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THE TEXT OF KRAMAT KAREM SONG GAMBANG KROMONG BETAWI: A HERMENEUTIC REVIEW

Malona Sri Repelita^{1*}, I Komang Sudirga², Ni Made Arshiniwati³, Ni Luh Sustiwati⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Doctoral Program in Fine Arts, Institut Seni Indonesia Bali, Indonesia

Corresponden Email: litamalona@gmail.com-malonasr@ikj.ac.id¹

Abstract

Kramat Karem is a Betawi cultural heritage song whose lyrics tell the story of the tsunami caused by the eruption of Mount Krakatau in 1883 in the Sunda Strait, Indonesia. The lyric contains stories, descriptions of disaster, and the traditional local wisdom that accompanies them. Kramat Karem lyrics have changed over the generations; the singer's interpretation is influenced by historical experience and the background context. From era to era, the meaning no longer represents the author's original intent. This study aims to examine the singer's interpretation from a hermeneutic approach and the function of socializing local wisdom. This research used a qualitative method and analyzed the text of the contemporary Kramat Karem song using a hermeneutic approach as a broad framework to examine changes in the text. The data were collected through literature reviews, interviews, social media records, and community observations. This study is expected to produce recommendations for the Betawi ethnic group to learn and appreciate local wisdom in gambang kromong songs. In addition, the results of this study also serve as a trigger for the Betawi society to strengthen the Betawi traditional culture as a medium of communication and social integration.

Keywords: Gambang Kromong, Kramat Karem, Local Wisdom, Hermeneutics, Communication, Social Integration

INTRODUCTION

Gambang kromong is a traditional Betawi musical ensemble that has been sustained for over two and a half centuries and stands as a prominent example of cultural acculturation in Jakarta. Its origins can be traced to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period marked by close and continuous interaction between indigenous Betawi communities and Chinese settlers, particularly those of Peranakan descent. Through sustained contact, a hybrid musical tradition developed, combining musical ideas, instruments, and repertoires from both cultural backgrounds in creative ways, resulting in a distinctive sonic identity associated with Betawi culture (Repelita, 1995; Yampolsky, 1995).

This acculturative process is clearly reflected in the ensemble's instrumentation. Instruments rooted in local Indonesian musical traditions such as the gambang (wooden xylophone), kromong (set of small kettle gongs), kendang, kecrek, and gong form the core of the ensemble. These are integrated with instruments of Chinese origin, including the ningnong, the cio tauw trumpet, and bowed string instruments like the tehyan, kongahyan, and sukong, which are related to the Chinese huqin family. Rather than functioning as separate elements, these instruments are combined within a unified musical system,

involving shared tuning principles, melodic structures, and performance practices that together shape a cohesive Betawi musical idiom (Kartomi, 2001; Tenzer, 2000).

The musical repertoire of gambang kromong also reflects a layered historical trajectory. The earliest body of pieces, known as *lagu lama* (old songs), dates to the eighteenth century and is closely linked to early Betawi social ceremonies and entertainment practices. During the nineteenth century, the repertoire expanded with the introduction of *lagu dalem* or *lagu sayur*, which are more flexible and often semi-improvisational, commonly performed in communal and celebratory settings. Since the early twentieth century, gambang kromong has further evolved by incorporating modern compositions influenced by popular music and urban cultural dynamics, illustrating the tradition's capacity to adapt to changing social contexts (Repelita, 1995; Heins, 2010).

Viewed as intangible cultural heritage, gambang kromong demonstrates how musical traditions are continually reshaped through intercultural interaction and historical continuity. Its enduring transmission, syncretic musical structure, and continually developing repertoire highlight its significance not only as a form of entertainment but also as an important expression of Betawi identity and cultural resilience within Jakarta's multicultural society (UNESCO, 2003; Yampolsky, 1995).

Kramat Karem is categorized as a *lagu dalem* (inner song) within the gambang kromong repertoire and is traditionally performed in social gatherings that bring together indigenous Betawi communities and Chinese immigrants. As part of the *lagu dalem* category, *Kramat Karem* is generally associated with more refined, narrative, and value-laden texts, distinguishing it from lighter entertainment-oriented songs (*lagu sayur*). Its performance context reflects the historical role of gambang kromong as a musical bridge between ethnic groups in Batavia (later Jakarta), where sustained intercultural contact shaped shared social spaces (Yampolsky, 1990; Repelita, 1995). In these gatherings, Betawi and Chinese musicians collaborate closely in both instrumental performance and vocal delivery, embodying a long-standing tradition of musical cooperation. This collaboration is not merely technical but symbolic, as it represents negotiated cultural identities expressed through shared musical structures, tuning systems, and repertoires. The inclusion of Chinese-derived instruments such as the *tehyang*, *kongahyan*, and *sukong* alongside indigenous instruments like the *gambang* and *kromong* reinforces the ensemble's hybrid character and underscores the dialogical relationship between the two cultural traditions (Kartomi, 2001; Yampolsky, 1995).



Gambar 1: Instrumen Gambang Kromong dan pemainnya.

Sumber: Gambang Kromong | Blog (jakarta.go.id)

Historically, gambang kromong ensembles were especially prominent at celebrations attended by Chinese communities, such as weddings, birthdays, and ritual festivities. Within these contexts, music served a purpose beyond mere amusement. Gambang kromong and songs like *Kramat Karem*, in particular, served as a medium for conveying social values, moral reflections, and collective experiences through poetic and symbolic language. At the same time, the shared enjoyment and participation in music fostered social cohesion, easing ethnic boundaries and facilitating intercultural integration in everyday life (Heins, 2010; Yampolsky, 1990). From an intangible cultural heritage perspective, the performance of *Kramat Karem* illustrates how musical traditions operate as social practices that sustain communal relationships and transmit cultural meanings across generations. Its continued presence in intercultural social settings highlights the role of gambang kromong as both a cultural expression and a social instrument, mediating interaction, reinforcing mutual recognition, and contributing to the formation of a plural yet interconnected Betawi identity within Jakarta's multicultural society (UNESCO, 2003).

During the 1950s, state policies that restricted and prohibited public expression of Chinese cultural arts profoundly affected the continuity of gambang kromong traditions. These regulations led to the marginalization of musical elements associated with Chinese culture, resulting in the gradual disappearance of many Chinese-derived songs from the gambang kromong repertoire. The enforced absence of public performance spaces not only limited artistic expression but also disrupted vital intergenerational transmission processes, thereby undermining the sustainability of oral musical traditions. Although these restrictions were formally lifted in the early 2000s, the prolonged period of suppression had already caused the loss of an entire generation of gambang kromong musicians, along with significant portions of performance practice and repertorial knowledge (Sugihartati, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the contemporary context, particularly in the coastal areas of Tangerang, many poetic texts embedded in older gambang kromong songs are no longer fully understood by performers or audiences. Rapid social change, urbanization, and shifting cultural preferences have further weakened the transmission of lyrical knowledge. As a result, verses containing moral teachings, historical memory, and local wisdom have increasingly faded from collective understanding, while songs emphasizing entertainment value tend to dominate present-day performances. This condition reflects a broader transformation in which the symbolic and educative functions of gambang kromong are gradually overshadowed by its role as popular entertainment, raising concerns about the erosion of its cultural depth and communicative significance.

One gambang kromong composition widely recognized for its profound elements of local wisdom is *Kramat Karem*. As part of the *lagu dalem* repertoire, the song holds a significant place in Betawi musical tradition, not only for its melodic structure but also for its poetic text, which conveys moral values, collective memory, and reflections on human life. Like many forms of intangible cultural heritage, *Kramat Karem* has been transmitted orally from generation to generation. However, over more than two and a half centuries of transmission, shifts in historical circumstances, cultural orientations, and social environments have inevitably influenced how its verses are interpreted and understood. Oral transmission, while allowing flexibility and adaptability, also opens the door to reinterpretation, omission, and recontextualization, especially when the original socio-historical context of the song is no longer fully shared by later generations (UNESCO, 2003; Vansina, 1985).

These conditions raise several critical questions. To what extent has the original intention of the composer or the early bearers of the tradition been preserved and effectively communicated to contemporary audiences? Have the Betawi people consciously or unconsciously engaged in processes of reinterpretation, deconstruction, and reshaping of the verses in response to changing cultural values, religious perspectives, and socio-political realities? Such questions are particularly relevant given the historical disruptions experienced by gambang kromong traditions, including periods of cultural restriction and the decline of intergenerational transmission, which have altered the continuity of meaning embedded in song texts (Yampolsky, 1990; Sugihartati, 2019).

To address these issues, this study employs a hermeneutic approach that emphasizes interpretation as a dialogical process among the text, the performer, and the socio-historical context. Hermeneutics allows the analysis of *Kramat Karem* not as a fixed text but as a living cultural expression whose meanings are continuously negotiated across time. By situating the song within its historical background, performance contexts, and cultural symbolism, this approach seeks to trace shifts in meaning and to understand how local wisdom embedded in the lyrics has been maintained, transformed, or obscured (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981). Through this interpretive framework, the study aims to reveal how Betawi identity and worldview are articulated and rearticulated through musical poetry.

The findings of this research are expected to yield practical and cultural recommendations for the Betawi community, particularly to encourage renewed engagement with the textual and philosophical dimensions of gambang kromong songs. By fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of local wisdom, the study aims to support cultural continuity and revitalization. Furthermore, the results are intended to function as a catalyst for strengthening Betawi traditional culture, reaffirming its role not only as artistic expression but also as a medium of communication, moral reflection, and social integration within an increasingly plural and modern society (Heins, 2010; UNESCO, 2003).

The scope of the study is deliberately limited to ensure analytical depth. Primary attention is given to the version of *Kramat Kareem* performed by the renowned gambang kromong maestro Masnah (1926–2014), based on a 1978 recording, which serves as an important reference point within the living tradition. In addition, the analysis incorporates Suryadi's (2010) translation of *Syair Lampung Karam* as a comparative textual source to illuminate intertextual and semantic connections. To capture contemporary reinterpretations, the study also examines two further performances of *Kramat Kareem* gambang kromong available on YouTube, recorded in 2014 and 2021. These recordings reflect interpretations by younger generations who have inherited the song through oral transmission, thereby providing insight into ongoing processes of meaning transformation across generations.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, as it is particularly suited to exploring meanings, interpretations, and cultural processes embedded in traditional performing arts. Data were collected through a combination of literature review, in-depth interviews, and field observations within the community. The literature study provided a theoretical and historical foundation for understanding gambang kromong and the song *Kramat Kareem*. At the same time, interviews with practitioners, cultural figures, and community members offered insight into lived experiences, interpretive practices, and patterns of transmission. Observations of performances and social contexts in which gambang kromong is presented allowed the researcher to situate the song within its contemporary cultural environment, capturing both musical practice and audience reception.

The collected data were analyzed using hermeneutics as the overarching analytical framework to examine shifts in the meaning of the *Kramat Kareem* text in the present day. Hermeneutics is understood as "the process of transforming something or a situation of ignorance into understanding" (Palmer, 1969: 3), emphasizing interpretation as an active and contextual engagement with meaning. Within this framework, understanding is not seen as the recovery of a single, fixed meaning, but as a dialogical process shaped by time, culture, and the interpreter's horizon of understanding. Drawing on the romantic hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher, this study recognizes that the interpretation of discourse involves multiple

interrelated elements: the interpreter, the text, the author's intention, and the historical and cultural contexts in which the text was produced and later received (Palmer, 1969). This perspective is particularly relevant for orally transmitted texts such as *Kramat Karem*, which are inherently dynamic. As oral traditions move across generations, they are subject to transformation due to changes in place, shifts in socio-cultural conditions, variations in performers' and listeners' interpretive frameworks, and evolving communicative purposes. Consequently, meaning is continually renegotiated rather than preserved.

To complement the hermeneutic analysis, this study also engages Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction as an interpretive approach for examining how ancestral wisdom values in traditional performing arts are reinforced, altered, or marginalized over time. Deconstruction allows the researcher to question assumptions of textual stability and to uncover suppressed, overlooked, or reconfigured meanings within the song's verses. Rather than viewing change solely as cultural loss, this approach highlights how reinterpretation can also serve as a creative strategy through which communities adapt inherited texts to new social realities (Beilharz, 2003, p. 74). By combining hermeneutics and deconstruction, this research positions *Kramat Karem* as a living text, one that exists within a continuous interplay between tradition and change. This integrated analytical framework enables a critical examination of how local wisdom embedded in gambang kromong songs is understood, transformed, and potentially revitalized within contemporary Betawi society, while remaining attentive to historical depth and cultural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Betawi Ethnic in Social Life

Betawi are the original inhabitants of Jakarta, formed from a mixture of ethnic groups in Indonesia, and were later visited by foreign ethnic groups who eventually settled among the Betawi. According to Ayatrohaedi (1991:1), in the manuscript *Sang Hyang Siksa Kandang Karesian* (Anon, 1518). Sunda Kelapa Harbor was visited by Arab, Egyptian, Khmers, Baghdadis, and Chinese traders. According to Hidajat (1984:73-74), in the 13th century, there were already many Chinese trading in West Java, especially in the Banten and Jakarta areas (Ayatrohaedi, 1991, p. 1). By the 19th century, they had lost their original ethnic identity and became known as the Betawi. Ethnic Betawi consists of indigenous Betawi and Chinese Peranakan Betawi (Repelita, 1995, p. 110).

The Gambang kromong of the Peranakan Betawi, also known as Cina Benteng, which has Chinese nuances, significantly strengthens the ethnic identity of the Betawi community on the outskirts of Jakarta in Northern Tangerang. According to Bart, ethnic groups are formed by special characteristics and a pattern of social interaction within the community. (Sugihartati 2019: 131). Peranakan Betawi use the Betawi language in daily conversation. Acculturation is a process of cultural mixing that occurs when a community

group encounters a foreign culture, and its elements gradually blend into the community's original culture without eliminating the culture's identity (Koentjaraningrat, 2009, p. 202).

According to the author's observations, the Chinese Benteng people still practice traditional rituals and beliefs inherited from their ancestors centuries ago. Most of the houses of the Chinese Benteng people have ash tables for prayer. At marriage and death ceremonies and other thanksgiving events, it is still clear that ancestral traditions maintained include Cap Go Meh, Pek Cun, Tiong Ciu Pia (mooncake), and Pek Gwee Cap Go (day of perfection), but have been acculturated into local culture. For the Benteng Chinese, gambang kromong is a very familiar musical piece throughout every cycle of life. Most wedding parties are accompanied by gambang kromong for three days. On the first day, the gambang kromong musicians sing an old song called phobin kong ji lok. The next song is "Lopan," along with other old songs they know well. The drinking ceremony was held on the second day. The ciotau trumpet accompanies this event. After the series of traditional events is completed, the entertainment program of gambang kromong songs begins. It starts with a repertoire of music without verses, then continues with dalem songs and is followed by cokek dances or social dances. The structure of today's traditional wedding events does not differ much from that of 10 or 20 years ago; only the modern songs sometimes sung show the difference in era. Nowadays, there are hardly any people who can sing the old poetic songs. According to a resource person who is a gambang kromong singer, the '*dalem*' (inside) song or '*sayur*' (vegetable) songs have changed, with the verses shifting.

Periods in Gambang Kromong

In the first period (1743-1750), the orkes gambang performed Chinese instrumental pieces. The gambang orchestra collaborated with Chinese stringed instruments such as tehyan, kongahyan, sukong, hosing, and gihian (Phoa, 1949, pp. 37-39). These songs are called lagu lama and originated in Fujian Province, Southern China, and were brought to Batavia by Chinese-Hokkians around the 17th to early 18th centuries (Yampolsky 1990: 22). The repertoire consists of two types, namely Phobin, which are songs without lyrics, and songs with lyrics, including Sipatmo and Silitan (Muhadjir, 1986, p. 33). The former type of song repertoire is never performed for dancing. According to Phoa in Pantjawarna Magazine (1949: 37), Phobin's song repertoire includes: Matodjin, Si Djin Kwi Hwee Ke, Lui Kong, Tjoe Te Pan, Tjhia Pe Pan, It Ki Kim, Tay Peng Wan, Pek Bouw Tan, Tjay Tjoe Sioe, the repertoire of old songs that have verses (poetic songs) include: Dempok, Temenggoeng, Menoelis, Engko Si Baba, Indoeng-indoeng, Mas Nona, Djoedjang Semarang, Bong Tjeng Kawin, Koelannoen Salah, Bangliauw, Goenoeng Pajoeng, Petjah-piring, Tandjoeng Boeroeng. (Yampolsky, 1990: 22).

From the late nineteenth century onward, gambang kromong underwent significant transformations in both its performance context and musical form. Around 1870, gambang kromong songs, accompanied

by *cokek* dancers, began to be performed in *warungs* and other semi-public spaces. This shift marked an important moment in the ensemble's popularization, as it moved beyond elite or closed-community settings and became accessible to a broader audience, including indigenous inhabitants of Batavia. Through these informal venues, *gambang kromong* developed as a form of popular urban entertainment that facilitated everyday social interaction across ethnic and social boundaries (Yampolsky, 1990: 21).

A further milestone occurred in 1880, when Bek Teng Tjoe experimented by combining the *gambang* (xylophone) ensemble with *kromong*, *kempul*, *kendang*, and *gong*. This musical synthesis established the instrumental configuration that later became known as the *gambang kromong* orchestra in Batavia. During this period, the repertoire expanded to include Sundanese songs, reflecting the ensemble's openness to regional influences. Social norms surrounding performance also shifted: male guests increasingly participated more actively by holding *cokek* scarves and dancing alongside the performers, indicating changing attitudes toward gender interaction and public festivity (Phoa, 1949, p. 39).

It was during this historical period that the *gambang kromong* repertoire began to be commonly classified as *lagu dalem* or *lagu sayur*. These terms refer to songs regarded as originating from Betawi tradition and closely tied to everyday social life. The metaphor of "sayur" (vegetables) underscores their function as cultural staples, songs that are familiar, frequently performed, and deeply embedded in communal memory. To this day, *lagu dalem* remains the most commonly sung type within *gambang kromong* performances. Notable examples include *Kramat Karem*, *Jali-jali*, *Kincir-kincir*, *Balo-balo*, *Enjot-enjotan*, *Cente Manis*, *Gelatik Nguknguk*, and *Surilang*, which collectively articulate Betawi identity, humor, and local wisdom through poetic and musical expression (Depdikbud, 1982, p. 7).

Since the late 1960s, *gambang kromong* has continued to evolve in response to broader changes in Indonesia's musical landscape. The ensemble began incorporating *gambang kromong* elements into national popular music as a way of diversifying repertoire and appealing to contemporary audiences. This development highlights the flexibility of *gambang kromong* as a musical tradition, capable of absorbing popular genres while retaining recognizable Betawi characteristics. In modern *gambang kromong* performances, elements of pop music are blended with Betawi musical idioms, resulting in hybrid forms that reflect urban cultural dynamics (Repelita, 1995: 125).

The poetic texts of modern *gambang kromong* songs often depict everyday social life through short narrative vignettes, delivered in a relaxed and humorous style. Jokes and playful verbal exchanges are commonly interwoven into performances, reinforcing the ensemble's role as popular entertainment while maintaining its communicative and social functions. Today, *gambang kromong* orchestras not only perform pop-influenced compositions but also reinterpret genres such as *keroncong* and *dangdut*, further demonstrating the tradition's adaptive capacity. Through these ongoing transformations, *gambang kromong* continues to function as a living cultural form that negotiates continuity and change within Betawi society.

Gambang Kromong Karat Karam lyrics

The text of the *Kramat Karem* gambang kromong song is composed in free rhyme, a poetic structure that allows flexibility in expression and adaptation during performance. Beyond its function as entertainment, the verses convey layers of local wisdom, reflecting moral reflections, collective memory, and experiential knowledge rooted in Betawi cultural life. Although written versions of the lyrics exist, the transmission of *Kramat Karem* has predominantly occurred through oral tradition. As with many orally transmitted texts, this mode of inheritance has enabled the song to remain dynamic, while also making it susceptible to variation, reinterpretation, and partial loss across generations (Vansina, 1985; UNESCO, 2003).

Historically, *Kramat Karem* is closely associated with the memory of a significant natural disaster: the catastrophic eruption of Mount Krakatau in 1883. The song is believed to have been inspired by this historical event, which profoundly affected communities along the coasts of Java and Sumatra and left a deep imprint on regional cultural narratives. In this sense, *Kramat Karem* functions not only as a musical composition but also as a cultural medium through which historical trauma and communal experience are preserved and communicated in poetic form.

A key textual reference related to this event is *Syair Lampung Karam*, a long narrative poem that provides a journalistic-style account of the Krakatau eruption. Mohamad Saleh wrote the poem, which was initially published in lithographic form and rediscovered approximately 125 years later. *Syair Lampung Karam* consists of 375 stanzas, each composed of four lines, and employs a consistent rhyme scheme of a-a-a-a, characteristic of classical Malay syair poetry. This formal structure supports its narrative function, allowing the poet to present detailed chronological descriptions of the disaster while maintaining poetic coherence (Suryadi, 2010).

The thematic and narrative parallels between *Kramat Karem* and *Syair Lampung Karam* suggest an intertextual relationship, in which historical events recorded in written literary form were later reinterpreted and condensed within musical and oral traditions. While *Syair Lampung Karam* presents an extensive and explicit account of the Krakatau tragedy, *Kramat Karem* appears to transform this historical narrative into a more symbolic and performative expression, adapted to the aesthetic and social conventions of gambang kromong. This process illustrates how written texts and oral performance traditions interact, enabling historical knowledge and local wisdom to circulate across different media and generations (Suryadi, 2010; Kartomi, 2001).

Through this interplay of oral transmission, poetic form, and historical reference, *Kramat Karem* exemplifies the role of traditional music as a cultural archive. It preserves memories of past events while embedding them within performative contexts that emphasize communal reflection, moral awareness, and

social cohesion. As such, the song stands as an important example of how *gambang kromong* repertoire integrates history, literature, and local wisdom into a living tradition that continues to resonate within Betawi cultural life.

<i>Riuh bunyi di dalam perahunya</i>	The noise in the boat
<i>Bersahutan sama sendirinya</i>	Muttering to itself
<i>Seperti kiamat rupa bunyinya</i>	Like the apocalypse, it sounds
<i>Ramailah orang datang melihatnya (stanza 16)</i>	People come to see it (stanza 16)
<i>Dapat Kabar Kapalpun datang</i>	I got news that the ship came
<i>Dari Barat negeri Padang.</i>	From the west, the land of Padang.
<i>Lalu ke Betawi negeri yang gadang</i>	Then to Betawi, the land of fields
<i>Lalu tak boleh orang menumpang (stanza 248, hal 85)</i>	Then people are not allowed to board (stanza 248, p. 85)
<i>Di benawang pula orang yang gempar</i>	In Benawang, too, people are in an uproar
<i>gelombang datang terlalu besar</i>	The waves were too big
<i>Terkena rumah serta pasar</i>	It hit houses and markets
<i>Orang mengucap Allahu Akbar (stanza 269 hal 90)</i>	People say Allahu Akbar (stanza 269, p. 90)
<i>Gelombang datang pada rumahnya</i>	The wave came to his house.
<i>Nona berdandan menghiasi dirinya</i>	The lady dressed up to adorn herself
<i>Emas dan intan semua dipakainya</i>	Gold and diamonds she wore
<i>Dipukul gelombang hilang dianya (stanza 274 hal 91)</i>	Hit by the wave, she was lost (stanza 274, p. 91)

The excerpt describes a moment of extreme chaos and fear experienced by those affected by the Krakatau eruption, conveyed through vivid and emotionally charged imagery. The situation aboard the writer's boat is depicted as overwhelmingly noisy and disordered, evoking a scene likened to hell itself. This metaphor underscores the intensity of the catastrophe: the eruption of Mount Krakatau is not only a natural event but an apocalyptic experience in which human senses are overwhelmed by sound, movement, and collective panic. The presence of many onlookers further intensifies the confusion, suggesting a mass confrontation with an incomprehensible, terrifying force of nature.

After the eruption subsided, the passage introduces a moment that reflects the cruelty of circumstance and social helplessness following disaster. A ship arriving from Padang, West Sumatra, passes by the affected area, yet the victims are not permitted to board. This episode highlights the vulnerability and abandonment survivors feel, emphasizing that, in the aftermath of a catastrophe, rescue and relief are uncertain and often inaccessible. The ship becomes a symbol of hope denied, reinforcing the theme of human powerlessness in the face of both natural disaster and social limitations.

The narrative then shifts to Benawang, where the devastation continues in the form of a massive storm that destroys houses and markets. This description extends the scope of the disaster beyond the initial eruption, illustrating how its impact spread across regions and disrupted everyday life. The destruction of homes and marketplaces signifies not only material loss but also the collapse of social and economic structures that sustain community life. In this context, the text emphasizes that people could do nothing but surrender themselves to prayer, turning to the Almighty as their final source of hope and meaning.

The crashing waves that swept into houses and carried away all possessions, including gold and diamonds, serve as a powerful reminder of the fragility of worldly wealth. By explicitly mentioning valuable objects, the text contrasts material riches with spiritual endurance, implying a moral lesson embedded within the narrative. The disaster strips people of all earthly possessions, reinforcing the idea that human life and faith ultimately outweigh material attachments. Read within the broader tradition of *syair* and *gambang kromong* narratives, this passage does not merely document a historical event but also conveys local wisdom: an awareness of human limitation, the impermanence of wealth, and the necessity of humility and spiritual resilience when confronting forces beyond human control. Lampung Karam's poem became one of the inspirations for the song *Kramat Karem*. The song example below is a song sung by Masnah, a *Gambang Kromong Betawi* singer, recorded in 1978:

It is Kramat Karem's rhyme.	The mountain exploded at the border of
Erupting mountain feels scary, dearly loved	Lampung
The wind of miscarriage is scary, dearly loved	The coral broke until it floated away, dearly loved
The wind of miscarriage, dear, dear, dear sister.	Why are the waves not chaotic waves, baby, baby
If the eyes are sore, the sleepy head does not want to sleep	Aer in the sea until the waves are chaotic, baby, baby, baby.
The song of the kramat karam that was flooded	Water in the sea, dear, in the village Kramat karem is incomparable

In the continuation of *Kramat Karem*, the verses further intensify the depiction of disaster by describing the arrival of a tsunami that scattered people in all directions, swept fish from the sea onto tree branches, and caused houses to drift away entirely. These images emphasize the total disruption of the natural and social order, where boundaries between sea and land collapse and human settlements lose their stability. Such imagery is characteristic of oral disaster narratives in the archipelago, in which extraordinary natural events are conveyed through concrete, sensory metaphors that are easily remembered and transmitted across generations. The closing lines of *Kramat Karem* thus function not only as a narrative conclusion but also as a mnemonic device, preserving collective memory of catastrophe within a musical-poetic framework.

In another stanza, the song shifts from large-scale destruction to more intimate bodily sensations and domestic signs. Despite the cloudy air, the singer describes feeling unusually sweaty, while everyday household tools such as the kitchen pounding implement are said to break, signaling an ominous premonition. These details reflect traditional knowledge systems in which natural anomalies and disruptions in daily routines are interpreted as warnings of impending disaster. The verses then move to practical advice: lack of sleep leads to dizziness, and catching a cold should be treated with a ginger-based remedy. Such lines embed local health knowledge and coping strategies within the song, illustrating how *gambang kromong* lyrics often combine narrative, moral reflection, and pragmatic guidance. The repeated insertion of the affectionate refrain *sayang di sayang* (“dear, oh dear”) softens the gravity of the content, creating an aesthetic balance between pleasure and fear and enhancing the song’s appeal to listeners.

The interpretive depth of *Kramat Karem* is further enriched by the life history of its most prominent performer, Masnah, also known as Pang Tjin Nio. Recognized as a living *gambang kromong* maestro, Masnah inherited her singing talent from her mother, herself a *gambang kromong* singer who served as her first teacher. Her mother was a native of Mauk on the north coast of Tangerang, Banten, while her father was of Chinese descent, placing Masnah within the cultural intersection that characterizes *gambang kromong* traditions. Born in 1926, Masnah can be understood as belonging to approximately the fourth generation after the Krakatau tsunami, positioning her performance within a long chain of post-disaster cultural memory.

In Masnah’s rendition of *Kramat Karem*, the lyrics are delivered in the form of *pantun* with an a-b-a-b rhyme pattern. The first- and third-lines end with similar phonetic sounds, while the second and fourth lines conclude with different but harmonically compatible endings, creating a fluid and engaging sonic texture. Each stanza typically begins with an introductory line indicating the song or stanza title, and consistently ends with the refrain *kramat karem yang kebanjiran* or *kramat karem kebanjiran*. This structural repetition reinforces the central theme of inundation while anchoring the listener's attention. The harmonious blending of end sounds enhances the musical pleasure of the performance, yet beneath this

aesthetic surface, Masnah conveys a deep-seated fear of volcanic eruptions and the lingering anxiety experienced by communities affected by earthquakes and tsunamis, particularly the inability to sleep due to the threat of aftershocks.

Beyond emotional expression, the song also transmits concrete knowledge. Masnah's verses reference the disaster's geographic locus in the Sunda Strait, which separates Java and Sumatra, thereby embedding spatial information within the poetic form. Other stanzas convey embodied warning signs, such as sweating despite cool or cloudy weather, that ancestors recognized as precursors to earthquakes. In addition, the song preserves traditional Betawi health practices, such as preparing ginger infusions to restore the body after exhaustion or illness caused by lack of sleep. Through these layers, *Kramat Kareem* functions as a repository of experiential knowledge, blending disaster memory, environmental awareness, and everyday medical wisdom. Taken as a whole, the poem of *Kramat Kareem* demonstrates how gambang kromong songs operate on multiple levels: as aesthetic performance, as historical testimony, and as a medium for transmitting local wisdom. The deeper meanings conveyed through rhyme, repetition, and metaphor transform the song into a cultural text that educates as much as it entertains, offering insights into how Betawi communities have understood, remembered, and responded to natural disasters across generations.

The hermeneutic process that occurs in this song is strongly influenced by history and culture. The composer of the song expresses thoughts through rhyming verse that gradually convey local wisdom. This song is sung and taught from generation to generation. Vague knowledge becomes increasingly understandable and serves as a guideline in society. The poetry of this song is sourced from Arabic-Malay (ancient Jawi) manuscripts in the form of lithography translated into a language that is understood by the next generation, in the course of time the inheritance process there is a shifting understanding of meaning, but the Betawi ancestors who experienced the loss of loved ones, loss of residence and livelihood felt the need to convey these things to the next generation. According to Aristotle, as quoted in Palmer (1969), experience is expressed in verse and song; the words we speak are symbols of our mental experience, and the words we write are symbols of the words we speak. (De Interpretatione, I.16a.5). Words are expressions just as one person does not have a written language in common with another, so too people do not have a spoken language in common. The mental experiences that one symbolizes directly are the same for everyone, just as one's imagination for describing things is the same. For example, when coastal communities experience a tsunami, they experience the same mental experience, the same imagination, but when expressing it in spoken or written language, there are usually differences. The Betawi ancestors realized that the tsunami was a harrowing mental experience and had to be written down to be passed on to the next generation as information and a warning.

Texts in gambang kromong songs change over time, with changes in place, different interpreters' understandings, historical and cultural contexts, and different goals for each singer in conveying the message. According to Derrida, differences in texts are commonplace. Derrida developed hermeneutic deconstruction as a method of textual analysis. In his development, Derrida made his philosophy an interpretation; he taught that deconstructive reading is very philosophical. He interpreted philosophical texts and sought their weaknesses (Beilharz, 2003). Derrida also shows that there is no stable meaning in a text. Deconstruction is like disassembling a machine; the bad parts are repaired, then reassembled. The goal is to eliminate what is not good in a culture, then rearrange it so that it becomes better. In deconstruction, an understanding of aesthetics is needed in viewing beauty so that it can be accepted by the people who own the culture. As cultural heirs, gambang kromong singers, whether planned or spontaneous, deconstruct verses, dismantle parts of a whole, interpret verses, internalize, and convey to listeners with goals that are in accordance with the purpose of the event. In addition to entertainment, the deconstructed verses convey the Betawi people's local wisdom values. (Beilharz, 2003: 74).

The following example is the song "Kramat Karem" by Gambang Kromong Group Shinta Nara, Leader: Teng Sui Tiang/Maman Setiawan. This group has its own version. The verse of the following song was taken from a recording of an entertainment event at a wedding in Mekarsari Village, Neglasari Village, Neglasari District, Tangerang on Saturday, Nov. 29, 2014. This song was accessed from YouTube on April 024, 2023 https://youtu.be/5NJjq4_hHPM. The song lyrics are adapted to the era in which this song is sung as follows:

A pool of water waters a flower	Kramat or Dikali Angke
Flowers are watered, half dead	I stir-fry spinach vegetables - dear to my
dearly loved, like a bird about to fly, oh dear	heart
Like a bird about to fly, dearly loved	What amulet do you use - dearly beloved
Dearly beloved, I want to catch up with the	Day and night I cry
heart	Kramat Karem got here
Kramat Karem has a song	

The poetry of this song centers on the emotional sorrow of the female singer, who has abandoned by her lover. Structurally, the poem follows an *ab-ab* rhyme pattern, with careful attention to sound repetition that enhances its musicality. In the first stanza, each line ends with the phonetic sequence *-ang-ti-ang-ti*, while in the second stanza, the lines conclude with *-ke-in-ke*. This consistency in end sounds creates a strong sense of harmony between words and stanzas, allowing the emotional content of the lyrics to be delivered in a melodious and aesthetically pleasing manner.

In terms of meaning, this poem conveys themes that differ markedly from the earlier song inspired by the Krakatau eruption, reflecting a historical and experiential distance of approximately 131 years from that catastrophic event. Rather than documenting collective trauma or natural disaster, this song focuses on intimate personal emotion and romantic longing. The first stanza expresses deep affection, with the singer likening herself to a bird preparing to fly in pursuit of her beloved. This metaphor symbolizes devotion, emotional vulnerability, and the desire to overcome distance, suggesting that love compels her to follow her lover even after being left behind.

The second stanza introduces a shift in tone, blending longing with suspicion and emotional unrest. Here, the singer voices her prejudice or doubt, questioning whether her lover might be using an amulet or supernatural means. This suspicion arises from her confusion and emotional turmoil, particularly as she observes that her lover continues to cry for her both day and night. Such imagery reflects traditional beliefs in mystical practices that often appear in Betawi oral poetry, where emotional experiences are sometimes explained through spiritual or supernatural interpretations.

Both stanzas are interspersed with the refrain *sayang disayang*, a recurring affectionate expression that softens the emotional tension and enriches the musical texture of the song. This repeated phrase not only enhances the lyrical beauty but also reinforces the central theme of love and attachment. Overall, the poem illustrates how gambang kromong songs can shift focus from collective historical narratives to deeply personal expressions of emotion while maintaining aesthetic coherence through structured rhyme, metaphor, and refrain. The song "Kramat Karem," performed by Abryal Etnik and Sumitra, was uploaded to YouTube around 2021. The lyrics of the song Kramat Karem Abryal Etnik and Sumitra are as follows:

<i>Kramat karem Kramat karem flooded.</i>	The tip of a heavy head's teeth
Long cypress long hair	You are the one going to die standing up, dear
When I come to the island of Java, dearly	in dear
loved	Find more, get less, sweet souls
I dream of sleeping in a bed, sweet soul, sweet	Find more can be less, sweet soul protect in
soul, dear protected	love
One pillow, two heads	In the end, you regret it
Kramat Karem has flooded	Kramat Karem Menteng Tangerang

This song is taken from the Abryl Ethnic Group recording. The recording of this song was uploaded to YouTube around 2021. This song was accessed from YouTube in April 2023:

<https://youtu.be/v3jYfGf7mcU>

This version of *Kramat Karem* is taken from a recording by the Abryal Ethnic Group, which was uploaded to YouTube around 2021 and accessed in April 2023. As a contemporary digital artifact, the recording reflects how gambang kromong repertoire circulates today through social media platforms, reaching audiences beyond its original communal and ritual contexts. The migration of traditional music to digital media has significant implications for transmission, interpretation, and meaning, particularly among younger generations who encounter these songs primarily as audiovisual content rather than as inherited cultural narratives (Heins, 2010; UNESCO, 2003).

Structurally, the rhymes in this version follow an *ab-ab* pattern, combined with freely arranged couplets (*pantun bebas*). This flexible poetic form allows singers to improvise, insert repetitions, and adapt verses according to performance context and audience expectations. However, as noted by Sumitra, most gambang kromong songs have historically been learned and transmitted orally. Only in more recent times have certain singers, cultural observers, and educators begun documenting lyrics and teaching them formally in schools and Betawi cultural institutions. While such efforts contribute to preservation, oral transmission remains the dominant mode, making songs particularly vulnerable to semantic shifts and loss of historical depth over time (Vansina, 1985).

The *Kramat Karem* performed by the Abryal Group and Ethnik Sumitra is explicitly themed around romantic love and concludes with the line *kramat karem ini lagunya* (“this is the song of Kramat Karem”). In this version, the traditional refrain *kramat karem kebanjiran*, which historically served as a signifier of flooding and disaster linked to the Krakatau tsunami, is no longer retained. Instead, it is replaced with *kramat karem Menteng Tangerang*, a phrase that localizes the song geographically but removes its association with natural catastrophe. As a result, the signifier of disaster, collective trauma, and moral reflection embedded in earlier versions of *Kramat Karem* is effectively erased, leaving behind a dominant signifier of contemporary romantic relationships.

From a semiotic and hermeneutic perspective, this shift illustrates a significant transformation in meaning. The song no longer serves as a mnemonic for historical memory or as a carrier of local wisdom on disaster awareness and human vulnerability. Instead, it primarily functions as entertainment and creative expression, aligning with current tastes and the logic of social media consumption. The insertion of varied *pantun*, repetitions, and lyrical embellishments serves to emphasize poetic beauty and emotional appeal rather than didactic or historical content. Such reinterpretation reflects how different cultural and historical horizons shape the singer’s role not as a transmitter of ancestral wisdom, but as a performer responding to contemporary aesthetic and social demands (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981).

This phenomenon can also be understood through Derrida's concept of deconstruction, in which dominant meanings are displaced and recentered in new contexts (Beilharz, 2003). In the 2021 recording, the original narrative of disaster and flooding is deconstructed and replaced by a romantic narrative that

resonates more strongly with today's audiences. While this does not necessarily signify cultural loss alone, it does indicate a reorientation of gambang kromong's function from a medium of historical remembrance and moral communication to a form of popular entertainment and digital content creation.

Overall, the Abryal Ethnic Group's rendition of *Kramat Karem* exemplifies how gambang kromong continues to evolve as a living tradition. Different cultural experiences and historical distances produce different interpretations of the same song, reshaping the role of performers as messengers of meaning. In the contemporary context, *Kramat Karem* is reimagined less as a repository of disaster memory and local wisdom and more as a creative, entertaining, and shareable work that fits the expressive needs of the younger generation and the dynamics of social media culture.

CONCLUSION

Different historical experiences and cultural backgrounds fundamentally shape how a text is interpreted, remembered, and rearticulated across generations. A song text, especially one rooted in oral tradition such as gambang kromong, does not exist as a fixed or closed entity. Instead, it lives through performance, memory, and reinterpretation. Each generation encounters the text within a different constellation of natural conditions, social realities, political circumstances, and cultural values. As a result, meaning is never transmitted intact; it is continuously negotiated, fragmented, forgotten, or reassembled according to the needs and horizons of the present.

In oral cultures, the transmission of knowledge relies heavily on embodied memory and communal repetition rather than written archives. It makes traditional songs highly adaptive, but also highly vulnerable to semantic erosion. When fragments of information are disconnected, such as the historical memory of a tsunami, volcanic eruption, or collective trauma, the song gradually loses its original referential framework. Environmental changes (no direct experience of disasters), social shifts (urbanization, the commercialization of art), political contexts (a loss of emphasis on local history), and cultural transformations (the dominance of popular media and digital platforms) all contribute to this process of forgetting. What remains is often only the aesthetic shell of the song, its melody, rhyme, and emotional tone, while its deeper layers of meaning fade away.

Contemporary singers operate within a radically different cultural economy. Today's artistic ambition is frequently oriented toward creativity, commercial viability, and virality. Social media platforms reward immediacy, emotional appeal, and repetition rather than historical accuracy or cultural depth. In this context, traditional lyrics are often simplified, romanticized, or re-themed to align with dominant popular narratives, such as love and personal emotion. This transformation is not inherently harmful; it demonstrates that gambang kromong is a living tradition. However, when creative freedom is not accompanied by adequate cultural knowledge, the lyrics may drift far from the poet's original intention and the collective

experiences embedded in the song. The singer becomes a performer of sound rather than a mediator of memory.

It is where deconstruction becomes crucial not as an act of destruction, but as a critical method of re-reading and re-listening. Deconstruction, in the Derridean sense, seeks to uncover suppressed meanings, marginalized histories, and forgotten contexts within a text. Applied to gambang kromong, deconstruction allows contemporary singers and audiences to question why certain refrains, symbols, or narratives were originally present, and what social functions they once served. By dismantling the taken-for-granted romantic or entertainment-focused interpretations, singers can rediscover layers of local wisdom related to disaster awareness, moral reflection, communal solidarity, health practices, and human vulnerability before nature.

When deconstruction is followed by reconstruction, traditional songs can be sung again with renewed awareness. It does not require a rigid return to the past, but rather an informed reinterpretation that bridges ancestral knowledge with contemporary expression. In this way, gambang kromong can reclaim its broader social function. It can once again operate as a medium of communication, transmitting ethical values, historical memory, and practical knowledge, while simultaneously fostering community integration and collective identity. If such a process occurs, gambang kromong will no longer be confined to the role of entertainment or digital spectacle. Instead, it will re-enter social life as a cultural language, one that connects past and present, experience and memory, art and everyday life. Through conscious deconstruction and culturally grounded creativity, today's singers can transform gambang kromong into a living archive of local wisdom that remains relevant, meaningful, and beneficial to society at large.

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