

Natural Elements in the Mantra of *Igal* Ritual Theatre Bajau Sabah from an Eco-Criticism Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the natural elements in the *igal* ritual theatre mantras of the Bajau ethnic group from Semporna, Sabah. The study focuses on the aspects of nature in the mantra by applying William Howarth's (1996) eco-criticism theory through its principles, namely ecology, ethics, language, and criticism. Ethnographic methods are used in this study to obtain data and achieve the study objectives. The elements of nature in the mantra reflect that humans have an indirect relationship with the natural environment because they contribute to the well-being of human life.

Keywords: Natural Element; Mantra; *Igal*; Eco-Criticism

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1.0 Introduction

Nature combines plants, animals, seas, and rivers, including the heavens, such as the sun, stars, moon, and many more, closely related to human life (Nurul Aina Ibrahim & Mas Rynna Wati Ahmad, 2023). Local scholars have already debated the definition of nature because of its characteristics of unity, including combining and containing elements such as the sky and the sea, which are interdependent. According to Mohd Rozaimi Hamat and Mohd Yuszaidy Mohd Yusoff (2020), nature is critical to social, cultural, religious, and economic life. Therefore, the interconnection between nature and humans is inseparable because it is indirectly involved in humans' daily lives.

Elements of nature are often used in works of green writing to be used as a message by the author about environmental issues, including in the science of mantra literature. The elements of nature used in a mantra reflect that the relationship between humans and the natural environment is very close. In the *igal* ritual theatre ceremony, the mantra is the most important element to ensure the occurrence of the ritual. *Igal* ritual theatre is a traditional culture in the Bajau community, especially in the Semporna district. This ritual is usually related to the norms of life of the Bajau Laut ethnic group, which emphasizes the value of harmony between the life of physical reality and metaphysical reality or the supernatural (Mohd Anis et al., 2017 & Hanafi Husin, 2008).

This study seeks to unravel the relationship between natural elements and human ecology by reflecting the interconnectedness that leads to universal human well-being and the environment. Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyze the elements of nature in the *igal* ritual theatre mantras by applying William Howarth's theory of eco-criticism (1996). Ecology between humans and other creatures is due to interdependence in daily life, while ecological ethics describes the human attitude of respecting and being in harmony with non-human creatures

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Bajau Ethnicity and Igal

The Bajau are the second largest ethnic group in the state of Sabah, with a population of 93.8% in Semporna (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). The Bajau ethnic community still practices their beliefs in traditional customs that have been theirs for centuries. The Bajau ethnic community continues to practice the *igal* ritual theatre, one of their traditional customs. The *igal* ritual practiced by the Bajau ethnic community is conducted in the manner of a ritual theatre. In the framework of traditional beliefs, the principal objective of *igal* ritual theatre is to facilitate healing in order to safeguard the community from the adverse effects of a plague or curse referred to as *tulah* (Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman et al., 2020). The Bajau ethnic community believes that this medical method goes through a process that involves spirits (Mohd Anis et al., 2017 & Hanafi Hussin, 2008; Abdul Rahman, 2023).

2.2 Mantra and Natural Element

A mantra is a sentence or word that, when spoken, can create supernatural powers for specific purposes, for example, curing diseases (Dewan Bahasa Pustaka, 2005). A mantra certainly has language competence; the creator must know the word and its meaning (Devi Kusmarini et al., 2019). A mantra is similar to *talibun*, *teromba*, and others in form and structure. It is classified as a mantra because of its content and function as a "mantra" and is used for medicinal purposes, ceremonies, and witchcraft (Harun Mat Piah et al., 2000). Mantras function as a tool for medicine, beauty, self-defense, and many other uses because elements of nature and symbols in them contain the values of Malay thought. This is considered a description or reflection of the life of the Malay community in ancient times (Norazimah Zakaria et al., 2021).

2.3 Eco-Criticism

The interaction between humans and nature is considered a natural ethic. Natural ethics means natural human behavior or how humans interact with their surroundings. This process is part of the value system practiced by a group of people, which is closely related to moral behavior (Mohd Saberi Muda & Mas Rynna Wati Ahmad, 2021). Eco-criticism requires a more inclusive method across disciplines and has a theoretical analysis method that covers various issues involving natural elements. Nature relates not only to humans but also to other organisms. Ecology has various inclusions, and one of them is human ecology, which examines ecosystems (basic units that exist as a result of actions between living and non-living components) that are the effects of human actions (Howarth, 1996).

Therefore, Howarth has classified it into four (4) principles in ecocriticism theory, such as ecology, ethics, language and criticism. These four principles are related to each other. Among the studies that use eco-criticism are Nurul Aina Ibrahim and Mas Rynna Wati Ahmad (2023), who identified the elements of nature in the novel *Loagan Bunut* and then analysed the elements of nature using the theory of eco-criticism. In addition, Hu Ann Leh (2016), who studied environmental problems in several selected short stories by Jong Chian Lai, used the theory of ecological justice criticism from Brian Baxter, which is part of environmental justice. However, the focus of the study is still the same: to raise awareness among the public about the concern for protecting and preserving the environment, reveal the culture and traditions of the Iban community in Sarawak, and show the interdependence between the Iban community and the natural environment. In addition, researchers who use ecocritical theory are Mohd Saberi Muda and Mas Rynna Wati Ahmad (2021), who see green poems produced by poets between two countries, namely Malaysia and Indonesia, as tools to make the public aware of the importance of caring for and preserving the environment, especially in the context of a nation-state.

Based on previous studies, a description of the natural elements in the *igal* ritual theatre mantras by applying William Howarth's (1996) ecocriticism theory has not yet been explored because most previous researchers have applied this theory to green works such as poetry, short stories and so on.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Ethnography

Ethnography is a subfield of anthropology dealing with the scientific description of human civilisation (Dewan Bahasa Pustaka, 2005: 345). Moschella (2023) states that ethnography is a way to delve into the lives of a community to learn something from them. Ethnography is also referred to as a pastoral practice because it can open the eyes and ears of researchers to understand how they practice their beliefs. This study uses the ethnographic method, field research, as the primary source because, based on this method, all data and sources will be obtained. The main source techniques used are participation, observation, and interviews. Participation is a participatory technique carried out by the researcher at the fieldwork to meet with informants (*kalamat/shaman*) who will contribute research data. The researcher will conduct observations through interviews with the informants, as this observation process enhances the researcher's understanding of the data obtained through the answers provided by the informants. Through the interviews, the main focus is to obtain mantras as the primary data for the study. The locations focused on are Kg. Menampilik, located in the Menampilik archipelago, and Kg. Hampalan Darat, in the Bum-Bum archipelago, Sabah.

3.2 Eco-Criticism Principle

This study also uses a second source to achieve the objective. William Howarth's eco-criticism theory (1996) is the basis for the objectives of this study. Upon acquiring the data from the field study, the principals of eco-criticism, including ecological, ethical, linguistic,

and critical principles, are implemented. Howarth (1996) claims that nature is interconnected not only between humans but also with other organisms. Human ecology is a summary of various ecologies. Ecological ethics is the human attitude towards the environment. Howarth classifies two groups of nature lovers: deep ecological and superficial ecological ethics. Deep ecological ethics is an attitude of concern for protecting the environment and inviting the community to protect the environment. Superficial ecological ethics is an attitude that does not care about the sustainability of the environment, leading to misfortunes that universally affect human life's well-being. The same goes for the principles of language and criticism, which have a relationship. Howarth believes language can connect the environment and culture or ecology and ecological ethics. Once the elements of nature in the *igal* ritual theatre mantras are identified, they will be analyzed using eco-criticism principles to see the interconnection between human ecology and the natural environment.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Iga Ritual Theatre Mantras

Mantras are verses with magical elements and powers that become a tool for creating *igal* ritual theatre. The use of mantras depends on the type of ritual performed, such as the ritual of *magbuaya*, *penangsang*, *magkalamat*, *kebusungan*, and others. However, these rituals have a common goal: to cure diseases or plagues, thus leading to harmony and well-being in the community. Examples of mantras that use natural elements in them are as follows:

MANTERA MAGBUAYA
Bismillahirrahmanirrahim
Ya Allah ya Tuhan kami
Atiyana kami anga inang mag amuk
Tahun magbuaya
Ombo' raja alam
Salikul alam
Siguntul alam
Si raja timbang
Si raja guntu
Si raja putalan
Sikara sikmayang
Berkat Lailahaillallah

LUGU PENANGSANG
Pinai-pinai kumpanun
Jambangan bunga ayun
Rirayun marabia
Tinoko haitai
Tujuh halaman sunai

MANTERA KEBUSUNGAN/SAWAN
Awan-awan terbang sekawan
Huju putih terbang sekawan
Mati sawanni hidup nyawa ini

MANTERA MAGKALAMAT
Bismillahirrahmanirrahim
Ya Allah,
Ya Jibril, ya Mikail, ya Israfil, ya Izrail
Andai ku susurai, suru ghaibku
Berkat Laihaillallah

MANTERA JAGA BADAN
Bismillahirrahmanirrahim,
Sialungku sialung gajah,
Kakiku raga,
Pinangku pinang muda, pinangku sangkarukak,
Aku meningkag sahaja,
Sahayaku Allah, sahayaku Fatimah,
Kabul Berkat Lailahaillallah, Muhammadarasulullah.

4.2 Natural Elements in The Igal Ritual Theatre Mantras

4.2.1 Animal

The *mantera magbuaya* incorporates the same natural elements in the above mantra, specifically *sikara sikmayang*. The practitioners believe that *sikara sikmayang* is an *ombo'* (subtle spirit) that incarnates as a white crocodile and will be present during the *magbuaya* ceremony. The ritual ceremony by the sea reportedly features a substantial white crocodile. The mantras' use of animals, such as crocodiles, indicates that the Bajau community believes in symbols of power and protection because crocodiles are often associated with strength, courage, and protection. This coincides with the purpose and goal of the *magbuaya* ritual, which is to cure patients by using the services of subtle spirits through their beliefs.

4.2.2 Plant

Plants can be defined as living beings that are spread throughout the earth. In addition to having roots, stems, branches, and leaves, they are also able to produce their food by using chlorophyll to go through the process of photosynthesis. The benefits of food these plants produce are valuable for themselves and other creatures such as humans and animals. Apart from the benefits of the food produced, plants also supply oxygen (O₂) and convert carbon dioxide (CO₂) exhaled through the respiratory system of humans and animals into oxygen (O₂) again, which can be used by other living creatures (Ferdinand & Ariebowo, 2009, p. 23). The use of natural elements that can be seen in the mantra above is the *penangsang* ritual, which uses a matching number of flower bouquets. Flowers are often associated with the balance of nature, harmony, and tranquillity. The bouquet can be associated with the integrity and collective strength of the Bajau Laut people who live in groups and their relationship with the surrounding nature. In the *penangsang* ritual, coconut palms are used during the healing ritual. The *kalamat* will hold this flower as the ritual leader. According to Chua Sui Sen (1991), some people gain knowledge about plant uses through dreams. Some people also gain knowledge about medicinal plants through their relationships with spirits. Therefore, the use of coconut palm has a meaning and purpose because it is through the knowledge of the community of practitioners that why it is used during the ritual.

4.2.3 Cosmos Realm

Nature has been defined as the universe. Philosophically, nature is the organized material and forms that exist in the sky and on earth other than God as the creator and guardian of nature. Cosmology is included in the part of natural philosophy and talks about the contents found in the universe and their relationship to each other. Etymologically, cosmology comes from the Greek word *cosmos*, which means world, while *logos* means knowledge (Siti Maunah, 2019). This means that cosmology is a branch of science that talks about the reality of the universe, which is the entire system of the universe. The element of the cosmos used in the above is the *mantera kebusungan* or *sawan*, clouds. This mantra is usually used when a patient experiences a rebuke from a spirit or is affected by artificial things. Because the life of the Bajau Laut community is very close to two fantastic realms, the sky and the sea, this can be linked to the way they communicate with the spirits of their ancestors and the subtle spirits that come from the sky (the door between the real and the unseen world).

4.2.4 Supernatural Beings and Human

Angels, jinn, devils, and demons are unseen creatures that are not directly visible to the five senses. Mat Jalil (2019) states from an Islamic perspective that the key to religious life in Islam is to believe and believe in the unseen, and the actions of life that do not contradict the rules of Allah are called faith and Islam, while life that contradicts the rules of Allah is *kufr*. This role is assumed by creatures called humans, who are appointed as caliphs on this earth and are held accountable for all their actions. The mantra of the *igal* ritual theatre already blends the Islamic religion with traditional customs. For example, the incantations begin with *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* and end with *Berkat Lailahaillallah*. Additionally, the mantra incorporate the names of angels like Jibril, Mikail, Israfil, and Izrail, as well as Islamic figures like Siti Fatimah Al-Zahra. The *magkalamat* and *jaga badan* mantra reflect this. Thus, the evidence shows that although religious beliefs are ingrained in the Bajau Laut community, their belief in ancestral customs and traditions is still practiced and is a guiding principle in their daily lives

5.0 Discussion

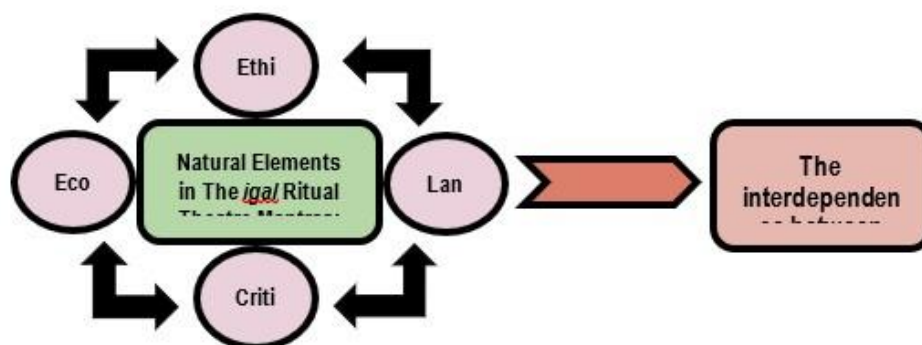


Figure 1. The *igal* ritual theatre mantra reflects the elements of nature, bringing prosperity to the ecology and community of practitioners.

The analysis of this study focuses on the elements of nature in the *igal* ritual theatre mantra by applying an ecological theory. This theory, pioneered by William Howarth (1996), emphasizes the relationship between living things on earth, especially humans. The purpose is to maintain the sustainability of a more harmonious and prosperous quality of life between universal humans and their environment. The elements of nature identified in the *igal* ritual theatre mantra are animals, plants, the cosmos, supernatural beings, and humans. The analysis can be seen through the following Figure 1:

Figure 1 illustrates how the ritual of *mantera magbuya* incorporates animal elements. Animals have their uses and functions in human life. Animals are not only a source of food for humans but can also provide clothing and jewelry materials for medical and pharmaceutical purposes. If viewed from the perspective of eco-criticism, ecology explains the balance and conservation of predatory reptile species that affect a balanced ecosystem. This is because the community of practitioners believes that the white crocodile, or *ombo*, is a sacred animal and empowered to help during rituals. This implicitly alludes to human ethics, which prioritizes the preservation of cultural identity by respecting creatures other than humans. In addition, the language and criticism that can be seen are used in the animal name *sikara sikmayang*, which refers to the white crocodile. This reflects the animism and spiritual beliefs in the community of practitioners and shows that the original language is still maintained to connect the human and non-human worlds.

Next, the element of plants has been used in the *lugu penangsang*, which is the word flower. Apart from animals, plants are the most important element in daily life because they provide fruits, vegetables, and other things. Coconut palms are one of the tools used during the *penangsang* ritual. The individual holding the coconut palm is the *kalamat* (bomoh/shaman), the leader of the ritual. If seen from the perspective of eco-criticism, the coconut tree indeed has many benefits to humans, starting from its roots, trunk, leaves, fruit, and flowers. It is also categorized as an ecosystem-friendly plant because almost all of its parts can be used to reduce the waste of natural resources. Due to the traditional and heritage beliefs of the Bajau Laut community regarding the use of coconut palms in the *penangsang* ritual, it will continue to be used as long as the ritual is still practiced by its community. This further increases the respect of the practicing community towards nature and encourages them to appreciate nature. Similarly, if we look at the symbolism of coconut palms, which symbolize fertility and survival, it is important in healing rituals. However, coconut husks should be controlled so that the natural coconut production process is not affected.

The element of nature in the *igal* ritual theatre mantra is the cosmos. In Malay thought, nature is divided into two: the real and unseen worlds. The real world is the world found in the sky and on earth, and it can be seen with the five senses of the eye, such as rivers, seas, mountains, hills, the sun, and the moon. The unseen world is the world that cannot be easily seen and is kept secret, where the existence of heaven, hell, and heaven (Norazimah Zakaria et al., 2021). The *kebusungan* ritual, or *sawan* medicine, uses a mantra that contains the element of the cosmos, namely clouds. From the point of view of eco-criticism, clouds benefit not only humans but also other creatures, such as animals and plants. Providing rain, maintaining humidity, and controlling the earth's temperature are the functions and benefits of clouds. Therefore, the community of practitioners uses clouds in mantras for purification and healing. In language metaphors, clouds are often associated with individual emotions and feelings; for example, the idiom "*mendung di hati*" describes sadness, while "*awan putih bersih*" describes a sense of peace of mind.

Additionally, the *igal* ritual theatre mantras incorporate elements of supernatural beings and humans. In the Quran, the term supernatural includes several things, including death, doomsday, angels, jinn, devils, heaven, and hell (Nuramin, 2021). Furthermore, the six pillars of faith mandate that a Muslim must believe in supernatural entities. The *magkalamat* and the *jaga badan* mantras have supernatural and human elements related to religion, especially Islam. The majority of the Bajau community in Semporna is Muslim. Therefore, the *igal* ritual theatre mantras are dominated by the recitation of *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim* (in the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) at the beginning of the verse, then ending with *Berkat Lailahailallah* (there is no God but Allah). Ecologically, human dependence on the creator is strong because God determines a person's sustenance or fate through Him. The supernatural beings used in the *mantera magkalamat* are angels named Jibril (delivers revelation), Mikail (delivers sustenance), Israfil (blows the trumpet), and Izrail (takes away life). The community of practitioners believes that the probability of making the ritual successful is high by calling on the names of these angels in the mantra. The same is true for the *mantera jaga badan* that uses the name of the youngest daughter of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, namely Siti Fatimah Al-Zahra. Siti Fatimah's personality is that of a loving and patient person, which is why her name is used in the mantra of the community of practitioners' beliefs. Therefore, using these names illustrates that the community of practitioners highly believes in religious elements for treatment and healing.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study concludes that the *igal* ritual theatre mantras contain natural elements that promote universal human and environmental harmony. Furthermore, incorporating these natural elements allows us to understand the perspectives and beliefs of the practicing community, the Bajau Laut, concerning the surrounding environment. The function and role of the mantra are apparent because they are a medium for the success of the *igal* ritual theatre, which ultimately improves the quality of life and well-being of the community.

6.1 Limitation of Research

This study's limitation is that it focuses on the elements of nature in the *igal* ritual theatre mantra and uses four principles of eco-criticism: ecology, ethics, language, and criticism.

6.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could focus on linguistic and language aspects, either studying the language form or comparing it with mantras from other communities in the Nusantara region. This issue can be highlighted because it has the potential to build the Bajau Laut community's

identity and cultural heritage. In addition, future studies can also further describe other elements and the diversity of cultural heritage identities.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study presents the relationship and interdependence between universal humans and the environment through the elements of nature in the *igal* ritual theatre, which reflects the community's well-being and preserves the cultural heritage of the Bajau Laut community. Indirectly, this study contributes to the preservation of culture and heritage as well as the well-being of the community.

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