

Desacralization of Acehese Sultanate Gravestones: Breakdown of Sacred Value Communication

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Abstract

The condition of gravestones associated with the Aceh Darussalam and Samudera Pasai Sultanates reflects a transformation in how sacred value is communicated within contemporary social life. Previous studies largely position gravestones as historical artifacts or objects of preservation, leaving a limited explanation of how their meaning is mediated through everyday practice. This study examines how routine interactions function as communicative processes that reshape the transmission of sacred value in postcolonial Aceh. Using a qualitative, practice-oriented approach, data were collected through field observation, in-depth interviews with five institutional and community informants, and document analysis across Aceh Besar, Banda Aceh, and Pidie. Thematic analysis identifies three recurring practices, functional reassignment, spatial neglect, and relocation, through which gravestones are disengaged from their religious and historical meanings. These findings indicate not reinterpretation but a breakdown in communicative transmission, shaped by disrupted historical knowledge, spatial pressure, and institutional limitations. The

study reframes desacralization as a problem of mediated meaning and proposes communication-based heritage strategies grounded in historical literacy and situated interpretation.

Keywords: *Desacralization; Sacred Value Communication; Gravestones; Everyday Practice; Postcolonial Aceh*

1. Introduction

The condition of gravestones in Aceh, Indonesia, reflects a critical transformation in how sacred heritage is communicated and enacted within everyday social life. Acehnese gravestones in this context have long functioned as material expressions of religiosity, historical memory, and respect toward ancestors, embedding spiritual and cultural meanings within the landscape (Suprayitno, 2023). However, their presence in contemporary settings increasingly coincides with patterns of neglect, functional repurposing, and spatial displacement. These conditions indicate a broader reconfiguration of how sacred values are understood and communicated within postcolonial society, where their status is no longer stabilized through collective practice (Jamaluddin et al., 2026). Everyday interactions with gravestones, including their treatment within domestic, public, and developmental spaces, reflect shifting modes of engaging with heritage and religiosity. Therefore, examining these practices allows for a clearer understanding of how desacralization operates as an embodied and socially mediated process within contemporary Acehnese life.

Existing scholarship on desacralization, material culture, and postcoloniality provides important conceptual foundations, yet remains fragmented in explaining how sacred value is transformed within everyday practice. Studies on desacralization largely frame it as a socio-religious process involving shifts in worldview, authority, and symbolic systems, often emphasizing theological reinterpretation, social control, or cultural commodification (Abbate, 2023; Gosselin, 2022; Hayati, 2020; Rudiarta et al., 2022). At the same time, research on gravestones positions them as cultural artifacts, rhetorical devices, and social archives that reflect identity, aesthetics, and historical structure across diverse cultural settings (Clark et al., 2018; Nur Azizah, 2022; Samari & Rezalou, 2020). Meanwhile, postcolonial perspectives highlight the persistence of colonial logics in shaping social hierarchies, knowledge systems, and material relations within contemporary life on a global scale (Ezegwu & Cin, 2022; Mayblin et al., 2020; Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021). However, these bodies of literature are rarely integrated into a coherent analytical framework that

connects material objects, everyday practices, and the mediation of sacred meaning. As a result, existing studies tend to operate at a conceptual or structural level, leaving a limited explanation of how desacralization is enacted, negotiated, and normalized through routine interactions with cultural objects. This limitation becomes particularly visible when examining specific empirical contexts such as Aceh, Indonesia, where transformations of sacred value are embedded within localized yet globally relevant configurations of postcolonial social life.

Within the specific context of Aceh, Indonesia, existing studies on gravestones and cultural heritage tend to emphasize historical classification, stylistic variation, and preservation concerns rather than examining their transformation within everyday social practice. Research on Acehese gravestones, for instance, has largely focused on typology, ornamentation, and the influence of cultural and religious interactions in shaping their visual forms (Maler et al., 2020; Satria, 2020). Other studies approach gravestones as cultural heritage objects that require protection, often framing the issue in terms of conservation, historical value, and heritage management within broader cultural contexts (Kgatle & Mashau, 2023; Samari & Rezalou, 2020). While these contributions are valuable in documenting material characteristics and historical significance, they provide limited insight into how local communities currently engage with these objects in their daily lives. As a result, the dynamic relationship between gravestones, shifting religiosity, and changing socio-cultural practices remains underexplored. This gap suggests that the transformation of sacred value in Aceh cannot be fully understood through typological or preservation-oriented approaches alone but requires closer attention to the everyday practices through which meaning is reproduced, altered, and diminished.

Taken together, previous studies reveal a tendency to treat desacralization, material heritage, and postcolonial conditions as separate analytical domains rather than as intersecting processes. Desacralization is often conceptualized at the level of belief, discourse, or institutional authority, while gravestones are examined as static cultural artifacts, and postcoloniality is framed as a structural condition shaping society at a macro level. This separation limits the capacity of existing research to account for how sacred value is continuously produced and transformed through everyday interactions with material objects. In particular, the absence of an analytical focus on practice obscures the ways in which ordinary actions function as communicative processes that mediate the relationship between religiosity, materiality, and historical consciousness. As a result, the transformation of sacred value is frequently interpreted

because of external forces such as modernization or institutional decline, without sufficient attention to how it is enacted and communicated within daily life. Positioning this study within these limitations, the analysis shifts toward examining how everyday practices operate as mediating communicative processes through which desacralization is articulated, negotiated, and reproduced in specific socio-cultural contexts.

Building on these considerations, this study asks how everyday practices mediate the communication of sacred values in the process of gravestone desacralization within postcolonial contexts. This study approaches desacralization as a form of cultural communication, in which sacred meanings are transmitted, interpreted, and negotiated through routine social interactions rather than solely through formal religious doctrine or institutional structures. In this perspective, everyday engagements with gravestones function as communicative practices that shape how sacred value is understood, contested, and rearticulated across generations. The central argument of this study is that desacralization emerges through the cumulative effect of these practices, where ordinary actions operate as mediating processes that reconfigure the relationship between material heritage, religiosity, and cultural memory. By situating gravestones as material sites of communication within lived religion, this study seeks to demonstrate how transformations of sacred value are produced within the intersection of social practice and postcolonial conditions. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to cultural communication scholarship by clarifying how everyday practice operates as a key mechanism in the ongoing negotiation of sacred meaning in contemporary society.

2. Method

This study is grounded in the observation that the desacralization of gravestones associated with the Samudera Pasai and Aceh Darussalam Sultanates, and their continued presence in contemporary community environments, reflects a shift in how sacred values are understood and enacted within everyday life. These gravestones are approached not merely as historical artifacts, but as material-cultural objects embedded in social practice, where meanings related to religiosity, memory, and authority are negotiated through everyday use. The increasing prevalence of neglect, repurposing, and spatial displacement indicates changes in how sacred significance is recognized and maintained within postcolonial Acehnese society. Rather than treating this condition solely as a loss of value, the study examines how such practices reflect changing orientations toward heritage, shaped by social, cultural, and material conditions. Accordingly,

this research is guided by a single question: how everyday practices mediate the communication and transformation of sacred values associated with heritage gravestones in postcolonial Aceh. In this framework, neglect is understood not simply as individual behavior, but as a socially patterned practice that reflects broader shifts in cultural knowledge, historical continuity, and value formation.

This study employs a qualitative research design with a practice-oriented interpretive approach to examine how sacred values are mediated through everyday interactions with gravestones. The research was conducted between February and April 2025 across three key locations in Aceh Province, Indonesia, namely Kabupaten Aceh Besar, Kota Banda Aceh, and Kabupaten Pidie. These sites were selected due to their concentration of gravestones associated with the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate and the Samudera Pasai period, as well as their continued presence within contemporary community environments. The study draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data consist of field observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews with five key informants who hold institutional and community-based roles related to heritage preservation and local historical practice. These include members of Masyarakat Peduli Sejarah Aceh (MAPESA), representatives from the Balai Pelestarian Kebudayaan Aceh, and representatives of the Center for Information of Sumatra-Pasai Heritage (CISAH). Participants were selected purposively based on their institutional involvement, experiential knowledge, and proximity to gravestone sites. Secondary data were obtained from archival materials, scholarly literature, and policy documents related to Islamic gravestone traditions, heritage management, and socio-historical changes in Aceh.

Data were collected through three interrelated techniques: field observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Field observations were conducted across multiple gravestone sites to identify patterns of everyday engagement, including functional repurposing, neglect, and spatial displacement, with attention to how these practices are embedded in routine activities and local spatial arrangements. Semi-structured interviews, conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, explored how such practices are interpreted and explained by participants, particularly in relation to changes in historical knowledge, cultural awareness, and socio-economic conditions. Document analysis was used to contextualize these findings within broader historical developments and institutional frameworks related to heritage management in Aceh. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, beginning with transcription and coding to identify recurring patterns in both practices and

interpretations (Fernando et al., 2023; Maulana & Hendri, 2025). These were then organized into broader themes, including forms of gravestone use, patterns of neglect, and factors contributing to changes in perceived value. To enhance analytical consistency, findings from observations, interviews, and documents were compared and cross-checked. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent from all participants and attention to the handling of culturally sensitive sites and materials. Through this process, the study develops an interpretive account of how sacred values associated with gravestones are transformed through everyday practice in postcolonial Aceh, Indonesia.

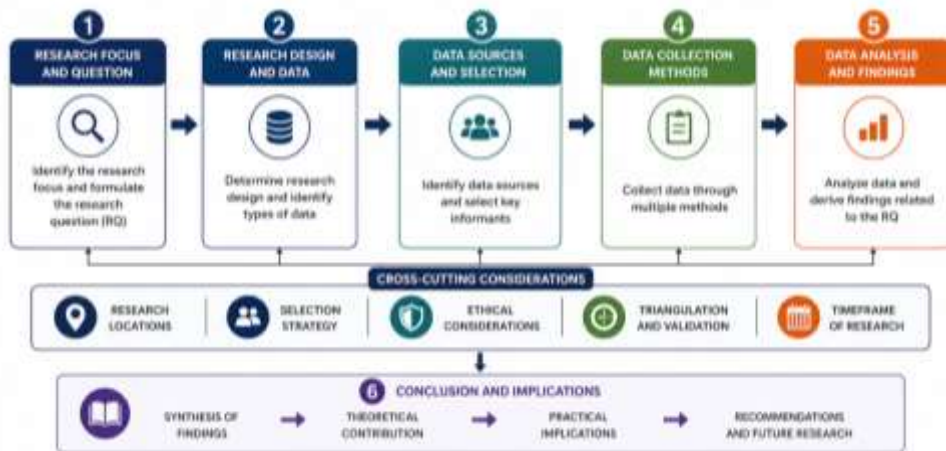


Figure 1. Research Flow Diagram

3. Results

The observed practices surrounding gravestones in Aceh, namely functional reassignment, spatial neglect, and relocation, indicate a shift in how sacred value is communicated and recognized within everyday life. Gravestones that historically functioned as material expressions of religiosity, memory, and ancestral authority are now embedded within routine activities, public indifference, and development-oriented spatial arrangements. Rather than being sustained through collective ritual or symbolic recognition, their meaning is increasingly mediated through ordinary interactions that prioritize material utility, accessibility, and land use. This condition reflects an ongoing process of desacralization, understood not simply as a loss of value but as a reconfiguration of how sacred meaning is interpreted, transmitted, and enacted in postcolonial Acehese society. The following sections examine these practices as patterned forms of everyday engagement through which the communication of sacred value is transformed.

3.1. Functional Reassignment of Gravestones

Functional reassignment of gravestones constitutes a patterned form of everyday practice in which their role as sacred markers is displaced by utilitarian use. This occurs because interactions with gravestones are increasingly structured by practical needs rather than symbolic or ritual considerations. Field observations across Aceh Besar and West Aceh show that gravestones are regularly integrated into domestic and economic activities such as grinding spices, sharpening tools, and supporting building structures. These practices are not isolated incidents but recur across multiple sites and are recognized by local actors as materially efficient solutions within everyday life. Consequently, gravestones are repositioned within a framework of functional knowledge, where their sacred status is no longer the primary basis for engagement, indicating an initial shift in how their value is recognized and enacted.



Figure 2. Sharpen a machete on the tombstones



Figure 3. Become a spice grinding place



Figure 4. Used for building columns

Source: Researcher data, 2023

Figures 2–4 document several forms of gravestone use observed during fieldwork in Aceh. Figure 2 shows a gravestone inscribed with the *kalimah tauhid* that has been repurposed as a sharpening surface in a meat market in West Aceh. The stone displays visible wear consistent with repeated sharpening activity. Figure 3 presents a gravestone used as a grinding surface for food preparation in a household setting in Aceh Besar, where its flat and textured surface facilitates the processing of spices. Figure 4 shows a gravestone positioned as a base for a structural pillar in a residential environment, indicating its use as a supporting element in construction. Across these examples, gravestones appear in different functional contexts, including market spaces, domestic kitchens, and building structures, demonstrating their incorporation into routine activities in multiple locations.

The repeated use of gravestones in these contexts indicates a patterned form of engagement that extends beyond isolated instances of reuse. This pattern emerges as such practices become embedded within routine

activities, allowing them to be learned, repeated, and gradually normalized over time. Observational findings show that gravestones are engaged primarily in terms of their material utility, with limited reference to their religious and historical function as markers of burial and memory. In several cases, individuals demonstrate familiarity with the physical properties of gravestones while showing little engagement with the inscriptions and meanings they convey. This condition suggests a disconnection in the transmission of historical and religious knowledge, where gravestones are no longer consistently understood within their intended Islamic context. As a result, repeated interaction stabilizes their functional role while simultaneously displacing their role as markers of memory and religious significance.

Functional reassignment can therefore be understood as a form of mediated communication through which the religious and historical significance of gravestones is reinterpreted within everyday practice. This occurs because meaning is not only sustained through explicit recognition, but also through the continuity of knowledge that enables objects to be understood within their proper cultural and religious context. In the observed cases, gravestones are consistently engaged in terms of their material utility, with limited recognition of their function as Islamic burial markers associated with Acehnese historical lineages. In several instances, gravestones are perceived as generic ancient objects, sometimes associated with non-Islamic pasts or treated simply as old material artifacts without specific cultural reference. This condition reflects a disruption in the transmission of historical and religious knowledge, where the interpretive link between object, meaning, and identity becomes weakened. As a result, everyday practices stabilize alternative understandings, leading to a gradual redefinition of how religious and historical meaning is communicated.

3.2. Spatial Neglect of Gravestones

Spatial neglect of gravestones appears as a recurring mode of everyday engagement in which burial sites are incorporated into surrounding activities without consistent reference to their religious and historical function. This condition develops as cemetery areas are increasingly treated as accessible and unregulated spaces, allowing various non-funerary practices to take place. Field observations across several locations in Aceh show gravestones situated within environments marked by waste accumulation, unrestricted movement, and proximity to domestic and agricultural activities. These conditions are not limited to isolated cases but occur across multiple sites, indicating a broader pattern of spatial use. As a result, gravestones are embedded within everyday environments where

their presence does not actively structure behavior, suggesting a shift in how burial spaces are recognized and engaged. See figures below.



Figure 5. Garbage around the grave



Figure 6. Tombs Trampled on by State Civil Apparatus



Figure 7. Functions as a livestock binder

Source: Researcher data, 2023

Figures 5–7 illustrate several forms of spatial neglect observed during fieldwork. Figure 5 shows a gravestone associated with a historical figure from the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate surrounded by scattered waste, indicating its use as a disposal area. Figure 6 presents a cemetery site in Pidie where an individual stands directly on gravestones within a royal burial complex. Figure 7 shows a cemetery area in Aceh Besar where gravestones are located within a livestock enclosure, with visible signs of trampling by cattle. Across these examples, gravestones are positioned within spaces where routine activities such as waste disposal, movement, and animal grazing occur in proximity. These observations demonstrate that cemetery spaces are integrated into broader patterns of everyday spatial use.

These observations indicate a patterned form of spatial engagement in which the presence of gravestones does not consistently regulate behavior within these environments. This pattern emerges as repeated exposure to such conditions allows these practices to be sustained over time without being treated as exceptional. Observational evidence suggests that activities such as stepping on gravestones, disposing of waste, and allowing livestock to occupy these areas occur within routine spatial practices rather than as isolated actions. In several sites, the absence of clear spatial boundaries and limited site management further enables the continuation of these practices. Consequently, cemetery areas become part of everyday spatial systems, where their function as burial sites does not consistently shape how they are used or navigated.

Spatial neglect can therefore be understood as a form of mediated communication through which the religious and historical meaning of gravestones is reconfigured within everyday life. This occurs because meaning is not only conveyed through explicit recognition, but also

through the ways space is used and organized in practice. In the observed cases, gravestones are situated within environments where everyday activities proceed without differentiation between burial space and other functional areas. This condition reflects a weakening in the recognition of their role as markers of burial, memory, and religious identity, as spatial practices no longer reinforce their distinct status. As a result, repeated interaction within such environments stabilizes modes of engagement in which gravestones are treated as part of undifferentiated space, contributing to a gradual transformation in how their meaning is communicated.

3.3. Relocation of Gravestones

Relocation of gravestones appears as a distinct form of everyday and institutional practice in which burial markers are physically displaced from their original sites and reinserted into new spatial contexts. This occurs as gravestones are increasingly subjected to competing spatial demands, particularly in relation to infrastructure development and residential expansion. Field observations indicate that gravestones associated with the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate are relocated to accommodate road construction, urban growth, and changes in land use. These practices are not limited to a single context but involve different actors, including state-led development projects and local community decisions. As a result, gravestones are removed from their original spatial and historical setting, altering the conditions under which their meaning is encountered and interpreted.



Figure 8. Moved due to the construction of toll roads



Figure 9. Moved to the back of the house



Figure 10. Unearthed by a Treasure Hunter

Source: Researcher data, 2023

Figures 8–10 illustrate several forms of gravestone relocation observed during fieldwork. Figure 8 shows gravestones displaced due to toll road construction in Aceh Besar, where burial markers have been removed from their original location and placed in new areas following infrastructure development. Figure 9 presents gravestones relocated to the backyard of a residential property after the original burial site was converted into

housing. Figure 10 shows a cemetery complex in Pidie that has been dismantled through excavation activities, where gravestones have been removed from their original positions. Across these cases, gravestones are found in altered spatial arrangements, including roadside areas, domestic environments, and partially excavated sites. These observations indicate that relocation occurs through different processes, including development-driven displacement, residential adjustment, and extractive removal.

Table 1. Interview Related to the Desacralization and Abandonment of Acehese Tombstones

No	Statement	Description
1	The value of the tombstones during the sultanate in Aceh is significant because the Acehese people can no longer read the tombstones. This is due to the interruption of History education in the Acehese Community. Especially those related to historical heritage objects (Muhammad, 2023).	Disconnection of local history education
2	After the war with the Dutch, there was a conflict, and after that, there was a tsunami. As a result of many people dying and leaving, many Acehese people were cut off from their descendants. Aceh now arguably has more people who are not connected to its predecessors (Jamali, 2023).	Don't feel like having a historical Acehese tombstone.
3	The development of Aceh in the last three decades has forced us to use empty spaces. New buildings must finally be built on grave lands, such as those found in Pango, toll roads, and around the city of Banda Aceh. Results of interviews with several experts (Dedy, 2023).	Pressed because of the need for development
4	I was very sad to see the phenomenon of abandoned Acehese tombstones. But we do not have enough human resources to take care of it, with a very large and widespread site (Rusdi, 2023).	Abandoned tombstones
5	After the tsunami, we were heavily influenced by outside cultures. As a result, our own relics are unconscious and forgettable (Ibrahim, 2023).	Lack of public concern

Source: Interviews with experts, 2023

These observations indicate that relocation is not a singular process but consists of multiple forms of spatial intervention shaped by different underlying conditions. This variation is further supported by interview data presented in Table 1, which highlights several factors influencing the displacement of gravestones. Informants point to the expansion of infrastructure and urban development as a primary driver, where burial sites are repurposed to meet increasing land demands. Other accounts emphasize broader socio-historical disruptions, including conflict, tsunamis, and the weakening of genealogical continuity, which reduce the perceived connection between communities and ancestral burial sites. In addition, limitations in heritage management capacity and shifts in cultural orientation contribute to the absence of systematic preservation. As a result, gravestones are relocated under diverse circumstances, where decisions are shaped not only by spatial necessity but also by changing patterns of knowledge, memory, and social attachment.

Relocation can therefore be understood as a form of mediated communication in which the relationship between gravestones, space, and meaning is reconfigured through spatial displacement. This occurs because the significance of gravestones is not inherent solely in their material form but is closely tied to their position within a specific historical, genealogical, and burial context. In the observed cases, gravestones removed from their original sites are placed in new environments such as roadside areas, residential backyards, or fragmented excavation sites, where their connection to burial context and lineage becomes less accessible. This condition is reinforced by the factors identified in Table 1, including the disruption of historical knowledge, weakening of social attachment, and increasing pressure from development. As a result, relocation produces new modes of interaction in which gravestones are encountered outside their original frame of meaning, contributing to a gradual transformation in how their religious and historical significance is communicated.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the desacralization of gravestones in Aceh emerges through patterned forms of everyday practice that mediate how sacred value is communicated and sustained. Across the three identified categories, functional reassignment, spatial neglect, and relocation, gravestones are consistently situated within social contexts shaped by material utility, spatial accessibility, and developmental pressures. Functional reassignment positions gravestones within domestic and economic activities, where their physical properties are engaged as practical resources, reflecting broader processes in which material culture

is reinterpreted through everyday use (Clark et al., 2018; Samari & Rezalou, 2020). Spatial neglect situates burial sites within undifferentiated environments, where routine activities such as waste disposal, movement, and livestock grazing occur without consistent behavioral distinction, indicating a weakening of the social mechanisms that sustain sacred recognition (Abbate, 2023; Gosselin, 2022). Relocation further reshapes the communicative conditions of gravestones by displacing them from their original genealogical and spatial contexts, often in relation to infrastructural expansion and changing land use, in line with broader postcolonial dynamics that reorganize material relations and spatial arrangements (Ezegwu & Cin, 2022; Mayblin et al., 2020). Supported by interview data, these practices are associated with disruptions in historical knowledge transmission, weakening genealogical continuity, post-disaster demographic shifts, and limitations in heritage management capacity. Taken together, these findings indicate that sacred value is actively reconfigured through everyday interactions, where ordinary practices operate as mediating processes that reshape how religiosity, memory, and historical meaning are communicated in postcolonial Acehnese society.

The patterns identified in this study emerge from the convergence of multiple structural and socio-cultural conditions that shape how gravestones are encountered and interpreted in everyday life. One key factor lies in the disruption of historical knowledge transmission, where the inability to read inscriptions and the weakening of local historical education reduce the capacity of communities to recognize gravestones as meaningful religious and genealogical markers. This condition is further reinforced by socio-historical ruptures, including prolonged conflict, the 2004 tsunami, and subsequent demographic shifts, which have fragmented genealogical continuity and altered relationships between present communities and ancestral heritage. In parallel, increasing spatial pressure driven by urban expansion and infrastructure development has reoriented land use priorities, positioning gravestones within competing frameworks of economic necessity and spatial efficiency. Institutional limitations in heritage management, including constrained resources and uneven site protection, further contribute to the absence of sustained preservation practices. These dynamics resonate with broader studies that associate weak governance frameworks and limited cultural awareness with the degradation of heritage values (Alshweiky & Ünal, 2016; Meskell, 2014; Timothy & Boyd, 2006), while also reflecting postcolonial transformations in knowledge systems and material relations that shape how heritage is valued and maintained (Ezegwu & Cin, 2022; Mayblin et al., 2020). At the same time, these practices are embedded within pragmatic responses to

material constraints, spatial demands, and changing social realities, rather than reflecting a singular process of cultural decline. Taken together, the observed patterns of desacralization emerge from the interaction between disrupted knowledge systems, socio-historical discontinuities, spatial-economic pressures, and institutional limitations, which collectively reshape the conditions through which sacred value is recognized and enacted.

The identified patterns of everyday practice indicate that the communication of sacred value associated with gravestones is not effectively sustained within contemporary social interactions. Rather than functioning as stable references of religiosity and historical continuity, gravestones are increasingly engaged through practices that fail to transmit their intended religious and cultural meanings. In this context, actions such as using, neglecting, or relocating gravestones operate as embodied forms of communication in which material engagement overrides symbolic understanding, reflecting broader processes in which material objects lose their capacity to convey shared meaning when detached from their interpretive frameworks (Clark et al., 2018; Samari & Rezalou, 2020). Within Islamic cultural frameworks, gravestones are recognized as burial markers that require respectful treatment, and their utilitarian use reflects a disjunction between established normative values and everyday practice. This condition suggests not a reinterpretation of sacred meaning, but a breakdown in the communicative processes through which such meaning is transmitted and maintained, consistent with studies that describe desacralization as a weakening of symbolic systems and collective recognition (Abbate, 2023; Gosselin, 2022). As interpretive continuity weakens, the relationship between gravestones, collective memory, and cultural identity becomes increasingly fragile, limiting the capacity of these material forms to sustain historical consciousness across generations. Consequently, desacralization emerges as a condition in which sacred value is no longer effectively communicated, as the connection between material form, meaning, and memory becomes progressively fragmented. This perspective underscores that the transformation observed in this study reflects a weakening of communicative transmission, rather than a rearticulation of sacred value within alternative frameworks.

The findings of this study both align with and extend existing scholarship on cultural heritage degradation, particularly in relation to the role of structural and institutional factors. Previous studies have emphasized how weak governance, limited policy enforcement, and the pressures of modernization contribute to the neglect and displacement of heritage sites (Meskell, 2014; Ruiz-Jaramillo et al., 2020). Similarly,

research on infrastructure development has demonstrated how economic priorities frequently override cultural continuity, resulting in the relocation or destruction of historical landscapes (Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011; Timothy, 2014). These perspectives are consistent with the present findings, especially in explaining the role of spatial pressure, institutional limitations, and development-driven land use in shaping the conditions of gravestone relocation and neglect. However, the present study differs in its analytical focus by demonstrating that these structural processes are mediated and reproduced through everyday practices at the community level. Rather than locating desacralization primarily within institutional failure or macro-level transformation, the findings show how routine actions such as repurposing, stepping on, or disregarding gravestones function as ongoing mechanisms through which sacred value is disengaged in practice. This difference is partly shaped by the study's practice-oriented qualitative approach, which foregrounds direct observation of everyday interactions and local interpretations, as well as by the specific socio-historical context of Aceh, where post-conflict and post-disaster conditions intersect with contemporary development pressures. As a result, the study extends existing scholarship by shifting the analytical lens from structural causation toward the micro-level processes through which heritage degradation is enacted, normalized, and sustained within daily life.

Addressing the ongoing desacralization of gravestones in Aceh requires a reorientation in how these objects are positioned within both cultural understanding and communicative practice. Gravestones need to be approached not merely as material heritage, but as communicative media through which relationships between memory, religiosity, and historical consciousness are articulated and sustained. This perspective highlights that sacred value depends on the continuity of interpretive processes that enable communities to recognize and engage with the meanings embedded in these objects. The weakening of such processes indicates the need for interventions that operate at the level of everyday communication, particularly through the strengthening of historical literacy, the development of context-sensitive heritage communication strategies, and the integration of visual and spatial cues that reinforce the sacred status of burial sites. In practical terms, this may involve the use of signage, narrative framing, and community-based dissemination of historical knowledge that reconnects gravestones with their genealogical and religious significance. Such approaches align with broader discussions on heritage preservation that emphasize the importance of communicative frameworks in maintaining cultural meaning within changing social contexts (Meskell, 2014; Timothy, 2014). By repositioning gravestones as

active elements within systems of communication, heritage preservation can move beyond static conservation models toward more responsive strategies that address how meaning is produced, transmitted, and recognized in everyday life.



Figure 11. Desacralization of This Study

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the desacralization of gravestones in Aceh is not an abstract or purely structural process but is materially enacted through patterned forms of everyday practice that mediate the communication of sacred value. Functional reassignment, spatial neglect, and relocation emerge as recurring modes of interaction through which gravestones are disengaged from their religious, genealogical, and historical meanings. These practices are not incidental but stabilized through repetition within domestic routines, public spatial use, and development-oriented interventions, allowing alternative modes of engagement to become normalized over time. As shown in the results, gravestones are increasingly encountered as utilitarian objects, undifferentiated spatial elements, or displaced materials detached from their original context. This condition indicates that sacred value is not inherently lost but becomes ineffective as a communicative force when the interpretive frameworks that sustain it are weakened. In this sense, desacralization operates through the gradual fragmentation of the relationship between material form, meaning, and memory, where

everyday practices function as the primary mediating mechanism shaping how sacred value is understood and enacted within postcolonial Acehnese society.

Conceptually, this study contributes to the field of cultural communication by reframing desacralization as a problem of mediated meaning rather than solely as cultural decline or institutional failure. By foregrounding everyday practice as a communicative process, the study shifts analytical attention from macro-level explanations toward the micro-level mechanisms through which sacred value is produced, disrupted, and transformed. This approach extends existing heritage studies by demonstrating that the persistence or erosion of sacred meaning depends on the continuity of communicative practices that connect objects to shared systems of knowledge, memory, and religiosity. Methodologically, the use of a practice-oriented qualitative design allows for a grounded analysis of how material engagement functions as a form of communication, revealing patterns that are often obscured in typological or policy-driven studies. In practical terms, the findings suggest that heritage preservation cannot rely solely on physical conservation or regulatory frameworks but must engage with communicative strategies that operate within everyday life, including the strengthening of historical literacy, context-sensitive interpretation, and community-based dissemination of meaning. In this way, the study clarifies how sacred value is not preserved through objects alone, but through the communicative processes that sustain their recognition within social practice.

At the same time, this study is constrained by several limitations that shape the scope and interpretation of its findings. Empirically, the research is based on observations across selected sites in Aceh and interviews with a limited number of institutional and community-based informants, which restricts the generalizability of the patterns identified. While the study captures recurring forms of everyday practice, it does not systematically quantify their distribution, frequency, or variation across different social groups and spatial contexts. In addition, the analysis focuses primarily on observable practices and participant interpretations, leaving less explored the role of broader discursive formations such as media narratives, religious authority, and formal educational systems in shaping perceptions of gravestones. Future research would benefit from expanding the methodological scope through mixed approaches, including spatial mapping, longitudinal observation, and discourse analysis, to more precisely trace the interaction between practice, knowledge systems, and institutional frameworks. Further investigation is also needed to examine alternative interpretations of these practices, including the possibility of

adaptive reuse or shifting cultural logics, to avoid reducing complex social dynamics into a singular narrative of decline. Addressing these limitations will allow subsequent studies to develop a more differentiated and empirically robust understanding of how sacred value is negotiated within changing postcolonial contexts.

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