

12th AMER International Conference on Quality of Life
The Magellan Sutura Resort, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, 26-28 Jan 2024

***Igal* Ritual Theatre: A cultural sustainable development goals (SDGs) perspective**

Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman^{1*}, Umi Kalsom Ahmad¹, Syahrul Fithri Musa¹, Numan Hayimasae²

** Corresponding Author*

¹ College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA UiTM, Malaysia

² Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand

mohdkipli@uitm.edu.my, umi130@uitm.edu.my, sfitri315@uitm.edu.my, hayimas@hotmail.com
Tel: 019-4755365

Abstract

This study explains the spiritual aspect of *igal* ritual theatre. It justifies the relationship between the concept of Cultural Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the role of the *igal* ritual theatre in the well-being of society and the preservation of heritage. This research applies the ethnographic method through an 'inductive phenomenological character' approach. The result explains how the *igal* ritual theatre relates to the concept of Cultural SDGs presented by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). This study affirms that *igal* ritual theatre aligns with the agenda of the Cultural SDGs to improve society and preserve heritage.

Keywords: *Igal* Ritual Theatre ; SDGs ; Spiritual ; Heritage

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2024. The Authors. Published for AMER & cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9i27.5565>

1.0 Introduction

Bajau is the second largest ethnic group in Sabah and is a group of 'Proto-Malays' who are maritime, meaning they have skills and Knowledge about the sea. They like to travel in the sea and live a nomadic life, and depend a lot on the products of the sea. They began to move to the land when economic activity occurred and sought forest products for survival. In terms of customs and culture, the Bajau ethnic group still adheres to the rules of their ancestors, such as the customs of eating, bathing, weddings, feasts, and even belief in the surrounding conditions inhabited by other beings. The purpose is to maintain the goodness of their lives continuously because they believe that every act needs to be done carefully and according to the traditions of generations to avoid accidents or *tulah* (plagues). From the belief in plagues, evil spirits, and good spirits, the crisis or conflict in society is manifested through *igal* ritual theatre.

According to Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman (2018), two main factors cause the *igal* ritual theatre performance to be marginalized, the first of which is the religious factor. The influence of Islamic and Christian beliefs among the Bajau ethnic group causes them to abandon the ritual practice because it is contrary to Islamic and Christian religious beliefs. Second, is the factor of modern Education that removes their confidence in the ability of legal ritual theater as a healing medium. Bajau ethnics now go to hospitals or clinics to solve their health problems through modern medical methods.

1.1 Problem Statement

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2024. The Authors. Published for AMER & cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9i27.5565>

Igal ritual theatre is increasingly marginalized due to the progress of modernization. Its traditional function as a method of healing diseases experienced by the community needs to be explored again in the current context. The importance of *igal* ritual theatre as a vehicle for the community's well-being should be given more attention. So, this study describes the spiritual aspect of *igal* ritual theatre performance and synthesizes the concept of Cultural Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the inductive phenomenological approach of *igal* ritual theatre for community well-being and heritage sustainability.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objective of this study is first to describe the spiritual journey that the players go through in the dramatic performance structure of the *igal* ritual theater. The second is to explain the relationship between the spiritual benefits of the *igal* ritual theater and the Cultural SDGs, and the third is to justify that the spiritual benefits of the *igal* ritual theater are in line with the five principles of values in the Cultural SDGs to improve the quality of life for the well-being of society.

2.0 Literature Review

Malaysia is a country that has a diverse cultural heritage resulting from various races and ethnicities. Owned cultural heritage needs to be defended and protected because it reflects the identity and symbol of a country.

2.1 Heritage

Heritage is something handed down from previous generations; in other words, the remains of ancestors or the remains of nature need to be preserved. Heritage also means remains, which are the pride and identification of a nation that belongs to it. The existence of cultural heritage in Malaysia has gone through a long historical process based on a national mainstream image. It has long been a common property, creating a sense of belonging among Malaysians. Heritage begins with the human instinct to keep something that has been used, passed as a sign of memories, and a source of nostalgia. In general, heritage can be divided into Tangible Heritage and Intangible Heritage. Tangible heritage can be seen and held statically or mobile, i.e., in the form of an image or artifact that can be felt by direct and precise touch. Meanwhile, Intangible Heritage is a priority area of heritage that includes a heritage that is 'not a thing' to be enjoyed by the human senses. Strictly speaking, Intangible Heritage means a human act or gesture that can be seen, touched, felt, smelled, or heard when done or exists but can no longer be enjoyed when it is gone or ends (Official Website, National Heritage Department, KPK Malaysia, 2023).

2.2 Sustainability

According to the 'World Commission on Environment and Development for the United Nations General Assembly in 1987', sustainability is the ability or capacity of something to maintain or preserve itself. In other words, sustainability is about what we need to live in the present without compromising the potential of people in the future to meet their needs (Vermont Folklife Center, 2022). Brundtland Commission, which is an organization that was established in 1983 to promote global sustainability, also has the same view by adding that in addition to emphasizing the ability of the next generation, the sustainability paradigm also includes the interaction between people with aspects of economic, social and environmental life (Scammon, 2022). So, studying *igal* ritual theatre is critical because it also involves social and cultural matters that should be preserved as an essential heritage for developing a nation's civilization.

2.3 Igal Ritual Theatre and Bajau Ethnicity

Igal ritual theatre is an Intangible Heritage in the form of traditional performing arts. The form of the performance is a combination of elements of dance, singing, music, and acting. This performance departs from the ritual ceremony practiced by the Bajau ethnic group, especially in Semporna, Sabah, for healing that involves the power of ethereal beings. 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 (Abdul Rahman, 2023).

Starting from that, *igal* ritual theatre originates from ceremonies related to procedures in religious ceremonies that the practicing community has practiced since animism. It is a pattern of actions that are usually very symbolic, such as certain forms of worship, sacrifice, and prohibitions. Rituals result from the desire to connect with the metaphysical world because humans naturally have religious emotions. Metaphysics is a spiritual science that studies supernatural things, the spiritual world. So, ritual performance is a ceremony that results from the action or desire to find a relationship with the spiritual world (metaphysics) for the well-being of the mind and the social life of the practitioner (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2015).

Man's relationship with nature will trigger creativity and an extraordinary ability to produce works of art. As a performing art, *igal* ritual theatre is also related to the four elements of the cosmos, namely earth, water, fire, and air. The artworks produced also symbolize their passion for the cosmology of the artist's religious beliefs. The artwork produced is also believed to have spirit or soul (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, 2020).

Concerning that belief, food and rituals are performed in *igal* ritual theatre performances. The purpose is to respect and ask permission from the ethereal beings to approve their actions, especially in curing disease. Accordingly, the healing aspect in *igal* ritual theatre is categorized as faith healing, which refers to ritual practices related to spiritual and religious beliefs. Healing occurs due to belief in the spiritual power that intervenes in the healing process.

2.4 Spirituality

As an intervention in the *igal* ritual theatre, the spiritual aspect is related to the broad concept of belief in something outside the self. Spirituality seeks to answer questions about the meaning of life, how humans relate to each other, and the truth about the universe, unravel the mysteries of the existence of other beings, and also involves belief in religion based on belief in a higher power. It also involves a holistic belief in the individual's relationship with others and the world.

Akbari (2018) explains that spirituality is a source of peace, comfort, and relief from stress for many people. Although there are different ways of looking for God or a higher power, for religious people, the spiritual aspect becomes a shield in facing life's challenges. The spiritual aspect provides many benefits to the health and well-being of human life, whose elements are related to the following things:

- Strengthening relationships with others.
- Have compassion and empathy for others.
- Appreciate the feeling of interconnectedness between humans and the environment.
- Enjoy spiritual happiness and peace of mind.

2.5 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Culture

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become the main focus of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) agenda. As a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) with a global mandate on culture, UNESCO is involved in unleashing the power of culture to achieve the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By driving sustainable impact, UNESCO advances the 17 SDGs through its six cultural conventions. Culture provides the necessary transformative dimension that ensures the sustainability of the development process. The integration of culture in development processes, strategies, and policies at the national level is well underway across a broad spectrum of public policies, from reducing poverty through jobs, skills, and employment in the cultural sector to strengthening quality education for all and social justice, to provide responses that related to the context to foster environmental sustainability. UNESCO provides comprehensive support to member states for the design, adaptation, and implementation of their public policies by developing mechanisms and tools to document and measure the impact of culture on sustainable development from an integrated and comprehensive perspective. Culture should not be considered a policy domain in isolation but rather a cross-cutting dimension that can foster a paradigm shift to reform policy-making towards an inclusive, people-centered, and context-related approach (UNESCO, 2022).

In conjunction with the 'World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, 21 May 2019, the Trusteeship Council Chamber, United Nations Headquarters, New York, has affirmed that the transformative power of culture for social inclusion, resilience, and sustainable development is increasingly recognized as key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda for 'Sustainable Development' marks a significant turning point in global efforts to address development challenges and opportunities as local authorities and communities take an increasingly important role in this global momentum, together with international and national players and other stakeholders whose related culture is also an essential component in human development, representing a source of identity, innovation and creativity for all and providing sustainable solutions to local and global challenges. Following that, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) presented a policy in response to achieving the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The policy guidance document presents various ways cultural heritage arts can support the Cultural Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The policy statement found in the document is based on the UN 2030 Agenda, which focuses on the 5Ps principles, namely People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership (Labadi, 2021).

The main policy focus is to leverage the power of heritage to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs, whose call is as follows:

- a. Knowledge and resources sent through inheritance to achieve the well-being of the 'People'.
- b. 'Culture-Nature' approach and environment-based solutions to achieve 'Planetary' well-being.
- c. Sharing the resources contained in heritage to achieve community 'Prosperity'.
- d. The connecting power of heritage for unity and social dialogue to achieve 'Peace' in the community.
- e. Medium of heritage sharing and its connection with all aspects of human life to create 'Partnership'.

3.0 Methodology

This research applies the ethnographic method as a strategy through an 'inductive phenomenological character' approach involving descriptive research design exploration and case studies. The phenomenological character approach is an ethnographer's effort to understand the emic perspective to explain a cultural phenomenon through the perspective of the studied society, which is designed to describe and interpret social phenomena from the protagonist's point of view. The inductive character approach is based on experience and direct exploration of the social environment. This study uses observation and interviews as the main techniques to obtain the necessary data. From the information gathered, conceptual categories are produced that establish order and connection between what is observed. The result is a network of hypotheses and concepts that explain the reality of the object of study.

Accordingly, the ethnographic method through the inductive phenomenological character approach is applied to minimize subjectivity. Field research involves establishing informants, interviewing informants, making ethnographic notes, asking descriptive questions, doing interview analysis, doing domain analysis, asking structural questions, doing taxonomic analysis, asking contrasting questions, doing component analysis, finding cultural themes, and writing an ethnography.

At the initial stage, library research is done to obtain information to increase understanding and enlightenment during subsequent research. Field research is conducted using two suitable methods to produce research findings. Observation and interview methods were used in full when the field study was conducted, which was located in Semporna, Sabah. The observational method is focused on watching *igal* ritual theatre performances conducted by Bajau ethnic practitioners and audiences. The interview method is used to get

information sources more directly and quickly from informants. This interview method uses two techniques that suit the research being conducted: focused and group interviews. These techniques help and support the information obtained during the observation interview with informants, namely the head practitioners of *igal* ritual theatre, which was conducted to obtain in-depth information about the study. The information obtained is filtered before being analyzed according to the appropriate analysis technique. Support equipment such as photo and voice recording equipment is used to the maximum so that the information to be collected can be manipulated as well as possible. For this writing, data analysis is focused on several essential elements of *igal* ritual theatre, namely the dramatic structure of the performance, kalamat (shaman), patients, offerings, and music. Meanwhile, the Cultural Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are examined through the analysis of spiritual symbols manifested by the *igal* ritual theatre that affirms the 5Ps (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships), which is the basis of the cultural heritage of the SDGs.

4.0 Findings

The *igal* ritual theatre performance is held when a decision has been reached collectively by the Bajau Laut ethnic group that inhabits the Bum Bum Island, especially in the Gelam-Gelam village, Semporna, Sabah. Kalamat will act as the leader who steers the show. The findings of this study only focus on the crucial elements in *igal* ritual theatre, namely performance structure, kalamat, patient, music, mantra, and offerings, as shown in Figure 1.

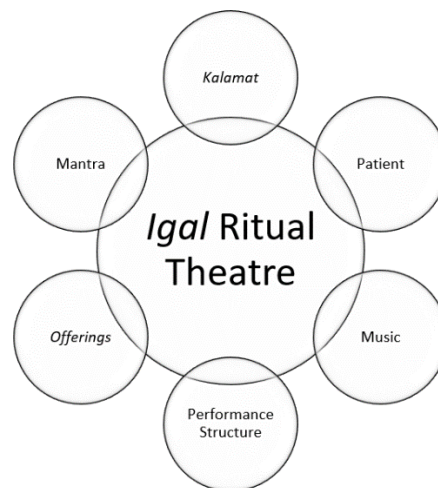


Figure 1. Elements of Igal Ritual Theatre

Of the ritual theatre elements explained in Figure 1, the spiritual aspect is the primary goal of the performance. The performance's dramatic structure emphasizes the players' spiritual journey to achieve their minds' well-being, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Spiritual Experience in the Dramatic Structure of *Igal* Ritual Theatre Performance

The dramatic structure shown in Figure 2 explains that *mantlak* is the initial stage of the performance, which is the recitation of mantras or prayers spoken by kalamat. At the same time, kalamat also prepares dishes to ask for blessings and permission from ethereal beings, namely *ombo'*. Mantlak is also read to patients to communicate between kalamat and *ombo'* during the healing process. Communication between kalamat and *ombo'* continues until the end of the performance.

The next stage is *tagunggu'* or *titikan* (musical notes), a compilation of the traditional musical instruments of the *kulintangan*. Tagunggu' is played immediately after the kalamat reciting the *mantlak*. The head Tagunggu' (head musician) will also interact with the *ombo'* to ensure that the rhythm of the music played is suitable according to the *ombo'*'s wishes.

The *magpa-igal* stage is a space of conflict between *igal lellang*, *igal limbayan* and *igal tabawan* which refers to the three types of *ombo'* that enter the patient's body and kalamat in turn. These three *igals* represent three different *ombo'* types that communicate with kalamat through the patient's body. When kalamat changes the dance rhythm to *igal limbayan*, her movements become more aggressive. After some time in such a state, the kalamat changes its dance moves to *igal panangsang* in line with the change in the song's rhythm to reach the performance's climax.

The presence of *ombo'* that permeates the patient's body and kalamat can be felt when a change in movement indicates a change in the player's consciousness from ordinary consciousness to the subconscious (trance)—the dramatic structure climaxes when the *ombo' panangsang* is present and invades the patient's body. *Ombo' panangsang* will communicate with kalamat about the cause of the disease caused by the *tulah* and suggest a cure.

The resolution stage of the *tulah* is marked by the movement of *igal panangsang*, which gradually slows down due to the action of subtle beings that begin to leave the patient's body. At this time, the kalamat will apply *air mata duyung* (offerings) to the patient's face to bring him/her back to ordinary consciousness. After that, the kalamat will explain the negotiation of the agreement signed with ethereal beings (as a medicine for the healing of evil spirits) to the family members of the patient present. Among the agreement's core was a thanksgiving feast or feasting on the spirits of the ancestors (*kenduri*). After that, the kalamat recites the mantra and then blows into the water, giving the patient a drink. Then, the healing process of *igal* ritual theatre is completed through the spiritual journey.

5.0 Discussion

The analysis clearly shows that the discussion of the elements of the *igal* ritual theatre is a platform for the performers to go through a spiritual experience. The purpose of the spiritual experience is to achieve the well-being of the mind, as shown in Figure 3.

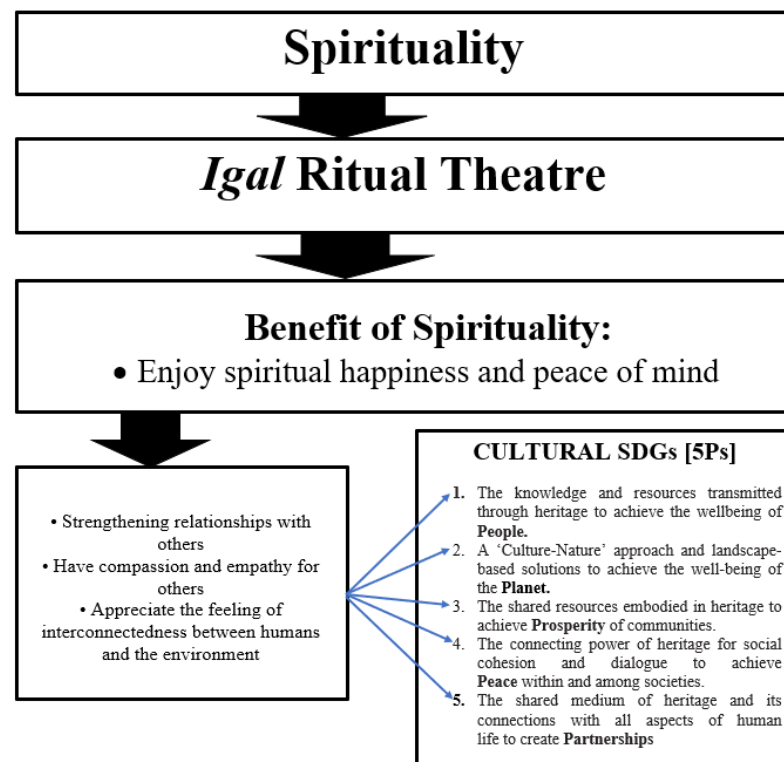


Figure 3. Spirituality in *Igal* Ritual Theatre and Cultural SDGs

As shown in Figure 3, the main benefit obtained by the community of performers through the spiritual experience of *igal* ritual theatre is being able to enjoy spiritual happiness and peace of mind, strengthen the relationship between the performers' community members and the audience from outside their group. The close relationship that is built makes them appreciate the sense of togetherness, compassion, and empathy towards their community group and other people. The spiritual experience of *igal* ritual theatre also fosters a

sense of interconnectedness between humans and the environment, primarily through taboos in preparing offerings from environmental sources to meet the *ombo*'s demand. The existence of the *ombo*', the embodiment of marine life, also fosters mutual respect and maintains ecological well-being in the community.

With that, the benefits of spiritual well-being align with the 5Ps goals in the Cultural SDGs, which are the agenda of ICOMOS. The performance of *igal* ritual theatre is a source of Knowledge transmitted through heritage to achieve the well-being of the people. The emphasis on the relationship between humans and nature in the *igal* ritual theater is a 'Culture-Nature' approach to solving problems based on the environment to achieve the planet's well-being. Implementing *igal* ritual theatre is an effort to share knowledge resources in heritage to achieve community prosperity. *Igal* ritual theatre is also a connecting force of heritage for unity and promoting social dialogue to achieve peace in the community. Finally, *igal* ritual theatre becomes a medium of heritage sharing linked to all aspects of human life to create a partnership limited to the practicing and global communities.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The spiritual aspect of *igal* ritual theatre is a religious belief that includes reciting prayers or mantras, offerings, and service to the community to cure diseases experienced by community members. Thus, the healing aspect of *igal* ritual theatre is 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. The purpose is for the well-being of the community from the aspect of the mind, relationships with other people, and the environment. This purpose aligns with the Cultural Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the community's well-being in improving the quality of life and heritage sustainability. Therefore, it is recommended that to prevent *igal* ritual theater performances from continuing to be marginalized, the awareness of various parties to research its importance in improving the social, economic, and ecological aspects needs to be strengthened.

6.1 Limitations of the study

This study is limited to discussing the spiritual aspect, which involves only six elements in the *igal* ritual theater, which is aligned with the five values of values in the Cultural SDGs found by ICOMOS. The spiritual relationship, elements of *igal* ritual theater, and Cultural SDGs are only explained through the dramatic structure of *igal* ritual theater performances with the aim of making this study more focused.

6.2 Suggestion for future research

Other elements of *igal* ritual theater performances can be explored for further research. The elements of *igal* ritual theater can also be studied from the aspect of its relationship with ecological well-being through taboos.

Acknowledgement

This research wanted to acknowledge the Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education for the financial support under the FRGS Grant with a Sponsorship Grant Number FRGS/1/2023/SSI06/UITM/01/1 and registered under Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia file number 600-RMC/FRGS 5/3 (069/2023). Fully appreciative also goes to Malay Archipelago Global Wisdom (MAGIS) Research Initiative Group, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UITM), Selangor, Malaysia, where the study was conducted. Our heartfelt appreciation also goes to the ethnic Bajau in Sabah, Malaysia, for their assistance in providing and supporting the valuable data and information.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper presents the relationship between *Igal* ritual theater as a performing art heritage with the agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that can provide well-being to the community and preserve heritage.

References

- Abdul Rahman, M.K., Zainal, S., Panan, A.P. and Moon, H.S. (2023). "Ritual Theatre Igal: Portrayal of the Ocean Realm Spiritual Self-Integrity of the Ethnic Bajau." *Asian Journal of Environment-Behaviour Studies*, v. 8, n. 24: pp. 71–83.
- Akbari M, Hossaini SM. (2018). "The relationship of spiritual health with quality of life, mental health, and burnout: The mediating role of emotional regulation." *Iran J Psychiatry*, v. 13, n. 1: pp. 22–31.
- Labadi, S. et al. (2021). *Heritage and the sustainable development goals: Policy guidance for heritage and development actors*. ICOMOS.
- Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman & Lena Farida Hussin Chin. (2018.). "Conservation of the Ngalai/Berasik Ritualistic Performance of Bajau/Sama' Ethnic Group for Sustainable Intangible Heritage." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. v. 8, n.2: pp. 35–46.
- Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman. (2015). "Bebayuh: From Healing Ritual to Traditional Performance". *International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences (IJASOS)*, v. 1, n. 2: pp. 136-141.

Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman. (2020). "The liminality of Igal Ritual Theater: A Solution of Tulah." *Journal of Critical Reviews*, v. 7, n. 6: pp. 523-525.

Official Website, National Heritage Department, KPK Malaysia. (2023). <https://heritage.gov.my/>.

Scammon, D. (2022). Sustainability and Culture: How do they work together? http://www.academia.edu/1817961/Sustainability_and_Culture_How_do_they_work_together.

UNESCO. (2023). Culture & sustainable development: Powering culture across public policies. <https://en.unesco.org/culture-development>.

Vermont Folklife Center, Cultural Sustainability Institute. (2023). What is Cultural Sustainability? <http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/education/cultural-sustainability/index.php>.