

ISA REGIONAL GUEST LECTURE

DISASTER ON DISPLAY: EXAMPLES FROM INDONESIA

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In this paper, I will investigate the commemoration of natural disasters in the context of Indonesia's growing tourism industry. Much of Indonesia is situated within the 'Ring of Fire' and has one of the highest incidents of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions worldwide.

Historically, local people's experiences and knowledge regarding natural disasters have been largely unknown to the wider world. But especially since the tsunami of 2004, which had particularly devastating effects on the west coast of North Sumatra, a new politics of commemoration has emerged, motivated by the desire not to forget such collectively tragic and influential events, but to make experiences of disaster accessible and understandable to a wider public. Examples are the tsunami museum in Aceh, the 'lava tours' and exhibitions on the slopes of Mt. Merapi near Yogyakarta in central Java and the stone monuments at the Lapindo mud flow near Sidoarjo in eastern Java.

While these initiatives serve the purpose of remembering the destruction and suffering as well as the victims of these particularly severe disasters, there is also an economic incentive, which in some cases may even be the driving force. Regional governments, and sometimes also local entrepreneurs, have identified new possibilities for promoting affected areas as tourist attractions, including offering disaster 'experiences' with voyeuristic appeal to domestic and international visitors.

In this paper, I will also discuss how these forms of 'dark tourism' are integrated into wider conceptions of place-making and the politics of remembrance in Indonesia. I will also offer some reflections on how cultural differences in dealing with and responding to calamities and loss have figured in the commodification of disaster.



Gabriele Weichart is a Senior Lecturer in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. Since her PhD in 1997, she worked for several years at the University of Heidelberg and was a visiting scholar and lecturer at various universities in Australia and Europe. She has done extensive research in different regions of Indonesia and Australia and published on Indigenous art, vernacular architecture and food cultures. Her current interest includes the commodification of cultural heritage and vernacular architecture and its impact by natural disaster.

