

# Ritual Theatre *Igal*: Portrayal of the ocean realm spiritual self-integrity of the ethnic Bajau

Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman<sup>1\*</sup>, Sharifuddin Zainal<sup>2</sup>,  
Amandus Paul Panan<sup>3</sup>, Moon Hyung Suk<sup>4</sup>

\* Corresponding Author

<sup>1</sup> College of Creative Arts, UiTM, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Akademi Seni & Teknologi Kreatif, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> College of Creative Arts, UiTM, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>4</sup> Department of Global Regional Studies, Sangmyung University, Korea

mohdkipli@uitm.edu.my, sharifuddin@ums.edu.my, amandus@uitm.edu.my, iovasia@naver.com

Tel: +60194755365

## Abstract

This study explored the portrayal of the self-integrity of the ethnic Bajau in the ritual theatre performance of *igal*. The study's objective is to confirm a portrayal of self-integrity between the ethnic practitioners and the audience through the ethnography method that emphasizes the link between behavior and culture. The theoretical applications of *communitas* and *liminality* are applied to analyze how both aspects display the self-integrity portrayal of the ethnic Bajau in the dramatic structure of the ritual theatre *igal panangsang*. The findings affirm that the ritual theatre *igal panangsang* serves as the self-integrity portrayal of the ethnic Bajau of Sabah.

Keywords: *Igal*; Spiritual; Ritual Theatre; Self-Integrity

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/aje-bs.v8i24.423>

## 1.0 Introduction

The ritual theatre *igal* is a traditional performance form combining dance, singing, music, and acting elements. It is rooted in the ritual practiced by the ethnic Bajau, especially in Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia, for healing. The ethnic Bajau is a group of 'Proto-Malays' that is characteristically maritime, where they have the skills and knowledge about the sea. This group loves to travel at sea and live nomadically. Bajau is said to be safer living at sea compared to the land. They began moving to the land when there were economic activities and had to look for fruits and plants in the forests for their sustenance. In the 19th century, the number of sea inhabitants decreased. In terms of customs and culture, the ethnic Bajau still holds on to the rules of their ancestors, including their dining customs, bathing, wedding, feasts, and even the belief that the supernatural from the other world inhabit their environment to ensure that they can live in harmony as they believe that every action must be done carefully and follow their customs to avoid misfortune or *tulah*.

In line with the belief in *tulah*, the ethnic Bajau, up until now, still believes in metaphysical entities or the existence of supernatural beings. They believe that these supernatural entities inhabit every corner of this earth. They have the view that these entities can help them and can also harm them. According to Yap Beng Liang (1993), Bajau believes there are extraordinary djinns (supernatural entities) in this world as they have power and can influence human actions and activities. Humans can only identify and feel this power that has been passed down to the members of the group or generation. It has become a culture in the context of healing the Bajau. They believe that this world is filled with humans and animals and the supernatural that can have a role in humans' lives. They believe that there are good supernatural beings and those with extraordinary power in helping to solve human issues, and there are those who are evil that can harm and cause trouble to humans' lives. Usually, supernatural beings can appear in one's body as their medium. Sometimes, they can become the inheritor if he or she passes away, and their family member will be the next inheritor. These supernatural entities cannot be seen, but their presence can be felt.

From this deep-rooted belief in bad and good supernatural beings, there emerges a crisis or conflict in the society manifested through the ritual of *igal* until Turner (1975) calls the ritual the term social drama or ritual theatre because the particular characteristic of the drama/theatre is the conflict that leads to a crisis among the characters as explained by Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman (2020) in figure 1. The ritual theatre *igal* is characterized by good and evil supernatural beings. Regarding the performance, the performers or the actors are the shamans, patients, and the crowd involved. The shaman is an individual who can see supernatural entities, so she is often said to be a very able man and has the power to heal the diseases caused by *tulah* or those inflicted by others. Treatment differs based on the way of the supernatural entities of the individual concerned. Such an individual will be respected as he or she can help resolve the issue for the benefit of the members involved. Thus, up until today, the ethnic Bajau still believes in the shaman in traditional treatment, especially in treating patients inflicted with evil supernatural entities.

From there, ethnic Bajau believes that the shaman who can connect with the entities is skillful and has supernatural powers. It is an extraordinary skill for society itself, as not everyone can have that skill. Esoteric knowledge is owned by people who are confident and would indulge in supernatural powers for a purpose. A leader or shaman will hold a ritual, have his equipment and tools, and be in certain places. They believe the knowledge is secret except in certain conditions, such as in the ritual theatre of *igal*. For ethnic Bajau, no one can dispute the capability of a shaman. This is because the shaman can know everything that happens, whether someone is harmed or hurt by *tulah*. Being a shaman is also an essential responsibility in society. They can be said to refer to something such as a disease and the things that happen around them.

The ritual theatre *igal* combines good and evil supernatural beings. In terms of performance, the performers or the actors are the shamans, patients, and the crowd involved. Stutley (2003) stated that shamanism is one of the earliest and farthest-reaching magical and religious traditions, vestiges of which still underline the primary religious faith of the modern world. The shaman's function is to show his or her people to unseen power behind the appearances of nature, as experienced through intuition, in trance states, or during ecstatic mystical visions. The primary function of the ritual theatre *igal* is to cure diseases or to look for the root cause and solve the problem of the disease. Ethnic Bajau believes this treatment method is a healing process involving other supernatural beings' power. Thus, they believe that entities also inhabit their residential places. Stemming from this belief, the food is served, and the ritual is done in the ritual theatre *igal*. The purpose is to respect and ask for permission from supernatural entities to bless their actions regarding healing diseases.

The *igal* ritual theatre practiced by the ethnic Bajau, especially in Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia, is increasingly marginalized due to the progress of modernization. According to Md Isa (2022), the modern society of Malaysia works in a factory, offices, or shops rather than in agriculture or any other primitive way such as hunting, fishing, or gathering. Due to that, the traditional function of *igal* as a method of healing diseases experienced by the practicing community could be more significant in the current context. Meanwhile, its importance as a vehicle for the empowerment of the ethnic Bajau identity and community wellbeing but have not been given due attention. Thus, this study seeks to describe the form of *igal* ritual theatre performance and synthesize the experience of *communitas* and liminality of the practicing community to justify its importance in prospering and empowering the ethnic Bajau self-integrity that should be preserved.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Traditionally, in the context of the people in the Archipelago, the role of the shaman is a medium or link between the physical and metaphysical worlds. A shaman has the advantage as she/he can communicate with supernatural entities familiar in the metaphysical world. It is her/his effort to heal diseases believed to have been caused by supernatural entities (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2015). A shaman can transform her/his

consciousness from ordinary consciousness (physical) to the state of subconsciousness, asserted by Turner (1977) as the *communitas* and liminal consciousness stages. The stage where experiences in which all members have the same social status. Turner studied rituals and social change and was famous for developing the concept of liminality and coining *communitas*. Turner's work revealed much about the processes of social change, both from the point of view of the individual experience and the development of shared beliefs that characterize the social group. He researched the meaning of rituals and their symbolism in this context. Through developing the concepts of liminality and *communitas* as examples of unstructured community experiences in which all members have the same social status, Turner suggested that human beings require time and separation from their social obligations to process and adjust to change. When people spend this time together, divested of the trappings and responsibilities of their previous social positions, equal participants in the transition to the new phase, deep bonds are formed which may be foundational to the new phase of life they are about to enter.

Thus, the *communitas* and liminality experiences of the ritual theatre practitioners, *igal*, are also related to the process of self-integrity that stems from the internal factor of spirituality. As maintained by Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman (2020) in Figure 1 below:

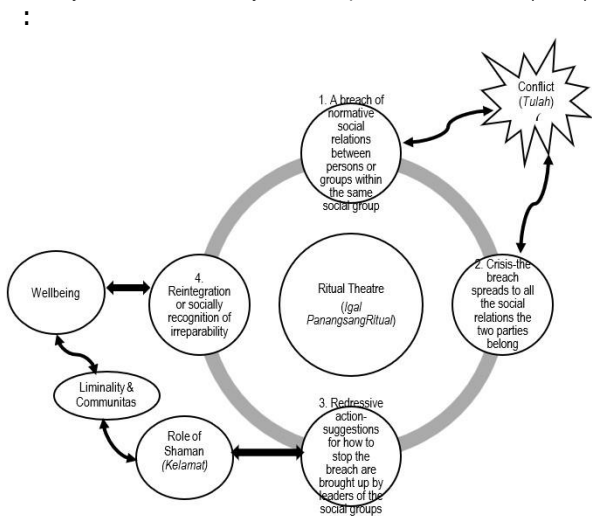


Fig. 1: *Communitas* and liminality in *igal* ritual as a ritual theatre  
(Source: Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2020)

In referring to Figure 1, the spiritual factor influences social status and culture change. On this note, the healing aspect in the ritual theatre *igal* is categorized as faith healing, which refers to the ritual of connecting with one's belief system. Healing happens following the belief in the spiritual power that has become the intervention in the healing process,

and automatically also influences wellbeing and displays the self-integrity portrayal of the practitioners through the ritual theatre.

Self-integrity is an element of life that mirrors the physicality of an individual and his or her society. By proper definition, self-integrity is the identity of an individual, community, and nation with some formidable, gratified traits. Everyone has his or her self-integrity. It can unite attitude, spirit, and soul as one seeks to achieve goals and ambitions. Thus, self-integrity is a tie that binds the soul, the mover of the spirit and strength, and the catalyst of one's being. Society has to understand and empathize with the notion of self-integrity.

Every race has its fundamental self-integrity, whether based on their faith, inherited one generation after another, noble life values, internal strength, the race's experience in wading through various challenges, or many others. About Kamus Dewan (2010), self-integrity is a genuine and noble self. Thus, self-integrity can mean "the core values of self" existent in the individual or the society. The values are inseparable from the race exhibited through character, attitude, also personality manifested in one's journey in life. It is a unique and special characteristic (in terms of custom, language, culture, religion, and so on) that has become the core and symbol of an individual's personality and race. Thus, self-integrity refers to an individual's unique character with an internal soul, spirit, and motivation. In this context, the self-integrity portrayal is a spiritual urge manifested through *communitas* and liminality in the dramatic structure of the ritual theatre *igal*.

### 3.0 Methodology

This research adopts the qualitative method by raising ethnography as a strategy. According to Malinowski (2002), the main point of ethnography is to understand the views of the native residents and their relationship with life and to get some opinion on their world. Culture in various forms of behavior is related to the pattern of society being studied. Thus, when conducting a field study, ethnographers would conclude that culture comes from three sources – the perspective of the society being studied, people's reactions, and the various artifacts used. The aspects of ethnography are applied to encompass arts and culture, language, and \*eld research. This research adopts the qualitative method by raising ethnography as a strategy. According to Malinowski (2002), the main point of ethnography is to understand the views of the native residents and their relationship with life and

to get some opinion on their world. Culture in various forms of behavior is related to the pattern of society being studied. Thus, when conducting a field study, ethnographers would conclude that culture comes from three sources – the perspective of the society being studied, people's reactions, and the various artifacts used. Ethnography aims to learn about how we obtain knowledge covering the observation method, the ethnography theory, and information about the diversity of cultures. The aim is to expand the systematic definition of all cultures from the perspective of the people who learn about the culture.

In this vein, ethnography has given a contribution in terms of knowledge about the cultural bound theory. This indicates the discovery of a theory based on understanding the complex society, understanding human behavior, and finally, making the ethnographers

work with the informant to portray culture. The researcher opines that the method of ethnography as a conventional discipline in arts and culture research aims to increase the objectivity in observation. In general, arts lean more on the element of subjectivity. However, this does not mean that art is not academic and can be handled in a lackadaisical way. By contrast, we need to stress the aspect of objectivity and minimize subjectivity. Thus, this study applies the ethnography method to minimize subjectivity. The aspects of ethnography are applied to encompass arts and culture, language, and field research.

Field research concentrates on the identification of the informant involving matters like deciding on the informants, interviewing them, making ethnographical notes, posing descriptive questions, conducting interview analysis, conducting domain analysis, asking structural questions and non-structural questions, making taxonomy analysis, posing contrasting questions, making component analysis, finding cultural themes and finally writing the ethnography. To implement the ethnography method through observation and direct participation, the researcher visited the study location to meet the practitioners of the ritual theatre *igal* in the village of Gelam-Gelam, Pulau Bum Bum, Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia.

The interview method is conducted through focused and group interviews to get direct information from informants. Both techniques have been able to help and support the information obtained during the observation. An interview that focuses on the individuals involved in the performers of the ritual theatre *igal*. The interview with the informants, especially with the *kalamat* (leader of the performance/shaman), to get some in-depth information about the ritual theatre. The information will be screened beforehand before the analysis using the appropriate analysis technique.

## 4.0 Results

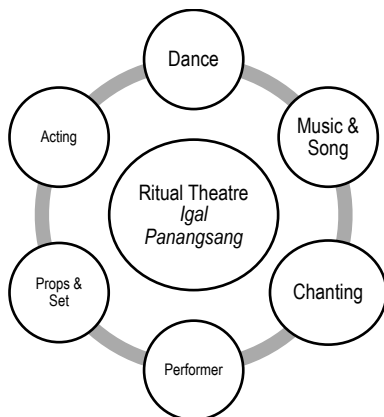


Fig. 2: Elements of the performance of the ritual theatre *igal panangsang*  
(Source: Authors, 2023)

Panangsang, which means stimulate, stimulating, or stimulated, is connected to supernatural power. The stimulation works by using the body's movement as the performers dance to the music. As a ritual theatre, *igal panangsang* is formed by elements of the performance, which are the aspects of acting, dancing, music, songs, chanting, the performers themselves, and the set and props are shown in Figure 2.

The ritual theatre *igal panangsang* will happen when a supernatural entity possesses the performers. The entity is the spirit of the ancestors referred to in the myth of Arung Salamiah, a legendary Bajau princess believed to have power. As believed by the ethnic Bajau, especially in the district of Semporna, Sabah, this ritual theatre *igal panangsang* was performed mainly by Arung Salamiah when she was alive. The ritual theatre *igal panangsang* is believed to have originated from the dance performance danced by Arung Salamiah. The ethnic Bajau is also confident that Arung Salamiah is a selected person who has extraordinary powers. The ethnic Bajau believes in the fact that the djinn and the spirit that they have inherited are also connected to the story of the life of Arung Salamiah, a selected one chosen from the supernatural world that can transform into various forms with the help of sea life known as *ombo'* (supernatural being). Thus, due to the involvement of this *ombo'*, the ritual theatre *igal panangsang* is also commonly referred to as the *ombo'* performance (*Keombo'an*), as shown in Figure 3 below.

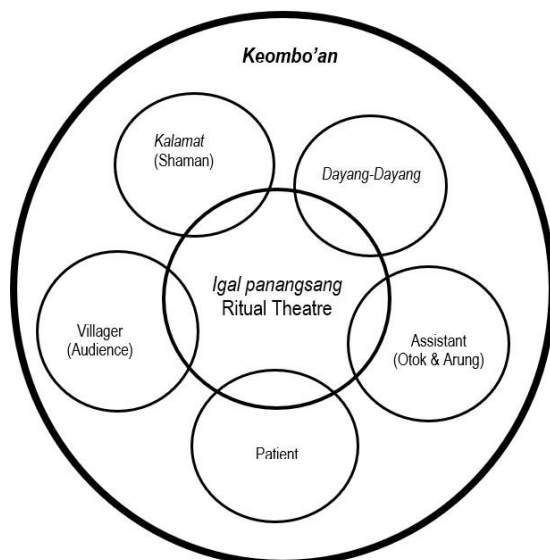


Fig. 3: The ritual theatre *igal panangsang* performers involve the *ombo'*.  
(Source: Authors, 2023)

The performance of the ritual theatre *igal panangsang* is led by a shaman known as *kalamat*. During the performance, the *kalamat* will interact with the supernatural entity

(ombo') through communication that the *kalamat* can only understand. Then, *kalamat* will deliver the meaning in a language people understand. The task of the *kalamat* in the performance is also assisted by performers known as *dayang-dayang*, comprised of women appointed by the *kalamat* herself. *Dayang-dayang* is the individual entrusted by the *kalamat* to help implement the ritual theatre from start to finish. The main task of the *dayang-dayang* is to become the communicator between the *kalamat* and the *ombo'*. *Dayang-dayang* will translate the ambiguous language from the *kalamat's* utterances to become more comprehensible and clear to the affected patients, their families, and anyone else present. The task of the *kalamat* is also helped by an assistant known as *otok* (man) and *arung* (woman). *Otok* assists in the technical aspect, like preparing the props and all the necessities for the performance. *Otok* also ensures that the implementation is on time and the music is ready. Other than that, *otok* is also responsible for preparing the ritual equipment (set and props) used throughout the performance. Meanwhile, *arung* helps in terms of the food preparation to serve and to be part of the feasts.

The patient is the individual experiencing a disease caused by *tulah*, and he or she will require the service of the *kalamat* to heal them by performing the ritual theatre *igal panangsang*. The villagers are the crowd comprising guests who either support the patient or the patient's family involved. They are also the audience of the ritual theatre and also the performers. Other than giving life to the performance of the theatre, the crowd's presence can also affect the healing process. This is because it is believed that the more people come to attend, the better the recovery process, as they will stimulate the *ombo'* to also be present in the performance.

#### **4.1 The dramatic structure of *igal panangsang* and the spiritual self-integrity journey of ethnic Bajau**

The performance of the ritual theatre *igal panangsang* is held when a decision is reached collectively by the ethnic Bajau who inhabits the village of Bum Bum Island, especially in Kampung Gelam-Gelam, Semporna, Sabah. *Kalamat* will steer the performance through the embodiment of the *ombo'* who will start the performance with the dance called *igal tabawan*. *Igal tabawan* is a delicate dance accompanied by the movements of the feet and shoulders and a chant called *lugu'*.

The song *kallang* follows this by *tanjung kallang* (singer) as a signal for the *kalamat* to change the pace of the dance to *igal limbayan*. At this moment, the *ombo'* will enter the body of the *kalamat*. Having been possessed by the *ombo'*, *kalamat* will act more aggressively by changing the tempo to *igal panangsang*, as shown in Figure 4.

Based on the dramatic structure shown in Figure 4, *mantlak* is the preliminary stage of *igal panangsang*. *Mantlak* is a form of chanting (prayer) recited by the *kalamat* as a form of calling to the *ombo'* so that *igal panangsang* can be conducted ideally. The function is to ask for the *ombo's* blessings and permission so that the performance is blessed. *Kalamat* will also recite the *mantlak* for the patient as an effort of communication between the *kalamat* and *ombo'*, who also possessed the patient to identify the root cause of the disease. If the disease comes from the curse of supernatural entities (ancestors' souls),



then the *mantlak* also functions as a cure for the disease suffered by the patient. The *kalamat* and *ombo'* communication will continue until the performance ends. The next stage is *tagunggu'*, right after the *kalamat* recites *mantlak*. At this stage, the musicians will play their part by performing *tagunggu'*, also known as *titikan* (musical notes), a compilation of music played using the traditional musical instrument *kulintangan*. The performance is led by the head of the musicians, who will also interact with the *ombo'* to ensure that the music played will follow the wish of the *ombo'*. After the *tagunggu'* is approved by the *ombo'*, the next stage is what is known as *magpa-igal*, the stage where conflict is shown through the interchanging three types of *igal*. They are known as *igal lellang*, *igal limbayan*, and *igal tabawan*, referring to three types of *ombo'* that have entered the performer's body. The three *igals* representing three different *ombo'* will communicate with the *kalamat* through the performer's body.

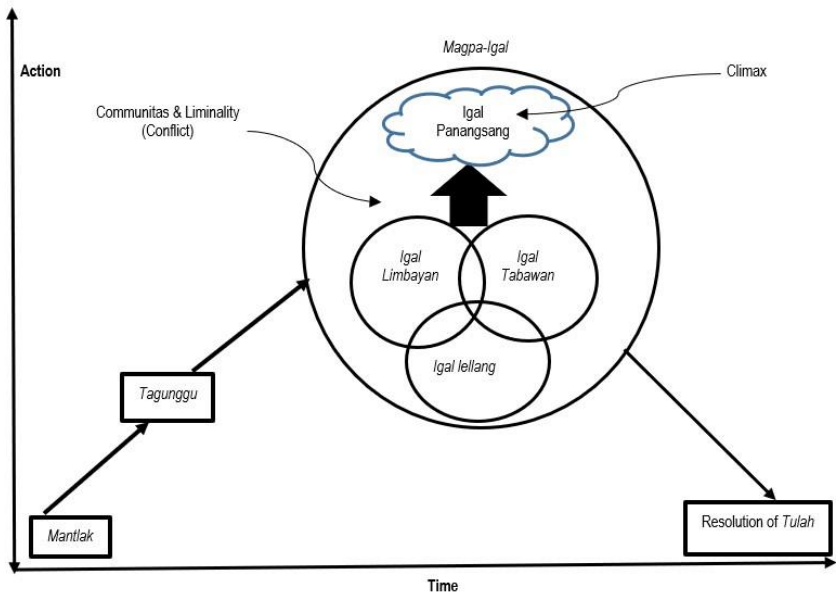


Fig. 4: The spiritual self-integrity portrayal of the ethnic Bajau through communitas and liminality in the dramatic structure of the ritual theatre *igal panangsang* (Source: Authors, 2023)

The conflict that combines the *mantlak*, *tagunggu'*, and *magpa-igal* shows how verbal conflict happens among the performers through the communication between the performers and the *ombo'*. First, an interaction happens between the *kalamat* and the *ombo'* (*lellang*, *limbayan*, and *tabawan*) so that it will be present in the performance and possess the dancers. The *ombo'*'s presence can be felt when there is a change in the

performers' movements, signifying that the performers have become sub-conscious or fallen into a trance state. It will climax when the *ombo'* panangsang is present and possesses the performers' bodies. *Ombo'* panangsang will communicate with the *kalamat* about the cause of the disease caused by the *tulah* and propose the healing method of *tulah*. The presence of the patient, his or her family, and the crowd plays an essential role at the stage of *mappa-igal* as they can stimulate *igal limbayan*, *igal lellang*, and *igal tabawan* to be around in the performance and possess the body of the performers (patient) and to change the movement to *igal panangsang*.

The climax happens when all the performers are in the trance possession state, especially when the patient is marked by the change of the dance movement called *igal panangsang*. At this stage, the performer's consciousness is believed to be possessed by the *ombo'* from djinns and the spirit of the ancestors. The *kalamat* will prepare herself to enter the supernatural world by giving way to the *ombo'* to enter the body. Through the reincarnation of the *ombo'*, the cause of the disease and the cure will be exposed through the communication between the *kalamat* and the patient. In general, verbal communication is shown in the form of screaming or dialogue between the *kalamat* and the evil entities possessing the body of the performers (patients). *Kalamat*, assisted by the *dayang-dayang*, will translate the meaning of the communication to the audience present, especially the patient's family. If evil entities cause the cause of the disease, then some agreement needs to be sealed between the entities and the patient's family. At this point, it also shows verbal and non-verbal communication intertwined with screaming and yelling, especially between the *kalamat* and the patient.

The resolution for *tulah* sees the movement of *igal panangsang* by performers (patient) becoming slower, slower, and weakened following the actions of supernatural beings who slowly begin to leave the patient's body. At this time, the *kalamat* will wipe the tears on the patient's face to bring the patient back to consciousness as they allow the *ombo'* to leave the patient's body. After that, the *kalamat* will clarify the negotiation of the agreement sealed by the supernatural entities (as medicine for the patient's healing or recovery) to the members of the family present. All the terms in the agreement decided by the djinn or spirit of the ancestors should be fulfilled soon so that the disease can be treated. Some agreement lists involve an apology if the patient and the family have wronged others. Other than that, the feast to serve the spirit of ancestors also needs to be done. If the agreement is violated, it is believed that the patient will experience worse pain which can be fatal. Thus, having sealed the agreement between the *kalamat* and the patient's family, the *kalamat* will read the last chant blown into the water and give it to the patient to drink. Right afterward, the healing process comes to an end.

## 5.0 Discussion

According to the analysis of the dramatic structure of ritual theatre *igal*, as shown in Figure 4, The *panangsang* is the climax of the performance, which is when the *kalamat* is possessed by the *ombo'*. The function of *mappa-igal* is as a sign of gratitude to the sea jinn

who controls the entire area in the district of Semporna. *Igal lellang*, *igal tabawan*, and *igal limbayan* are the incarnations of marine life embodied on the performer's body, as shown in Figure 5.

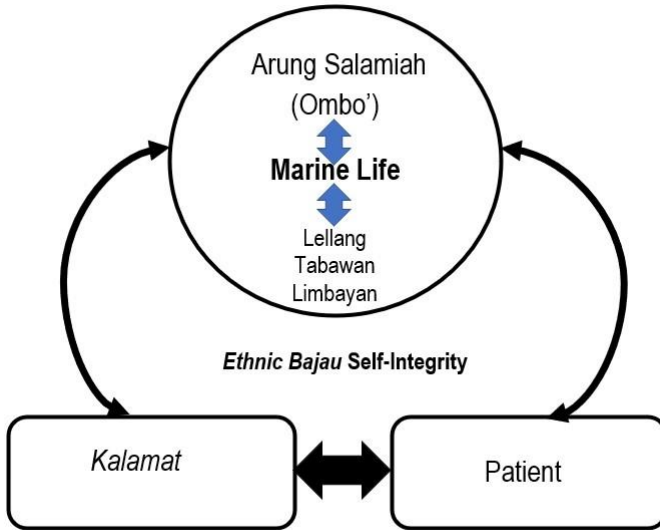


Fig. 5: Ocean realm as the self-integrity of ethnic Bajau  
(Source: Authors, 2023)

As shown in Figure 5, according to the ethnic Bajau beliefs, if the *kalamat* and the other performer have been possessed by the spirit of the sea lord, then this indicates that the sea spirit has been satisfied with the performance. Thus, the spiritual journey taken by the performer, who is also a patient in the *igal panangsang* ritual theatre, explains that the identity of the ethnic Bajau is the sailor and the ocean realm, which refers to the spirit of the ethnic Bajau ancestors represented by Arung Salamiah (*ombo'*), who changed into the form of marine life after her death, being called back to engage in the *igal panangsang* ritual theatre. The purpose is to assist in the healing process of diseases experienced by the descendants of the ethnic Bajau community. The supernatural entity feels they are still remembered and celebrated, and to show that the ancestors always guarded their inheritance.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Thus, it is evident that the spiritual aspect is a strong foundation and has contributed significantly to the formation of the self-integrity of ethnic Bajau depicted through the performance of the ritual theatre named *igal*. Thus, from the belief in the harmonious

relationship between the physical and the metaphysical beings, it is very reasonable to defend this belief regarding the core self-integrity of the ethnic Bajau. It successfully contributes to more substantial harmony among the ethnic Bajau and the Malaysians in general. Indeed, the role of *igal* ritual theatre in shaping self-integrity should be emphasized so that the heritage and legacy can continue for the next generations.

## Acknowledgement

This research wanted to acknowledge the Malay Archipelago Glokal Wisdom (MAGIS) Research Initiative Group, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor, Malaysia, where the study was conducted. Fully appreciate to Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education for the financial support under FRGS Grant with a Sponsorship Grant Number 2019-0131-107-02 and registered under Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia file number (FRGS/1/2019/SS108/UPSI/02/1). Our heartfelt appreciation also goes to the ethnic Bajau in Sabah, Malaysia, for their assistance in providing and supporting the valuable data and information.

## Article Contribution to Related Field of Study

State how this article has contributed to the related field of behavioural culture, heritage and performance studies.

## Authors Declaration

This article is an extended version of the original conference paper published in the E-BPJ, Vol 8(23), Mar, 2023, pp.87-91.

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