

PHANTASMAGORIA VERSUS TRANSCENDENTAL IN MAGOMBOK RITUALS: THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF BAJAU LAUT COMMUNITY

Amsalib Pisali^{1*}, Lena Farida Hussain Chin¹ and Haddi Junaidi Kussin²

¹Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

²Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: amsalib@fmsp.upsi.edu.my

Published online: 31 October 2025

To cite this article: Amsalib Pisali, Lena Farida Hussain Chin and Haddi Junaidi Kussin. 2025. Phantasmagoria versus transcendental in *magombok* rituals: The spiritual dimensions of Bajau Laut community. *Kajian Malaysia* 43(2): 143–164. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2025.43.2.8>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2025.43.2.8>

ABSTRACT

The Bajau Laut community in Sabah's Semporna district stands out as a maritime ethnic group with a rich tapestry of ritual practices. Their belief system is deeply intertwined with the convergence of the physical realm and ancestral dimensions, fostering a profound sense of sacredness. This study aims to unravel the intricate narrative of spiritual fusion among participants in the *magombok* ritual, a healing ceremony that specifically venerates ancestral spirits. The research focuses on examining this phenomenon through the lenses of phantasmagoria and transcendentalism. Employing a qualitative approach rooted in phenomenological inquiry, the study utilises semi-structured interviews and participant observation as primary data collection methods. To ensure the acquisition of significant data, triangulation techniques were implemented, and all information was subjected to thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the spectrum of phantasmagoria and transcendental experiences manifests prominently in the *magtagungguk* and *magigal* elements, which form the core structure of spirit invocation during semi-conscious states. These phenomena occur simultaneously, albeit with varying intensities. Themes embodying phantasmagoria comprise visual synergy and symphonies of sacred auditory expressions. Conversely, themes that translate transcendental aspects in the *magombok* ritual emphasise cosmic interconnectedness and spiritual existential dimensions. In essence, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the *magombok* ritual ceremony and the spiritual experiences that its participants encounter. The research implications are significant in enriching

academic discourse, particularly in developing a more comprehensive theoretical model for understanding the interplay between ritual experiences and culture within the context of this phenomenon.

Keywords: Bajau Laut, *magombok* ritual, phantasmagoria, transcendentalism, spirituality

INTRODUCTION

The maritime ethnic group known as the Bajau Laut geographically inhabits the waters of Southeast Asia, encompassing the southern Philippines, the Sulawesi waters, and the small islands of the Indonesian Sunda archipelago, with scattered settlements in the Mergui Archipelago in south Myanmar (Hanafi 2008). Within the context of this maritime ethnic group's population distribution in Malaysia, the state of Sabah serves as the primary settlement hub, and the districts of Semporna host the majority of this ethnic group's population (Sharifuddin et al. 2021).

The Bajau Laut in Semporna are categorised into four distinct groups: (1) Bajau Laut-Darat, who reside on the mainland; (2) Bajau Laut-Pulau, inhabiting the islands surrounding Semporna; (3) Bajau Laut-Laut, settled in the Tun Sakaran Marine Park; and (4) Bajau Laut-Terapung, who dwell in boats and lead a nomadic lifestyle in the waters of Semporna, extending to the southern Philippine border (Amsalib 2017). This community is renowned for its rich maritime heritage and profound connection on the sea. Moreover, their most prominent cultural aspect is the practice of diverse rituals, encompassing ancestral spirit worship, spiritual healing ceremonies, death rites, circumcision rituals, warding off misfortune, and various other traditional observances (Hanafi and Baptist 2019). These ritualistic practices reflect their intimate connection with the sea and the spirit realm, embodying a robust cosmology. These rituals not only play a crucial role in preserving their cultural identity but also in reinforcing social and spiritual bonds within their communal philosophy of life.

The *magombok* ritual is considered the most sacrosanct among the Bajau Laut community. It is a spiritual healing ceremony and an alternative treatment method aimed at restoring the spiritual well-being of individuals believed to have been corrupted or disturbed by *tulah* (ancestral curses), sorcery, or demonic interference (Syamsul Azizul and Mohd Anuar 2017). The ritual leader, known as the *kalamat*, invokes ancestral spirits to communicate with the corporeal world and obtain methods for healing these spiritual afflictions. The *magombok* ritual transcends mere physical aspects, encompassing profound spiritual dimensions, and thus renders it one of the rituals most intimately connected to the otherworldly realm. Its practitioners believe that through

spirit invocation, they can expel harmful elements and restore balance and harmony to an individual's life, making this ritual highly revered and considered sacred within Bajau Laut culture.

The most crucial sacred centre in the *magombok* ritual occurs during the process of spirit-body unification of the ritual participant. This intricate process demands a deep understanding of behaviours that can only be interpreted by the ritual leader, the *kalamat*, who is believed to possess extensive experience in communicating with ancestral spirit entities. When spirits are summoned and enter the ritual participant, their soul and spirit transform into an entity that is difficult for anyone but the *kalamat* to interpret (Amsalib et al. 2017). This transformation reveals that the ritual participant inhabits a sacred proxemic dimension, a fusion of the spirit realm and the physical world. This proxemic space becomes a medium of communication to obtain guidance and healing knowledge for the individual under treatment (Halina Sendera and Totu 2014). This process not only requires specialised skills but also high mental and spiritual stability. Consequently, the *kalamat* plays a pivotal role in translating this phenomenon to the audience. This position explains why the *kalamat* is highly respected in the execution of the *magombok* ritual. The spirit-body unification is depicted in the transitional phase from the human conscious state to the semi-conscious state of the ritual participant, marking the climax of the *magombok* ritual. The symbolism of this climactic plot imbues it with extraordinary sanctity and power, ensuring its efficacy in restoring the spiritual and physical well-being of the individual.

However, understanding how the process of spirit-body unification functions and how it affects the spiritual and physical well-being of individuals in Bajau Laut society becomes the central question. The pivotal process of spirit-body unification of the ritual participant will be given special emphasis. A comprehensive study needs to be conducted, discussing phantasmagoria and the transcendental to delve deeper into how the spirit-body unification of the ritual participant occurs. Phantasmagoria refers to illusory phenomena or apparitions often associated with the presence of spirits or ethereal entities, while the transcendental refers to experiences or realities that surpass the ordinary physical world.

Therefore, phantasmagoria and the transcendental must be meticulously examined to unravel the complex narrative related to the spirit-body unification of ritual participants in the *magombok* ritual. Phantasmagoria, with its focus on illusory appearances and spirit presence, helps us understand how the Bajau Laut society interprets and experiences interactions with ethereal entities. Meanwhile, the concept of the transcendental provides insight into how this unification involves a more sacred and profound spiritual dimension. Through an in-depth analysis of these two concepts, the general audience can gain a

clearer understanding of how ritual participants experience transformation and interact with the otherworldly realm. This approach will help unveil the subtleties and complexities of the spiritual process in the *magombok* ritual, as well as provide a more comprehensive picture of the role and influence of spirits in the spiritual healing of this ethnic group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In exploring the metaphysical and syncretic aspects of traditional and contemporary rituals, phantasmagoric elements are elucidated as conduits to the transcendental (Dollahite et al. 2020). The concept of sacrality and its extraordinary connection to the spiritual realm is inescapable, where the level of sanctity in a ritual form possesses its own emphatic agenda. To engender human understanding of this phenomenon, the concepts of phantasmagoria and the transcendental in sacred rituals emerge as complex interactions of mystery, symbolism, and profound sensory experiences (Arumugam 2023).

Phantasmagoria is a term referring to apparitional phenomena or illusions associated with the presence of spirits or ethereal entities (Marić 2024). This term first gained popularity in 18th-century Europe within the context of optical shows, where illusions of spectral and supernatural beings were employed in performances to entertain and frighten audiences (Spence 2022). Although originating as entertainment, the concept of phantasmagoria has been adapted in anthropological and psychological studies to elucidate spiritual experiences in sacred ceremonial rites and apparitions encountered across various cultures.

The discourse on the concept of phantasmagoria through an anthropological perspective is highly subjective. As in the study conducted by Petrof (2015), he explicates this concept as a form of profound experience reinforced through the use of ceremonial representations or traditional belief actions that serve as visual and acoustic altars, bridging the gap between the sacrosanct and the mundane through ritual and imagination. Salmi, Äikäs and Lipkin (2011) discuss phantasmagoria in the context of traditional ceremonies, referring to the lens of the performative nature of ceremonies involving the integrated structure of practices, senses, and emotions to create a vivid and profound authentic experience of a society's traditional belief system.

In contrast, Shearer (2007), in her book *Phantasmagoria: Spirit visions, metaphors, and media into the 21st century*, elucidates that phantasmagoria is more than mere illusion; it is the manner in which specific cultures depict and interact with the otherworldly realm. Phantasmagoric experiences are often perceived as real by those experiencing them, providing validation of the existence of spirits and supernatural beings. This renders phantasmagoria

an essential element in understanding how certain societies interpret and internalise their spiritual experiences to support behavioural actions, ensuring their interpretations and goals are achieved through transcendental experiences.

The concept of the transcendental in a spiritual context refers to a state of consciousness that surpasses ordinary physical and mental limitations, leading individuals to a higher or deeper reality (Amsalib et al. 2017). Across cultures, transcendence is crucial in therapeutic healing to overcome unconscious issues and express them through bodily movements (Berrol 2018). The use of the body to achieve this trance state is highly significant, as the body is the primary bridge connecting the world of reality and the universe (Haddad 2019). This interconnectedness is described as a form of transcendental communication practice with the creator or ancestors to achieve harmony with dimensions of the world that cannot be seen but can be felt through one's inner senses (Pusut 2022). These studies demonstrate that rituals are transcendental, playing a vital role in fostering spiritual connections and promoting well-being in individuals and communities through their profound symbolism and movements.

In the context of studies on the ritual realm of the Bajau Laut community, both these concepts have actually been discussed in detail, but previous researchers did not analyse their subjects from the perspective of phantasmagoria and discuss them in the context of transcendence phenomena. For example, in a study conducted by Sharifuddin et al. (2021, 67):

The visual aspects of the rituals, such as costumes, masks, and symbolic objects, are essential in conveying the spiritual and cultural messages during the performances. These images enhance the theatricality and convey deeper meanings to the participants and audience.

This quotation illustrates how visual elements in rituals can create an atmosphere that combines wonder and illusion, evoking the concept of phantasmagoria. Phantasmagoria, referring to visual displays depicting ghostly shadows and illusions, imparts a dramatic and mystical effect on the audience. In the context of Bajau rituals, the use of costumes, masks, and symbolic objects not only functions as cultural communication tools but also as a medium to bring spiritual experiences to life.

These keywords can also be identified in the study conducted by Mohd Kipli and Lena Farida (2018), where they argue that the actions during the *ngalai/berasik* ritual serve as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, creating a sense of illusion. In the study conducted by Hanafi (2019), they explain that the landscape of *magpa-igal* and *tagungguk* not only creates a sacred atmosphere but also becomes a tool for healing and maintaining spiritual balance. Hanafi, in his ethnographic study, explains *buwas kuning* (yellow rice) as an important

ritual food and a primary identity in the significant *magombok* ritual as a feast to summon ancestral spirits. The study conducted by Syamsul Azizul and Mohd Anuar (2017), which examines traditional healing rituals from an Islamic legal perspective, also explains elements of prayer recitation and mantras as a significant form of seeking blessings from God and ancestors as a form of transcendence.

All these discussions by previous researchers provide a clear picture of the transcendental and the existence of phantasmagoric elements that lead to experiences in the ritual ceremonies of the Bajau Laut community; however, they did not thoroughly discuss these elements in the context of these two phenomena. Therefore, this study views it as a research gap that can contribute to building a new corpus of knowledge in the field of cultural studies, particularly within the scope of Bajau Laut community rituals.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using the phenomenological method proposed by Husserl, as discussed by Mensch (2023) in his book *Husserl's phenomenology*. This approach aligns with the study's objective to understand the research subjects' experiences of phantasmagoria and transcendental aspects in the *magombok* ritual from their perspectives and how they attribute meaning to the phenomena they encounter. The research design involves two data collection methods: in-depth interviews and participant observation by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with ritual participants, including ritual leaders, patients, and family members. These interviews will help delve into their experiences and perceptions regarding the phantasmagoric and transcendental phenomena in the ritual. Additionally, the researcher will participate in several *magombok* ritual sessions to understand the context and experience firsthand. This participant observation will be recorded through field notes and documentation via video recordings and photographic records of the ceremony.

The research procedure involves a bracketing (*epoche*) process, where researchers will identify and set aside their personal beliefs and prejudices about the phenomenon under study to ensure objective analysis. Subsequently, participants' descriptive experiences will be detailed to capture the essence of phantasmagoria and transcendental phenomena in the context of the *magombok* ritual. The collected data will then be analysed through a phenomenological reduction process to identify key themes emerging from ritual participants' experiences. Data analysis will be conducted through thematic coding, where data from interviews and observations are thematically coded using the Taguette qualitative analysis software to facilitate the theme coding process by

researchers. Themes related to phantasmagoria and the transcendental will be identified and analysed to understand how these two phenomena are integrated into the *magombok* ritual.

The analysed data will be interpreted to understand the profound meaning participants attribute to their experiences. To ensure the validity and reliability of this study, triangulation will be employed, involving various data sources (interviews, observations, documents) to verify findings. Preliminary results will also be discussed with participants to ensure accuracy and representation of their experiences. This phenomenological methodology enables researchers to explore the deep meaning the Bajau Laut community attributes to phantasmagoric and transcendental experiences in the *magombok* ritual. Through this deeper understanding, this study aims to make a meaningful contribution to the field of ritual and spirituality studies in the local cultural context.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Structure of the *Magombok* Ritual Ceremony

The *magombok* ritual ceremony is held for three consecutive days, mandatorily starting on Monday and ending on Wednesday. Each day of its implementation has a specific structure with different names. Meanwhile, each specific structure has implementation elements with different functions, but their purpose is the same: to call or invoke ancestral spirits for offerings and worship as part of the spiritual healing process. Figure 1 shows a summary of the specific structure of the *magombok* ritual ceremony according to its implementation elements.

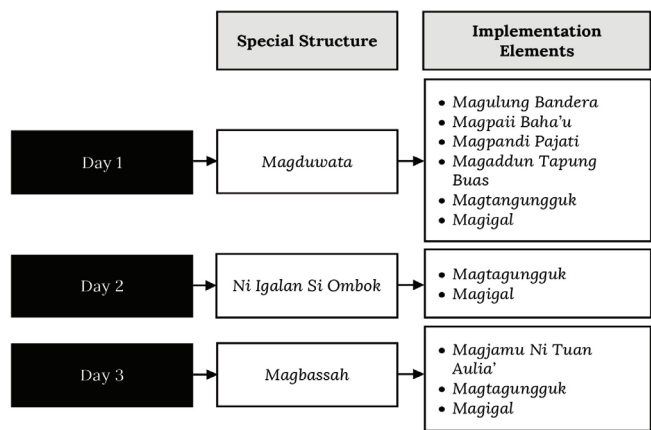


Figure 1: *Magombok* ritual structure.

The inaugural day (Monday) will feature a ceremony known as *magduwata*, a commencement ritual involving the preparation of offerings and presentations to honour ancestral spirits. The second day (Tuesday), termed *ni igalan si ombok*, will showcase the *igal-igal* dance performance accompanied by the *tanggunguk* musical ensemble, dedicated to the ancestors. The third day (Wednesday) will host the *magbassah* ceremony, a special event for reciting prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving to the forebears. Each implementation structure must possess a specific function. These functions carry profound sacred roles and values that must be executed to maintain the continuity and sanctity of the ceremony. Table 1 outlines the functions of the elements associated with each special structure within the *magombok* ritual ceremony.

Table 1: Functional elements within the specific structures of the *magombok* ritual

Elements	Descriptions
<i>Magulung bandera</i>	Meaning: The act of hoisting the flag. Function: To serve as a signal to the local community that a ritual healing ceremony is taking place, and to urge them to attend, with at least one representative from each household expected to be present. Sacred value: Upon the flag's raising, the community is prohibited from preparing fried foods or dishes with spiced ingredients, as a sign of reverence for the spiritual presence at the ritual ceremony site.
<i>Magpaii baha'u</i>	Meaning: The act of pounding upland rice and dried corn. Function: The pounded upland rice and dried corn serve as the fundamental ingredients for offerings to ancestral spirits. Sacred value: Upland rice and dried corn are considered authentic offering materials for the spirits' sustenance. The act of pounding rice and corn symbolises the absolution of minor transgressions by ancestral forebears.
<i>Magpandi pajati</i>	Meaning: The act of bathing the cannon bomb. Function: The bathed cannon bomb serves as a symbol of self-purification before the ritual ceremony is conducted. Sacred value: The cannon bomb is an ancestral relic believed to possess mystical powers. Bathing symbolises the cleansing of negative energy and protection from malevolent spirits.
<i>Magaddun tapung buas</i>	Meaning: The act of processing and kneading the pounded rice and corn flour. Function: To create spirit food offerings comprising <i>penyaram</i> , <i>pollo-pollo</i> , and <i>durul</i> . Sacred value: These food offerings are essential elements for ancestral spirits. Such provisions signify that those in the physical realm are expressing gratitude to the spirits. This mechanism demonstrates that the spirits feel appreciated and content.

(Continued on next page)

Table 1 (Continued)

Elements	Descriptions
<i>Magtanggungkuk</i>	Meaning: Playing traditional musical instruments comprising the mother <i>gong ibu</i>, <i>gong anak</i>, <i>kulintangan</i>, and <i>tambul</i>. Function: To provide musical accompaniment for the ritual practitioner in summoning ancestral spirits. Sacred value: The <i>tanggungkuk</i> musical ensemble produces resonant sounds that stimulate a hypnotic process, unifying the spirit and body of the ritual performer. It is believed that these melodious strains can summon and soothe the spirits, ensuring their presence during the ceremony and acting as a regulator of the homogeneous and isotropic dimensions of the universe (bridging the realms of reality and the supernatural).
<i>Magigal</i>	Meaning: Performing the dance known as <i>igal-igal</i>. Function: A medium of body language communication, with movement patterns that convey symbolic meanings to practitioners. Sacred value: In the conscious phase, the dance movement patterns act as a gateway for ancestral spirits to enter the dancer's body. During the semi-conscious phase, <i>magigal</i> symbolises the type of spirit that has entered, and each gesture describes the nature of the spiritual ailment afflicting the patient, as well as indicating the method of healing.
<i>Magjamu ni tuan aulia'</i>	Meaning: Presenting offerings (incantations, dance, music, food) to ancestral spirits. Function: Serves as the closing process in the <i>magombok</i> ritual ceremony and expresses gratitude to ancestral spirits for their presence in the realm of reality. Sacred value: This element integrates the recitation of <i>zikr</i> and salutations to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), while simultaneously conducting spirit worship. This convergence renders this element crucial in observing the perspectives of religious adherence and traditional beliefs.

As delineated in Table 1, the *magtanggungkuk* and *magigal* components stand out as focal points of paramount significance. These elements serve as the connective dimension between the spirit realm and the corporeal world. Executed simultaneously, they form the epicentre of a dimensional nexus that facilitates the fusion of spirits with the physical forms of ritual participants.

Magtanggungkuk, the act of playing traditional musical instruments, functions as an encoded signifier for summoning ancestral spirits. *Magigal*, in turn, becomes the medium through which spirits manifest intricate symbolic movements. These complex gestures remain inscrutable to most, save for the *kalamat*,

who assumes the role of a specialised interpreter. The *kalamat* seizes this opportunity to decipher the symbolic codes, translating them into appropriate therapeutic guidelines for treating the afflicted.

Consequently, the spectrum of phantasmagoria and transcendental experiences can only be thoroughly examined through the lens of the ritual participants' encounters within these two pivotal elements. Their subjective perceptions and interactions with the spiritual realm during *magtagungguk* and *magigal* provide the sole window into this ethereal dimension.

Spectrum of Phantasmagoria versus Transcendental

This investigation reveals that the phenomena of phantasmagoria and transcendental experiences occur within the same spectrum, specifically when ritual participants enter a semi-conscious state during the execution of the *magtagungguk* and *magigal* elements. This altered state of consciousness represents a transition from ordinary reality to a unique and complex cognitive realm that defies simple interpretation. In the *magombok* ritual ceremony, this state is exclusively experienced by ritual participants, including the *kalamat* as the ritual leader, the *dayang-dayang* (female ritual assistants), *si otok* (male ritual assistants), the patient, and the patient's family members.

All ritual participants position themselves within a liminal space of cognitive ambiguity, enabling the exploration of thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. From the perspective of the Bajau Laut community, this phase is regarded as a meditative process and a truth that hinges upon individual introspection.

Within this semi-conscious state, the spectrum of phantasmagoria manifests earlier, encompassing visual and auditory elements that contribute to an atmosphere of phenomena involving illusory appearances or spectral entities visible to the general audience. Conversely, the transcendental spectrum unfolds for ritual participants in a meditative state as they perform the *magigal* in rhythm with the *tangungguk* music. This includes experiences of ecstasy, profound tranquillity, or sensations of connecting with ethereal entities that can only be felt and experienced by ritual participants whose bodies have merged with spirits.

Nevertheless, these two phenomena occur simultaneously, albeit emerging at different intensities and moments. A clearer depiction of this spectrum can be observed in Figure 2, which elucidates the interrelationship and distinctions between these two phenomena, as they complement each other in assisting ritual participants to achieve altered states of consciousness and interact with the spiritual realm.

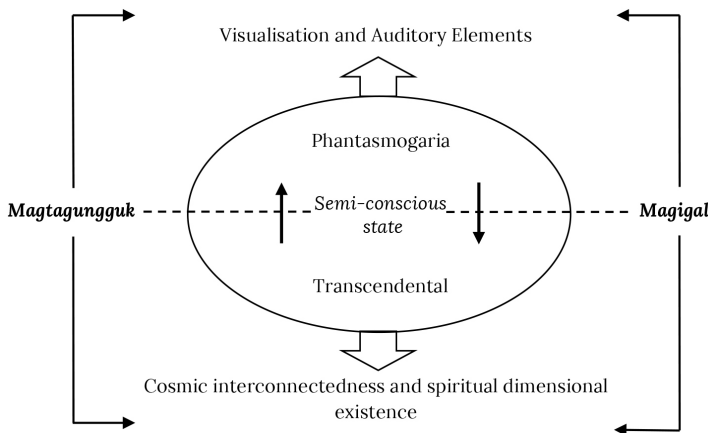


Figure 2: Spectrum of phantasmagoria and transcendental.

The elements provide a vivid illustration of how phantasmagoric elements function as induction to achieve transcendental experiences. These two phenomena occur in a semi-conscious space and are inextricably intertwined. Phantasmagoria facilitates the attainment of the transcendental, while the transcendental manifests within the context of phantasmagoria.

The phantasmagoric elements encompass visual and auditory aspects that shift the focus and concentration of ritual participants, involving redirection of attention and mental focus. The transcendental experience, in turn, demonstrates a state of consciousness that transcends the usual physical and mental boundaries of ritual participants, elevating them to a higher spiritual reality. It involves stages of trance and ecstatic experiences that engender a sense of connection with spirits, fostering spiritual enlightenment and visions.

The transcendental spectrum elucidates the experiences or conditions of ritual participants who find themselves in situations beyond their usual limitations and mental states. As participants achieve metaphysical intentions resulting from phantasmagoric stimuli, the transcendental experience becomes more dominant, wherein they experience interconnectedness with integrated dimensions of reality and the supernatural realm.

Phantasmagoric Elements in the Magombok Ritual

Phantasmagoria in the *magombok* ritual crafts a captivating and immersive experience that blurs the line between reality and fantasy through two primary elements: visualisation and auditory stimuli. Visual elements such as light and shadow, the use of costumes, props, and image projections, serve

to create a sacred and mystical atmosphere that obscures the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Meanwhile, auditory elements like the melodic strains of traditional *tagungguk* music and the recitation of spirit-summoning mantras add an auditory dimension that deepens the mystical and spiritual experience of participants. These two elements work synergistically to create a profound and mesmerising phantasmagoric experience in the *magombok* ritual, ensuring the sacredness and efficacy of the ritual is achieved, which drives the transcendental development experienced by ritual participants.

Sacred Visual Synergy

The visual displays in the *magombok* ritual are diverse, spanning from the first day of the ceremony to its conclusion, with each visual element, from shadow play to props and offering requirements, carrying sacred meanings and symbolism. In the context of *magtagungguk* and *magigal* execution elements, the visual display is more oriented towards a stimulus package designed for spirit summoning, with specific symbolism intended to provide a mystical experience. These visual transfigurations exist in their synergy and have specific roles. The research findings can be discussed with the first visual element, namely the use of light and shadow.

The use of light and shadow is a crucial element in creating a mystical and sacred atmosphere in the semi-conscious state (Matracchi and Sadeghi habibabad 2021). In observing and creating this atmosphere, the light sources in the *magombok* ritual consist of candles and kerosene lamps, which are highly significant as conditional code materials. Light from these two sources is used to selectively illuminate the ritual space, creating dramatic shadows during the ceremony. Shadow manipulation results from the body movements of participants performing the *igal* dance, creating an effect on the lens of the ritual execution space. A patient's testimony explains, "The flickering lights during the ritual created a mysterious atmosphere, with dancing shadows giving the illusion of spiritual entities' presence."

The *magigal* movement occurs in two stages: when in the conscious phase, the dance is displayed in gentle and planned movement patterns, and in the semi-conscious phase, the dance movements become more aggressive with vigorous floor stomping and uncontrolled body movements. The dynamics of body movement and moving light background build changing movements, thus adding elements of surprise and dynamism to the ritual atmosphere.

In terms of costume use, the *magombok* ritual does not have elaborate specific costumes. Instead, the use of head coverings is divided into three colour types that play an important role in distinguishing the roles of involved individuals. Yellow head coverings are used for *kalamat*, indicating their role as ritual leaders

who communicate directly with the spiritual world. Patients will be dressed in green head coverings, indicating that they are undergoing a process of spiritual healing and recovery. Family members of the patient will be dressed in red head coverings, indicating the family's role as emotional and spiritual supporters for the patient. According to one family member (the patient's brother), "Wearing the red cloth head covering made me feel stronger and braver to face whatever might come, whether from ancestral spirits or evil spirits. Most importantly is my sibling's health."

The wearing of these head coverings aims to obscure the identities of the shaman and other participants, adding elements of mystery and mysticism to prevent them from being visible to spectators.

Next is the use of ancestral spirit worship props consisting of areca palm fronds, *dugong* tears (sacred fragrant water), and bamboo fans. According to practitioners' beliefs, these props are used to ward off negative auras and detect spirits entering the body. The *kalamat* explains, "I can feel the presence of evil spirits through this areca frond. Sometimes it's difficult for me to withstand when possessed by spirits, but this frond helps me fight those spirits."

The areca frond is used to strike the patient's body to expel evil spirits (*jinn* and devils). The bamboo fan is used as a tool to detect the presence of these evil spirits. At the same time, the fan is used to fan the fragrance. In the Bajau Laut ethnic belief system, areca palm fronds are disliked by evil spirit elements (*djinn*), and the bamboo fan serves as a sign of their presence. The stronger the *kalamat*'s hand makes fanning movements, the stronger the type of evil spirit present in the patient's body. As for the *dugong* tears, this fragrant water provides an experience of a ritual atmosphere, as it is specifically used only during ritual ceremonies.

In image projection, it is marked through mirrors used to create appearances of supernatural entities, reinforcing the illusion that the spiritual world is interacting with the physical world. During the ceremony, spectators are forbidden from looking at mirrors and are required to cover any mirrors in the vicinity. Only a few mirrors will be used, namely flat mirrors and convex mirrors. From a phantasmagoric analysis perspective, flat mirrors are used to reflect images directly and clearly. This is the common type of mirror used to create shadow projections. Meanwhile, convex mirrors are used to manipulate and alter the shape of reflected images. These mirrors can create enlarged, miniaturised, or distorted images, adding elements of fantasy and illusion.

This visual synergy provides a clear sacred perception among *magombok* ritual participants, with each visual element, such as colour, light, and symbolism, contributing to the atmosphere and feeling of profound presence. The effective

use of visual elements can enhance the intimacy and spiritual connection of participants with the revered sacred entities in the ritual (Sun and Kim 2022). Moreover, Qureshi, Moleta and Schnabel (2022) found that visual elements not only enrich the aesthetic experience but also strengthen the ritual's meaning through deep symbolism.

Sacred Auditory Expression Symphony

The auditory mechanism refers to how sound and music influence the human mind and body (Janzen et al. 2022). In the context of ritual ceremonies, the combination of musical rhythms is supported by traditional music elements and mantras that are transformed into dynamic auditory compositions and harmonies for dramatic performances (Irawan, Suneko and Ardana 2022). Concerning this, the findings of this study are based on the melodic strains of traditional *tagungguk* music and the recitation of spirit-summoning mantras that form a sacred symphony for ritual participants. These two auditory elements provide control over the homogeneity and isotropy dimensions of ritual participants and also impart a sacred impact on attending spectators because this symphony is specifically geared towards the ritual.

The traditional musical instruments used consist of the *gong ibu*, *gong anak*, *kulintangan*, and *tambul*, which play a musical rhythm known as *titik kalamat*, a specific composition in summoning ancestral spirits. Meanwhile, the mantra recitations performed by the *kalamat* help attract attention and focus the minds of participants on the ongoing spiritual experience through repetition. The repetition of mantra recitations and *tagungguk* musical accompaniment creates a soothing sound pattern that engages both the auditory and mental faculties, bringing them into a meditative state where they are more receptive to spiritual experiences. A patient's testimony explains, "The *tagungguk titik kalamat* is very close to me, as I have been hearing it since childhood. It makes my spiritual soul very empty and very calm."

This experience illustrates how the phantasmagoric elements in the auditory component trigger emotions and memories that function as dissociation and hypnosis processes for ritual participants. The repetitive rhythm of *tagungguk* creates a stable resonance in the brains of ritual participants (Santamaria 2019). Resonance through this consistent and repetitive rhythm can help align participants' brain waves. The human brain produces waves with several frequencies, including alpha waves (8 Hz to 12 Hz), associated with mild relaxation states, and theta waves (4 Hz to 8 Hz), associated with meditative and hypnotic states (Levitin 2019). These frequencies are key in achieving states of dissociation and hypnosis, where individuals are more susceptible to experiencing altered states of consciousness.

Moreover, this repetitive resonance also helps centre the attention of ritual participants on the echo of these sounds, diverting attention from other external stimuli. This diversion of attention is one of the main elements in the hypnosis process. The *kalamat* explains, “The rhythm of *tagungguk* is very important in helping me achieve deep concentration and making it easier for me to enter a hypnotic state and recite mantras more easily.”

The *kalamat*’s statement provides a clear picture of when they focus on the rhythm of the music, their brains gradually enter a state of monotonous concentration. This state reduces higher brain wave activity, such as beta waves (13 Hz to 30 Hz), which are associated with alertness and critical thinking, thus making it easier for the *kalamat* to enter a hypnotic state while performing mantra recitations.

Not only that, several other sound rhythms also contribute to the authentic atmosphere of the *magombok* ritual, including the sound of frond strikes, the combination of bamboo fans, and assisted by the stomping of dancers’ feet on the floor, which also create proxemics (spatial) narrative that has a high impact on individuals, practitioners, ritual performers, and spectators present in the treatment session. In this cultural context, this meaning association can strengthen the effects of dissociation and hypnosis through participants’ expectations and beliefs towards the *magombok* ritual, as evidenced in the experience of one spectator, “I noticed that all ritual performers seemed intoxicated and spoke like ancestors. Their voices all changed, and their inner voices were very intimidating.”

This display leads to a clear perception where ritual participants may associate these sounds with profound spiritual experiences or mythology, adding depth to the hypnotic influence. These beliefs and expectations accelerate the process of entering a dissociated state.

The auditory mechanism in the context of dissociation and hypnosis involves a combination of repetitive rhythms, auditory focus, cultural symbolism, emotional triggers, and physiological alignment. Each of these elements plays a role in helping participants achieve altered states of consciousness, where they are more susceptible to hypnotic influence and experience profound spiritual experiences (Krippner 2005). The influence of these elements provides an authentic situation and dramatic effect for ritual participants to shift to the transcendental spectrum. For attending spectators, it provides a sacred experience and strengthens beliefs in the sanctity of the *magombok* ritual ceremony.

Translation of the Transcendental in the Semi-Conscious Space

The transcendental experience of ritual participants in the *magombok* ceremony is complex to translate because the elements presented in the semi-conscious space manifest in various forms. Each of these manifestations provides profound insights into healing and self-transformation for each ritual participant (Salimi, Sandage and Stavros 2016). However, the transcendental induction in this space can be explained through a process in which ritual participants experience metaphysical intensity, indicating that they are no longer themselves but are represented by other entities within their bodies. Therefore, the study can identify themes translating the transcendental experience within the semi-conscious realm of the *magombok* ritual, namely cosmic connectivity and spiritual dimensional existence.

Cosmic Connectivity

In the context of the semi-conscious, findings indicate that participants experience a profound sense of cosmic connectivity. This experience is characterised by a sense of identity transformation, where individuals feel that their identity is altered by the ritual. For example, a participant who is a family member of the patient states, “I felt myself becoming part of the ancestral realm as if I became someone else and merged with something greater, and it’s difficult to explain.”

This illustrates how the semi-conscious state in the *magombok* ritual creates a space where the boundaries between individuals and the supernatural realm are blurred, leading to a holistic and comprehensive experience. This identity transformation occurs not only on a physical level but also involves a spiritual dimension, which allows participants to feel as though they become one with the supernatural realm of their ancestral dimension.

Moreover, altered consciousness is also an important feature in cosmic connectivity. Participants describe out-of-body experiences, where they feel as if they are leaving their physical bodies and moving into another dimension that can only be experienced by the circle of participants. This out-of-body experience shows that participants sense the presence of another dimension that transcends the physical world and provides a new perspective on their own identity or that of ritual performers, but also expands their understanding of reality and existence.

The experience of identity transformation and signs of out-of-body experiences bring a narrative of special spiritual experiences to the point of providing strong signs of spiritual experience (Rozaimie, Tom and Jalil 2023). This spirituality no longer refers to healing insights alone, but also to the value of unity or

integration with the supernatural realm and feeling the presence of ancestors, which provides a clear form of memory experienced by ritual participants. This memory is marked by images of extraordinary feelings of harmony and balance with their surroundings. The *kalamat* explains:

During the ritual, I felt the presence of ancestors enveloping me. It gave an indescribable sense of security and calm because my memory of them is very brief. But in this ritual, I met them again.

This experience illustrates how the semi-conscious level in this dimension serves as a medium for the *kalamat* to attain a high spiritual state. The felt presence of ancestors gives them a sense of protection and tranquillity, strengthening their connection with a higher power that cannot be explained in terms of feelings because it is very subjective and occurs in the context of their experience alone. This aligns with the opinion put forward by Raihanah and Mohd Muzhafar (2022), that this cosmic connectivity transcends generations and is described as a way to reconcile with one's past and find peace in the present.

The overall experience of cosmic connectivity demonstrates how the *magombok* ritual fosters an atmosphere where ritual participants can establish a profound connection with the ancestral realm and spiritual entities. Each element translates its transcendental experience into a form of sacred and sacral dimension. It is also enhanced by phantasmagoric elements that further strengthen spiritual values, reinforcing this sense of connectivity. Altered consciousness, identity transformation, and profound spiritual experiences all contribute to a broader understanding of how this ritual enables participants to connect with their ancestral realm in a deep and meaningful way.

Spiritual Dimensional Existence

The spiritual dimension, which can be considered spiritual existence, refers to aspects of human life that transcend physical and material dimensions. It involves awareness, feelings, and experiences related to the soul, spirit, and belief in higher entities or forces (MacDougall 2018). This opinion aligns with research findings that show experiences in the *magombok* ritual involve various aspects that encompass the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of ritual participants, helping them achieve higher spiritual awareness and well-being. Healing is one of the main aspects, where participants report improvements in physical health, mental calmness, and spiritual well-being. A patient states, "After the ritual was completed, I felt my body was healthier, I felt no more negative element disturbances, and my life and thoughts were calmer."

This statement shows how this ritual functions as a comprehensive healing mechanism, influencing various aspects of participants' lives. This situation

clarifies the belief of the Bajau Laut community, which views the *magombok* ritual as an alternative treatment medium that cannot be addressed by modern medicine. This brings reinforcement to the debate put forward by Stavnichuk (2021) who sees the importance of the spiritual dimension in providing peace of mind, reducing stress, and improving mental well-being.

Meanwhile, the spiritual experience undergone in the semi-conscious phase suggests that the feeling of unity with ancestral spirits gives them a deep sense of connection and creates a belief system in which ancestral spirits are perceived as subtle entities that can help them overcome their inner conflicts. This code is marked by transcendent awareness that explores the meaning of life through the existentialism of ritual participants. This is explained by the *kalamat*:

This ritual makes me reflect on life and my existence in this world. As a ritual leader, I must be strong to help my generation live in a state of safety and health, both inwardly and outwardly, so that I can be a connecting medium with ancestors.

Based on the experience stated by the *kalamat*, it appears that the *magombok* ritual triggers deep self-awareness, forcing participants to confront profound questions about who they are and what the meaning of their life is in a world that is often unpredictable and full of uncertainty, marking the emergence of existentialism in the practitioner. This aligns with the opinion put forward by DeMarinis (2013) that existentialism, as a philosophical movement, emphasises individual freedom, responsibility, and the search for life's meaning in the context of human existence, which is often full of uncertainty and confusion.

Integrating the spiritual dimension into this transcendental spectrum also explains the code of purification and spiritual renewal. Two contexts that can be debated in this code are purification, which leads to a clean soul and spirit, and clarifies the spiritual journey that brings them to the symbolic landscape of their ancestral beliefs. A ritual patient explains, "I was not aware of anything, in my mind there was only an image of pure white ancestors, and I saw a bright light with a whisper of advice."

From this, two interpretations can be drawn. First is the purification space that symbolises spiritual renewal and cleansing, freeing participants from worldly burdens and preparing them for profound spiritual experiences. Meanwhile, it also provides clues to visions and spiritual journeys, which are forms of transcendental experiences where ritual participants gain insights and healing guidance. This suggests the existence of a spiritual dimension of existence, full of meaning and wisdom, that can be accessed through the *magombok* ritual ceremony.

CONCLUSION

As previously stated, the aim of writing this article was to examine and unravel the complex narrative related to the union of spirits with the bodies of participants in the *magombok* ritual. Using a phenomenological approach, this study successfully demonstrated that the *magombok* ritual is a complex process involving dynamic interaction between phantasmagoric and transcendental elements that occur simultaneously but emerge at different intensities and times. The phantasmagoric spectrum explains that visual synergy and auditory symphony are important dissociation and hypnosis mediums in planning and facilitating trance states for ritual participants. This provides deep insight into how perception and reality can be shaped by ritualistic context and individual beliefs. On the other hand, the transcendental aspect reveals that the *magombok* ritual builds a broader cosmological value. This study unveils that this transcendental experience is not only subjective but also influenced by environmental and social factors that support the success of the ritual with connections to larger cosmic and spiritual entities.

These two elements are interconnected and mutually influential in creating a deep and meaningful ritual experience for participants. The results of this research not only enrich our understanding of spiritual and ritualistic phenomena in specific cultures but also open up space for further research on how spiritual experiences can be studied through scientific approaches. Future research prospects that can be discussed as a result of this study include the influence of socio-cultural environment on the intention and quality of phantasmagoric and transcendental experiences in rituals, as well as developing a more comprehensive theoretical model to understand this interaction in various types of religious and spiritual rituals.

The implications of this study are important for considering cultural, social, and environmental factors in understanding spiritual and ritualistic experiences. Additionally, the conceptualisation of ideas in this research phenomenon provides deep insights into how individuals experience and interpret rituals. Thus, this study can serve as a basis for subsequent research that delves deeper into the dynamics of spiritual and ritual experiences in various cultural contexts. Implications for future research include the development of more holistic methodologies in understanding spiritual phenomena, as well as the application of these findings in therapeutic practices and social interventions to assist individuals involved in similar rituals. Further research can also expand our understanding of how spiritual experiences affect mental and emotional well-being, as well as how rituals can be utilised as tools for recovery and enhancing quality of life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) 2022-0060-107-02, provided by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia. We also extend our appreciation to Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris for their continuous support and facilitation.

REFERENCES

- Amsalib Pisali. 2017. Persembahan tari Ritual Panangsang di Daerah Semporna, Sabah: Analisis terhadap fungsi dan struktur. Master's diss., Universiti Malaysia Sabah.
- Amsalib Pisali, Sharifuddin Zainal, Humin Jusilin and Mestrah Lauk. 2017. Persembahan tarian Panangsang dalam ritual penyembuhan masyarakat Bajau Laut. *Jurnal Gendang Alam (GA)* 7: 73–96. <https://doi.org/10.51200/ga.v7i.1051>
- Arumugam, I. 2023. The sacred unbound: Insufficient rituals, excess life, and divine agency in rural Tamil Nadu. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 13(1): 53–67. <https://doi.org/10.1086/725206>
- Berrol, C.F. 2018. Transcendence via active imagination: Ritual, culture and choreographic offerings. *American Journal of Dance Therapy* 40(2): 277–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10465-018-9280-x>
- DeMarinis, V. 2013. Existential meaning-making and ritualizing for understanding mental health function in cultural context. In *Constructs of meaning and religious transformation*, ed. H. Westerink, 207–222. Germany: Vinna University Press. <https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737000994.207>
- Dollahite, D.C., L.D. Marks, A.B. Witting, A.B. Lebaron, K.P. Young and J.M. Chelladurai. 2020. How relationship-enhancing transcendent religious experiences during adversity can encourage relational meaning, depth, healing, and action. *Religions* 11(10): 519. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100519>
- Haddad, A.D. 2019. Performing transcendence through movement, perception and technology. *Proceedings of POM Beirut*. <https://doi.org/10.14236/ewic/pom19.5>
- Halina Sendera Mohd Yakin and A. Totu. 2014. Signification in the conception of proxemics and chronemics of the Bajau death rite: A study from a nonverbal communication perspective. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication* 30(2): 71–90. <https://doi.org/10.17576/jkmjc-2014-3002-0>
- Hanafi Hussin. 2008. Bajau Laut's diaspora and preservation of their traditional practices in Sabah. *Borneo Research Journal* 2: 149–163.
- . 2019. Buwas kuning (yellow rice) and its symbolic functions among the sama-Bajau of Malaysia. *SAGE Open* 9(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019885140>
- Hanafi Hussin and J.J. Baptist. 2019. Scaping the Bajau through rituals and celebrations in maritime of Malaysia and the Philippines. *Borneo Research Journal* 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.22452/brj.sp2019no1.2>

- Irawan, Y.D., A. Suneko and I.K. Ardana. 2022. Mantra musicalization: Cowongan rituals ideas for creating instruction karawitan compositions. *GHURNITA: Jurnal Seni Karawitan* 2(3): 180–191. <https://doi.org/10.59997/jurnalsenikarawitan.v2i3.1457>
- Janzen, T.B., Y. Koshimori, N.M. Richard and M.H. Thaut. 2022. Rhythm and music-based interventions in motor rehabilitation: Current evidence and future perspectives. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2021.789467>
- Krippner, S. 2005. Trance and the trickster: Hypnosis as a liminal phenomenon. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 53(2): 97–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207140590927608>
- Levitin, D.J. 2019. *This is your brain on music - understanding a human obsession*. U.S.: Penguin.
- MacDougall, S. 2018. God—the world’s future: Systematic theology for a new era. *Theology and Science* 16(1): 137–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2018.1416786>
- Marić, A. 2024. Phantasmagoria. In *Explorations in dynamic semiosis. Theory and history in the human and social sciences*, ed. E.M. Tragel, 393–400. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47001-1_18
- Matracchi, P. and A. Sadeghi habibabad. 2021. Explaining and evaluating the quality of “light” in religious environments and its effect on spirituality. *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 10(4): 803–820. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2021.06.001>
- Mensch, J.R. 2023. The phenomenological reduction and the transformation of phenomenology. In *Husserl’s phenomenology. Phaenomenologica*. Vol. 238. Cham: Sringer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26147-3_4
- Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman and Lena Farida Hussin Chin. 2018. Conservation of the ngalai/berasik ritualistic performance of Bajau/Sama’ ethnic group for sustainable intangible heritage. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 8(3): 35–45. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v8-i3/3898>
- Petrof, S. 2015. Religious broadcasting – between sacred and profane toward a ritualized mystification. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 14(40): 92–111.
- Pusut, A.P. 2022. Pola komunikasi transendental kompetensi dalam ritus mahelur oleh Etnik Minahasa. *Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 8(1): 71–83. <https://doi.org/10.35308/source.v8i1.4874>
- Qureshi, C., T.J. Moleta and M.A. Schnabel. 2022. Beyond the portal – A study of the tangible and intangible rituals within sacred spaces. Proceedings of the 24th Conference on Computer Aided Architectural Design Research in Asia (CAADRIA). <https://doi.org/10.52842/conf.caadria.2019.1.525>
- Raihanah, M.M. and Mohd Muzhafar Idrus. 2022. Growing up with ghosts: Dynamics of rememory and trauma in a Malaysian filial memoir. *Kajian Malaysia* 40(1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2022.40.1.1>
- Rozaimie Awang, A.A. Tom and S.W. Jalil. 2023. Conserving the *Jadi Mali* ritual for cultural sustainability: A case study of the Iban Community in Sarawak. *Kajian Malaysia* 41(1): 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2023.41.1.3>

- Salimi, B., S.J. Sandage and G.S. Stavros. 2016. Spiritual transcendence in psychotherapy: A relational, pragmatic, and semiotic approach. *Open Theology* 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2016-0046>
- Salmi, A.K., T. Äikäs and S. Lipkin. 2011. Animating rituals at Sámi sacred sites in Northern Finland. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 11(2): 212–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605311403962>
- Santamaria, M.C.M. 2019. Music, dance and the Sama-Bajau ‘diaspora’: Understanding aspects of links among communities through ethnochoreomusicological perspectives. *Journal of Maritime Studies and National Integration* 2(2): 86–90. <https://doi.org/10.14710/jmsni.v2i2.3708>
- Sharifuddin Zainal, Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, Esterlina Moo Chin Len Lazarus, Muhamed Syafiq Salleh, Yeon Amsalie @ Amsalib Pisali, Patta Arifin Hussin and Mohamad Nor Hisyam bin Musa. 2021. Kelamat-Keombo’an: Role play through the fifth elements unification in igal theatre-ritual performance of Sabah East Coast Bajau. *Jurnal Gendang Alam (GA)* 11(2): 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.51200/ga.v11i2.2293>
- Shearer, A. 2007. Phantasmagoria: Spirit visions, metaphors, and media into the twenty-first century by Warner, Marina. *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 52(5): 683–885. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5922.2007.00693_7.x
- Spence, C. 2022. The phantasmagoria: From ghostly apparitions to multisensory fairground entertainment. *Frontiers in Communication* 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2022.894078>
- Stavnichuk, A. 2021. Playful systematic theology: Toward transforming action. *Acta Theologica* 41(31): 270–283. <https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup31.16>
- Sun, H. and E. Kim. 2022. A study of visual symbolic perception in shamanic rituals. *The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2022: Official Conference Proceedings* 113–123. <https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2188-1111.2022.10>
- Syamsul Azizul Marinsah and Mohd Anuar Ramli. 2017. The traditional practice of Magombo’ in Bajau Community in Semporna Sabah: An analysis of sociocultural and Islamic perspectives. *Borneo Research Journal* 11(1): 72–86. <https://doi.org/10.22452/brj.vol11no1.5>