

# Legal Pluralism and Interethnic Land Conflict in the Development of the Nusantara Capital Area, East Kalimantan, Indonesia

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Edwardus Iwantri Goma<sup>1\*</sup>, R. Rijanta<sup>2</sup>, and Ratih Fitria Putri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Geography Education, Faculty of Teacher Training Education, Universitas Mulawarman, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Doctoral Program in Population Studies, Graduate School, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

\* Edwardus Iwantri Goma, corresponding author. Email: [edward\\_goma@mail.ugm.ac.id](mailto:edward_goma@mail.ugm.ac.id)

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## Abstract

This study investigates how migration, diverse land tenure systems, and interethnic relations shape social dynamics and conflict in the development zone of Indonesia's new capital, Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN). Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with six participants—three Balik migrants and three Javanese migrants—supported by participant observation. Thematic analysis, guided by Creswell's (2015) framework and strengthened through triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentary sources, ensured analytic rigor. Findings reveal that overlapping statutory and customary land systems create legal ambiguity that fuels interethnic disputes, intra-communal fragmentation, and the erosion of customary authority. The study proposes a typology of land conflicts—vertical (community–state), horizontal (interethnic), and internal (intra-communal)—to capture the multi-layered nature of contestation. The findings emphasize that acknowledging indigenous land rights, strengthening participatory spatial planning, and institutionalizing culturally grounded conflict mediation are essential to achieving inclusive, conflict-sensitive urban transformation in Indonesia's new capital.

## Keywords

Capital relocation; East Kalimantan; Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN); land conflict typology; migration

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## Introduction

The relocation of Indonesia's capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan—formally named Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) under Law No. 3/2022—represents a major spatial transformation designed to reduce demographic and ecological pressures on Java while fostering more equitable national development. Beyond its physical and economic objectives, however, the IKN project has triggered complex socio-spatial changes, particularly in Sepaku Subdistrict, Penajam Paser Utara Regency, which has been designated as the core development area (Farida et al., 2024; Tasya, 2024).

Scholars note that the implementation of the IKN Law and associated land acquisition policies has enabled elite-driven development practices that frequently overlook human rights safeguards and participatory governance, generating social unrest and potential conflict (Buana et al., 2023). Consequently, the IKN project not only reshapes the physical landscape but also reconfigures social relations, power structures, and territorial identities in East Kalimantan.

Historically, East Kalimantan has displayed considerable demographic diversity due to successive waves of transmigration, particularly from Java (Rijanta et al., 2022). Data from the 2021 National Socio-Economic Survey (SUSENAS) indicate that migrants make up a substantial share of the population, with lifetime migrants accounting for approximately 34.6% of residents, most of whom originate from Java (BPS - Statistics Indonesia, 2022). These figures underscore the enduring role of migration in shaping Indonesia's internal demographic landscape (Alabshar et al., 2023).

The influx of Javanese migrants into Sepaku—initially through state-sponsored transmigration programs and later through spontaneous in-migration—has significantly reshaped land ownership structures in areas historically inhabited by the Balik people. Most Javanese migrants participating in the government's transmigration initiative were allocated state-prepared land parcels with ownership certificates ranging from one to two hectares (Tanikwele et al., 2023). In contrast, the Balik ethnic group, as the region's indigenous inhabitants, maintains a profound cultural and historical connection to the land, rooted in customary traditions and practices (Badan Registrasi Wilayah Adat [BRWA], 2024). However, the customary land tenure system frequently clashes with the government-recognized legal frameworks, creating a persistent source of tension (Buana et al., 2023).

Existing studies on migration, land-use change, and capital relocation indicate that large-scale development projects can intensify land competition, widen spatial inequalities, and marginalize indigenous landholders when customary tenure systems are excluded from formal planning (e.g., Barter & Côté, 2015; de Jong et al., 2021; Seto et al., 2011; Teixeira et al., 2021). However, few studies have simultaneously examined the interconnected dynamics among (1) the plurality of land tenure regimes—state-certified versus customary rights, (2) interethnic relations between migrants and indigenous communities, and (3) intra-communal conflicts within indigenous groups driven by rising land values.

The case of IKN in Sepaku illustrates the intersection of these dimensions. The legalization of migrant land, the persistence of Balik customary claims, and the emergence of competing indigenous leaders have collectively intensified social tensions in the region. To address these gaps, this study employs an in-depth qualitative approach to examine how land tenure

regimes, migrant experiences, and intra-communal dynamics unfold within the broader context of Indonesia's national capital relocation.

In light of the issues outlined above, this study examines how migration and the coexistence of state and customary legal systems generate structural ambiguity in land governance. By tracing how these overlapping regimes are negotiated in everyday practices, the study contributes to theoretical debates on legal pluralism, indigenous land rights, and the governance of customary communities under state authority. Beyond its empirical insights, the study also situates the IKN case within the broader global trend of state-directed capital relocation. Comparable projects in Brazil (Brasília) and Myanmar (Naypyidaw) show that the establishment of new capitals frequently restructures outlying regions, reconfigures local governance, and reinforces socio-spatial inequalities. Finally, the study develops a typology of land conflicts, offering a novel contribution to the literature on migration, land governance, and urban relocation in Southeast Asia.

## Literature review

### Migration, social interaction, and the contestation of land legitimacy

Migration-induced social interactions shape how communities negotiate authority, belonging, and access to land within plural legal arrangements. In the IKN context, these interactions reflect not only demographic shifts but also everyday negotiations shaped by perceived inequalities and struggles for recognition. Migration, therefore, does not merely produce demographic change but also profoundly influences the dynamics of social interaction in host regions (Palczewska, 2023; Williams, 2024). Social interaction refers to relationships among individuals or groups (Bali, 2017).

In Indonesia, migration-driven interactions have historically been shaped by the transmigration policy that redistributed Javanese populations to outlying islands, including Kalimantan (Barter & Côté, 2015; Rijanta et al., 2022). This policy produced enduring relationships between migrants and indigenous groups, marked by both cooperation and conflict. In Sepaku, these dynamics appear in everyday encounters between Javanese migrants and the Balik community, where interethnic relations are negotiated through shared labor, community meetings, and land-related disputes, illustrating how micro-level interactions contribute to broader socio-spatial transformations.

Land governance in Indonesia operates within a system of legal pluralism, in which statutory and customary institutions coexist but often conflict. This dualism shapes how land authority and legitimacy are constructed and contested (Peluso & Lund, 2011; Sikor & Lund, 2010). Although customary law (*hukum adat*) remains central to indigenous identity and territorial belonging, it is often marginalized within formal legal frameworks. Consequently, conflicts arise not only from material competition but also from unequal recognition of the legal systems governing land.

These tensions reflect the "politics of possession," whereby both state and community actors invoke legal and moral claims to assert control over territory (Sikor & Lund, 2010; Pienaar, 2018). Land thus functions simultaneously as an economic resource and a symbol of identity and legitimacy. In the IKN project, these dynamics intensify as state-led development

intersects with long-standing indigenous tenure systems that lack formal recognition. Consequently, the core issue in Sepaku concerns the governance and recognition of indigenous rights within Indonesia's evolving land regime.

## **Migration and resource-based conflict**

Migration—particularly through the transmigration program—has long reshaped access to land and remains a major driver of resource-based conflict. Large-scale migration intensifies competition over land and reinforces power asymmetries, especially when state-issued land rights conflict with undocumented customary claims (Berenschot & Saraswati, 2024; Nurlinah & Haryanto, 2024; Vesco et al., 2020; Wiederkehr et al., 2022).

Since the 1970s, transmigration has reshaped agrarian structures and generated enduring tensions between indigenous communities and newcomers (Arifin, 2024). These historical legacies remain salient in Sepaku, where Javanese migrant settlers and the Balik community continue to navigate overlapping and contested land claims amid ongoing IKN development. Land conflict persists due to several structural factors: (1) Dualism in agrarian law, wherein overlapping statutory and customary frameworks complicate land governance (Anastasia et al., 2024); (2) Land grabbing, as the expansion of extractive and plantation industries displaces local communities (Bakker, 2023; Steinebach, 2017); and (3) Incomplete land data, as inaccurate or outdated land records foster uncertainty and disputes among communities and state agencies (Buana, 2017; Hasan et al., 2023; Patittingi et al., 2021).

## **Capital relocation, spatial change, and indigenous marginalization**

Capital relocation, although framed as a strategy for national integration, often disrupts existing social orders due to extensive land acquisition processes that frequently conflict with customary tenure systems (de Jong et al., 2021). Such projects accelerate urbanization and can further exacerbate inequalities when their benefits are unevenly distributed (Huang et al., 2023; Seto et al., 2011).

Experiences from Brasília and Naypyidaw show that large-scale spatial interventions frequently displace indigenous communities and produce long-term socio-spatial tensions (Seekins, 2021; Teixeira et al., 2021). These cases highlight the need for inclusive planning to prevent fragmentation. In the IKN context, the intersection of state-led planning and informal customary land claims renders spatial governance highly contested. Recognizing the multi-layered character of land tenure and identity is therefore crucial for mitigating conflict and fostering socially just urban development. Building on this context, the present study provides a micro-level perspective from Sepaku Subdistrict, examining how migration, legal pluralism, and local authority interact in everyday life.

## **Research methods**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the dynamics of migration, land tenure, and interethnic interaction within the IKN developmental framework. A case study design enables an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within their real-life settings (Yin, 2016).

## Study area and context

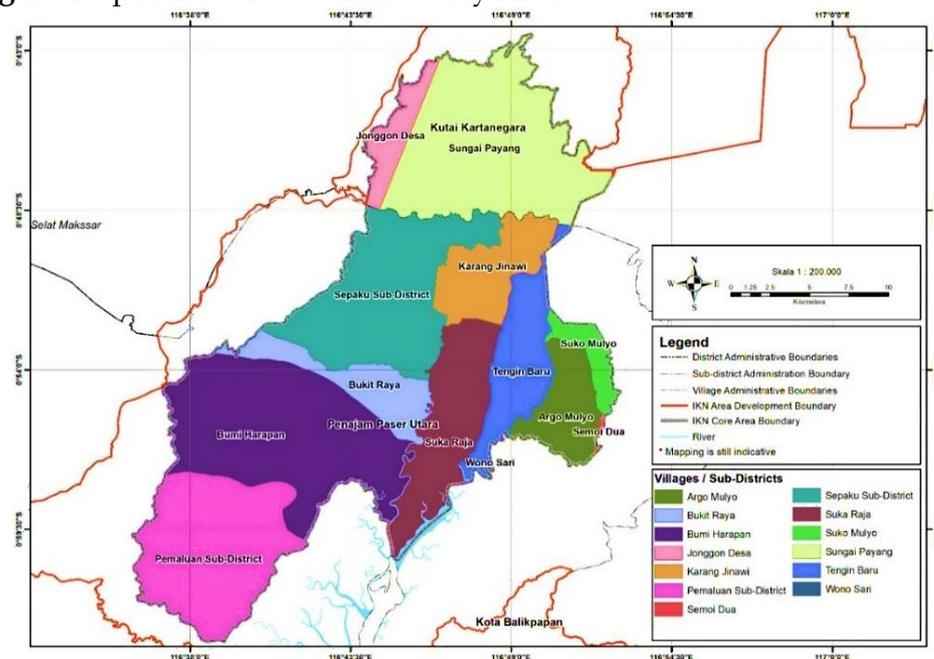
The study was conducted in Sepaku Subdistrict, Penajam Paser Utara Regency, East Kalimantan, which is recognized as the core area of IKN development. Sepaku was selected based on four criteria: (1) the presence of the indigenous Balik ethnic group, (2) the presence of Javanese migrant populations originating from the 1970s–1980s transmigration program, (3) the occurrence of land-related tensions, and (4) its strategic location within the IKN master plan.

Sepaku's demographic composition has been significantly shaped by the 1970s–1980s transmigration program, which relocated Javanese households and granted them one to two hectares of state-certified land. This restructuring altered local agrarian systems and population patterns. In contrast, the indigenous Balik community maintains strong cultural and spiritual ties to ancestral lands governed by customary law, which emphasizes collective ownership and lineage-based inheritance. However, the limited legal recognition of customary tenure has made these lands vulnerable to dispossession.

The announcement of the IKN project in 2019 transformed Sepaku's socio-spatial landscape, triggering land speculation, administrative reclassification, and intensified competition over land ownership. These developments further exacerbated interethnic disputes between migrants and the Balik community, as well as internal divisions among Balik leaders. The case of Sepaku, therefore, illustrates how historical transmigration, legal pluralism, and state-led spatial transformation intersect to shape contemporary interethnic and intra-community conflicts in the IKN development zone.

To provide a clearer understanding of the study context and spatial relationships among key locations, Figure 1 illustrates the research area, including administrative boundaries, the IKN core development zone, and the distribution of major villages where fieldwork was conducted.

**Figure 1: Spatial Overview of the Study Area**



Note: Author-generated map created using ArcGIS based on spatial planning data from Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 3 of 2022 on the State Capital (Republic of Indonesia, 2022a)

## **Data collection**

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. Informants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. A total of six participants were recruited, comprising three members of the Balik community and three Javanese migrants. To ensure anonymity while distinguishing perspectives, Balik informants were coded as “PL,” and Javanese informants as “MJ.”

Data collection instruments included a researcher-developed interview guide and an observation checklist. The interview guide, adapted from Creswell (2015), comprised open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their experiences and interactions related to land ownership, migration, and interethnic relations. Observations focused on community meetings, land demarcation practices, and public expressions of grievance.

## **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed following Creswell’s (2015) three-step procedure: (1) data condensation, involving the organization and summarization of key themes; (2) data display, entailing the structuring of findings into coherent narratives; and (3) conclusion drawing, focusing on the interpretation of patterns and the derivation of insights. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged across repeated interviews.

## **Validity and triangulation**

To enhance validity, methodological triangulation was applied by comparing data from interviews, field observations, and secondary materials. These materials included policy and planning documents related to the IKN master plan, as well as local media reports and community meeting minutes addressing land disputes and claims to customary leadership.

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Gadjah Mada (Ref. No. KE/UGM/039/EC/2024). Participants were informed about the study and provided written informed consent. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Interviews were conducted in private locations selected by participants, with particular attention paid to minimizing social risk due to the sensitivity of land conflicts and interethnic relations.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Interethnic land conflict in Sepaku**

The interactions between Javanese migrants and the indigenous Balik community in Sepaku have progressively shifted from relative coexistence toward contestation, shaped by the legacy of the state-sponsored transmigration program and divergent land tenure regimes.

Initial cooperation in agricultural activities gradually gave way to heightened tensions as state-issued land titles held by migrants came into conflict with the Balik community's largely unrecognized customary land claims. These tensions intensified further following expanded state development interventions, which exacerbated legal ambiguity and uneven recognition of land rights.

Disputes over land ownership have become the central source of conflict between the two groups. The findings indicate that the Balik community asserts ancestral claims over land currently occupied by Javanese migrants. However, this land was legally allocated by the state to migrants and formalized through transmigration land certificates. The tension arising from these competing claims is illustrated by a statement from informant MJ1:

*Many plots of land were taken without prior discussion. Boundaries were simply marked, and it was described as a maneuver by Javanese migrants regarding land ownership status. When I visited the site, the size of my land had already been reduced, and a red marker had been placed on it.*

(MJ1)

Land conflicts between migrants and the indigenous Balik community have intensified following the announcement of the IKN development. According to informants MJ1 and MJ2, although land claims by the Balik community existed prior to IKN, the frequency of disputes increased sharply after the project was announced. Rising land values further encouraged some Balik community members to sell land, thereby reinforcing contestation over ownership.

*There were already land claims before the IKN announcement, but they increased significantly afterward. While claims existed even prior to IKN, the intensity of disputes escalated once the IKN project emerged.*

(MJ2)

*Some people sold their land and became wealthier; you can see that they now own cars.*

(MJ1)

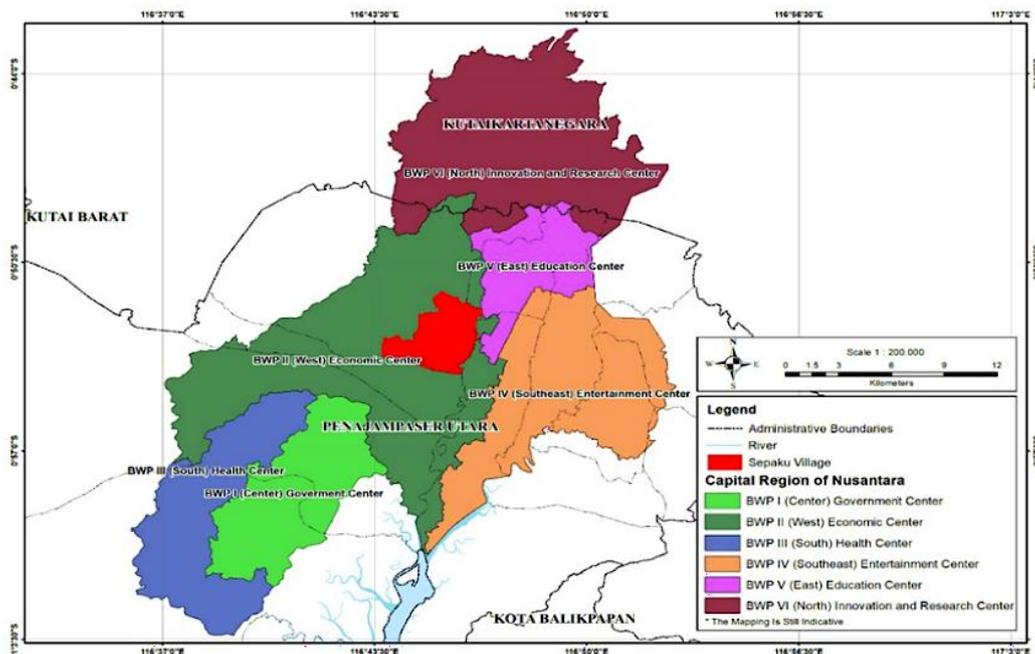
The designation of Sepaku Subdistrict as the core development area for the new capital has altered land appropriation dynamics, particularly shaping relations between the indigenous Balik community and Javanese migrant landholders. This status has prompted intensified efforts by Balik community members to reclaim land previously occupied or owned by migrants. While some migrants attempt to defend their land rights, others express resignation shaped by fear and social pressure, as illustrated by the following account:

*My child does not want to fight over the land; he is afraid. I wanted to insist on defending it, but my child would not allow it. I finally said, 'Just take it if you want. What matters is that my land remains blessed.'*

(MJ1)

As part of the IKN Core Area, Sepaku Subdistrict has experienced a substantial increase in land values. As shown in Figure 2, the area encompasses zones designated for strategic functions, including the Government Centre and emerging economic hubs.

**Figure 2:** Location of Sepaku Subdistrict Relative to the IKN Development Area



Note: Author-generated map created using ArcGIS based on spatial planning data from Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 3 of 2022 on the State Capital (Republic of Indonesia, 2022a) and Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 64 of 2022 on the spatial plan for the national strategic area of the Nusantara Capital City, 2022–2042 (Republic of Indonesia, 2022b)

Although Javanese migrants initially received land at no cost through the transmigration program, they now face increasing pressure from residents who regard land as a valuable commodity. This dynamic is consistent with prior research indicating that rising land values associated with urbanization frequently trigger land-use conflicts between migrants and local populations (Hulfareza & Dewi, 2021; Lombard, 2016).

## Customary vs. Legal land tenure

The tension between customary land tenure systems and formal legal frameworks constitutes a central fault line in Sepaku's socio-spatial transformation. The Balik community's historical attachment to land is grounded in genealogical inheritance, ritual practices, and long-term occupation; however, these claims remain largely unrecognized by the state. By contrast, Javanese migrants typically possess land ownership certificates (*sertifikat hak milik*) obtained through state-sponsored transmigration programs or market transactions, which confer formal recognition and legal protection under Indonesia's national land law.

The Balik ethnic group grounds its land ownership claims in customary law, locally known as *adat* law, which is recognized only to a limited extent within Indonesia's national legal framework. Consequently, many customary lands, despite their deep historical and cultural significance, are regarded as lacking formal legal status (Kurniawan et al., 2024). The findings indicate that the Balik community, like many other indigenous groups in Indonesia, relies on traditional knowledge and practices to delineate land boundaries. These practices include: (1) the placement of customary markers, such as wooden or stone objects, to demarcate territorial boundaries (see Figure 3); and (2) the strategic planting of specific trees, particularly sugar

palm (*Arenga pinnata*, locally known as *tondal tuwak*), which functions as both an ecological indicator and a customary signifier of land ownership (see Figure 4)

**Figure 3:** Wooden Boundary Marker Used by the Balik Community to Demarcate Customary Land Boundaries



*Note: Author's documentation, 2024*

**Figure 4:** The Aren Palm (*Arenga pinnata*), Locally Known as *Tondal Tuwak*, Used by the Balik Community as a Customary Boundary Marker



*Note: Author's documentation, 2024*

In regions such as Indonesia and China, pronounced socioeconomic disparities between migrant populations and local communities often give rise to conflicts commonly referred to as *Putra Tanah* conflicts. The term *Putra Tanah* – literally meaning “sons of the soil” – denotes a sociopolitical phenomenon in which indigenous populations claim preferential rights to land, resources, or political representation based on their status as the original inhabitants of a given region (Acharya et al., 2017; Barter & Côté, 2015; Boone, 2017).

These conflicts tend to emerge when local communities perceive that migrant groups disproportionately benefit from regional economic, political, or social systems (Barter & Côté, 2015). Such dynamics often generate resentment, especially when migrant success is viewed as undermining indigenous populations' historical claims and access to resources. In some cases, these tensions escalate into resistance or violence when local communities feel excluded from decision-making processes or economic opportunities.

Informant MJ1 noted that the land area claimed and demarcated with stakes by the Balik community covers approximately a quarter of a hectare:

*Approximately a quarter (of a hectare) or more.*

(MJ1)

In this context, the Balik community articulated its land claims through ancestral lineage and cultural continuity, as noted by Informant MJ2:

*They said the land belonged to their grandmother and their ancestors, so they took it back.*

(MJ2)

This assertion reflects a deep-rooted connection to land that transcends formal legal documentation, emphasizing historical occupation and cultural heritage as the primary basis for land rights. In indigenous customary communities, land ownership and control typically encompass both individually held and communally managed land; the latter is commonly referred to as *hak ulayat* (communal land rights) (Pienaar, 2018; Rubiati, 2024).

Informant MJ3 described an encounter centered on the contested status of land ownership, recounting the purchase of land from the parents of a Balik community member that their child later reclaimed following the parents' death:

*I previously bought the land from a member of the Balik community; it was their parents who sold it. After the parents passed away and I had not managed the land for a long time, it was entirely cultivated by the seller's child. To ensure that I received some benefit from it, I reminded them.*

(MJ3)

Comparable patterns of contestation between customary and statutory land claims have been documented in other transmigration areas in Indonesia. In East Kolaka, residents asserted ancestral rights over land allocated for transmigration by invoking indicators such as long-standing coconut plantings, despite the absence of formal documentation (Heryanti et al., 2018). A similar dynamic was observed in Melawi Regency, West Kalimantan, where the Dayak Kebahan community contested Javanese migrants' cultivation of land regarded as customary territory (Wibowo et al., 2020). These cases demonstrate that land conflicts often stem from ambiguous land ownership involving multiple stakeholders, including government authorities, indigenous communities, residents, and migrant groups (Farakhiyah & Irfan, 2019).

Although Javanese migrants allowed the indigenous Balik community to claim the land, they continued to regard ownership as legally theirs. This conviction is reflected in the continued registration of land certificates under the migrants' names, as illustrated by the following informant's statement:

*Let them claim it, but the certificate is still in our hands. Besides, no one dares to buy it either.*

(MJ1)

Indonesian law establishes land ownership through government-issued certificates, which constitute definitive legal proof of ownership (Napitupulu, 2024; Sidabutar, 2023). Thus, although the local Balik population considers the land part of its customary territory, legal ownership formally resides with the certificate holders, namely Javanese migrants. This situation underscores the tension between customary land recognition and the duality of formal legal frameworks that frequently generate disputes in regions shaped by migration. Drawing on critical geographies of land (Peluso & Lund, 2011), the conflict in Sepaku illustrates how land functions as both a material resource and a symbolic battleground where legality, ethnicity, and state power intersect.

In the context of IKN, these tensions are likely to intensify unless institutional mechanisms are developed to reconcile competing land regimes and meaningfully include indigenous voices in spatial planning processes. The findings reaffirm that the primary dynamic in Sepaku is not merely interethnic contestation but institutional friction between *adat*-based legitimacy and state-based legality. This condition reflects what Sikor and Lund (2010) conceptualize as the “politics of possession,” in which access to resources is mediated through overlapping legal and moral claims. The struggle over recognition, rather than simple competition for land, thus reveals the enduring tensions embedded within Indonesia’s pluralistic legal framework.

### **Internal conflict within the Balik community**

The Balik community, as an indigenous group, maintains a profound bond with its ancestral land. In agrarian law scholarship, this relationship is commonly conceptualized as a religio-magical (*religio-magis*) bond, in which land transcends its mere economic function and is understood as a sacred, living entity embedded in spiritual, cosmological, and communal life. Recent studies emphasize that, for customary communities, *ulayat* land or ancestral territory is intrinsically connected to collective identity, ritual practices, and moral obligations – dimensions that are frequently overlooked by conventional land tenure regimes (Dianto et al., 2023; Lubis et al., 2024; Zahra & Priyono, 2025). For the Balik people, land is therefore not simply an economic asset but a cultural legacy imbued with deep spiritual significance.

The development of IKN has reshaped social relations in Sepaku, not only between migrants and the Balik community but also within the Balik group itself. Intensifying competition over increasingly valuable land has generated internal disputes that frequently override kinship ties. Informants reported conflicts among close relatives, including cousins, who advanced competing claims over the same parcels of land. These disputes also involve prominent figures within the Balik community who are bound by blood relations.

*Conflict clearly exists. Some people even disregard their own nephews and nieces. I have witnessed various disputes related to the IKN project – over land and even over stones. I was recently interviewed by the media about these issues, although I was not directly involved in the incident and was not present when it occurred.*

(PL2)

*The individuals involved in the conflict are Mrs. S, Mr. J, and Mr. Si. They have never gotten along, despite being cousins.*

(PL3)

Extensive infrastructure projects in developing countries often lead to social fragmentation, particularly among indigenous and local communities (Adugbila et al., 2022), and similar dynamics have emerged in Sepaku. Field interviews indicate that since the initiation of the IKN project, at least four individuals have proclaimed themselves customary leaders despite lacking formal appointment through the Balik community's consensus-based deliberative process (*musyawarah mufakat*) (PL1; PL3). Such unilateral assertions were widely perceived as departures from established customary norms and as strategic attempts to gain control over land administration and access to newly valorized resources. As reflected in the informants' accounts:

*With the establishment of IKN, Balik customary leaders suddenly appeared everywhere; there are now so many of them.*

(PL1)

*Initially, it was only Mr. S. Later, Mr. J. and I emerged as another group, at one point led by Mrs. R. Over time, we realized that Mrs. R. had her own interests. The customary leader here was originally Mr. S, although he functioned more as a caretaker than as a formally recognized leader. I also once sought the position of customary leader, but we belonged to different factions. We did not want to be manipulated or subordinated by the leadership, which is why each group eventually formed its own faction.*

(PL3)

These developments reflect broader struggles over authority and access to resources. As theorized by Sikor and Lund (2010), power is closely linked to the capacity to claim, manage, and distribute resources; consequently, contestation over leadership positions functions as a proxy for control over land. In the Balik case, competing factions have each appointed their own leaders and asserted rival claims to customary authority, thereby undermining long-standing governance structures and weakening community cohesion (Rakia, 2021).

Unresolved tensions risk escalating into more severe disputes, as prolonged delays in conflict resolution tend to intensify dissatisfaction and deepen social divisions (Williams, 2024). One informant expressed concern as follows:

*If this situation continues without being addressed, the conflict will only escalate.*

(PL2)

Preventing conflict escalation requires early and coordinated intervention involving multiple stakeholders to develop transparent, culturally appropriate, and sustainable solutions. Potential measures include establishing community-based early warning mechanisms, strengthening local institutions, and promoting resilience-oriented values (Nizar et al., 2021). Local wisdom likewise plays a crucial role in reconciliation and conflict mediation processes (Indrawan, 2020; Rasyid et al., 2023). Such proactive and culturally grounded strategies are essential for mitigating conflict and maintaining social stability within the Balik community amid the ongoing transformations associated with IKN development.

## Typology of land conflicts in the IKN development zone

To clarify the spectrum of spatial contestation in Sepaku, this study organizes the empirical findings into a typology of land-related conflicts (Table 1). This typology integrates dispute forms, involved actors, underlying triggers, and spatial implications, thereby capturing the multidimensional nature of territorial tensions associated with IKN development.

**Table 1:** Typology of Land Conflicts in the IKN Development Area

Conflict Type	Actors Involved	Trigger	Spatial Impact
Interethnic Land Dispute	Javanese Migrants vs. Balik Community	Overlapping land ownership	Encroachment, contested land borders
Customary vs. Legal Claims	Balik Customary Holders vs. Migrant Certificate Holders	Lack of recognition of customary tenure	Undocumented territory boundaries
Internal Customary Leadership Rivalry	Balik Family Factions & Self-Proclaimed Leaders	Emerging competition for compensation/recognition	Fragmentation of customary territory
Speculative Land Reclamation	Balik Community Members	Rising land values driven by IKN development	Reinforcement of claims in strategically located areas
Fear of Dispossession	Migrant Landholders	Uncertainty about land status	Market stagnation and land hoarding

This typology demonstrates that land disputes in Sepaku cannot be reduced to binary distinctions between local and migrant actors or between statutory and customary regimes. Instead, land conflicts operate across multiple, overlapping layers:

1. Vertical conflicts between local communities and the state, particularly regarding the recognition of customary land tenure;
2. Horizontal conflicts among ethnic groups, most notably between migrants and indigenous residents;
3. Internal disputes within the same ethnic group, such as intra-family rivalries among the Balik community; and
4. Individual strategic claims driven by land speculation in anticipation of IKN-induced market shifts.

Overall, the findings indicate that land conflicts in Sepaku are shaped not only by material disputes over territory but also by symbolic struggles over legitimacy, recognition, and cultural identity. These dynamics arise from the coexistence—and frequent collision—of plural legal systems, producing zones of legal ambiguity. Addressing such conflicts, therefore, requires governance approaches that recognize multiple land regimes and meaningfully integrate customary institutions into formal spatial planning processes.

### Comparative insight: Brasília and Naypyidaw

The experiences of Brasília, Naypyidaw, and IKN reveal recurring patterns in state-led capital relocation projects. In Brasília, the relocation undertaken in the 1960s displaced rural and indigenous communities, often with inadequate compensation, thereby deepening socioeconomic inequality (Barbosa & Preve, 2024). Similarly, the development of Naypyidaw has contributed to socio-spatial segregation and limited opportunities for meaningful community participation (Letsa, 2023; Seekins, 2021; Thamminaina, 2017). IKN shares these characteristics but is further complicated by Indonesia's dual land regime, in which formal land rights derived from transmigration coexist with the unrecognized customary claims of the Balik people. This duality produces a condition of "legal invisibility" for indigenous communities and reinforces long-standing structural inequalities.

These comparative insights underscore that capital relocation in the Global South often perpetuates historical imbalances and the marginalization of indigenous communities. In the absence of recognized customary rights and inclusive, participatory spatial governance, state-led modernization is likely to reproduce patterns of dispossession and undermine social cohesion. The experiences of Brasília and Naypyidaw thus offer critical lessons for IKN, underscoring that equitable and sustainable urban transformation must go beyond physical relocation to encompass social inclusion and the legal recognition of local communities.

## Research limitation

This study is subject to several limitations related to its spatial and methodological scope. The analysis focused on Sepaku Subdistrict, the core development area of IKN; therefore, the findings may not fully reflect the diverse socio-spatial conditions of the surrounding regions. Although the qualitative case study design provided rich, contextually grounded insights, it relied on a limited number of participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

In addition, fieldwork was conducted during the early phase of IKN's implementation, a period in which institutional arrangements and policy frameworks were still evolving. Consequently, some governance dynamics may change as the project progresses. Future research would benefit from adopting a longitudinal and multi-sited approach to capture temporal shifts and spatial variations across different stages of development. Furthermore, including government officials and private-sector actors involved in land acquisition processes would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of governance asymmetries and power relations shaping land and identity politics in the IKN development area.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the complex dynamics of land conflict unfolding in Sepaku, the core development area of IKN. The findings demonstrate that land disputes emerge from the intersection of historical transmigration, legal pluralism, and rapid spatial transformation. These overlapping processes generate multiple layers of conflict—vertical (between communities and the state), horizontal (interethnic), and internal (intra-communal)—all of which are shaped by competing claims to legality, legitimacy, and territorial identity. The findings further reveal that ambiguity between statutory and customary land regimes produces contested authority over land access, control, and ownership.

To mitigate these risks, inclusive and culturally grounded governance mechanisms are essential. Such efforts should prioritize the formal recognition of customary land rights, the institutionalization of indigenous conflict mediation practices, the strengthening of legitimate customary leadership, and the promotion of participatory spatial planning. Ultimately, this study underscores that the success of the IKN project depends not only on physical development but also on its capacity to uphold social justice, protect indigenous rights, and sustain intercultural coexistence in Indonesia's new capital.

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