

Embodying the Living Corpse: Intermedial Adaptation in Balinese “Calonarang” Shadow Theatre

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Abstract: As Balinese *Calonarang* shadow theatre responds to shifting audience expectations and media influences, intermediality has emerged as a strategic mode of adaptation. This article examines a notable example: the emergence of the *watangan matah* or ‘living corpse,’ a figure performed by a live actor within the traditionally two-dimensional shadow space. This adaptation bridges symbolic shadow play with embodied presence, negotiating ritual integrity with theatrical spectacle. Using a mixed-method embedded design, the study combines descriptive quantitative data with ethnographic interpretation through observation, video analysis, interviews, and an audience survey. Findings show that the inclusion of *watangan matah* intensifies visual and emotional impact but generates divided responses between younger, media-oriented audiences and ritual purists. More significantly, staging a live corpse figure introduces power contestation, as puppeteers symbolically challenge mystical forces to assert spiritual authority. *Watangan matah* thus exemplifies how *Calonarang* theatre navigates preservation and transformation while maintaining its sacred resonance.

Keywords: intermediality; embodiment; *Calonarang*; shadow theatre; Balinese puppetry

1. Introduction

The *watangan matah*, a ‘living corpse’ portrayed by a live actor in Balinese *Calonarang* shadow theatre, marks a pivotal intermedial adaptation that introduces physical embodiment into a traditionally shadow-based medium. Introduced around 1998, *watangan matah* expands the expressive vocabulary of *wayang kulit* (puppet shadow) performances by adding an intense visual and emotional layer. More than an aesthetic innovation, its appearance invites spiritual contestation, positioning both puppeteer and performer at a

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liminal threshold between life and death. This phenomenon draws heightened audience fascination and simultaneously reflects the deeper dynamics of power negotiation embedded in Balinese mystical traditions.

Wayang kulit itself is a form of traditional leather shadow puppetry widely practiced across Indonesia, and in Bali it carries profound ritual and symbolic significance (Cohen, 2016; Coldiron, 2018; deBoer & Rajeg, 1987; Hobart, 2013). Among its most spiritually charged variants is *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, a performance dramatizing the myth of *Calonarang*, a powerful widow and practitioner of black magic whose story centers on cosmic struggle and ritual purification struggle (Cerita & Foley, 2022; Hobart, 1979; Widayanti et al., 2018). Typically staged during temple ceremonies, *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* serves both as a sacred rite and a vehicle for cultural storytelling (Ardiyasa, 2020; Diamond, 2001; Hynson, 2015; Marajaya, 2023; Marajaya & Peradantha, 2024; Sedana, 2016). Within this ritual context, the integration of *watangan matah* reconfigures the traditional performance grammar by uniting shadow, sound, and live embodiment into a single immersive theatrical experience.

Such intermedial adaptation is not unique to Bali's contemporary arts. Digital platforms like YouTube and podcasts pioneered by puppeteer Wayan Nardayana (Cenk Blonk) have demonstrated how embracing new media can revitalize *wayang*'s popularity across generations without displacing its spiritual roots (Darma Putra, 2025). These examples show that intermediality in Balinese performance extends beyond visual innovation to include modes of distribution and audience engagement, fundamentally reshaping how traditional arts are accessed and appreciated.

Despite increasing scholarship on innovation in Balinese performing arts (Sudana, 2020a; Sudiana, 2022; Sutana & Palguna, 2020), few studies examine how embodied figures like *watangan matah* transform dramaturgy, aesthetics, and the spiritual stakes of performance. Specifically, there has been little exploration of how these practices intersect with power dynamics among puppeteers, mystical communities, and audiences. By investigating *watangan matah* as a case of intermedial adaptation embedded in ritual performance, this study seeks to reveal how traditional arts negotiate their relevance through both aesthetic experimentation and spiritual contestation. These findings contribute to understanding how sacred performances adapt to shifting cultural expectations while preserving their symbolic depth.

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted intermediality as a dynamic strategy of innovation in the performing arts. Grishakova (2023) conceptualizes intermediality as a transitional field of meaning between media that reshapes modes of perception rather than functioning as a simple technical

fusion. Zezulka (2022) underscores how intermediality reconstructs audience experience through embodied presence, spatial dynamics, and technological mediation. Expanding this discourse, Milledge (2017) presents intermediality as a collaborative and iterative process grounded in creative practice, while Ceciu (2021) introduces the notion of epigenetic intermediality to describe how traditions such as Kathakali and Patachitra evolve across media through performative transformation. These theoretical perspectives offer a critical lens for examining innovation in traditional performance, especially as it responds to digital ecosystems and the shifting expectations of contemporary audiences. In the Balinese context, creative experimentation across media has long been part of ritual and performative traditions, suggesting that intermediality is not a recent addition but a culturally embedded mechanism for continuity and adaptation.

Research on innovation in Balinese shadow puppet theater, however, has tended to concentrate on descriptive analyses of form and function. Gumana Putra (2018), Sugita and Tilem Pastika (2022), and Widiyantara et al. (2024) all contribute to documenting performance developments. Marajaya (2019) examines the shift of *wayang kulit* from a ritual medium to a form of entertainment and commercial art, while Sudana (2020b) surveys creative innovations including electric *wayang*, *Wayang Babad*, and *Wayang Arja*. Yet these studies rarely interrogate how such innovations reshape aesthetic meaning or influence audience reception. Danaswara et al. (2022), Suaka and Budiasa (2024), and Sutana and Palguna (2020) analyze digital formats and rhetorical strategies of originality in performances such as *Wayang Cenk Blonk* and *wayang* cinema, but their approach remains limited to formal and stylistic dimensions, without engaging with intermedial theory.

In contrast, Yudabakti's study on *Wayang Kulit Parwa* in Gianyar (2016) reveals that the lack of creative renewal by puppeteers has become a major factor behind declining audience interest. His findings indicate that audiences, especially younger viewers, are increasingly drawn to performances that offer entertainment and visual engagement rather than purely moral instruction. This stands in sharp contrast to the success of puppeteer Wayan Nardayana's *Wayang Cenk Blonk*, as examined by Suaka and Budiasa (2024), whose popularity stems from his ability to combine rhetorical brilliance with critical humor and engaging storytelling, without abandoning the core values of traditional puppetry. Whereas stagnation in content and presentation may alienate contemporary audiences, revitalization through innovative performance strategies can reinvigorate interest and expand audience demographics. These contrasting cases underscore the urgency of innovation not merely as an aesthetic option but as a cultural necessity, especially in exploring hybrid forms such as *watangan matah*, whose intermedial qualities remain underexamined.

In the specific case of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, studies that address visual innovation such as *watangan matah* are still scarce. Marajaya (2017) documents a performance featuring a collaboration between *Wayang Cenk Blonk* and *Calonarang* that includes *watangan matah* as a visual addition, though his treatment is primarily descriptive. Sari et al. (2024) and Gina (2011) explore the sacred symbolism within *Calonarang* narratives but do not consider how contemporary visual elements might influence dramaturgical structure or shape audience interpretation. Ngurah et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of *banten caru* or ritual offerings in preserving the spiritual effectiveness of *Calonarang* performances, which offers a useful reference point for assessing the boundaries of acceptable innovation.

What remains underexplored is how *watangan matah* functions not simply as a theatrical device but as an intermedial aesthetic strategy that merges the corporeality of live actors with the symbolic world of *wayang*, and in doing so, reshapes both dramaturgy and audience reception. This research addresses that gap by examining *watangan matah* in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* as a case of tradition-based innovation that connects ritual practice, visual expression, and contemporary audience engagement. Through this lens, the study affirms the relevance of intermediality as a framework for understanding how traditional performance can evolve while remaining rooted in its cultural foundations.

3. Method and Theory

3.1 Method

This study employed a mixed-method embedded design, wherein descriptive quantitative data supported the interpretation of ethnographic qualitative findings (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Liem et al., 2021; Oranga, 2025). The primary objective was to investigate how *watangan matah*, as a live-performed corpse figure, functions as an intermedial innovation within *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* performances in Bali. The research explored both the dramaturgical structure and the socio-cultural reception of this element among diverse audience groups. Data collection included direct observation of selected live performances, audiovisual documentation analysis (YouTube recordings), in-depth interviews with puppeteers and cultural experts, and an online survey involving 60 Balinese respondents from varied social, religious, and generational backgrounds. Survey responses were analyzed thematically to assess public perceptions of *watangan matah* in relation to aesthetic appeal and sacred value.

3.1.1 Field Research and Audiovisual Study

Field observation provided firsthand insight into the visual, spatial, and ritual dynamics of *watangan matah* within the live performance setting.

One such observation took place on 11 March 2017 in Banjar Tegallantang Kaja, Padangsambian Klod Village, Denpasar, and another on 31 May 2025 at Pura Dalem Pauman, Padangsambian Kaja, Denpasar. The latter event enabled photographic documentation of *watangan matah* in the *ngundang leak* (challenging black magic) scene. To trace the evolution of *watangan matah*, the study also analyzed video documentation and historical records of earlier performances dating back to 1998. The aim was to compare staging techniques, performative contexts, and audience responses across a broader historical span. These performances are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Documented Performances Featuring Watangan Matah (1998–2025)

No.	Year	Performance Title / Description	Puppeteer / Collaborator	Location	Notes
1.	1998	<i>Wayang Kulit Calonarang</i> with Siwa Murthi Bali spiritual institute.	Jro Mangku Gede Made Subagia	Pura Dalem Pauman, Padang Sambian, Denpasar	First known appearance of <i>watangan matah</i>
2.	2008	Classical <i>Wayang Kulit Calonarang</i> performance	Ida Bagus Gede Sudiksa	Banjar Babakan, Cangu, Badung	Featured the use of <i>watangan matah</i>
3.	2012	Collaborative <i>Wayang Kulit Calonarang</i>	I Wayan Nardayana (Cenk Blonk) & Jro Mangku Gede Made Subagia	Pura Penataran Ped, Nusa Penida, Klungkung	First collaborative staging of <i>Wayang Kulit Calonarang</i>
4.	2016	<i>Lipyakara</i>	Ida Bagus Gede Sudiksa	Bali Mahalango, Taman Budaya Denpasar	Uploaded on YouTube by Tugus Dwija Putra (2021)
5.	2017	Field observation (live performance)	Ida Bagus Gede Sudiksa	Banjar Tegallantang Kaja, Denpasar	Observed directly by the author
6.	2023	<i>Ratu Gede Mecaling</i>	Jro Dalang Putu Gede Sartika (Dug Byor)	Banjar Penaka, Tampaksiring	Uploaded on YouTube by Dug Byor (2022)
7.	2025	Field observation (live performance)	Ngurah Gede Bagiada	Pura Dalem Pauman, Denpasar	Observed directly with photographic documentation

Source: Compiled by the author from field observations (2017, 2025) and publicly available video documentation (2016–2024).

This table outlines the historical trajectory of *watangan matah* from its first documented appearance in 1998 to its most recent applications. The combination of live observations and digital documentation enabled cross-comparison across time, location, and presentation style, highlighting both continuity and creative adaptation in how this intermedial device is employed.

3.1.2 In-Depth Interviews

To explore the essence and cultural significance of *watangan matah* in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, this study used semi-structured interviews with key informants, including *dalang* who also serve as Bali Hindu lay priests, with direct experience in these performances. Informants were purposively selected based on their active involvement in the performance and development of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, particularly in versions that incorporate *watangan matah*. The selection criteria included: (1) experience as a puppeteer or performing artist in *Calonarang*; (2) comprehensive knowledge of the performance's dramaturgical structure and ritual elements; and (3) direct participation in the innovation or visual transformation of the performance.

The interviews focused on three main areas: (1) perspectives on the essence and sacred values of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*; (2) interpretations of *watangan matah* in relation to ritual context and aesthetic expression; and (3) perceptions of *watangan matah* as a strategy for innovation within traditional performances. The collected data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of meaning, aesthetic practices, and cultural responses to this innovation.

3.1.3 Online audience perception survey

To examine public acceptance of the use of *watangan matah* in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* performances, a random online audience perception survey was conducted using Google Forms. Respondents were individuals who had attended performances of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* that featured *watangan matah* elements. The survey included questions related to viewing experiences, perceptions of the visual and dramaturgical appeal of *watangan matah*, preferences between performances with and without these elements, and interpretations of its meaning within the performance context. Data gathered through open-ended survey responses and observational notes were analyzed using an interpretive approach.

To enhance validity, data triangulation was employed by comparing findings from direct observations, insights from puppeteer and culture experts, and public audience responses. The analysis was conducted in two phases. The first involved a visual and dramaturgical analysis to assess the contribution of *watangan matah* to the visual richness and dramatic structure.

The second involved a cultural and social analysis to explore its influence on local audience reception and its implications for the preservation of traditional values. The aim was to address the research questions concerning how visual and dramaturgical innovations involving *watangan matah* enrich *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* and how these transformations are perceived within the framework of local cultural values and sacred traditions.

3.2 Theory

This study was grounded in interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, one of which was Erving Goffman's reception theory that emphasizes how performance elements are constructed to influence audience perceptions (Dell, 2016; Rachman, 2019). To understand the changes in the visual elements and the medium of performance, this research drew on Chiel Kattenbelt's theory of intermediality for analyzing how *wayang kulit*, as a form of realist theatre, interacts with other traditional media to create distinct aesthetic and dramaturgical experiences (Heuvel, 2013). According to Kattenbelt (2008), intermediality is not simply the combination of various media within a performance; rather, it lies in the interactions between media that produce new meanings and affect audience perceptions.

In examining public acceptance of *watangan matah* in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, the study utilized the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss and the encoding/decoding model of Stuart Hall. Jauss (1982, p. 24) helps one to understand how audience expectations of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* change over time, facilitating the interpretation of innovations like *watangan matah* within the context of evolving tastes and rituals. Hall's encoding/decoding model (Shaw, 2017) provides a framework to analyze how audiences interpret these innovations in three ways: full acceptance (hegemonic reading), acceptance with adjustments (negotiated reading), or rejection (oppositional reading) (Ariestyani & Ramadhanty, 2022; Hall, 1980).

Additionally, Turner's concept of liminality (Turner, 1978, 1979) offers insight into how the portrayal of *watangan matah* places performers at a threshold between life and death, a position imbued with spiritual risk that fascinates audiences and elevates the stakes of the performance. By integrating these theories, this research aimed to provide a more profound understanding of how *watangan matah* contributes to the enrichment of visualization and dramaturgy in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, as well as how the local customary community perceives this transformation in relation to the preservation of tradition. These intellectual positions emphasize both the aesthetic and narrative aspects of the performance while also exploring the social, spiritual, and cultural factors associated with creative invention.

4. Results and Discussion

Balinese shadow puppet theatre has long operated as a multi-sensory theatrical form, integrating shadow imagery, narration, gamelan music, and symbolic gesture. In recent decades, however, the genre has witnessed new forms of intermedial experimentation, marked by the inclusion of physical performers, cinematic lighting, and digital sound. These intermedial strategies do not merely add technical spectacle, but actively reshape the dramaturgical space by blending media, expanding aesthetic registers, and altering audience perception. In *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, these experiments have taken on spiritual significance, as the performance is deeply rooted in ritual contexts and mythic cosmology.

The *Calonarang* narrative centers on a powerful widow and practitioner of black magic, often named Rangda, whose wrath and mystical powers disrupt the harmony of the natural and spiritual worlds (Belo, 1949; Darmawan, 2019; Weiss, 2017). The story unfolds as a moral and cosmological struggle between destructive forces and ritual purification, culminating in spiritual reconciliation through offerings and sacred rites. Traditionally performed during temple festivals, *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* dramatizes this myth through rich symbolism, invoking both fear and reverence.

4.1 “*Watangan Matah*” in the Perspective of Intermediality

The early visualization of *watangan matah* was first introduced by Ida Rsi Agung Yoga Sidhi Bang Pinatih in 1998, under his former name Jro Mangku Gede Made Subagia (Marajaya, 2017). According to Ida Rsi Agung, the primary motivation behind the practice was to enhance visual engagement, intensify dramatic tension, and deepen the mystical resonance of the performance (interview 9 February 2025). Building on this groundwork, *dalang* I Putu Gede Sartika (Dug Byor) adopted and further developed the technique, adapting it for performances oriented toward entertainment. His creative direction resonates with views expressed by other interviewed puppeteers, who regard *watangan matah* as a responsive strategy to ensure that *Calonarang* performances remain dynamic and relevant in an era shaped by fast-paced, image-driven entertainment.

During the author’s field observation at Pura Dalem Pauman on 31 May 2025, photographs were captured documenting the appearance of *watangan matah* alongside *celuluk*, a mystical figure symbolizing black magic (Figure 1). The live staging of these elements intensified the atmosphere of the *ngundang leak* scene, combining ritual symbolism with heightened visual drama. The proximity of *celuluk* and *watangan matah* created a powerful tableau that embodied both fear and fascination, evoking the tension central to *Calonarang*

narratives. This documentation provides concrete evidence of how intermedial adaptation operates within contemporary performances, merging embodied figures with traditional shadow play to enhance emotional and symbolic impact.



Figure 1. *Watangan matah* figures covered in white cloth during the *ngundang leak* (challenging black magic) scene (Source: Author's field observation at Pura Dalem Pauman, 31 May 2025).

This element has also appeared on prominent stages, such as during the Bali Mandara Mahalango event at Taman Budaya Denpasar in 2016, where the now-late Ida Bagus Sudiksa featured *watangan matah* as part of his dramatic structure. Its presence in such a context illustrates the element's flexibility in occupying both sacred and popular entertainment spaces while retaining its dramatic potency. In an interview conducted on 25 February 2025, *dalang* Dug Byor described *watangan matah* as a means of “opening the boundary” between reality and mythology, between sacredness and entertainment. He viewed this innovation as a way to reach wider audiences, particularly younger generations accustomed to fast-paced, visually intense aesthetics.

However, the incorporation of this element has also drawn critique. Conservative puppeteers such as Ida Bagus Alit Argapatra and I Made Lamu, both of whom were interviewed on 26 February 2025, oppose its use, arguing that *watangan matah* lacks grounding in the canonical texts of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* and may compromise the tradition's established dramaturgical integrity. For Argapatra and Lamu, the essence of the performance lies in refined and symbolically rich puppetry techniques, such as the *ngalinting* (dancing fire shadow effect) scene (Figure 2), rather than in startling visual effects. Beyond its role as an aesthetic innovation, *watangan matah* is also embraced by certain spiritual communities, such as Siwa Murti, who regard it as a medium for channeling energy and enacting sacred practice during performance (interview

of Ida Rsi Agung Yoga Sidhi Bang Pinatih, 10 February 2025). Thus, the presence of this element reflects an ongoing and dynamic negotiation between the preservation of traditional values and the evolving dramaturgical and



Figure 2. *Ngalinting* (dancing fire shadow effect) scene in Calonarang shadow puppet show (Source: Author's field observation at Pura Dalem Pauman, 31 May 2025)

The history of experimentation in Balinese performing arts holds considerable significance. One notable example is the emergence of Legong Dance in Saba Village during the early 20th century. Figures such as I Gusti Bagus Jelantik and I Gusti Gede Raka are credited with pioneering aesthetic innovations, particularly through the integration of Legong elements with Baris Dance and Rangda iconography (interview of Agung Giri Putra, 24 April 2025). These creative explorations led to the development of dance variants such as *Legong Semara Dahana* and *Legong Sudarsana* dance, which reflected adaptations to evolving dramatic forms influenced by increased public interest and tourism in the 1920s and 1930s (Tresna & Agung, 2022).

Similar integrations of Rangda iconography into Legong dance have been observed in other regions of Bali. For instance, the *Sekaa Andir Usana Budaya* group in Tista Village, Kerambitan, created the *Legong Durga* dance (Tantra et al., 2024). This dance presents the figure of Dewi Durga, a character visually and dramatically associated with Rangda, symbolizing a powerful, authoritative female figure capable of warding off disaster. *Legong Durga* functions both as a sacred ritual to repel malevolent forces and as a secular performance for entertainment and tourism, illustrating the intersection of ritualistic purpose and modern aesthetic appeal. In Denpasar, photographic documentation from 1935 captures a performance in which Legong dancers and a Rangda figure appear

together on stage (Figure 3). This image indicates that the fusion of Legong's refined elegance with Rangda's dramatic intensity has been recognized and



Figure 3. Ni Tjawan poses in a scene from a *legong* dance with the witch Rangda, in front of the *gong gede* gamelan orchestra at Kedaton in Denpasar, Bali, *circa* 1935 (Source: Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 43227)

This indicates that the use of Rangda imagery in Legong dance was not an isolated innovation, but part of a broader experimental trend that spread across Bali. It also reveals how Balinese artists responded to shifts in social, spiritual, and aesthetic values by creating hybrid performance styles, firmly rooted in tradition while embracing evolving narrative and symbolic forms. Such a tradition of experimentation laid the foundation for the emergence of the Prembon genre in Gianyar in 1942, pioneered by I Wayan Geria, I Made Keredek, and I Nyoman Kaler, which combined the dramatic structure of Arja with the performative expressions of Topeng Panca (Rahayuning, 2010). These experimental forms have continued to resonate with audiences and are actively performed today. Both Legong dances featuring Rangda iconography (Figure 4) and Prembon performances have maintained their popularity, illustrating the enduring vitality of tradition-based innovation in the evolution of contemporary Balinese performing arts.



Figure 4. Legong Sudarsana Dance Performance by Saba Sari Art Studio, 2023
(Source: (iWagu Production, 2023)

This spirit of innovation continues to thrive in contemporary Balinese performing arts, particularly in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, which now embraces intermediality through the integration of the human body, digital music, and spiritual symbolism. One of the most striking forms of intermedial expression is *watangan matah*, the live appearance of a human figure in front of the shadow play *kelir* screen serving as a visual embodiment of magical power within the narrative. This phenomenon recalls the tradition of *dramatari Calonarang*, which incorporated elements of *watangan matah* to create a mystical atmosphere. However, in the context of shadow puppetry, the physical presence of the human body represents a distinct innovation, expanding both the visual and emotional dimensions of the performance while bridging the symbolic world of shadows with tangible human presence. *Watangan matah* functions as an intermedial articulation that unites body, shadow, sound, and ritual into a simultaneous and immersive aesthetic experience. This marks a shift from purely symbolic representation to a more tangible mode of performance, without diminishing the philosophical and sacred values of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*. The innovation reflects the inherently adaptive character of Balinese performing arts, which remains in active dialogue with its contemporary context.

4.2 “*Watangan Matah*” as a Dramaturgical Strategy

The integration of *watangan matah* into *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* introduces significant changes to its dramaturgical structure. Prior to this innovation,

performances followed a conventional narrative sequence rooted in ritual structure, from *kayonan* to *banten caru* offerings. With the inclusion of *watangan matah*, the *ngeringkes* procession, a ritual cleansing act, has been incorporated into the *ngundang leak* scene, thereby enhancing the ritual gravity of the moment. Visual elements, formerly dominated by puppetry and light, are now complemented by realist actions such as the physical enactment of *ngeringkes*, which draws from actual Balinese Hindu death rituals. This addition deepens the mystical atmosphere while signaling that the ritual aspect is not merely theatrical, but spiritually grounded within *nyomia bhuta-bhuti* practices.

Symbolic representations of *leak*, previously conveyed through shadows and puppeteer narration, are now supported by embodied ritual performance, making the summoning scene more vivid and immersive. However, this intermedial expansion also invites differing interpretations: some view it as aesthetically powerful, while others express concern that it may distract from the core focus of traditional puppetry. The comparative elements can be seen in Table 2.

The integration of *watangan matah* alters the visual logic of the performance. According to Ida Bagus Alit Argapatra, such elements may disrupt the equilibrium of traditional aesthetics by pulling focus away from the *kelir*, the central screen that serves as the primary expressive surface (interview 26 February 2025). In his performances, Argapatra intentionally omits *watangan matah* to retain the purity of symbolic projection. His position reflects the ongoing negotiation within Balinese performance between maintaining ritual symbolism and responding to new aesthetic expectations.

Watangan matah in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* exemplifies a shift in performance dramaturgy, expanding traditional symbolic conventions through embodied action. According to Ida Rsi Agung Yoga Sidhi Bang Pinatih, the figure of *watangan matah* typically appears after the *ngereh* and *ngundang leak* segments, maintaining continuity with established performance sequences (interview 10 February 2025). This addition is not viewed as a rupture but rather an extension of existing dramatic forms that visualize the presence of dark magic and its spiritual consequences. I Putu Gede Sartika (popularly known as Dug Byor) further elaborates that this inclusion serves educational and dramatic purposes, conveying a clearer path toward purification (interview 25 February 2025).

Table 2. Comparison of major elements in Balinese *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* shadow play before and after integration of *watangan matah*

No.	Category	Before <i>watangan matah</i>	After <i>watangan matah</i>	Impact on performances
1.	Narrative Structure	Followed conventional narrative sequence: <i>kayonan</i> , <i>jejer wayang</i> , <i>patangkalan</i> , <i>panyahcah</i> , <i>angkat-angkatan</i> , <i>pangalangkara</i> , <i>ngalinting</i> , <i>ngereh</i> , <i>ngundang leak</i> , and offering <i>banten caru</i> .	The <i>ngeringkes</i> procession (the ritual cleansing of <i>watangan matah</i>) is integrated into the <i>ngundang leak</i> scene as part of invoking mystical powers.	Adds dramatic and ritual elements, reinforcing the sacred dimension of the performance.
2.	Performance Visualization	Dominated by symbolic elements using puppets and light play.	Incorporates realist elements such as the <i>ngeringkes</i> procession with <i>watangan matah</i> .	Enhances the mystical atmosphere and strengthens the ritual impression within the performance.
3.	Mystical and Ritual Aspects	<i>Leak</i> presence symbolized through fire shadows (<i>linting</i>) and puppets.	<i>Ngeringkes</i> procession uses death ritual tools from Bali Hindu tradition.	Emphasizes that the element is not merely theatrical, but also carries spiritual function in <i>nyomia bhutabhuti</i> .
4.	Scene Dynamics	<i>Leak</i> summoning scene relies solely on symbolism and puppeteer's voice.	<i>Ngeringkes</i> is integrated into the <i>leak</i> summoning scene, presenting an actual ritual act.	Delivers a deeper and more immersive experience for the audience.
5	Performance Aesthetics	Traditional aesthetics based on shadows and silhouettes.	Additional theatrical elements such as conducting rituals for <i>watangan matah</i> .	Sparks debate between aesthetic effectiveness and distraction from performance focus.

Source: Author's interpretation

In dramaturgical terms, the presence of *watangan matah* can be interpreted through Erving Goffman's concept of the performance front, referring to constructed visual and performative elements that guide audience perception (Zeng, 2023). Positioned within the aesthetic architecture of the performance,

this figure operates on three levels. First, it functions as *pengeruwak* and *pangeruwatan*, clearing ritual space and neutralizing mystical disturbances. Second, it heightens the sacred atmosphere, integrating spiritual intensity with theatrical engagement. Third, the live human presence contributes to an immersive experience, resonating with audiences attuned to contemporary visual intensity. Overall, *watangan matah* exemplifies how intermedial elements can be embedded into a sacred performance without dismantling its core symbolic framework. It extends the expressive register of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, adding embodied presence to shadow play while inviting re-evaluation of ritual, realism, and theatrical innovation.

4.3 Public Response to Intermediality in “Wayang Kulit Calonarang”

The acceptance of the *watangan matah* innovation in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* varies significantly across different age groups (see Table 3). A survey of 60 respondents reveals that age plays a key role in shaping attitudes toward changes in traditional performing arts. Among those aged 19 to 26 (predominantly university students), 45% supported the innovation (*hegemonic*), 23% rejected it (*oppositional*), and 32% remained undecided (*negotiated*), following the framework of Stuart Hall’s audience reception theory. The group aged 27 to 40 (predominantly self-employed) showed the highest level of support, with 63% approving, 21% opposing, and 16% neutral. This higher acceptance may be attributed to their involvement in the creative economy, where adaptability to new trends and emphasis on aesthetic value has become prevalent.

In contrast, individuals aged 41 and above (predominantly academics and civil servants) expressed the highest resistance to innovation, with 58% rejecting, 37% supporting, and only 5% undecided. This conservative view reflects concerns that innovation could disrupt traditional conventions and undermine the sacred dimensions of the traditional *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* ritual drama.

The data clearly show that the younger the respondents, the more likely they are to accept innovations in traditional arts. University students demonstrate greater openness to change, although some remain cautious, likely due to limited understanding or experience. Self-employed adults exhibit the highest level of support, reflecting their adaptability and engagement with the demands of the contemporary creative economy. Meanwhile, academics and civil servants are more resistant, primarily out of concern for preserving the authenticity and sacredness of the art form. Notably, the “negotiated reading” category is most prominent among the younger generation, suggesting that while they do not outright reject innovation, they have yet to fully grasp how transformation can be harmonized with tradition.

Table 3. Correlation between age and acceptance of the *watangan matah* innovation

No.	Age Group	Number of Respondents	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
1.	19 to 26 years (predominantly university students)	22	10 (45%)	5 (23%)	7 (32%)
2.	27 to 40 years (predominantly self-employed)	19	12 (63%)	4 (21%)	3 (16%)
3.	41+ years (predominantly academics and civil servants)	19	7 (37%)	11 (58%)	1 (5%)
	Total	60	29 (49%)	20 (33%)	11 (18%)

Source: Author's analysis and interpretation of data

As noted by Ida Bhagawan Gana Dwijananda, younger audiences are often curious about innovations, including the incorporation of *Leak* figures. However, these elements do not compromise the ritual essence of the performance, provided that ritual offerings are properly prepared by the *dalang* to maintain spiritual integrity (interview 26 February 2025).

4.4 Aesthetic Impact versus Sacred Value in the Reception of “*Watangan Matah*”

Reception of the *watangan matah* innovation in *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* is shaped by three reception orientations among audiences and practitioners. These include: (1) those who prioritize the aesthetics and visual appeal of the performance, viewing the innovation as a positive development to attract younger audiences; (2) those who emphasize sacred values and traditional norms, expressing concern that such innovations may compromise the ritual integrity of the performance and blur the distinction between *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* and the *Calonarang* dance drama; and (3) a neutral group who considers both aspects equally important and believes that their relevance depends on the performance context. Detailed data can be seen in Table 4.

According to survey results, 58% of respondents who supported the innovation stated that enhanced visual appeal and dramatic effect were the main reasons for acceptance. For these supporters, the use of *watangan matah* strengthens the mystical atmosphere, which aligns with the character of *Calonarang* and is considered effective in attracting the interest of the younger generation. In contrast, 35% of respondents rejected the innovation, perceiving it as reducing the sacredness and as a potential deviation from traditional norms. This group, largely composed of academics and civil servants involved in cultural preservation, expressed concern that modernization without

limitations could diminish the symbolic and spiritual meanings embedded in the performance.

Table 4. Audience Reception of *Watangan Matah*: Aesthetic versus Sacred Values

No.	Influencing Factor	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)	Analysis
1.	Aesthetics and Visual Appeal	35	58%	Main factor in acceptance due to enhancement of viewing experience and appeal to younger audiences.
2.	Sacred Values and Traditional Norms	21	35%	The primary reason for rejection is to maintain the integrity of traditional norms in <i>Wayang Kulit Calonarang</i> and to avoid blending with Calonarang dance drama, which is seen as potentially altering the overall structure of the performance.
3.	Equally Important	4	7%	The neutral group sees both aesthetics and sacred values as coexisting aspects, depending on the performance context.
4.	Total	60	100%	Reflects the dilemma between modernization and conservation of traditional values.

Source: Author's analysis and interpretation of data

Meanwhile, 7% of respondents were neutral or in the negotiated reading category, expressing caution due to their limited understanding of the innovation's impact on both aesthetic and spiritual dimensions. This dynamic reflects the tension between the need for artistic renewal and the commitment to conserving cultural values. Turning to Hans Robert Jauss' (Jauss, 1982, p. 24) 'horizon of expectation' concept, audience responses reflect each person's background experiences and cultural values that shape how they assess innovation. These findings confirm that the acceptance of innovation in traditional performing arts such as *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* is not solely determined by technical or artistic aspects, but also by perceptions of spiritual values and cultural identity embedded within the performance. The majority of respondents appreciate the aesthetic aspect, but resistance persists among groups who regard sacredness as the main pillar of the performance

4.5 Discussion: Power Contestation in Intermedial Adaptation

The integration of *watangan matah* into *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* represents an intermedial adaptation that functions as a dramaturgical strategy, combining puppetry, live performance, and ritual symbolism to enhance both the visual and emotional dimensions of the performance. Drawn from *dramatari Calonarang*, this embodied figure introduces physical presence into the symbolic realm of shadow puppetry, reframing ritual space, performative language, and how meaning is conveyed as shadow, sound, and embodied ritual converge into a unified theatrical experience. In this context, adaptation becomes a culturally grounded form of innovation, rooted in Balinese tradition yet responsive to contemporary artistic needs.

More than aesthetic layering, *watangan matah* embodies liminality, a transitional state Turner describes as the threshold between established categories (Turner, 1987). Here, it situates performer and audience at the ambiguous boundary between life and death, where norms are suspended and transformation becomes possible. By daring to portray a corpse, puppeteers symbolically expose themselves to spiritual contestation; rivals may attempt to harm the performer through mystical means, testing the *dalang's* real power. This risk heightens audience fascination, making the *ngundang leyak* scene and the presence of *watangan matah* a sensational centerpiece that draws spectators seeking both dramatic spectacle and intense spiritual experience. Field data show that puppeteers affiliated with spiritual communities such as Siwa Murti Bali led by Ida Rsi Agung Yoga Sidhi Bang Pinatih, Sari Murni founded by the late Ida Bagus Sudiksa, or unnamed mystical groups associated with Dalang Dug Byor involve their members as *watangan matah*, not only as performers but also as participants in a public demonstration of spiritual power (*kawisesan*), reinforcing both the dramatic intensity and the stakes of the performance.

Before an individual performs as *watangan matah*, three ritual elements are enacted: *mantra* (holy words), *tirta* (holy water), and *banten* (holy offerings). According to I Kadek Sumariyasa, a key performer, these preparations include the recitation of secret mantras, carrying spiritual protection items, and offering a prayer of intent (interview 13 July 2025). Onstage, the performer is ritually treated as a symbolic corpse: bathed with sacred water, chanted over with mantras, and accompanied by *banten*. Although these resemble funerary elements, the *banten* used are *caru* offerings specific to temple ceremonies, symbolizing purification and balance. The goal is not to simulate death literally but to construct a liminal condition where the performer becomes a vessel for ritual tension and spiritual demonstration. Sumariyasa describes entering a state of surrender and heightened spiritual awareness, where worldly perceptions fade and a calm focus emerges. He experiences a stillness wherein only divine

presence and natural forces are perceived. This testimony aligns with Turner's theory of liminality, as the performer embodies a space between social roles and sacred enactment, reinforcing both the symbolic power and spiritual stakes of the performance.

Beyond Bali, similar concepts of liminality involving symbolic death and transformation appear in other Asian traditions. In Japan's *Shugendo*, practitioners undergo *nyūjō* rituals, retreating to caves or sacred mountains to symbolically "die" and return with heightened spiritual insight (Blacker, 1965; Fugazzola & Moreman, 2014). In Thailand, Theravada Buddhist ordination rituals require symbolic death through head shaving, robe donning, and the renunciation of secular identity (Darlington, 2012; Schedneck, 2023). These practices mark spiritual transformation, paralleling *watangan matah*, which integrates this symbolic death into a dramatic communal spectacle.

In Balinese tradition, performative borrowing appears across sacred forms. In Legong Durga, dancers embody Durga during trance, merging theatrical presence with ritual potency (Tantra et al., 2024). The use of *topeng* masks in Wayang Arja or *dramatari* fragments in Bapang Sari reflects cross-genre integration (Dibia, 2016). Japanese *Noh* and Thai *Lakhon* similarly blend symbolic embodiment with musical and gestural ritual, illustrating how sacred performance adapts by integrating spectacle without abandoning spiritual roots (Jatuthasri, 2018; Pellecchia, 2013).

In *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, audience responses to *watangan matah* reflect values shaped by generational, aesthetic, and religious perspectives. The audience survey reveals that 58% of respondents appreciate the intensified engagement, viewing the adaptation as a means of revitalization. Meanwhile, 35% express concern about the performance's spiritual integrity, and the remainder remain neutral. These findings confirm that *watangan matah*, while controversial, enhances emotional immersion and symbolic resonance, offering audiences a potent mix of ritual spectacle and mystical provocation. As Jauss (1982) argues, each audience brings a unique horizon of expectation shaped by memory and experience. When framed by ritual awareness, intermedial adaptation transforms *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* into a living site of negotiation, where preservation and transformation intersect to ensure continued cultural relevance in Balinese society.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how intermediality functions as a dramaturgical strategy within *Wayang Kulit Calonarang*, focusing on the integration of *watangan matah* as a live-performed figure that bridges shadow play, ritual, and embodied presence. The findings show that *watangan matah*

reshapes traditional performance grammar, particularly through the inclusion of the *ngeringkes* procession in the *ngundang leak* scene, which intensifies the ritual atmosphere with visual and symbolic power. Rather than replacing sacred elements, it expands their expression through intermedial layering that unifies puppetry, live action, and spiritual symbolism within a shared performance space.

Audience responses to this adaptation were shaped by generational and professional backgrounds. While 58% of respondents valued the aesthetic enhancement, especially for its appeal to younger viewers, 35% expressed concern that the adaptation could diminish the ritual integrity of the performance. More than an aesthetic innovation, *watangan matah* embodies liminality, situating both performer and puppeteer at the threshold between life and death. This condition invites spiritual contestation and heightens the stakes of the performance. Field data reveal that puppeteers affiliated with spiritual communities, such as Siwa Murti Bali and Sari Murni, are more likely to incorporate *watangan matah*, suggesting that such practices are grounded not only in artistic aims but also in the co-existence of performance and esoteric training within Balinese mysticism.

These findings affirm that artistic change in traditional performance is not evaluated solely on technical grounds, but through the lens of sacred meaning and cultural identity. Drawing on Jauss' concept of the horizon of expectation, the study highlights how diverse cultural experiences inform divergent readings of adaptation. *Watangan matah* thus emerges not as a rupture but as a symbolic and performative negotiation balancing preservation and transformation. Although this research provides insight into the cultural and dramaturgical implications of *watangan matah*, its geographic scope remains limited and does not track longitudinal changes in puppeteer perspectives.

Future research should explore regional variations in adaptation, long-term effects on performance ecology, and cross-generational dialogues on the ethics of intermedial integration. In addition, investigating the co-existence of spiritual communities with mystical performance practices in Bali would deepen understanding of how these networks influence artistic risk-taking and the evolution of sacred arts. By encouraging culturally literate experimentation grounded in ritual awareness, the evolving practice of *Wayang Kulit Calonarang* can sustain its sacred vitality while remaining relevant to contemporary audiences.

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