

Magombok: Reimagining traditional performance (ritual-theatre) for heritage sustainability

**Sharifuddin Zainal^{1*}, Mohd. Kipli Abd. Rahman², Amsalib Pisali³,
Mashor Awang Long¹, Muhammed Syafiq Salleh¹, Khairul Kamsani⁴**

**Corresponding Author*

¹ Academy of Arts and Creative Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, City, Malaysia

² Institut Seni Kreatif Nusantara, Universiti Teknologi MARA UiTM, City, Malaysia

³ Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, City, Malaysia

⁴ Faculty of Arts Cultures and Education, School of The Arts, University of Hull, United Kingdom

sharifuddin@ums.edu.my, mohdkipli@uitm.edu.my, amsalib@fmsp.upsi.edu.my, mashorawanglong@ums.edu.my, syafiqsalleh87@ums.edu.my,
K.Kamsani@hull.ac.uk
Tel: +60127404420

Abstract

Facing cultural erosion, the endangered Magombok ritual of Sabah's Bajau Laut may be revitalized through theatrical transformation. This research explores bridging ritual and performance, guided by Schechner and Turner's theories. By integrating performance elements with ritual perspectives, the study aims to empower local identity, preserve cultural heritage, and enrich Sabah's traditional theatre scene. Practical adaptation methods offer a path to cultural sustainability. The reimagined Magombok holds potential as a cultural tourism asset, boosting the socio-economic well-being of the local community and ensuring the tradition's continued existence. This innovative approach offers a sustainable future for cultural preservation.

Keywords: Magombok Rituals; Heritage Preservation; Liminal; Sabah Traditional Theatre

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1.0 Introduction

Magombok, a term from the Bajau Laut language, denotes ritualistic healing performances characterized by trance states and the invocation of ancestral and guardian spirits. The term "Ombok" signifies ancestors in the Bajau lexicon, thus "Magombok" literally translates to "possessing ancestors." The Bajau ethnic group enacts diverse Magombok performances, differentiated by nomenclature contingent upon the specific ritual function and the sub-ethnic affiliation of the practitioners. These ritual performances encompass various forms, including Magbuaya, Magdundang, Panansang, Koktaun, and Magdewata. This tradition of Magombok ritual healing has been hereditarily maintained within the Bajau Laut community, particularly in the Semporna district of Sabah. Contemporary Magombok rituals face challenges to their sustainability, influenced by the modernization of belief systems, cultural norms, and religious practices among its practitioners. Consequently, these ritualistic expressions are being relegated to a liminal state, underscoring the urgency for their preservation. This liminal transition yields evolving manifestations, prompting scholarly inquiry into the potential of transforming these rituals into traditional theatrical forms. In this context, this study aims to reflect on the Magombok traditional healings ritual as it pertains to the conceptualization of the ethnic traditional theater performance. Furthermore, this paper aims to examine and discuss the potential for transforming the Magombok form as a proactive measure to preserve artistic heritage and empower the ethnic economy.

2.0 Literature Review

The Bajau ethnic community in Sabah exhibits a bipartite division, comprising the Bajau Pantai Barat (West Coast Bajau) and the Bajau Pantai Timur (East Coast Bajau). The West Coast Bajau are alternatively designated as Bajau Darat (Land Bajau), while the East Coast Bajau are commonly referred to as Bajau Laut (Sea Bajau). These appellations categorize Bajau groups based on settlement patterns, economic pursuits, and cosmological tenets. The Bajau Laut community inhabits the coastal regions along Sabah's eastern seaboard, extending from the districts of Kudat, Kota Marudu, and Pitas southward to Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Tawau, and Semporna, bordering the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas. The Bajau Laut are further segmented into various sub-ethnic groups, including Bajau Kubang, Bajau Bangingik, Bajau Balimbing, Bajau Simunul, and Bajau Setangkai, among others. These sub-ethnic designations frequently correlate with settlement names and geographical locations. Consequently, most of the Bajau Laut engage in fishing and the harvesting of marine resources as primary economic activities. The Bajau Laut possesses a profound and intrinsic connection with the aquatic environment, which serves as a central locus for their daily routines, belief systems, and cultural practices. This symbiotic relationship significantly influences the cosmological perspectives of these ethnic groups (Sharifuddin Zainal et al., 2018).

The Bajau Laut ethnic group ascribes a provenance and enduring presence of beneficence to the marine environment. In addition to this Thalasso centric belief system, they maintain a belief in Keombokan, ancestral guardian spirits and spirits of nature inherited from pre-Islamic pagan traditions (Md. Saffie Abd Rahim et al., 2012). This community relies on the perceived influence and efficacy of the Keombokan in shaping their lives and overall well-being. Consequently, healing rituals are enacted to facilitate communication with the Keombokan, aiming to resolve conflicts arising between the human and spiritual realms (Sharifuddin Zainal et al., 2019). Transgressions committed by humans against the metaphysical world are believed to engender illness, catastrophes, and misfortune. Rituals are therefore performed to restore equilibrium between the microcosm and macrocosm, enabling their harmonious coexistence within shared spaces across different dimensions. However, concurrent with the syncretic integration of pagan and Islamic beliefs, the perceived relevance of traditional healing ritual practices has transformed. These rituals have adapted and evolved, undergoing a liminal process that has resulted in novel performance forms. While some rituals are preserved and enacted in forms approximating their original structure, the performances are invariably influenced by the inherent tensions arising from their dualistic belief system. Moreover, certain healing rituals have become extinct, while others continue to evolve in response to contemporary belief systems. Understood through the lens of 'play' and 'playing' – universal concepts inherent in both ritual and traditional theatre performances – these healing rituals now occupy an intermediary space between the traditional theatre and social drama (ritual) and thus conceptualized as theatre-ritual performances (Sharifuddin Zainal et al., 2023).

Nasuruddin M.G. (2002, 2000) conducted a comprehensive review of traditional theater forms in Malaysia, detailing practices across various states, with the exception of Sabah and Sarawak, where official traditional performances are absent. In contrast, Deenerwan M. (2014) explored the Dusun ethnic group's traditional bobolian ritual in Sabah, framing it within a theatrical context and advocating for its evolution into a social drama. Similarly, Abd Rahman M.K. (2024) examined the Ngalai healing ritual through the lens of performance art, highlighting its potential as a traditional theatrical form. This research builds upon previous studies by addressing identified gaps and issues, specifically the appropriateness of transforming ritual performances into foundational elements of traditional theater, thereby enhancing the scholarship on traditional theater in Malaysia, particularly in relation to Sabah.

3.0 Methodology

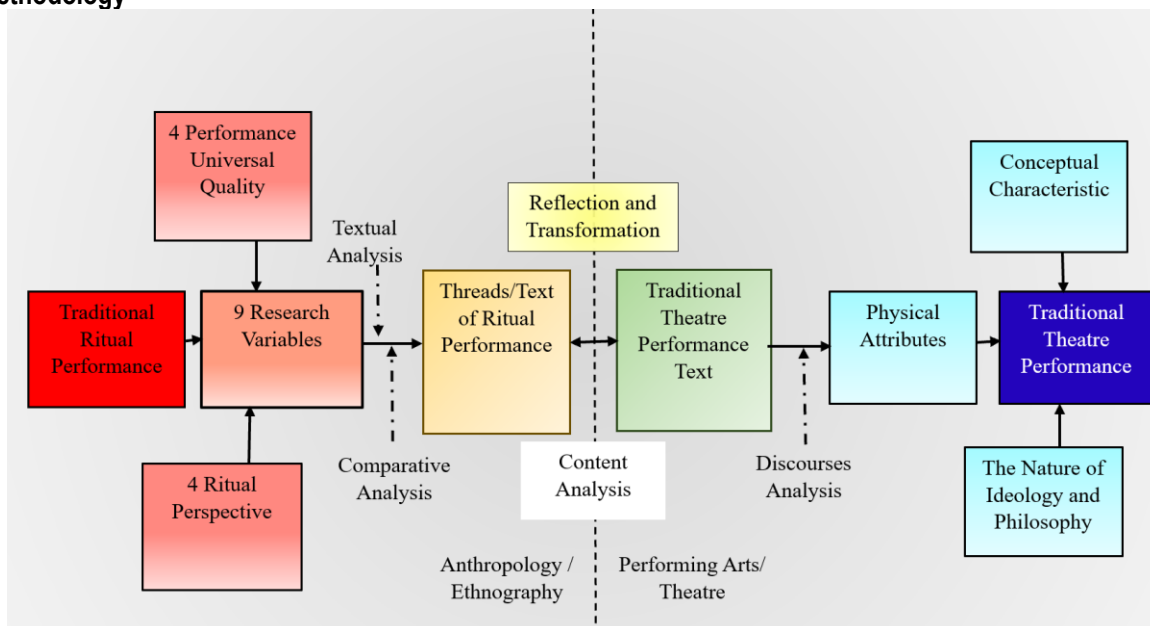


Figure 1: Reflection and Trajectory of Theatrical-to-Ritual Transformation
(Source: Sharifuddin Zainal, 2025)

This research employs a qualitative study design that applies Richard Schechner's performance theory and Victor Turner's ritual theory to explore the transformation of ritual performances into traditional theater. The transformation strategy consists of two phases: bridging and reflection. Drawing upon these performance theories, the study identifies nine key variables that connect these two modalities, which were subsequently translated into performance texts and characteristics. In accordance with Schechner's framework, this research recognizes four universal qualities inherent in all performance forms, as outlined in his "performance fan": time, value, resources, and rules. The study asserts that traditional theater synthesizes concepts of artistic and playful performance. To bridge the gap between ritual and theater, variables derived from Turner's (1982) ritual theory were incorporated, specifically his four perspectives on ritual: structure, process, function, and affect/value. These elements define a ritual's identity within its cultural context, reflecting the meanings and values attributed by the community. Turner also interprets the evolution of traditional theater as indicative of a paradigm shift, moving from ethnographic and anthropological methodologies toward a performance-centric framework.

The following diagram illustrates the transition and transformation of ritual into theater through a guided liminal transformation strategy employed during the foundational phase of this research. Primary data were collected through participatory observation, recordings, and interviews conducted in the field. The study then performed textual analysis to derive the ritual performance texts and comparative analysis to identify universal themes across these ritual performances. The traditional ritual performance texts were subsequently reflected upon and transformed into traditional theater texts through content analysis. The resulting performance texts are discussed as fundamental characteristics of traditional theater, particularly in the conceptual stages and forms of Magombok performances.

4.0 Finding

Through the process of reflection on the traditional ritual performance text of Magombok, this research has successfully synthesized the traditional theater performance text of Magombok (TTM). The research, conducted through discourse analysis, has successfully conceptualized Magombok in the form of traditional theater; through this form, the research has also identified the fundamental characteristics of this traditional theater performance. The research has identified three distinct categories of characteristics inherent to TTM as part of the conceptualization process for this traditional theatrical form:

- Conceptual Attributes
- Physical Manifestations
- Ideological Underpinnings (encompassing thought and philosophy)

The conceptualization of this traditional theatrical form was achieved through a creative exploration of the performance text, encompassing nine research variables. The study elaborates on the conceptual and physical characteristics of TTM according to a detailed analysis of the elements within these nine variables. The ideological characteristics, encompassing thought and philosophy, are discussed in more general terms, as many of their elements are contingent upon those found within the conceptual and physical domains. Furthermore, the discussion of these ideological characteristics is largely encapsulated within a single research variable: beliefs and taboos. A summary of the liminality performances form characteristics as manifested in TTM is presented in Table 1.0 below.

Table 1.0 Fundamental Characteristics (Text) of Magombok Traditional Theatre Performance

The Attributes	TTM Characteristics
Conceptual Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functionality: Employs a performative paradigm with a "<i>bermain</i>" (playing/performing) concept that encompasses both secular and sacred elements. The performance's intended function dictates the narrative repertoire and overall presentational format. • Structure: Organized into a tripartite framework: an inaugural segment, the narrative enactment, and a concluding segment. The plot follows an episodic structure, and the overall form is constituted by a sequenced arrangement of vocal performance, dance, dramatic enactment, and strategic artifice. • Temporality: Performances are not constrained by a specific temporal mandate. Enactments may occur throughout the calendar year, with the exceptions of Ramadan and in immediate proximity to residences experiencing bereavement. Performance duration may extend from one, three, five, up to seven days. • Scenography and Spatial Configuration: The performance space is characterized by an open configuration, eschewing the conventional fourth wall. The set design adheres to a minimalist aesthetic, emphasizing multi-functionality. Scene transitions are not executed through physical alterations; rather, shifts in the setting are signified through the utilization of local conventions. • Costume and Accessory Design: Costume and accessory design embraces a minimalist approach, drawing inspiration from traditional ethnic attire. Costume changes are absent; temporal progression is indicated solely through modifications in accessories. Characters and roles are delineated and differentiated via the sartorial choices of the performers. • Props and Equipment: Props and equipment are conceived as multi-purposive elements, subject to transformation and symbolic representation by the actors. • The allocation of roles within the performance collective adheres to a hierarchical structure. The composition of performers may encompass both male and female individuals. Individual performers may embody multiple characters and roles within the performance.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The musical ensemble's performance is characterized by improvisational execution, guided by the cues provided by the kalamat (narrator/leader). Instrumentation consists of gongs and bronze percussion instruments, played through striking and hammering techniques. • The performance aims to integrate all elements of the cosmos. This unification of cosmic elements is achieved through the symbolic deployment of props and equipment. All scenic elements and performance apparatus are exclusively designated for performance contexts and are not repurposed for everyday activities.
Physical Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The narrative core of TTM (likely an abbreviation for the performance being discussed) revolves around the odyssey of the legendary figure, Arung Salamiah. The recounted experiences from this voyage constitute the performance's repertoire. • The performance's structure unfolds in a tripartite sequence: <i>niukuban</i> (<i>Magulung lepa, magandak, magkalangmagigal heya</i>), <i>nionka'an</i> (<i>magbisara, igal arikik, magongka'</i>), and <i>Nitambulan</i> (<i>magbassa luggu</i>). These stages represent distinct phases within the overall dramatic arc. • The performance spans approximately two to three hours, typically during the afternoon and evening hours. • The staging is characterized by an open configuration, demarcated solely by two key scenic elements: the kalamat's (narrator/leader) bed and the lepa flag. The performance is adaptable to both proscenium arch and arena staging formats. • Principal characters are distinguished by their attire, donning costumes in <i>the Ala Bimbang</i> style, while supporting characters are clad in <i>Baju Sigpit</i>. These sartorial choices serve to differentiate roles and potentially signify status or function within the narrative. • Hand-held props encompass items such as the sumping barong (headdress), the <i>kain selempang</i> (cloth), and hand fans. Set-specific props include the <i>tikar mengkuang</i> (mat) and the Kalamat's tray. The selection and deployment of these props likely hold symbolic weight within the performance's semiotic system. • The performance is presided over by the Kalamat, who functions as the narrator and director. The central roles are embodied by male and female escorts, while key supporting roles are assumed by the <i>Dayang Toa</i> (elder maiden) and <i>Dayang Muda</i> (young maiden). Additional supporting characters include the <i>Tambalan Otok</i> and <i>Tambalan Arung</i>. This hierarchical casting structure reflects the social dynamics embedded within the performance. • The kulintangan ensemble comprises instruments such as the gong inak, gong anak, tambul, kulintangan/gabbang, and teng-teng. The instrumentalists are positioned in a designated area opposite the kalamat's bed, suggesting a deliberate spatial relationship between the musical and dramatic elements of the performance. • All rotational movements are executed in a counter-clockwise direction. Furthermore, corporeal characters consistently enter from the left side of the stage, whereas metaphysical characters consistently enter from the right. This directional coding signifies a symbolic distinction between the earthly and spiritual realms. The props associated with the Kalamat and the escorts are considered personal and are not to be shared, underscoring the individual agency and symbolic significance of these performers.
The Nature of Ideology, Philosophy, and Thought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rooted in syncretism, the belief system integrates Islamic doctrines with pre-existing pagan beliefs inherited from ancestral traditions. This fusion highlights the dynamic interplay between established religion and indigenous spiritual practices. • Central to the belief system is the concept of Keombokan (a term requiring further contextualization, potentially referring to animistic spirits, sacred sites, or a localized form of spiritual power). The performance draws its origins from the veneration of guardian spirits and ancestral spirits, reflecting a deep connection to the spiritual realm and lineage. • A strong belief is centred on the ocean, which aligns with the geographical context and the socio-economic activities of coastal communities. The community ascribes to the ocean as the power of purification and restoration, suggesting a perception of the marine environment as a source of both sustenance and spiritual renewal. This maritime focus underscores the intimate relationship between the community and the sea.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Transformation of Traditional Theater into Performance Art

The transformation of traditional theater into performance art is a well-established field of academic inquiry, particularly in Southeast Asia, a region celebrated for its rich heritage of sacred ritual performances, including those in Malaysia. This research highlights the threats posed by cultural modernization and the potential for extinction, necessitating the evolution of traditional ritual performances to ensure their ongoing relevance. Drawing on Victor Turner (1982), ritual is understood as a dynamic reflection of community life; thus, its continued relevance and sustainability hinge on its ability to adapt. R.M. Pramutomo (2021) anticipates this study by arguing that the

transformation of rituals arises from modernization and globalization, promoting intercultural exchange. He underscores the need for ritual evolution to maintain relevance within Indonesia's contemporary socio-cultural landscape.

5.2 Theoretical Framework

This research finds that transforming a ritual performance into theater serves as a significant approach to sustainability with considerable potential. The most critical aspect to consider is how to preserve and enhance the characteristics and identity of the ethnic practitioners. The changes and transformations undertaken must consider the perspectives of these practitioners and contribute to elevating the cultural values of their community.

5.3 Broader Implications of Ritual Transformation

In this regard, this research expands the discussion on broader research objectives by examining the potential of transformed performance forms. This topic concludes by investigating traditional theater as a solution to the challenges faced by traditional ritual performances, framed through the concepts of sustainability, regeneration, and empowerment. This research identifies the potential of traditional theater, arising from ritual transformation, to contribute to social, cultural, and community development in three key areas:

Heritage Sustainability

The proposed guided liminal transformation process and traditional theater form offer a preservation method for ritual performances facing extinction. This aligns with R.M. Pramutomo's (2021) assertion that rituals must remain relevant as identity containers and cultural preservation tools. This research advocates for an open interpretation of traditional ritual performances through diverse paradigms, particularly within performance and performing arts perspectives, enabling their re-reading and reflection in various forms. Recognizing theater's potential as an optimal preservation method for ritual performances—with "performance" acting as the connecting bridge—this research, citing Victor Turner, concludes by highlighting theater's opportunities and potential for ritual.

"If anthropologists take ethnodramatics seriously, our discipline will have to become something more than a cognitive game in our heads and inscribed in – let's face it – somewhat tedious journals. We will have to become performers ourselves and bring a human existential fulfillment to what has hitherto been only mentalistic protocols. We must find ways of overcoming the boundaries of both political and cognitive structures by the dramatic empathy, sympathy, friendship even love as we acquire ever deeper structure knowledge in reciprocity with the increasingly self-aware" (Victor Turner, 1982: 101)

Traditional theater offers a sustainable avenue for ritual performances, addressing their extinction by resolving belief conflicts often faced by ethnic groups in their practices. As sacred rituals transform into secular performances, new meanings emerge, aligning with the evolving ideologies and cultural practices of the ethnic practitioners. This transformation simultaneously preserves and strengthens ethnic identity. This research emphasizes key considerations during the guided liminal process to ensure that traditional theater performances maintain ethnic identity.

Economic Generation

Traditional theater not only provides a sustainable platform for ritual performances, mitigating their extinction by addressing belief conflicts but also presents opportunities for ethnic economic development. As a secular performance, it readily transforms into a cultural tourism product, particularly relevant in Sabah's burgeoning tourism sector. This economic potential through traditional ritual liminality aligns with R.M. Soedarsono's research (1985, 1986, 1991, 1998, 1999) on ritual, performing arts, and tourism in Indonesia. Soedarsono's work highlights the commodification of ritual performances for tourism and identifies factors driving the transformation of rituals into marketable cultural products:

Tourism Attractiveness: The appeal of local cultural performances and diverse cultural exhibitions is a growing trend in the tourism sector. Experiential homestay tourism, offering immersion in local life and traditions, is also gaining traction among international visitors. These novel tourism concepts, such as eco-tourism, agro-tourism, and cultural tourism, contribute to increased tourist arrivals and, consequently, improved local economies (Amran Hamzah, 2004).

- **Enhanced Economic Well-being:** Promoting traditional performance arts as cultural tourism products generates supplementary income for local communities. This revenue stems not only from performance sales but also from ancillary services like transportation and lodging.
- **Facilitated Cultural Exchange:** The transformation of traditional ritual performances into theatrical productions fosters cultural exchange. Tourists gain opportunities to observe and learn about local cultural traditions and heritage.

Accordingly, this research posits that traditional theater performances offer a potential avenue for economic generation and income for communities. These groups can leverage their cultural heritage as a source of economic benefit and family income. Performances, once perceived as a source of belief conflict, can be transformed into assets contributing to socio-economic development and progress.

Empowering Malaysian Traditional Theatre

This traditional ritual transformation offers a third potential: the development of traditional theater, both in Malaysia generally and specifically within Sabah, which is the focus of this research. Guided by a liminal process, the formation of traditional theater will enrich the local traditional theater performance landscape by expanding its forms and increasing its presence. The creation of Magombok

traditional theater addresses a gap in Malaysian traditional theater studies, particularly concerning the existence of such theaters in Sabah and Sarawak. This guided liminal transformation process can complement the existing forms of traditional theater throughout Malaysia, including those in Sabah and Sarawak.

In summary, this research contributes to the understanding of the transformation of traditional rituals into performance art, emphasizing the theoretical frameworks that support this evolution. It encourages future exploration into the implications of these transformations beyond the confines of the current research, advocating for a deeper engagement with the socio-cultural dynamics at play. By incorporating structured headings and clear delineation of themes, this discussion aims to enhance clarity and facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the potential of traditional theater in contemporary society..

6.0 Conclusion

The transformation explored in this research is limited to the conceptual stage, focusing on establishing the foundation for the final form (liminality form) of the traditional performance. In conclusion, the study of Magombok ritual healing performances within the Bajau Laut community of Sabah reveals a tradition facing challenges from modernization and evolving belief systems. By applying performance and ritual theories, this research proposes a guided liminal transformation process to adapt these rituals into Magombok Traditional Theatre (TTM). This transformation offers a pathway for heritage sustainability, potentially alleviating the risk of extinction for these practices while creating opportunities for cultural tourism, economic empowerment, and enriching Malaysian traditional theater. The proposed TTM framework preserves cultural identity while facilitating the evolution of meaning, aligning with the changing socio-cultural landscape of the Bajau Laut community. Future research can further explore how the resulting traditional theater can sustain the heritage of rituals that have become extinct, alongside developing systematic strategies and methods for transforming rituals into physical theater prototypes. This expanded research will contribute not only to the field of performing arts but also to tourism, economics, and the literature of the local ethnic community.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research paper contributes to the advancement of traditional theater performance in Malaysia by enriching the corpus of this field of study. It also enhances and empowers the discipline of tourism studies, particularly within the context of Sabah, by producing and diversifying local cultural tourism products. Furthermore, the study provides substantial impacts and contributions to the fields of heritage and heritage sustainability.

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