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- Bali, kamu mau kembali kemana?

Interpreting pandemics through history, text and performance

Written by: SIDDHARTH CHANDRA | Published: Jul 12, 2024 |



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Siddharth Chandra

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This edition originated during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, a number of years after I had published my research (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00324728.2012.754486>) reexamining the mortality from the flu epidemic of 1918 in Java. In summer 2020, when I was President of the American Institute for Indonesian Studies (AIFIS), a consortium of over thirty US universities with faculty members who have dedicated their careers to scholarship on Indonesia, decided to

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hold a virtual conference on Indonesian Studies in partnership with the Asian Studies Center at Michigan State University. Our decision to 'go virtual' was a response to the pandemic and the restrictions on movement that it entailed. In planning the conference, we expected 100 or so scholars to attend the conference and that, after the end of the pandemic lockdowns, the need for such a virtual conference would cease. We were pleasantly surprised when about 500 scholars from over twenty different countries attended the conference, among them the interdisciplinary team that has put together this collection. To accommodate ongoing interest among the global community of scholars of Indonesian Studies, the AIFIS-MSU conference has now become an annual event.

Professor and ethnomusicologist Martin (Marty) Hatch from Cornell University, to whom this collection is gratefully dedicated, was AIFIS's Treasurer at that time. Having steadfastly served AIFIS for a decade and held the organisation together during some of its most vulnerable years, Marty had built collaborations between AIFIS and leading lights in the world of Indonesian music and the arts.

Dhalang Purbo Asmoro /Kitsie Emerson



One of AIFIS's most productive collaborations was the one Marty established with the Javanese dhalang Purbo Asmoro in November 2020 through the good offices of Dr Kathryn (Kitsie) Emerson, Director of Ekalaya Performing Arts Center in Solo, Central Java. With AIFIS sponsorship, Purbo Asmoro performed 12 all-night wayang performances over the next 18 months, including one to celebrate the inauguration of US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in

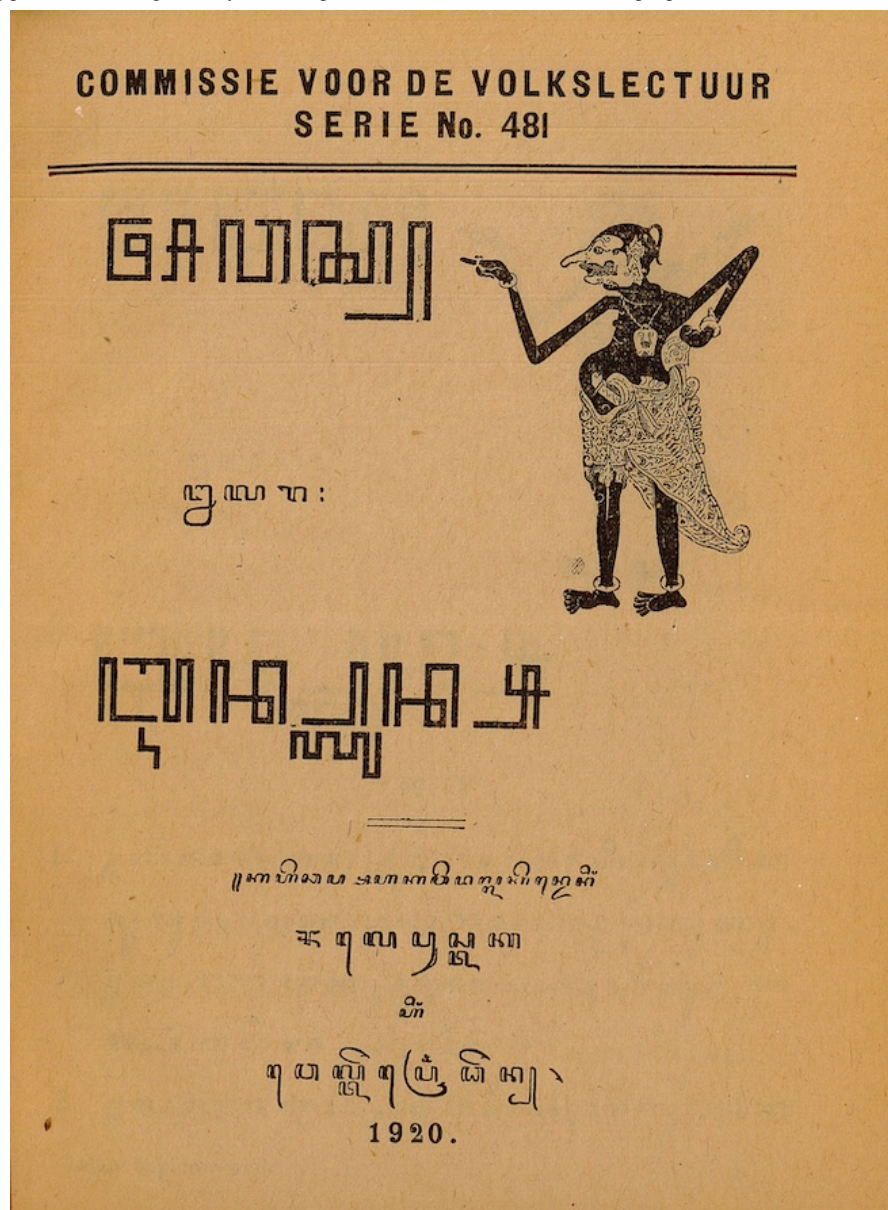
January 2021. Purbo Asmoro and Kathryn Emerson also coordinated wayang performances by Cahyo Kuntadi, Sigid Ariyanto, Midiyanto S. Putro, and Gamblang Carito under the AIFIS program, as well as two online discussion seminars. All the events were live-streamed, with Kitsie providing simultaneous English-language translation.

Wayang in a time of influenza

During this time, I approached professor of Javanese and Indonesian Studies and historian at the University of Michigan, Nancy Florida (</editions/edition-157-jul-sep-2024/beware-the-disease-of-influenza>), to ask if she might be interested in translating the Javanese play *Awas Lélara Influwensa* (Beware the Disease of Influenza). This unusual piece was written by an unknown Javanese author and published by Balai Pustaka two years after the devastating influenza pandemic of 1918. The aim was to educate Javanese subjects of the Dutch East Indies in the proper care of influenza patients and in the prevention of the spread of the disease. Written in the form of a play with characters from the wayang tradition, this small book is the inspiration for this collection.

Nancy was enthusiastic about the project and agreed to translate the volume (much to our delight!) and, as the reader will see (</images/Edition157/Ed%20157%20Florida%20trs%20Beware%20Influenza.pdf>), her rendering of this anonymous Javanese work elegantly captures the sparkling wit so often seen when the punakawan (clown servants of the shadow play) make their appearance on the stage. It also reveals complicated understandings – and Dutch (or Dutch-educated) understandings of ‘native’ understandings – of the pandemic from a colonial Javanese perspective.

Cover of *Awas Lélara Influwensa* (Beware the Disease of Influenza), Balai Pustaka, 1920.



In the summer of 2021 with the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to rage across the globe, I asked Kitsie if she could persuade Purbo Asmoro to bring to life, after a hiatus of 100 years, the wayang-inspired play *Beware the Disease of Influenza*. We were (again) delighted when Purbo Asmoro agreed not only to perform it, but also to build out from the original text to capture the immediate context within which he would present his work. As Kitsie explains (/editions/edition-157-jul-sep-2024/petruk-1920-confronts-petruk-2020), Purbo Asmoro calls his novel creation a fully developed wayang play, that tells the story of the ravages of COVID-19 in contemporary Java, *Tamba Têka Lara Lunga* (Remedy Shows Up, Malady Gives Up). While Purbo Asmoro uses 1918 as a starting point for this work, he proceeds to connect it to the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic, which was ravaging populations across the world and in Indonesia at the time of his performance. Purbo Asmoro performed his creation on 28

September 2021, with Kitsie providing a live English translation. The live-streamed performance has now been viewed over 38,000 times.

A witness account

Finally, in order to provide some background for the two artistic works in this collection – Purbo Asmoro’s performance and Nancy’s translation – I have included a translation (</images/Edition157/van%20Steenis%20Magelang%20Report.pdf>) of one of the most detailed accounts of the 1918 influenza pandemic in Java; that of Pieter Bastiaan van Steenis, a health officer with the KNIL (Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger, the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army) who was posted to Magelang and witnessed the devastation that the pandemic caused there. A young officer at the time, van Steenis was to later return to the Netherlands to pursue an illustrious career as a doctor and with the Department of Tropical Hygiene at the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam. In recognition of his deep knowledge, which he captured in a rich treatise on tropical medicine, he was also appointed an extraordinary professor at the University of Amsterdam.

As I explain (</editions/edition-157-jul-sep-2024/reporting-on-javas-1918-influenza-pandemic>) elsewhere in this edition, statistics in van Steenis’ report demonstrate that the 1918 influenza pandemic took an unusually severe toll on the people of Magelang (and, likely, of Java as a whole). While he noted the ‘ignorance’ of the local population, his report also demonstrated, somewhat ironically, that western scholars themselves disagreed about both the causative agent of influenza and how it was transmitted.

P.B. van Steenis’ report titled, ‘Some epidemiological remarks about the flu in the Magelang Division, 1918’, was published in *Medical Journal for the Netherlands Indies*, in 1919.

MEDICAL JOURNAL FOR NETHERLANDS INDIA

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VOLUME LIX.

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Java Bookshop and Printer
Batavia ❖ 1919.

Meanwhile, as Nancy's and Kathryn's articles in this edition (/editions/edition-157-jul-sep-2024) emphasise - as does Ravando (<https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/wacana/vol23/iss2/5/>) (2022) - Javanese made sense of the pandemic using their own ideas of the universe. The government's attempt to educate them probably emerged from a recognition of these misguided (to the government) understandings and the perceived need to bridge Javanese and western understandings (or misunderstandings) of influenza. Their use of a beloved tradition as such a bridge resulted in *Beware the Disease of Influenza*.

Lessons learned?

Almost a century after it ravaged the world, the 1918 influenza was being simultaneously called the 'Great Influenza' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Influenza) and the 'Forgotten Pandemic' (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/americas->

forgotten-pandemic/2743E3A649CCF1197CA35939F9A5F8A1)'.

This incongruous pair of labels says as much about the pandemic, which came and went in the blink of an eye only to be overshadowed by the subsequent Great Depression and World War II, as it does about the human attention span. Lessons that could and should have been learned and internalised after 1918 were forgotten and had to be re-learned with haste in 2020, as COVID-19 took its terrible toll.

This collection illustrates the multi-faceted ways in which pandemics, from the 1918 influenza to COVID-19, affect us. Here we see a conversation between the science of epidemiology and public health, drama and translation, and the performing arts and contemporary interpretations of historical events, all of which are interwoven in interesting and sometimes surprising ways. These pieces are our attempt to bring these diverse perspectives together in the hope that the reader will appreciate their many interconnections. We also hope that they will serve as a reminder that pandemics have been and will always be part of the human struggle, and that we forget their lessons at our own peril.

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• Bali, kamu mau kembali kemana?

Beware the disease of influenza

Written by: NANCY K. FLORIDA | Published: Jul 12, 2024 |



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Nancy K. Florida

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In response to the devastating flu epidemic of 1918-19, the government publishing house Bale Pustaka issued a slim volume of some 52 pages in Javanese language and script, illustrated with figures from the wayang (shadow puppet theatre) tradition. The volume (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100176416>), titled *Awas Lėlara Inpluwensa* (Beware the Disease of Influenza), was to be distributed among the Javanese populace as a public health measure.

Beware the Disease of Influenza tells a story of the epidemic in Java, while at the same time offering measures to control the outbreak and to treat its sufferers. Though it was not written

in the form of a wayang shadow play, the story is told in the idiom of wayang and the form of a play. Below you will find a complete translation of this short pocketbook.

A public health intervention

Commissioned by the Health Service of the Netherlands East Indies government in May 1919, the book came out the following year. By then it was too late (<https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/shaps-research/2020/12/15/1918-spanish-flu-colonial-indonesia/>), several millions had already perished and the epidemic was on the wane. It is estimated (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3687026/>) that in the space of a year the flu had caused a population decline of between 4.26 and 4.37 million in Java and Madura (excluding the Principalities) – with most of the deaths occurring in late 1918. This was approximately ten per cent of the population of these most populous areas of the colony.

We do not know who the author of the book was, but we can surmise that he (or possibly she) was a Javanese who was well-versed in the wayang and in Javanese literary conventions. The author may well have been a dhalang (shadow puppeteer). He or she was also well-informed on the most recent advances in modern medical knowledge pertaining to the causes and treatment of influenza. The book forms an epistemological translation of sorts, across these different worlds of knowledge. Traditional wayang characters, living in a traditional wayang world, encounter and meet the challenges of a contemporary early twentieth-century medical emergency.

The story

The light-hearted story that our author tells in the form of a play revolves around the figures of the punakawan, that is, the retainers that serve the noble heroes who are the protagonists of the wayang stories. The punakawan, who appear and reappear in every wayang play, perform both as clowns and as voices for the 'little people.' Sĕmar is the most senior of the punakawan we meet in *Beware the Disease of Influenza*. With his obese form and weepy eyes, Sĕmar is the father of the two

other punakawan who appear as protagonists of the story. Though he is a lowly servant, Sēmar is in fact the highest of the manifest gods. He is noted for his wisdom and supernatural powers and is often considered the guardian spirit of Java. Sēmar's divine name is Bathara Ismaya; he is the second egg-born son of the highest god, Sanghyang Wēnang (the Almighty), having been created from the white of the divine egg.

Sēmar's sons are Petruk and Gareng. Petruk, the younger son, is the 'hero' of our story. Tall and thin, with a pointy nose and little pot belly, Petruk is the brash one and it is he who leads the effort to eradicate the flu. Gareng, the elder son, is short and plump. He is riddled with tropical yaws, a disease of poverty. A bit whiny and 'school-marmy,' Gareng joins with his brother and father in the effort to combat the epidemic. The three are portrayed as ordinary, if enterprising, Javanese villagers.

The other punakawan to appear in the story is Togog. Short and obese, with a hideously deformed wide mouth, the Togog of the wayang world serves as a retainer to the forces of evil (demons or foreign enemy kings). But he is also Sēmar's brother. The eldest son of Sanghyang Wēnang, Togog was born of the shell of the divine egg. In our story he appears as the head of a village that has been struck down with influenza – and as the father of the lovely Sari-hati (Heart's Essence).

The other central figure in the story is 'the most noble Sir Doctor' (Bēndara Dokter), a Javanese doctor. An unparalleled master of modern medical science, Bēndara Dokter is a clever aristocrat, depicted by the wayang figure of Krēsna. In the wayang world, Lord Krēsna is the world-conquering hero who is an incarnation of the god Wisnu. He wields his power, in part, through the means of his supernatural weapon, a blazing discus, or chakra. In our story, the chakra is the receptacle of all the doctor's modern medical knowledge. He bestows this magical, world-conquering weapon upon Petruk, thereby instantly endowing the Javanese 'little man' with the means and methods of modern scientific medical knowledge.

At the close of this very short book, Petruk conveys this 'magical-modern' knowledge to his new bride Sari-hati and to the villagers whom he has just cured – while at the same time, by extension, delivering it to the most important audience, the Javanese readers of the book. The final section of *Beware the Disease of Influenza* comprises a short treatise on the etiology and epidemiology of influenza as it was understood at the time, as well as a textual guide on both the treatment of the disease and the prevention of its spread.

The song

The 'treatise' is composed as a song in traditional Javanese verse (*macapat*) in Sinom verse form, a melodic form considered appropriate for delivering teachings. Macapat verse is written to be sung, and one can presume that at least some of the Javanese readers would have sung this final section of the book – reading it aloud to themselves or to their fellows in the easy, steady cadences of Sinom.

In the Javanese script published edition, the text of these teachings is presented in hybrid form – the first stanza is graphically presented in poetic form, while the following stanzas are graphically rendered in numbered paragraphs (2-15), as if they were prose. And yet, as Petruk notes, the entire text conforms to the metrical rules of Sinom meter, and thus may be (or is meant to be) sung. It is for this reason that, as you will see below, I have made the choice to render all thirteen stanzas graphically in poetic form, while retaining the numbers that indicate the numbered paragraphs, each of which constitutes a separate topic.

I invite readers to imagine Petruk, the clown and emblematic 'little man', reciting these teachings to his fellow Javanese in an engaging melodic voice – and doing so in a very traditional form according to the strict prosodic rules of sung Javanese poetry – thereby to instill in them a more 'modern' consciousness of the disease that was threatening them and very well might return to threaten them again.

The Text

Click on the image to read and download the translated text



(/images/Edition157/Ed%20157%20Florida%20trs%20Beware%20In

Key references

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Petruk 1920 confronts Petruk 2020

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Kathryn 'Kitsie' Emerson

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When renowned dhalang Purbo Asmoro received Siddharth Chandra's invitation ^(/editions/edition-157-jul-sep-2024/interpreting-pandemics-through-history-text-and-performance) to create and perform a full-length wayang kulit tale based on the 1920 play *Awas Lėlara Inpluwensa* ^(/editions/edition-157-jul-sep-2024/beware-the-disease-of-influenza) (Beware the Disease of Influenza), he was immediately inspired by the challenge. Purbo Asmoro is no stranger to creative construction of wayang tales that fall outside of traditional structures and was already active in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic through his art. Having

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received the materials from Siddharth Chandra on 5 July 2021, he live-streamed his original work entitled *Tamba Těka, Lara Lunga* (Remedy Shows Up, Malady Gives Up) on his YouTube channel on 28 September 2021, only two-and-a-half months later.

In the four to five years before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, dhalang across Java had been embracing live-streaming of their performances. By 2018, almost every major dhalang across Java had started a YouTube channel and was broadcasting performances regularly. Superstar dhalang might have as many as 2,000 in attendance at their wayang and as many as another 10,000 viewing the live stream on YouTube. This established medium of wayang in a virtual format was to come in handy once COVID-19 began to ravage Java and other parts of Indonesia in early 2020.

Finding a voice during the pandemic

The first of many COVID-19 lockdowns in Indonesia was put into place on 20 March 2020. This sent a shock wave through the dhalang community whose profession is characterised by gathering large crowds in relatively small spaces. Purbo Asmoro was the first dhalang to make a public statement of concern just five days later, on 25 March 2020. Without warning or fanfare, he began to broadcast live from his home via YouTube and proceeded to perform a wayang completely alone – no 25 member gamelan troupe accompaniment, no technical team, and not a single person in the audience. He performed a ritual-cleansing story known as *Sudamala* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AfN1Rm2FXyI&t=1813s>) (*Lessen the Affliction*) and by midnight much of the artistic community in Java was abuzz, emboldened by the idea that COVID-19 shutdowns did not have to mean artistic silence.

Purbo Asmoro continued to directly address the suffering and frustration caused by the pandemic in 62 subsequent performances, mostly virtual, held almost weekly over the next 18 months. Through his original interpretations of wayang tales, which he made relevant to what was happening, he invited the community to reflect on the effects of the pandemic.

The invitation by Siddharth Chandra, however, was something very different. Over 100 years ago, a fellow Javanese dhalang was asked by a Dutch colonial health official to create a play (Purbo Asmoro felt the 1920 play was written by a dhalang, but we cannot know for sure) that would educate the general public on how to treat the sick and prevent further spread of the disease during the 1918 flu pandemic. And now Purbo Asmoro had the script, complete with some simple illustrations, in his hands. This powerful connection to the suffering of his fellow Indonesians from a century ago, through the words of a fellow dhalang, captivated his imagination. Purbo Asmoro went about the process of studying the script as a starting point for constructing a full-length wayang, which he hoped would be dynamic, and meaningful to his current-day audience.

Inspiration despite a personal crisis

Two factors came into the equation that both slowed Purbo Asmoro down and helped forge an even more intimate relationship with the project. First, almost simultaneously upon receiving the proposal from Siddharth Chandra, Purbo Asmoro himself came down with a serious case of the Delta variant of COVID-19. Although he was quite ill, he had decided not to tell anyone outside his immediate household. He felt it was crucial to keep knowledge of his illness out of the general artistic community chatter, because of the second factor in the equation – his elder colleague, friend and a legendary superstar dhalang, Manteb Soedharsono, had died of COVID-19 three days earlier, and Purbo Asmoro had likely fallen ill as a result of the same superspreader.

A powerful government official had skirted the pandemic regulations and sponsored a mass-audience wayang in Jakarta, with Manteb Soedharsono as the dhalang and Nurroso Ensemble, directed by Blacius Subono, as the gamelan troupe. By the time the crew returned from Jakarta many of them had started to feel ill. Purbo Asmoro's son, Kuku Indrasmara, was one of the Nurroso performers. The troupe returned to Solo on 26 June 2021 and Manteb Soedharsono passed away a week later, on 2 July 2021. Four days after returning home, Purbo

Asmoro's son Kukuh came down with the infection and soon after that his mother, older brother, and finally, on 3 July, his father, Purbo Asmoro followed suit.

Dhalang are some of the most revered members of any traditional Javanese neighborhood. Superstar dhalang, like Manteb Soedharsono and Purbo Asmoro tend to be idolised by the entire nation. They are thought to be able to do no less than shift the path of a rainstorm away from an important event and are trusted to keep their entire crew safe from traffic accidents, illnesses, or other turns of bad luck. While it might have been understandable that a virus was killing off average citizens, it was incomprehensible to many that it had conquered the life of the invincible Manteb Soedharsono. And now, Purbo Asmoro had isolated himself away in his room, deathly ill from the very same strain of the virus, imagining how overwhelming it might be if the news of his illness came out.

Ki Purbo Asmoro shows his audience the 1920 pamphlet that inspired his performance



It was in this context that Purbo Asmoro received the invitation from Siddharth Chandra to study the 1920 pamphlet *Awas Lēlara Inpluwensa*, two days into his own illness and three days after the death of Manteb Soedharsono. Holed up in his room, well-aware of the serious shortage of both medical care and equipment available in Solo, he tried to ignore his symptoms by immersing himself in the nine characters and five short scenes in the pamphlet. By the end of July he was feeling better, and he had mapped out a wayang kulit story in three acts (known as a lakon) with 18 scenes, 30 characters,

and 32 distinct gamelan selections to support the dramatic flow. Purbo Asmoro briefly ran through the musical accompaniment with his gamelan troupe known as Mayangkara. On 28 September 2021, he live-streamed (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hSRwwGnJXk>) the lakon from his home to the world, with simultaneous translation into English. It lasted 4.5 hours, and as of this writing, the streaming has garnered over 42,000 views on Purbo Asmoro Official – 38,000 for the main link and 4,000 for the English translation.

From the original 1920 storyline, Purbo Asmoro retained the main premise that Togog has announced a competition for his daughter's hand in marriage (see Nancy Florida's accompanying translation and list of characters). Whoever can find a cure to the influenza pandemic that is killing so many of the villagers in *Padha-lara* (Everyone-is-Sick), will win the beautiful Sari-hati as a wife. Purbo Asmoro also retained the idea that the clown-jester, symbol of the commonfolk, Petruk would be the one to solve the crisis, with the help of Krēsna's amulet, the chakra. Purbo Asmoro also liked the idea that the village would be renamed *Padha-waras* (Everyone-is-Cured and Healthy) after the illness had been conquered, and, to close his performance, he made use of the final verse of the 13-verse poem in *sinom* form that closed the 1920 play. He also quoted the initial verses of this poem in the interlude known as *gara-gara*. From this basic premise and these borrowed bits, however, Purbo Asmoro created a new, full-length work that is wholly original, profound, and compelling. The entire 4.5-hour performance, with English translation, can be found at this link (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hSRwwGnJXk>).

Wayang Kulit - TAMBA TEKA LARA LUNGA - Ki Purbo



Wisnu deems Krēsna no longer worthy (warning: spoiler alert)

The following brief description of the performance could be useful, post viewing, for those who would like to process what they saw. It might also be useful for those readers who do not have time to enjoy the entire wayang performance but would like to understand how Purbo Asmoro developed the seed of an idea found in the 1920 booklet *Awas Lėlara Inpluwensa*. I strongly urge you to watch the entire performance, since a dhalang's work – full of poetry, music, dramatic artistry, philosophy, skilled movement techniques, and beautiful wayang figures – cannot be represented by a few written paragraphs.

In Purbo Asmoro's wayang tale, the COVID-19 virus of 2020–2021 is at its height, bringing misery and death across all of Java. The story opens with a vision of Petruk in despair, wondering what should be done. His wife, Wrantawati, joins him and they commiserate. Petruk decides he should meditate, fast, and wander through the countryside helping anyone in need with no thought toward recompense (the latter is a form of self-sacrifice common in wayang stories, known as *tapa rame*). Petruk is convinced that through these ascetic exercises a solution will come to him. Wrantawati begs him not to leave her alone and reminds him that all the experts in the land have already tried and failed to find a cure for the virus, so why should he think he could be of any use. In the audience's

first sign that Petruk will, in fact, be chosen as the one worthy of finding a solution, he refuses to be discouraged and knows only one thing – he must give it a try.

Throughout his work, Purbo Asmoro centres the action around a complicated series of disguised identities. One of these is comedic; Togog's sidekick, Bilung, masquerading as the arrogant King Sarambaya (Stark Danger). Bilung, who is typically also known as Sarawita (which 'Sarambaya', the disguise name, obliquely evokes), takes a subordinate place to Togog's advisory position in most wayang tales and is constantly making silly comments. Now Bilung is uncharacteristically stepping out, as he is in love with Sari-hati and wants to enter the competition for her hand in marriage.

Two other and more menacing imposters foment unrest and discontent in an effort to seize control of the kingdom. One is the spirit of Rahwana who comes back to haunt the world disguised as King Malaningrat (Malady of the World). One of the most terrifying antagonists in the wayang universe, Rahwana violently overthrew kingdom after kingdom in the days of the Lokapala and Ramayana story cycles. His cruel ogress sister, Sarpakēnaka, poses first as an incompetent sage named Darumaya (Illusory Light) who hands out bogus treatments for the virus. When found out to be a fake healer, she morphs into a second disguise as the ogre Darubēksi (Disaster Born of Black Magic). The final mystery lies in the disguises of the god Wisnu, who tries out two distinct identities, in an effort to convince everyone of the existential crisis that is causing the pandemic. While the cunning and mystery of fake identities are a staple trope of wayang stories, such a complex web of them is unusual. When I asked Purbo Asmoro about it, he said, 'I wanted to reflect how the virus was constantly mutating into aggressive variants, just when we thought we had it under control'.

Ultimately, we find out that the COVID-19 virus was able to rage unabated because some time ago, the god Wisnu extracted himself from the mortal being of King Krēsna, feeling that Krēsna was no longer worthy to be his avatar. Now that King Krēsna no longer embodies the wisdom and insight of Wisnu as a leader, there is a looming hopelessness and despair among the people that is almost as profound as the deaths the

virus has caused. Many traditionally-minded Javanese deeply believe that sicknesses, natural disasters, and other crises are ultimately caused by a sort of tipping point, in which too many important and powerful people have gone astray and any divine boons they may possess, have abandoned them. In this interpretation, while the virus is real, the ferocity of the pandemic as well as the extent to which society is overwhelmed by its consequences, stem from this general malaise. This in turn leads to opportunism on the part of evil forces, both natural and supernatural. While this domino-like flow of side-effects is the main theme of Purbo Asmoro's work, he ties it together only at the very end.

First, Purbo develops Petruk's motive for wanting to help. In a creative and imaginative scene from his ascetic travels, Petruk meets a series of performers who are out of work due to COVID-19 shutdowns. This scene also serves as a lively display of some of the unusual wayang figures Purbo Asmoro created for other works

(<https://www.youtube.com/@purboasmoroofficial5638/videos>) during the pandemic. We watch as Petruk meets up with a dhalang trying to sell off his wayang figures, a professional female 'jathil' trance dancer from Ponorogo, East Java desperate for work, and a theatre actor from the kethoprak tradition who is also suffering financially. For most dhalang, and Purbo Asmoro is no exception, Petruk serves as both a symbol of the commonfolk and as the embodiment of the dhalang himself. In this scene, Petruk as dhalang witnesses his fellow performers out of work and becomes ever more convinced that he must do something. Eventually, Petruk will be the chosen one – the vehicle the god Wisnu uses to make King Krēsna realise that he has lost his way.

Two Petruk figures from Purbo Asmoro's collection: the Petruk on the left was owned by the son-in-law of Solonese King Pakubuwono X (r.1893-1939); the Petruk on the right is from Purbo Asmoro's modern collection from around 2010

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After visiting his Uncle Togog and officially joining the competition for Sari-hati's hand in marriage, Petruk returns to his meditation. The vision of a Petruk figure from the past (the god Wisnu in disguise) emerges before him at the height of his meditation. Here Purbo Asmoro uses an actual antique Petruk figure that dates to the era of Pakubuwono X (r. 1893-1939), labelled in the live-streamed translation as Petruk 1920. Petruk 1920 confronts Petruk 2020, asking him what good such meditation could possibly do. He reminds the modern Petruk of the pandemic 100 years ago and how devastating it was. When the modern Petruk refuses to be discouraged, the god Wisnu, not quite ready to reveal himself, transforms from Petruk 1920 to a mysterious sage named Sarwa Langking, or All Black (the color black being associated with both Krēsna and the god Wisnu). He grants Petruk the chakra amulet and tells him it will cure those infected with the virus. Petruk has passed the test of being chided and challenged, yet not dissuaded.

Meanwhile, our trio of characters in disguise are working together to block the entrance to Togog's village so that no one can enter the competition for Sari-hati's hand in marriage. This will, in turn, reduce the incentive for finding a cure for the virus. King Malaningrat (Rahwana), Ogre Daruběksi (Sarpakěnaka), and King Sarambaya (Bilung) battle both Petruk and the wayang hero Arjuna. They are eventually defeated and rendered back into their original forms. Petruk then tends to the ailing villagers in 'Everyone-is-Sick,' while sharing with them public health information on the treatment and spread of the disease, most of which is taken directly from the 1920

pamphlet. He does, however, add relevant instructions not provided in the earlier work – telling them, for instance, that they should mask up.

With Rahwana, Sarpakēnaka, and Bilung defeated, and Petruk having healed all the land of the virus by using the chakra, the wedding between Petruk and Sari-hati begins. Suddenly chaos erupts. In comes King Krēsna with Petruk's jealous wife, Wrantawati, who is Krēsna's own daughter by one of his mistresses. King Krēsna is clearly not concerned about the virus, or the forces of Rahwana and Sarpakēnaka, only with his own private family matters. At this point, the sage Sarwa Langking transforms back to the god Wisnu and gives Krēsna a piece of his mind. Krēsna acknowledges his past and current transgressions and repents, after which Wisnu is willing to enter his being once more.

To conclude the performance, Purbo Asmoro reveals that Sari-hati is a divine vision and not actually mortal. She is an amulet of wellness that Togog has been entrusted with by Sang Hyang Wēnang (The Almighty One). She incarnates into Wrantawati, both to make peace in the household and to symbolically entrust Petruk's family with a divine power of wellbeing. Does Purbo mean for us to believe it is Petruk as a symbol of the commonfolk who has been entrusted with the amulet for wellbeing, or as a symbol of the dhalang? Herein lies the beauty and mystery of wayang, as it is up to each one of us to decide.

During the *gara-gara* interlude of this performance, Purbo Asmoro praises modern society for the vaccine and for the regulations that allowed Indonesians to avoid the level of devastation of the 1918 pandemic. He shows his audience photographs from the 1918 pandemic and suggests that Indonesians should feel optimistic that they have battled the virus well and are in a more positive position than those who suffered in 1918. At the same time, and although he is himself three-times vaccinated and willing to mask up when absolutely required, Purbo Asmoro has a general distaste for Western biomedicine. This is reflected in the world he creates in this lakon – a world without the Sir Doctor of the 1920 pamphlet, and without the chakra amulet full of Western medicines.

King Krēsna (left) receives a lecture and chastisement from by the god Wisnu (right) for his lack of integrity as a leader



In this original work, Purbo Asmoro creates a more traditional, Javanese-mystical world – a world in which selfishness and a lack of integrity on the part of the powerful leads to the exit of any divine forces that may have been enlightening their decisions. This results in a decline in the character and self-confidence of society as a whole, leaving everyone vulnerable to the influence of evil, sometimes supernatural forces. These negative forces are symbolised here by the return of Rahwana and his sister Sarpakēnaka. Purbo Asmoro's other treatments of lakon during the COVID-19 era saw the return of the god Kala and his wife Durga, or Niwatakawaca and his descendants, or even hardline religious groups in Java.

In Purbo Asmoro's *Tamba Těka, Lara Lunga*, the manifestation of this evil influence on society has been the virus and its variants complete with opportunists and their fake cures. Through meditation, self-reflection, self-sacrifice and a showing of empathy for others, the wisdom and influence of the god Wisnu can perhaps be brought back into society. And according to Purbo Asmoro, this will most likely start with commonfolk at the grassroots level, supported by their dhalang.

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- Bali, kamu mau kembali kemana?

Reporting on Java's 1918 influenza pandemic

Written by: SIDDHARTH CHANDRA | Published: Jul 12, 2024 |



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Pieter Bastiaan van Steenis' insightful article in the *Geneeskundig Tijdschrift Voor Nederlandsch-Indië* is a rare and detailed account by a colonial health official who experienced first-hand the horrors of the 1918 influenza pandemic in Java. A second-class health officer with the Royal Dutch East Indies Army (KNIL) at the time, he was able to visit and interact with victims and survivors of the pandemic and unusually, given the scarcity of such reports from that time, put pen to paper to record his findings. Later in his career, van Steenis was to become a leading light in the field of tropical medicine in the Netherlands.

The first part of van Steenis' report characterises influenza as a disease and explores its causes based on a robust literature review and his own experiences as a bacteriologist and public health professional. While we take for granted today the knowledge that influenza is caused by a virus, in 1918 the question of influenza's causative agent was the subject of a vigorous debate. Many scientists at the time believed that Pfeiffer's *Bacillus* (now known as *Haemophilus influenzae*, henceforth Hi) caused the flu. Van Steenis' account, written 15 years before the definitive discovery and isolation of the influenza virus, illustrates the many doubts scientists and public health officials across the globe were beginning to have about the role of Hi in causing influenza.

The second part of van Steenis' report focuses on how the pandemic unfolded in Magelang in Central Java. The 1918 influenza pandemic struck Java with great severity. With estimates of population loss (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00324728.2012.754486>) ranging as high as 4.26 to 4.37 million, or approximately 10 per cent of the population, Java was one of the worst-affected regions of the world. Van Steenis made several observations that aligned with what was being observed in other parts of the world at the time. For example, he emphasised the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on pregnant women (<https://academic.oup.com/aje/article/187/12/2585/5060947>), noting a spike in deaths among women between 20 and 40 years of age and 'extremely frequent influenza-associated deaths during childbirth (at term or premature)'. Drawing the reader's attention to the important role of nutrition in determining individual outcomes of infection, observed in many other locations including British India and the USA, he pointed out the 'paramount importance' of a good supply of food in areas affected by the influenza. On the timing of the pandemic, he noted that Java experienced a so-called 'Herald Wave' of infections and excess mortality in mid-1918 that preceded and was later dwarfed by the massive wave of late 1918. A similar spring or early summer wave had been observed (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1047279717307263?via%3Dihub>) in many locations around the world.

Van Steenis' account also gives us a unique week-by-week account of the spread of the pandemic across Magelang. Here he emphasises the importance of the roads from Yogyakarta to the southeast and Temanggung to the northwest as important routes for the spread of the infection to Magelang.

Importantly, he highlights the role of the crowded markets (see the above image) as locations of what we might today call 'super spreader' events:

'with a few exceptions, the outbreaks appear to start close to the large bazaars and to develop around them. This is very important. Everybody knows the bazaars, where thousands of natives appear twice a week, swarming together. One could not create a better opportunity for the infection to spread rapidly.'

The public health implications of this observation, with all the challenges they entailed, were as clear to him then as they were to officials during the recent COVID-19 pandemic:

'Domestic Administration officials I spoke to considered it impossible to close a large bazaar for two to three weeks - that would cause famine - but in any case, measures should be taken to mitigate the dangers of these bazaars; closely monitoring and removing feverish patients would help somewhat, but how long the recovered influenza patients remain infectious, and what is the status of healthy bacilli carriers, these are unanswerable questions.'

While van Steenis' report mentions maps, they were not included in the digital scan of the article used for this translation. Therefore, a cartographic version of his account, rendered using ArcGIS, is included as an appendix to illustrate how the pandemic progressed from the main thoroughfares and markets of the regency to more remote locations, often at higher altitudes.

Click on the image to read and download the translation

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Java Bookshop and Printer
Batavia ♦ 1919.

(/images/Edition157/van%20Steenis%20Magelang%20Report.pdf)

Van Steenis' account of the pandemic also provides an important, contemporary, and authentic insight into the magnitude of the devastation of the pandemic. For example, '...dessa Tindomojo met 822 inwoners stierven in de week 22-28 November 60 personen' (van Steenis, p.909), which translates to '60 people died in the week of 22-28 November in village Tindomojo (population 822)'. This translates to a staggering seven per cent mortality rate in a *single week* for a pandemic that dragged on for many months and appeared and reappeared in multiple waves across Java.

Van Steenis' account is backed by reports from other sources, for example 'Nu er bijna 2 miljoen Inlanders aan die ziekte gestorven zijn, komt men pas tot de ontdekking, dat die groote sterfte te wijten is aan onvoldoende voiding' ('Persoverzicht', *Koloniaal Tijdschrift* of 1919, first half-year, p.482), translated as 'Now that almost 2 million Natives have died of that disease, it is only discovered that this large death is due to insufficient feeding'.

Notably, the synopsis in the *Koloniaal Tijdschrift* referred to a newspaper article published in December 1918, that quoted a notification by the Civil Medical Service of the Netherlands Indies long before the pandemic had worked its way through all of Java, let alone the other islands of the Netherlands East Indies. The published two million figure is (like van Steenis' account) based on truncated information, pointing to an even higher death toll for the entire duration of the pandemic.

These descriptions are important because a recent estimate of

deaths places the toll for Java at an optimistic 1.47 million (or about 3.9 per cent of the population; see the unpublished working paper by van der Eng (2023)

([https://acde.crawford.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publication/acde_crawford_anu_edu_au/2023-](https://acde.crawford.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publication/acde_crawford_anu_edu_au/2023-06/acde_van_der_eng_2023_06.pdf)

[06/acde_van_der_eng_2023_06.pdf](https://acde_crawford_anu_edu_au/2023-06/acde_van_der_eng_2023_06.pdf)). This calculation is based on Boomgaard and Gooszen's (1991)

([https://opac.humaliterasi.id/index.php?](https://opac.humaliterasi.id/index.php?p=show_detail&id=214&keywords=)

[p=show_detail&id=214&keywords=](https://opac.humaliterasi.id/index.php?p=show_detail&id=214&keywords=)) underestimate of early 20th century population growth in Java. They ignore the impact of the one-time drop in population during the pandemic on the slope of the population growth trajectory, thereby deriving a much lower growth rate of population than would otherwise be obtained. This introduces a logical contradiction into the van der Eng analysis. It attempts to estimate the effect of a historical event based on underlying data that assumes that the event never occurred.

The final section of van Steenis' report speculates on modes by which influenza was transmitted in Magelang. While he rightly identifies 'droplet infection at a short distance' as a key mode, his statement, 'In the high, humid mountain regions I consider it likely that long-lived germs of infection blow through the air during the early morning or evening hours from village to village over greater distances', is intriguing and likely would not pass muster among modern-day epidemiologists.

While there exist a few reports on the 1918 influenza pandemic in the Netherlands East Indies, most describe the pandemic at a high level of spatial aggregation (such as 'Rapport over de Influenza-epidemie in Nederlandsch-Indië 1918' [Report on the influenza epidemic in the Netherlands Indies 1918],

Mededeelingen van den Burgerlijken Geneeskundigen Dienst in Nederlandsch-Indië [Reports of the Civil Medical Service in the Dutch East Indies] 1920;10:77-157); or provide very brief snapshots of the pandemic in specific locations (for example, the *Koloniaal Tijdschrift* article described above). By virtue of its thoughtfulness and degree of detail, the van Steenis report on the pandemic in Magelang is a unique and valuable resource that stands apart by providing rich scientific, social, and spatial context on how this devastating event unfolded in one of the most densely populated regions of the world.

van Steenis, P.B. 'Some epidemiological remarks about the flu in the Magelang Division, 1918', *Medical Journal for the Netherlands Indies*, LIX:901-20.

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