

# **‘PLAY AND PLAYING’- CROSS-READING THE EAST-COAST BAJAU’S RITUAL PERFORMANCES AS A TRADITIONAL THEATER PERFORMANCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The East-Coast Bajau ethnic group is clustered into the Bajau Laut ethnic division. Having a sea centered belief, the spirits of ancestor (*Keombo'an*) and the spirits of nature - these formerly pagan ethnic groups have achieved a syncretism of beliefs since the emergence of Islam. These changes in beliefs have been a factor in the occurrence of liminal processes; in their practice and beliefs of the sacred traditional healing ritual performances to the more secular form of traditional theater. The terms of 'play and playing' is a familiar term and a common practice of the traditional theater performances in which instead of acting, the performers play the role in accordance with its spontaneous and improvisational features. The playing skills of the traditional theater players (instead of performers) are always tested with their ability to develop performances based only on a given storyline. The elements of 'play and playing' are also an important part to the performance structure of the Bajau Laut's healing ritual, most of which consist of secular elements in the ritual performances. The 'play and playing' element in the ritual performance is seen as the aesthetic potential of the Sabah's indigenous traditional theater. This paper aims to synthesize the liminal performance of the Bajau's traditional ritual as a traditional theater performance text. Through the cross-reading towards 'Victor Turner's-ritual theory' and 'Richard Schechner-performance theory', the discourse analysis on the elements of 'play and playing' was carried out to obtain and to unfold the traditional theatrical features of the Bajau.

**Keywords:** Bajau Laut, 'Play and Playing', Performance, Ritual, Theatre.

## INTRODUCTION

The Bajau ethnic community in Sabah is divided into the two largest groups of Bajau Pantai Barat (The West Coast Bajau) and Bajau Pantai Timur (The East Coast Bajau). The West Coast Bajau is also known as Bajau Darat (Land Bajau) while the East Coast Bajau is always referred as Bajau Laut (Sea Bajau). These names put the Bajau ethnics into the group associated to their settlements, their economic activities and their cosmological belief. Bajau Laut community lives along the Sabah east coast seas up from Kudat, Kota Marudu and Pitas districts down to Sandakan, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Tawau and Semporna districts (facing the Sulu and Sulawesi waters). The Bajau Laut ethnic is later divided into many sub-ethnics such as Bajau Kubang, Bajau Bangingik, Bajau Balimbing, Bajau Simunul, Bajau Setangkai etc. Most of the sub-ethnics are subjected to the names of their settlement and geographical location. Hence, upon their settlements, the majority of the Bajau Laut community are fisherman and collect sea products as their source of income. The Bajau Laut ethnic inherit a strong and intimate bond with the sea which their live activities, beliefs and culture are centered. The close relationship (between the community and the sea) affects most of the ethnic groups' cosmological belief (Sharifuddin Zainal et al., 2018).

Bajau Laut ethnic believe that all the good things come from and stay at the sea. Apart from the sea centered belief, they too believe in the *Keombo'an*. *Keombo'an* is guardian spirits of ancestors and spirits of the nature which they carried from paganism just before they converted into Islam (Md. Saffie Abd Rahim et al., 2012). The ethnic relies on the roles and the power of the *Keombo'an* that affect their life and wellbeing. Henceforth, the Bajau Laut performs the healing ritual to communicate with the *Keombo'an* to solve the occurring conflict between the two worlds (Sharifuddin Zainal et al., 2019). The misdeed committed by the human to the metaphysical world is believed to bring illness, catastrophe and misfortunes. Rituals are performed to keep the balance between the two worlds (micro cosmos and macro cosmos) back in order, so both worlds can live together in the same spaces (different dimension) in peace and harmony. However, in line with the new syncretism of belief (between Paganism and Islamic beliefs) the ethnic has gained the relevancy of healing ritual practices. The rituals have changed and started to evolve. The performance practice goes through a liminal process and evolves into a new form. Though some are still performed in their authentic form as much as they possibly can, the ritual performances are still affected by their two-conflicting belief. Furthermore, some of the healing ritual performances have extinct, while some are still evolving to adapt with the current belief.

The present study describes the two stances of the Sabah healing ritual performances and the Sabah traditional theater performances (the Bajau Laut/the East Coast Bajau). This paper aims to link both performances to the question of existence, the form, the concept and the functions through the liminal process. This paper also aims to fill the gap of study on Sabah traditional theatre performances, concept, features, and philosophy. This paper will bridge the ritual performances and the traditional theatre performances using the elements of 'play and playing', as suggested in the performance theory of Richard Schechner to keep the similarity features of each performance's genre. The elements are strategically believed to be a core to unfold the features and the concepts of the traditional theatre performances. From the theory perspective, the research paper aimed to synthesize the Sabah Traditional Theatre from ritual performances. Furthermore, from the cross reading on the three healing ritual performances (*Ngalai berasyik*, *Mag'buaya* and *Mag'dundang*), the research paper aims to unfold the performance elements and features of the Sabah traditional theater.

## RITUAL NGALAI BERASYIK

*Ngalai berasyik* is a healing ritual performance of Bajau Kg. Beliajung. Located in the remote area of Kota Marudu, the community performs *Ngalai berasyik* for specific purposes related to the unseen world. *Ngalai berserk* is performed after twilight for either one, three, five or seven consequent nights, depending on how

complicated the problem needs to be solved or how severe the illness of the patient. *Ngalai* is a Bajau term denoting the action of dancing focusing on the hand swinging movement (Mohd. Kipli Abd Rahman et al, 2017), whereas *Berasyik* refers to the unconscious state of human mind in pleasure enjoying something. *Berasyik* can also be referred to the trance state of human mind. In associate to the name, *Ngalai berasyik* is a healing ritual demanding the shaman and the patient to mainly be dancing in trance after the *Keombo'an* possessed their bodies. The embodiment of the *Keombo'an* is the crucial state for the ritual performances as an indicator of the healing process and the successes of one's performed ritual. Apart from the trance dancing, the role playing and *langar air* are the prominent features of the ritual (taken place as recurrence process in many parts of the performances). *Langgar air* (terms translated for crashing into the water) is one unique feature of *Ngalai berasyik*, a game played as part of the ritual. The male audiences and the *dayangs* will gather around to protect a pot of water behind them. They must stop (in whatever way) the *Keombo'an* (embodied in shaman bodies) from reaching the pot of water. It is believed during the ritual performances; the patient's soul has been kept inside the pot of water to be purified. It is also believed if the *Keombo'an* manages to reach the pot of water, the patient's soul will never return to its' body again and he/she will be taken by the spirits back to the unseen world. *Langgar air* is the mass fun and the secular part of the ritual tagged with the most serious consequences.

### **RITUAL MAG'DUNDANG**

*Mag' Dundang* is *Bajau Balimbing's* healing ritual performance featuring the act of swinging as part of the healing process performances. *Mag' Dundang* is a term derived from the word '*berdundang*' referring to the act of swinging a high swing while singing a lullaby. Representing the whole concept of '*berdundang*', the ritual performance starts with the process of *berkalang*<sup>1</sup> and swinging the patient at the 20 feet tall swing. The swing is built by the community right after dawn on the first day of the performance. The ritual performance takes place for seven days and seven nights in a row. *Mag' Dundang* is a big scale performance involving almost all the community's members as part of the audience and the participants. The healing process of the ritual is performed during daylight, right after dawn until before twilight. On the other hand, the more relaxed and secular activities are held during the night times at the performance site. During the night, the performance site turns into a social gathering spaces where the community is involved in the social activities such as mingling around, playing games, cooking, having dinner and etc. The main idea is to keep the host (the patient and his/her family) company as they are prohibited from returning home and camping at the performance site during the entire seven days performance/rituals. Aside from the swinging act, the role playing, the supernatural (trance dancing) and the music ensembles are also the main processes of the healing rituals. Among all the Bajau Laut healing ritual performances, *Mag' Dundang* performances are the closest to the sense of festivals and celebration, considering the whole process from the parade sailing boat used during the process of collecting mangrove woods (to build the swing), number of the audiences, to the feast prepared for the guests every night. On the last performance-day, the community will clean the performance site (usually a spacious space like a field) and gather around in the shaman's house for the last feast.

### **RITUAL MAG'BUAYA**

*Mag' Buaya* is a healing ritual which summons the *ombo' buaya pote'* (the guardian spirit of white crocodile) during the ritual performances. Practiced by the Bajau Laut Kg. Seloka Empat, the ritual is performed for three days in the front yard of the *Kelamat*<sup>2</sup> house. It is a woman dominated performance which consists of more women roles and participations. In contrast to most of the Bajau Laut healing rituals performances, *Mag' Buaya* does not involve the trance dancing performances as part of the healing process but emphasizes the role playing. However, *igal* in *Mag' Buaya* performed by 'the seven *dayang*' as part of the opening and the welcoming dances. There are several unique features of *Mag' Buaya* ritual performance

such as the crocodile replica, the seven *dayangs*, the ‘*curi air*’ (water stealing) process and the *ajung*<sup>3</sup> process. During the performance, the main *dayang* and the *Kelamat* will work hand in hand to make the two crocodile replicas using sticky rice, *penyaram*<sup>4</sup> and boiled eggs. Furthermore, at the end of the performance, the crocodile replica will be placed into *ajung* and sailed free to the open water as the gratitude offering given by the community to the *ombo*’ *buaya*. The seven *dayangs* are seven virgin young girls’ helper that are selected or volunteered from the community members. Virgin is a requirement to fulfill for the seven *dayangs*. It is believed, the person who has been chosen as the seven *dayangs* should not be lying of her virginity or the healing process will never occur and the *dayangs* will get misfortune and illness. Two main tasks of the seven *dayangs* are to do the ‘*curi air*’ process and to dance the *igal* opening dance. During the preparation days, the seven *dayangs* will wander around the village to steal water. The water will then be used in many parts of the ritual performances. It is said that if they get caught by the owner while stealing the water, they have to splash the water back to the owner so he/she will never remember the event (Patta Arifin Hussin et al., 2020)

## METHOD, APPROACHES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present research was carried out based on Richard Schechner’s performance theoretical framework. Schechner in his performance theory suggested the seven genres of performance. The seven genres are: 1. Rites and ceremony, 2. Shamanism, 3. Eruption and resolution of crisis, 4. Performance in everyday life, entertainment, 5. Play, 6. Art-making process, and 7. Ritualization (Richard Schechner, 2002). Figure 1 below shows how Richard Schechner relates each genre in the shape of the performance fan. According to Schechner, each genre formed as the fan blade rooted as performance and are interconnected to each other’s with the four universal qualities.

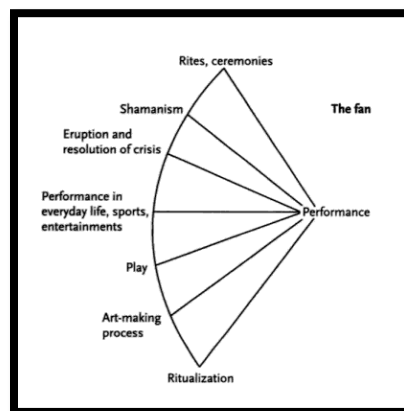


Figure 1: Photo of the fan (Source: Richard Schechner, 1988,2003: xvii)

The four universal qualities are important elements in the performance perspective, linking each genre’s blade of the performance fan. The four universal qualities are:

1. Special ordering of time.
2. A special value attached to objects.
3. Non productivity in terms of good.
4. Rules

(Richard Schechner, 1988,2003)

Working in the framework of this performance theory perspective, the research has strategized to bridge the ritual performances and the traditional theatre performances by further analyzing the traditional theatre

performances features. Based on the four universal qualities of performance genres and the elements of ‘play and playing’ (*main dan bermain*) as variables, this research paper attained the cross-reading of the traditional healing ritual performances as a traditional theatre performance text (text in the context of the research referring to the features, structures, and elements). The working strategy summarizing the genre bridge of the traditional theatre performances pictured in Figure 2. The elements of ‘play and playing’ in the four universal qualities of the performances; are the sharing elements between the two genres bridging the ritual performance to the traditional theatre performances. Thus, deporting the whole actions from the sacred ritual perspective to the more secular ritual point of view.

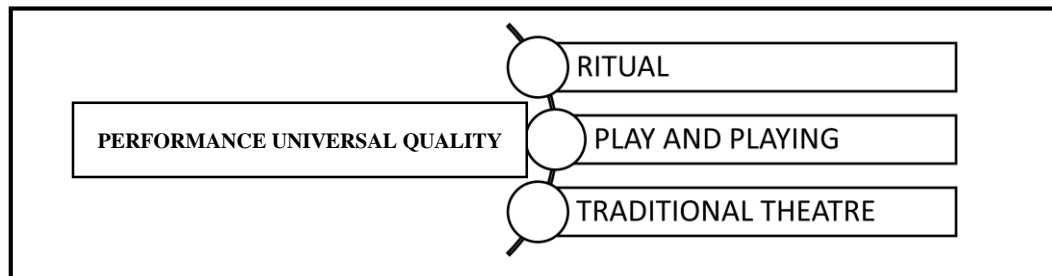


Figure 2: Photo of genre bridging.

### CONCEPT DEFINITION ‘PLAY AND PLAYING’

The elements of ‘play and playing’ have been generated as research variables following the ideas and the features associated to the concept. Grounded with the concept of fun, informal and secular, the research paper underlines the sharing sentiments and the senses of ‘play and playing’ with the whole concept of the traditional theatre performances. Hence, the research suggested, reading the elements of ‘play and playing’ consisted in the traditional ritual performances is essential. Reading the text will consequently unfold the secular ritual (traditional theatre) out of its sacred ritual (healing ritual) sources. Schechner (2002) refers to play as the heart of performance. He also suggests, “Performance may be defined as ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play” (Schechner, 2002). The ‘play and playing’ is a concept engaging the activities for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose. Piaget (1962) defined play as assimilation, or the human efforts to make environmental stimuli match his or her own concepts. This definition of play given by Piaget also explains the concept theater performances in which a practice is symbolized to manifest one’s culture and way of life. In parallel to Piaget, Csikszentmihalyi (1981) described play as "a subset of life..., an arrangement in which one can practice behavior without dreading its consequences". Again, a definition pointed out the concept of ‘play and playing’ which is subjected to the idea of enjoyment, recreation, freedom secularity and spontaneity.

‘Play and playing’ is a familiar concept and common practice in the Malaysian Traditional Theatre. It is widely used in the field mostly referring to the spontaneous and improvisational features of the performances. The unscripted and the freedom actions in acting to develop the scene and the role played. Kuritz (1983) defined an improvisation as series of playing action created through the imaginative analysis towards the present situation. The terms ‘play and playing’ are commonly used to denote the action of performing and to perform the traditional theatre such as *Makyong* play, *Wayang Kulit* play and *Main Puteri* play (Nasuruddin, M. G, 2000). It is also the terms used to refer other forms of traditional performances in Malaysia such as dance and music ensembles. Mana Sikana (2006) suggested “Before the drama term was used, the traditional theatre is better known by the term ‘play’ (*main*)”. Most of the Malaysian Traditional Theatre researchers and practitioners have used the term ‘*main*’ (play) to describe the practices and the actions of performing. ‘Play’ (main) is also the term used by the *Kelamat* and the Bajau Laut healing

traditional ritual practitioners to refer to the certain parts of rituals performance which mostly are associated with the concepts of informality, fun and ‘self-enjoyment’

## ‘PLAY AND PLAYING’ IN RITUAL PERFORMANCES

### Elements of ‘Play and Playing’ in *Ngalai berasyik* Ritual Performances

Through the readings on the *Ngalai berasyik* ritual performances, at least four elements of ‘play and playing’ underline from the ritual performances contribute the biggest parts of the performance structure and are the repeating process. The four elements are involved in every performance day with the sentiment of ‘play and playing’. The practitioners also use the terms *main* (play) and *bermain* (playing) in referring to the action of implementing the process in that particular part of performance. The four elements are *Ngalai*, *Bertitik*, play role and *Langgar air* (water crash). Table 1 listed the elements of ‘play and playing’ in *Ngalai berasyik* healing ritual performance.

Table 1: List of ‘play and playing’ elements in *Ngalai berasyik*.

The elements of ‘play and playing’ in <i>Ngalai berasyik</i> ritual performances	
<b><i>Ngalai</i></b>	Referring to the dancing play. <i>Ngalai</i> is also known as <i>main alai</i> by the shaman and the community. The term is subjected to the part of dancing with the guardian spirit ( <i>Keombo’an</i> ) during the ritual performance. <i>Main alai</i> is done by the shaman and the patient or any other participants who have been possessed by the <i>Ke’omboan</i> . <i>Main alai</i> is performed in specific performance space. It is performed around the center of the performance site where the main <i>mayang pinang</i> was hung. The <i>alai</i> movement is performed in anti-clockwise circle in the center of the main performance spaces.
<b><i>Bertitik</i></b>	<i>Bertitik</i> is literally translated as hitting. The term refers to the act of hitting the music instrument. A collective music which ensembles <i>gabbang</i> (a xylophone type of <i>kulintangan</i> ) and homemade kind of drums (using suitable recycle can). The musicians start to play the music as a sign to begin the ritual performance. Two types of notes are played in <i>Ngalai berasyik</i> performances: 1. <i>titik terinai</i> and 2. <i>titik burung sepantai</i> . The music is played in an improvised manner as they follow the spontaneous process of <i>main alai</i> .
<b>Role play</b>	Role play is the most happening part of the performance. The shaman or the patient or even any selected audience will get into the trance state and play the roles accordingly with the types of <i>Keombo’an</i> which possess their body. They will spontaneously play the roles and doing an abstract act by interacting with the <i>dayangs</i> and other participants. <i>Ngalai Berasyik</i> ritual associates the <i>Keombo’an</i> to the place where the guardian spirit comes from. Hence the characters in the role play process are identified with the names of people where they come from. The roles in <i>Ngalai berasyik</i> rituals are always known as <i>orang kayu</i> (people of the woods), <i>orang langit</i> (people of the skies), <i>orang pulau</i> (people of the islands), <i>orang tanah</i> (people of the lands), <i>orang lopak</i> (people of the swamp) and <i>Mero’on</i> (the red people).
<b><i>Langgar air</i></b>	<i>Langgar air</i> or water crashing is part of the ritual performances which male participant must stop the <i>Keombo’an</i> by reaching and crashing a jar of water. Linked with deep philosophy of the community belief (the belief toward <i>keombo’an</i> and all the philosophy and principals fixed on it)- this process however is the most part of the ritual affixed with the sense of secular and enjoyment. This process is so much resemblance to the child games of <i>Galah Panjang</i> (long poles).

	The community believes in during the healing processes, the soul of the patient is kept inside the particular jar of water. The processes are repeated more than one time in each performance day and performed daily during the performance days.
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### **‘Play and Playing’ Elements in *Mag’dundang***

Four elements of play and playing elements are also be found in *Mag’dundang* ritual performances. The four elements are *mengalai*, *mag’tanggunguk*, role play and *berdundang*. *Berdundang* is a unique feature of ritual performances as each performance day begins with the process. The *berdundang* process will be executed first by the patient and other participants are welcome to ride the swing afterwards as long as they abide by the rules and the terms given by the *Kelamat*. The community believes if anyone does not keep his/her manners when riding the swing, he/she will be thrown away by the swing itself into the sea (the swing is always built at the edge of sea side). Therefore, the swing can always be ridden under the *Kelamat* supervision during the day. Table 2 is a list of play and playing elements in *Mag’dundang* ritual performances. The short explanations of each element are also noted in the table.

Table 2: List of ‘play and playing’ elements in *Mag’dundang*

<b>The elements of ‘play and playing’ in <i>Mag’dundang</i> ritual performances.</b>	
<b><i>Mengalai</i></b>	<i>Mengalai</i> takes place in many parts of the seven days <i>Mag’dundang</i> performances. <i>Mengalai</i> in the ritual performance is also known as <i>mag-igal</i> . <i>Igal</i> is a traditional dance of the Bajau Laut. <i>Kelamat</i> will start to <i>Mag-igal</i> first in the opening dance session. He will be followed by the patient and later their family. Trance process occurs during the dance by the shaman and the patient (involved directly) and even to any ‘chosen one’ among the participants or the audiences (who are involved indirectly) in the performance. When it happens, they will dance abstractly according to the spirit of <i>Keombo’an</i> possesses their body. The dancing is then called <i>Panansang</i> dance.
<b><i>Mag’tanggunguk</i></b>	<i>Tagungguk</i> is a music assemble of <i>kulintangan</i> and <i>gendang</i> . <i>Tagungguk</i> is played by four musicians. The note play of <i>tagungguk</i> depends on the type of the <i>igal</i> performed during the performance. The <i>Tabawan</i> notes are played for the <i>Mag’dundang</i> ritual performances in line with the <i>Tabawan</i> dance. In accordance to the dance, the musician will play a <i>Panansang</i> note when the trance process occur. The tempo and the notes are played spontaneously according to the process of <i>mag-igal</i> .
<b>Role play</b>	Role play is the most happening part of the performance. The shaman, the patient or even any selected audience will get into the trance state and play the roles accordingly with the types of <i>Keombo’an</i> possesses their body. They will spontaneously be playing the role and doing an abstract act by interacting with the <i>dayangs</i> and other participants. The embodiment and the trance process are the most important processes as these are the indicators of the success performed rituals. The guardian spirits of the <i>Mag’dundang</i> are the spirits of the sea which each have their specific names and characteristics. They are comprising of the sea animal characters (such as turtle and stingray) and the human characters (such as prince and warrior).
<b><i>Berdundang</i></b>	<i>Berdundang</i> is a swinging process and a special feature of the ritual performances. Before the ritual begins, the community will work together hand in hand to build a 20 feet high swing. The swinging process for the healing will take place every morning during the seven days performance and only patient is allowed to sit on the swing during the time. After the swinging process is done by the patient,

	anybody is allowed to play with the swing as long as they follow the rules of the rituals.
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### **‘Play and Playing’ Elements in *Mag’buaya***

The elements of ‘play and playing’ in *Mag’buaya* are also listed as four main elements. *Mengalai* or *Mag-igal* is the first element of ‘play’ extracted out, though it is executed in slightly different manners and concept. The second element is *Mag’tagungguk*. The music ensembles of *Mag’buaya* consists of all female musicians. There are four musicians in the ensembles and will play during the *Mag-igal* process and several different parts of the performance. The play role is the third element and *curi air* (water stealing) is the fourth. *Curi air* is the unique features of *Mag’buaya*. Clear water is essential to the community as they live in island surrounded by the sea. However, during the preparation period of the *Mag’buaya* performances, the community will purposely leave their clear water outside of their house to be stolen by the seven *dayang*. They leave the water as a bait to catch the *dayangs* and experiencing the supernatural of their belief.

Table 3: List of ‘play and playing’ elements in *Mag’buaya*

<b>The elements of ‘play and playing’ in <i>Mag’buaya</i> ritual performances.</b>	
<b><i>Mengalai</i></b>	<i>Mengalai</i> is a dancing term implied to the smooth hand swaying and waving movements in the <i>igal</i> dance. <i>Igal</i> is the traditional dance of the Bajau Laut. <i>Igal</i> will always be played in many occasions including the ritual performances. <i>Igal Limbayan</i> is the type of <i>igal</i> performed during <i>Mag’buaya</i> . It is the softer version of <i>Igal</i> as it is specifically dance by only female dancers. The dance process is also known as <i>Mag-igal</i> . <i>Igal</i> in <i>Mag’buaya</i> is played as part of calling and welcoming guest (the spirit). It being danced by the seven <i>dayang</i> in the beginning of the ritual as an indicator it has started and already happening. It is in contrast with the rest of the Bajau Laut healing ritual performance. The <i>igal</i> process in <i>Mag’buaya</i> is not executed in trance state. In other words, it is played as <i>Igal</i> and stay as <i>igal</i> . It does not change into <i>Panansang</i> .
<b><i>Mag’tagungguk</i></b>	<i>Tagungguk</i> is a music assemble of <i>kulintangan</i> , <i>gendang</i> , <i>tambul</i> and the gongs ( <i>Inak</i> and <i>Anak</i> or mother and child). <i>Tagungguk</i> is played by four musicians. The note play of <i>tagungguk</i> depends on the type of the <i>igal</i> performed during the performance. The <i>Limbayan</i> notes are played for the <i>Mag’buaya</i> ritual performances in line with the <i>Limbayan</i> dance.
<b>Role play</b>	Role play is the most happening part of the performance. The shaman or the patient or even any selected audience will get into the trance state and play the roles accordingly with the types of <i>Keombo’an</i> possessing their body. They will spontaneously be playing the role and doing an abstract act by interacting with the <i>dayangs</i> and other participants. The embodiment and the trance processes are the most important processes as these are indicators to the success of the performed rituals. The guardian spirit of <i>Mag’buaya</i> is a very specific <i>Keombo’an</i> . It is called <i>ombao’ Buaya pote’</i> or the spirit of white crocodile. However, during the trance process, different characters may appear to be brought out by the patient (the conflicting spirit)
<b><i>Curi air</i></b>	<i>Curi air</i> (steal water) is a process of the seven <i>dayangs</i> (7 virgin young girls) roaming around the village to steal water. The clean water used during the healing ritual performances ought to be from the <i>curi air</i> process. During the process, the seven <i>dayangs</i> will go to the targeted houses to steal the water. It is believed if they get caught by the owner, they have to splash the stolen water back to the owner so that the owner will never remember the event that occurred as if it is never happened.



## ANALYSIS OF ‘PLAY AND PLAYING’ ELEMENTS

Through the comparison analysis shown in *Table 4* below, the research paper has divided the elements of ‘play and playing’ in the ritual performances into two groups. The groups are the universal group and the specific feature group. The universal group is extracted from the similar elements unfolded through the comparative analysis. While the specific feature group is dug out through the differences by the same process. The elements of ‘play and playing’ is grouped into the universal group when it hits higher numbers of frequency distribution score (range between 2/3 to 3/3). The universal elements are also identified from the analysis as a conditional code (*kod bersyarat*) to the ritual performances. It is a must performance element to be fulfilled or to be performed during the ritual performance. It cannot be removed, changed or replaced and mostly linked to the needs and the rules of the *Keombo’an*. The ‘play and playing’ elements clustered in the universal group are: 1) Dance (*Mengalai, Igal-Limbayan, Tabawan, Lellang, Panansang*), 2) Role Play (*Keombo’an* embodiments), and 3) Music (*Kulintangan/Gabbang, Gendang, Gong*).

On other hand, the elements of ‘play and playing’ are extracted into the specific feature group as they have the lower number of the frequency distribution score (1/3). The elements of play and playing resemble/feature half-conditioned code or non-conditional code respectively with regards to the performance’s rituals. The elements of play and playing resemble/feature half-conditioned code or non-conditional code respectively with regards to the performance’s rituals. The elements in the half conditional code are also essential elements for ritual performances. It’s could not be removed. However, the elements identified as the half conditional code could be changed or replaced into something with similar concept. Meanwhile, the non-conditional code elements are optional elements. Some are removeable while some are changeable and replaceable. Regardless of the manner of the elements (half-conditional and non-conditional), the specific feature group is always associated with the uniqueness to each ritual and tagged with an authentic sense of identities for each performed ritual. The ‘play and playing’ elements clustered in the specific feature groups are the games and the tricks (*langar air, curi air* and *berdundang*). The comparative analysis on similarities and differences of each ritual ‘play and playing’ elements is described in *Table 4*.

*Table 4: Comparative analysis*

<b>Play and Playing Elements</b>	<i>Ngalai berasyik</i>	<i>Mag’buaya</i>	<i>Mag’dundang</i>
Dance (3/3)	<i>Mengalai</i> (3/3)  <i>Main alai</i> (1/3) <i>(alai berasyik)</i> (1/3)	<i>Mengalai</i> (3/3)  <i>Mag-igal</i> (2/3) <i>(Limbayan)</i> (1/3)	<i>Mengalai</i> (3/3)  <i>Mag-igal</i> (2/3) <i>(Tabawan, Panansang)</i> (1/3)
Music (3/3)	<i>Batitik</i> (1/3)  <i>(titik terinai, burung sepantai)</i> (1/3)  <i>(gabbang (a wood kind of kulintangan), gendang/drum)</i> (3/3)	<i>Mag’tagungguk</i> (2/3)  <i>(titik Limbayan)</i> (1/3)  <i>(kulintangan, gendang, (3/3) tambul, gong anak, gong inak)</i> (2/3)	<i>Mag’tagungguk</i> (2/3)  <i>(titik Tabawan, titik Panansang)</i> (1/3)  <i>(kulintangan, gendang)</i> (3/3) <i>gong</i> (2/3)
Acting (3/3)	<i>Role play</i> (3/3) Spontaneous Improvise  <i>Shaman, patient, dayang and audience</i> (3/3)	<i>Role play</i> (3/3) Spontaneous Improvise  <i>Shaman, patient, dayang and audience</i> (3/3)	<i>Role play</i> (3/3) Spontaneous Improvise  <i>Shaman, patient, dayang and audience</i> (3/3)

	<i>Keombo'an</i> (3/3) Spirit of ancestor Spirit of the nature (people) People of: sky, island, land, woods, swamp and puddle (1/3)	<i>Keombo'an</i> (3/3) <i>Buaya pote'</i> (1/3) (spirit of white crocodile) Spirit of ancestor Spirit of the nature	<i>Keombo'an</i> (3/3) Spirit of ancestor Spirit of the nature sea Jin Lalla (1/3) Jin Randa (1/3)
Games and Trick (3/3)	<i>Langgar air</i> (1/3) (water crash)  Resemblance the child play of: - <i>Galah panjang</i> (long pole) - <i>Musang dan ayam</i> (fox and the chicken) - <i>Datuk harimau</i> (tiger grandfather)	<i>Curi air</i> (1/3) (water stealing)  Resemblance the child play of: - <i>Polis dan pencuri</i> (police and thief) - <i>Sembunyi ibu</i> (hide and seek)	<i>Berdundang</i> (1/3) (swinging)  Resemblance the child play of: - <i>main buaian</i> (swing) - <i>jongkang jonket</i> (seesaw)

### Synthesizing the Traditional Theatre

The traditional theatre is synthesized from the two groups of 'play and playing' elements of the traditional ritual performance. In lines with the secularism and the similarities shared (ritual-performance (play) – theatre), the features tagged on with the concept of 'play and playing'. It is an important principle of perspective in turning the table around from once a sacred form to the secular form (from rituals to theatre). The research synthesized the two groups (universal and special features) of 'play and playing' elements into the three components of traditional theater features. The three divisions of Sabah East Coast Bajau traditional theater are: 1) The physical form, 2) The concept and 3) The philosophy.

### The Physical Form and The Concept

Previous literatures on the elements of 'play and playing' in the subjected traditional healing ritual performances suggest four physical forms of the traditional theatre. The four physical features are dance, music, acting and the structures. Table 5 presents the physical forms of features where each are tagged with their conceptual features. The table demonstrates *Ngalai* or *Igal* has been identified as specific feature for the dance elements of the East Coast Bajau traditional theater. *Igal* is a multi-functional dance performed repeatedly in many parts of the traditional theatre performance structure. *Kulintangan/gabbang*, *gendang* and gong are the major instruments of the theatre performance. The music ensembles consist of only two to five musicians. The music is always played following the cue by the *Kelamat* and usually in unison with the dance. The Bajau traditional theatre also features acting or play roles elements. The roles are played based on the characters of the *Keombo'an*. In union to the stylized acting technique, the actor is required to also sing, dance and recite *kalang* in the performance.

Actors play among and with the audiences with no fourth wall. *Kelamat* is a group leader which recite the *kalang* as an opening act. He/she also dances, sings and gives cue for the musician and the other performers. The main actor is entitled as the *Kelamat* and the *Ombo'*. Meanwhile, the supporting actors are known as the *dayangs*. Based from the myth of legend *Arung Salamia Journey*, the theatre has a long episodic narrative plot. It is developed based on the fixed and improvisational features of performance structure of performance structure. *Arung Salamia* is a Bajau Laut legendary princess bestowed the ability to dance and to sing beautifully. Upon the unfortunate event in her life she chooses to cross over dimension and become *Keombo'an* (Fauzrina Hj Bulka, 2017; Yeon Amsali Pisali et al., 2017). The concept of the traditional theatre performance structure is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: List of traditional theatre features (Physical Form and Concept)

The Physical Form Features	The Concept Features
<p>DANCE</p> <p>(<i>Ngalai, Igal-Limbayan, Tabawan Lellang, Penansang</i>)</p>	<p>Feature dancing as part of the play.</p> <p>Dances are performed in the beginning of the performance as an opening.</p> <p>Dances are performed in between scenes as a transition technique.</p> <p>Dances are performed at the end as part of the closure.</p> <p>Dance symbolizes characters played and its characteristics.</p> <p>Dances are used to picture dramatic moments.</p>
<p>MUSIC</p> <p>(<i>Kulintangan/Gabbang, Gendang, Gong</i>)</p>	<p>Music is featured in most part of the play.</p> <p>Music is used as a background to accompany dancing and acting.</p> <p>Major instruments are <i>kulintangan/gabbang</i> and <i>gendang</i>. Additional instruments are gong <i>anak</i>, gong <i>inak</i> and <i>tambul</i>.</p> <p>Playing of the instruments based, on iron, bronze and wood. <del>Based instruments.</del></p> <p>All performance starts with <i>kalang</i>.</p>
<p>ACTING</p> <p>(Role Play- <i>Ombo', Keombo'an</i>)</p>	<p>Stylized acting.</p> <p>Actors are required to dance, to sing to recite <i>kalang</i>.</p> <p>Some actors play a single role while others <del>and some</del> are required to play more than one role.</p> <p>Spontaneous and improvised acting.</p> <p>No <del>forth</del> fourth wall. Actor plays and interacts with the audiences.</p> <p><i>Kelamat</i> role is as a group leader and the main actor.</p>
<p>STRUCTURE</p> <p>(Dramatic and Episodic)</p>	<p>Long dramatic and episodic plot.</p> <p>Contain dancing, acting and singing.</p> <p>Contain parts with audience involvement and audiences' active reactions.</p> <p>Contain fixed structured part and improvisation parts.</p> <p>Basically, divided into three clear parts of the opening, the performing and the closing.</p>

### The Philosophy

The philosophy of the traditional theatre is rooted and much adapted from the practice of the traditional ritual performances. It abstractly pictures the cosmological belief of the ethnic and their way of life. Based on the literature reviews, the research has unfolded the complex bonding between the ethnics and their cosmological belief. The ethnic's belief is going through a modification, adjustment, symbiosis and the reconstructing process due the syncretism and the liminal state. However, the ethnics still firmly stand on the very core of their cosmological belief and manifest it through their performance practices. Henceforth, the philosophy of the ethnic's traditional theatre is also much influenced from their cosmological belief towards the environment and the world around them. Therefore, the research suggest two crucial principles to abide with the philosophy laid behind the performance practices of the ethnic traditional theatre. The first principal is it is sea centered and the second principle is the belief towards *Keombo'an*.

The Bajau Laut ethnic strongly believe in the power of water and sea. The ethnic believes that water and sea have magical healing power. They believe every good comes from the sea, remain in the sea and need to be returned into the sea. Hence, many *Keombo'an* characters represent sea creatures or creatures coming from the sea. The principle of the belief is also manifested in *langgar air, curi air* and *berdundang* processes. In related to the first principle, the ethnic belief towards the *Keombo'an* is also much influences the performance practices. Rooted from the long history to the beginning of the healing ritual performance practice, the traditional theatre performance practice is also centered to the narrative of the legendary Arung Salamiah life's journey. Besides rooted the legend of Arung Salamiah, the traditional theatre narrative is

also co-related with the other Bajau Laut myths and folklores which is pinned down to the ethnic belief towards the *Keombo'an*.

## CONCLUSION

The Sabah East Coast Bajau traditional theatre is the liminality form of its traditional healing ritual performances. Dealing with the conflict of extinction, the traditional healing ritual performances need to be cross-read from different view and perspective in order to ensure their survival. Traditional theatre has offers conservation and preservation spaces needed by the nearly extinct rituals to reincarnate as a new form of the cultural heritage. The elements of 'play and playing' is a functional variable in bridging the ritual performance with the traditional theatre form. Thus, allowing the research to synthesize the traditional theatre from the traditional ritual performances. By cross reading the ritual performance as the traditional theater performance text, the present study managed to generate the elements and the feature of the traditional theater. The 'play and playing' elements of the Sabah East Coast Bajau traditional healing rituals performances are the roots of the Sabah East Coast Bajau traditional theatre features. The traditional ritual performances have undergone the liminal state and evolving from one form to another. Evolving from the ritual performance to a social drama, the ritual performance is now have evolved into the theater-ritual performances form. The performance is now positioned in between the social drama form and the traditional theater form. The research has given space for the ritual performance to evolve more and to revive as its final liminality form, the traditional theater.

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