

# What Do the Names of the Mountains of Java Mean?

Some notes by George Quinn

**Gunung Karang** (unclear, possibly) = Rocky Mountain. *Karang* has a variety of meanings in different contexts. Mostly *karang* means “a rock” in watery surrounds, like coral, boulders on the seashore or rocks in a stream. But phrases like *karang liman* (elephant rock) also appear in some place names suggesting a rock or hill that is big and solid like an elephant and not necessarily in watery surrounds. So **Gunung Karang** could mean “the mountain that looks like a boulder” or “the mountain that is full of rocks and boulders”. In some contexts *karang* means “a place where people live or assemble” as in the Indonesian phrase *karang desa* = “the countryside (where there are a lot of villages)”. So *karang gunung* or *karang pagunungan* might mean “the place of many mountains” or “a mountainous region” (like the interior of West Java) and **Gunung Karang** might mean something like “the mountain in the interior”.

**Gunung Pulosari** (unclear) *Pulo* usually means “an island” but it also appears in several place names in Java (e.g. around Krawang) that are quite far from the sea. So it is possible that *pulo* also means something like “an outcrop”, “a prominence”, “something that rises from flat surroundings whether from the sea or from the land” or “an enclosed place”. It is also possible that *pulo* is a corruption of *pala* or *pahala* (pronounced /polo/ in Javanese) = “divinely bestowed reward for good deeds” or “the fruit of one’s deeds”, or simply “fruit”. *Pulosari*, then, might mean “the essence of divine reward” i.e. harking back to a time when people believed in karmic reward for good deeds, and mountains were venerated as the abode of deities and the source of good things.

**Gunung Raksa** = Guardian Mountain. *Raksa* (also *reksa*) means “guardian” so **Gunung Raksa** may once have been seen as the sacred guardian of the surrounding area.

**Gunung Pangrango** (unclear). *Rango* could be a variant of an ancient word that suggests “panting” or “huffing and puffing” and thus *pangrango* might mean “that which huffs and puffs” i.e. emits smoke and ash during eruptions.

**Gunung Cikuray** = Mount Cikuray. This mountain appears to take its name from a nearby locality. *Ci* means “water” (usually in the names of rivers and streams) and *kuray* is a kind of tree. So *Cikuray* means “Kuray River” which presumably is a village or place, and the nearby mountain takes its name from this place.

**Gunung Salak** = Snakefruit Mountain. Possibly so named because from a distance the mountain has a rough, brown appearance like that of the “scaly-skinned” *salak* or snakefruit.

**Bukit Tunggul** = Prominent Hill. In Sundanese *tunggul* means “tree stump” but also “to stick out above the surface”, “to be most prominent” (related to Indonesian word *unggul* = superior, like the English term “outstanding” or “standing out”).

**Gunung Papandayan** = Mount Smithy’s Forge. *Papandyan* probably comes from the base-word *panday* or *pande* meaning “blacksmith, ironsmith, metal artisan”, and *papandeyan* is “the place of the ironsmith” i.e. the fire in which the ironsmith forges his metal. So the name *papandayan* probably refers to the volcanic crater of the mountain.

**Gunung Tampomas** (unclear) There could be two possibilities. (i) In Old Javanese the word *tampo* means “rain, mist” so *tampo mas* might mean “golden rain”. “Golden rain” (usually *udan mas* or *hujan emas*) is a popular poetic term that might respectfully or affectionately be applied to a mountain. (ii) In Sundanese *tampeu* means “overlooking something” so *tampo mas* might mean something like “the golden mountain that looms over us”.

**Gunung Sawal** (unclear). *Sawal* or *Shawwal* is the tenth month of the Arabic-Islamic calendar. It is the month after the fasting month of Ramadhan, so it opens with the festivities and celebration of Idul Fitri that mark the end of the Fast. It is possible that **Gunung Sawal** may have had an older name that reflected Hindu or pagan culture, and this name was replaced by the more positive, celebratory Islamic name “*Sawal*” when the people of the surrounding region converted to Islam. Compare **Gunung Slamet**.

**Gunung Sanggabuana** = Mount Holding-Up-The-World. *Sangga* means “to support something from below”, “to hold something up” and *buana* means “the world”. So *sangga buana* has something of the force of the English phrase “to take the world on your shoulders”. The significance of the name can be sensed if we compare it with the use of *sangga buana* in another context. In the front/north part of the Kasunanan palace in Surakarta there is a tower called the Panggung Sanggabuana. Just as **Gunung Sanggabuana** rises above the surrounding countryside, so also the Panggung Sanggabuana rises above the surrounding buildings of the Surakarta palace. It was the place where the kings of Surakarta meditated and met with the spirit queen of the southern ocean Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, so it had religious and meditative functions that may have been the same as those of **Gunung Sanggabuana** in former times.

**Gunung Bongkok** = Hunchback Mountain. *Bongkok* means “hunched” and is used here describing the shape/appearance of the mountain.

**Gunung Slamet** = Mount Safety. *Slamet* is the Javanese variant of the Malay-Indonesian word *selamat* meaning “rescued from danger”, “having avoided danger”. In the region around **Gunung Slamet** local tradition records that in pre-Islamic times the mountain was called Gunung Gora. In Javanese *gora* is a slightly archaic word meaning “horrible, scary, intimidating”. It is very likely that when the people of the region converted to Islam (probably some time in the 1500s) the forbidding name of the mountain inherited from Hindu-Buddhist /

pagan times was changed to the more reassuring Islamic name of **Gunung Slamet**. See also **Gunung Sawal**.

**Gunung Sumbing** = Mount Hare-Lip. The “mouth” of this volcano, or the “lip” of its crater, has a cleft in it like a hare-lip.

**Gunung Merbabu** = Ashy Mountain. The name *Merbabu* probably evolved from *merabu* or *merawu* which consists of the prefix *mer-* and the base word *abu* or *awu*. *Mer-* (same as the Indonesian-Malay *ber-*) means “to have/possess the quality expressed in the base word”, and *abu* / *awu* means “ash”. So *Merbabu* means “the ashy one” referring to ash expelled during the mountain’s incessant eruptions. See also **Mount Lawu**.

**Gunung Sindoro** = Lordly Mountain. *Sindoro* probably comes from the Javanese *si* (a kind of “title” or “person marker”) and *ndara* (pronounced /ndoro/) or *bandara* (pronounced /b’n.doro/) meaning “lord, master”.

**Gunung Muria** = (probably) High and Noble Mountain. Probably *muria* (pronounced /MOOR.yo/ in Javanese) is a variant of the Javanese word *mulya* (pronounced /MOOL.yo/) meaning (among other things) “high, noble”. Note that in the evolution of Indonesian languages /l/ often morphs into /r/ and vice-versa because the points of articulation of /l/ and /r/ are almost the same inside the mouth. Thus we have (for example) the title of the ancient spirit deity of the southern ocean Nyai Roro Kidul, who is also often Nyai Loro Kidul.

**Gunung Ungaran** = Mount Ungaran. *Ungaran* is the name of a place meaning something like “new town”, “new settlement” or “a place where a new start is made. It is likely, I think, that the town of Ungaran gave its name to the big hill or mountain looming over it.

**Dataran Dieng** = The Plateau of the Great Gods. *Dieng* seems to be a modern contraction of the words *da – hyang*. In Old Javanese *da* (sometimes *ra*) is a kind of title in front of the name or title of someone of high rank, and *hyang* means “a god, goddess, deity”. So *dahyang* means “the great gods”. Compare this with the place name Parahyangan which is still in use today to denote the mountainous interior of West Java. *Parahyangan* consists of *ra-hyang* (the great gods) flanked by the prefix-suffix combination *pa-an* which signifies a place. So Parahyangan means “the place of the great gods”.

**Gunung Telomoyo** (unclear). *Telomoyo* probably from the Javanese *tela* (pronounced /TAY.lo/) meaning “clearly visible” and *maya* (pronounced /MO.yo/) meaning “lightly coloured and hazy”.

**Gunung Lawu** = Ashy Mountain. *Lawu* comes from the Javanese *awu* meaning “ash”. Probably in the distant past the mountain was called Merawu (*mer + awu*) “the ashy one” but in the course of time the /r/ changed to an /l/ (see note on **Gunung Muria** above) and the initial syllable weakened and disappeared, leaving *Lawu*.

**Gunung Raung** = The Roaring Mountain. To the best of my knowledge *raung* is not a standard Javanese word, so it comes either from the regional dialect of East Java, or from Malay-Indonesian or from Madurese. In any case its meaning is clear: “to roar loudly” referring to the noise emitted by the volcano during eruptions.

**Gunung Arjuno** = Mount Arjuno. *Arjuno* is the Javanese pronunciation of *Arjuna*. Arjuna is the middle (third) of the five Pandawa brothers who are heroes of the Indian Mahabharata epic and the plays of the *wayang purwa*, the classical Javanese shadow theatre. Arjuna is renowned as the handsome, invincible warrior of the shadow play, so perhaps the mountain is named “Arjuno” because it is as beautiful and impressive as the shadow theatre character.

**Gunung Liman** = Elephant Mountain. *Liman* is the high Javanese (*krama*) word for “elephant”. Elephants used to be fairly plentiful in Java but they have now died out completely on the island. Nevertheless there are several place names that recall the presence of elephants, including Gunung Liman which (presumably) is so called because it has the big, solid, greyish appearance of an elephant.

**Gunung Tarub** = (possibly) Mount Blacksmith’s Workshop. One of the main meanings of *tarub* in Old Javanese is “the shed/shelter where a smithy or blacksmith works”. So **Gunung Tarub** might be so named because its crater is hot and fiery like a blacksmith’s forge (see also **Gunung Papandayan**). In modern Javanese *tarub* has widened in meaning to signify the temporary shed/shelter built at the front of a house to accommodate guests at a wedding celebration.

**Gunung Baluran** (not clear). There might be two possibilities. (i) A nearby settlement was a place where *balur* fish were raised, or possibly *belut* fish (a kind of eel). With the addition of the suffix *-an* to *balur* or *belut* this comes to mean “a place where *balur* fish are raised”. The nearby mountain is referred to by the name of the settlement. (ii) Possibly *balur* is a variant of *balut*, an Old Javanese word meaning “veiled in mist, like a beautifully misty-eyed woman on the verge of tears”.

**Gunung Pananggungan** (not clear). In Old Javanese *tanggung* means “to bear a burden, to take on a burden” so *pananggungan* might mean “the place where the world is supported” (compare **Gunung Sanggabuana**). The Pananggungan Plateau has been a sacred place from distant times (there are significant pre-Islamic ruins to be seen there today), so it is possible that the name of the place reflects its ancient function – a place where ascetics and kings “took on the burdens of the world” by connecting with the deities of the sites.

**Gunung Kelud** (not clear, possibly) Old-Man Mountain. One of the meanings of *kelud* in Old Javanese is “old and decrepit” so it is possible that the name **Gunung Kelud** reflects a perception that the mountain is an ancient, ancestral entity. In modern Javanese *kelud* means “a feather duster” so it is possible (though I think unlikely) that **Gunung Kelud** is “that which sweeps through everything (when it erupts).”

**Gunung Tengghi** = Tall Mountain. The language of Bawean is primarily a dialect of Madurese, and *tengghi* is the Madurese word for “tall, high”.

**Gunung Bromo** = Brahma’s Mountain. *Bromo* is a Javanese pronunciation of *Brahma*, one of the gods of the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva).