



## Negotiating Sacred Space And Urban Legality In An Informal Settlement (Ethnographic Study In Katiasa Village, Harjamukti, Cirebon City)

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#### ABSTRACT

Housing is one of the basic human needs, but there are still many people who do not have a decent place to live. This phenomenon reflects the gap in the fulfillment of basic needs, including in urban areas such as Cirebon City. This research aims to understand the subcultures formed in communities living in the cemetery area, including adaptation patterns and strategies developed in facing various life struggles. The research used a qualitative method with a rapid ethnographic approach, where researchers were directly involved through observation, interviews, and documentation for approximately six months at the research location, namely Kampung Katiasa, Harjamukti Village, Cirebon City. The results showed that the people in the Kampung Katiasa area are the fifth generation to live in the Kemlaten Public Cemetery (TPU) area. The experience of living side by side with death gave birth to a new meaning to the concept of home and death itself. The community faces various struggles, such as inner struggles, land ownership conflicts, and difficulties in accessing the economy. To overcome this, they developed survival strategies, including not building new buildings, saving money to face the possibility of eviction, and avoiding activities in the cemetery area at certain times. These findings show that the people of Kampung Katiasa tend to use adaptive strategies in responding to social and economic conditions.

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## ABSTRAK

*Perumahan merupakan salah satu kebutuhan dasar manusia, namun masih banyak masyarakat yang tidak memiliki tempat tinggal layak. Fenomena ini mencerminkan adanya kesenjangan pemenuhan kebutuhan dasar, termasuk di wilayah urban seperti Kota Cirebon. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami subkultur yang terbentuk dalam masyarakat yang tinggal di area pemakaman, termasuk pola adaptasi dan strategi yang dikembangkan dalam menghadapi berbagai pergulatan hidup. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan etnografi cepat, di mana peneliti terlibat langsung melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi selama kurang lebih enam bulan di lokasi penelitian, yaitu Kampung Katiasa, Kelurahan Harjamukti, Kota Cirebon. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat di kawasan Kampung Katiyasa merupakan generasi kelima yang tinggal di area Tempat Pemakaman Umum (TPU) Kemlaten. Pengalaman hidup berdampingan dengan kematian melahirkan makna baru terhadap konsep rumah dan kematian itu sendiri. Masyarakat menghadapi berbagai pergulatan, seperti pergulatan batin, konflik kepemilikan lahan, dan kesulitan akses ekonomi. Untuk mengatasinya, mereka mengembangkan strategi bertahan hidup, antara lain dengan tidak membangun bangunan baru, menabung untuk menghadapi kemungkinan penggusuran, serta menghindari aktivitas di area pemakaman pada waktu-waktu tertentu. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat Kampung Katiasa cenderung menggunakan strategi adaptif dalam merespons kondisi sosial dan lingkungan tempat tinggalnya.*

## 1. Introduction

Shelter is one of the basic human needs that is urgent. Shelter is categorized as a physiological need that is essential for human survival and security (Sutono, 2021). Not only does it function as a physical living space, housing also reflects social status and cultural identity (Algunadi & Armiyanti, 2014). Therefore, the absence of adequate housing directly reflects the failure to fulfill the welfare of the community, as affirmed by Suharto (2005) and the mandate of the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution.

However, in the Indonesian context, the fulfillment of the right to housing remains a serious challenge, especially in urban areas. Uncontrolled urbanization has put pressure on city land and infrastructure. The imbalance between population migration and housing availability encourages the emergence of informal and illegal settlements, which often occupy spaces that are not suitable for their designation (Jamaludin, 2017). Locations such as railroad tracks (Ridlo, 2020), riverbanks (Algunadi & Armiyanti, 2014), under bridges, and even cemetery areas (Nisah & Handayani, 2014) become survival arenas for groups of people who do not have enough economic capital.

One interesting case occurred in Katiyasa Village, which is located in the Kemlaten Cemetery area, Harjamukti District, Cirebon City. This settlement has been in existence since the 1970s and continues to grow to this day despite standing on cemetery land. The existence of this settlement is not only supported by economic needs, but also on the basis of symbolic and cultural

capital of the community. belief in historical and spiritual values such as the belief that the Islamic figure Sheikh Siti Jenar once lived and was buried in the area (Wamad, 2021), is a strong source of legitimacy to sustain the existence of the community. This shows that the practice of occupancy on cemetery land is not only driven by economic factors, but also by historical and spiritual values that live in the collective consciousness of the community.

This problem presents an urgency to be studied in depth because it touches the realm of social vulnerability, spatial justice, and settlement policies that have not been able to reach the reality of marginalized communities. Although regulations such as the Cirebon City Regional Regulation No. 9/2017 on the Prevention and Improvement of the Quality of Slums and the Regional Spatial Planning Regulation No. 8/2012 have been established, the existence of Kampung Katiyasa continues to exist without comprehensive handling. Based on this, this research does not only view illegal settlements as a spatial problem or a violation of law as most previous studies have, but tries to understand the social, cultural and spiritual logic that shapes and perpetuates the existence of settlements in cemetery areas. Using an ethnographic approach, this research explores in depth how communities build legitimacy, adapt and manage living space, and negotiate their existence amidst the pressures of legality and stigma.

By answering these questions, this research aims to provide a new understanding of the dynamics of informal settlements that develop in sacred and unusual spaces, and contribute to the formulation of settlement policies that are more inclusive and based on the social realities of urban communities.

## **2. Methods**

This research uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods to explore in depth the dynamics of settlements in the Kampung Katiyasa cemetery area, Cirebon City. This approach was chosen so that researchers can understand the lives of local people through their own point of view (native's point of view), including values, habits, and social processes that develop in the neighborhood. The research location focused on 09 Community Unit (RW), especially at 01 and 02 Neighbourhood Unit (RT) which are located on the Kemlaten Public Cemetery (TPU) land. The research process lasted for approximately six months throughout 2022.

Data in this research was obtained from two main sources, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, visual and written documentation, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from supporting documents such as demographic data and relevant regional regulations.



Data collection was conducted in a variety of ways to obtain complete results. Interviews were conducted with the head of village, head of community unit, and local residents to explore information related to the history of the village, land status, and the experience of living in the cemetery area. Observation was used to observe social interactions, daily activities, and the physical condition of the environment. Documentation supported this process with visual evidence and field notes. FGDs were conducted once and involved various elements of the community to capture the symbolic meaning of the settlement and their hopes for the future of the village.

To ensure the validity of the data, this research applied source and method triangulation, by comparing findings from various informants and data collection techniques. Time triangulation was also used by conducting observations in different time spans, to reveal consistent patterns of life in the community.

All data were analysed using (Spradley, 1980) ethnographic cycle model, which includes the stages of planning, collecting, reducing, categorizing, and presenting data. Analysis was conducted simultaneously with the data collection process to ensure that the depth, relevance and interconnectedness of the findings were maintained throughout the research process.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

Administratively, Katiasa is located in Harjamukti Urban Village, Harjamukti District, Cirebon City. Katiasa is the name for RW 9 Harjamukti Village which stands in the area around Kemlaten Cemetery.

Kampung Katiasa RW 9 Harjamukti Village is divided into four RT's. RT 1 and RT 2 are located in the inner area of Kemlaten TPU (Public Cemetery) and the majority of them stand on TPU waqaf land. RT 3 and 4 are located on the outskirts of the TPU, standing on customary land, namely privately owned land obtained from inheritance or hereditary land.

Demographically, the latest data of 2023 Katiasa Village is inhabited by approximately 295 families with 130 families located in RT 1 and RT 2. The majority of the people of Katiasa Village work as casual laborers, some trade, and some are grave diggers. These professions are chosen according to their abilities and capital.

#### **The meaning of the cemetery for the community: Economic Source and Social Area**

Kemlaten Cemetery is a cemetery that can be said to be alive for 24 hours. The location of Kemlaten TPU, which is adjacent to the residential area of

Katiasa Village, makes Kemlaten TPU more alive and has a socio-economic function for the surrounding community, namely:

a. Source of Community Economy

Public Cemeteries (TPU) are often considered a sacred space, separated from the roar of socio-economic activity. However, in Kemlaten Cemetery, Cirebon, this narrative has changed significantly. Directly adjacent to the dense settlement of Kampung Katiasa, Kemlaten TPU is not just a final resting place, but a 24-hour living ecosystem that uniquely weaves sacred functions with economic and social activities, changing the way people interpret and utilize cemetery space. This phenomenon is not only an arena for socio-economic interaction around the cemetery, but also reflects the community's adaptation to limited land (Harvey, 2012).

Traditionally, cemeteries are sacred spaces devoid of economic activity. However, limited land in urban areas and pressing economic needs have prompted a functional reinterpretation of the cemetery area in TPU Kemlaten. The people of Kampung Katiasa do not see the physical boundary between settlements and cemeteries as a barrier, but rather as an opportunity.

This phenomenon shows how emic perspectives (views from within the community itself) on sacred space can adapt to economic realities. For Katiasa residents, while the tomb itself is revered, its periphery is seen as "dead land" that can be brought to life through economic activity without compromising the sacredness. It is not just about making a living, but also about creating life and security in a space conventionally associated with death and solitude.

Kemlaten TPU has become a center of diverse informal economic activities, reflecting the adaptation and innovation of the local community:

- 1) 24-Hour Local Stalls: Along the periphery of the TPU, rows of stalls owned by residents of Kampung Katiasa stand. From *seblak*<sup>1</sup> stalls, groceries, animal feed, to fast food, these stalls not only serve the daily needs of local residents, but also users of the alternative road that cuts through the TPU. The presence of these stalls, with their bright lighting, transforms the "dark and scary" perception of the cemetery into a safe and bright space, reducing the fear of people passing by, even at night. This is a concrete example of how economic necessity creates unexpected social functions.
- 2) Flexible Informal Employment: In addition to stalls, Kemlaten Cemetery is also a source of various informal jobs such as; a) Grave Digger which is exclusively accessed by the men of Katiasa Village. With the main capital of willingness and energy, this job is available whenever there is a funeral, showing the flexibility and accessibility of informal work. 2) Seasonal Workers: Parking lot attendants, flower sellers, and drink sellers become very active in the run-up to the

<sup>1</sup> Local food such as spicy cracker soup

fasting month until after Eid al-Fitr. This is the peak pilgrimage period, where the sheer number of pilgrims creates seasonal economic opportunities that residents take advantage of. These jobs are not only economically beneficial but also facilitate and ease pilgrims in fulfilling their needs, suggesting a symbiotic mutualism between service providers and pilgrims.

- 3) Night Market as a Socio-Economic Meeting Point: The presence of a night market every Friday night in the Kemlaten TPU area adds another dimension. The night market attracts traders from outside the Katiasa area, expanding the economic reach of the TPU. More than just transactions, the night market also serves as a center of recreation and social interaction for the community, fulfilling entertainment needs that are often difficult to access in dense settlements.

Although Kemlaten TPU demonstrates harmony between sacred and economic functions, potential tensions cannot be ignored. The local community's emic view of "there is no prohibition as long as it does not disturb road users" is key. This implies the existence of unwritten boundaries governing space utilization: economic activity must not pollute the sanctity of the tomb itself and not impede pilgrims' access or comfort. This concept of "unwritten social agreements" is in line with (Bourdieu, 1990) concept of *habitus*, the norms that shape behavior without being explicitly written down.

This harmony is realized because the perceived communal benefits outweigh the potential for conflict. The lighting from stalls that keeps the TPU bright, the ease of access for pilgrims, and the jobs created are evidence that the community has found a way to balance spiritual values with pragmatic needs. Kemlaten TPU, therefore, serves as a model of how an inherently sacred public space can be integrated into the socio-economic life of the city, reflecting a dynamic cultural adaptation in the midst of limited urban space in Cirebon.

#### b. Community Social Arena

In Kampung Katiasa, where residential land is very limited and houses tend to be small, TPU Kemlaten emerges as a crucial "third space" after housing. This is not just about physical accessibility, but about the reinterpretation of the meaning of sacred space by urban communities in line with (Lefebvre, 1991) idea that social space is not neutral, but is shaped and recreated by social relations and human needs. In this case, people no longer see the cemetery only as a site of mourning, but as an extension of their communal space, a canvas for diverse social interactions.

Symbolically, the cemetery, though inhabited by the dead, paradoxically comes alive through the presence of the living. The availability of a large



space, albeit filled with headstones, provides a spatial expanse not found in the cramped houses. For residents, this is evidence of pragmatic cultural adaptation, where the need for social space overcomes conventional constraints on sacredness.

The intense social interaction at TPU Kemlaten creates conditions that are far from haunted. These activities not only fill leisure time, but also strengthen social ties:

- 1) Nongkrong: the habit of the women of Katiasa Village to gather in the afternoon, sit casually on a tombstone, and chat. During the focus group discussion, one of the residents said, "Yes, Ma'am, in the afternoon at home it is stuffy and hot. Outside the wind is nice." This quote clearly shows how practical needs combine with social meaning. The gravestone, symbolically a marker of death, is reinterpreted as a comfortable place to sit, enabling informal interactions that are essential for community cohesion. This is a form of cultural negotiation of sacred space.
- 2) Childcare and Play: Children are free to run around and play among the graves, under the supervision of their parents. TPUs become natural playgrounds, where the boundaries between life and death are blurred in the joy of childhood. This shows how this space serves as an arena for cross-generational socialization. According to one of the children playing soccer, "I'm not afraid, because there's no other place to play soccer".
- 3) Hajatan and Dangdut: utilization of the cemetery area for large celebrations such as circumcisions and weddings. Land and economic limitations force residents to innovate. "So don't be surprised, Ma'am, if there is dangdut in the cemetery area here," said a resident. She continued, "If you live in a narrow house, renting a building is expensive. Here, the streets are wide, so we can put up tents and a stage for a solo organ. The locals are also helping. The important thing is to celebrate, pray for the good."

This quote is crucial in understanding the social meaning of the party at the cemetery. Dangdut and solo organs are not just entertainment, but an integral part of the celebration rituals that mark the life cycle. The presence of boisterous music and crowds among the headstones reflects the community's belief that life should be celebrated, even alongside death. It is a celebration of human existence that transcends the limitations of space and dismisses absolute sacredness, demonstrating the flexibility of cultural interpretations of burial space. The sedekah bumi activities that are also held

there further reinforce the cemetery's function as the central point of communal rituals.

As a living 'social arena', TPU Kemlaten is also not free from conflict. Pierre Bourdieu (Adib, 2012) calls social space a "field" where struggles over resources and capital occur. In Katiasa Village, conflicts that arise in the cemetery area are often inter-individual as in the form of gossip, individuals with groups or inter-groups as in the case of conflict over land. Although considered "normal" and not disruptive to public order, such conflicts demonstrate informal power dynamics and the struggle for symbolic capital (reputation, social status) within the community. Cemeteries, as open public spaces, become places where social norms are tested and interpersonal tensions are revealed. A deeper analysis could look at how these gossip functions as an informal social control mechanism or as an argument for social fragmentation.

### **The Struggle of the People of Katiasa Village: Land legality, Ideals, and Myths**

Every individual wants a comfortable and good house and place to live. A good house is also an individual's economic capital to raise their social class. This ideal is also what the people in Katiasa Village want to achieve. However, in the discussion forum that was held during the research, the community revealed that the house they currently live in is physically uncomfortable. The small size of the house and the fact that it is inhabited by many family members (there is more than one family in one house) means that there is very limited space for movement, such as no area for children to play. In addition, these conditions also make privacy between individuals less secure.

Another inconvenience experienced by the community is the home environment. As explained in the previous description, the houses in Katiasa Village are adjacent to the cemetery. This condition makes people feel uncomfortable because the surrounding environment is full of tombstones.

The inconvenience in living that the Katiasa community experiences basically wants to get a solution. The community aspires to have a larger house and a neighborhood that is far from the cemetery to support their daily activities. However, back to the conditions and economic limitations make the community unable to do much. In the end, the community again chose to live and survive in Katiasa Village.

The helpless condition of the community in Katiasa Village also occurs in terms of land legality ownership (certification of land ownership rights). Although the people of Katiasa Village are recognized administratively, until



now the community does not have the legality of land ownership as evidenced by land certificates.

Based on the informant's statement, the community's survival in Kampung Katiasa is also part of carrying out the mandate of the Palace. In this case, the palace as the landowner allows the community to live in Kampung Katiasa until whenever, even if they want to sell their house. However, the status of the land remains under the ownership of the Palace so that the community will not be able to make a certificate.

Based on the description above, it can be seen that the people in Kampung Katiasa do not have administrative and population problems. The community gets official identity rights as a citizen in the form of a land certificate.

However, the community experienced obstacles in housing administration. The community understands that their house is located on waqaf land, but they want to get their house and land officially. This is done on the grounds that the land occupied is inherited land which when built was empty land without an owner and until now the community has routinely paid land and building tax (PBB).

The community's desire for land legality was realized through efforts to obtain land certificates. This effort was made not only once but several times with zero results. The authorities were unwilling to grant housing legality on the grounds that the land was waqaf cemetery land on which housing should not be built.

At the time of this research, land legality was still an aspiration for residents. On the one hand, the community wanted legality. But on the other hand, the community realizes that legality is an impossible thing to have considering the mandate of the palace as the landowner, which only allows living but not ownership.

The palace's mandate regarding land legality is considered sacred to the community. This mandate must be carried out and will have consequences if carried out. The community believes that if waqaf land is claimed for ownership and certified, the land will cause blessings such as economic ruin, health problems, and even death to the family who inhabits the land. The community's belief is built on the basis of cases that have occurred in the neighborhood.

Based on the description above, it is known that the existence of Katiasa Village cannot be separated from the life built by its residents. Legally, the land of the people of Katiasa Village is indeed on illegal land. The community inhabits waqaf cemetery land, which is legally not allowed to build settlements. The community also does not have the right to legalize the land on which they live.

### **Survival Strategy of the Katiyasa Village Community**

The existence of the Kemlaten TPU cemetery, which has existed since before the community was born, means that the surviving community must be able to adjust to the existence of the cemetery. It is important to do this so that people's lives can run as usual even though the location is in the cemetery area. This condition makes the community do several things, including:

#### **1. Not building or adding new buildings**

The people of Katiyasa village are the generation who inhabit the house inherited from the previous generation. The house they currently live in is the same house that the previous generation (parents) gave them. Although they want to have a bigger house, several obstacles such as illegal land status, lack of land and financial limitations make the community stay with the house that has been built.

The status of the land is a big reason for the community to survive with the condition of the existing house. Living on land without legality makes the community vulnerable to the threat of eviction. In addition, the status of waqaf land does not allow people to add and build new buildings. The community realizes this rule because cemetery land for settlements is also limited. The cemetery land is full and there is no longer enough space to build settlements. Therefore, people only live in existing houses and do not change them. People keep their houses intact as they got them from previous generations and only make renovations if necessary.

The cemetery at TPU Kemlaten is an active cemetery that is still in use today. Activities at TPU Kemlaten also run like other cemetery activities such as burials and grave pilgrimages. Especially grave pilgrimages, usually take place on Fridays and certain times such as during holidays. At these times, the cemetery is quite crowded with pilgrims. Therefore, at that time the community does not carry out activities in the cemetery area as usual. For example, they do not congregate and sit casually on the tombstones and do not play soccer in the cemetery. This is done to respect each other and avoid conflict.

#### **2. Building Economic and Social Capital**

Pada Basically, the status of community housing in Katiyasa Village can be said to be legal and illegal. Legal because the community has permission to build and inhabit the land. However, it is illegal because the community does not have ownership papers. This status creates conditions that are prone to eviction if one day the landowner or his heirs take the land. In this condition, the community has prepared themselves if one day their land is taken and they have to move house. The preparation is done by saving money.

The community's ability to save is built due to the limited land that makes the community unable to add buildings. Therefore, if there is a budget for house management, it is diverted to savings. This is done to anticipate if one day the land is taken and the community is evicted from Katiasa Village. The savings that the community accumulates basically become the community's economic capital to build strength. Economic capital is financial resources that can be used and utilized by the community to achieve goals, such as income, savings, and ownership (Prihandini, 2017). In the Katiasa community, economic capital is dominated by income, accounts payable and savings while ownership is something that is still aspired to.

The economic capital of the people of Katiasa Village in the form of income and savings is used for daily needs and becomes a reserve fund if one day they have to move. Meanwhile, the community's economic capital in the form of debt and credit is prioritized for business capital such as debt and credit made through the *emok* bank.

In addition to having economic capital, the people of Kampung Katiasa also have capital that is considered part of the strength and positive side of living in TPU Kemlaten. Based on kinship lines, the community of Kampung Katiasa consists of kinship networks that, if traced, are still in one lineage (December 14, 2023). The community recognizes that residents from the front to the back know each other clearly and if traced, there are still family ties. This relationship is the social capital of the Katiasa Village community to strengthen each other. This story was conveyed by one of the informants when responding to the eviction of stalls in the cemetery area. The informant emphasized that "if one is evicted, then all must be evicted", indicating that it is not permissible to only evict some of them. If the eviction occurs, the TPU will be deserted, scary and difficult for others who want to pass the alternative road. In addition, if the eviction occurs, the mandate of the palace that entrusts the cemetery to be maintained will be violated. Some of these values are still adhered to by the community to survive and remain in Kampung Katiasa.

Based on the description above, it can be seen that the social capital of the Katiasa community operates in the form of social networks or relationships built between individuals and groups to gain recognition among each other (Linda, 2019). In this social network, the community builds cooperation, mutual cooperation, and joint participation so that moral support is built. This social capital is also what binds the Katiasa community so that people can live comfortably and survive even though there is an opportunity to move because they are married to people outside the area. As stated by (Solikatun & Juniarsih, 2018) that social capital can be a strategy for survival, this is also



used by the people in Katiasa Village to build a comfortable life on top of concerns and struggles for land rights.

The people of Katiasa Village have inhabited the Kemlaten TPU area for decades and have survived until now. This shows that there is a bond between the land and the community in which the community interprets the burial ground as a mandate that must be maintained. In addition, the burial ground also provides a source of economy and livelihood. Therefore, the community has values that are embraced in living side by side with the cemetery, including the value of mutual respect by making several adjustments to their environment.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This research departs from fundamental issues regarding the dynamics of informal settlements and community resilience in contested spaces, especially in the context of areas that have religious or sacred significance. The case of Kampung Katiasa in Harjamukti RW 09, which is located in the Kemlaten TPU cemetery area and stands on waqf land, provides rich ethnographic insights into the complexities of living within the boundaries of urban legality and social norms. The research findings highlight that the existence of the Katiasa community for more than five decades is not simply an anomaly, but a manifestation of deep socio-cultural adaptation to the cemetery environment, which has been transformed from a place of final rest to a vital social arena and economic resource.

This study makes significant empirical and theoretical contributions to understanding informal settlements, particularly in cemetery areas. Empirically, the case of Kampung Katiasa challenges the dominant narrative of settlement illegality that often focuses only on the formal ownership dimension. This research shows that, despite legally lacking property rights, the Katiasa community's presence is permitted by the waqaf grantor as indefinite land users, an important nuance that highlights non-formal forms of legitimacy in the context of indigenous and religious communities in Indonesia. Furthermore, we uncover how the community builds economic and social capital as a resilience strategy for survival, even in the face of uncertain land status, as well as their willingness to adapt by not adding new buildings as a form of adjustment to environmental conditions.

Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of community resilience in contested urban spaces. Kampung Katiasa offers the perspective that resilience is not only determined by economic factors or formal policies, but also by the construction of social and cultural meanings of space, in this

case the cemetery. The reciprocal relationship between the community and the cemetery environment that has been going on for generations forms a unique pattern of life and culture, challenging the assumption that sacred spaces cannot be productively inhabited. This study implicitly questions urban policy discourses in Indonesia that often tend to ignore the cultural and historical dimensions of land ownership, and sharply dichotomize between “legal” and “illegal” without considering cultural or communal legitimacy.

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