

INILAH SYAIR LAMPUNG KARAM ADANYA (KRAKATAU. THE TALE OF LAMPUNG SUBMERGED)

Muhammad Saleh

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Narrative Poem, Didactic Poem

Muhammad Saleh's *Syair Lampung Karam* (1883) is a Malay narrative poem that recounts the 1883 eruption of Krakatoa and the tsunami that devastated the Lampung region. Blending eyewitness testimony with moral reflection, it portrays the disaster's ecological and social impact, focusing on loss, displacement, and social disruption. The eruption is read as divine warning and punishment, prompting prayers, repentance and renewed faith, while calling for empathy and solidarity.

Year of Publication	1888
Publication Place	Singapore
Editor	Al-Hajj Muhammad Taib
Entity	1883 eruption of Krakatoa

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption 1883 eruption of Krakatoa

REAL EVENT

Time	1883
Location	Ring of Fire, Sunda Volcanic Arc (Lampung province) Indonesia
Coordinates	-6.102791, 105.422217
Impacted Areas	The Krakatoa Archipelago; the Province of Lampung; Java
Base/Complex	The volcanic island of Krakatau
Typology	Explosive

"great clouds of smoke and ash" (Winchester 213)

Explosive

"enormous chunks of pumice began to rain down from the sky" (Winchester 217); "Pieces of pumice hurtled down from the sky, burning fiercely like jagged meteorites" (229); "the intermittent hails of pumice stones" (241)

Explosive

"falling rock" (Winchester 229); "flying lava bombs" (379); "Some of the lava bombs had been huge, some as large as a motorbus" (387)

Volcano/Eruption Typology

Terrestrial

Stratovolcano

Caldera

"Caldera collapse during the catastrophic 1883 eruption destroyed Danan and Perbuwatan cones and left only a remnant of Rakata. The post-collapse cone of Anak Krakatau (Child of Krakatau) was constructed within the 1883 caldera at a point between the former Danan and Perbuwatan cones" (Smithsonian Institution; PVMBG); "Collapse of the ancestral Krakatau edifice, perhaps in 416 AD, formed a 7-km-wide caldera. Remnants of this ancestral volcano are preserved in Verlaten and Lang Islands; subsequently Rakata, Danan and Perbuwatan volcanoes were formed, coalescing to create the pre-1883 Krakatau Island" (NOAA)

Anthropization Level

Cities

Towns

Villages

Offices

Facilities

Agriculture Areas

Farming Areas

Ecological Impacts

Atmospheric Changes

"Within moments all Anjer was enveloped in dust and cloud and became strangely dark" (Winchester 214); "the sky was completely darkened in all of southern Sumatra" (234)

Tsunami

"enormous and ever-growing waves in the same Sumatran bay" (Winchester 219-220); "communities that were already huddling, frightened, along the low coastline of the Strait began to experience ever greater waves, ever more dangerous seas" (226); "the giant tsunamis generated by the eruption" (231); "the sea suddenly rose, presumably owing to the subsidence of part of Krakatau and other islands or to a submarine upheaval, and a wave of considerable height advanced with great rapidity on the shores of western Java and southern Sumatra, causing greater or less damage according to its distance from the centre of disturbance" (237)

Earthquake

"the rumbling of an earthquake" (Winchester 212); "ominous tremors" (226)

Physical Landscape Changes

"part of Krakatau island, the island of Poeloe Temposa and other small islands in Sunda Straits have disappeared, and [...] a reef has been formed between Krakatau and Sibesie islands [...] Dwarts-in-den-weg/Thwart-the-Way, an island at the northern entrance to the Straits, is reported split into five pieces, while numerous small islands are said to have been raised which had no existence previously" (Winchester 237); "The west coast of Java from Merak to Tjeringin [has] been laid waste" (238); "The island of Krakatoa, meanwhile, had in essence disappeared. Six cubic miles of rock had been blasted out of existence, had been turned into pumice and ash and uncountable billions of particles of dust" (239)

Changes In The Volcano's Shape

"The island of Krakatoa, meanwhile, had in essence disappeared" (Winchester 239).

Social Impacts

Destruction Of Goods/Commodities

"a schooner and twenty-five or thirty prahus were being carried up and down between the drawbridge and the ordinary bridge as the water rose and fell, and nothing remained unbroken, including the telegraph wires" (Winchester 225); "smashed boats" (226)

Destruction Of Dwellings

"ruined houses" (Winchester 226); "the entire town of Ketimbang [...] had been destroyed, totally" (229-230); "The Sumatran town of Ketimbang was then destroyed at 6.15 a.m., and Anjer, her Javan sister-port across the Strait – according to the few who survived to tell the tale – was inundated and wrecked very shortly thereafter" (233-234)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

"In an instant Beyerinck's office suddenly came crashing down, along with a clutch of outbuildings" (Winchester 229)

Destruction Of Facilities

"The lighthouse at Fourth Point, just to the south of Anjer, is hit by a vast wave and destroyed" (Winchester 234); "Anjer, the port [...] no longer exists" (238)

Deaths

"the whole of the southeastern coast of Sumatra must have suffered severely from the effects of the sudden influx of the sea, and thousands of natives inhabiting the villages on the coast must have almost certainly perished" (Winchester 238); "Many Europeans, including numerous officials, and many thousands of natives have been drowned" (238)

Resource Depletion

"owing to the covering of ashes which spreads over the whole country, the cattle are deprived of their ordinary nourishment" (Winchester)

Poverty

"It is to be feared that the natives will be greatly impoverished by the damage done to fruit and palm trees which form a source of wealth, while coffee and tea gardens and standing crops of all descriptions must have suffered severely" (Winchester 238)

Volcanic eruption 1883 eruption of Krakatoa

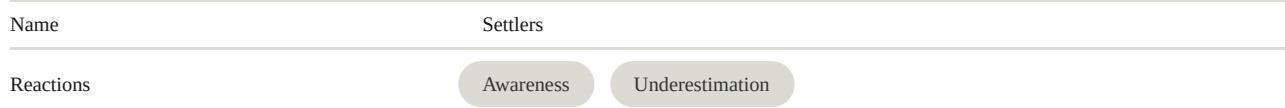
LITERARY EVENT

Time	1883
Location	Ring of Fire, Sunda Volcanic Arc (Lampung province) Indonesia
Impacted Areas	The Krakatoa Archipelago; Anjer; the Province of Lampung; Java
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Base/Complex	The volcanic island of Krakatau
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Typology	Gases Ash Rainfall Volcanic Bombs Lapilli
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial Stratovolcano Caldera
Anthropozization Level	Villages Towns Sea Coast Offices Public Buildings Facilities Settlements



COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes



Affects/Reactions



LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords

Muhammad Saleh 1883 Krakatoa Eruption Divine Nemesis
 Corrupted Civilisation Colonialism Syair

Metaphors

"three blasts of cannon fire" (Saleh, stanza 38, line 2)

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes

Locus Horridus Hell Apocalypse Deified Nature Gods
 Nemesis Fire Death Ruins Panicked Mob
 Corrupted Civilisation The Downfall Of Society The End Of The World
 Evil

Syntax

Simple Sentences, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Punctuation

High Frequency Punctuation Marks, Multiple Commas

Morphology

Preference For Nouns Adjectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Phonetics/Prosody

Sound-related word choice (onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration), Relevance of language rhythm

Saleh, Muhammad' *Syair Lampung Karam (Krakatau. The Tale of Lampung Submerged)* is a first-person account of the 1883 eruption of Krakatoa – a stratovolcano located in the Sunda Strait, Indonesia – and resulting tsunami, in the form of a *syair*, a classical Malay rhymed poem. In ancient times, *syair* was a literary genre that had both informative and educational functions. Reflecting the traditional functions of *syair*, Muhammad's long narrative poem shed light on local responses to the widespread devastation in the region struck by the catastrophe.

From a geological and historical perspective, in 1883 the volcanic archipelago of Krakatau (Krakatoa) consisted of four islands: Polish Hat, namely a small rocky islet between Krakatoa Island and Lang Island, Panjang/Rakata Kecil (Lang), Sertung (Verlaten), and Rakata. These had been originated from consecutive eruptions started 60,000 years ago, which split the Ancient Krakatoa – a very large mountain – "blowing almost all to smithereens" (Winchester 150). According to most modern history books, previous eruptions occurred in the *anno Domini* years 416 and 535. However, the only confirmed eruption prior to 1883 was a moderate one in 1680 (155).

On May 20, 1883, volcanic activity resumed from one of Krakatoa's cones (Perbuatan), sending ash-filled clouds as high as 6,8 miles (11. 000 meters) into the sky. The eruptions were so loud that explosions were heard in Batavia (now Jakarta). However, the activity subsided by the end of the month. It picked up again on June 19 and escalated significantly by August 26. On that day, at 1:06 p.m., a series of increasingly powerful eruptions began. The first roar of such explosions was heard by the telegraph-master working in the city of Anjer, Mr Schruit, who "saw, instantly, the unforgettable sight of a tremendous eruption" (270). In his journal, Captain Sampson of the British vessel *Norham Castle* wrote about an incessant rain of pumice stones, while Captain Watson of the Charles Bal reported a dark rain of rocks. At 2:45 p.m. Captain Lindeman, master of the *Loudon*, was able to avoid

“showers of ash and rocks cascading down from the plumes of smoke” (273). By mid-afternoon the ash column had risen to a height of seventeen miles. By 5:00 p.m. enormous chunks of pumice began to rain down from the sky. Reports from ships in the Sunda Strait speak continually of smashed boats and inundations of low-lying land. On August 27, between 5:30 a.m. and 6:15 a.m. the cities of Ketimbang and Anjer were destroyed by another great explosion and a resulting tsunami. A second one occurred at 6:44 a.m. The most intense eruption occurred at 10:02 a.m., producing colossal explosions that were audible as far away as Australia. It had an estimated Volcanic Explosivity Index (VEI) of 6, and is one of the deadliest and most destructive volcanic events in recorded history. The cloud of gas and white-hot pumice is believed to have risen to the height of twenty-four miles (around 38,600 meters) in the air. Part of Krakatau Island, the island of Poeloe Temposa and other small islands in Sunda Straits disappeared due to the giant tidal waves caused by either the subsidence phenomenon or submarine upheaval. A series of tidal waves advanced on the shores of western Java and southern Sumatra too, causing devastation and damage in several areas.

As Winchester observes,

The destruction caused by the waves on shore both to life and property, although known from reports already to hand to be very widespread, can hardly yet be estimated with any degree of certainty, as owing to the action of the sea and the heavy rain of ashes, telegraph and road communication has been either entirely interrupted or is much delayed. (298)

The intensity of the explosions gradually decreased throughout the rest of the day, and by the morning of August 28, the volcano had become quiet. Minor eruptions persisted over the following months, continuing until February 1884.

The eruption brought about huge changes in the surrounding physical landscape. Most of Krakatoa Island vanished, leaving only the southern third of the island intact. A large section of the Rakata volcanic cone was blown away, exposing a steep cliff about 250 meters high. In the island's northern region, all that remained was a small rocky outcrop called Bootsmansrots (“Bosun's Rock”), which was a surviving piece of Danan. Polish Hat completely disappeared. Furthermore, the eruption discharged an enormous volume of material, significantly reshaping the seafloor around the volcano. Thick layers of ignimbrite filled in the deep basin surrounding the area: its depth, which was about 100 meters before the eruption, increased to between 200 and 300 meters afterward. The landmasses of Verlaten and Lang islands grew in size, as did the western edge of what remained of Rakata.

Plants and animals on the islands were severely affected by the eruption, which buried everything under a thick layer of ash. Unfortunately, very little is known about the previous flora and fauna. Edmond Cotteau visited the islands of Sebuko and Sebesi on May 27, 1884 and found that the only sign of animal life was a spider. However, in 1889, Emil Salenska found there a rich fauna of insects, spiders and giant lizards (Dammerman 9). By 1897, the bare ash slopes of Rakata, Sertung, and Panjang “gave way to open coastal *pes-caprae* (morning glory) formations and pioneer grass communities at high altitudes. Coastal *Barringtonia* and *Casuarina* forests were established by 1906 but *pes-caprae* persisted on the beaches” (Rawlinson et al. 21–22).

Regarding the social impact of the disaster,

in the aftermath of Krakatoa's eruption, 165 villages were devastated, 36,417 people died, and uncountable thousands were injured – and almost all of them, villages and inhabitants, were victims not of the eruption directly but of the immense sea-waves that were propelled outwards from the volcano by that last night of detonations. (302)

Syair Lampung Karam is a *syair kewatawanan*, “a journalism poem [...] contain[ing] eyewitness reports on real-life events” (McGlynn, “Introduction”). Consisting of 375 four-line stanzas rhyming a-a-a-a, b-b-b-b, and so on, it was written in Javi script and published in 1883, with three subsequent editions issued within the following five years. However, since only those who knew classical Malay literature could read Malay in Javi script, the poem fell into obscurity until it was transliterated into Latin script by Suryadi in 2010 (IIAS Newsletter), and later translated into English, in 2014. The last known edition of the poem, on which McGlynn's 2014 translation is based, was originally titled *Inilah*

Syair Lampung Karam Adanya (This is a poem about Lampung when it was submerged). The translated version employs a a-a-b-b rhyming scheme.

Syair Lampung Karam was composed in the Bangkahulu Quarter of Singapore by Muhammad Saleh, a migrant to Lampung from South Sulawesi. In the poem (stanza 4, line 2), the author states that he came from Tanjung Karang; indeed, he may have been one of those refugees who fled to Singapore carrying with them first-person accounts of the disaster. In stanza 84, he writes: “So this is my story [...] One that I witnessed, with my own two eyes” (lines 1–2), a statement frequently reiterated throughout the text to gain the reader’s trust. Therefore, as Suryadi points out, “The poem reveals that, in addition to the many scientific analyses of the 1883 Krakatau cataclysmic explosion, which appear mostly in Western scholarly publications, there is also a native account of the disaster” (IIAS Newsletter). Saleh describes what happened to more than thirty towns and villages in the Lamoung Region of Southern Sumatra during the eruption and the resulting tsunami, depicting different and antithetical attitudes and reactions to the events. For example, he reports how people helped each other in the face of the cataclysm, but he also deals with deplorable acts of looting. McGlynn maintains that “As a Muslim, and in accordance with the tastes of the day, [Saleh] offered moral observations and pieces of advice” (“Introduction”) to strengthen his confreres and readers’ faith in Almighty God. As the poet himself maintains in stanza 108, his report addresses “young men of religious predilection” (line 1) and aims to “reinforce [their] spiritual conviction” (line 2).

In the first five stanzas, Saleh follows the traditional structure of the *syair*: first, he asserts that he aims to praise God through his verses, defining himself a humble servant of the prophet Muhammad; second, he unveils his social class, maintaining that he is “a tradesman of humble birth” (stanza 2, line 1); third, he clarifies the verse form of his poem. Furthermore, he underlines that he is not sure he will be able to express his thoughts truly due to his “imperfect mind” (stanza 2, line 4) and the “pain and misery” (stanza 5, line 2) that shape his traumatic condition.

In the sixth stanza, he describes an unusual phenomenon occurring in the town of Tanjung Karan in August 1883: “ash began to fall. / For three long days, ash descended thick and hard, / Til a layer two fingers deep covered the yard” (lines 3–4) before unveiling in the ninth stanza that “The source was Krakatau, that sulfurous mount” (line 4). The adjective “sulfurous” suggests that in 1883 people living in the region of Lampung were fully aware of the volcanic nature of Mount Krakatoa. In stanzas 12 and 13, Saleh mentions that at four o’clock on August 26, 1883 he heard a booming sound coming from the sea, which signalled the first great eruption of Krakatoa. In stanza 18, he describes the dynamics of the eruption: “a rain of pumice, as big as corn kernels, fell” (line 2), while in stanza 24, he mentions a series of earthquakes as a side effect of the eruption, highlighting that “The tremors were coming from the ocean’s wake” (line 4). Tremors are transmitted from the ocean to human bodies: “The crisis had everyone trembling with fright” (stanza 25, line 4). In this passage, the shiver of the sea’s surface is mirrored by people’s trembling, a psychophysical reaction involving feelings of fear and helplessness. Such tremors produce a wave that washes away a flock of ships sailing in the port and causes severe damage to the coastal settlements. Then, the town of Tanjung Karan is shrouded in darkness and struck by “raindrops of stone falling in a shower” (stanza 37, line 1). Like in many reports from that time, the booming sound caused by the eruption is compared to “blasts of cannon fire” (stanza 38, line 2). Saleh also reports of volcanic lightning (stanzas 21, 22), falling ash and hot windstorms (208), and rainstorms of hot mud and fire (stanza 218). His descriptions of the phenomena related to the eruption corroborate Winchester’s reconstruction of the chain of events following the awakening of Krakatoa in 1883. In his poem, Saleh depicts the devastation of several towns, villages, and islands in the Lampung Region, including Tanjung Karang, Teba, Kuala, Lampasing, Kampung Menanga, Sebesi Island, Sebuku, Umbul Batu, Rajabasa, Benawang, Limau, Semangka, Badak, Java, and Merak Island. Not only does he deal with the geological phenomena pertaining to the different phases of the eruption, but he also provides measures and spatial details concerning the impact of the submarine earthquake and the resulting tsunami, as in the following example: “The distance the waters travelled inland, / Was by reckoning two leagues from the strand” (stanza 72, lines 1–2).

In his *syair*, Saleh also explores the ecological impact of the eruption. First, he describes how a series of submarine earthquakes resulted in giant waves that devastated the Lampung coast. Second, he reports the effects of the rains of volcanic ash on local ecosystems: “The layer of hot ash, eight fingers

deep, / Obliterated all life on the ground beneath" (stanza 62, lines 3-4). The island's slick land is compared to "a boiled egg with no shell" (stanza 63, line 3), a simile that emphasizes the vulnerability of all the species living on that doomed ground. Third, he mentions the death of trees (stanzas 63, 130) and animal species. In Kampung Menanga, for example, "Buffalo and goats [...] were taken" (stanza 112, line 1) by "the ocean devil" (stanza 291, line 2). Fourth, he refers to water pollution brought about the rains of mud and volcanic ash. Lastly, the eruption showed that Mounts Perbuatan and Krakatau "appeared to be one but were bifurcated" (stanza 124, lines 1-2), suggesting how geologic disasters, despite their detrimental effects, can lead to the development of knowledge and to a better understanding of the earth's morphology.

However, the poem mainly focuses on the social impact of the disaster: Saleh reports of unnumerable deaths (stanzas 28, 33, 54, 64, 92, 134, 136, 216, 226, 227, 228, 233, 290, 307, 313, 314), emphasizing the fate of the most vulnerable subjects, namely women and children (stanzas 67, 68, 81); furthermore, he mentions injuries (stanza 43, 93), severe damage to commodities and facilities such as ships (stanzas 40, 73) and docks (stanza 27), the destruction of houses (stanzas 78, 106, 110, 222), the loss of private property (stanza 55), water shortage (stanza 154), food shortage (158), the disruption of families with their members torn apart (stanza 116), poverty and beggary (stanza 351), and forced migration (stanza 142).

Regarding people's reactions to the eruption and the tsunami, Tanjung Karang's citizens are portrayed as people "in a state of shock" (stanza 18, line 3) and compared to "a crazed flock" (stanza 18, line 3). By using this simile, Saleh suggests how a disaster can disrupt the social contract, turning human beings into animals running hither and thither. Similarly, the flight of Kuala's townsmen is likened to "a mad race" (stanza 97, line 2).

The poet informs us that "Voices raised in prayer" (stanza 50, line 3), and people "sought forgiveness for sins and errors" (stanza 51, line 3). The dramatization of such attitudes and reactions is consistent with the representation of the disaster as divine punishment. Indeed, throughout the poem, the eruption and the tsunami are referred to through words and phrases pertaining to the *topoi* of Nemesis, the end of the world, Hell, and Apocalypse, as emerges in the following examples: "a pronouncement of doom" (stanza 10, line 2); "the end of the world" (stanza 16, line 3); "the calamities that Allah might impart" (stanza 21, line 4); "God's might on display was a sign for all, / To show remorse before death came to call" (stanza 37, lines 3-4); "the deadly deluge" (stanza 45, line 4); "victims of fire, / Burnt beyond recognition, as if on a pyre" (stanza 54, lines 1-2); "If the waters should reach as far as this place, / It will be the end of the world, our very race" (stanza 87, lines 3-4); "[...] to suffer such a fate, / Had been predestined in Doomsday's Slate?" (stanza 119, lines 3-4); "As if the storm had brought the apocalypse" (stanza 191, line 1); "those struck by the inferno lost their minds" (stanza 218, line 3); "the oceanic devil" (stanza 291, line 2); "our land was in pandemonium" (stanza 329, line 2).

In stanzas 56-57, Saleh juxtaposes two different kinds of reaction: Those who were "bemused" (stanza 56, line 1), "did nothing, all too confused" (stanza 56, line 2), while "People of a much practical mind" (stanza 57, line 1) chose to rely on a "man of different race" (stanza 60, line 4), namely a Dutch inspector to whom they clung for rescue. In this passage, the poet unveils the relationship between social status and risk response, highlighting how people in positions of power in colonial Lampung could play a pivotal role in immediate assistance and disaster recovery. Winchester too has discussed how colonial hierarchy decisively influenced risk communication, preparedness and response during the different phases of 1883 disaster, ironically suggesting that "Controllers in the colonial service of Holland were not a breed of men given to panic" (156), and explaining in a note that "An official warning of troublesome seismic activity sent by a *contrôleur* would certainly cause senior members of the colonial administration to sit up and take notice" (156, emphasis in original).

In Tarjung Karan, Saleh encounters many refugees whose inner conditions are not easily readable, as "What was in their hearts, no one could glean" (stanza 143, line 4). However, he recognises some attitudes: pity for others (stanza 145), a sense of loss and displacement (stanza 149), selfishness and deceitfulness (stanzas 173, 178), and compassion (stanza 185). As far as he is concerned, he shows unpretentiousness and gratitude towards his rescuers. The moral message, inextricably tied to religious values, always emerge when the poet describes people's behaviours. For instance, relating to

burglaries and looting, he writes that “in times of chaos, Satan always does roam” (stanza 20, line 4), while he maintains that “Pray keep us distant from the fires of Hell” (stanza 372, line 2).

Syair Lampung Karam stands as a powerful literary testimony to the 1883 Krakatoa eruption, offering a rare indigenous perspective that blends eyewitness narrative with poetic tradition. Muhammad Saleh’s first-person account captures not only the physical devastation but also the emotional, spiritual, and societal upheaval that followed the eruption of Krakatoa and the tsunami caused by the earthquake swarm. By embedding traumatic memory in the classical form of the *syair*, Saleh preserves the voices of survivors and provides future generations with a moral and historical reflection. In the last two stanzas of the poem the author speaks of his great sadness, maintaining that “Only Allah and His Prophet can truly discern / The sorrow and pain that make my heart burn” (stanza 374, lines 1–2). Here, the poet recognizes the limits of language and human comprehension in capturing the full depth of the trauma. This reflects how traumatic memory often exceeds narrative, existing as emotional residue or unprocessed grief that may lead to “[a] fevered delirium” (stanza 375, line 4). By ending on such a deeply reflective and solemn note and mentioning “Allah and His Prophet”, the poet underscores the function of his *syair* as a vehicle for remembrance and the strengthening of faith. Connecting back to stanza 371, the final stanza marks the shift from immediate witness to enduring memory, ensuring that future generations do not forget the devastation and “right [their] ways as soon as [they] can” (stanza 371, line 4).

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