultural contexts (Armitage & Tam, 2007; Hein, 2019; Kuswardono et al., 2021; Neilson, 2016). However, with the rapid urbanization across the archipelago (Firman, 2000; Firman et al., 2007; Mardiansjah et al., 2021), scholarly attention has increasingly turned to urban and urbanizing spaces. Recent literature on Indonesian urban areas tends to concentrate on two major themes: the dynamics of spatial planning and land use (Basworo, 2019; Muryono et al., 2019; Pujianingsih & Setiawan, 2021; Sudibyanung et al., 2018) and urban land conflicts (Novenanto, 2019b; Parsaulian & Sudjito, 2019; Sukaryanto, 2016). While these studies predominantly focus on landscapes for the living, this paper contributes to the discourse by foregrounding landscapes for the dead. In Indonesia, the management of urban deathscapes increasingly competes with commercial interests in urban development (Nalle & Moeliono, 2023). This tension is not unique to Indonesia; similar dynamics are observed globally, including in Romania (Rusu, 2020), Germany (Christ, 2022), and China (Ho & Zhao, 2024). These developments also prompt broader discussions on cemetery systems and socio-spatial justice (Rugg, 2022), the production of memorial places (Petersson, 2016), and contemporary urban planning (Davies & Bennett, 2016). As Peters (2016) argues, deathscapes are essential for the living to maintain a connection with the memory of the dead.

In this context, this study seeks to answer two central questions: (1) What social, economic, and symbolic values do Lapindo mudflow survivors attach to the graveyards in their abandoned villages? and (2) How do these values reflect their efforts to maintain cultural identity amidst displacement? By framing these questions through the lens of value, the study

highlights how survivors' struggles over burial space are simultaneously struggles over meaning, rights, and belonging.

The following sections begin by outlining the conceptual framework that guides this study, with a focus on anthropology of value. This is followed by a presentation of research methodology, which draws on ethnographic engagement and qualitative data collection. The paper then moves into a detailed discussion of the key findings, organized around the functional, economic, and symbolic values attached to graveyards by Lapindo mudflow survivors, and interpreted in relation to existing literature on space, memory, and value. Finally, the paper concludes with reflections and recommendations for advancing political ecology research, particularly through anthropological approaches that foreground lived experience, cultural resilience, and contested meanings of space.

URBAN DEATHSCAPES AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF VALUE

This paper focuses specifically on graveyards as a form of deathscapes within an urbanizing society. While cemeteries are often studied as cultural landscapes or religious sites, this paper treats them as spaces where multiple forms of value intersect and compete. To analyze these dynamics, the study draws centrally on David Graeber's (2001) anthropological theory of value, which provides a framework for examining how different actors – communities, the state, and private developers – attach sociological, economic, and symbolic meanings to the same physical space. This emphasis on value highlights that graveyards are never neutral spaces but rather sites of negotiation and struggle, where competing interpretations of meaning and ownership play out in visible and invisible ways.

This conceptual focus on value complements existing spatial theories of urban life. A foundational conceptual framework for understanding the spatial and symbolic significance of graveyards can be traced to Michel Foucault's notion of *heterotopia*, first introduced in his 1967 lecture and later published in English (Foucault, 2008). Foucault emphasizes the relationship between space and power, arguing that urban space is shaped by practices of emplacement – where objects or individuals are situated based on the value attributed to those spaces. Cemeteries exemplify this dynamic, as their meanings evolve over time, linking the present to the past (Foucault, 2008, pp. 18–20).² The concept of heterotopia thus provides a useful lens for analyzing the layered and shifting meanings of deathscapes in their socio-historical contexts, framing them as spaces for both the dead and the living.

Graveyards serve not only as burial grounds but also as sites of memory, or what urbanist Pierre Nora refers to as *les lieux de mémoire* – places where memory crystallizes and secretes itself (Nora, 1989). Nora distinguishes between memory, which is lived and embodied, and history, which is constructed and institutionalized, highlighting the tension between the two (Nora, 1989, p. 22). Building on this, historian Michael Rothberg (2009) introduces the concept of “the knot of memory”, which seeks to reconcile history and memory by acknowledging their

² By the 18th century, cemeteries in Western European states were still considered sacred spaces and were placed in city centers, adjacent to churches. There was even a sort of hierarchy in the emplacement of someone's grave: the more the dead was considered as important and sacred, the more the tomb was emplaced closer to the altar. Such treatment was natural at that time because people believed in the resurrection. However, in line with the rise of secularization, the strengthening of atheism, and various disasters related to epidemic, in Western Europe the dead are no longer placed in the city centers. Entering the 19th century there was an attempt to relocate the graves from the sacred and eternal hearts of the city to the outskirts of the city.

entanglement and the conflicts that arise in remembering past events (p. 9). The historical and memorial significance of cemeteries can become a focal point for communities to negotiate, contest, and reshape collective identity. This process is facilitated by both physical presence of graveyards and the temporal rhythms of commemorative practices (Novenanto & Suyadnya, 2025). Graveyards are thus deeply embedded in the existential cycle of social groups, often carrying multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings. As Husain (2010) argues, spaces such as cemeteries are cultural artifacts that articulate collective identity and serve as material symbols of respect for ancestors. They are also linked to broader social understandings of the afterlife and spiritual continuity (Heng, 2022).

In urbanizing societies, the provision and preservation of space for the dead increasingly compete with capital interests in land commodification (Nalle & Moeliono, 2023). Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space (1991) offers insights into how capitalism narrows the meaning of urban space to its economic utility, often marginalizing non-commercial values (see also Schmid, 2022, Chapter 7). Building on these spatial theories, Graeber's (2001; 2013) tripartite model of value offers a powerful tool for understanding cemeteries as dynamic socio-political spaces. In the context of post-disaster recovery, this approach is especially relevant, as it allows for an examination of how survivors simultaneously negotiate practical needs, market constraints, and deep cultural attachments to land and memory. Graeber (2001) outlines three dimensions through which anthropologists can understand value: sociological value – the usefulness or benefit of objects to society, rooted in human desire and social function (p. 3); economic value – the exchangeability of an object, often measured through monetary transactions and market dynamics (pp. 6-8); and, symbolic value – the meanings attributed to an object within a broader system of cultural and conceptual distinctions (pp. 14, 17).

Applying this framework, graveyards in this study are analyzed threefold: as sociological spaces because they fulfill the essential functions of burial and remembrance; as economic assets since they are subject to commodification and land exchange; and as symbolic sites because they carry diverse meanings for different individuals and communities, reflecting cultural, spiritual, and emotional attachments.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in qualitative data collected during the second half of 2021. The author's engagement with the field spans over a decade, beginning with ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2013. This long-term immersion provided foundational insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of communities affected by the Lapindo mudflow. From 2016 to 2021, the author maintained relationships with key actors through a community-based socio-ecological rehabilitation project, serving as an academic consultant on knowledge production, program design, and evaluation.

The research focuses on three Islamic cemeteries located in Porong district, Sidoarjo, East Java – an area directly impacted by the Lapindo mudflow disaster. The cemeteries include Gedang village public cemetery, Belasungkawa Cemetery (a community-managed cemetery operated by a private association), and the grave of Kiai Anas of Jatirejo (a revered site now located within the mudflow containment dam). The first two cemeteries remain functional and accessible, while the grave of Kiai Anas has become symbolically significant due to its location within the disaster zone.

To understand cemetery management practices and cultural meanings, the study conducted interviews with the caretakers of each cemetery. Given the shared Islamic context and vernacular religious traditions surrounding death and burial, three local Islamic leaders were

also interviewed to provide broader perspectives on ritual practices and theological interpretations. Most interviews were conducted in person, with a research assistant providing support for translation, note-taking, and logistical arrangements when needed. Typical questions explored how participants engaged with burial practices and navigated changes influenced by the densely populated environment. Notably, the Lapindo mudflow disaster disrupted many villagers' connections to their places of origin, further complicating these practices.

To complement local perspectives with academic insights, an online interview was conducted with a scholar from the State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, focusing on comparative understandings of death and cemetery practices among East Javanese Muslim communities and the broader Islamic context. Additionally, five Lapindo mudflow survivors were interviewed to explore the socio-cultural implications of displacement, particularly regarding the availability and significance of graveyards in their new neighborhoods. These survivors were selected based on their direct experiences with cemetery-related challenges post-displacement.

In total, 12 key informants were interviewed for this study: three cemetery caretakers, three local Islamic religious leaders, one academic expert, and five mudflow survivors. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided verbal consent to participate in the interview. In cases where real names are used, explicit permission was obtained from the participants concerned to include their names in the research findings. Beyond these formal interviews, the research also incorporated insights from numerous informal and spontaneous conversations with other survivors. These interactions enriched the data and helped construct a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences and cultural negotiation surrounding deathscapes in the aftermath of the disaster.

All interview data were analyzed using a qualitative data analysis approach, primarily through thematic coding. After transcription, the data were manually reviewed to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and narratives relevant to the study's focus on deathscapes and cultural identity. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, allowing themes to emerge organically rather than being imposed a priori. These codes were grouped into broader categories – such as cemetery management, religious meanings, memory, and identity – which helped structure the analysis and interpretation. This coding process enabled the researchers to draw meaningful connections between the informants' experiences and the theoretical frameworks guiding the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, which aim to uncover the sociological, economic, and symbolic values that Lapindo mudflow survivors attach to graveyards in their abandoned villages. The analysis is organized around three central themes: (1) the functional role of graveyards as spaces for burial and remembrance, (2) the economic value of burial plots in the context of displacement, and (3) the symbolic significance of graveyards as sites of cultural identity and resistance. These themes reveal how graveyards, understood as deathscapes, play a vital role not only in honoring the dead but also in shaping the lived experiences of survivors. They serve as spaces where cultural identity is asserted, commodification is resisted, and the challenges of displacement are navigated. These three themes reflect Graeber's (2001; 2013) tripartite framework of value, showing how graveyards simultaneously operate as communal infrastructure, contested economic resources, and symbolic anchors for displaced communities. By linking these categories, the analysis illustrates the complexity of negotiating post-disaster recovery through sacred spaces. The following subsections explore each theme in detail,

drawing on qualitative data from interviews, field observations, and informal conversations with key stakeholders.

Negotiating Burial Space

For many relocated survivors of the Lapindo mudflow, graveyards in their origin villages represent what Rothberg (2009) conceptualizes as a ‘knot of memory’ – a space where personal remembrance and collective memory intertwine. Although residents have physically relocated, public services, including funeral arrangements, often remain tied to their original administrative areas. During fieldwork, it was observed that the Gedang village public cemetery continues to accommodate burials for former residents, despite their relocation. The most common reason cited was the deceased’s expressed wish to be buried in their ancestral village. For some, this practice reflects a desire to maintain spiritual and familial ties to their homeland; for others, it serves as a symbolic act of remembrance and resistance against the disaster that displaced them.

Beyond personal motivations, structural factors also influence burial decisions. Several survivors reported being denied burial rights in their new neighborhoods. A common justification was the limited capacity of village cemeteries, with priority given to native residents. This issue of overcrowding is widespread in Javanese village cemeteries. For instance, Syaiful (57 years old), the muezzin of Gedang village, noted that although former residents are still accepted for burial, space is increasingly scarce. He has requested the establishment of a new cemetery complex, but the local government has yet to respond. As a temporary solution, Syaiful resorts to burying new bodies atop older graves that family members no longer maintain. “It is now not only one, two, or three, but four-to-five piles,” he explained (personal communication, June 2021).³

This practice of graves stacking reflects a broader tension in East Javanese Muslim communities between Islamic doctrine and Javanese tradition. According to Munir Ikhwan of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Sunni Islam in East Java generally holds that ‘who is dead is dead,’ with no concept of an afterlife requiring sacred treatment of graves (personal communication, August 2021). In contrast, Javanese traditions maintain a belief in spiritual continuity, with routine visits to ancestral graves – especially on Thursday evening and Thursday Kliwon – serving as acts of remembrance and connection. Despite theological contradictions, many traditional Muslims continue to practice these traditions. One villager described visiting her family’s grave as a way to pray, commemorate, and feel emotionally grounded.

Conversations with mudflow survivors revealed widespread uncertainty and anxiety about securing burial plots in their new neighborhoods. One woman from Mindi village, now relocated to Kesambi, recounted being asked by the village head to sign a statement agreeing not to be buried in the local cemetery as a condition for administrative acceptance. Similar restrictions were reported in other villages, leaving many survivors in a precarious position, not only needing to find new homes but also to secure a final resting place. Even for those who do not hold strong beliefs in an afterlife, the need for burial space remains deeply felt. In some cases, survivors were able to claim burial rights through their spouse’s origin village, but many faced resistance from local communities.

Some cemeteries, such as those in Gedang, Jatirejo, Besuki, and Mindi, remain accessible because they have partially submerged by the mud. In Mindi, where the original cemetery was lost, the village head successfully petitioned the national government for a plot of state land to

³ All translations are made by the author.

serve as a new burial ground for its former residents. This land, left idle after compensation processes, was repurposed to meet the community's burial needs. In the case of Besuki village, whose most residents collectively relocated to Pangreh, a community committee proactively secured a separate plot for a cemetery in the new place. This plot was distinct from the residential area, and its cost was included in the overall relocation fees collected from residents. A committee member noted the unusual nature of this arrangement, comparing it to modern housing developments, where graveyards are typically not provided by developers. The committee's decision was informed by the experiences of earlier survivors relocated to other areas, recognizing the importance of planning for public facilities, including burial grounds, in self-relocation efforts.

The Price of Rest

The challenge of securing burial space becomes particularly complex for Lapindo mudflow survivors who relocated individually, outside of organized resettlement schemes. For many, the most viable solution was to purchase a burial plot in a private cemetery. In Gedang village, one such cemetery is managed by an association called *Perkumpulan Belasungkawa* (literally, 'Association for Condolences'). According to the caretaker, Fatkhurrohman (54 years-old), the cemetery was established in the 1930s by a group of families who pooled resources to acquire land adjacent to the historic Daendels Post Highway. He is the great-grandchild of one of the initiators. Membership in the association is based on family lineage rather than residential status. Once registered, a family gains burial rights within the cemetery complex. However, when children grow up, marry, or move away, they must register separately to retain burial privileges, an exclusive system that has persisted for over three generations.

In response to the displacement crisis, the association adopted its policies to accommodate mudflow survivors. Fatkhurrohman explained that the initial motivation was to help survivors meet administrative requirements in their new neighborhoods, where village authorities often demanded written agreements not to seek burial in local public cemeteries. These restrictions posed significant barriers to survivors attempting to register for essential services such as school enrollment, birth certificates, or marriage documentation. By offering new memberships, the association provided a workaround: survivors could secure burial rights through the private cemetery, thereby satisfying administrative conditions in their new communities.

The Lapindo mudflow has prompted the association to become more inclusive, updating its membership system to reflect changing needs. New members pay a one-time registration fee of IDR 1,000,000 per family, regardless of the number of family members, along with a monthly maintenance fee of IDR 60,000. In 2019, the association conducted a membership audit, identifying inactive members who had relocated and no longer contributed. Like many Islamic cemeteries in Java, the association enforces a 'no-*kijing* policy'—prohibiting the construction of permanent grave covers made of cement or stone. Fatkhurrohman contrasted this with Chinese cemeteries, which often feature elaborate gravestones. The absence of tombstones in some neglected graves has led to confusion; in one case, bones were discovered during a burial, with no record of the grave's occupant. These plots were subsequently reassigned to new members. By the time of the research, the cemetery had over 150 active member families, and the mudflow disaster had catalyzed a shift toward what Fathkurrohman described as "a more modern way to manage *rumah masa depan* (future home)" (personal communication, October 2021).

The prohibition of *kijing* reflects broader theological debates within Javanese Muslim communities. According to Munir Ikhwan of UIN Sunan Kalijaga, the ban is rooted in efforts to

combat *shirk*, the sin of associating partners with God. Practices such as grave purification and sanctification are viewed as violations of monotheism. “The main mission is monotheism. God is only one,” he explained (personal communication, August 2021). Conversations with research participants confirmed that public cemeteries strictly prohibit *kijing* and allow only simple tombstones (*tetenger*) as markers. In contrast, private cemeteries, often owned by wealthier families, permit more elaborate constructions. The status and wealth of the deceased often correlate with the magnificence of the grave, reinforcing social hierarchies even in death.

Deathscape as a Site of Memory and Resistance

Among the graveyards affected by the Lapindo mudflow, the grave of Kiai Anas Al-Ayyubi in Jatirejo stands out as a particularly compelling site of symbolic significance. Kiai Anas was a respected religious leader and founder of the Abil Hasan Asy Syadzily Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) in Jatirejo village. He passed away in January 2003, prior to the mud eruption, and was buried in the yard of his home. Today, both his grave and the entire village lie buried beneath the mud. As one of his sons-in-law poignantly wrote in his memoir: “Jatirejo village was once a basin of mud, then a lake of mud, then a sea of mud, and finally, a mountain of mud” (Zuber, 2009, p. 4).

From the onset of the mudflow disaster, the position of the *pesantren* and Kiai Anas’s family marked by resistance. They were among the villagers who refused to sell their land for compensation, a stance influenced by the late Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), former president of Indonesia and a prominent leader of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Gus Dur publicly advised victims not to sell their land. This message carried significant weight in East Java, where religious leaders hold strong influence in both daily and political life. Following this guidance, Kiai Anas’s family sold only their building assets, retaining ownership of the land. With the compensation money, they purchased a plot in a neighboring district within a 5-kilometer radius and rebuilt their home and *pesantren*. According to Kiai Anas’s wife, while building can be reconstructed, the founder’s grave holds irreplaceable spiritual and historical value. She recalled, “He was the Kiai of Porong, Sidoarjo. So many other religious leaders know him well” (personal communication, September 2021).

The grave, once located in the yard where Kiai Anas hosted religious and intellectual discussions, is now submerged approximately 20 meters below the mud surface. To honor his memory, the family constructed a mausoleum above the original grave site. During a visit in 2016, the author observed a modest structure accommodating around 15 people. By 2021, the mausoleum had expanded to hold up to 50 visitors, with a surrounding terrace and transparent glass walls allowing visibility from outside. Field conversations revealed that pilgrims regularly visit the site, not only from East Java but also from other provinces and islands. As his son, Gus Maman, explained: “My father doesn’t belong to his family only. He belongs to many people. So, as long as they behave, as long as they act nicely, we have no problems with that.” (personal communication, September 2021). In a separate conversation, Kiai Anas’s wife confirmed: “First of all, he is still a public figure. Secondly, pilgrimages have many benefits: to remind pilgrim about death and to send prayers to the dead.” (personal communication, September 2021)

The number of mausoleum visitors reportedly increased after the grave was submerged. Before the pandemic, weekly gatherings were held every Saturday evening; in 2021, the routine resumed on Thursday evenings.

On one evening in September 2021, the author visited the mausoleum. Entry required passing through a gate guarded by PPLS security officers,⁴ typically closed to the public. Upon stating the intention to visit Kiai Anas's grave, the officer allowed entry, cautioning about the road conditions. Driving along the embankment flanked by wet mud was tense, especially at night, though streetlights provided guidance. The surreal juxtaposition of an artificial mud lake with functioning electrical infrastructure was striking.

Upon arrival, the mausoleum appeared brightly lit. Inside, the tombstone rested on ceramic flooring beneath a clay-tiled roof, enclosed by white brick walls interspersed with large glass panels. Surrounding the main structure were several auxiliary facilities. To the east and southeast were fish ponds. To the north stood a small building equipped with a kitchen and bathroom, suggesting that someone resides there. To the south lay a garden with seating, seemingly designed for gatherings. To the west, a meditation area faced the mud lake, with the city lights of Porong forming the backdrop. The final area, a private prayer space, is reserved for Kiai Anas's family and guests. There, the author met Gus Maman, one of Kiai Anas's sons and current administrator of the relocated pesantren. He shared that a former student voluntarily lives at the site to watch over the grave, despite being discouraged from doing so. Gus Maman also recounted a prophetic remark from his father: "He once said his home would sink. At the time, many people wondered 'how could that happen?' because their location is far from mountains, from rivers, and from the sea." (personal communication, September 2021)

As the conversation unfolded, Gus Maman described the original village and family complex in vivid detail. Though the author had never visited Jatirejo before the eruption, the narrative offered a powerful glimpse into the emotional and symbolic landscape that continues to shape the family's connection to the site.

According to Gus Maman, the pesantren does not prohibit the tradition of pilgrimage to his father's grave, even though some Islamic groups might oppose it. He acknowledged the diversity of interpretations within Islam, noting that while some view grave visitation as heretical, other consider it as a *Sunnah* – a commendable practice. The key, he emphasized, lies in respecting differing perspectives. He offered the following illustration to the author:

Let's say one teacher has five students. Each student's interpretation of the knowledge from the same teacher is not necessarily the same. It doesn't matter if it's different, as much as possible it doesn't interfere with the others' belief. Feel free to speak out, but please never forbid anything different. Those who prohibit the tradition have their own basis and angle of interpretation. Go ahead, the important thing is not to insult the others. The Prophet Muhammad was like that too. In Mecca and Medina, they were different because the customs were also different. But life continues to develop. (personal communication, September 2021)

The emphasis on pluralism and tolerance also extends to how Gus Maman and his family responded to the government's compensation policy. The mausoleum of Kiai Anas stands not only as a spiritual site but also as a symbol of resistance – a physical and ideological rebuttal to the claim that all victims accepted compensation. In reality, many survivors, including the family of Kiai Anas, refused to sell their land, asserting their right to retain ownership and memory. While some sold their buildings, they preserved their land as a form of protest and continuity.

⁴ PPLS is the acronym of *Pusat Pengendalian Lumpur Sidoarjo* (Sidoarjo Mudflow Control Center), a subunit of Directorate Generale of Water Resources, the Ministry of Public Works.

This act of refusal has inspired a circulating imagination among survivors: the hope that one day, they might return and rebuild on the mud-covered land, just as the family of Kiai Anas did with the mausoleum. This sentiment is poignantly captured in a poem written by his son-in-law, titled *We Shall Return* (Zuber, 2009, p. 108):⁵

Someday,
We shall return.
Although only in our dreams
Although only in our fantasies.
But on the roofs of sunken houses.
On the branches of thirsty trees.
I render my words in the morning dew.
I say it again.
We shall return.
For however long we may be refugees.

This vision of return – both literal and symbolic – underscores the enduring connection between displaced communities and their ancestral spaces. The grave of Kiai Anas, now transformed into a site of pilgrimage, memory, and resistance, embodies the complex interplay between faith, identity, and socio-spatial justice in the aftermath of disaster.

Conclusion: Deathscapes as Sites of Value, Resistance, and Justice

This study demonstrates that graveyards, here understood as deathscapes, are not merely spaces for the dead but vital arenas for the living to assert cultural identity, resist displacement, and navigate socio-spatial injustices. Through the experiences of Lapindo mudflow survivors, the research reveals the multifaceted values attached to graveyards: functional, economic, and symbolic. These values play a critical role in post-disaster recovery, not only as practical burial spaces but also as cultural anchors, sites of resilience, and arenas of political negotiation.

The findings build upon and complicate previous scholarship by showing how environmental and socio-political forces not only make space dynamic and contested, but also imbue it with cultural and symbolic meanings (Hamdi, 2015; Novenanto, 2018, 2019b; Novenanto & Suyadnya, 2025; Oliver-Smith, 2011). Drawing on David Graeber's (2001) anthropological theory of value, the study categorizes the values attached to deathscapes into three dimensions. First, functionally, graveyards serve as burial grounds and as mediums for maintaining connections between the living and the dead. Second, economically, they become assets in navigating administrative systems – especially when public cemeteries are inaccessible – forcing mudflow survivors to engage with market mechanisms to secure burial plots. The case of Belasungkawa cemetery illustrates how burial land can be commodified and leveraged in post-disaster transactions.

Third, the study demonstrated that the value of deathscapes extends beyond functionality and economics into symbolic values. In the context of the Lapindo mudflow, the delayed and contested compensation process has deepened survivors' emotional and symbolic attachment to lost spaces, including graveyards. Over time, displaced communities continue to discover

⁵ The poem book is in English. I could not get the original (Bahasa Indonesia or Javanese) version of the poem.

new meanings for these spaces as they adapt to life in relocation. A compelling example is the mausoleum of Kiai Anas, which has become a symbol of resistance against the government's compensation narrative. The continued ritual use of the site reinforces survivors' claim to memory, identity, and justice.

Importantly, these three dimensions are not isolated categories but overlapping and contested forms of value. Graeber's framework allows us to see how the same physical space can simultaneously serve practical needs, function as an economic resource, and carry profound symbolic meaning. In the context of disaster recovery, this perspective highlights how survivors navigate complex trade-offs between survival, spirituality, and political resistance. Ultimately, this study underscores that the value of space is never singular – it is always plural, contested, and evolving, shaped by the lived experiences of those who inhabit, remember, and reclaim it.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express profound appreciation to the research informants for their participation. The author is also indebted to Ms. Aisha Fadhila for her invaluable assistance in the field data collection. The author also acknowledges the constructive feedback provided by Phillip Drake and Gunnar Stange, as well as the insightful comments from reviewers and editors, which significantly enhanced the analysis and conceptual discussion. The author alone assumes full responsibility for any errors or shortcomings that may remain.

DISCLOSURE

The author declared no conflict of interest.