

Kite hadap je lah: Ontological Politics and Counter-Worlding in Elang Community, Riau Island, Indonesia

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Abstract

This research aims to deconstruct the rationality of spatial dispossession and document the political agency of the Elang community, who face existential erasure due to the Eco-City Mega Project. Employing a qualitative approach and ethnographic methods over five months, this study adopts an engaged anthropology perspective to validate the residents' reality amidst power asymmetries. Data were collected through literature review, active participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings conclude that the mechanism of state administrative recognition paradoxically operates as an instrument of exclusion through onto-epistemic violence, aimed at delegitimising the history of vernacular land tenure. This dynamic represents an ontological clash between the state's one-world regime—which imposes a singular reality—and the community's organic legitimacy, rooted in lived experience and material bonds to space. The results indicate that despite facing material repression and slow violence, the Elang community builds infrastructures of counter-worlding that integrate everyday praxis, the institutionalisation of resistance through AMP, digital counter-worlding tactics, and synergy with external advocacy networks. Through this layered configuration of resistance, the Elang community asserts its position as autonomous political subjects actively defending their world and spatial sovereignty from the threat of state reduction.

Keywords: *Ontological politics, counter-worlding, agrarian conflict, elang community*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendekonstruksi rasionalitas perampasan ruang (spatial dispossession) dan mendokumentasikan agensi politik masyarakat Elang, yang menghadapi ancaman penghapusan eksistensial akibat Proyek Mega Eco-City. Dengan menerapkan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode etnografi selama lima bulan, studi ini mengadopsi perspektif antropologi terapan (engaged anthropology) untuk memvalidasi realitas warga di tengah ketimpangan kekuasaan. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi pustaka, observasi partisipatif aktif, wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur, dan dokumentasi. Temuan penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa mekanisme

pengakuan administratif negara secara paradoks beroperasi sebagai instrumen eksklusi melalui kekerasan onto-epistemik, yang bertujuan untuk mendelegitimasi sejarah penguasaan tanah vernakular. Dinamika ini merepresentasikan benturan ontologis antara rezim satu-dunia (one-world regime) milik negara—yang memaksakan satu realitas tunggal—dan legitimasi organik masyarakat, yang berakar pada pengalaman hidup serta ikatan material terhadap ruang. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun menghadapi represif material dan kekerasan lambat (slow violence), masyarakat Elang membangun infrastruktur “dunia tandingan” (infrastructures of counter-worlding) yang mengintegrasikan praksis keseharian, pelembagaan resistensi melalui AMP, taktik counter-worlding, serta sinergi dengan jaringan advokasi eksternal. Melalui konfigurasi perlawanan berlapis ini, masyarakat Elang menegaskan posisinya sebagai subjek politik otonom yang secara aktif mempertahankan dunia dan kedaulatan ruang mereka dari ancaman reduksi negara. [Garamond, 11 pt, Normal]

Kata Kunci: *Politik ontologis, counter-worlding, konflik agraria, masyarakat Elang*

Introduction

Over the past decade, the phenomenon of Large-Scale Land Acquisitions or LSLA, driven by national strategic projects, has continued to escalate across various developing nations in Southeast Asia. This is confirmed by recent comprehensive studies noting that of the 14.7 million hectares of land accumulated through LSLA practices across mainland Asia between 2003 and 2021, Southeast Asia stands as the region most heavily targeted by investors (Orsi et al. 2024). Rather than being recognised as a practice of spatial dispossession, this escalation of displacement is instead shrouded in the rhetoric of modernisation. Hegemonic narratives produced by the state and corporations consistently position land acquisition as an engine for economic growth and a catalyst for industrial down-streaming in peripheral regions. However, such promises of inclusive prosperity often clash with realities at the grassroots level; they frequently trigger the marginalisation of agrarian labourers and widen structural inequalities (Geissel 2025). This forced shift into schemes of spatial modernisation represents a stark deviation from the rhetoric of social justice echoed by authorities.

In Indonesia, this developmental anomaly is recorded on an alarming scale. The Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (2024) notes that between 2015 and 2023, 2,939 agrarian conflicts erupted, seizing 6.3 million hectares of community-managed territories and dispossessing 1.75 million families. This phenomenon of spatial grabbing is now entering a more complex phase as state ambitions expand aggressively into archipelagic regions, as evidenced in Bertuan Island, Madani City. The transformation of coastal areas into strategic commercial zones implies not only a loss of economic access but also an existential threat to communities that have settled there for generations. For the people of Bertuan Island, their identity cannot be reduced to mere daily agrarian practices; rather, it has been forged through historical ties stretching back to the Riau-Lingga Sultanate and intertwined with traumatic memories of exodus during the Dutch and Japanese occupations. This profound historical attachment between humans, land, and sea gives their living space ontological

weight, predating modern state institutions. Yet, within the logic of modernist policy, these ancestral territories are reduced to fictitious commodities ready to be repurposed for capital accumulation, triggering a massive collapse of social institutions (Polanyi 2001).

This structural marginalisation is no coincidence; it results from systemic orchestration through state bureaucracy. The process of land takeover is justified through positive law instruments—such as the Right to Manage (*Hak Pengelolaan*/HPL) scheme—and rigid administrative categorisations. Through this bureaucratic rationality, the state unilaterally engages in the misrecognition of local historical documents held by residents, such as Land Clearing Statements (*Surat Tebas*) and *Surat Keterangan Tanah* (SKT). Yet, for the local community, these documents serve as collective proof of the physical labour involved in clearing land across generations (Ribot & Peluso 2003). Discursive manipulation through euphemisms such as relocation or asset optimisation functions as a legal shield to delegitimise the residents' vernacular sovereignty. This series of operations creates a process of displacement that appears rational and administratively valid yet is substantially a form of onto-epistemic violence.

The displacement of residents through legal processes impacts social life, in which it creates existential clash or ontological conflict. When administrative instruments fail to control resident's autonomy, state intervention, often in cooperation with large-scale capital, may escalate into coercive repression. Residents not only bear the burden of slow violence or the trauma of bureaucratic dispossession but are also confronted with overt physical violence, ranging from tear gas to rubber bullets (CNN Indonesia 2023). Their refusal to leave is rooted in the importance of land and sea to their lives. For the community, land and sea are not merely productive assets, but essential entities that support their livelihoods, social relations, and worldview. When the state forces assimilation into a singular capitalistic reality, such repression gives rise to forms of resistance whose weight transcends mere demands for material compensation.

In this study, resistance is understood not simply as opposition to power, but as the ability to create alternative ways of living and protect a community's world. Analytically, this resistance operates across two intertwined dimensions. The first is the discursive-political dimension, in which residents challenge the state's dominant narrative of development. The second is the ontological dimension, where resistance manifests as worlding—the ongoing effort to maintain relationship between humans and the environment outside capitalist logic. These dimensions differ in how resistance is expressed. The discursive-political dimension involves public acts of rejection, such as the unfurling of protest banners; the ontological dimension is expressed through everyday practices, including fishing and farming. Hence, residents maintain their way of life and reject the transformation of their living space into a mere economic commodity.

Beyond mere daily practice, the community's resistance is also expressed through local phrases frequently heard during fieldwork, such as “*kite hadap lah*”, “*kite hadap je lah*”, or “*hadap je lah*”. On the surface, these phrases might appear as a form of resignation. However, it reflects the community's determination to face uncertainty and protect its village identity. Rather than treating them as ordinary linguistic expressions, this study understands them as a part of the mental foundation of community resilience and counter-worlding. This resilience is further supported by collaboration with external advocacy networks. These networks contribute to political education and help residents question

dominant development narratives. Such collaboration strengthens communal resistance by supporting the community's ability to maintain its identity and system of meaning, even when its physical space is under pressure.

Despite these layered dynamics of ontological resistance being crucial for community survival at the grassroots level, literature on agrarian conflict has hitherto tended to fixate on economic loss calculations, formal litigation routes, and eruptions of overt conflict (Rachman 2018). This focus often fails to dissect the micro-dynamics of resistance that transform from silent tactics in private spaces towards the institutionalisation of collective movements at the grassroots. Furthermore, a significant gap exists in ethnographic discourse bridging field-level ontological resistance with digital counter-worlding practices. Whilst studies on social media mobilisation in protest movements have been extensively explored (Ramos 2024), there remains a void in the literature regarding how coastal communities transform cyberspace into an infrastructure of visual testimony to deconstruct the technocratic aesthetics of state development.

Therefore, this research is crucial to deconstructing the rationality of spatial dispossession and recording the political agency of residents who refuse to be erased from the map. Set in Elang Urban Village, this study asks not merely "why do residents resist?", but "what manner of world is being defended?". Through a synthesis of the politics of ontology and counter-worlding, this research aims to provide two primary contributions. Academically, it is expected to enrich contemporary anthropological discourse by offering a theoretical synthesis within the arena of archipelagic agrarian conflict that bridges spatial materiality and visual representation. Practically, the findings can serve as a basis for transformative policy recommendations, urging the state to abandon reductionist bureaucratic paradigms in favour of a substantive recognition of living evidence and grassroots community values to achieve spatial justice.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods. Drawing upon the thought of Malinowski (in Spradley 1997, 7), the heart of ethnography lies in the effort to grasp the subject's point of view, their relation to life, and their vision of the world. The choice of this method is crucial as it enables the researcher to describe human behaviour, both as individual and collective actors bound within specific cultural structures or subcultures (Wijaya 2018).

The researcher's enculturation process in the field spanned five months, from 3 October 2024 to 12 March 2025. Because of the sensitive nature of this research, the researcher anonymised the names of informants, locations, projects, and institutions to protect their privacy and safety. This follows the ethical principle of the American Anthropological Association (2012), which asserts that anthropologists have the responsibility to protect research participants. Therefore, the research site is referred to by the pseudonym Bertuan Island, in particular Elang Urban Village, Alang Sub-district, since this research can be categorised as a high-risk context.

To deconstruct the intertwined layers of this space, the researcher applied a selection strategy for informants through purposive sampling, preceded by stakeholder mapping. This mapping identified and analysed key actors with interests, influence, and involvement

in the research issue (Schmeer 1999). Subsequently, the purposive sampling technique allowed the researcher to gather in-depth information from individuals deemed to hold authoritative knowledge regarding the phenomenon under study (Spradley 1980). Data collection techniques included literature review, active participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted by living amongst and interacting directly with the community, such as participating in security post duties, attending orations or AMP meetings, and engaging directly in the residents' fishing and farming practices. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain personal perspectives and contextual data that complemented the observational findings.

The collected data were analysed through multi-level thematic analysis. First, open coding was used to identify key actions and experiences in field notes and interview transcripts, such as farming routines amidst threats, refusal to submit ID cards, and cynical banter. Second, through axial coding, these fragments of empirical code were reduced and grouped into broader operational categories, such as protection of material production space and information safeguarding. Finally, these categories were developed into theoretical concepts. This process connected everyday experiences with broader analytical claims. The findings suggest that residents' activities are not merely a survival strategy but also forms of worlding practice—a structured defence to protect their spatial sovereignty from the reductive threats of the Eco-City Mega Project.

Throughout this process, I adopted an engaged anthropology approach rather than claiming a neutral position. My ethical commitment to the Elang community does not mean portraying residents as passive victims. Instead, it reflects a methodological effort to recognise and validate the residents' experiences in facing the threat of ontological erasure by the state. I view the community's narratives and practices of resistance not merely as discursive strategies to win political legitimacy, but as an effort to maintain a world order amidst the siege of the project's technocratic hegemony.

This methodological reflexivity required me to acknowledge the challenges and power dynamics in the field. For instance, I was suspected of being a company representative or state official. Rather than ignoring this tension, I used it to understand the threats experienced by the community. As Hale (2006) argues, researchers' political involvement can help deconstruct power structures that are often hidden behind a veil of neutral analysis. Thus, engaged anthropology does not necessarily weaken objectivity; it can strengthen the analysis of power relations. In this study, it helps explain how physical space becomes a site of conflicts between the state's development project and residents' effort to protect their way of life.

To unravel how this existential battle is rooted and operates materially, the following section will dissect the landscape of Elang Urban Village. This area is not positioned merely as a geographical backdrop or an administrative object, but as the primary arena where the ontological weight of a living space is currently at stake.

Result and Discussion

The Ontological Weight of Land

Bertuan Island occupies a strategic position as the largest island in Madani City, Riau Islands Province. It is characterised as a living space that contains deep historical layers

while simultaneously facing the complexities of contemporary change. Administratively, the island is divided into two urban villages, namely Bertuan Cate and Elang, both of which fall under the jurisdiction of Alang Sub-district. This research focuses on Elang Urban Village, an area spanning 65.83 km² inhabited by 3,431 people across 1,092 households (Badan Pusat Statistik 2024). Ecologically, the region is marked by a landscape of low hills with an elevation of approximately 60 metres above sea level and is surrounded by narrow straits, forming a societal orientation closely intertwined between the land and the water (see Picture 1 on the following page).

One unique finding from field observations is the way the local community interprets administrative nomenclatures such as RW (*Rukun Warga*) and RT (*Rukun Tetangga*). Rather than being viewed merely as bureaucratic units, the residents of Elang frequently position the RW and RT as *kampung* (villages). This indicates that their social identity is rooted more in communal spatial proximity than in mere governmental categories. Elang Urban Village itself comprises five RW clusters and 11 RT units, each serving as a pillar of social life and a starting point for regulating their relationship with the land.

Picture 1. Administrative Map of Elang Urban Village, Madani City.



Source: Madani City Government, reconstructed by author, 2026.

From a historical perspective, Elang—known locally as the eagle’s nest—has a long history as a strategic territory within the Riau-Lingga Sultanate’s defence system. Under the leadership of Raja Alang Dilaut, this area functioned as a military base to guard the southern waters of Bintan during the Dutch East Indies colonial period. The collective memory of this role has shaped a historical consciousness among the community as legitimate guardians of the territory, long before the presence of modern state institutions. This identity was further reinforced by the traumatic experience during the Japanese

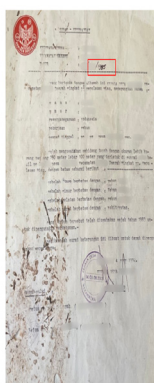
occupation (1942-1945), when the community was forced to migrate to surrounding small islands to evade forced labour practices and military repression.

The community's return to Elang following the proclamation of Indonesian independence in 1945 marked the beginning of a new chapter in the state's territorial arrangement. Administrative shifts occurred gradually, starting from its merger into South Bintan Sub-district (1966-1983) to the designation of Elang as part of Alang Sub-district under the Riau Islands Regency in 1983. The integration of Elang into the broader regional government structure strengthened when the area was designated as part of Madani City in 1999 and Riau Islands Province in 2002, expanding the reach of state intervention in territorial governance.

However, the state's use of formal legal instruments changed the way land ownership was understood. The state introduced legal standards demanding administrative proof through formal certificates, whereas for the Elang community, land legitimacy is rooted in concrete practices of production. The community's *tebas-tanam* (slash-and-plant) practice is a form of physical mapping that comes before formal legal recognition. For Elang residents, land is more than a commodity. Empirical data from the Urban Village Government Archives (2024) showing the dominance of the agricultural (55%) and fisheries (18%) sectors reinforces the fact that land is understood not as a commodity, but as the primary basis for inherited survival. In practice, residents' land claims are based on direct involvement in the process of clearing land and cutting back vegetation to achieve productivity. This long-term relationship between humans and the environment produces social recognition through continued labour, use and historical attachment, rather than through formal documents alone.

Field findings reinforce this pattern through the narrative of Mr Roky (52), a local fisherman who asserted that land mastery begins with the act of cultivating the land until it yields results, followed only then by the legalisation process. His statement, "Clear it first, then plant, and once it is planted and bears fruit, only then are the papers processed" (Interview, 2 March 2025), indicates that for residents, material evidence in the form of production holds a more fundamental epistemic standing than written documents. In this context, the SKT he obtained in 1984 does not function as the starting point of ownership, but rather as a form of state recognition of a social practice that had already existed.

Picture 2. Surat Keterangan Tanah/SKT.



Source: Author's documentation, 2025.

Before this pattern was implemented, the recognition of land claims in Elang was facilitated by local authorities through the issuance of a *Surat Tebas* by the *Penghulu*¹. This document functioned as more than just administrative proof; it was a symbol of collective recognition deeply rooted in the community's social legitimacy. However, since the 1980s, state expansion through the integration of Elang Urban Village into the Madani City government structure has introduced a new legal regime that enforces certainty through HPL certification. As asserted by Sikor & Lund (2009), land rights are constructed through a process of recognition by authoritative institutions. On the ground, this recognition transforms into an instrument to filter the validity of claims, where the state's formal recognition often suffers a disconnection from the substantive legitimacy that has long lived at the local level.

This tension is clearly visible in the status of the residents' SKT and *Surat Tebas*. For the community, both documents are historical proof of the labour involved in clearing the land. However, through the logic of the HPL, the state carries out a misrecognition or a denial of recognition toward these documents, as they are deemed not to meet the standards of legal formality². Consequently, state recognition functions as a mechanism for disregarding the history of local land mastery; state authority is consolidated by delegitimising the people's documents to smooth the path for interests within the area.

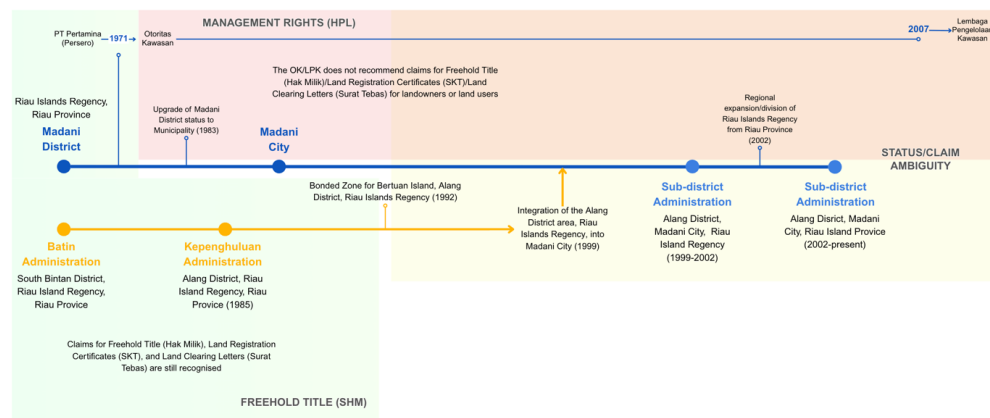
This effort to delegitimise local sovereignty is not an accidental administrative oversight, but rather part of a far more systematic design of intervention. The following section will dissect how the state institutionalises this displacement through bureaucratic operations and onto-epistemic violence.

Onto-Epistemic Violence and The Bureaucracy of Erasure

State intervention in Elang Urban Village is not merely interpreted as an expansion of administrative territory, but rather as a systemic orchestration to institutionalise a regime that negates citizen sovereignty. Through the presence of the *Lembaga Pengelolaan Kawasan* (LPK), the state enforces a transformation of tenure types from Freehold Title (*Sertifikat Hak Milik*/SHM) into the HPL scheme—a repositioning of authority that represents a shift in control from the community toward absolute state institutional control. This series of transitions serves as a deliberate strategy to integrate coastal areas into a centralised modern governance system, as summarised in Figure 3.

1 *Penghulu* refers to a fourth-level administrative head, equivalent to a Village Head (*Kepala Desa*), who presides over a *Kepenguluhan*. This nomenclature was officially utilised within the local bureaucracy of the Riau Islands Regency prior to its reconstitution as a province in 2002.

2 The rejection of *Surat Keterangan Tanah* (SKT) or *Surat Tebas* (Land Clearing Statements) is predicated upon the formalism of land registration (Article 19 of *Undang-Undang Pokok Agraria* in conjunction with Article 32 of *Peraturan Pemerintah* No. 24/1997), which establishes land certificates as conclusive evidence of title. This principle is further reinforced by Articles 2 and 4 of *Peraturan Pemerintah* No. 18/2021, which permit the designation of Right to Manage (*Hak Pengelolaan*/HPL) over unregistered land.

Picture 3. Administrative Transitions in Elang.

Source: Processed by author, 2026.

The implications of this process are both structural and ontological. The community is gradually losing its footing on local-based legitimacy mechanisms—such as SKT and *Surat Tebas*—and is being forced to adapt to the state's legal-rational authority. Aligned with Lund's (2016) concept of rupture, where the state utilises legal instruments to bypass local legalities, these bureaucratic operations, in turn, manifest as an epistemic cleansing of long-entrenched legal boundaries. This process is a manifestation of the one-world world (Law 2015); a world that grants itself the right to absorb all other worlds and, in doing so, denies the very existence of those other worlds.

Tensions reach a sharper point of articulation when the state adopts legal definitions that equate the absence of formal certificates with the absence of land rights themselves. From a bureaucratic perspective, local documents such as SKT or *Surat Tebas* are reduced to mere underlying titles, or *alas hak* that lack legal standing equivalent to the state-controlled HPL. In essence, this epistemic reduction constitutes a practice of ontological politics. Such a clash is not merely about differing perspectives on the same world, but about different worlds being enacted within the same territory (Blaser 2013).

The manifestation of this ontological political clash is vividly confirmed through the statement of an LPK official, Mr Jayadiningrat (57), who noted: “They have no rights to the land, or no real rights” (Interview, 15 January 2025). This logic of exclusion is further reinforced by the Head of Alang Sub-district, Mr Rudianto (55), who discredited residents' documents because they were perceived to stem only from land-clearing practices rather than formal legal recognition (Interview, 14 March 2025). Both statements are manifestations of onto-epistemic violence; an operation in which the state deliberately translates the world and sovereignty of the citizens into mere physical activities, such as clearing land. Such operations intentionally reconstruct the activities of citizens as actions devoid of juridical validity, so that their displacement appears to have a legitimate justification (De la Cadena 2015).

Particularly following the enactment of Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 62 Tahun 2019, the state, through the LPK, has begun to impose its spatial rationality, positioning land as a strategic asset within the framework of the Free Trade Zone and Free Port (*Kawasan*

Perdagangan Bebas dan Pelabuhan Bebas/KPBPB), subject to the logic of investment. Within the operation of this modernist regime, an epistemic violence occurs where the meaning of land is successfully transformed: it is uprooted from its socio-cultural roots as a living space, only to be re-engineered into an economic commodity ready to be mobilised and optimised to sustain the ambitions of large-scale projects.

The climax occurred when Bertuan Island was designated as part of the Eco-City Mega Project through PERMENKO No. 7 Tahun 2023. This designation again marks an ontological shift in the way the state interprets land—from a social entity into an economic object to be engineered as a commodity within the networks of global capitalism. The development zoning planned by the LPK, as shown in Figure 4, reinforces the state's hegemonic claim, which positions the relocation of the community as a logical consequence of industrial progress.

Picture 4. Development Zones of the Proyek Raksasa Eco-City.



Source: Lembaga Pengelolaan Kawasan Archive, 2025.

However, dynamics at the ground level indicate that compensation schemes and new settlements are often perceived as mechanisms for increasingly stringent spatial control rather than a form of empowerment. Consequently, the dynamics in Elang cannot be reduced to a mere administrative matter; instead, they represent an arena of contestation between two regimes of legitimacy: organic legitimacy, which arises from the community's lived experience, and formal legitimacy, produced by modern bureaucracy. When administrative instruments fail to subjugate citizen autonomy, state intervention escalates beyond regulatory boundaries toward coercive material repression.

Coercive Practices

The presence of the Eco-City Mega Project on Bertuan Island vividly demonstrates that development implementation produces not only massive spatial transformation but also practices reflecting extreme power imbalances between the state, corporations, and the community. This transformation frequently ignores established social orders for the sake of large-scale capital accumulation. In Elang Urban Village, this process of marginalisation

operates through a spectrum of multi-layered pressures that can be categorised into two primary analytical dimensions: gradual administrative repression and the open escalation of material repression.

1. Administrative Repression and Slow Violence

Forms of pressure emerging in Elang Urban Village are not limited to direct violence but extend into subtler yet effective administrative and psychological realms that weaken the community's bargaining power. Bureaucratic instruments, spatial planning regulations, and the production of legal uncertainty function as control apparatuses that slowly erode communal sovereignty. This is manifested in the experience of a school principal, Mr Toni (50), who was faced with the dilemmatic choice between accepting relocation or resigning from his position. His resignation was a consequence of a systemic coercive scheme that provided no space for equitable negotiation.

The residents' experiences reflect what Nixon (2011) terms slow violence—a form of violence that operates gradually and is not always visible yet has an accumulative impact on social life. Heikkinen et al. (2023) expand this concept within the context of resource conflicts, showing that the degradation of well-being does not always appear in a spectacular form, but rather through the slow erosion of health, economic stability, and the psychological integrity of the community. The uncertainty of land status creates prolonged mental stress that becomes an individual and collective burden, where the narrative of public interest is frequently used as an ideological instrument to normalise the practice of dispossession over the residents' living space (Harvey 2003; Levien 2013).

2. Escalation of Material Repression

When administrative and discursive instruments fail to subjugate citizen autonomy, state intervention escalates beyond regulatory boundaries toward coercive material repression. This escalation marks the transition from bureaucratic pressure to overt physical violence to enforce the clearing of space for investment interests. This spectrum of violence is recorded in a series of incidents involving physical attacks, criminalisation, and the destruction of assets, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of Key Incidents, Dates, and Victims.

Case	Date of Incident	Victims
The tear gas and rubber bullet attacks by the joint task force and authorities at Bridge 4 on affected residents who refused land measurements and the installation of stakes on Bertuan Island.	September 7, 2023	Dozens of injured
Efforts to sow division or incite provocation via banners.	November 16, 2024	No casualties
Verbal confrontations between affected residents.	November 17, 2024	One injured
Repeated efforts to sow division or incite provocation via banners.	November 20, 2024	No casualties
Brutal early-morning attacks on several residents guarding the local guard post.	December 18, 2024	Eight injured
The designation of three villagers as suspects.	January 17, 2025	No casualties
Forced seizure of villagers' gardens.	May 2, 2025	No casualties
Forced demolition of villagers' houses.	July 8, 2025	No casualties
Violence against an elderly resident.	July 10, 2025	One injured

Source: Compiled from AMP social media and re-analysed by author, 2026.

This situation forces the community into a defensive position against a system that, from the outset, was not designed to protect their autonomy. Rather than serving as a shield, legal instruments and state apparatuses are instead deployed to facilitate capital accumulation for the Eco-City Mega Project. The bitter reality experienced by the residents of Elang echoes a broader pattern of structural dispossession. As asserted by Payne et al. (2012), tenurial vulnerability at the ground level never emerges from a vacuum; it is rooted in the legacy of land tenure and the configuration of contemporary ownership regimes that inherently operate to exclusively marginalise indigenous or vernacular communities.

When social groups lacking access to formal bureaucracy are pitted against aggressive land market expansion, the resulting forced evictions not only seize physical space but also trigger a domino effect of livelihood loss and fatal social disintegration (UN Human Rights Council 2007). It is within this framework that FAO (2021) data—indicating that over one billion people worldwide live in conditions of vulnerable tenure—finds its contextual footing.

By ascending this analytical ladder, the escalation of violence in Elang Urban Village cannot be reduced to a mere anomaly of a local administrative dispute. It manifests as a precedent and a microcosm of the global land governance crisis under neoliberal development regimes, where living spaces are aggressively reconfigured from animate social habitats into mere commodity investment assets. Despite being subjected to a spectrum of repressive and multi-layered violence, the community refuses to be reduced to mere passive victims of development. To address these threats, the following section will trace how residents construct an infrastructure of resistance to defend their world.

Infrastructures of Counter-Worlding

Community resistance in Elang did not emerge as a spontaneous outburst, but rather as the crystallisation of everyday infrapolitical practices that gradually transformed into an organised ontological defence. Although in its embryonic phase this resistance operated microscopically as a hidden transcript within private spaces (Scott 1990), the dynamics of resistance in Elang Urban Village have, in fact, moved beyond that stage. While Scott's concept is useful for reading passive resistance tactics, this framework has limitations as it assumes that the state and the citizens are merely negotiating within the same hegemonic world.

To dissect the case in Elang, this analysis must be pushed further by making a sharp distinction between sporadic, individual everyday resistance and collectively organised political mobilisation. From a political ecology perspective, this resistance is not merely a tactic used by citizens to hide their intentions from those in power, but a form of spatial defence intended to challenge the state's extractive territorial claims (Peluso 1992). Furthermore, the success of the residents in institutionalising their movement reflects the formation of autonomous local institutional structures (Lund 2016). Here, practices that appear to be hidden transcripts are the foundation for ontological defence—an active effort to maintain a world and a rationality that are fundamentally different from the state's technocratic logic. It is upon this ontological foundation that the residents of Elang do not merely resist discursively but instead build a series of concrete infrastructures of resistance.

As a manifestation of this material infrastructure, under the shadow of the development narrative and the increasingly massive penetration of the Eco-City Mega Project, agrarian routines in Elang no longer take place in a vacuum. Tension has crept into the plantations, transforming everyday production spaces into arenas of suspicion as well as the most banal of fortifications. This is manifested in the daily life of Mr Zoro (36), a local farmer. Amidst the roar of relocation threats, his decision to continue going to his farm is not merely about tending to crops, but a strategy to calibrate social solidarity and read the map of friends and foes. This shift in the emotional landscape is vividly captured in his narrative:

“I’ve kept farming from the beginning until now, no problem... But since this Eco-City issue arrived, well, the tone has changed. At first, we were whispering, looking askance... If there’s a stranger like you, we go silent, or some even reject them because they’re afraid... That silence is actually a way to plot who is still on our side.” (Interview, 15 March 2025)

Mr Zoro's words reveal the dense micro-dynamics of conflict at the ground level. The glancing and whispering amidst the lush foliage are not merely gestures of resignation, but high-level risk mitigation tactics amidst power asymmetries. Surrounded by the threat of surveillance and potential repression, the silence of the residents transforms into a social radar—an organic mechanism to identify who remains loyal to defending the *kampung* and who might have compromised. The rejection of strangers is not an apolitical stance, but a form of collective prudence to protect the remaining nodes of resistance.

Only after situating these layers of fear and survival strategies does Mr Zoro's persistence in swinging his hoe every day find its political weight. At that point of escalation,

the routine of farming becomes a concrete manifestation of ontological occupation. The swing of his hoe is an instrument of worlding; a material practice that continuously reproduces the reality that the land of Elang is still alive, sovereign, and refuses to be reduced to a plot of empty commodity in the state's extractive logic.

If, in the plantation areas, defence manifests in the swing of a hoe, a similar sentiment spreads and transforms within the domestic sphere. The arena of resistance shifts from mere protection of physical land to multi-layered safeguarding of administrative information across families. Everyday interaction spaces closely linked to the world of women, such as neighbourly chats at the *kedai* or local shop, organically shift function to become the first line of defence. In these informal spaces, the circulation of information is filtered, and vigilance tactics are distributed. The practice of protecting private space driven by this cynicism is sharply articulated by Mrs Susanti (46):

“When it was about to be built, I spoke to the neighbours when we met at the *kedai*, saying Eco-City was coming, saying they'd give us soap-box houses if we agreed to relocate... Don't you dare give them your signature, your ID card, or let them into your house; it's dangerous!... then they'll make promises... and suddenly our land and houses will be gone... Well, we just have to face it now.” (Interview, 27 February 2025)

Mrs Susanti's narrative clearly shows how macro-threats from the state are met tactically at a microscopic scale. Interactions at the shop turn into vital nodes of consolidation. In the eyes of the residents, everyday administrative elements such as ID cards, signatures, and guest access to the living room are no longer viewed as mere bureaucratic formalities; they have been identified as lethal instruments with the potential to nullify their land and homes. The call to close the door to officials represents a heroic effort to protect private boundaries from the penetration of manipulative state power.

Interestingly, rather than using official terminology, the residents use the term Ego-City—a vernacular pun that consciously distorts the name Eco-City. This is the residents' linguistic weapon to expose the selfishness of a project that has long been wrapped in the sweet promises of compensation and soap-box houses³. Through this deconstruction of language and the protection of private space, theoretical analysis finds its solid empirical footing. The Ego-City and the residents' refusal to have their documents manipulated are not merely wordplay. They manifest as what Foucault (1980) described as subjugated knowledges—local historical knowledge that rises from below to dismantle myths and undermine the legitimacy of the state's technocratic promises.

For the women of Elang, refusing to hand over ID cards and guarding the house door is the actual praxis of ontological defence. They are attempting to defend their territory by maintaining their world against the threat of erasure by a single reality (Escobar 2018). This determination to defend their world reaches a point of explicit articulation through the statements of farmers like Mr Onal (55). He openly challenges the state's legal construction by asserting: “From the beginning, in my opinion, we are not illegal... we are legal!” (Interview, 3 March 2025). This declaration is an assertion of the operation of a counter-legitimacy regime rooted in a long history of land mastery, physical labour, and multi-generational social investment.

3 An alternative designation used by the Elang community for relocation housing.

This series of silent practices and courageous articulations eventually synergise into a reservoir of social energy that continues to accumulate. This accumulation exploded as the pressure from the Eco-City Mega Project escalated beyond the residents' threshold of tolerance. The explosion reached its peak in October 2024 through the formation of the *Aliansi Masyarakat Pejuang* (AMP). This body successfully consolidated previously sporadic resistance into a structured movement—ranging from regular meetings every 15th of the month, cross-resident coordination, the establishment of community guard posts, to the reinforcement of rejection narratives through weekly orations. Through this process of institutionalisation, the ontological resistance in Elang has transformed into a collective political entity that refuses to be erased.

Picture 5. Routine AMP Consolidations, Weekly Orations, and Local Guard Post Activities.



Source: Author's documentation, 2025.

However, that institutionalisation does not necessarily lead to rigid bureaucratisation. Conversely, AMP operates within a creative tension between the need for formal structure and a commitment to horizontal autonomy. Decision-making practices that remain centred in communal spaces ensure that every movement is not co-opted by the logic of managerialism but remains faithful to the articulation of residents' anxieties at the ground level. The manifestation of this alignment between organisational structure and grassroots aspirations is explicitly reflected in the way residents interpret their involvement, as stated by Mr Erwan (44), a local fisherman:

“AMP is to strengthen the community so they can hold out in the *kampung*. That’s why we joined the organisation... There isn’t a case where the chairman is the one making the decisions, it’s not like that. We stay fixed on that goal: to hold out in the *kampung*.” (Interview, 10 January 2025)

The consolidation of the movement was also triggered by a profound crisis of representation at the local level. Field findings revealed a rift between residents and some community elites—including actors associated with the *Saudara Adat Tempatan* (SAT)—who were perceived as being integrated into the logic of development. At this point, the resistance ceased to be fragmented; it transformed into a singular consciousness based on a widely felt collective experience. Ultimately, this transformation of consciousness found its form of articulation through the systematic efforts of residents to dismantle the symbolic dominance of the state embedded in the language of development.

The hegemonic rhetoric constructed by the state—for example, through narratives like “live in a new village for the prosperity of your grandchildren”—underwent a process of deconstruction through the negotiation of meaning performed by the residents. This intervention developed further into a form of semantic disruption, where technocratic terms such as relocation or shifting were questioned for their epistemic legitimacy and confronted with the term eviction, which more accurately represents the experience of spatial violence. This shift confirms that the arena of conflict takes place not only on a material level but also on a symbolic level, particularly in the production and contestation of language.

Picture 6. State-led Persuasive Narratives: From Statistical Success to Dream-Home Rhetoric.



Source: Collected from secondary media and re-processed by author, 2026.

As articulation intensified, residents revitalised material space as a site for visual representation strategies. Through these banners and symbols, resistance in Elang Urban Village merged into a semiotic practice that deconstructs technocratic dominance while asserting sovereignty over living space. These symbols serve as instruments to interrupt the

hegemonic narrative of development, while asserting the existence of a collective subject that refuses to be subordinated to the claims of LPK authority.

Their placement at strategic points—from the edges of main roads to the facades of residential houses—results in a spatial configuration that forms a counter-cartography. Here, space is re-articulated as an entity fraught with political meaning, while simultaneously challenging the reduction of space to a mere passive object in the logic of capital accumulation.

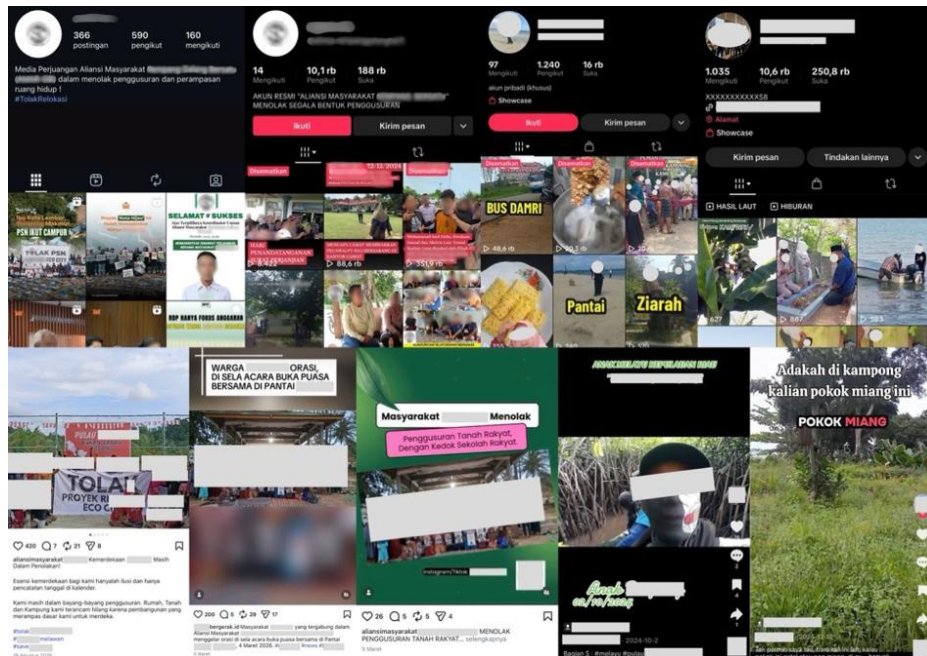
Picture 7. Protest banners displayed by Elang community opposing relocation and Proyek Raksasa Eco-City.



Source: Author's documentation, 2025.

Subsequent developments show that the field of resistance is no longer limited to physical space but has expanded into the virtual realm through practices of digital counter-worlding. The formation of counter-publics on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok—driven both by official AMP accounts and the personal posts of residents—must be analysed as more than just an expansion of campaign tactics. This practice is a strategy by residents to project the “World of Elang” into the global public sphere to rival the development model aesthetics reproduced by the regional authorities. In this arena, digital platforms transform into spaces of visual testimony that bypass censorship and the singular narratives of mainstream media. The photos and videos uploaded by residents are no longer just conventional protest tools, but a form of semiotic counter-worlding infrastructure that interrupts state technocratic claims in real-time.

Picture 8. A collage of posts from collective and individual accounts by Elang community in the digital realm.



Source: Collected from secondary media and re-processed by author, 2026.

It is important to situate this fluid and decentralised mobilisation phenomenon within the proper proportions of digital social movement literature. The dynamics in Elang indeed confirm Tufekci's (2017) argument regarding the effectiveness of digital networks, while proving the residents' shift from objects of development to autonomous political subjects (Castells 2012). However, while these theories explain how digital autonomy mechanisms operate, reality on the ground demands further reading as to what that autonomy is deployed for.

Unlike contemporary urban political movements—which often serve as the empirical basis—where demands centre on regime reform or economic justice, the resistance in Elang is a ground-level agrarian conflict. The primary goal of the residents is not to win financial compensation, but to prevent their *kampung* and their world order from being permanently erased from the map. Therefore, digital autonomy here carries a much heavier existential burden. By building a counter-digital archive, residents do not merely challenge conventional power structures; they deploy cyberspace as an essential weapon to win a larger battle: asserting sovereignty while practising their ontological defence.

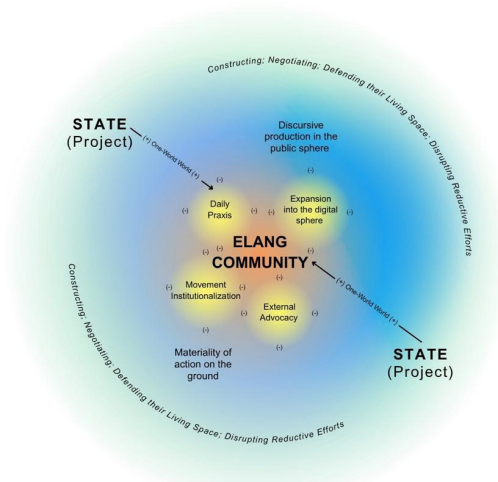
Nevertheless, expansion into the digital space also introduces new ambivalences. Some residents view digital documentation practices as a source of vulnerability, as the material they produce has the potential to be distorted into tools for criminalisation by those in power. Responding to this paradox, residents frequently engage in the practice of deleting digital artefacts (photos or videos) as a risk mitigation strategy. This self-censorship reflects not only the residents' navigation strategy amidst digital surveillance but also confirms the strong potential of the chilling effect (Penney 2016) from the state's

presence in cyberspace. Thus, the digitalisation of resistance in Elang presents itself as a double-edged sword: it expands the reach of the residents' voices into the public sphere, but simultaneously widens the gap for those in power to intervene, which ultimately demands a high degree of caution in digital information management.

In the same vein, the involvement of organisations such as the *Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia* (WALHI) and the *Lembaga Bantuan Hukum* (LBH) demonstrates that local resistance is always intertwined in broader relational configurations. These institutions not only provide litigation support but also play a role as strategic mediators connecting residents with advocacy tools, political education, public communication strategies, and socio-environmental impacts. Field findings—through the statements of Heo (25) and Izky (26)—show that the assistance provided is ongoing and includes efforts to dismantle narratives of co-existence that mask the ecological and social risks of the development project. This synergy facilitates the transformation of residents' political consciousness, while reinforcing the argument of Borrás & Franco (2013) that external solidarity is a crucial infrastructure for the sustainability of ground-level movements, especially when the state fails to guarantee substantive justice.

More than just technical intervention, this assistance contributes to the transformation of the residents' political consciousness. Mr Erwan's (44) admission regarding the uncertainty in collective decision-making reflects an early phase of ongoing political learning. In a situation where the state tends to be oriented towards investment interests, the presence of the WALHI and LBH becomes crucial in facilitating the articulation of claims over land and the environment. This support does not stop at a formal level but is internalised in the everyday practices of resistance, as illustrated in the statement of Mr Onal (55), who affirmed his conviction regarding the risks to the sustainability of living alongside the project. These everyday practices of resistance, alongside external advocacy, do not operate in isolation but rather form a complex, interconnected system of survival and assertion. This multidimensional approach is mapped in Picture 9, which illustrates the layered configuration of counter-worlding in Elang.

Picture 9. The Layered Configuration of Counter-Worlding in Elang.



Source: Processed by author, 2026.

As clearly demonstrated in Picture 9 (see previous page), the resistance in Elang operates through a mutually reinforcing, multidimensional configuration. This framework integrates daily praxis, movement institutionalisation (AMP), digital tactics, and synergies with external advocacy networks. The intersection of these dimensions gives rise to a non-linear form of resistance, combining the assertiveness of material action at the grassroots level with discursive contestation in the public sphere. Ultimately, these dynamics affirm that the Elang community is not a passive object of development projects, but rather sovereign political subjects who actively construct, negotiate, and defend their world against the threat of state reduction brought about by the Eco-City Mega Project.

Conclusion and Reflection

Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented, this research concludes that the mechanism of state administrative recognition in Elang Urban Village paradoxically operates as an instrument of exclusion. Addressing the study's problem statement, state bureaucratic rationality is proven to be absent in guaranteeing tenure security; instead, it is engineered through onto-epistemic violence to delegitimise the history of residents' vernacular land tenure to facilitate the investment interests of the Eco-City Mega Project. These findings confirm the hypothesis that the dynamics in Elang are not merely administrative matters but rather an arena of contestation and an ontological clash between two regimes of legitimacy. On one hand, the state imposes a singular reality—a one-world world—through formal legal instruments and bureaucratic categorisations; on the other, the community's legitimacy grows organically from lived experience, daily practices, and material bonds to space. When these administrative instruments fail to subdue the residents' autonomy, state intervention escalates beyond regulatory limits, manifesting in coercive repression and slow violence that reveal a social justice deficit within the normative foundations of contemporary development.

Despite facing different forms of violence, the Elang community refuses to be reduced to mere passive victims of development. Instead, they respond by building forms of resistance to protect their way of life. Community resistance demonstrates a layered and interconnected configuration: everyday actions at the grassroots level, the organisation of the movement through AMP, digital resistance, and collaboration with external advocacy networks. These forms of resistance are interconnected, linking actions in the physical space with the production of discourse of refusal in public and digital spaces. Throughout this process, the people of Elang firmly assert themselves as autonomous political subjects who actively construct, negotiate, and defend their living space, whilst challenging the state's development project. simultaneously disrupting the state's reductive efforts.

Reflection

As a methodological and epistemological novelty, this research demands critical reflexivity regarding the researcher's positionality amidst a conflict arena characterised by power asymmetry. Dissecting the existential crisis in Elang has led the author to realise that, in the ethnography of conflict zones, a positivist objectivity that merely maintains a safe distance often results in a misleading illusion. By adopting an engaged anthropology approach, the

researcher maintains that the ethical commitment to validate the reality of residents facing ontological erasure is not a form of romanticisation.

When state instruments actively marginalise research subjects, claims of political neutrality risk perpetuating such structural violence. Consequently, the greatest challenge to the study's objectivity lies in navigating the dynamics of the researcher's power relations in the field. Rather than being ignored, this tension is utilised as an analytical lens to probe the depths of the sense of threat rooted within the community. Ultimately, the researcher's political engagement transforms into a sharp methodological instrument to dismantle hegemony hidden behind the veil of developmental neutrality.

Therefore, this ethnography positions itself not merely as a medium for academic representation, but as a form of situated witnessing. Through the acknowledgement of field vulnerability and epistemological alignment, this research offers a form of critical objectivity: an objectivity that sharpens the analysis to deconstruct how space is transformed into an arena of existential battle between a project of erasure and the community's efforts to continuously defend its world.

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