

‘Igal’ Ritual Theatre: ‘High-Value Culture’ from DAKEN21 and Malaysia MADANI Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper explores the *igal* ritual theatre practised by the Bajau ethnic group in Sabah, Malaysia, that is performed to heal for the community's well-being and focuses on the concept of high-value culture, which goes hand in hand with the thrust of 'Malaysia MADANI' and National Cultural Policy 2021 (DAKEN21). The ethnographic method is applied through an 'inductive phenomenological character' approach involving descriptive research design exploration and case studies. The relationship of six *igal* ritual theatre elements and their meaning, high-value culture, and the concept of 'Malaysia Madani' is highlighted to demonstrate the community's well-being and ensure the quality of life.

Keywords: *Igal*; ritual theatre; high-value culture; Malaysia MADANI

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1.0 Introduction

The Bajau ethnic group in the state of Sabah is divided into two groups, namely the *Bajau Darat*, known as *Bajau Sama* in the Kota Belud district and the *Bajau Laut*, who mostly live on the East Coast of Sabah, such as the Lahad Datu, Kunak, Tawau and Semporna districts. Ethnic *Bajau* in the Semporna district can be classified into four categories based on their settlement location, the first being 'Bajau Laut-Darat' who live permanently in Kampung Air Bangau-Bangau or the mainland of Semporna district, such as in Kampung Kabogan, Kampung Tampi-Tampi Timbayan and surroundings. Second, the 'Bajau Laut-Pulau' who live permanently in the islands around Semporna district, such as Bum Bum Island (Labuan Haji), Mabul Island, Omadal Island, Sibangkat Island, Dinawan Island and Gusungan Island. The third 'Bajau Laut-Lau' live permanently in the Tun Sakaran Marine Park, and the fourth is the 'Bajau Laut-Terapung' who live in boats and live a nomadic or nomadic life in the waters of the islands around Semporna district (Abdul Rahman, 2024).

The *Bajau* ethnic group, especially in the Semporna district, still preserves their culture and customs based on traditional beliefs through ritual ceremonies. There are different types of rituals performed for different purposes. This ritual is usually related to the *Bajau Laut* ethnic life norms that emphasize the value of harmony between the life of physical reality and metaphysical reality or the supernatural (Mohd Anis et al., 2017 & Hanafi Husin, 2008). One of the ritual ceremonies that the *Bajau Laut* ethnic group still practices is *igal*. It is a form of performance in the form of information transmission between the *kalamat* (shaman), the patient and the audience for healing. *Igal panangsang* is a ritual specifically performed to heal diseases caused by the plague (tulah). *Kalamat* is usually a woman with an extraordinary ability to connect with the supernatural to cure illness.

Igal ritual theatre originates from ceremonies related to procedures in religious ceremonies that the community of practitioners has practised since animism. Animism is a belief in the existence of supernatural beings that influence life. It is a form of religion that originates from the beliefs or beliefs of primitive people who think that the surrounding world, that is, all things, whether animate or inanimate, have souls. Based on that belief, the Bajau ethnic group prepares dishes for a ritual ceremony called *igal* ritual theatre. The purpose is to respect and ask for permission from ethereal beings to approve their actions, especially in curing diseases. Healing is believed to occur due to belief in the spiritual power that intervenes in the healing process through the *igal* ritual theatre method (Rahman, 2020).

Thus, this study aims to unravel the relationship between the elements of *igal* ritual theatre performance with *Dasar Kebudayaan Negara 2021* (DAKEN21) or National Cultural Policy 2021 and Malaysia MADANI. Therefore, the study's objective is to assert that the *igal* ritual theatre element reflects the culture of high values contained in the ten core values of DAKEN21 and upholds the six principles of Malaysia MADANI values. The *igal* ritual theatre elements reflect a culture of high values that aligns with the goal of DAKEN21, which is heralded in the Malaysia MADANI concept to achieve the community's well-being and improve the quality of life.

2.0 Literature Review

Igal is a ritual theatre in traditional performing arts that combines dance, singing, music and acting elements. Ritual theatre *igal* resulted from ritual ceremonies practised by the *Bajau* ethnic group, especially in Semporna, Sabah, for healing purposes. The *Bajau* ethnic group is the second largest race in Sabah, and they inhabit almost the entire area of Sabah (Sharifuddin Zainal et al., 2023). The primary function of *igal* ritual theatre is to cure illness and find the cause and way to solve the problem of illness experienced by the patient for the community's well-being. The *Bajau* ethnic group believes this medical method is a healing process involving the power of ethereal beings (Mohd Anis et al., 2017 & Hanafi Husin, 2008; Abdul Rahman, 2023).

MADANI means progressing in terms of thought, spirituality, material things (not society and generation), and efforts to shape society by instilling noble family values that focus on building society. On 19 January 2023, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim announced Malaysia MADANI as a policy framework to re-establish the country as prosperous and respected. With the theme of 'Building a Civilized Malaysia', the concept introduced by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim rests on six main pillars: sustainability, innovation, creativity, respect, Believing (trust) and kindness (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia Official Website, 2024).

Indeed, Malaysia MADANI is an integrated and holistic guide and effort as a more humane administrative policy. Malaysia MADANI relies on mutual respect, celebrates diversity and becomes a field of dialogue between civilizations. The framework of Malaysia MADANI is the driver of the existence of an advanced and civilized society based on knowledge, tradition, treasures and local wisdom.

Referring to the National Cultural Policy 2021 (DAKEN21), the concept of national culture is a way of life that cuts across the cultures of tribes and ethnicities that pattern cultural practices at the national level. National culture is our common property, which is the practice and pride of Malaysians no matter where they are. In a multi-tribal and ethnic country like Malaysia, three (3) dimensions come together and strengthen it as a polity (DAKEN, 2021):

1. District or physical space with clear political boundaries;
2. The state system, including the Constitution, and socio-economic and political related matters; and
3. The presence of a shared culture at the national level that cuts across tribal and ethnic cultures - the dimension that needs to be strengthened.

This third dimension is essential in the nation-building process. It needs to be planned based on a clear direction because the concept of nation-building must be in line with the Federal Constitution, which has a master program system for the economy and the political and social system of the country (Dasar Kebudayaan Negara, 2021). In line with the aspiration of a 'Developed Country with Cultured People', this policy outlines four (4) principles with seven (7) central cores as a focus in planning cultural functions towards the catalyst of creative and highly personalized human development, a competitive economy and a conducive environment. The essence of DAKEN21 is to direct the country to be

advanced in all sectors, whether social, economic, educational, human capital or other matters that touch the harmony and creativity of society. DAKEN21 is a guide and reference for all parties and stakeholders to elevate and prioritize cultural elements in national development programs. Cultural and creative rights are also a priority in this policy. However, they must align with the commitment to preserve, conserve and protect the nation's cultural treasures and not conflict with the principles of DAKEN21, the Federal Constitution and *Rukun Negara* (Dasar Kebudayaan Negara, 2021).

Referring to DAKEN21, the vision presented is 'Leader of High-Value Cultural Ideas in the Formation of the Nation'. This National Cultural Policy serves as a guide in implementing various cultural development agendas and plans at all levels to ensure the formation of a developed nation with the practice of high-value culture. Meanwhile, the stated mission is to 'Strengthen the Nation's Civilization and National Civilization in Achieving Shared Prosperity.' procedure and level of intellectuality. This policy also promotes sustainability and cultural empowerment through science and technology to add value to the country's socio-economic development. The third DAKEN21 policy statement (3), 'Based on High-Value Culture and pure practice in religion,' emphasizes that high-value culture supporting procedures, etiquette, and intellectual level are the central core. Ten (10) Shared Values support a High-Value Culture: Spirituality, Goodness, Consensus, Glory, Equality, Well-Being, Loyalty, Honesty / Sincerity, Beauty and Cleanliness (Dasar Kebudayaan Negara, 2021).

Based on the literature review, the explanation of *iga*/ ritual theatre reflecting high-value culture is a research gap that has yet to be explored. The reflection aligns with the goals of DAKEN21 and the Malaysia MADANI concept to achieve the community's well-being and improve the quality of life.

3.0 Methodology

Accordingly, the ethnographic method is applied through an 'inductive phenomenological character' approach involving descriptive research design exploration and case studies. Ethnography is a research strategy created by anthropologists that focuses on the relationship between behaviour and culture. Clark Moschella (2023) defines ethnography as the direct study of a group of people for a period. The primary technique is participant observation and personal interviews. Surveying and collecting information from available documents is another way that this method is used to achieve its purpose. Ethnographers use qualitative and scientific methods that rely on observation to gather non-numerical data. When conducting an ethnographic study, the researcher focuses on interpreting and describing cultural or social groups, considering their common characteristics. Aspects such as language, social relations, religious or political beliefs, and behaviour are the objects of observation.

The phenomenological character approach is an ethnographer's effort to understand the emic perspective, which explains a cultural phenomenon through the perspective of the studied community. It is designed to describe and interpret social phenomena from the

point of view of the protagonist himself. The application of the inductive character approach is based on experience and direct exploration of the social environment. Participant observation and interviews with informants are the main techniques for obtaining data on *igal* ritual theatre performances (Abdul Rahman, 2023). In the observation method, the researcher gains the group's trust by participating in it and thus can ask questions that he thinks are appropriate and examine the behaviour.

Meanwhile, the interview technique is a personal meeting with informants or members of different groups to obtain information about their culture and customs related to *igal* ritual theatre. The focus of data collection is on the elements of *the igal* ritual theatre performance and the meaning behind its performance. From the information gathered, conceptual categories were created to create order and connection between high-value culture, *igal* ritual theatre DAKEN21 and the concept of Malaysia MADANI.

4.0 Results

Igal ritual theatre is performed to heal the disease known as *tulah* (condemnation). The Bajau ethnic group believes that *tulah* is a calamity that occurs due to a violation of customs and taboos in the community that are related to ethereal beings. In addition, *tulah* can also occur when a person does bad things, such as shown in table 1:

Table 1: Bad things that can cause *tulah*

No.	Cause of <i>Tulah</i>
1	Disrespecting both parents
2	Disrespect others
3	Disrespecting ethereal beings by disturbing their dwellings
4	Breaking taboos in society
5	Harassing or hurting others
6	Accusing others of doing evil without solid evidence

(Source: Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2024)

So, *tulah* is believed to happen when an individual commits an evil deed, i.e. violates rules such as breaking taboos, disturbing the area of spirits, hurting others, going against what parents say or talking about something illegal. Therefore, a person affected by the *tulah* will find a *kalamat* (shaman) for healing. *Kalamat* is an individual who has a unique ability to communicate with ethereal beings to cure diseases caused by the *tulah*. *Kalamat* performs the healing process by performing the *igal panangsang* ritual theatre.

As explained by Rahman (2020) by referring to Fig. 1, a characteristic feature in drama/theatre is the conflict that causes a crisis between the characters. Aspects of character in *igal* ritual theatre are good and evil spirits. From the performance aspect, the performers/actors are shamans, patients and the audience involved. A shaman (*kalamat*) is an individual who can see these subtle beings who are said to be capable and have the privilege of curing diseases caused by the plague. The way to cure differs based on the holdings carried by the ethereal being or the individual. *Kalamat*, who has this privilege, will

be regarded as noble because it can help solve problems for the community members' well-being. Thus, until now, the Bajau ethnic group still believes in *kalamat* in traditional medicine, especially in treating patients affected by evil spirits (*tulah*).

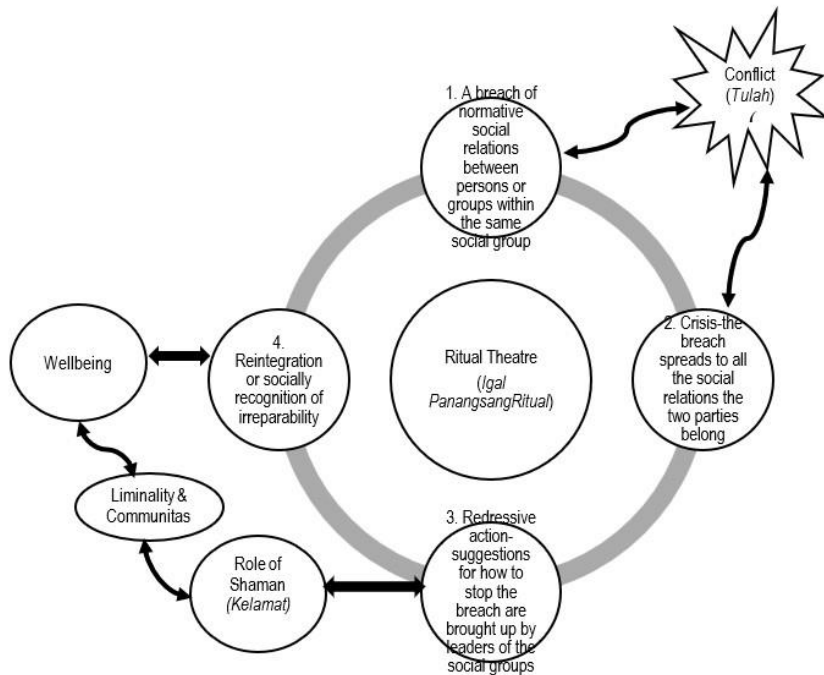


Figure 1: *Communitas and liminality in igal ritual as a ritual theatre*
(Source: Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2020)

4.1 *Igal* Ritual Theatre

Igal ritual theatre as a traditional performing art has elements as shown in Fig. 2. Referring to Fig. 2, the performance of *igal* departs from the ritual ceremony practised by the Bajau community, especially in Semporna, Sabah, for the purpose of healing. The variety of theatrical elements makes the *igal* ritual ceremony also referred to as a theatrical performance. The primary function of *igal* ritual theatre is to cure illness and find the cause and way to solve the problem of illness experienced by the patient for the community's well-being. The Bajau ethnic group believes this medicine method is a healing process involving the power of ethereal beings. Departing from the belief in evil and good spirits, it gives rise to crisis or conflict in society, manifested through *igal* ritual theatre performance, as explained in Fig.1 above. In the traditional context, performing arts is also a ritual ceremony commonly used for healing. So, a ritual performance is a ceremony that results from an action or desire to find a relationship with the unseen world (metaphysics) for a specific

purpose that is usually for the good, well-being and tranquillity of the practitioner (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2012).

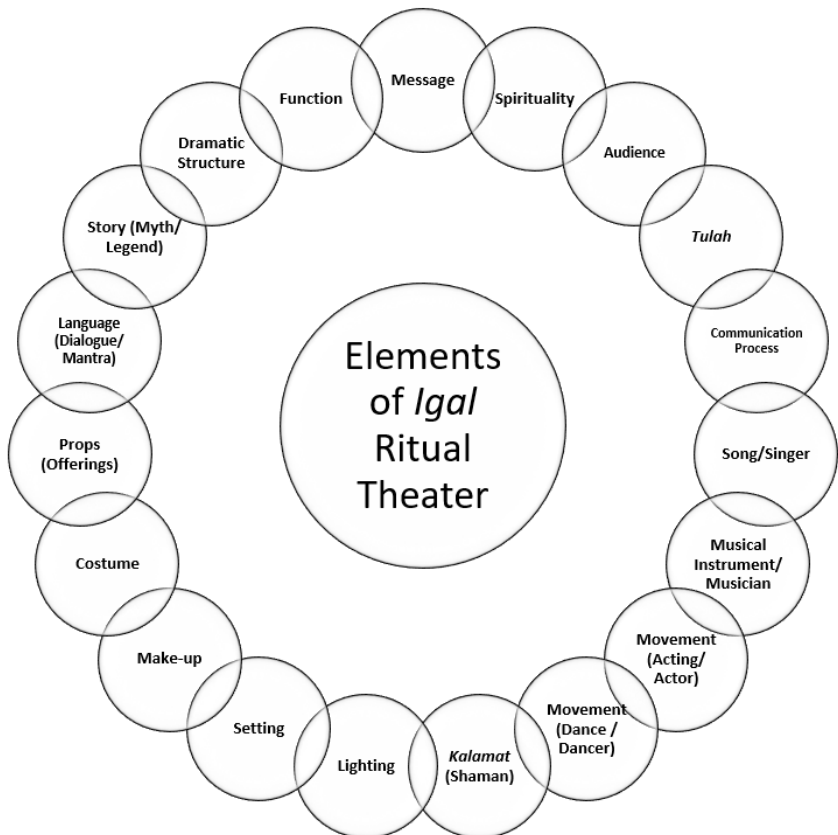


Figure. 2: Elements of *igal* ritual theatre
(Source: Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2024)

Based on that, the Bajau ethnic group believes that *kalamat* can connect with ethereal beings who can lead the *igal* ritual theatre. For the Bajau ethnic group, no one can dispute a *kalamat*'s ability because he knows everything that happens, especially involving metaphysical phenomena. *Kalamat* is also responsible for handling all the elements of *igal* ritual theatre performances, which are essential in ensuring the event of the ceremony is a healing process. In addition, *kalamat* also serves as a source of reference for the Bajau ethnic group in terms of social and religious life.

4.2 The performance

The *igal* ritual theatre performance is led by a shaman known as a *kalamat* in treating patients affected by the plague (*tulah*). During the performance, *kalamat* will interact with ethereal beings (*ombo'*) who help in the healing process through communication that only *kalamat* can understand. Then, the *kalamat* will convey the meaning of the communication with the *ombo'* in a language the audience understands through her assistants, known as *dayang-dayang* (women). *Dayang-dayang* translates the communication between *kalamat* and *ombo'* to the patient, the patient's family and all the audience present. This healing process involves aspects of spirituality that allow *kalamat* to interact with ethereal beings known as *ombo'* (Abdul Rahman, 2023).

Thus, offerings are an essential element in *igal* ritual theatre performances to call *ombo'* to be present in the performance. Therefore, the *kalamat* is also assisted by *Otok* (male) and *Arung* (female), who are responsible for the dishes required by the *ombo'*. The prepared dishes consist of glutinous rice, *kuih apam*, water and boiled eggs. Other offerings are also prepared, such as candles, perfume, *bertih* (roasted grain rice), *mayang pinang* (nut cluster), *kain kuning* (yellow cloth), *kain merah* (red cloth) and *kain hijau* (green cloth). Incense will be burned and smoked around the performance space and towards the patients. *Otok* helps handle the technical aspects, namely preparing props and all the performance requirements, ensuring the ceremony's punctuality, and providing the music requirements. Meanwhile, *Arung* helps prepare food for the banquet and feasting process.

The patient is an individual suffering from a disease caused by the *tulah*. *Kalamat* needs the services to cure the disease by performing the *igal panangsang* ritual theatre performance.

The audience consists of villagers who are present as guests to support patients and family members who have been struck by calamity. The audience's presence is vital in influencing the efficacy of the healing process because the more guests present, the more influential the healing process will be because it can stimulate the *ombo'* to attend the performance.

Table 2: Purpose of *igal* ritual theatre for healing

No.	Purposes
1	To identify the type of disease experienced by the patient
2	To identify the cause of the disease
3	To identify the type of subtle beings that bother the patient
4	To suggest the appropriate medicine for healing

(Source: Researcher 2024)

After the performance, the *kalamat* will explain the negotiation of the agreement signed with the *ombo'* (spiritual being) to the patient's family members. All conditions in the agreement that the *ombo'* has set must be fulfilled for the patient to recover. The core of the agreement is that the patient and his family must apologize for having made a mistake. The way is to perform a thanksgiving feast for the feast of ethereal beings. At the end of

the performance, the *kalamat* will recite the mantra while blowing into the water given to the patient to drink. Thus, in general, *igal* ritual theatre performance is a healing process whose purpose is as shown in table 2:

5.0 Discussion

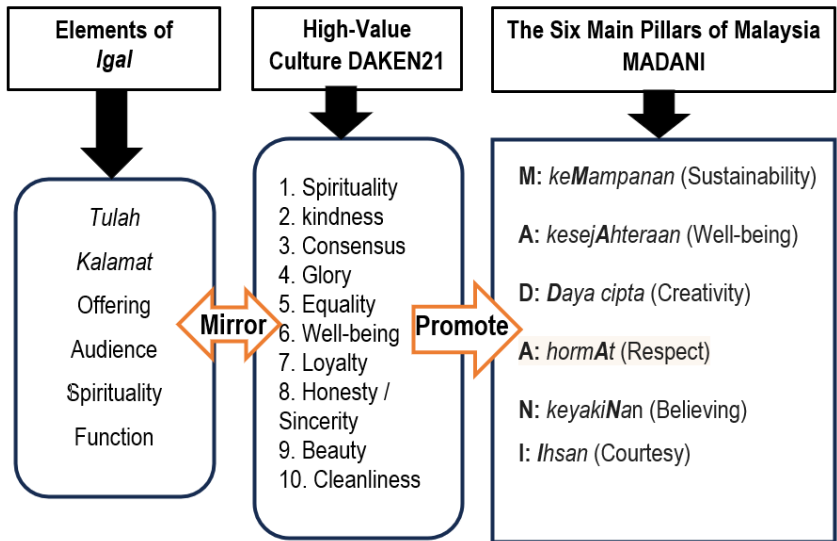


Figure 3. Reflection of *igal*'s high-value culture in DAKEN21 and Malaysia MADANI
(Source: Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2024)

The discussion of this study focuses on the six elements of *igal* ritual theatre and the concept of high-value culture, which goes hand in hand with the thrust of Malaysia MADANI. High-value culture and pure practices in religion and culture are fundamental principles in the National Cultural Policy 2021 (DAKEN21), which supports procedures, etiquette and the level of intellectuality as the main elements. DAKEN21 outlines ten shared values that support a culture of high values that go hand in hand with the six core values of Madani Malaysia: compactness, well-being, creativity, respect, believing and courtesy. The discussion about that is referring to the following Fig. 3:

Referring to Fig. 3, the concept of *tulah* forms the Bajau ethnic thought pattern to not do bad things to fellow creatures, whether in the physical or metaphysical world. If a community member is affected by the *tulah*, meeting with the *kalamat* for healing is necessary.



Figure 4. Reflection of *tulah*

Referring to Fig. 4, This concept reflects DAKEN21's High-Value Culture from a spiritual aspect that emphasizes awareness of the values in humans that balance physical and mental life to build perfect human qualities. In addition, it reflects the aspect of beauty that is aware of the perfection of God's creation and inspires all forms of artwork, human actions, and thoughts. Beauty is essential in planning to maintain authenticity and not pollute, damage and destroy nature. It upholds the pillar of believing in Malaysia MADANI, a belief closely related to trust and a pledge of moral responsibility in the world and the afterlife.

In the *Bajau* ethnic context, *kalamat* plays a role in society as a traditional leader, ceremonial leader, mediator, healer, teacher, and reference expert. The role played by *kalamat* reflects the high-value culture of honour, honesty, loyalty and virtue as outlined in DAKEN21.



Figure 5. Reflection of *kalamat*

As shown in Fig. 5, *kalamat* is seen as a knowledgeable person with high regard for knowledge, which is the basis of personal and community development. Culture is encouraged, built and nurtured. *Kalamat* must always be honest and sincere in shouldering his responsibilities and have a straight heart. This attitude will set aside personal considerations, resist greed and purify practice for the true purpose of life. *Kalamat* is also a person who is loyal, steadfast, trustworthy, and obedient, and he does not contradict or violate the instructions of his religious beliefs and duties. Loyalty is not only focused on friendship with fellow human beings, but loyalty is also the nature of devotion and undivided love for the country. Referring to the role and responsibility of *kalamat*, she is also virtuous. Her role reveals the subtlety, order, and sincerity of discretion and her character and common sense, which form the basis of community relationships. A reflection of high-value culture, the *kalamat* upholds the concept of courtesy, respect and creativity in Malaysia MADANI. The courtesy attitude in *kalamat* is always concerned and compassionate about

the problems experienced in the community. It shows an attitude of *adab* and respect between *kalamat* and community members who continually protect the dignity of fellow creatures. *Kalamat* also has the potential for creativity when performing the *igal* ritual theatre, a beautiful work of art inspired by the creation of performances orchestrated by ethereal beings.

The performance in the *igal* ritual theatre aims to call the *ombo'* (spiritual beings) to attend the performance and heal the patient. It is based on the *Bajau* ethnic belief that the presence of ethereal beings must be welcomed to enliven the performance. The offerings provided are food, drinks, clothes and other equipment from the environment where the *igal* ritual theatre practitioners live.



Figure 6. Reflection of offerings

Fig. 6 shows that the concept of taboos plays an essential role in preparing dishes that emphasize aspects of cleanliness and respect, which are cultural characteristics of high value outlined in DAKEN21. Cleanliness refers to pure practices and a well-maintained, beautiful, organized and systematic environment that creates a harmonious and calm atmosphere. Cleanliness, from a deeper perspective, is related to a clean soul, integrity, and the practice of good values. These values are essential in ensuring the occurrence and efficacy of the healing process. It upholds the value of respect in Malaysia MADANI, which carries the connotation of human dignity preceded by manners.

The audience also plays a vital role in the healing process of *igal* ritual theatre. Therefore, this performance is also known as communal healing, which means that healing occurs with the involvement of all community members. In this regard, the audience reflects high cultural values from the perspective of consensus, kindness, and equality, as shown in Fig. 7.

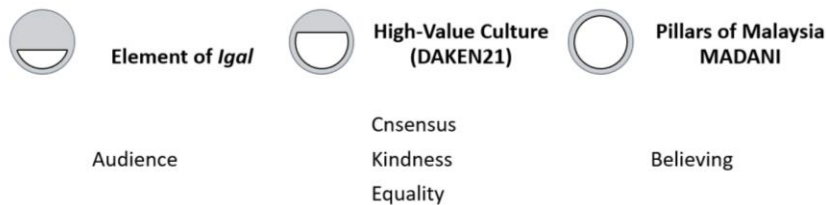


Figure 7. Reflection of audience

Consensus refers to reaching decisions, actions, and joint responsibilities borne not only by the *kalamat* and the patient but also by the audience, which consists of villagers

living in the same environmental space. This value embodies neighbourly living, cooperation and mutual aid. The embodiment of these values expresses *budi*, which is about subtlety, order, and sincerity of discretion, as well as character and common sense, which are the basis of community relationships. The expression reflects equality, which refers to justice in balancing the socio-economic life of the community. Indeed, the culture of high values in the ritual theatre audience upholds the pillar of believing in Malaysia MADANI, which is closely related to trust, a pledge of moral responsibility in the world and the afterlife.

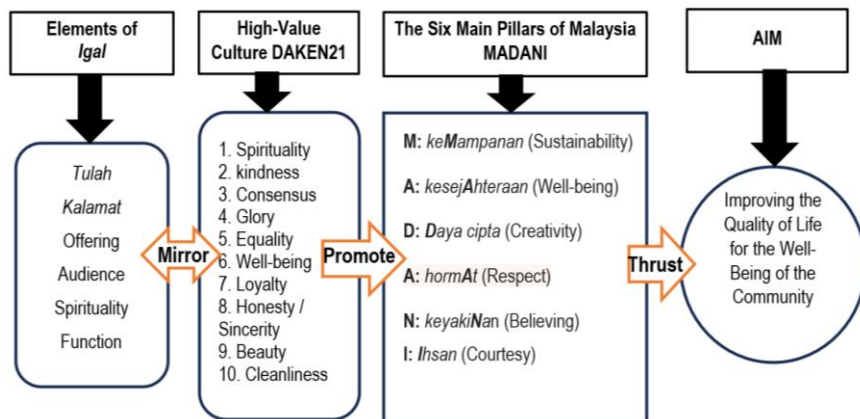


Figure 8. The whole function of the *ighal* ritual theatre is to improve the quality of life
(Source: Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2024)

In addition, spiritual factors also play a role in changing the social and cultural status of *ighal* ritual theatre practitioners. Based on that, the healing aspect in *ighal* ritual theatre is also categorized as faith healing, which refers to ritual practices related to religious beliefs. Healing occurs due to belief in the spiritual power that intervenes in the healing process. It is aligned with the culture of high values of spirituality and loyalty in DAKEN21, which is the awareness of values in human beings that balance physical and mental life to build perfect human qualities. On the other hand, loyalty demands loyalty, steadfastness, trust and obedience, not contradicting and breaking instructions. Loyalty is not only focused on friendship with fellow human beings, but loyalty is also an undivided devotion.

As shown in Fig. 8, the high cultural values uphold the pillars of integrity and belief in Malaysia MADANI. Well-being emphasizes the balance of the physical and metaphysical cosmos, while believing is closely related to trust and moral responsibility in the world and the hereafter. In the traditional context, *ighal* ritual theatre serves healing purposes and carries religious, educational, social interaction and entertainment functions.

6.0 Conclusion

The study's conclusion succeeded in disseminating the high-value culture, which is reflected through several elements of *igal* ritual theatre and is in line with DAKEN21 as desired in the concept of Malaysia MADANI. *Igal* ritual theatre serves healing purposes and carries religious, educational, social interaction and entertainment functions. Indeed, all those functions reflect the ten characteristics of high-value culture in DAKEN21 and uphold the six main pillars of Malaysia MADANI. The ultimate goal is to improve the quality of life for the community's well-being.

6.1 Limitation of Research

The limitations of this study are that it only focuses on the aspect of high-value culture in the six elements of *igal* ritual theatre performance that describe the ten core values of DAKEN21 and the six principles of Malaysian MADANI values in general.

6.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Suggestions for future studies can be focused on other elements of *Igal* ritual theatre by emphasizing the relationship between *Igal* ritual theatre and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The issue concerns the propriety of *igal* ritual theatre performance to be preserved because it supports efforts to improve the community from social and economic aspects. It is also suggested that the focus be placed on placing the *igal* ritual theatre in the National Heritage Act and heritage preservation efforts.

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Article Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper presents the relationship between *Igal* ritual theatre as a performing arts heritage with the agenda of DAKEN21 and Malaysia MADANI, which can provide well-being to the community and preserve heritage.

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