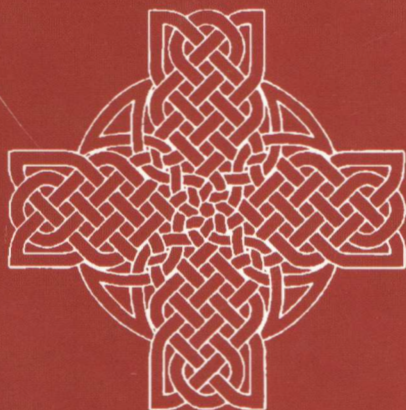


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Following Jesus the Clown

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Abstract

Based on the author's autobiography of hyphenated identities, the article attempts to compare cross-culturally two clown figures: the Javanese Semar and the Christian Jesus. Both figures demonstrate that a clown must live in their total otherness, perform both social critique and solidarity, and take the risk to be a victim and healer. Finally, the church must become a community of clowns in order to be faithful to Jesus the Clown.

Keywords

Clown, Semar, Jesus, Marginal, Centrality, Javanese

Only by learning to laugh at the hopelessness around us can we touch the hem of hope. Christ the clown signifies our playful appreciation of the past and our comic refusal to accept the specter of inevitability in the future. He is the incarnation of festivity and fantasy.¹

My Personal Journey

“Theology is certainly autobiographical, because I alone can tell my faith story,” claims Jung Young Lee.² Fascinated with this statement, I will also start this article with an autobiographical introduction. Yet, it is a communal instead of a personal autobiography. What I have experienced uniquely in my own life is also, I believe,

1. Harvey Gallagher Cox, *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1969), 142.
2. Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 7. In the same spirit Paul F. Knitter writes that “All theology, we are told, is rooted in biography.” See Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 1.

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experienced largely by many friends of mine (many Chinese-Indonesians like me) who can be said to be marginal people precisely because of our hyphenated identities. Therefore, I would like to put myself in this marginal community in solidarity with fellow Chinese-Indonesians.

Several months after graduating from seminary, I had the opportunity to participate in a workshop which was held in Seoul, South Korea. During the workshop—which theme was “Reading the Bible through Asian Eyes”—I had a very disturbing experience. One of the speakers made a statement that actually was not new to me as an ex-seminarian, but the *kairos* made it very different. He said that the hermeneutical process, in which we try to correlate text and context creatively, should begin with the recognition of personal identity. This became a source of deeply disturbing feelings for my heart and mind.

After the lecture, each participant was given time to share and express his or her personal identity. When my turn came, everything went smoothly until suddenly someone from the audience, a participant from South Korea, loudly remarked, “But you are more likely Chinese than Indonesian!” This simple comment caught me off guard, and my instant reaction was defensive as I, in a louder voice, admitted, “Yes! I am the fourth generation of my ancestors coming from China! But now I am a citizen of the Republic of Indonesia. And I identify myself as Javanese.”³

The conversation then expanded, as everyone seemed to become interested in the subject. Another participant from South Korea asked me, “Then how could your Chineseness be included in your reading of the Bible and also in your own personal identification? Why do you try to hide and eliminate some of your personal identities as if it is meaningless to you?” I was shocked; I could not say anything in return.

I have to confess that being Chinese-Javanese is uneasy for me. The Indonesian government developed the politics of assimilation after the Communist tragedy in 1965, five years before I was born. In the name of assimilation, all Chinese who wanted to become Indonesian citizens had to drop their Chinese names and adopt Indonesian names. Chinese schools were closed and books written in Chinese were banned. Speaking as Chinese and on behalf of the Chinese community was politically incorrect. Chinese-Indonesian citizens were (and still are) discriminated against. For example, they had to pay more for every required legal document and the state university had a quota for the number of Chinese-Indonesian students admitted. Moreover, many Chinese-Indonesian children and youth are subject to derogatory taunts and chants. In retrospect, I deeply suffered from these taunts as a youth. The fact that they called me “*sipit!*,” which means “slanting eye,” hurt my feelings. They made me a clown, a fool, a funny person among the “normal” people.

3. Javanese is a name of an ethnic group in Indonesia, inhabiting the central and eastern parts of Java Island. Nowadays the political scene of Indonesia is seen as a reflection of Javanese culture.

These traumatic experiences made it difficult for me to do theology as someone with a Chinese-Javanese identity. I cannot speak Chinese and I have no Chinese name on my birth certificate. Why do I now have to include my Chineseness in my identity-building as well as in my theological construction? What the participants from South Korea said became an uncomfortable reminder to me of my struggle of identity. My preference to be Javanese instead of Chinese-Javanese or Chinese-Indonesian is only to escape from the harassment.

How can I reflect on God's universal love and unconditional acceptance while I am a clown in the eyes of my neighbors? How can I theologize in relation to my marginality? Captivated with the clown figure, I realize that being marginalized is not necessarily a predicament for spiritual and theological reflection. Rather, it can be my theological gateway. I will, therefore, focus on the clown figure and the act of clowning as another way to theologize as a Chinese-Indonesian, a marginal person who bears a burden of rejection (as the impact of in-betweenness) as well as quasi-acceptance (as the impact of in-bothness).

Semar: The Javanese Clown

There is one particular clown character, called Semar, from the well-known Javanese show *Wayang* (shadow) with which I am fascinated. Semar is not just any clown but, in the words of Franz Magnis-Suseno, he is an "unfathomable, wise, simple, popular, kind, laughable, and invincible character."⁴ Semar is recognized as a protector, a descendant of Brahma and Vishnu. He is really the god Ismaya, who is the most powerful indigenous Javanese god.

In general, the stories of the Javanese show are about the never-ending confrontation between good and evil. They are taken from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata chronicles. The Javanese version has several additional characters related to the values of Javanese culture, but Semar is the central figure.

Semar has an unshapely and fat body with large breasts and a huge bottom; it is not obvious whether he is a man or a woman. His name can be interpreted variously, but the most popular meaning is *samar* (vague). The form of his body is also vague. If one says that he is a man, his face is like a woman; if one says he is a woman, his body is like a man. That is why many people estimate him/her wrongly.⁵

In any show, Semar usually appears at midnight. At that time, the show reaches its first climax in the so-called *gara-gara* (chaos) scene, where nature lapses into turmoil: the earth quakes, volcanoes erupt, and the sea begins to boil.⁶ It is the

4. Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Javanese Ethics and World-view: The Javanese Idea of the Good Life* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1997), 185.

5. Ki Ageng Mangir, "Trilogi Pewayangan (2): Dunia Pewayangan Dan Kekuasaan Orde Baru," http://www.munindo.brd.de/artikel/artikel_03/art03_trilogi_ordebaru_2.html, accessed April 24, 2003.

6. Hartojo, "Gara-Gara Dan Munculnya Semar," *Mawas Diri* 8 (1979).

gara-gara that becomes the most critical scene, where the good heroes are ready to fight against the bad giants or evil figures. The situation is very tense for the audience and at this critical moment Semar appears.

Spontaneously, the audience clap their hands and the plot changes dramatically. Semar takes over. He makes jokes that embarrass both the heroes and the evil figures. Yet, “if he is angry, the gods themselves shake; whatever he desires, happens,” says Magnis-Suseno: “Every attempt by the gods to take over the world... is thwarted by Semar.”⁷ The clown Semar transforms the chaotic *gara-gara* into a peaceful world.

Cross-Cultural Analyses

Most cultures have their own clown figure.⁸ The clowns, in fact, have several characteristics in common. The first is their total otherness. It is obvious that the most significant feature of the clowns is that of having their own rationality, their own *récit*. Clowns cannot walk patiently in the world’s path. They have their own odyssey; this sometimes makes them look insane, self-contradictory, or even idiotic. No one can understand fully their thoughts, sayings and deeds; at one time they can be vulgar and rude but at another time they can be very unselfish and loving. As Wolfgang M. Zucker maintains, “He is crude and mean, but also gentle and magnanimous; clumsy and inept, but, simultaneously, incredibly agile and endowed with astonishing skills; ugly and repulsive, yet not without elegance and attractive charm.”⁹

Semar, the Javanese clown figure, completely fits this description. Opposing the policies of noble people, he addresses them in low Javanese.¹⁰ In some instances, he even farts on them, which in Javanese etiquette is the rudest form of behavior. Yet, he often gives magnanimous and loving assistance to them, especially in hard times. Semar’s self-contradiction is described clearly by Clifford Geertz by comparing him with Falstaff, the clown in Shakespeare’s *King Henry the Fourth*:

But what, finally, of Semar, in whom so many oppositions seem to meet the figure who is both god and clown, man’s guardian spirit and his servant, the most spiritually refined inwardly and the most rough-looking outwardly? ... Like Falstaff, he is fat, funny, and worldly-wise; and, like Falstaff, he seems to provide in his vigorous amor-alism a general criticism of the very values the drama affirms. Both figures, perhaps,

7. Magnis-Suseno, *Javanese Ethics and World-view*, 185.

8. Bruce Johnson has listed various clowns around the world, including Semar. See Bruce Johnson, “Multicultural Clowns,” www.charliethejugglingclown.com/multicultural.htm, accessed February 12, 2012.

9. Wolfgang M. Zucker, “The Clown as the Lord of Disorder,” in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*, ed. M. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury, 1969), 77.

10. The Javanese language consists of five speech levels. The usage of the levels depends on the social level of the speaker and the addressee. See Laine Berman, *Speaking through the Silence: Narratives, Social Conventions, and Power in Java* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 12–17.

provide a reminder that, despite overproud assertions to the contrary by religious fanatics and moral absolutists, no completely adequate and comprehensive human world view is possible, and behind all the pretense to absolute and ultimate knowledge, the sense for the irrationality of human life, for the fact that it is unlimitable, remains. Semar reminds the noble . . . of their own humble, animal origins.¹¹

Semar's sexual ambiguity is also another proof of his/her self-contradiction. He is both male and female. As Joseph F. Martin rightly says,

Clowns can integrate the masculine/feminine aspects of themselves. The understanding of what constitutes "maleness" and "femaleness" is ingrained in all of us . . . clowns remind people that a friendship of the masculine and feminine is possible within the personality of each individual. Thus, the clown is not asexual, but fully sexual.¹²

This self-contradictory feature of Semar points to his personal identity; begs us to recognize him as "the radical other," and that "the difference" is the most valid norm to the recognition.¹³ This fact makes us treat him just as he is. His abnormality, viewed from social norms, is at the same time his own normalcy.

While many marginal people pose the question of their identity, the clowns answer this by presenting their own "abnormal" life to the public. By doing so, they disregard worldly status and attributions. This total disregard is best illustrated by a contest that took place between two Zen "clowning" monks trying to determine who could identify himself with the lowest thing in the scale of human norms:

Chao-chou began: "I am an ass."

Wen-yuan: "I am the ass's buttocks."

Chao-chou: "I am the ass's faeces."

Wen-yuan: "I am a worm in the faeces."

Chao-chou, unable to think of a rejoinder, asked: "What are you doing there?"

Replied Wen-yuan: "I am spending my summer vacation."

Chao-chou conceded defeat.¹⁴

11. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 139.

12. Joseph F. Martin, "My Clown as Spiritual Director," *Review for Religious* (July–August, 1987): 593.

13. "The radical other" and "difference" are key words in postmodern ethics, which are discussed in-depth by postmodernists such as Levinas and Derrida. Due to the limitations of space, those concepts will not be explored here. See. Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

14. Carl Olson, "The Zen Clown Ikkyu: A Cross-Cultural Study of a Symbol of Disorder," *Journal of Dharma* 13 (1988): 152; cf. John C.H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (Taipei: United Publishing Center, 1975), 137.

This self-contradiction and abnormality certainly makes a clown a stranger, a marginal one, even among the marginalized people. “The soul of the clown is loneliness,” said Ken Feit.¹⁵ He is the margin of marginality.

Anton C. Zijderfeld argues that the struggle of identity in the clowns’ life can be expressed sociologically by means of the concept of marginality. He maintains that clowns and some ethnic minorities share the *infamiae macula* (the stain of infamy), which prevents them from “being fully human” and deprives them of very basic rights.¹⁶ He also points out that for nobility, clowns in the Middle Ages were used as “an instrument of power,” although this is not the case with Semar.

The second common feature of clowns is double-sided: criticism and solidarity. When clowns say something, they don’t soliloquize. They live in the same space or society with people who become their neighbors. When society is in a chaotic situation, they respond to it boldly. Since each chaotic situation separates the oppressed from the oppressor, the clowns clarify their position by taking sides with the oppressed. No neutral position is possible for them. In the face of the clown, the people who are marginalized find their own face. “The clown laughs as we do, and yet at the very best the clown cries, as do we”;¹⁷ or, as Henri J.M. Nouwen says, “They are on our side.”¹⁸ This double-sidedness of solidarity and criticism expresses what is termed by Jean-François Lyotard the ethical imperative “to present the unrepresentable” and “to war a war on totality.”¹⁹

According to Chinese legend, Yu Sze is the clown of Emperor Shih Huang-Ti, who oversees the construction of the Great Wall of China. Thousands of lives have already been lost in building the Wall. When the Emperor decides to have it painted, which would have cost even more lives, Yu Sze mocks the Emperor into abandoning the plan. In the eyes of the people, Yu Sze has become their hero. By criticizing the oppressor, Yu Sze take sides with the oppressed.

We see this kind of solidarity in the figure of Semar. When Semar appears in the play, the spectators welcome him enthusiastically with applause because he is their hero, the mediator between the common people and the powerful noble people as well as the gods.²⁰ They feel a sense of freedom as they laugh at Semar’s farcicalities, especially when he makes fun of noble people; something which would not be possible in real life.

15. Olson, “The Zen Clown Ikkyu,” 539.

16. Anton C. Zijderfeld, *Reality in a Looking-Glass: Rationality through an Analysis of Traditional Folly* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 113.

17. Hugh Lewin, ed., *A Community of Clowns: Testimonies of People in Urban Rural Mission* (Geneva: WCC, 1987), 9.

18. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1979), 2.

19. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1984), 82.

20. Sindhunata, *Hoffen Auf Den Ratu-Adil: Das Eschatologische Motiv Des “Gerechten Königs” Im Bauernprotest Auf Java Während Des 19. Und Zu Beginn Des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: Kovac, 1992), 282.

The third common feature of clowns is their characteristic as both Victim and Healer. In one of the Javanese stories, Siva, the god of destruction, comes down to earth incarnated as a mystical teacher. In an attempt to bring two warring parties—the Pendawas and the Korawas—together, Siva attempts to arrange a negotiated peace between them. But behind this brilliant proposal is hidden an effort to compromise truth and evil. Semar, in his wisdom, recognizes Siva's deceitful plan. Therefore, Arjuna²¹ is instructed by Siva to kill Semar. Knowing this, Semar confronts Arjuna by saying, "So this is how you treat me after I have followed you everywhere, served you loyally, and loved you? All right then, I would rather burn myself and die." After saying this, Semar builds a bonfire and stands in it. But, instead of dying, he is transformed into his godly form and defeats Siva in combat. Then the war between the Pendawas and the Korawas, between truth and evil, starts again.²²

In this touching story, Semar is shown as a victim of a great conspiracy; but at the same time, his sacrifice prevents his masters from falling into a fatal entrapment. The victim, therefore, becomes a healer. Zucker says,

The clowning is the actor who has accepted the twofold role of breaking all taboos and receiving all the punishments for it. He has agreed to make himself so utterly grotesque that the people in the audience can despise him, insult him, and torment him to their heart's delight. He assumes the role of the scapegoat and receives the punishment for their half-hearted attempts at stepping outside of the common order . . .²³

The role of the scapegoat makes a clown closer to what René Girard says about *pharmakos* with its various meanings: poison, victim (scapegoat), and healer.²⁴ The meaning of poison is reflected when a clown criticizes the social order and norms. In addition, the clown is simultaneously a victim and a healer. By sacrificing himself as the scapegoat, the clown heals the community. He submits himself to be "defeated, humiliated, and stepped-upon."²⁵ By doing so, he provides a catharsis for those who defeat him.

Jesus the Clown

After examining the cross-cultural features of the clowns, I now propose to see Jesus as a clown. The reduction of the clown as the traditionally wise person merely to the level of his present role in the entertainment world seems humiliating. Yet, what I will do here is not defining but naming him. By naming him, I try to reflect

21. Arjuna is one of the five Pendawa brothers, and is also believed to be the embodiment of the god Wisnu. He is the most loved master of Semar; he is always escorted by Semar everywhere he goes.

22. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 140.

23. Zucker, "The Clown as the Lord of Disorder," 82.

24. Mark I. Wallace and Theophus H. Smith, eds, *Curing Violence* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1994).

25. Olson, "The Zen Clown Ikkyu."

on existential experiences as the impact of encounter with Jesus through a metaphorical language. In this sense, Jesus the clown is a metaphor.

The three common features of the clown are apparent in Jesus' life. First, we can see that Jesus, just like Semar, is the self-emptying God, "taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:7). This kenotic action shows a reversal of human and worldly paradigms: being in the form of God, he takes the form of a servant; being rich he becomes poor for our sakes (2 Cor 8:9). Erasmus paraphrased the kenotic hymn,

And that Christ, in order to relieve the folly of mankind, though Himself "the wisdom of the Father," was willing in some manner to be made a fool when He took upon Himself the nature of a man and was found in fashion as man?²⁶

This kenotic action of Christ culminates in the crucifixion, that is to be seen "as the paradigm of God's folly."²⁷

Jesus seems also rude when he rebukes Simon, calling his beloved disciple "Satan" (Mark 8:33). But, like any other clown, Jesus' confusing acts and words come with his tender, magnanimous life. He accepts the prostitutes, the poor, the children, and the Gentiles.

The self-contradiction clowns display leads people to recognize their unique and incomparable pattern of life. Jesus' question to his fellows, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29), is along the same line. The clown Jesus must be respected not in comparison with other prophets, but as the unique "other." By saying this, Jesus relativizes the social order which treats people according to their position in that system. In such a system, one is recognized as a part of one's group, not as a unique, different person.

Erasmus, again, reflected on the way Jesus identifies himself and his disciples with the symbol of sheep or lamb:

Add to this that Christ calls those who are destined to eternal life by the name "sheep"—and there is no other creature more foolish, as is witnessed by the proverbial phrase in Aristotle, "sheepish temperament," which he tells us was suggested by the stupidity of the animal and commonly used as a taunt against dull-witted and foolish men. And yet Christ avows himself as shepherd of this flock and even delights in the name of Lamb, as when John pointed Him out, "behold the Lamb of God!" There is much use of his term also in the book of *Revelation*.²⁸

26. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* (New York: Modern Library, 1941), 116.

27. Peter C. Phan, "The Wisdom of Holy Fools in Postmodernity," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 739. The intertwining concepts of kenosis and foolishness are very significant within Russian Orthodox theology as well as in Russian writers such as Dostoevsky.

28. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 116.

The lamb metaphor, too, expresses Jesus' willingness to identify himself with his disciples. He is not only the shepherd, but also the first among the lambs; he is not only their *pastor*, but also their *amicus* (friend) (John 15:14). The friendship of the foolish lamb is the core of the upside-down kingdom proclaimed by Jesus.

Jesus the clown also criticizes the social norms, structures, and unequal positioning which prevailed at his time. Such systems unjustly marginalize the people at the grass roots, such as the poor, children, prostitutes, the outcasts, and so on. By proclaiming the advent of the Kingdom of God with an upside-down norm, he takes sides with those who suffer. This new way of life is enacted in a clowning way. Jesus' uniqueness as a clown, therefore, creates a new creative centrality, which marginalizes those who become the center of centralities.²⁹ Once again, we find here the liberating power of intertwining criticism and solidarity. In the margin of marginalities, Jesus the clown becomes the new center of centrality, the new humanity.

Jesus the clown is also the *pharmakos*, the victim and the healer. The two functions reach their climax in agony on the cross.³⁰ It is also true that the death of Jesus happens after a collusion of two centralities: the religious circle represented by the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the political circle represented by Pontius Pilate and Herod, which have never occurred before. This collusion makes the marginal clown become more marginalized. On the cross, even the writers of the Gospels take the reader into the big question, of whether God is also implicated in this scandalous, unholy alliance or whether He is still the God of the marginalized and the oppressed. The cry of Jesus on the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?," indicates and strengthens the first assumption. But Jesus the clown can handle the situation. He knew that his Father is always a "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows" (Ps 68:5). It is exactly in the suffering of Jesus that God's humor reaches its climax. God hides himself. He is *deus absconditus*, God who hides, but, at the same time, in the suffering of Jesus, He shows solidarity with the suffering people who have been marginalized. In Jesus' suffering, therefore, God is absent as well as present and revealed (*deus revelatus*). On the cross, the tragedy and comedy coexist. And only by this humorous clowning can we be healed; as Peter also reminds us, "By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24; cf. Isa 52:5).

A Community of Clowns

Believing in Jesus as a clown figure means living in a community of clowns. Christlikeness, then, means clownishness, and the exact meaning of discipleship is to walk on the path Jesus passed through and to imitate the Holy Fool. As put by the writer of Hebrews, "So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured" (Heb 13:12–13). His way of life is an

29. Lee, *Marginality*, 98.

30. Margaret Halaska, "The Clown on the Cross," *Review for Religious* 44.4 (1985): 528–32.

eccentric one, and clowning in this sense means journeying outwardly from a centrality, toward the outsiders and the marginal people.

Precisely, the community of clowns understand themselves as Paul says: “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ” (1 Cor 4:10). However, “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor 1:25). It is the new identity of the community of clowns, which Erasmus called oxymoronically *morosophous* or *foolosophers*.³¹ Phan maintains that *morosophia* is the only path to wisdom in the postmodern era, where “the royal road to wisdom by means of *mythos* and *logos* is barred.”³²

It is my deep conviction and hope that unless we relieve ourselves from the bondage of marginalization of any kind, we will not be able to follow Jesus the clown freely. Thus, clowning also needs to be understood as a willingness to apply self-criticism. The community of clowns must be a laboratory of recognizing “the others” and accepting differences. In such a community, I believe, we have to live uniquely in and not separately from the world in a clowning way of life. We have to have the courage to criticize marginalization in our society and to live in solidarity with marginal people around us. In these ways the risk of being a victim must not be avoided, otherwise we would not be a healing agent of the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of clowns.

Author biography

Joas Adiprasetya, Th.D., holds the doctorate in philosophy, theology, and social ethics from Boston University School of Theology. He serves as the President of Jakarta Theological Seminary. He also teaches theology of religions, systematic theology, and contextual theology.

31. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 10.

32. Phan, “The Wisdom of Holy Fools in Postmodernity,” 731.