

The Weather of Merapi

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Elisabeth Inandiak is author of Centhini, an edited translation of one of Java's greatest epic poems, and of The White Banyan, a collaboration with artist Heri Dono about the intersection of old and new stories about Mount Merapi, an active volcano in Central Java. In 2010, Mount Merapi lethally erupted, displacing thousands living along its southern flank for up to a month, and killing hundreds. Inandiak lives on the southern flank, about twenty kilometers from the crater. She has long been active in the village of Kinahrejo, one of the closest to the peak that was devastated in 2010. Her current book project recounts the eruption and its aftermath as both reportage and myth.

The following is a translated excerpt from her diary of the 2010 eruption and its aftermath, originally published in French, in Lemond.fr (8 November 2010) and Les Cahiers d'anthropologie sociale: Désastres (October 2011). It was translated by the Scapegoat editorial board. This is followed by an interview with Inandiak at her house at the foot of Merapi.

Asep, my faithful collaborator in reconstructing Bebekan village since 2006, soon joined the rescue team. It was he who had informed me in the hours that followed of the magnitude of the disaster, well before the television news broadcast it. At around nine o'clock in the evening, he told me that Ibu Pujowijowo, the female shaman who conducts the annual sacred offerings, and her husband were both taken to the hospital. They are from Kinahrejo, the village that is also the home of the volcano's guardian. He was suffering 90 percent burns, and she, 75 percent. Mbah Marijan, the guardian of the volcano, remained missing. I said to myself that he must be dead, because the shaman and her husband always stayed close to him in cases of strong volcanic activity. At midnight, members of the rescue team returned to Kinahrejo where they entered the hellish night under the great risk and menace of the *nuées ardentes*.¹ They found sixteen bodies, but apparently not the guardian of the volcano. Media and public rumours developed all sorts of theories: maybe Mbah Marijan succeeded in hiding in a secret protected location, because many Indonesians attribute to him magical powers. His *pamor* (prestige/charisma) had diminished considerably in the past three years since he sold his image to a brand of "Javanese Viagra," Kuku Bima (the nail of Bima).

1 Also known as a pyroclastic flow, with super-heated clouds of ash, gasses, and material. These are more dangerous and common during a Merapi eruption than the threat of lava flows.

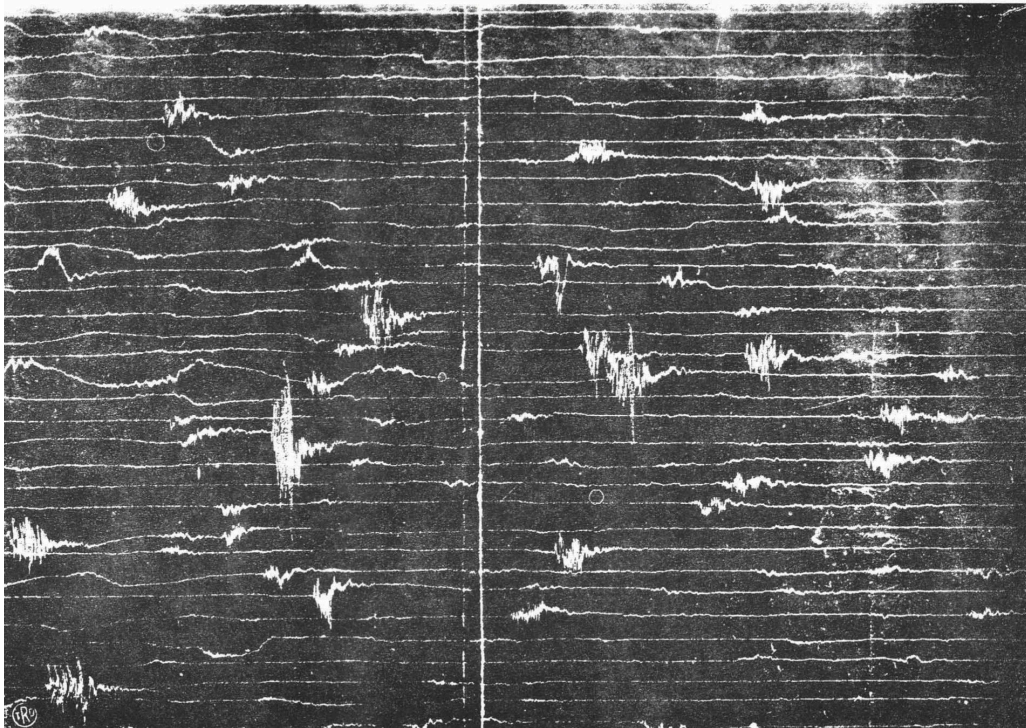


Fig. 10 Part of the seismogram of the Merapi on 23–24 November 1930 (from Neumann van Padang, 1933a, foto 2).

s Bima is the strongest of the five brothers of Pandawa in the
c Indian epic Mahabharata, equipped with a weapon that makes
a him invincible: the nail on his right thumb. His exploits are
p commonly portrayed in the Javanese Wayang theatre.² If we add
e to this mythical name some ginseng and sea-horse extract, an
g erection is guaranteed. For the past three years, Mbah Marijan's
o photograph was on the packages of Kuku Bima beside an
a Indonesian boxing champion, Chris John. The ads ran non-stop
t on television and were plastered on the fleet of Jakarta buses.

8 Also, there was a small storm on a day approaching the
Sultan's annual offerings to the volcano.³ With a strange roar,
it descended on Merapi and broke a window at Mbah Marijan's
house. It tore the roof, then left without touching any other
house in the village. The news appeared the next day in the
press. The esoterics saw it as a sign: to lose your roof in Java is
to lose your head. That was three years ago. This year, in July,
Mbah Marijan did not bring offerings up to the volcano. The
procession started without him.

The next day at six in the morning Asep called me: the

2 Shadow theatre.

3 The Special District of Yogyakarta is recognized by the Indonesian Republic as a Sultanate. Its borders stretch to the tip of Merapi and include the southern flank of the volcano.

charred body of Mbah Marijan had arrived at the hospital's emergency room. He took the arrival of his own death in his arms like a mummy. He was found in his kitchen in the position of *sujud*, the gesture of prostration in Muslim prayer. At eleven in the morning, the television had still not announced his death.

In the meantime, I watched images from the village of Kinahrejo on television, only a half-hour by car from my house. The village (named after *kina*, a type of Cinchona tree) was always spared during eruptions because it was the seat of the Guardian, personally named by the Sultan. Kinahrejo is now nothing more than a field of ruins and cinders. The forest is completely covered in white ashes that look like snow.

A learned Indonesian friend drew me a map of the south slope of Merapi. He showed me how Kinahrejo had until recently been protected by a hill to the north, Gunung Kendil, that ran to the edge of the River Gendol in the east. In 2006, Merapi erupted two weeks after an earthquake (in fact, it wasn't an eruption but the collapse of the crater walls that had been split by the earthquake), and the pyroclastic flows in a torrent spilled down the Gendol. It had been equipped with monumental dams, built in the 1990s in co-operation with Japan, for moments like this. More than one hundred dams have been built in all of Merapi's rivers—a colossal and extremely costly project, and also handsomely profitable for the companies in charge of building them. The old director of the Merapi Centre of Volcanology explained to me that the dams hadn't been working in the past few months. The Japanese engineers had applied a method that fit their own type of lava-ejecting volcano, but not Merapi and its frequent *nuées ardentes*. When colliding with the dam, the molten material, under intense pressure, exploded and bounced off the dam walls as if on a trampoline, out of the river beds and up onto the land. This occurred in 2006. An enormous mass of molten material flattened the hill of Gunung Kendil and destroyed the fortress that for centuries had protected the village of Kinahrejo, making it a sacred site. This is why on 26 October 2010, Kinahrejo was one of the first villages to fall under the nocturnal *nuées ardentes*.

The entire population in a radius of less than ten kilometres from the crater received orders to evacuate their villages. But as usual, Mbah Marijan refused to leave. He said that for better or for worse, the volcano is home, and that his duty was



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to guard it. He said that everyone is responsible for their own security: “If you sense that it is time to leave, then do so and certainly do not follow the example of an idiot like myself who has never been to school.” At the beginning of the day on 26 March, Mbah Marijan asked his wife and family to leave. And so they did. But many village men wanted to stay by his side, and journalists crowded around him. Of the thirty-two deaths from the eruption, thirty-one were found in the village where the guardian of the volcano lived.

Scapegoat

What is the relationship between myth and history in your work?

Elisabeth Inandiak

Natural disasters have helped me to read things like the Bible and the Mahabharata in a better way.

Disasters are incredible events. They are so powerful and very sad. They bring a lot of disruption, and people are so desperate at these times that they don't know how to face it, and so they need stories to give them meanings so they can go on with their lives. And these meanings provide them with a higher meaning. Something might look like a minor disaster when you also see that one day the whole earth or universe can also be destroyed.

Maybe you look at it and say, this is a sign of a disaster inside myself. We can be full of anger or jealousy. Perhaps what is happening outside, natural disasters, are just reflections of my own interior. This is one of my questions: can pride produce a natural disaster? Some people said that Mbah Maridjan was so proud that he brought the eruption in 2010. But it is more subtle than that. It is not that the disaster is the externalization of the pride in yourself. Myth is a way to look at reality from different angles, scales, perspectives, and levels of understanding. It is a way to link the interior with the exterior, to make connections between things like internal pride and external destruction. It is not a one-way relationship between mind and world.

For example, Mbah Maridjan refused to leave during the eruption because he was too proud. This is true! But an additional perspective would be that Mbah Maridjan did not die in the eruption, he was united with it—so, no big deal, let's celebrate! Yet another is that he sacrificed himself so that people would understand that the eruption was a serious matter and that they had to leave the volcano. And so on. And I do not know what was in his mind before he died, but it is possible that all these levels were there simultaneously. We know this very well: whenever we are doing a task, in some place in our minds there is always another perspective on it, another perhaps contradictory or complimentary emotion about what we are doing. In just one person there are many perspectives.

Myth does not judge. The characters in a myth are your teachers, even if they act badly. This is why we can say that Mbah Maridjan wanted us to learn the lesson not to be proud. If you are proud, this is what will happen. It's up to me to look at it that way. If I want to look at it in a very basic way, you could say he was so selfish that he deserved it. But then you do not grow. You could also say, thank you very much, you gave me a good lesson, this is about pride in life. This is what myth can do.

My idea for the current book is to make it into a tool for people who have undergone disasters.

Scapegoat

Can you describe the eruption of 2010?

Elisabeth Inandiak

It was strange. I was at my house and it was raining and storming. The windows were vibrating and there were thunderstorms. I received a call from my daughter. "Look at the TV," she said, "Merapi just erupted." Adding to the storm, it was already dark outside. We could not see anything happening on television except all the motorbikes driving down the mountain. It was too dark, so there were no images of the eruption. So I stayed in front of the television. It was so strange, the volcano is so close and here I was watching the event on the television, but I could not see any images.

Scapegoat

When did ashes start to fall?

Elisabeth Inandiak

I think that during the first two nights it was okay. Then suddenly, three days later, or something like that, my daughter called, worried about the ashes (she was pregnant at the time). She said there are many ashes coming, that we had to leave. So we went to the south but in the early morning we came back here. Finally, I left the house because it was full of ashes.

By the time of the second eruption on 5 November, I was having dinner with the French volcanologists here. It was ten in the evening and they were saying how they could not measure Merapi any more because their seismographs were not refined enough, so they were waiting for a delivery of better seismographs from Bandung. Something very big

might happen because the material was still inside the cone, they said. And suddenly they received a call—maybe around ten-thirty at night, from Magelang—reporting that there were a lot of tremors. "This is it!" they said, and we left the restaurant immediately. I remember that we drove slowly down Jalan Kaliurang. It was midnight and we saw many people facing the volcano. But it was all dark, and no one could see anything. So we stopped and heard very loud sounds. And then the ashes started to fall. But because it was night, the French volcanologists said, "We don't know what's happening, we can't see anything, but it's very big." So I called up everyone I knew living near the volcano and told them to leave. There was already an order to leave if you lived within fifteen kilometres. We spent until three o'clock in the morning doing that. The next day I went to the hospital where many people who had been burned had arrived. I took care of the family of Ibu Pujowijowo and found them a house by the cemetery. I came back here to my home and it was starting to be full of ashes, so I took my bed and all my stuff and gave it to them. They had lost everything. I was like, you'd better take it, I don't even know what's going to happen to my house. I grabbed a few of my things and then I left the house for longer than a week. Oh yeah, but then I got dengue fever, so I went to the hospital. It was the apocalypse.

Scapegoat

It has been four years. How has the last

eruption been processed in this time? How have people made sense of it?

Elisabeth Inandiak

It is very difficult to speak in other peoples' name. We never talk, I would never ask them "How do you feel now?" We are really working on re-building. At the beginning, Pak Badiman said we had to be born again. We are at zero, below *nul kecil* (the first level of kindergarten). This was the way that they look at it. We have to re-invent a new life.

In a house nearby there were almost 400 people for about two months. They knew that they could never return to their village. That it was too dangerous. It wasn't that it was forbidden by the authorities, but they were scared. So the idea was to look for new land twenty kilometres away from the summit. That's what they were saying. And then, after a few months, the idea of living closer to the volcano slowly came back. At first it was completely traumatic, they had no desire to return to the volcano. But you could see that they were recovering. Now, I don't know. In Europe you would put a lot of emphasis on trauma and mental recovery. In France we have clinical psychology and different infrastructures built around dealing with trauma. Here we have different infrastructures: arts, spirituality, a sense of community, myth. The healing process is different. You do not talk it over and over again, trying to find out peoples' nightmares, as you would in France. I don't know if it's good or not, but the process is

different. This is it: we have to go on. We live on a volcano, sometimes there is destruction. I find it very impressive.

I do remember, though, that there were those handheld radios connected to the volcano monitoring signals. Some people always had one of them on them. They would not carry a mobile phone but they always had with them the signal of the status of Merapi, dormant or erupting. You could also see it in the *jathilan* dance, which we revived. After the eruption it was performed a lot. Not so much anymore. Everyone was getting into a trance, it was totally crazy. Which I think was related to the process. When you are in a trance, all the fear you have... everything goes out. Even the public watching the dancers were falling into trance. You could have twenty people all in a trance at once.

I do not think that people talk that much about the events after the eruption. You do not feel the need to talk so much about how you feel. Instead, act. This is not to say that you are hiding the disaster, but transforming it through action and being together. It doesn't mean that you keep it inside. And because we all experienced the same event, we do not feel alone. Even if you lost a husband or wife, which happened, many widows remarried quite soon afterwards. One girl lost her parents, she was seventeen, but she married the next year and now she has a child. You move on.

Scapegoat

Your work has been reflecting on disaster for a long time. Centhini, for example,

is written in the midst of the fall of an empire, a world in the end times. The White Banyan, too, is about Merapi and the intersection of old and new stories about it, and how it works.

Elisabeth Inandiak

I think that the narrative structure of Centhini developed an idea I have long been interested in, of a kind of endless unfolding of viewpoints. Causality is very complex: why does something happen? Many worlds are required to make something happen.

Everything is dying. And it is always a disaster. If you experience the death of someone you love, it is a disaster as much as the Merapi eruption. You are devastated inside. The death of a friend is personal, a Merapi explosion is shared among a community or village. But they are both devastating on the inside. It is micro and macro.

I wonder why I have spent so much time with this story. I have been working on this new book about Merapi and disaster for years. I want to be finished with it.

Scapegoat

Because you are not finished with it.

Elisabeth Inandiak

I think that maybe you're right. I've had to try to figure out how to retell the story. Maybe it will not work. And you always have to be ready to let go if it's necessary. In the creative process, as in life, you go through so many things but only keep just a drop of it.

Scapegoat

It is hard to know when a project is finished.

Elisabeth Inandiak

Yes! It's up to other people. To outside forces you do not anticipate. Sometimes there are books you write in one night, and others take years. What makes the difference?