

## Sacred Symbolism in the Ritual Healing Ceremony of *Magombok*: An Analysis of the *Panangsang* Dance

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### ABSTRACT

*Panangsang*, a sacred dance integral to the *Magombok* ritual, serves as a spiritual healing ceremony for the Bajau Laut community in Semporna, Sabah. This mesmerizing performance is believed to bridge the gap between the physical and ethereal realms, facilitating communication through symbolic movements that embody the essence of the healing process. This study aims to meticulously analyze each gesture within the *Panangsang* dance to unravel the intricate tapestry of symbolic meanings woven throughout. Employing a qualitative approach rooted in ethnographic methodology, this research encompasses three distinct healing ceremonies involving separate patients. Each movement is scrutinized using Barthes' Order of Signification model to identify authentic and culturally relevant symbolic patterns and their meanings. The findings reveal seven animal-inspired movements, including representations of the Eagle, Rooster, Stingray, Turtle, Spider, Python, and Cobra. These zoomorphic gestures symbolically convey that the patient is afflicted by sorcery or ancestral curses. Furthermore, the interpretation of these symbols reflects the profound spiritual values deeply entrenched in Bajau Laut mythology. The significance of this study lies in its elucidation of the ceremony as both a medium for artistic expression and a conduit for conveying

spiritual messages integral to the healing process.

The implications of this research contribute to a more nuanced understanding of symbolism within traditional healing rituals, reinforcing the theory that sacred elements play a crucial role in facilitating communication between humans and the spiritual realm.

**Keywords:** Bajau Laut, healing ritual, *Magombok* ritual, *Panangsang* dance, sacred symbolism

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bajau Laut community in the Semporna region of Sabah holds a deep-seated reverence for the ancestral spirit worship (Nor & Hussin, 2019). This veneration is a central element in a sacred healing ritual, serving as a therapeutic bridge connecting the spiritual and physical realms (Pisali et al., 2017). The sacred value embodies a harmonious union between the physical and spiritual worlds, wherein ancestral spirits are believed to play a vital role in enhancing individual spiritual well-being.

This healing ritual, known as 'Magombok,' represents a ritualistic worship of ancestral spirits to treat illnesses stemming from mystical and magical origins (Pisali et al., 2017). Its execution is revealed through a rich and intricate structure that encompasses various elements, such as offerings (food and ritual props), dance, music, costumes, invocations, and captivating symbolic performances (Husin et al., 2020; Zainal et al., 2021). These elements coalesce into a platform to summon ancestral spirits and manifest them in the physical realm, conveying healing messages.

The ritual spans three days, comprising ceremonies for (1) spiritual purification, (2) preparation of offerings, and (3) the summoning of spirits. The spiritual purification ceremony involves two customary practices: *Magpandi Pajati* and *Magulung Bendera*. *Magpandi Pajati* entails bathing the patient beside the *Pajati* (cannon)—a heirloom legacy from their ancestors. Conversely, *Magulung Bendera* denotes the act of raising a flag, signifying

that an individual has been purified for the purposes of healing.

In the offering preparation ceremony, two customary practices must be executed: *Magpaiti Bahauh* and *Maggaddun Tapung Buas*. The *Magpaiti Bahauh* custom involves preparing the essential ingredients for the ritual offerings: upland rice, cooked sugarcane to produce sugar, and coconuts used for extracting oil. This is followed by the *Maggaddun Tapung Buas*, which processes these ingredients into three obligatory dishes for the spirits, known as *Pannyam*, *Pollo-Pollo*, and *Durul*.

In the spirit summoning ceremony, two principal customs are observed: 'Magtagungguk' and 'Magigal.' These customs are crucial as they function as methods of invoking the presence of ancestral spirits. Both are performed simultaneously, with ritual practitioners dancing three specific traditional dances at the outset: *Igal Tabawan*, *Igal Lellang*, and *Igal Limbayan* (Rahman et al., 2023). Concurrently, musicians perform the *magtagungguk* ritual by playing traditional instrumental ensembles, such as *Kulintangan*, *Tambul* (drums), and gongs, to accompany the dances.

This sacred healing ritual is led by *Kalamat*, the shaman, who occupies the highest rank and is deeply revered within the Bajau Laut community, especially regarding matters of customary practices and healing rituals. *Kalamat* is believed to possess the ability to connect and communicate with ancestral spirits (Pisali et al., 2017). Their role is to interpret subtle signs from these spirits, which are perceived as directives

for the healing process guiding the patient's recovery. Thus, the Bajau Laut community places immense faith in *Kalamat's* wisdom and abilities to restore health and well-being (Zainal et al., 2018).

While the *Magombok* encompasses various customary structures, the true medium of healing occurs solely when the *magtagungguk* and *magigal* customs are performed. These two customs act as an initial exposition connecting practitioners with the spirit realm, whereas the other customs serve merely as conditional elements supplementary to the overall ceremonial narrative. The process begins with auditory elements from the *tangungguk* rhythm, which serves as a medium for spirits to possess the dancers during the performances of *Igal Tabawan*, *Igal Limbayan*, or *Igal Lellang*. The presence of the spirit is signified when the performer enters a trance state, exhibiting symbolic movements that are often enigmatic.

These symbolic movements, known as the *Panangsang* dance, signify the communication that has transpired between *Kalamat* and the spirit (Pisali et al., 2017). Such communication is deemed sacred as it conveys messages regarding the origins of ailments and descriptions of healing methods. Each movement bears a distinct pattern and symbolic significance, varying according to the type of spirit that possesses the ritual performer. However, the challenge lies in interpreting these movement patterns, necessitating a profound understanding from *Kalamat* to ensure that the messages conveyed by the spirit are accurately translated.

In the context of this ritual, each movement pattern possesses an implicit meaning related to the sources of illness and the healing methods recommended by the spirit possessing the ritual performer. The uniqueness of this communication system rests with *Kalamat*, who serves as the intermediary in interpreting the messages conveyed through these dance movements. Nonetheless, the interpretation of these movement patterns is subjective and relies entirely on *Kalamat's* skill and experience, who often lacks systematic documentation to ensure the continuity of this knowledge. The absence of movement codification complicates the understanding of this sacred communication, particularly among younger generations increasingly distanced from traditional ritual practices. Furthermore, socio-cultural changes and the influence of globalization have led to the erosion of skills necessary for interpreting movement patterns, placing this tradition at risk of extinction unless it is systematically recorded and analyzed academically.

Therefore, it is imperative for this study to analyze and interpret the movement patterns within the *Panangsang* dance as a form of sacred communication system operating within the healing rituals of the Bajau Laut community, effectively serving as a healing process. This endeavor also entails defining signs associated with their myths and beliefs. Thus, the scope of this study is confined to the sacred symbolism of dance movements, focusing on elucidating the function and efficacy of *Panangsang* in the execution of the *Magombok* ritual.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sacred symbolism in ritual ceremonies is often regarded as a medium of communication that conveys divine entities, spiritual concepts, or cosmological principles considered sacred and interconnected. According to previous studies, these symbols are highly complex because they not only serve as visual or ritualistic communication tools but also play a significant role in shaping human relationships with the metaphysical world. For instance, Eliade (1957/1987) emphasizes that symbols in rituals function as forms of sacred communication containing dual dimensions: as manifestations of transcendent reality and as channels of communication between humans and the supernatural realm.

Turner (1969) emphasized that rituals are rich in symbolic meaning and function to connect individuals or communities with the supernatural. He viewed rituals as complex communication processes where symbols convey profound meanings. This communication occurs not only verbally but also through actions, movements, and the use of symbolic objects. Turner introduced the concept of “*communitas*” to describe the sense of unity and equality experienced during rituals, highlighting the transformative power of these symbolic acts in reinforcing societal norms, values, and beliefs.

This concept of symbolism carries multiple layers of meaning and can be interpreted in various ways. As Fenn (1974) noted in Geertz’s explanation, symbols in rituals often contain different meanings depending on their context and intended

audience. Geertz further emphasized that symbolic rituals are a form of cultural text that requires reading and interpretation to understand the deep meaning of a particular society. For instance, a symbol may convey sacred meaning in a religious context but social significance in a community context.

This narrative is upheld by researchers who have focused on the ritual practices of the Bajau Laut ethnic group. As Yakin (2017) observed, the Bajau Laut community maintains its cultural identity through rituals and symbolism that reflect its beliefs and traditions. According to Yakin, these symbols are non-verbal, and the ritual space itself serves as a direct and indirect means of communication. In this ritual, it is crucial to preserve the cultural identity of the Bajau Laut community, particularly in the context of diaspora and modernization (Hussin, 2009).

According to Hussin and Santamaria (2008), the sacred elements in the beliefs of the Bajau Laut community comprise behavioral practices and the execution of ritual equipment. This includes musical instruments, dance, food offerings, incantations, and the ritual structure itself. However, the primary determinants of symbolic representation refer to dance (Zannie, 2013). The *Magpa-igal Jin* dance is described as a medium of communication between the spirit and physical worlds (Pugh-Kitingan et al., 2005). This statement corresponds with the opinion expressed by Nor and Hussin (2019), who stated that dance in Bajau rituals is the instrument for connecting the living with the spiritual realm. Each movement and rhythm in this

dance carries deep symbolic meaning, illustrating the close relationship between participants and their ancestral spirits.

Pisali et al. (2017) previously conducted research that revealed that only specific dance movements giving special meaning will occur if patients or practitioners have changed from patterned dance to trance dance. They explain trance as a dance that occurs when practitioners reach a trance-like state. Any action or pattern displayed in this dance is a special sign referring to a specific meaning or symbol. Therefore, this study aims to fill gaps in knowledge about symbolization and special meaning in trance dance. At the same time, it also seeks to expand the corpus of knowledge related to this phenomenon in a more specific and profound manner.

The question is, how do these sacred symbols provide communicative meaning as a form of healing? This leads us to seek an ideal concept that explains how symbols in the dances of Bajau Laut rituals serve as a sacred form of communication, aiding in the healing process. Therefore, this study aims to fill the knowledge gap by analyzing the specific symbols and meanings within these dances as a dimension of sacred communication. At the same time, it seeks to expand the body of knowledge related to this phenomenon in a more specific and in-depth manner.

## METHODS

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate the Bajau Laut community in Semporna,

Sabah. This research is a follow-up of the researcher's previous studies on the functional and structural aspects of the sacred rituals of this community, which began in 2014. The study revisited the community multiple times to uncover diverse dimensions of their lives, particularly those related to rituals.

That begins with the respectful consideration of local elders and key participants in the ritual. This study has since gained their confidence in the dedication to cultural insight without eroding the secrecy and sacredness of the rituals. Further, this research will keep the norms and morals of the community intact, even aligning behavior with local culture until approval for the research itself is obtained.

Consequently, this article summarizes data collected from three patients who underwent the *Magombok* ritual. The three cases are presented in Table 1.

According to Table 1, the interview protocol was conducted with respondents carefully selected by the researchers based on their functions and roles in the ceremony. This selection was predicated on the criterion that the chosen individuals possessed rich and detailed information pertaining to the specific issue or phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Table 1  
*Information on the implementation of Magombok rituals according to spiritual disease type*

Patient	Spiritual Disease Type
Male	Enchantment
Female	Enchantment
Female	Ancestral Curse

The interviewees comprised the *kalamat*, patients, *Dayang-Dayang* (female assistants), *Si Otok* (male assistants) and musicians. Additionally, the study incorporated participant observation during the ritual ceremonies for all three patients. These observations were undertaken to glean insights and information regarding the *panangsang* dance movements during the trance state, with the resultant data being analyzed through a semiotic approach which examines the signified (the cultural and spiritual meanings or messages conveyed through the dance) and the signifier (the physical gestures and movements performed during the trance).

This approach was employed to help me systematically analyze every movement from the *panangsang* dance, allowing for a clearer interpretation of the signs and symbols embedded in the ritual. Connecting the observed gestures with their underlying meanings in each of the three cases could uncover the layers of symbolism specific to the spiritual and cultural context, thereby offering deeper insights into the role of the *panangsang* dance in healing practices.

This study adapts Barthes' semiotic theory, employing a sign system to analyze specific behaviors or actions that involve the interpretation of a particular society at a given time, thereby creating meaning (Rahman, 2009). Barthes classifies these signs into three categories, known as the 'order of signification', encompassing denotative, connotative, and mythical levels. Denotative signification reveals meanings that are visibly apparent or conveyed through an individual's bodily movements and actions. Conversely, connotative signification at the second level uncovers the implicit meanings contained within denotative signs. Myths, however, evolve within societal thought due to cultural influences, interpreting the correlation between what is visibly apparent and the implicit signs derived from it, ultimately leading to sacred experiences (Tejera, 2022), as illustrated in Figure 1, which elucidates Barthes' model of signification.

In elucidating visual signs and their associated meanings, diagrams and photographs play a crucial role. However, this research is bound by ethical

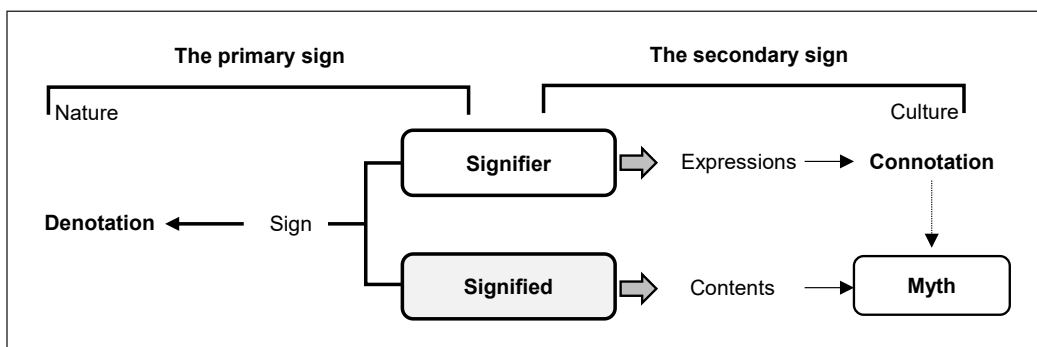


Figure 1. Adapted from the 'Order of Signification' model  
 Source: Tejera (2022)



considerations that respect the discipline and taboos of conducting such studies. The research participants were strictly prohibited from making any video recordings, photographs, or image-related captures to prevent potential harm to the researchers and the subjects. Consequently, a mutual agreement was reached between both parties, stipulating that all documentation data would be represented through sketched images of body movements aligned with observational data. The analysis process was entirely adapted to the interview data and sign codes, according to the verbal facts expressed by the respondents. Accordingly, these sketched images were produced exclusively by the researchers and have been authorized for use by the study participants.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Structure of the *Panangsang* Dance

The term '*Panangsang*' in the Bajau Laut community signifies stimulation, arousal, or excitation. The philosophy of this society elucidates that the *panangsang* dance is sacred, serving as a conduit to unite the physical and spiritual realms. Literally, the *panangsang* describes the behavior of an individual in an altered state of consciousness, driven by traditional customs and spiritual practices. According to the *kalamat*, a person performing the *panangsang* experiences heightened mental and emotional states, supported by ritual elements such as incantations, music, meditation, and sacred dance movements.

Not all participants in the *magombok* ceremony are destined to perform the

*panangsang* dance, as it is reserved exclusively for those chosen by the spirits, particularly the *Kalamat*, patients, patients' families, *dayang-dayang*, and *si otok*. *Panangsang* is a crucial element within the structure of the *magombok* ritual ceremony, serving as a communicative medium to identify treatment prescriptions believed to be conveyed solely by ancestral spirits to the ceremony's participants. These treatment descriptions are manifested in two forms: through symbolic movements inherent in the *panangsang* or verbal utterances delivered in a semi-conscious state.

The *panangsang* dance is divided into three distinct phases: the conscious phase (exposition), the semi-conscious phase (trance), and culminating in the post-conscious phase (catharsis). This research has formulated a model of the *panangsang* dance performance structure, conceptualized as a descending process in the pursuit of achieving a trance state, culminating in residual echoes of consciousness that determine the description of meaning, cause, and treatment methods. This model, known as the *Panangsang* Cylinder Model, elucidates the concept of the descent between reality and the spirit world during the *panangsang* performance, as illustrated in Figure 2.

As depicted in Figure 2 (*Panangsang* Cylinder Model), the exposition section is where the ritualists enter a trance. Before such a transformation occurs, the ritual actors perform one of the dances: *igal tabawan*, *igal lellang* or *igal limbayan*. The *igal lellang* is specifically for men,

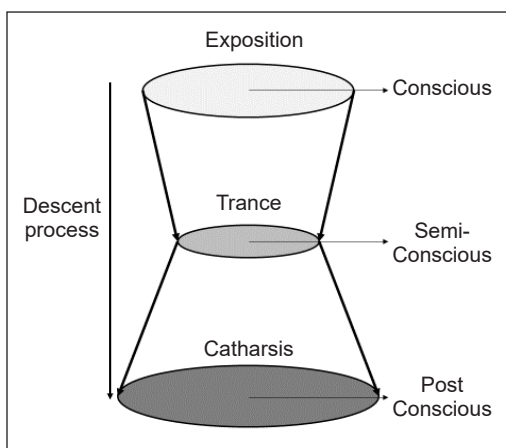


Figure 2. Panangsang cylinder model

and the *igal limbayan* for women (Nor & Hussin, 2006). But when dancers of both sexes move together, they give us the *igal tabawan* (Pisali et al., 2017). The value of a sex-separated dance style is that it serves to point out and enable the type of spirit that enters every dancer's body. Usually, the female parents' spirit dwells in the female performers' bodies, and vice versa.

Once the spirit takes over the dancer's body, no longer does the dance performed follow the formal rules as it once did. The dance is now improvisational, aggressive in its movements and floor-style freeform. Every movement is symbolically coded with different meanings that only the *kalamat* and *dayangs* can understand. The spirit also links the ritualists and the *kalamat* in a symbolic movement of the dance or other devices.

The catharsis period refers to the release of the spirit from the body of the actor, except the *kalamat*. It is a critical step as it concludes the spirit's direct control over the medium. This is the catharsis stage in which the ancestral spirits and the *kalamat* agree

on the best approach to heal the patient. Anything learned from the spirit during this possession process is critical for the patient's healing. These may be instructions, offerings, recipes or rituals the patient needs to follow to receive healing. The performer will then have to recover for about an hour or two to get back to their baseline. In the meantime, the *dayangs* will help the *kalamat* heal and be able to take part in the next ritual.

### Analysis of Symbolic Movement Patterns in the *Panangsang* Dance

Barthes' expanded theory of symbols aids this research in comprehending how meaning is generated in the *panangsang* performance through emergent signs and symbols. Accordingly, the movements encompass various bodily gestures inspired by animal forms and behaviors. Seven animal movement patterns and behaviors were identified based on the frequency of their recurrence across all three patient cases. The animal movement patterns include the Eagle, Rooster, Stingray, Turtle, Spider, Cobra, and Python. These seven icons are deeply intertwined with sacred animal symbols in Bajau Laut's beliefs, derived from mythical narratives and beliefs in jinn and demons. Table 2 elucidates the matrix of animal movement patterns that emerged during the three healing processes.

### Movement Pattern: Eagle

The first identified pattern is the eagle movement, which manifested in the ritual treatments of Patient 1 and Patient 3. This



Table 2  
Matrix of emergent animal movement patterns for each patient

Patient Details	Days	Conditional Code Implementation	Movement Pattern									
			Eagle	Rooster	Stingray	Turtle	Spider	Cobra	Phyton			
Patient 1 Male/Enchantment	Day 1 (Monday) الاثنين	Morning	/	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	-	-	-	-	/	-	-	-	-	
	Day 2 (Tuesday) الثلاثاء	Morning	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	/	
	Day 3 (Wednesday) الأربعاء	Morning	/	-	-	-	-	/	-	-	-	-
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Patient 2 Male/Enchantment	Day 1 (Monday) الاثنين	Morning	-	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	-	-	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	
	Day 2 (Tuesday) الثلاثاء	Morning	-	-	-	-	-	/	-	-	-	
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	/	-	
	Day 3 (Wednesday) الأربعاء	Morning	-	-	-	-	-	-	/	-	-	
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	-	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Patient 3 Female/Ancestral curse	Day 1 (Monday) الاثنين	Morning	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	/	/	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
	Day 2 (Tuesday) الثلاثاء	Morning	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	-	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	-	
	Day 3 (Wednesday) الأربعاء	Morning	-	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		After Zuhur (noon prayer) After Asar (afternoon prayer)	-	-	-	/	-	-	-	-	-	
<b>Frequency</b>			<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>		

movement pattern did not appear during Patient 2's ritual treatment session. The eagle movement pattern appeared three times during Patient 1's treatment: once on the first day during the implementation of conditional code in the morning (Conditional code refers to specific regulations and prerequisites that must be fulfilled before an individual or group can perform or participate in the ritual). The conditional code in rituals aims to ensure the authenticity, sanctity, and smooth execution of the ceremony, and twice on the third day: in the morning and after Asar. For Patient 3, it emerged twice, but only on the first day: after Zuhur and after Asar.

Figure 3 depicts the Eagle movement pattern. The denotative analysis of this movement can be identified when the physical posture begins with raised arms extended high to the sides above head level, with fingers splayed. The face is turned in either the left or right direction. The lower

body movement shows the performer on tiptoes, alternately balancing on the left and right big toes. Connotatively, this movement is interpreted as a symbolization of an eagle. The arms raised high to resemble an eagle's wings, while the face turned to either left or right signifies the eagle's keen eyes, symbolizing vigilance and alertness. The tiptoeing motion of the feet indicates the eagle's readiness and agility in pursuing its prey. Thus, the alternating balance on the right and left big toes supports the action of an eagle grasping its prey with its talons.

The synthesis of denotative and connotative meanings from the eagle movement pattern is marked by symbols of strength, freedom, and keen vision. This movement embodies a profound symbol of protection, spiritual guidance, and the intimate connection between humans and nature. This aligns with their belief that the eagle is an incarnation of their ancestral

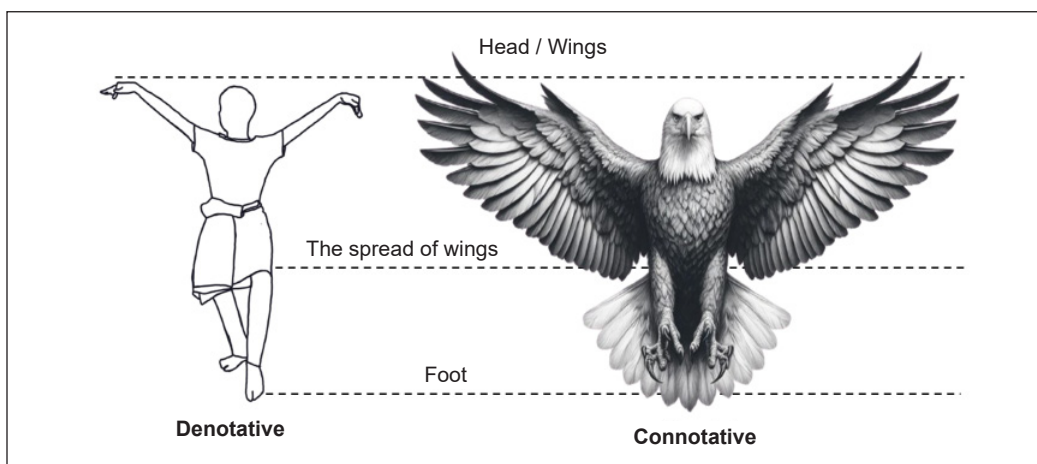


Figure 3. Eagle movement pattern

Note. The figure of the dancer is the author's work, created using Procreate, and the eagle image was generated using the ChatGPT image generator

spirit known as ‘*Ombok Maulana*’, an iconic male shaman figure who once served as protector and leader of this ethnic group in ancient times. This reflects an ideology emphasizing the importance of ancestral protection and guidance in community life. The movement reinforces narratives of courage and strength as highly esteemed values in Bajau Laut society.

**Movement Pattern: Rooster**

The second pattern is the rooster movement, which also appeared in Patient 1 and Patient 3’s ritual treatments.

The Rooster movement plan is illustrated in Figure 4. This movement did not emerge during Patient 2’s treatment sessions. The difference lies in its frequency: it appeared twice for Patient 1 on the third day after *Zuhur* and after *Asar*. For Patient 3, it occurred three times: twice on the first day, after *Zuhur* and after *Asar*, and once in the morning on the second day.

The denotative meaning of this movement describes the arms being spread downward at the sides. The body is slightly lowered with a small stance. The head is moved forward and backward while alternately raising and lowering the shoulders. Meanwhile, the feet are planted firmly and evenly without crossing between the left and right legs. To elucidate the connotative meaning, the body posture is believed to depict a rooster preparing to attack an opponent. A fighting rooster symbolizes a contest that could result in death for one of the combatants, indicating that even though it is not venomous or overtly threatening, it can still bring harm or serve as an ill omen for the patient.

In Bajau Laut’s belief, the rooster is often viewed as an incarnation of ‘*Ombok Kalamat*’, one of the revered ancestral spirit icons known for exceptional courage and vigilance. According to their mythology, they believe that *Ombok Kalamat* once

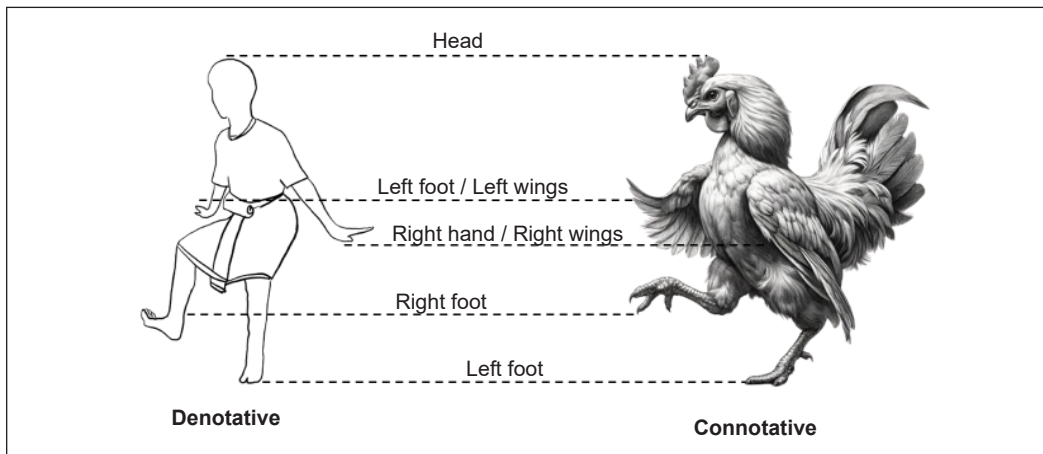


Figure 4. Rooster movement pattern

Note. The figure of the dancer is the author’s work, created using Procreate, and the rooster image was generated using ChatGPT image generator

possessed a rooster of extraordinary strength, which frequently emerged victorious in cockfighting festivals. It is believed that *Ombok Kalamat*'s inner strength merged with that of the rooster, leading to numerous triumphs. These contests were not merely between roosters but rather a reflection of how one's image and status of power were measured through their fighting rooster at that time.

### Movement Pattern: Stingray

The third identified pattern is the movement of stingrays. This pattern emerged in the treatment sessions of Patients 2 and 3, but was absent in Patient 1's sessions. This movement appeared quite frequently, seven times. For Patient 2, it occurred on the first day in the morning after Zuhur and after Asar on the third day. Patient 3 exhibited this movement more often, with four occurrences after Zuhur on the second day and the third day for each conditional code set.

Denotatively, the arms are spread at shoulder level, with palms positioned vertically on both sides. The body stands erect with thighs close together. The heels are alternately planted between the left and right feet. Connotatively, this movement represents the stingray icon, where the alignment of the spread arms with the shoulders depicts its fins. The vertical posture illustrates the stingray's head and tail structure, while the alternating heel planting symbolizes the stingray's tail whipping motion.

The spiritual connection between the Bajau Laut community and marine life forms a robust cosmology within their cultural practices and customs. This is clearly shown in Figure 5 where Stingray movement pattern is displayed. In local belief, the stingray is considered an incarnation of an ancestral spirit known as '*Ombok Banag*.' This view is reinforced by a myth that narrates how stingrays helped rescue their ancestors from

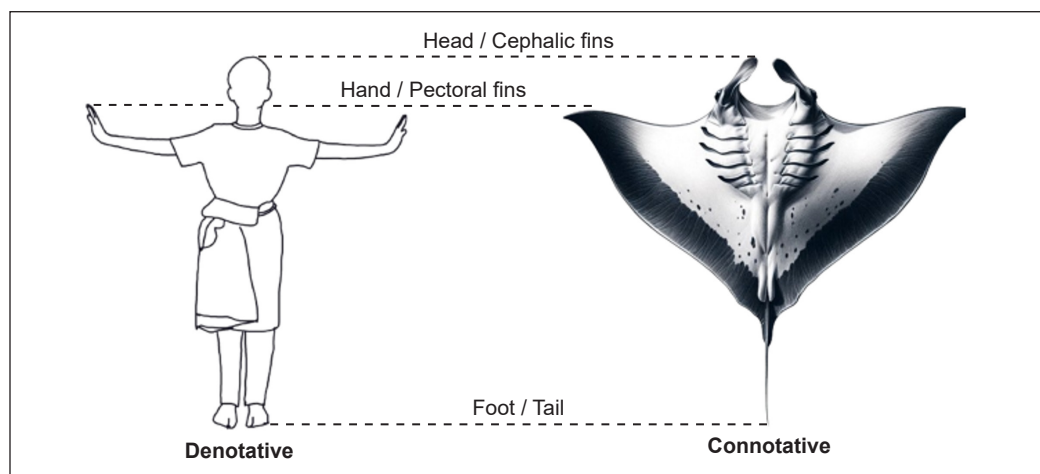


Figure 5. Stingray movement pattern

Note. The figure of the dancer is the author's work, created using Procreate. The Manta Ray image was generated using the ChatGPT image generator

drowning at sea and guided them to shore. Consequently, the ancestors vowed never to consume stingrays, regarding them as their lifesavers. This myth portrays the stingray as a guardian and savior that appears in critical moments to protect and assist its descendants.

### Movement Pattern: Turtle

The fourth animal movement pattern that emerged is the turtle movement. This pattern, similar to the stingray movement, was observed in the treatment sessions of Patients 2 and 3. The difference lies in its frequency of occurrence: for Patient 2, it appeared four times over the three days, after Asar on the first day, in the morning on the second day, and after Zuhur and after Asar on the third day. For Patient 3, the turtle movement only emerged on the third day during the implementation of the conditional code.

A denotative analysis reveals a forward-bent body with an erect torso. The arms

are not spread, but rather tucked behind by joining the right and left hand fingers over the hipbone. The feet are planted evenly in multiples, producing no stomping sound. The connotative meaning of this movement portrays the turtle symbol, with the forward-bent body posture denoting a shelled turtle. The convergence of the left and right fingertips further illustrates the turtle's rounded shell. The evenly landed, soundless footfall symbolizes being under the sea, contrasting with the audible footfall referring to the land.

Another movement pattern is Turtle movement pattern as exhibited in Figure 6. According to local belief, the turtle's movement pattern signifies the presence of an ancestral spirit known as '*Ombok Millung*.' As the story goes, *Ombok Millung* journeyed to the sea to search for her husband, who had been missing for several weeks. When she did not find her husband, *Ombok Millung* beseeched the turtle's assistance to locate her husband, even if

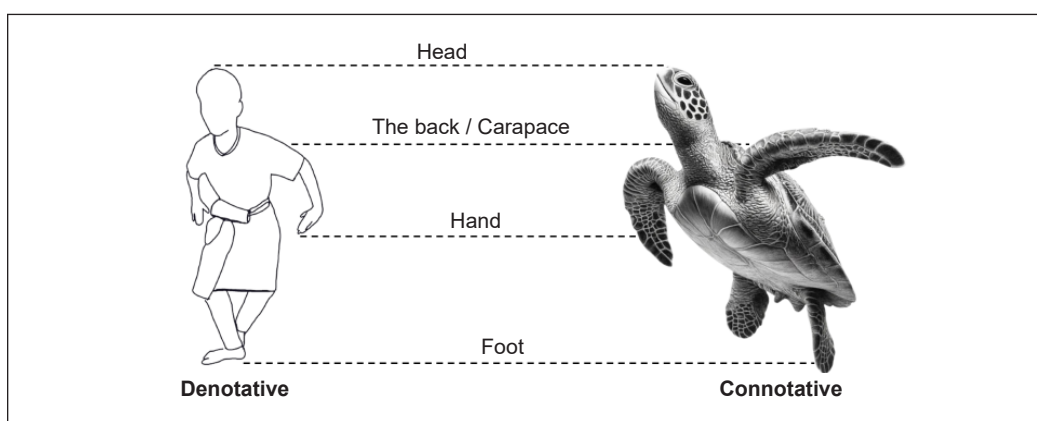


Figure 6. Turtle movement pattern

Note. The figure of the dancer is the author's work created using Procreate, and the turtle image was generated using the ChatGPT image generator

he was deceased. Then, from the sea floor, turtles arose and brought her husband's body. From that day forward, *Ombok Millung* decreed that her spirit would manifest as a turtle after her death to aid her descendants. The *Ombok Millung* myth underscores the importance of faithfulness, sacrifice, and protection, inherited through the symbolism of the turtle.

### Movement Pattern: Spider

The next emerging movement pattern identified is the spider movement (shown in Figure 7), which only appeared twice in Patient 1's treatment sessions. The occurrences were first observed after Zuhur on the second day. They were then repeated on the morning of the third day. Notably, these events coincided with the movements of eagles and pythons, which were happening during the same period.

Denotatively, the performer is in a crouching position, signifying that one heel supports the buttocks. Another foot is placed forward to support the body's entirety. The

arms are extended at shoulder level, crossing at the forearms, with fingers pointing downwards and vibrating. The connotative meaning of this movement illustrates a crouched body, symbolizing spider-like movement that brings the body closer to the legs. The fingers at shoulder level, directed downwards, symbolize the numerous moving legs of a spider, transitioning from one place to another.

The Bajau Laut community's spiritual belief towards the spider does not carry connotations or narratives emerging from myth. Instead, the spider is associated with the story of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), where it is narrated that a spider assisted by weaving a web over the mouth of the Thawr cave—the hiding place of the Prophet Muhammad, whom the Quraysh pursued. Upon arriving at the cave mouth, the Quraysh saw a complete spider's web; thus, they concluded that no one was inside the cave and continued their search elsewhere, preserving Prophet Muhammad and Abu Bakar from the threat of the enemy.

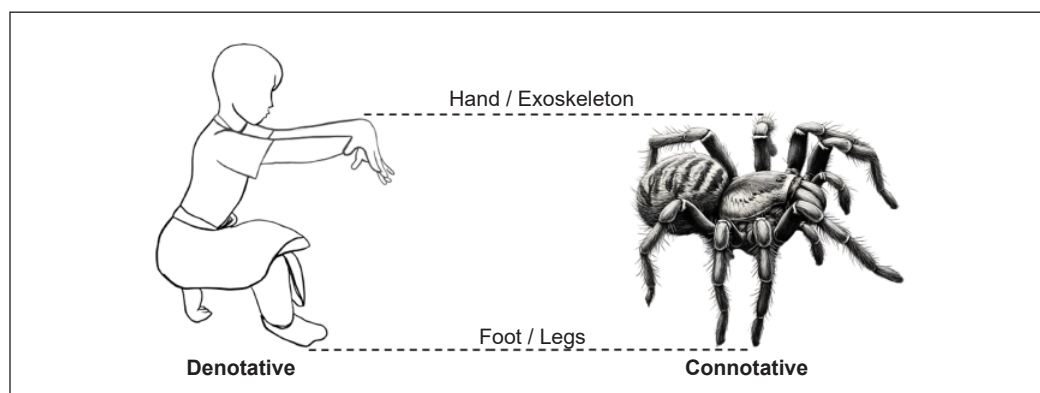


Figure 7. Spider movement pattern

Note. The figure of the dancer is the author's work created using Procreate, and the spider image was generated using the ChatGPT image generator



This narrative substantiates the belief that the spider's movement is a good omen, intended to offer protection from any harm.

**Movement Pattern: Python**

The subsequent pattern detected is the Python movement (Figure 8), which appeared in Patient 1's treatment sessions. This movement pattern emerged once on each treatment day, after Asar on the first and second day, and in the morning on the third day.

Denotatively, the body posture is upright, with both hands raised and curved above the head. This position only mobilizes the arms, and the body remains static in one position. If moving from one place to another, the legs are significantly extended with hands continuously directed upwards. The connotative meaning of this movement resembles a standing python, with its body curving into a circle. The stance of keeping an upright body posture with arms spread

above resonates with a python's large, majestic posture. Pythons are dangerous predators and are believed to bring harm to humans.

The symbolism embodied in the form of the python represents destructive power. The community explains that the python is a manifestation of evil spirits (demons and jinn), often regarded as entities that ruin lives and destroy everything around them. In one incident, a farmer killed a python that had eaten his livestock. It was later revealed that the python was a pet of a practitioner of black magic. As a consequence of this action, the black magic practitioner cast a curse, causing the farmer's pregnant wife to give birth to a child with skin resembling that of a python. Therefore, the python emerges as an entity that brings misfortune to the real world, emphasizing the importance of vigilance and spiritual protection in facing threats from the supernatural realm.

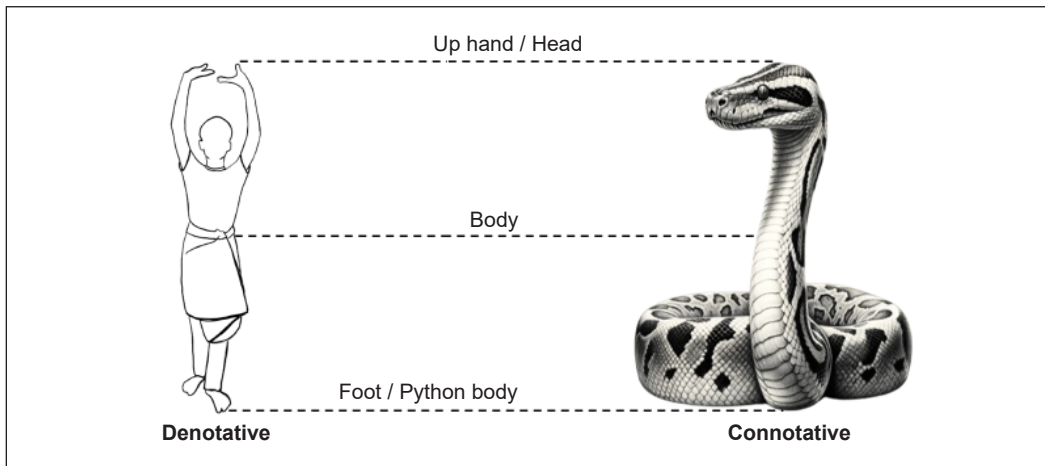


Figure 8. Python movement pattern

Note. The figure of the dancer is the author's work, created using Procreate, and the Python image was generated using the ChatGPT image generator

### Movement Pattern: Cobra

The final movement pattern documented in all three treatment sessions was that of the cobra (illustrated in Figure 9). This distinctive motion was observed in Patient 2's treatment session, appearing consecutively beginning on the second day of treatment, first after Zuhur and then after Asar, followed by two occurrences on the third day: in the morning and after Zuhur.

A denotative analysis reveals curved hand movements extending to the upper and lower sides. The positioning of the hands is interchangeable, with either the left or right hand above and vice versa. The body posture remains upright with an arched torso. Piercing eyes scan the surroundings, while the head is aligned with the upraised hand. The legs are slightly bent and poised on tiptoes, crossed in opposition to the upward-extended hand. The connotative interpretation of this movement symbolizes a cobra poised to strike its adversary, with

the erect torso signifying the potency of its venom. The piercing gaze is often associated with a state of threat, indicative of self-defense and intimidation of potential prey. The raised position of one foot on tiptoes represents the snake's supportive body posture, while the implied tail-lashing motion suggests the viper's readiness to deploy its venom.

This movement's symbolism elucidates a perilous threat capable of affecting an individual's physical and spiritual aspects. The cobra represents a malevolent spiritual force that shamans employ to inflict sorcery upon others. This motion indicates that the patient has been bewitched, marking the start of negotiations between ancestral spirits and malevolent entities for the purpose of healing. This ideology stems from the narrative of ritual practitioners, recounting an ancestral tale wherein one of their forebears was bitten by a cobra. Subsequently, *kalamat* engaged in a face-to-face dialogue with

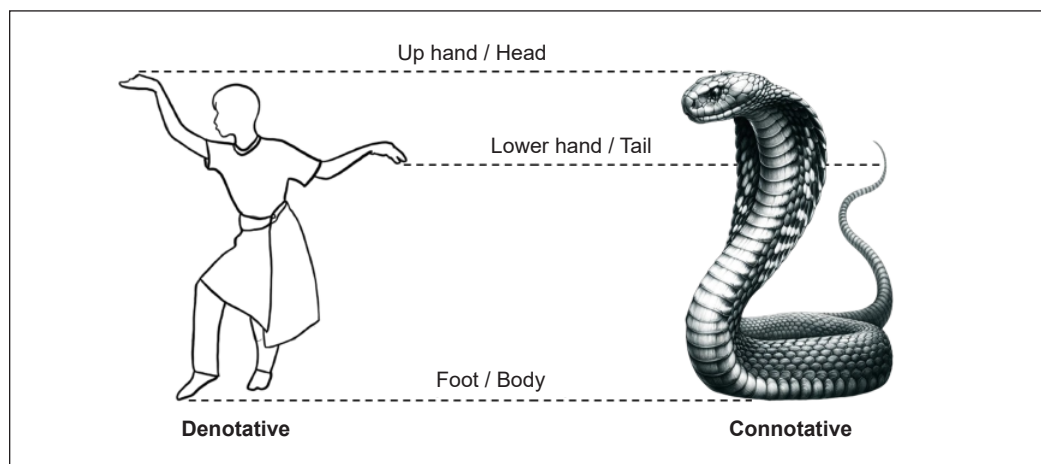


Figure 9. Cobra movement pattern

Note. The figure of the dancer is the author's work, created using Procreate, and the Cobra image was generated using the ChatGPT image generator

the serpent, persuading it to withdraw its venom and pledging that neither he nor his descendants would harm or kill the cobra henceforth. Consequently, this movement reinforces the mythological significance and cultural beliefs surrounding the cobra as a potent symbol of spiritual threat.

### **Correlation Between Movement Patterns and Semantic Analysis Across Treatment Sessions**

In the case of Patient 1, four movement patterns were noted: (1) the eagle (twice), (2) the rooster (twice), (3) the spider (two), and (4) the snake (three). The healer regards the python not as a weapon but as an expression of evil magic by a mainland shaman. This enchantment is intended to disrupt the mundane and instill dread, suggesting that the person is under a magical attack and requires spiritual defenses. These defenses involve summoning deities such as the eagle, rooster, and spider. Their dances symbolize an act of revenge against the python, an invasive predator.

The third day, the eagle's motion coincided with that of the spider and the python, revealing a conflict between the ancestral guardians and the python's djinn. The rooster, too, showed up with the eagle in the afternoon session, marking an important step in the treatment. By contrast, Patient 2 had three movements: (1) the stingray (three times), (2) the turtle (four times), and (3) the cobra (four times). The cobra symbolizes dark witchcraft, particularly on women, which resonates with the Bajau Laut cosmology of deadly magical forces.

Stingray and turtle migrations represent formidable ancestral spirits associated with the ocean: stingray (*Ombok Banag*) and turtle (*Ombok Milung*), both guarding the Bajau Laut genealogies.

Patient 3, suffering from a curse or *Tulah*, exhibited just four motifs: (1) the eagle (two times), (2) the rooster (three times), (3) the stingray (four times), and (4) the turtle (three times). This absence of serpentine movement is evidence of resentment towards their ancestors for things that harm their tradition. These patterns are part of the Bajau Laut ancestral pantheon, encompassing nautical and bird imagery. The dominance of the stingray marks the significant presence of *Ombok Banag*, ancestral participation in the settlement of *Tulah*. The gestures overall reflect the presence of the ghosts of ancestors as well as the evil spirits of magic, creating an alternate history over the course of the therapies.

*Panangsang* dance is a critical vehicle for spiritual care, linking the physical and metaphysical spheres for the community. It represents beauty and holds a key spiritual message. Every animal-related movement signifies a therapy first, followed by signs that connect to the therapeutic procedure, echoing the dual significance of animals as signs. These symbols and signs convey meaning in words and through gestures, facial expressions, time, space, and other non-verbal components. This lack of spoken expression is vital to the Bajau Laut faith and forms a history of myths, convictions and practitioners' lived experiences that inform their social philosophy.

## CONCLUSION

In its entirety, it can be deduced that the symbolic movements in the *panangsang* dance serve as a profoundly significant medium of communication for treating spiritual ailments. This dance effectively bridges the communication gap between the physical and metaphysical realms, offering a readily comprehensible interpretation to the community. It stands as a testament to artistic expression while conveying spiritual messages integral to the healing process. Each animal-inspired movement is an initial indicator of the treatment description, followed by specific signs that form an analogous concept of the required therapeutic method. This reverts to the fundamental symbolism of venomous animals as harbingers of ill omens and, conversely, as bearers of positive portents.

As intermediaries within the realm of social phenomena, these signs and symbols are not merely expressed through spoken language or linguistic verbal symbols, but also through actions, facial expressions, time, space, and other non-verbal means. The influence of non-verbal signs, as elucidated in each movement pattern, holds immense significance in the belief system of the Bajau Laut community. Consequently, this form of communication reflects a symbolic interpretation that weaves together a narrative tapestry of myths, beliefs, and practitioners' experiences to construct the social philosophy of their society.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study significantly advances the Sacred Communication Theory, proposed by Eliade (1957/1987), by expanding its scope beyond linguistic and textual traditions to incorporate totemic symbolism and gestural communication as mechanisms of transcendental interaction. While prior research has largely emphasized verbal rituals (Turner, 1969), sacred texts (Carey, 2009), and prayers as primary modes of divine communication (Turkle, 2022), it overlooks the role of non-verbal signifiers, particularly totemism and bodily expressions, as mechanisms of spiritual engagement. Thus, this study demonstrates that sacred meaning is also transmitted through non-verbal signifiers such as totemic representations and ritualistic movements.

Moreover, the introduction of a dualistic framework—distinguishing between benevolent (non-venomous) and malevolent (venomous) totems—provides a new analytical lens for understanding sacred equilibrium in ritual communication, as discussed by Turner (1969) and Turkle (2022). This challenges existing assumptions that sacred symbols function solely as unidirectional conduits of spiritual meaning, highlighting instead their dynamic interplay in the construction of religious experience (Womack, 2005).

By bridging semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1988) with ritual theory (Turner, 1969), this research establishes a broader theoretical foundation for examining sacred

communication across diverse cultural contexts, incorporating totemic and gestural semiotics as active communicative forces within ritual structures (Tejera, 2022). The findings provide a theoretical foundation for understanding non-linguistic sacred interactions in indigenous and mainstream religious traditions, further refining the intersections between materiality, embodiment, and spirituality

Practically, this study offers crucial implications for the preservation of traditional ritual practices of the Bajau Laut community, particularly in the realm of performing arts and the maintenance of cultural identity. The discovery of the role of gestural communication as a conduit for sacred interaction can be applied in the creation of a new traditional dance form, inspired by the movement representative of totemism. The movement patterns highlighted in this study act as symbolic representations and possess the potential to be artistically translated into traditional choreography that retains the original aesthetic values without compromising religious and cultural sensitivities. This approach could serve as an effective strategy for preserving intangible cultural heritage, where ritual elements are re-adapted as performance art forms that honor the beliefs of diverse communities.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study primarily focused on the *magombok* ritual practiced by the Bajau Laut in the Semporna district of Sabah.

The research specifically examined the *panangsang* dance to explore sacred movement symbols that serve as a medium of communication between the metaphysical and physical realms. However, the study's limitations were confined to three treatment sessions, potentially restricting the ability to collect more extensive and in-depth data on ritual practices across the broader Bajau Laut community.

Consequently, future research is recommended to expand the scope of the study by involving multiple Bajau Laut groups from diverse locations to obtain a more comprehensive perspective on sacred symbolism in their rituals. Further investigations could also examine how these sacred elements evolve within changing societal contexts and how the community adapts. In a broader spectrum, cross-cultural studies on sacred practices from various other ethnic groups could provide robust perspectives on the theory of the sacred in human culture. In this regard, a more diverse methodological approach incorporating different theoretical and practical perspectives could be applied to gain a more profound corpus of knowledge about sacred symbolism in the context of human customs and belief systems.

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