The Practice of Post-Disaster Memorialization in Indonesia

La práctica de la memorialización post-desastre en Indonesia

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Abstract

The practice of post-disaster memorialization in Indonesia constitutes a contentious practice in which narratives of loss, culpability, and resilience are actively negotiated. Through analysis of three sites; the state-sanctioned Aceh Tsunami Museum, the community-curated Sisa Hartaku, and the corporately contested Lapindo mudflow, this study demonstrates that memorials function as arenas of political contestation. Official monuments frequently aestheticize catastrophe to advance state-led narratives of national unity and resilience, often obscuring underlying vulnerabilities and issues of corporate accountability. In contrast, grassroots memorialization operates as a form of resistance. These informal sites, shaped by personal and communal loss, commodify trauma not solely for economic purposes but to sustain collective memory, demand justice, and contest enforced oblivion. Memorialization in Indonesia thus represents an ongoing negotiation between hegemonic state power and community agency, positioning the act of remembrance as a significant political instrument for marginalized groups.

Keywords: Post-disaster; Memorialization; Resistance.

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Resumen

La práctica de la memorialización post-desastre en Indonesia constituye un campo de disputa en el cual se negocian activamente narrativas de pérdida, culpabilidad y resiliencia. Mediante el análisis de tres sitios –el Museo del Tsunami de Aceh, sancionado por el Estado; el Sisa Hartaku, curado por la comunidad; y el desastre del flujo de lodo de Lapindo, contestado por responsabilidad corporativa–, este estudio demuestra que los memoriales funcionan como arenas de confrontación política. Los monumentos oficiales frecuentemente estetizan la catástrofe para promover narrativas estatales de unidad nacional y resiliencia, oscureciendo a menudo vulnerabilidades subyacentes y problemas de responsabilidad corporativa. En contraste, la memorialización de base opera como una forma de resistencia. Estos sitios informales, moldeados por la pérdida personal y comunitaria, mercantilizan el trauma no solo con fines económicos, sino para sostener la memoria colectiva, exigir justicia y disputar un olvido forzado. La memorialización en Indonesia representa, por tanto, una negociación continua entre el poder estatal hegemónico y la agencia comunitaria, posicionando el acto de recordar como un instrumento político significativo para los grupos marginados.

Palabras clave: Post-desastre; Memorialización; Resistencia.

Introduction

As the world's fourth most populous nation and an archipelago endowed with abundant natural resources, Indonesia's fortunes have long been both a blessing and a curse. For a postcolonial state emerging from decades of horizontal and vertical conflict in the 20th century, the recognition that these resources could be harnessed effectively was both an opportunity and a source of contention. Debates quickly surfaced over how this wealth should be managed, provoking unprecedented responses to the promises and perils of prosperity, often crystallized in state policies and their legal legitimations (Booth, 2016).

Situated along the volatile arc of the Pacific "Ring of Fire," Indonesia inhabits a geography defined by both ecological abundance and geological precarity (Reid, 2015). Volcanic peaks punctuate its islands, seismic faults traverse its seabed, and surrounding oceans conspire with tectonic instability to render the archipelago among the most disaster-prone regions in the world. While earthquakes, tsunamis, and eruptions are often narrated as the inevitable culmination of natural processes, such framing obscures the ways in which many disasters are, in part, human-made. Extractive industries, driven by corporate imperatives and facilitated by state complicity, have long exerted pressures that exhaust tectonic, hydrological, and ecological systems. Within an Anthropocene perspective, corporations cannot be absolved of culpability; as Bubandt (2017), observes, they are central actors in the making and unmaking of the very environments within which disasters unfold.

This article examines how the entanglement of state, corporate, and societal actors materializes through forms of collective memorialization, tracing how aesthetic, affective, and political registers are unevenly mobilized across different sites. Memorial spaces such as the Aceh Tsunami Museum, the Sisa Hartaku museum near the Merapi eruption zone, and the commodified disaster

landscape of the Lapindo Mudflow function as contested arenas in which narratives of loss and culpability are negotiated, authorized, or suppressed.

While these sites are visually curated to invite contemplation, education, or tourism, they also bear traces of unresolved violence and structural harm that exceed the discrete disaster event, pointing instead to deeper configurations of power and the resistances they provoke. By reading these memorializations as what might be termed "morbid travesties of visual pleasure," this analysis interrogates how different actors aestheticize and instrumentalize catastrophe, and to what political and ecological ends. In doing so, it illuminates the continuities between Indonesia's disaster governance, its extractive political economy, and the persistence of ecological crisis despite rhetorical commitments to environmental accountability.

Theoretical Framework

To anchor a productive comparative discussion of the three selected sites, this article draws on Tony Seaton's (2018), concept of Engineered and Orchestrated Remembrance (EOR) as its principal analytical framework. EOR is mobilized here as a connective apparatus that bridges multiple registers of analysis: it enables an examination of why certain disaster sites acquire mnemonic authority and iconic status while simultaneously circulating as sites of tourism, and it illuminates how institutional and legal frameworks of museology materialize in concrete spatial and curatorial forms, as exemplified by the Aceh Tsunami Museum and Sisa Hartaku near Mount Merapi.

Within this framework, the Lapindo mudflow site occupies a singular and analytically productive position. Unlike Aceh or Sisa Hartaku, Lapindo was neither formally engineered nor institutionally orchestrated as a memorial or museum. Yet its mnemonic field has been subject to intense contestation. As Novenanto (2017), demonstrates, competing narratives have actively sought to reframe the mudflow as a natural disaster rather than an industrial incident, a move that carries profound implications for accountability and responsibility. In the absence of official memorialization, local communities have developed grassroots strategies to cope with protracted displacement and uncertainty, including the pragmatic reconfiguration of the site into an informal attraction. Through guided visits and situated storytelling, residents facilitate direct encounters with the landscape of loss, enabling remembrance to emerge not through curatorial design but through lived narration and improvisation.

EOR is analytically inclusive precisely because it accommodates such divergent modes of remembrance. In Seaton's formulation, dark tourism constitutes a triadic exchange that brings together: the represented dead, whether associated with mortality or fatality; the engineers and orchestrators of remembrance, whether institutional or vernacular; and visitors whose encounters activate memory as experience. Understood in this way, EOR functions as a site of transaction in

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Journal of the Philosophy of History
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which these actors—each endowed with differing degrees of authority, agency, and constraint—negotiate meaning, responsibility, and visibility. What distinguishes the three sites, therefore, is not whether remembrance exists, but how it is engineered, by whom it is orchestrated, and to what political and ethical ends.

Elemental to EOR is the proposition that fatality and mortality constitute divergent registers of death, despite their shared grounding in human finitude. While both are anchored in the broader concept of death, they diverge fundamentally in their social, political, and epistemic implications. *Fatality* denotes death that is abrupt, disruptive, and often violent, marked by causal trajectories that are complex, contested, and rarely transparent. Precisely because its causes resist straightforward explanation, fatality readily invites critical scrutiny, systemic interrogation, and debates over responsibility and liability. *Mortality*, by contrast, refers to death as an inevitable and universal condition of human existence. It is socially normalized, culturally routinized, and generally insulated from political controversy, and thus seldom gives rise to sustained campaigns of engineered and orchestrated remembrance.

It is in the context of disasters that fatality is collectively experienced and intensifying forms of public remembrance tend to emerge. In this regard, all three sites examined in this study are unified by conditions of fatality that proved profoundly destabilizing, not only to the internal political order of the state but also to the cohesion and continuity of the communities directly affected.

Post-disaster Memorializations in Indonesia

Practices of disaster memorialization in Indonesia operate within a dense and highly formalized legal–institutional environment. At one level, this landscape appears comprehensive: state policies governing cultural heritage, museums, and public memory are articulated through an extensive regulatory framework that defines how past events, particularly those involving large--scale mortality and loss, are to be preserved, narrated, and made publicly legible. Any discussion of disaster memorialization in Indonesia therefore cannot be detached from the legal architecture that enables certain forms of remembrance while constraining others. In this regard, Government Regulation No. 66 of 2015 on Museums constitutes a pivotal reference point, as it provides the principal juridical template through which disaster-related memory is institutionalized in museum form. The regulation defines museums as permanent, non-profit institutions tasked with protecting, developing, utilizing, and communicating collections to the public, thereby situating memorialization squarely within a technocratic regime of heritage management, professional expertise, and state oversight.

Within this framework, disasters become legible primarily through their transformation into curated objects of knowledge; registered, inventoried, conserved, and communicated as part of a

national cultural apparatus. Events marked by exceptional mortality or historical rupture are rendered worthy of "perpetual" public recognition insofar as they can be stabilized as collections, narratives, and spatialized exhibits. This legal framing privileges particular modes of remembrance, most notably museums and formally designated heritage sites, without foreclosing the persistence of informal and community-driven commemorative practices, whose embeddedness in everyday life places them outside, rather than in opposition to, institutional regimes of recognition. As a result, disaster memorialization in Indonesia often operates less as an open-ended engagement with loss and responsibility than as a process of administrative normalization, wherein remembrance is folded into broader agendas of education, tourism, and national resilience.

At the same time, this institutional landscape is deeply entangled with questions of power, visibility, and narrative authority. This landscape extends to informal sites that fall outside official regimes of memorialization yet function as de facto memorial spaces, producing affective encounters with loss and displacement; nevertheless, whether formal or informal, these sites tend to articulate justice at a symbolic level, privileging commemoration over accountability and recovery over sustained engagement with causality, as in the case of the Lapindo mudflow (Azmeri et al., 2017; Skwarko et al., 2024; Wibisana, 2013). The aforementioned Government Regulation renders the state's role in disaster response and memorialization double-edged: it casts the state as the principal initiator and guarantor of remembrance, while situating grassroots initiatives and private citizen interventions within a secondary, supportive register of recognition. Recent disaster responses due to flooding in three provinces in Sumatra this year illustrate this tension, where spontaneous civic aid and informal acts of solidarity have at times been overshadowed, or actively constrained, by the state's desire to control visibility, credit, and narrative coherence (Rahmadini, 2025).

Seen from this broader perspective, Indonesia's landscape of disaster memorialization is neither monolithic nor uniform. Instead, it is constituted by a spectrum of encounters shaped by varying degrees of institutionalization, informality, and contestation. Large-scale, state-backed projects such as the Aceh Tsunami Museum reflect a model of memorialization aligned with global visibility and national significance, particularly given the transcontinental impact of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In contrast, grassroots initiatives such as Sisa Hartaku emerge from lived experience and localized loss, operating at the margins of formal recognition. The Lapindo mudflow, despite lacking official status as museums or memorials, have generated their own forms of commemorative practice through informal tourism and everyday acts of witnessing, producing what might be described as a landscape of absence and unresolved responsibility. Together, these sites generate distinct modes of engagement, yet they converge in foregrounding intertwined perceptions of human mortality and material devastation, revealing disaster memorialization in Indonesia as a contested field where remembrance, governance, and representation are continually negotiated.

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Aceh Tsunami Museum

Situated in the heart of Banda Aceh, the Aceh Tsunami Museum stands as the most prominent and state-sanctioned site of memorialization in post-tsunami Aceh. Inaugurated by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2009 and opened to the public in 2011, the museum is more than an architectural landmark, it is a curated repository of loss, faith, and national narrative. Designed by Ridwan Kamil, an Indonesian architect who would later serve as Governor of West Java, the museum's aesthetic vocabulary draws simultaneously from the violence of the 2004 tsunami and the deep cultural heritage of Aceh. Its four-storey, 2,500 m² structure is sheathed in a perforated façade inspired by the traditional Saman dance, functioning as decoration as well as a climatic device that moderates light and airflow. The building itself is engineered to resist earthquakes and floods, elevated above ground and integrated with designated evacuation spaces, architecture as both symbol and infrastructure of resilience (Nursandi & Ashadi, 2021).

The disaster that precipitated its construction, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, remains the deadliest in recorded history. Triggered by a 9.1–9.3 magnitude undersea earthquake along the Sumatra–Andaman subduction zone, it claimed an estimated 176,313 lives across Southeast Asia and the eastern coast of Africa, with Indonesia suffering the greatest toll: 165,708 dead or missing (Ozer & Longueville, 2011; Ramalanjaona, 2011). The economic damages in Indonesia alone reached several billion dollars, compounding the human tragedy with extensive destruction of infrastructure, livelihoods, and coastal settlements. Wave heights exceeding 30 metres obliterated entire coastal towns, leaving behind a terrain of ruin that required not just physical rebuilding but also a profound reweaving of collective memory.

Inside the museum, visitors are expected to embark on a spatial sequence that deliberately cultivates an emotional arc, from shock to reflection. Visitors enter through a dimly lit hallway where the sound of rushing water and Islamic devotional chants (*dzikir*) envelop the senses, evoking both the terror of the waves and the spiritual practices of mourning. In the main galleries, immersive dioramas depict moments frozen in crisis: people fleeing walls of water, domestic spaces reduced to splintered debris, makeshift communal kitchens feeding survivors. Interspersed among these tableaux are artifacts salvaged from the disaster zone, twisted vehicles, shattered household objects, and fragments of daily life abruptly suspended in time (Disbudpar Aceh, 2021).

The most solemn space is the *Ruang Sumur Doa* (Chamber of Blessing), a circular room designed to resemble a well, its walls inscribed with the names of identified victims. Above hangs a single piece of Arabic calligraphy bearing the word *Allah*, gazing down upon the names and visitors alike (Noverma, 2023; UPTD Museum Tsunami Aceh, n.d.). This arrangement is not a neutral gesture, it inscribes the disaster within Aceh's Islamic cosmology, suggesting that all lives lost are "forever under God's protection." The museum's religious dimension is not incidental; it is central

to its curatorial ethos, weaving remembrance with spiritual affirmation in a way that reflects Aceh's self-understanding as *Serambi Mekah*, the "Veranda of Mecca."

Yet, for all its architectural sophistication and affective force, the Aceh Tsunami Museum is equally defined by what it leaves unarticulated. Within its walls, the disaster is presented primarily as a geological phenomenon; an unavoidable act of nature, an interpretation reinforced by the museum's very name, which foregrounds the overwhelming physical force of the tsunami itself. Beyond the museum's walls, however, structural vulnerabilities and the political economy of post-disaster reconstruction remain largely absent from the narrative it advances. This absence appears less a matter of curatorial oversight than a consequence of the museum's epistemic focus, which remains anchored in the tsunami as a singular catastrophic event rather than extending into the uneven and contested social actualities of recovery and reconstruction. While the museum gestures, at a symbolic level, toward ideals of resilience and collective endurance, emphasizing the community's capacity to recover and move forward, it stops short of memorializing the structurally conditioned processes through which recovery unfolded.

It is in this sense that the Aceh Tsunami Museum's significance operates through a marked duality. On the one hand, it functions as a site of healing and public education, fostering awareness of disaster preparedness while preserving the memory of an event that profoundly reshaped Acehnese society (Syamsidik et al., 2021). On the other hand, it exemplifies how state-led memorialization can aestheticize catastrophe while shielding the institutional arrangements and power relations that reproduce vulnerability (Zilberg, 2009). The absence of meaningful public consultation in the planning and implementation of the project further reflects a form of state–corporate alignment in post-disaster urban redevelopment, wherein institutional and commercial interests are prioritized over community participation and deliberation, while echoing long-standing patterns of center–periphery alienation that predate the tsunami itself (Gaillard et al., 2008; Pisupati, 2005; Samuels, 2019).

This tension between official and vernacular modes of remembrance is further illuminated by Kent's (2016), observations in post-tsunami Aceh. Kent recounts encountering a mass grave situated within an ordinary garden; an informal memorial space she found far more affecting than the museum itself. Her reflection points to an imbalance between engineered, institutionally sanctioned forms of remembrance and more layered, situated, and everyday practices of memory. In Aceh, such plural and alternative commemorative expressions tend to be channeled into a more orchestrated and monolithic form, most visibly embodied by the museum and its carefully curated aesthetic regimes. In this process, everyday acts of mourning and localized sites of memory are not erased, but are rendered peripheral, absorbed into, or overshadowed by a dominant framework that privileges coherence, visibility, and institutional legibility.

The entanglement of politics and affect in practices of remembering the past and imagining the future is particularly evident in memorial sites that exerted a more immediate and sustained influence on urban residents' narratives of commemoration. As documented in Annemarie Samuels' (2019), ethnographic work on everyday life in post-tsunami Aceh, certain sites, notably the two monumentalized ships and the largest mass graves, recurred persistently in everyday conversations and assumed central roles during tsunami anniversary commemorations. These locations were widely described by residents as "authentic" monuments, precisely because they were understood as direct material consequences of the tsunami rather than as retrospectively curated representations (2019, p. 117). Furthermore, Samuels' observations of public ambivalence toward the planning and promotion of spiritual tourism in post-tsunami Aceh inferred that, these "authentic" monuments mark the limits of the marketization of tourism, whether framed as dark, spiritual, or heritage-oriented, by resisting incorporation into redevelopment logics and resilience-driven future imaginaries. In doing so, they point toward alternative memorial practices, both in Aceh and beyond, in which pluralized forms of remembrance grounded in lived experience offer a means of reckoning that balances the politics of memory with ideals of public empowerment and a more grounded framing of collective memory.

Further situated within Aceh's post-disaster recovery and post-secessionist reconciliation, the museum assumes an additional diplomatic role, offering a symbolic space through which the Indonesian state articulates reconciliation following decades of conflict between the former and the *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM) (Dunlop, 2018; Perkasa, 2019). Taken together, the Aceh Tsunami Museum occupies an ambivalent while quite seemingly neutral position within Indonesia's broader landscape of disaster memorialization: an elegant architecture of mourning that simultaneously enables collective reflection and delineates the political boundaries of remembrance, revealing as much through its silences as through its commemorative presence. Simultaneously, the museum's touristic appeal has been embraced as a pragmatic middle ground for sustaining post--conflict stability in Aceh, even as this approach stops short of fully reckoning with the experiences of civilian victims and survivors of the protracted and violent secessionist conflict (Grayman & Bronnimann, 2018).

a. Sisa Hartaku

In stark contrast to the monumental scale and state-led curation of the Aceh Tsunami Museum, *Sisa Hartaku*, literally "What Remains of My Possessions," but also known as *The House of Memory*, stands as a deeply personal memorial, born not from bureaucratic initiative or architectural competition, but from the unmediated aftermath of loss (Dinas Kebudayaan Kabupaten Sleman, 2022). Situated in Sleman Regency, Yogyakarta Province, the site occupies the footprint of a private home that was engulfed by the 2010 eruption of Mount Merapi. One of the most active

volcanoes in Southeast Asia, Merapi has shaped both the physical and cultural landscapes of the region for centuries, its eruptions leaving cyclical imprints on collective memory (Jousset, Pallister & Surono, 2013; Surono et al., 2012).

The 2010 eruption ranks among Indonesia's most devastating volcanic events in recent decades. Over the course of several weeks in October and November that year, pyroclastic flows, searing ash clouds, and toxic gases claimed the lives of approximately hundreds of people, forcing tens of thousands to evacuate their homes across Yogyakarta and Central Java. The owner of the house that would become Sisa Hartaku returned to find his dwelling reduced to a skeletal shell, its walls blackened, its contents charred beyond recognition. Faced with the choice to rebuild or erase, he chose neither. Instead, he allowed the ruins to stand, preserving them as they were, a silent witness to catastrophe and an unfiltered archive of personal and communal loss.

Unlike formal museums, Sisa Hartaku was never formally "designed." It retains the spatial logic of an ordinary rural home, with each room left largely undisturbed since the day the eruption struck. Visitors walk through spaces where daily life has been violently suspended: a living room containing warped furniture, a kitchen strewn with cooking utensils fused to ash, a barn with the bones of livestock still in place. Melted motorcycles and scorched household appliances stand alongside small, intimate objects, cups, clocks, toys, now stripped of utility yet saturated with narrative weight. The dust and ash that blanket the site are not artifacts to be removed but rather made integral to facilitate the expression of testimony, thus lending an immediacy and authenticity rarely found in institutional displays.

The curatorial style is neither didactic nor grandiose; it is visceral, unmediated, and profoundly local. *Sisa Hartaku* does not guide the visitor toward a predetermined moral or political conclusion. Rather, it invites reflection through presence, standing in the ruin, one is confronted with the fragility of human life in the face of nature's volatility, the impermanence of material possessions, and the resilience of communities who live with disaster as a cyclical certainty. In its very informality, it resists the aestheticization of catastrophe that often accompanies state-led memorialization, offering instead a raw, unfiltered encounter with the material aftermath of disaster.

Today, *Sisa Hartaku* is among the most visited disaster-related sites in Yogyakarta. While it has become part of the region's tourism circuit, the site's origins and operation remain rooted in community initiative. Maintenance is sustained through modest entrance fees and local stewardship rather than formal institutional funding. This has allowed it to retain a degree of autonomy in shaping its narrative, one that privileges lived experience over official discourse. At the same time, the provincial government has tacitly embraced the site's role as an educative space, integrating it into broader initiatives aimed at raising public awareness of volcanic hazards and disaster preparedness. Through this framing, the Sisa Hartaku as an institution and its engagement with tourism is

articulated as part of a context-sensitive approach to disaster education that is expected to contribute to more effective mitigation in the future (Nurjanah et al., 2025; Nurjanah et al., 2024).

Beyond its touristic appeal, Sisa Hartaku functions as a memorial that operates across multiple registers of meaning. The exhibition of objects scarred by lava, preserved in their original condition at the owner's discretion, originated in a personal impulse to retain what remained of a devastated life. Over time, this act of preservation has acquired broader representative force.

A close relationship can be traced between the abrupt, often irreversible interruption of life in hazardous environments and the unintended mnemonic effects of disaster sites. Within this dynamic, such site operate simultaneously as spaces of mourning, tactile forms of environmental risk education, and informal settings through which disaster memory becomes embedded in everyday practice.

Building on this, Rucińska and Lechowicz's (2014), work on natural disaster tourism advances a broader analytical proposition: that the antagonistic tension between hazard and tourism itself generates site-specific value. In the context of Merapi and the Sisa Hartaku, it produces a distinctive form of appeal: niche in character, peripheral to elite and centrally curated attractions, and overlapping in key respects with practices commonly associated with dark tourism.

A fuller understanding of how this niche form emerges in the case of Sisa Hartaku must be grounded in the lived realities of the surrounding community. Anchored in *Kejawen*, a Javanese animistic and shamanistic spiritual orientation, local ways of inhabiting the Merapi landscape suggest that the continued presence of communities in close proximity to volcanic hazard exceeds the register of cultural attachment alone. Javanese cosmological conceptions of harmony between human and nonhuman realms position Merapi not merely as a geographical feature, but as a foundational axis of social and political life (Bobbette, 2019).

The Merapi community and their enduring cosmological relations between the volcanic landscape and locally embedded, spiritually informed forms of geological knowledge render questions of mitigation and future safety particularly complex. For adherents of *Kejawen*, Merapi is understood as a constant and a condition of life: a relational presence that must be inhabited, negotiated, and lived with, rather than treated as an external threat to be managed or eliminated.

By extending this antagonistic register to the boundaries of state-centered political life, Sisa Hartaku foregrounds a mode of curatorial discretion that is both candid and compelling. This quality has enabled the site to attract official recognition, including from the provincial government, which has come to endorse its role as an educative space on volcanic activity. Yet despite this institutional acknowledgment, Sisa Hartaku's memorial logic remains distinct from that of formally institutionalized, elite-backed museums. Memory at the site is neither exhaustively narrated nor selectively organized around narratives of recovery and resilience. Instead, it is sustained through

physical proximity to loss, the presence of material remnants, and forms of everyday engagement that embed remembrance within lived practice.

This mode of engagement also helps explain the site's capacity to blur the boundaries between mourning and spectacle. Visitors interact with the space in ways that are at once affective and informal; touching objects, navigating uneven terrain of villages surrounding Merapi, taking photographs, producing moments that may appear playful without negating the gravity of loss. Such interactions do not trivialize disaster; they instead destabilize the rigid separation between solemn remembrance and visual consumption that characterizes more formal memorial settings, including the Aceh Tsunami Museum. In doing so, Sisa Hartaku foregrounds a form of remembering that is less scripted, less monumental, and more open-ended, reflecting the everyday realities of living within an ongoing horizon of volcanic risk.

b. Lapindo Mudflow Site

The Lapindo mudflow disaster warrants special attention for its physical magnitude, but for the fact that it was not the consequence of a natural force majeure, but rather the culmination of human actions embedded within Indonesia's political–economic landscape. Occurring in the Porong district of Sidoarjo, a regency immediately south of Surabaya in East Java Province, a region frequently characterized as one of Indonesia's most industrialized, the disaster unfolded in a setting dense with corporate activity, including oil and gas exploration by PT Lapindo Brantas. In May 2006, during one such drilling operation, hot mud began to surge uncontrollably from beneath the earth. The scale of devastation that followed was staggering: entire villages were inundated, farmland rendered unusable, homes and businesses obliterated, schools shuttered, and thousands of residents displaced (Drake, 2013).

From the outset, PT Lapindo Brantas faced accusations of negligence in triggering the Sidoarjo mud volcano (McMichael, 2009), while state intervention was marked by inadequacy, failing to mitigate impacts or secure just compensation (Batubara, 2025; Down to Earth, 2006). Lapindo mud thus emerged as both an environmental calamity and a case study in corporate impunity and state passivity.

This framing, however, has long been complicated by a competing "natural history." Just forty-eight hours before the eruption, a 6.3-magnitude earthquake struck near Yogyakarta. Given that mud volcanoes are often triggered by seismic events, some geologists, including company advisors and several state experts, attributed the mudflow to a strike-slip movement along the Watukosek fault, positioning it as a natural disaster and thus beyond corporate liability (Bubandt, 2017; Novenanto, 2017). Critics dismissed this as a manufactured doubt campaign, citing the unprecedented 250-kilometer distance and the strategic interests behind such claims.

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The plurality of names used to designate the Lapindo mudflow site such as *Lusi*, *Lumpur Sidoarjo*, and *Lumpur Lapindo*, is not merely semantic inconsistency but politically consequential. As observed by Bubandt (2017, p. 128), naming operates as a discursive anchor point through which responsibility, causality, and moral accountability are either foregrounded or deflected. The term *Lumpur Lapindo* explicitly anchors the disaster to corporate culpability, while *Lumpur Sidoarjo* and the more affective *Lusi* allow the event to circulate as a localized or quasi-natural phenomenon.

Though never formally designated as a memorial or tourist site, Lusi has become informally organized by local residents into a space where memory and economy intersect. These communities, often themselves survivors of the disaster, lead visitors through the area, offering narratives that blend eyewitness testimony with ongoing grievance (Tampubolon, 2013; The Straits Times, 2016). Within this unresolved terrain, memorialization at the Lapindo site takes a markedly different form from that of curated museums or formal monuments. The site is largely devoid of designed exhibits or symbolic artifacts; instead, its materiality is dominated by the expansive, monotonous presence of mud submerging former houses, roads, schools, factories, and administrative buildings. With this in mind, the site mnemonic force is not curatorial orchestration but guided narration. Local residents, many of whom are themselves displaced survivors, lead visitors along the embankment, the earthen embankments constructed to contain the mudflow, narrating the landscape as they move through it. These narratives typically unfold as a layered assemblage of eyewitness testimony, personal loss, and unresolved grievance: pointing to submerged neighborhoods, recounting moments of evacuation, naming absent institutions, and reiterating demands for recognition and compensation.

Such guiding practices function as a form of contestation precisely because they operate outside the idiom of formal protest. Combined with demonstrations, legal petitions, or activist campaigns that seek visibility through confrontation and literary testimonies (Drake, 2013, 2018), these narrations are quiet, repetitive, and persistent that seemingly refuse the temporal closure implied by disaster recovery discourse and resist the depoliticization embedded in technocratic or geological framings. Storytelling here is performative rather than commemorative in a conventional sense: it continuously reinscribes the disaster as an ongoing political condition rather than a concluded event (Novenanto, 2017). Visitors are not positioned as passive spectators but as witnesses drawn into an unresolved moral economy, where memory circulates through walking, pointing, naming, and retelling. Community actors have assumed the role of custodians of memory, crafting a commemorative practice that is embedded in lived experience rather than official narrative.

Ecologically, the Lapindo mudflow remains an ongoing crisis, with environmental degradation, land subsidence, and displacement persisting nearly two decades after the initial eruption. Politically, it continues to symbolize the unresolved tensions between industrial development, environmental governance, and social justice in Indonesia. As a site of public memory, Lusi operates

in a liminal space; neither fully abandoned to oblivion nor embraced by the official apparatus of commemoration (Padawangi, 2016). It is here, in this ambiguity, that the site's analytical significance lies: it challenges the state–corporate alliance not through formal protest, but through the quiet persistence of storytelling, guiding, and remembering, thereby ensuring that the disaster remains part of the public consciousness despite the absence of institutional sanction (McMichael, 2009; Drake, 2013; Batubara, 2025; Tampubolon, 2013).

Memory, Power, and the Politics of Post-Disaster Memorialization

The diverse modalities of post-disaster memorialization in Indonesia, when examined closely, provide more than descriptive accounts of local responses to catastrophe. They illuminate the very character of Indonesian political life, where memory does not simply operate as a repository of mental impressions but emerges as an ambivalent and instrumental construction. On one register, such constructions nurture solidarity and nationalism, binding communities together through shared suffering and collective identity. On another, however, they function as lamentation, signaling a refusal to relinquish the past and embodying a quiet recalcitrance against enforced forgetting.

What is at stake, then, extends beyond the commemoration of disaster to encompass broader processes of nation-making, processes marked by disjuncture as much as unity. While the rhetoric of memorials often invokes national cohesion, such cohesion is continually challenged by divergent political imaginaries and practices of remembrance. These dynamics point to both a problematization of state power and an unfinished, fractured project of nationhood.

The Aceh Tsunami Museum exemplifies this tension with particular clarity. It is deeply embedded within a paternalistic logic of state memorialization, prescribing understood boundaries around which memories are rendered visible and which narratives are projected onto the national stage. Seminal work by Zilberg (2009), demonstrates how the museum is situated within entrenched vertical struggles between central state authorities, provincial governance structures, and civil society, revealing the persistence of hierarchical relations even in the aftermath of catastrophe. These dynamics are further illuminated in Samuels' (2019, p. 132), ethnographic account, where one informant's hope that the tsunami might finally bring an end to Aceh's long-standing conflict underscores how disaster was momentarily imagined as a rupture capable of reconfiguring political relations, an expectation that ultimately proved untenable.

Where this tension is especially evident is in debates over museum content. The preference of Indonesia's Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) for predominantly geological exhibits reflects an effort to privilege narratives that are universal, non-controversial, and compa-

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tible with technocratic governance and disaster-preparedness discourse, thereby sidelining more politically sensitive social and historical registers (Zilberg, 2009). At the same time, the enduring strength of Acehnese regional identity marks a clear limit to this paternalistic logic, necessitating, albeit partially, the inclusion of cultural and spiritual registers and underscoring the difficulty of subsuming Aceh's historical and affective particularities within a singular, state-centered narrative of disaster and recovery (Jauhola, 2015; McGregor, 2010; Samuels, 2019).

By contrast, *Sisa Hartaku* site, though lacking explicit reference to the volcanic powers that wrought devastation, nevertheless conveys their inevitability. Through fragments of personal belongings and ruined dwellings, it offers a *pars pro toto* representation of the collective trauma experienced by affected communities.

The Lapindo mudflow site, meanwhile, occupies an altogether different register. Neither museum nor formal memorial, it became an improvised tourist attraction, where displaced residents charged entry fees to visitors wishing to witness the submerged settlements. This practice at once commodified memory and articulated resistance: it refused closure, deferred the search for culpability, and redirected attention toward the ongoing struggle for recognition and settlement (Astuti, 2021; Astuti & Pandia, 2021; Irawan, 2019). The site itself embodies a form of resistance that is less about symbolic commemoration than about political survival. Advocacy efforts, community organizing, and even the act of imposing retribution fees constituted modes of politicization through which memory was weaponized in the pursuit of justice.

Thus, across these sites, memory is not reducible to either a unifying national narrative or a melancholic fixation on the past. Instead, it poses some imperative to consider the complex entanglements of politics, resistance, and ecology, where the force of geological events intersects with the ambivalence of national belonging and spirituality, and where communities transform memory into a site of both endurance and defiance.

A closer reading of memory as a constructed phenomenon, produced through the representation of memorial objects in both formal and informal registers, compels us to confront more troubling dimensions of sociopolitical life in Indonesia, especially in relation to the state. Memory here is not a neutral archive; rather, it operates divergently. On the one hand, certain memories are manufactured, prescribed, and normalized through official channels; on the other, counter-memories emerge organically as initiatives of individuals or collectives. When social and political registers converge, they can fashion self-organizing forms of collective agency. Yet this emergent vitality must be understood against the enduring hegemony of the state, which circumscribes claims for meaningful recognition and participatory citizenship.

What gives memory its potency as a mode of resistance, as visible in grassroots practices such as Sisa Hartaku and the improvised tourist economy at the Lapindo mudflow site, is precisely its capacity to unsettle the state's conventional image of the Indonesian subject as docile. These

popular acts of remembering refuse the easy equation of the citizen with obedience and instead articulate alternative forms of presence, accountability, and political claim-making.

Equally critical to the understanding of commemorative practice in this sense is to address what makes an obedient subject and thus it calls for attendance to the inseparability of power and knowledge in the formation and maintenance of dominance. Jackson's (1978), formulation of the "bureaucratic polity", which was the norm during the authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998) and albeit still quite at play in contemporary and democratic Indonesia captures this concretely: a polity in which a consortium of elites, insulated from a "floating mass," monopolizes influence; where ordinary people are effectively disenfranchised, especially under the justified by fears of foreign infiltration.

This bureaucratic design is sustained across multiple institutional vectors, the military, the civil service, political parties, mass media, and development planning, each reinforcing hierarchical control and limiting avenues for popular intervention. In such a configuration, grassroots memorial practices become more than expressions of grief: they are tactical responses to exclusion, modalities of resistance that rework memory into a claim for recognition, justice, and political voice.

Furthermore, significant tensions arise where the political instrumentalization of memory tends to marginalize the imperative of future mitigation. In the aftermath of the tsunami, non-governmental organizations assumed a quasi-authoritative role within Aceh, a region simultaneously devastated by disaster, fiscally weakened, and politically unsettled. This expanded presence generated growing concerns regarding accountability, particularly in relation to the extent of these organizations' long-term commitment to supporting social reconstruction and recovery. In the end, the overwhelming volume of support became counterproductive and in a way complicated the effort to rebuild and recover (Daly, 2015; Pandya, 2006; Zeccola, 2011).

The state-sanctioned framing of disasters as unavoidable acts of God or as tragedies overcome by national resilience, especially in the Lapindo case obscures the anthropogenic factors, like corporate negligence, and human-induced environmental degradation, that amplify vulnerabilities. By divorcing the disaster from its political ecology, such memorialization risks perpetuating the very conditions that lead to catastrophe. True commemoration, therefore, must not only honor the past but also serve as an unflinching pedagogical tool that demands accountability and prioritizes preventative justice, ensuring that memory actively contests the cycles of risk reproduction rather than becoming complicit in them.

Conclusion

The diverse memorialization of disaster in Indonesia, from the monumental Aceh museum to the intimate ruins of Sisa Hartaku and the activist landscape of Lapindo, reveal that the process

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of remembrance is never neutral. It is a deeply political field where the state seeks to consolidate narratives of resilience and national unity, often effacing questions of accountability and historical conflict. In contrast, grassroots and community-led memorials subvert this officialdom. They represent a critical form of resistance: against enforced forgetting, against corporate impunity, and against the state's monopolization of memory.

Sisa Hartaku resists through the raw, unmediated presence of ruin, preserving a haunting testimony that challenges sanitized, state-curated aesthetics. The Lapindo mudflow site resists through its very existence as an ongoing, commodified disaster; it is a space where survivors weaponize memory itself, using tourism as a platform to sustain their demand for justice and to keep the question of corporate culpability alive in the public consciousness. These practices demonstrate that for marginalized communities, memorialization is a vital mode of political claim-making. It is a way to assert presence, voice dissent, and challenge the image of the docile citizen within Indonesia's bureaucratic polity. Therefore, the core of contentious memorialization lies in this enduring struggle: while the state uses memory to build a unifying, forward-looking narrative, resistance emerges from the bottom up, insisting that true resilience cannot be achieved without accountability, and that the past must be remembered on terms that acknowledge its wounds and its ongoing injustices.

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Statement