

Dru Hendro and I Made Marajaya

Cenk Blonk (I Wayan Nardayana) is Bali's best known shadow puppeteer (dalang). His moniker is the composite of the names of his two favorite punakawan (clown) characters, Cenk and Blonk. During the COVID-19 pandemic, using his Cenk Blonk Channel on YouTube, he presented a series of simple, ten-to-twenty-minute scenes, featuring clown characters. These were meant to educate the public around issues of COVID-19 and promote social distancing in the Balinese community.

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Introduction

Indonesian wayang has been recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of World Heritage (2003) and was inscribed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Indonesia (2008). Balinese wayang, one variation of this national art, remains a necessary component of ceremonies in ritual contexts. But, to remain strong, it needs the continuing creativity of performers staying relevant and must use modern media to both preserve and enhance the genre (Djatnika 2011). The art of Dalang Cenk Blonk (the stage name of I Wayan Nardayana) during the COVID-19 pandemic showed “best practice” in modernizing Balinese puppetry—his digital presentations were thoughtful, communicative, and

educational, while also being comically entertaining.

Wayang is known for its symbolic cultural functions in Bali (Seramasara 2019) but today can be very difficult for some audience members to digest, especially if they are part of the younger generation, given the strong dependence on archaic language (Kawi) for *wayang* dialogue. I Wayan Nardayana's skillful communication primarily through heightened focus on characters who speak contemporary Balinese in his clown scenes, however, wins over audiences that otherwise might abandon this heritage art. His performances appeal to workers, school children, university students, and officials, as well as committed *wayang* aficionados (see Marajaya 2016; Jenkins 2010; Foley 2012).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, *Balinese wayang* was in a dilemma. It was still needed for entertainment and socio-religious functions, but was stymied by the government's recommendation to avoid large crowds. Before the pandemic, *Balinese wayang* was primarily delivered through live performance, but, for almost a year and a half, puppeteers could not perform due to the widespread transmission of COVID-19. Given the challenge, puppeteers in Indonesia embraced digital media, especially YouTube (Hendro and Marajaya 2021; Setyawan 2020). Uploads were either versions of video/cassette recordings made of live performances or, as will be discussed in this paper, performances created specifically for online viewing. This paper will focus on two videos made specifically for virtual audiences.

In Bali the two puppeteers who are most active in creating digital content on YouTube are I Wayan Nardayana from Belayu Village, Tabanan Regency, who had 105 virtual *wayang* offerings by December 2022, and I Made Sutama (Dalang Bayoe Edan) from Payangan Village, Gianyar Regency, who had seventy-six. Sutama's Bayoe Edan (Crazy Wind) Channel recordings focus mostly on more traditional issues of Balinese custom and religion and will not be discussed in this paper, which focuses on COVID-19 issues. But I Wayan Nardayana's Cenk Blonk Channel has been especially prominent in raising COVID-19 awareness—a tenth of his 105 videos at the time of our research dealt with the pandemic in some way. Dialogue from some of these COVID shows will be shared

below.

Dalang Nardayana started his pandemic-related social media offerings in 2019, and many of his presentations were quick to go viral in Balinese society. His model for pandemic pieces was not a normal multi-hour performance with full *Mahabharata*-based narrative that a *dalang* would normally present for a live audience. Instead, many of his YouTube offerings were short comic scenes which became effective community education during the COVID pandemic.

Cenk Blonk's puppet work currently appears on social media in four forms: 1) complete shows in versions made for cassettes/DVDs, which are freely sold in the market; 2) short, serialized virtual recordings with a duration of fifteen to twenty minutes; 3) short, commissioned virtual recordings, usually of ten to fifteen minutes; and 4) YouTuber uploads filmed by fans during his live performances, which again are usually ten to twenty minutes long.

While the uploads by viewers (group four) are done without Nardayana's permission, when interviewed in 2021, he noted he has reconciled himself to the fact that copyright in Bali is impossible to maintain in this oral-aural genre (Nardayana 2021; see also Jenkins 2010). Indeed, his decision to focus on short comic scenes for his pandemic education videos was a direct response to the scenes his viewers post: clown scenes.

The virtual recordings of his short, serialized episodes are fifteen-to-twenty-minute videos and usually feature the standard clown (*punakawan*, *penasar*) figures of the "right," Twalen and Merdah, who serve the heroes in normal plays, and figures of the "left," Delem and Sangut, who serve the villainous characters, as well as more recently invented clown figures who are not necessarily aligned with any side in the narrative. The latter group includes the comic figures Nardayana developed himself—Nang Klenceng (Cenk) and Nang Eblong (Blonk). Having become famous for clown scenes using these two figures, people call him Dalang Cenk Blonk after these clowns' nicknames, rather than by his actual name. As in Europe's *commedia dell'arte*, each

clown character has a known temperament, voice, and persona that is recognized by all. Observing the customary traits and inclinations of these clown figures, Dalang Nardayana began making twenty-minute virtual puppet presentations. These excerpts, of course, had roots in Nardayana's presentations of the same characters in live performances, especially in his comic scenes of Delem-Sangut (Lem and Ngut) and Nang Klenceng-Nang Eblong (Cenk and Blonk). The characters of Delem and Nang Eblong are comparable, both are *belog* (foolish) and *lugu* (clueless). In contrast, Sangut and Nang Klenceng are intelligent, applying critical thought to the debate. In many ways, they replicate the widespread comic pairing of a foolish clown/fall guy and witty clown/straight man whose presence highlights the distance between a fool and a thinking person.

Dalang Nardayana, when I interviewed him in 2021, said the difficult part in devising his short recordings was making a script beforehand and keeping to it—scripted, condensed comedy was unlike his improvisation with the clowns in a live performance. In plays (*lakon*), clowns mostly present short interludes between narrative scenes and, more importantly, translate into the Balinese vernacular the lofty (and largely obscure) speeches of the noble characters whose dialogue is delivered in Kawi (Sanskrit-derived language). The Kawi sequences are full of archaic terms, since this is a language peculiar to *wayang*/performing arts, but ill understood by the average viewer. In these new videos the dialogue would be all clowns, and, hence, directly understandable to all.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, Joko Widodo, President of Indonesia, and the provincial government of Bali worked to control the spread of the disease. Dalang Nardayana supported the government effort by posting his short skits featuring these clown characters who could educate and entertain. His efforts have been watched by millions of netizens (a member of the community of Internet users). Rather than a full *lakon* (play) with multiple characters, dense narrative, and special effects, these short videos only feature the dialogue of the well-known clowns and *bebondresan* (newly invented comic figures). The scenes are not backed by the fully melodic accompaniment of *gender wayang* (the quartet of bronze-keyed instruments used in traditional Balinese

wayang), but by a simple rhythmic playing of a few metallophone instruments: *kajar* (kettles set on cords strung on a boxlike stand), *klenang* (small kettle), *kemong* (high pitched hanging gong), and *kempul* (lower pitched medium sized gong). Dalang Nardayana's performance, however simple, always amazes. His joking dialogues use standard Balinese, the local tongue (with sprinklings of Indonesian and sometimes English). His comic videos also have subtitles in the national language, Indonesian, making the material accessible to viewers of all ethnic groups across the archipelago.

Cenk Blonk *Wayang* and COVID-19

As noted earlier, YouTubers had long been posting short comic dialogues they recorded during Dalang Nardayana's live shows. Excerpts filmed usually had the clowns spouting off on government issues or current events. Customarily for a regular performance, a *dalang* will conceptualize such comic scenes through thinking in advance how to shape a story to suit the particular audience, time, and atmosphere before presenting, or he may just wait to be inspired in the moment of performance.

Thus, the idea of Dalang Nardayana to create a comedian-only virtual series began from observing what his audience members were taping and uploading. Realizing that short comic dialogues were favored, Nardayana began his online series in May 2019, thus making this format available when COVID struck in 2020. These virtual performances, of course, had some of the features of the comic scenes of his normal live performances, wherein constructive (and much deserved) criticism of society and state abound. Nardayana, like other puppeteers, often has two characters of differing viewpoints debate a problem, but on the Internet channel during COVID this debate of two comic figures became the whole show. Online *Wayang* Cenk Blonk begins with a *kayonan* (tree of life) dance—the standard opening of all *wayang* performances. Next, dialogue between a comic pair takes place. In the instances below, the topic was the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to these virtual performances, Cenk Blonk had often been hired by the government and/or businesses to promote certain programs, but in his pandemic recordings he took such “edu-tainment” further, as the two examples below will

demonstrate.

Just Stay Home (Di Rumah Aja)

The Governor's Regulation No. 15 of 2020 (April) concerning the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) ordered people to stay at home to break the chain of transmission. In Cenk Blonk's recording of April 13, *Just Stay Home* (seen by over 579,000), Delem and Sangut appear (Nardayana 2020a). Dalang Nardayana drew inspiration as he created the piece from Satgas (Satuan Tugas Penanganan, COVID-19 Task Force for Handling COVID-19) information. He wrote the dialogue on a computer and edited it, highlighting COVID information in his jokes. Nardayana's intention was to educate people regarding the Coronavirus. Delem, whose nickname in the dialogue is often "Lem" or "Melem," represents an average villager, while Sangut, often called "Ngut," is better informed. In the sequence posted April 12, Delem is a virus denier asking Sangut to return to work at the palace of the ruler they both serve. Sangut refuses, afraid of the Coronavirus. Delem calls Sangut a coward, and says he, Delem, is braver and not afraid of *leak* (sorcery) or unnerved by the shadow of a bird (*sikep*, hawk) flying by. Delem ignores the virus, claiming, if death is after you, you can't hide. The dialogue discusses three types of death: 1) Hyang Widhi (God) has destined it; 2) you go seeking death; and 3) mischance, death by being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

If you die from the Coronavirus, the skit says, your death is in category two—you are looking to die. The government had advised everyone to stay at home and avoid people with coughs who had a high probability of spreading the virus to others. The skit emphasizes wearing masks, staying home, and washing hands. The dialogue (given here in our translation) educated the community, especially those living in rural areas.

DELEM: Sangu-u-u-t . . . my younger bro' Ngut . . . come out Ngut. Why are you just staying at home, like a chicken hatching an egg? I'll take you to the palace to do your voluntary royal service. So late, and you are not yet out from "incubating eggs on your nest."

SANGUT: Oh so sorry, Lem, my elder brother! . . . I can't go out, Lem, and don't dare go out.

DELEM: Bah! . . . Ha, ha, ha, . . . you are a coward, Ngut. You think there is sorcery wandering around now? Why are you afraid of going out?

SANGUT: Oh! . . . I'm really afraid about the pandemic, Lem. The world is still suffering from the pandemic, Lem. Don't you know that the world is in a surge of the pandemic?

DELEM: What pandemic? Are you afraid of a virus? Badah! . . . You are just like a chicken, spooked by just the shadow of a hawk. You are afraid of a shadow.

SANGUT: I am not afraid of the virus, Lem.

DELEM: So, then what are you afraid of, you bean brain, why incubating at home . . . ?

SANGUT: I am afraid to get sick, Lem, let alone die from the virus—my wife is still so young and amorous.

DELEM: Hah, you are such a stupid puppy, Ngut. Hey, Ngut, . . . you know life and death is not just decided by a virus. When it's your time, though protected by a stone fortress, you'll surely die. You think you can be reborn just like a snake sheds its skin?

SANGUT: That's true, Lem, but the causes of death are many, Lem.

DELEM: Many causes—what do you mean?

SANGUT: There is death by divine destiny and then there is the abnormal death—death by making a mistake.

DELEM: So the death by such virus is . . . ?

SANGUT: That is called a mistaken death, death by a mistake. When the virus is known

to be infectious and causes death, you still dare to approach it? . . . How is that different than walking into the mouth of a hungry tiger, Lem? One would surely be gobbled up by the tiger . . .

DELEM: Wow! You think too much, Ngut. If you stay home, can it cancel your chance of death by the virus? You may die of starvation instead.

SANGUT: Nowadays . . . no need to see a raging *leak* (witch). One just sees someone sneezing, and everyone is out of there.

DELEM: Huh? . . . A sneeze is more frightening than seeing a *leak*, Ngut? Ha, ha! It's so easy now to make people sick.

SANGUT: That is the reason, Lem. Don't go out. If anyone hears your cough, they may think you are spreading the virus.

DELEM: Hah, you are a mere puppy, Ngut, always putting me down. If I want to go buy coffee, how should I do it?

SANGUT: Cover your mouth with a mask.

DELEM: Why do you ask me to use a mask? I'm not sick.

SANGUT: Although you're not sick, you must be protected so you will not bring sickness home. The second function of a mask is to mitigate your stinky breath.

DELEM: Badahh! . . . You are always saying that. What is the reason for this current global pandemic? What causes this pandemic? Is this a natural or human-made virus?

SANGUT: Oh! To such a question, I don't have an answer. I am afraid to speculate. I am afraid of making a misstatement. I am avoiding a misstatement that may cause me difficulty in life. Previously, we were strong by being together, disaster was being

separated.

DELEM: But now?

SANGUT: Now, disaster is being together; strength is in separation. DELEM: How can that be, Ngut?

SANGUT: When we all get together, the virus proliferates quickly, making more people sick. When we are separated, all staying home, it means less virus and less contagion.

DELEM: So . . . that is the reason why you are not going out; for a week you merely stay in your nest.

SANGUT: At least two weeks one should stay home, Lem. When some of our people are sick from the virus, we should stay home even longer until such virus cases are over.

DELEM: So now . . . ?

SANGUT: So now, if you want to beat the virus, you, elder brother Melem, simply stay home. That means you are victorious against the virus.

DELEM: It sounds good to me, Ngut!

SANGUT: That's it, Lem. Instead of just grumbling, unhelpfully making our brains stress-filled, we had better fight the virus together.

DELEM: What is the way, Ngut . . . ?

SANGUT: It's so easy, *just stay home!*

DELEM: I agree, Ngut. Now I will just stay home, Ngut.

Is Bali Immune? (Nak Bali Kebal?)

Is Bali Immune? (Nardayana 2020b) was posted 25 April 2020 and has been viewed over 248,000 times. It was a fifteen-minute presentation featuring the gruff and deluded Delem standing by his motorcycle with his more savvy sidekick, Sangut, in the door of his house. By the conclusion of the piece, audience members are warned by Sangut's critique of how to prevent Corona (stay home, wear a mask, avoid saliva). For a story kernel in the skit, we find the virus—or so Delem argues—can be bribed by ritual offerings. The *tawur kesanga* (Balinese paying off of demons by extensive offerings in the ninth month just before Nyepi, the day of silence), *segehan* (small offering of five colors with rice and alcohol put on the ground near the house for *buta kala* [demons] each fifteen days), *arak berem* (Balinese red alcohol used in offerings for demons to drink), *tedadahan nasi wong-wongan* (a human shaped rice offering which includes the four sacred colors), *ayab-ayabang* (devotional offering), and other practices are referenced. All this banter refers to the local, religiously-sanctioned method of dealing with the demonic—placating the angry spirits with offerings. Balinese believe that if demons are already stuffed with the good things you supply in offerings, they will be too full to attack you. As in a normal show, word play, which is termed *kridabasa/kridabasita*, abounds. *Dalang* push words beyond their normal grammatical and linguistic boundaries in the *antawacana* or *wayang* dialogue (Sedana et al. 2021: 80-83). Again, the translations are our own and some of the dialogue has been a bit condensed.

SANGUT: Lem, my man! Where are you going, Bro' Delem? Wandering around on the road

without a mask—the authorities will be after you.

DELEM: Bullshit! What do I care? I need to grab a breath of fresh air, Ngut! My brain needs to enjoy a whiff of fresh air, and we don't know when the government will ever repeal the health protocol.

SANGUT: Sorry, Lem. There is still a pandemic going on. Pandemically positive cases are not yet past.

DELEM: Hah! You are such a coward. I have stopped being afraid, Ngut. No more fear! No more fear! I am not afraid of *leak* [*witches, which most villagers fear*], let alone a measly virus.

SANGUT: Hey, Lem! Don't be so arrogant, Lem. Even the *balian* [*shaman/healers*] who are the magically empowered ones in Bali have temporarily closed shop and are afraid to practice, due to the virus. Wow, Melem! You think you are some macho Spiderman, so brave? What's the reason? Have you been popping nerve pills?

DELEM: Hah! you're just a pup! . . . You are stuck with one way thinking. You are a whimpy whimp, reading the news, until you are aquiver to see anything and hear anything! All of those foreign reporters are confusing we Balinese.

SANGUT: Confusing us about what, Lem?

DELEM: Confusing us because we are Balinese. So how come we are all immune? More than four million people in Bali, how come so few have tested positive? So many of these foreigners come to Bali pre-pandemic; they are all confused, all confused . . .

SANGUT: Really? What causes the Balinese to be relatively immune, Lem?

DELEM: Ahh! How can the foreigners know such facts, Ngut? They think the Balinese immunity is a mystery. They can't understand it, Ngut! Ah, ah, ah!

SANGUT: Woah! Please don't open your mouth so wide, Lem! You need to stop spraying your saliva everywhere!

DELEM: You are a real whimp, Ngut! You're even afraid of my spit. Proves your brain has been infected by the virus.

SANGUT: What, Lem?

DELEM: Abroad there are so many people ill and dying due to the pandemic. In Bali only few are infected, therefore the foreigners don't know how to explain it.

SANGUT: Okay, Lem. If it's true the Balinese relatively immune, then what's your take on the reason?

DELEM: I think it's the Balinese life style.

SANGUT: What do you mean?

DELEM: Abroad the pandemic-causing virus is treated as an enemy.

SANGUT: But in Bali?

DELEM: Well, Gnut, we in Bali . . . we treat the virus like family.

SANGUT: What—I am confused to hear you, Lem? Treat the virus like family! How?

DELEM: The virus is pacified by the Balinese with rice molded into a human form to make the virus happy [Referring to *tedadahan nasi wong-wongan ceremonial offerings which many Balinese were making during the pandemic*]. If we treat the enemy like family, the enemy will be pacified, won't it be? If we befriend the virus, it will certainly won't murder us.

SANGUT: Oh, is that so, Lem?

DELEM: Some people say, you can kill the virus by giving it alcohol.

SANGUT: Then what?

DELEM: In Bali we always drink *tuak* [palm wine]. So if virus enters into your mouth, it



will get drunk with you, Ngut. Ha, ha, ha! So drink and keep on drinking. What's more, Balinese *arak* [*anise-flavored alcohol*] has been legalized—makes it easy, Ngut!

SANGUT: So, *arak* and *tuak* are our saviors?

DELEM: Plain as day, Ngut. That's why people say "*Tuak* is the breath of life."

SANGUT: Oh, yeah? Does that sound right to me, Lem?

DELEM: You don't know the latest news; the virus can also be too busy with ceremonies: *tawur kesianage* [*pay the demons off in the ninth month before Nyepi, day of silence*], *segehan* [*minor offering placed near the house compound every fifteenth day*], Kajeng Kliwon [*offering when the days of two different calendars coincide*], *mecaru* [*exorcistic offerings made the day before Nepi to feast lower demons*]. Offer them this, offer them that; placate the virus until its stomach is full.

SANGUT: Aah! So, then virus has a stomach?

DELEM: It's true, Ngut. That's it—food for the virus, lower spirits, *bhutha kala* in Bali.

SANGUT: Every fifteen days?

DELEM: Every Kajeng Kliwon, the sacred day, every fifteenth day.

SANGUT: So now?

DELEM: Aa-a-h! Now we offer it every day, every day, Ngut. Make a five-color [*sacred colors of the four directions, white, red, yellow, black*] virus offering to the earth, sprinkle *arak berem* [*red colored alcohol*], offer it up and dedicate it to let all viruses and *bhuta kala*, lower spirits, feast happily.

SANGUT: Wow! Is this really the reason why the Balinese are still relatively immune?

Cenk Blonk *Wayang* Innovating against COVID-19

Wayang Cenk Blonk's YouTube channel has become a site promoting innovative *wayang* for the millennial generation. His virtual puppetry presents fresh humor, current issues, and information answering community needs. Cenk Blonk's advice in his online shows during the pandemic invited the public to take care of their health and avoid transmission of COVID-19. These virtual shows avoided some of the difficulties that regular *wayang* poses for younger viewers. The archaic Kawi language normally spoken by the major characters was gone, since the *dalang* focused his skits on the clowns, who speak only the local language. The heavy use of philosophical and religious concepts that are part of traditional *wayang* are bypassed. Instead, there is direct communication about a pressing issue regarding the health and welfare of the community. Complex manipulation in battle scenes and long musical passages were cut. The puppet master instead went to the heart of communication with the community.

In Bali, the *dalang* is often nicknamed *pinandhita* (religious expert) or *guru loka* (spiritual teacher), considered a preacher of *dharma* (right action). Hence, a *dalang* is seen as a servant of society providing both entertainment and important messages. I Wayan Dibia and Setiyono Wahyudi in their 2004 book discuss *praginas* (performers). This is a title given to dancer-actors and *dalangs*. *Praginas* customarily hold high status in Balinese thought. But in our changing times, for art to survive, *praginas* must work to find relevance while they continue to reflect the noble values that elevate audiences religiously and intellectually. The central position in the hearts of the community that *praginas* have enjoyed and from which their social status and economic success stems is their socio-spiritual function. *Praginas* bring truth and balance to the community via performance.

Although traditional *wayang kulit* performances are still part of religious ceremonies, among the general public, *wayang kulit*'s popularity has faded and standard plays from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are no longer attracting the audience's attention without considerable aesthetic elements, jokes, and/or media/technology interest

added. Still, individuals like Dalang Nardayana have prompted the emergence of a strong online Wayang Cenk Blonk fan community. Six hundred eighty thousand viewers have often followed one of his new broadcasts in the space of two days. With this large a number of viewers, Dalang Nardayana accrues financial support from YouTube ads.

Concerning entertainment, cultural critic Edi Sedyawati (2007, 129) distinguishes “art” from “entertainment.” She holds that “art” has implications for contemplation, is supported by complex techniques, and has a set of underlying concepts. Meanwhile, “entertainment” directly captures viewers with movement and glamor, stimulating the senses. *Wayang* has long had multiple functions in Indonesian society, including as a vehicle for character education, conveying morality, unifying society, and providing exciting entertainment for the community (Sunardi, Kuwato, and Sudarsono 2018). Arwan Subaidi (in Ra’uf 2010, 161) argues that a *wayang kulit dalang* may be the premier public entertainer in the world. All night long, the *dalang* plays all the characters using his leather figures. He changes his voice and intonation according to each figure that he brings onscreen. He makes jokes and even sings. The Cenk Blonk COVID-19 series in 2020 took as its mission to educate spectators about the virus while entertaining the audience at all social levels by making them laugh and think.

Conclusion

Wayang Cenk Blonk's virtual performances were innovated by Dalang Nardayana to respond to the curtailing of live performances for a year and a half. Screens, lighting, puppets, language, and music were used with an emphasis on minimalism rather than spectacle. These were short fifteen-minute shows, often featuring the two clown-servant figures, often of the “left,” Delem and Sangut. In Series 63, *Just Stay Home*, the message was to break the chain of transmission by isolating, wearing a mask, and maintaining distance. The idea in Series 65, *Is Bali Immune?*, was maintaining health through exercise, diet, rest, and not leaving the house unnecessarily, as the *dalang* shared humor about the Balinese religious practice of appeasing the demonic. These and other Coronavirus-themed short videos by Dalang Nardayana educated,

enlightened, and enlivened the Balinese digital sphere, overcoming Coronavirus isolation while using traditional means—the comic interpolation of clowns—to bring important political, social, and religious ideas down to earth in understandable language and pragmatic terms in a new digital clowning form. Dalang Nardayana was doing what good *praginasdo*, serving the aesthetic, philosophical, and pragmatic needs of the Balinese community in a changing world.

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