

BOOK REVIEW

Muhammad Saleh. *Krakatau: The Tale of Lampung Submerged, Syair Lampung Karam*. Translated by John McGlynn. Singapore: NUS Press, 2014.

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There are over a thousand European studies of the world famous explosion of Krakatau (or Krakatoa) in August 1883, mainly of a geological nature. The book under review presents a contemporary firsthand account by an Indonesian/Malay author of the effects of the event on the local inhabitants of South Sumatra and Northwestern Java. It is written in the verse form known as *syair*.

This review briefly describes the events of 1883, outlines the complex threads that have contributed to the making of this book, and provides a few comments on the contents of the *syair* and its translation.

THE EVENTS OF 1883

The island of Krakatau was situated¹ in the Sunda Strait between the islands of Java and Sumatra, approximately 40 kilometers from both main islands. The island was 5.6 miles (9 km) long by 3.1 miles (5 km) wide and consisted of three cones: Perbuatan in the north, Danan and Rakata. Each contributed to the disaster.

After earlier rumblings from Perbuatan beginning in May 1883, a series of massive eruptions occurred in August. The first continued for many hours after 13:00 PM (local time) on the 26 August, sending a cloud of ash some 17 miles (27 km) into the air. A small tsunami reached the shores of Java and Sumatra between 18:00 and 19:00 hours.

On the following day, four enormous eruptions took place between 05:30 and 10:41 AM (local time). The first eruption sent a tsunami that headed directly towards Telok Betong, at Lampung Bay, Sumatra, and the

thriving port town of Anyer, northwest Java.² Further waves followed each eruption and were 30 metres high in places. The third eruption opened fissures in the walls of Rakata, allowing seawater to pour into the magna chamber and creating the final explosion that destroyed most of the island. According to Dutch records, at least 36,417 people died as a result of these events; 165 villages and towns near Krakatau were destroyed and a further 132 were seriously damaged.³ The actual figure may have been closer to 120,000 people. Approximately 1,000 persons were killed by a separate blast of hot ash directed at Ketimbang, in Lampung, the rest by waves or the after effects of the eruptions.

The third and largest explosion, at 10:02 AM, was heard over 2,000 miles away, as far away as Perth, Western Australia, and the island of Rodrigues, near Mauritius. Concussive airwaves from the explosions traveled around the world seven times. Global weather patterns were affected for the next five years (falling by as much as 1.2 degrees Celsius) and sunsets were rendered more vivid because of the large amounts of sulfuric acid in the air. It has been estimated that the force of the eruptions was nearly 10,000 times that of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.

THE HISTORY OF SYAIR LAMPUNG KARAM

The blood red cover of the volume under review gives the title of the book as *Krakatau: The Tale of Lampung Submerged, Syair Lampung Karam*. The author is named as Muhammad Saleh. The book is "translated by John McGlynn."

The title page is far more inclusive: "*Krakatau/The Tale of Lampung Submerged/Syair Lampung Karam* by Muhammad Saleh, translated from the Classical Malay by John McGlynn based on the romanised transliteration by Suryadi and an essay on the syair verse form by Ian Proudfoot and Virginia Hooker."

Clearly this volume builds on the work of many people. The author, Encik Muhammad Saleh, personally witnessed these events and their consequences from Tanjung Karang and toured neighboring areas shortly thereafter (stanzas 4, 84, 103, 170, 232 and 374 of the 1888 edition). Within two months after the eruption, he wrote the initial *syair* in Bencoolen Street, Singapore, finishing it on Monday 14 Zulhijjah 1300 (15 October 1883) (stanzas 367–369). It is not known who he was, although it has tentatively been suggested that he may have been a religious leader from Bone, South Sulawesi, who was instrumental in building the Jamik Al-Anwar Mosque in Teluk Betung, Lampung, after 1839.⁴

Four lithographed editions of this text were published over the next four years, all somewhat different and with slightly different titles:

- (i) The first appeared within a year of composition: *Syair Negeri Lampung yang Dinaiki oleh Air dan Hujan Abu*, Singapore, 1301 AH (between November 1883 and October 1884), 42 pages. No publisher is mentioned. Copies of this edition are held in the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia, Jakarta, and The Russian State library, Moscow.
- (ii) A less complete reprint soon followed: *Inilah Syair Lampung Dinaiki Air Laut*, Singapore, 2 Safar 1302 (21 November 1884), 42 pages. Pages 23 and 24 of the first edition are missing. This edition too is held in the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia, Jakarta.
- (iii) The third edition was *Syair Lampung dan Anyer dan Tanjung Karang Naik Air Laut* Singapore, 27 Rabiulawal 1303 (3 January 1886), 49 pages. It is referred to in some advertisements as *Syair Negeri Anyer Tenggelam*, which may have been aimed at attracting Javanese purchasers of the pamphlet. The publisher of this edition was Haji Said. A copy is held in the Cambridge University Library.
- (iv) The fourth edition was *Inilah Syair Lampung Karam Adanya*, Singapore: 10 Safar 1306 (16 October 1888), 36 pages (two pages were accidentally omitted by the printer). It was copied by Encik Ibrahim and published by Cap al-Hajj Muhammad Tayib. Copies are held in National Library, Jakarta, and the universities of Leiden, London and Malaya, according to Dr. Ian Proudfoot's *Early Malay Printed Books*.⁵ A further copy was collected by the Methodist missionary Emil Lüring and is held in Frankfurt (Warnk 2004: 20).⁶

A symposium was held in Jakarta in August 1983 in commemoration of the centenary of these events. As part of the proceedings, a transliteration of the first edition (with reference also made to the second) was presented by Dr. Sri Wulan Rudjiati Mulyadi of the Lembaga Riset Kebudayaan Nasional, Jakarta: "An Eye-witness Account on the Eruption of the Mountain Krakatau in the Form of A Syair." She describes the tone of the text as "lively" and "charming in its simplicity," while noting that "the syair-form

which expects the same rhyme at the end of each line in each couplet makes the poem seem rather clumsy here and there."⁷

Following Dr. Mulyadi's pioneering efforts, a copy of the 1888 edition was "discovered" in the Leiden University Library in late 2007 by Dr. Suryadi, an instructor in Indonesian at the University. He delivered a paper on the *syair* to the 24th ASEASUK Conference, John Moores University, Liverpool, 20–22 June 2008: "*Syair Lampung Karam: Images of the 1883 Eruption of the Krakatau Mountain in a Classical Malay Literary Text.*" A detailed report on the paper was also carried in the Jakarta newspaper *Kompas* on 12 September 2008. The report was written by Yurnaldi, who edited the subsequent publication of Suryadi's detailed romanised transcription of the text in August 2009: *Syair Lampung Karam. Sebuah Dokumen Pribumi tentang Dahsyatnya Letusan Krakatau 1883*. A second edition quickly appeared in January 2010.⁸ Suryadi's edition is a diplomatic transcription of the 1888 lithograph, based on the Leiden text and made use of Mulyadi's transcription of the first and editions. Stanzas 218–237, the missing two pages, were completely taken from Mulyadi's transcription.

A further summary of Dr. Suryadi's 2008 paper was published in the *IAS Newsletter* no. 61, Autumn 2012. The article included a few verses translated by Mr. John McGlynn, which he had begun in 2011 according to the "Translator's Acknowledgments" of the final book, and publication of the bilingual volume was indicated in the article as forthcoming in 2013.⁹ The book finally appeared in October 2014, published by the NUS Press in Singapore in association with the Lontar Foundation in Jakarta.

Suryadi's hope was that the book would reach an audience far wider than specialists in Indonesian and Malay manuscripts. The present volume both sharpens and simplifies his earlier work. It includes Suryadi's Indonesian text, without the philological or other annotations, and the English translation, which is given the greater prominence on the cover. The joint Introduction by McGlynn and Suryadi follows Suryadi's *IAS* paper, with two extra sections inserted, one on "Jawi script," the other on "transliteration and translation," both presumably by McGlynn. An Indonesian translation of the Introduction by Ms. Femmy Syahrani is also provided.

To further explain about the form of the narrative, the book also includes an essay entitled "The *Syair*: A Verse for Every Purpose" by Dr. Ian Proudfoot and Prof. Dr. Virginia Hooker. This originally formed part of a much longer essay called "Mediating Time and Space: The Malay Writing Tradition," in *Illuminations: The Writing Traditions of Indonesia*¹⁰ and is virtually unchanged. The essay was previously translated into Indonesian

under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Achadiati Ikram and was revised for this volume by Ms. Wikan Satriati of the Lontar Foundation.

The volume concludes with a photo-reproduction of "The Original Jawi Text," drawn from the Leiden University Library Shelfmark 895 D6 text. This is entitled "*Syair Lampung Karam*," and bears the first line in Jawi: "*Ini [sic] Syair Lampung Karam Adanya.*"

Published by a major university press and the leading Indonesian publisher of modern Indonesian literature in translation, it is to be expected that the book will attract three different audiences. The first will be Indonesian and overseas scholars, who will find that the book could be a valuable introductory literary history to be shared with their students (for this purpose, further reference should necessarily be made to Suryadi's work in Indonesian and Mulyadi's edition). The second will be general Indonesian readers, who are interested in these major historical events. Finally, there will be the more casual English readers primarily attracted by the sensational aspects of "the day the world exploded."¹¹ They will probably prefer to dip into the translation and ignore the more demanding information on Jawi script, manuscripts and literary form. It would have helped them had the Arabic dates been translated (perhaps in a footnote) in the translation and a rough map provided of the various places mentioned in the text.

SYAIR LAMPUNG KARAM: LANGUAGE, SOCIOLOGY AND POETRY

In his 2008 paper, Suryadi describes the *Syair Lampung Karam* (henceforth SKL) as a "classical Malay text." One might question the use of the term "Classical Malay" for a late 19 century work. Professor Cyril Skinner's term "transitional Malay literature"—"transitional between a 'classical and a 'modern' literature"—would seem to be more appropriate,¹² as might Pramoedya Ananta Toer's category of "pre-Indonesian literature."¹³ Following Mulyadi,¹⁴ Suryadi in his earlier paper, and with McGlynn (2014: xxiii), alternatively describes this as a "*syair kewartawanan*," a journalism poem. The emphasis on a first person narration of actual events witnessed by the narrator, published by a commercial press in a major colonial city, clearly indicates that this text is not the traditional type of *syair* but "a creative 'forgetting' of this tradition."¹⁵

Nor is the book a scientific record of the events, unlike the European studies. The first 50 stanzas or so do describe some immediately observable aspects of the eruptions and the tidal waves that followed, but the rest of the text dwells on the consequences of the events for the residents of the more

than 30 named villages in the Lampung region of Sumatra and the northwest coast of Java, both the indigenous inhabitants and their colonial administrators alike. Muhammad Saleh describes the horrors of the events in horrifying detail:

*Di atas langit nyata kelihatan,
Seperti bunga api yang kelihatan,
Hati di dalam takutlah, Tuan,
Bahala banyak diturunkan Tuhan.*

There appeared above, in that astral murk,
A luminous display much like fireworks,
Indeed, dear sirs, striking fear in the heart,
For the calamities that Allah might import. (stanza 21)

Some acts of kindness took place, though not a lot:

*Tatkala gelap [sic] di situ, nan Tuan,
Orang berkumpul berkawan-kawan,
Lalu beberapa berpegang-pegangan,
Takut bercerai ia sekalian.*

I say this, dear sirs, that when darkness did fall,
People sought out company, each one and all,
They held on for dear life to one another,
Fear of being left alone was hard to smother. (stanza 79)

But there was also much widespread looting and violence:

*Sehari demikianlah, Tuan,
Pencuri turun berkawan-kawan,
Mengambil harta orang merusakkan,
Ada sepuluh hari yang demikian.*

The next day, dear sirs, was more of the same,
With bands of robbers joining the game,
For ten days the situation was highly changeable,
With people stealing lost and broken valuables. (stanza 263)

In response to this horror and evil, Muhammad Saleh commits himself and his writing to God—"Allah dan Rasul yang mengetahuinya,/Hati di dalam

sangat siksanya" (Only God and His Prophet can truly discern/The sorrow and pain that make my heart burn... [stanza 374]). He also uses the various ethical situations he describes to encourage his readers to consider the consequences, good and bad, of their own actions:

*Perkataan ini hamba katakan,
Kembali kepada hamba, nan Tuan,
Sebab takut yang demikian,
Harap diampuni olehNya Tuhan.*

Listen to me as I say these words to you,
Return to God's path, the one that is true,
Never hesitate in choosing that course,
Pray for God's pardon and show remorse. (stanza 122)

There are many theories on the translation of poetry. The most famous is that of the American poet Robert Frost, commonly paraphrased as: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation."¹⁶ Granted that attempts are nevertheless regularly made to translate poetry, there are two other extreme positions, expressed as: a translation of verse should always be in prose; and a translation of verse should always be in verse.¹⁷ McGlynn has chosen to translate the 375 four-line Malay verses into matching four-line English verses. The verses of the traditional *syair* commonly maintain the same one syllable end-rhyme. Because an attempt to imitate this would be "to put it bluntly, unreadable" (xxix), McGlynn has chosen to rhyme the first and second lines, and the third and fourth lines, of each verse. Thus the poem opens:

*Bismillah ini permulaan kata,
Alhamdulillah puji yang nyata,
Berkat Muhammad penghulu kita,
Fakir mengarang suatu cerita.*

*Fakir yang daif dagang yang hina,
Mengarang syair sebarang guna,
Sajaknya janggal banyak tak kena,
Daripada akal tidak sempurna.*
"In the name of God" is our opening phrase,
To show our devotion, to Allah give praise,
By the light of Muhammad, our spiritual guide,
This humble servant may his tale transcribe.

Though I'm only a tradesman of humble birth,
 I've composed a poem, for what it's worth,
 A clumsy effort of uncertain rhyme,
 The modest product of an imperfect mind.

According to the famous Riau author, Raja Ali Haji, the perfection of a *syair* consists in three things: "*Pertama, cukup timbangannya; kedua, betul sajaknya; tiga, tiada cacat dengan sebab berulang-ulang apalagi janggal*"¹⁸ (in being sufficiently well balanced, precise in its rhymes, and in not being defective because of repetition or, in particular, dissonance). The rhymes of the second couplets of the two stanzas just quoted are admittedly imperfect (guide/transcribe, rhyme/mind), and this is in fact not uncommon throughout the translation, but when the verses are read aloud—and this is very much an oral text¹⁹—their flaws are less obvious. Adjunct Professor Peter Carey, in a review of *SLK* elsewhere, has paid tribute to "McGlynn's superb rhyming couplet translation" in this "magnificent publication", and I shall defer to his opinion here.²⁰ We need not take Muhammad's mock modesty too seriously.

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NOTES

- ¹ I use the past tense in this review to refer to the island that was two-thirds destroyed in the 1883 eruptions. All plant and animal life was obliterated. In August 1930 an island named Anak Krakatau (the child of Krakatau) emerged from the caldera formed earlier.
- ² Winchester, S., *Krakatoa* (New York: Viking, 2003), 233, 238.
- ³ A. Zimmerman ironically states that "thirty-seven Europeans and over thirty-six thousand natives" died: "Krakatao," *Inter-Ocean*, IX: 2, February 1928, 96. Cited in Suryadi, *Syair Lampung Karam. Sebuah dokumen pribumi tentang dahsyatnya letusan Krakatau 1883*, ed. Yurnaldi, 2nd ed. (Padang: Komunitas Penggiat Sastra Padang, 2010), 5–6.
- ⁴ Zulkarnain Zubairi and Iyar Jarkasih, "Jejak Islam di Lampung (5): Masjid Al-Anwar pintu Islam di pesisir," *Lampung Post*, 15 August 2010; cited by McGlynn and Suryadi (xix), but rejected for lack of further written evidence.
- ⁵ Academy of Malay Studies and Library, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 1993, 319.
- ⁶ Warnk, H., "Some notes on the collection of Malay books of Emil Lüring in Frankfurt." Paper Presented at the *Seminar Sastra Cetak Abad ke-19*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 14–15 December 2004.

- ⁷ Proceedings of the Symposium on 100 Years Development of Krakatau and Its Surroundings, Jakarta, 23–27 August 1983, Vol. II: Social Sciences, 1–2 of the original format. Published by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, Jakarta 1985, 25–57.
- ⁸ Suryadi, *Syair Lampung Karam. Sebuah dokumen pribumi tentang dahsyatnya letusan Krakatau 1883*, ed. Yurnaldi (Padang: Komunitas Penggiat Sastra Padang, 2009).
- ⁹ "The tale of Lampung submerged," *IAS Newsletter* No. 61 (Autumn) 2012, 8–10.
- ¹⁰ Edited by Ann Kumar and John McGlynn, Lontar, Jakarta, 1996.
- ¹¹ The subtitle of Winchester's popular narrative; see footnote 2 above. Some English readers may also be reminded of the 1969 American film oddly entitled *Krakatoa, East of Java*— which presumably referred to the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora on the island of Sumbawa, the only eruption in world history that was even louder and more devastating than Krakatau.
- ¹² "Transitional Malay Literature: Part 1 Ahmad Rijaluddin and Munshi Abdullah," *BKI* 134 (1978), No. 4, 467.
- ¹³ *Tempo Doeloe: Antologi sastra pra-Indonesia*, Hasta Mitra, Jakarta 1982.
- ¹⁴ "'Wartawan' yang berdentang dalam syair dan naskah kita," *Lembaran Sastra*, 12, 1991, 155–168.
- ¹⁵ Koster, G. L., "Making it new in 1884: Lie Kim Hok's *Syair Siti Akbari*," *BKI* 154 (1998), No. 1, 109. Reference should also be made to: Watson, C. W., "Some preliminary remarks on the antecedents of modern Indonesian literature," *BKI* 127 (1971), No. 4, 417–433; and Sykorsky, W., "Some additional remarks on the antecedents of modern Indonesian literature," *BKI* 136 (1980), No. 4, 498–516. During the nineteenth century, Munshi Abdullah wrote *Syair Singapura terbakar* (1843) and *Syair Kampung Gelam terbakar* (1847), both in *Karya lengkap Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi*, ed. Sweeney, A., vol. 2 (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2006); *syair* were also written on other contemporary non-court focused events, such as the construction of a railway line in Java in 1890 and the visit of a Russian crown prince in 1897 (Sykorsky 505–506).
- ¹⁶ The actual quotation is: "I could define poetry this way. It is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation. That means something in the very way the words are curved and all that—the very way the words are taken, the very way you take the words." *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Lathem, E. C. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1966), 203.
- ¹⁷ Savory, T., *The art of translation* (London: Cape, 1957), 50.
- ¹⁸ Cited by Sutayadi: *Syair Lampung Karam*, 25, fn. 9, from Jan van der Putten and Al Azhar: *Dalam berkekalan persahabatan (In everlasting friendship)*, Talen en Culturen van Zuidoost Azië en Oceanië (Semaian 3), Leiden 1995, 119.
- ¹⁹ Note Proudfoot and Hooker's comments: "quite contrary to modern notions, in the days of the handwritten manuscript it was verse, not prose, that was easier for authors to compose, for performers to read and recite, and for listeners to follow... Verse was closer to common Malay speech. Its grammatical forms were more colloquial, its syntax was simple, and its sense units were short and predictable" (137).
- ²⁰ "The poetry of Krakatau," *Tempo Magazine*, 6 January 2015.