2026

Research Article

Igal Ka'mbo'an: A Sama Master's Perspective on Passing Tradition to the Next Generations

Zhea Katrina R. Estrada, Altan Idilis Ishmael, &
Nursida Diamson Jaluddin

Received: November 11, 2025
Revised: February 26, 2026
Accepted: March 17, 2026
Published: March 31, 2026
Similarity index: 0%

Abstract

Igal, the traditional dance of the Sama people in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, holds profound cultural and historical significance as both a way of life and a ritual expression. Often compared to *pangalay* and *pansak*, *igal* possesses unique stylistic and symbolic elements that reflect the identity and traditions of the Sama community. Based on collaborative ethnographic research conducted in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, from October to November 2024, including in-depth interviews and participant observation with Sama *igal* master Nursida Jaluddin, who also serves as co-author, this paper explores the nuances of *igal*, highlighting its variations in Sibutu and Bongao, and examines efforts to teach this art form to younger generations, particularly through initiatives at Mindanao State University–Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography (MSU-TCTO). Despite these efforts, challenges persist, including limited resources, scarcity of skilled *igal* masters, and waning appreciation for the dance, which some audiences perceive as less entertaining. There is also a growing concern that festival-oriented innovations, introduced to enhance audience appeal, may overshadow and slowly displace more traditional forms, contributing to the misrecognition of ancestral *igal* as overly simple or outdated. However, opportunities for preservation and revitalization abound, such as the establishment of a School of Living Traditions (SLT) for *igal*, development of an *igal* guidebook, integration of *igal* into school curricula, and increased incentives for performers. Furthermore, deeper research into *igal*'s historical and cultural connections could strengthen its role in affirming Sama identity. This study highlights the importance of collaborative efforts to ensure the survival and transmission of *igal* to future generations, thereby safeguarding it as a living testament to Sama heritage.

Author Information:

[1,2]**Zhea Katrina R. Estrada**
[1]Instructor & [2]PhD Candidate
zrestrada@up.edu.ph
orcid.org/0000-0002-4953-5896

[3]**Altan Idilis Ishmael**
Instructor
altanishmael@msutawi-tawi.edu.ph
orcid.org/0009-0003-5530-2321

[3]**Nursida Diamson Jaluddin**
Igal Master and Culture Bearer
nursidajaluddin0@gmail.com
orcid.org/0009-0005-2723-7897

[1]Department of Philosophy,
University of Santo Tomas - Manila
Manila, Philippines

[2]Department of Anthropology,
University of the Philippines - Diliman
Quezon City, Philippines

[3]Sama Studies Center,
Mindanao State University - Tawi-Tawi
College of Technology and Oceanography
Tawi-Tawi, Philippines

https://doi.org/10.53899/spjrd.v31i1.1631

Keywords: igal, Tawi-Tawi, Sama, dance, living tradition

Dance, as a cultural form, is never merely aesthetic; it encodes histories, cosmologies, and ways of being in the world. For the Sama of Tawi-Tawi, in the southernmost province of the Philippines, *igal* embodies this entanglement of movement, identity, and tradition. More than performance, *igal* is woven into the very fabric of Sama social life, marking life-cycle events, mediating relations with the unseen, and affirming belonging to a community deeply attuned to the rhythms of the sea (Maceda, 1998). Its slow, fluid gestures, punctuated by the subtle flick of the wrist and the swaying of the torso, evoke the image of boats at sea, waves moving to shore, and the intimate gestures of everyday life. In this sense, *igal* is not only an artistic expression but also a practice of remembering and embodying the Sama identity.

Scholars of Philippine dance have long grouped *igal* with related forms such as the Tausug *pangalay* and the Yakan *pansak*, owing to their shared emphasis on fluid, non-metrical movements accompanied by the *kulintangan* ensemble (Maceda, 1998). However, while these dances share structural similarities, they are culturally distinct. *Pangalay* has increasingly gained recognition in national and international performance circuits, often celebrated for its virtuosity and stylization. *Pansak*, by contrast, is more circumscribed in ritual contexts, particularly in healing and funerary ceremonies. *igal* occupies a middle ground: it is both everyday and ritual, ordinary and sacred, performed in weddings and communal gatherings as much as in ceremonies of healing and supplication. This polyvalence highlights the embeddedness of *igal* in Sama lifeways, where movement is not abstract but relational, connecting people to the spirits and to the sea that sustains them.

Despite its centrality to Sama life, *igal* today faces the challenges of transmission. Elder practitioners, once the custodians of its gestures and meanings, are passing away without entirely passing on their knowledge to younger generations. Institutions such as the Mindanao State University - Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography (MSU-TCTO) have attempted to integrate *igal* into cultural programs and student workshops. Still, these efforts remain constrained by limited resources, shifting youth preferences, and the scarcity of formally recognized *igal* masters (N. Jaluddin, personal communication, October 28, 2024). At the same time, modern audiences often perceive *igal* as "too slow" or "less entertaining" compared to fast-paced contemporary dance forms popularized through social media platforms like TikTok. These dynamics place *igal* at risk of being relegated to the margins of cultural memory, even within the very communities that have long sustained it.

Nevertheless, there are also signs of revitalization and hope. Community-based initiatives, such as the establishment of Schools of Living Traditions (SLTs) for *igal* and the potential to create pedagogical resources, including an *igal* guidebook, point to new opportunities for sustaining this dance in the present and for the future (National Commission for Culture and the Arts [NCCA], 2025a). SLTs, as defined by the NCCA, are community-centered learning spaces where transmission is led by tradition bearers in situ and where learning occurs through direct participation, practice, and apprenticeship rather than through formal classroom models (NCCA, 2025a). They allow elder culture-bearers to teach within their own cultural environment, at their own pace, and according to community knowledge protocols more aligned with how *igal* has historically been passed down. Furthermore, positioning *igal* within broader discourses on intangible cultural heritage invites reflection on the politics of recognition, preservation, and transmission in contexts of rapid social change (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003).

Contemporary research on intangible cultural heritage highlights that safeguarding is not value-neutral: inequalities in participation and institutional recognition shape which practices receive resources and which remain marginal. Eichler (2021) shows how heritage regimes can reproduce uneven access to benefits and visibility, making community agency central to successful safeguarding. In parallel, comparative Southeast Asian studies emphasize community-driven models that connect

education, local identity, and sustainability, arguing that living traditions persist when transmission mechanisms are rooted in community practice rather than solely through top-down listing or spectacle.

Recent scholarship in the southern Philippines has also increasingly emphasized the importance of documenting and sustaining local cultural knowledge in the face of social and technological change. Studies of Indigenous language communities in Mindanao, for example, show how fragile embodied and oral traditions become when intergenerational transmission weakens, underscoring the urgency of community-based documentation and safeguarding (Gasing & Al-Saggaf, 2025). At the same time, research on Filipino youth reveals that awareness of intangible cultural heritage is uneven and often mediated by formal education and media exposure, highlighting the need for sustained engagement with living traditions beyond the classroom (Pastera, 2024). Complementing these perspectives, analyses of everyday cultural expression in public spaces demonstrate how identity and belonging in the southern Philippines are continuously produced through visible, performative practices that shape how communities understand themselves (Pil et al., 2025). These studies provide a regional and national context for examining *igal* not simply as a dance form, but as a dynamic site of cultural transmission, memory, and identity among the Sama of Tawi-Tawi.

This paper examines *igal* as both cultural heritage and living practice. Specifically, it aims to: (1) describe variations of *igal* in Sibutu and Bongao, two critical sites that reflect different trajectories of continuity and change; (2) analyze the challenges that constrain the transmission of *igal* across generations, particularly in relation to resources, institutional support, and cultural shifts; and (3) discuss efforts and opportunities for revitalization, including educational initiatives, government and community programs, and further scholarly research. In doing so, the study situates *igal* not only as a marker of Sama identity but also as a critical lens for understanding how cultural practices survive, adapt, and thrive in the face of modernity.

Methodology

Data were gathered in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, from October 28 to November 5, 2024, comprising nine consecutive days of sustained engagement. During this period, four extended interview sessions were conducted with Jaluddin, each lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. In addition to these formal interviews, daily informal conversations, rehearsals, and demonstrations were observed, amounting to approximately 25-30 hours of participant observation. These engagements took place in practice spaces, community settings, and informal domestic environments, allowing for contextualized discussion of embodied knowledge, ritual experience, and performance practice. The research focused on Jaluddin's life history, her training in *igal* in Sibutu, her subsequent relocation to Bongao, and her work as a teacher, choreographer, and cultural advocate.

Participant observation occurred alongside these interviews and involved observing and engaging with Jaluddin's teaching, rehearsal processes, and demonstrations of *igal*. These observations provided insight into movement vocabulary, pedagogical strategies, and the relationship between ritual forms and contemporary performance. No other participants were interviewed; the analysis presented in this paper is based on Jaluddin's narrative, embodied practice, and interpretive reflections, which are treated as both ethnographic data and expert cultural knowledge.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. Fieldnotes from participant observation were reviewed alongside interview transcripts. Data were coded thematically, focusing on recurring concepts such as tempo inversion, improvisational structure, ritual propriety, pedagogical transmission, festival adaptation, and boundaries of aesthetic correctness. These thematic clusters guided the organization of the Results and Discussion section, enabling the interpretation of

movement principles and transmission dynamics within broader discourses on intangible cultural heritage and maritime identity.

The decision to center this study on a single primary knowledge holder was intentional rather than incidental. Jaluddin is widely recognized in Tawi-Tawi as a senior *igal* master trained in Sibutu and an active teacher in Bongao, positioning her at the intersection of ritual continuity and institutional transmission. Given the study's aim to trace variation across these two sites through a lived trajectory, her life history provided a coherent analytical frame. This article does not claim to represent all Sama *igal* practitioners. Instead, it offers a focused case study grounded in depth, expertise, and collaborative authorship.

This study follows a collaborative and reflexive approach in which the primary knowledge holder is also a co-author. Jaluddin is listed as the third author of this paper in recognition of her central role in generating, interpreting, and authorizing the knowledge presented. This model aligns with community-engaged and decolonial approaches to research on intangible cultural heritage, which emphasize shared authority and the ethical inclusion of culture bearers as intellectual partners rather than anonymous informants. Jaluddin reviewed and approved all sections of the manuscript that draw on her experiences, histories, and interpretations of *igal*, ensuring that the representation of Sama cultural practices reflects her perspectives and community values.

The primary researcher approaches this study as an academic engaged in cultural heritage research, rather than as a member of the Sama community. This positionality required reflexive attentiveness to cultural protocols and deference to Jaluddin's authority as a knowledge holder. The collaborative authorship model mitigated extractive tendencies by ensuring that interpretation and representation remained grounded in Sama perspectives and subject to review by the culture bearer herself.

Ethical considerations were guided by principles of informed consent, cultural respect, and shared authority. Jaluddin provided informed consent for all interviews, observations, and documentation, and exercised full control over how her name, knowledge, and cultural practices are presented in the publication. This co-authorship ensures transparency, accountability, and the avoidance of extractive or misrepresentative research practices. The study followed ethical guidelines for research on Indigenous and intangible cultural heritage, including respect for community ownership of cultural knowledge, sensitivity in describing ritual practices, and the right of culture bearers to review and revise scholarly representations of their traditions (NCCA, 2025a; UNESCO, 2003).

Results and Discussion

The word *igal* is widely used among Sama communities not only in Tawi-Tawi but also across the southern half of the Sulu Archipelago and in parts of northeastern Borneo, to refer to their distinctive dance tradition. In everyday speech, *mag-igal* means "to dance". However, in Tawi-Tawi, the practice transcends this literal definition, carrying connotations of bodily knowledge, ritual, and identity. Among elder informants, the term "igal ka'mbo'an" is sometimes invoked—literally "*igal* of the ancestors"—to signify the dance's deep genealogical roots as an inheritance from earlier generations (N. Jaluddin, personal communication, October 28, 2024). In this sense, *igal* functions as a mnemonic device, a living archive that binds the present community to its forebears, linking generations through embodied performance.

The designation of *igal* as "ancestral" highlights its continuity with pre-Islamic, Indigenous cosmologies of the Sulu Archipelago. While Islam has profoundly shaped Sama's spiritual life since at least the fifteenth century (Majul, 1973), oral traditions suggest that *igal* predated Islamization and was

later adapted to coexist with new religious sensibilities (Kiefer, 1972). This layered history underscores the dynamic character of *igal*: it is both a ritual inheritance and a continually transforming cultural practice. What is remembered in the movements of *igal*, therefore, is not just an artistic form but a worldview that has survived cycles of religious, political, and social change.

The movement vocabulary of *igal* is deeply rooted in the natural and maritime environment of the Sama, a people long described as "sea-oriented" or "maritime nomads" (Nimmo, 2001; Sather, 1997). Gestures often mimic waves, the rocking of boats, or the spread of sails. The soft, undulating motions of the arms and wrists echo the sway of seagrass or the gliding of fish, while the gentle rotation of the hands suggests currents moving through water. In some variants, stepping patterns simulate paddling movements or the shifting of balance while walking on a boat, giving dancers the appearance of swaying with the sea. These embodied references underscore how *igal* encodes the Sama worldview, in which the sea is not only an economic resource but also a cosmological anchor. To "know" the sea is to know one's place in the world, and *igal* translates this seascape epistemology into bodily performance. This connection between environment and movement aligns with anthropological arguments that dance often functions as an "embodied cosmology," in which gestures map onto metaphysical understandings of life (Kealiinohomoku, 1983).

One of the defining aesthetic principles of *igal* is its deliberate counterpoint to musical tempo. When the *kulintangan* ensemble accelerates, the dancer's movements slow and become more controlled; when the music slows, the dancer responds with quicker, more agile gestures. This intentional opposition between sound and motion creates a dynamic tension that distinguishes *igal* from many other dance traditions and reflects Sama values of balance, restraint, and attentiveness to shifting rhythms. As Jaluddin explained, "If the music is fast, you slow down. If the music is slow, you move faster. You must not follow it directly" (N. Jaluddin, personal communication, October 28, 2024).

Igal also departs from choreographed or count-based dance forms in its open-ended structure. There is no fixed beginning or ending to a performance, nor is there a prescribed sequence of steps to be followed. A dancer may stop when they feel the performance has reached a natural completion, guided by embodied judgment rather than external cues. Repetition of the same movement style is discouraged, and there is no counting of steps; instead, each dancer continuously varies gesture, tempo, and flow in response to the music and to their own internal sense of balance and beauty. In this way, *igal* is shaped less by choreography than by the dancer's cultivated sensitivity, aesthetic intuition, and relational attunement to sound and motion. "There is no counting," Jaluddin emphasized. "You feel when it is enough. You should not repeat the same movement. It must continue flowing" (N. Jaluddin, personal communication, October 28, 2024).

The absence of a formal movement notation system is not a deficiency but an epistemological feature of *igal*. Unlike codified classical dance traditions that rely on standardized kinesiology or written scores, *igal* privileges embodied memory and improvisational flow. Movements are not segmented into countable units but emerge through continuous modulation of wrists, shoulders, torso, and gaze. The wrist rotates inward before extending outward in a soft arc; the shoulders subtly shift to redistribute weight; the feet glide rather than stamp. Such micro-adjustments resist reduction to static diagrams. *Igal*'s intelligibility lies not in fixed notation but in the relational attunement between the dancer, the music, the environment, and the unseen presence.

Within this open, improvisational framework, a few movements are considered "wrong" in *igal*. However, elders and practitioners identify clear boundaries of propriety: excessive hip swaying or overly forceful, brash gestures are avoided, as they violate Sama ideals of composure, modesty, and grace. A successful *igal* performance is therefore not judged by technical precision but by the dancer's

ability to sustain fluid, controlled, and dignified movement that remains ethically and aesthetically aligned with the values of the community. According to Jaluddin (2024), "There are no wrong movements, except when it becomes too showy or too strong. *igal* must remain gentle and graceful".

Although *igal* is practiced by individuals of all genders, its performance is not entirely gender-neutral. Rather than restricting participation, gender inflects stylistic nuance depending on context, narrative intention, and social expectations. In everyday and festive settings, both men and women perform *igal*, and mastery is not determined by gender but by embodied knowledge, lineage, and aesthetic sensitivity.

However, when *igal* is used to convey particular stories, such as courtship, mythic narratives, or ritual sequences, movement quality may subtly shift. Courtship-themed performances often emphasize modesty and grace in female-presenting dancers through softened wrist articulations, controlled torso sway, and lowered gaze. Male-presenting dancers, meanwhile, may demonstrate grounded footwork, slightly broader shoulder articulation, and contained expansiveness that conveys dignity rather than aggression. These distinctions are not codified rules but culturally legible variations shaped by narrative and social context. Importantly, the boundaries of propriety apply across genders. Excessive hip swaying, exaggerated force, or overly brash gestures are discouraged for all performers, as they contradict the Sama value of *mapia*, a disposition of composure, balance, and moral propriety (Sather, 1997). Thus, femininity and masculinity in *igal* are not expressed through dramatic contrast but through disciplined modulation of movement.

The career of Nursida Jaluddin further complicates rigid gender binaries. As a female *igal* master and choreographer, her authority rests not in gendered performance but in lineage, expertise, and ritual grounding. Her prominence demonstrates that while gender may shape aesthetic inflection, it does not delimit access to cultural authority. *Igal* remains inclusive while still responsive to social meanings attached to gendered embodiment.

Igal is frequently compared to two other major dance traditions of the Sulu Archipelago: *pangalay* of the Tausug and *pansak* of the Yakan. Structurally, these dances share similarities, such as the use of the *kulintangan* ensemble, slow non-metrical movements, and a preference for curved rather than angular body shapes (Maceda, 1998). However, important distinctions exist.

Pangalay has often been described as the "classical dance" of the Sulu Archipelago. It emphasizes technical virtuosity, elaborate hand gestures, and stylization, and in recent decades it has been showcased nationally and internationally through cultural troupes such as the Alun-Alun Dance Circle (Jacinto, 2015). By contrast, *igal* is more closely tied to communal life. It is less ornamental, privileging fluidity and continuity of movement over virtuosity. Its gestures are subtle and restrained, embodying an aesthetics of flow rather than spectacle. This aesthetic distinction reflects deeper cultural values: where *pangalay* has been codified as a heritage art form presented on stage, *igal* remains intimately woven into the everyday fabric of Sama life.

Pansak, meanwhile, diverges more sharply. It is performed primarily in ritual contexts, such as healing ceremonies, funerals, and agricultural rites. Its rhythm is slower and more solemn, and its intent is not primarily aesthetic but spiritual, often aiming to mediate between human and non-human worlds. While *igal* may overlap with ritual, the Sama distinguish specific ritual modes within this spectrum: during *pagduwata* (healing ceremonies), for example, *pag-igal* (dancing) and *igal jin* (dancing spirit bearer) are transitional performative elements within the ritual sequence, facilitating the movement between visible and invisible realms. In *pagduwa'a salamat* (thanksgiving) contexts and *pagtawal* (healing) sessions, *igal* is similarly an embodied act of supplication and offering. At the same time, *igal* remains more polyvalent than *pansak*, extending to weddings, social gatherings, and

entertainment events in contemporary settings. Thus, while *igal*, *pangalay*, and *pansak* share kinship as dance forms of the Sulu Archipelago, they occupy distinct cultural niches. To collapse them into a single "style" is to miss the nuances of how each community inscribes its worldview into movement.

The embeddedness of *igal* in communal and ritual life also illustrates its role as a flexible form of cultural expression. In weddings, circumcision rites, or communal feasts, *igal* functions as a celebration of kinship and collective joy. Meanwhile, in contemporary festivals such as the *Kamahardikaan sin Tawi-Tawi*, literally "Liberation of Tawi-Tawi" and also known as "Province Day," a month-long commemoration of Tawi-Tawi's separation from Sulu, *igal* becomes a marker of regional pride and a symbol of cultural identity presented to outsiders. The *Kamahardikaan sin Tawi-Tawi* contains multiple sub-festivals (e.g., Agal-Agal/Seaweed Festival, Lepa/Boat Festival, and Dulang/Food Abundance Festival), and, significantly, *igal* is performed in all of these festivals, underscoring how *igal*'s adaptability is key to its endurance.

Beyond their mimetic references to wind, lightning, and waves, these movements carry layered spiritual and relational meanings. *Limbay*, as illustrated in Figure 1, often described as portraying the wind, is not merely atmospheric; performers interpret it as invoking unseen forces that move through both sea and spirit. The gentle oscillation of the arms suggests openness and receptivity, signaling humility before forces larger than oneself. *Kidjut*, as performed in Figure 2, which references lightning, embodies sudden illumination and power. While the gesture may appear sharp in comparison to other movements, it remains controlled, reflecting the Sama belief that strength must always be tempered by restraint. *Kellok*, as shown in Figure 3, evoking waves, is perhaps the most cosmologically resonant: its cyclical undulation mirrors the rhythm of tides and the continuity between life, death, and ancestral presence. For performers, these movements are not symbolic in an abstract sense; they are relational. *Igal,* thus, becomes a medium through which dancers position themselves within a moral and spiritual ecology, negotiating visibility and invisibility, and presence and remembrance.

Figure 1

Depiction of Limbay, an Igal Movement that Portrays the Wind (Source: Jaluddin, 2025)

Figure 2

Depiction of Kidjut, an Igal Movement that Portrays Lightning (Source: Nursida Jaluddin, 2025)

Figure 3

Depiction of Kellok Movement in Igal (Source: Jaluddin, 2025)

Note. A depiction of *Kellok*, an *igal* movement that portrays the waves of the sea.

Perhaps the most crucial feature of *igal* is its dual identity as both a performance and a way of life. For the Sama, dancing *igal* is not restricted to staged events but permeates daily rhythms. To learn *igal* is not only to acquire a set of steps but also to internalize the values of grace, patience, and fluidity. These qualities resonate with Sama's ideals of social comportment. Dance often extends beyond aesthetics to model social ethics. *igal* is no exception: its smooth transitions, avoidance of sharp angles, and flowing gestures echo Sama ideals of balance, subtlety, and harmony with the sea. This embeddedness in everyday life has led some scholars to describe *igal* as a "living tradition" (NCCA, 2025b). The term emphasizes not only continuity with the past but also adaptability to the present. For example, in Bongao today, youth may perform *igal* on stage during the *Kamahardikaan sin Tawi-Tawi*, accompanied by theatrical lighting and costumes. In Sibutu, however, *igal* remains closer to ritual codes, performed in subdued settings where the dance is less spectacle and more communal prayer. Both contexts are valid expressions of *igal*'s vitality, illustrating the capacity of tradition to inhabit multiple forms without losing its essence.

Understanding *igal* as both a performance and a way of life highlights significance as a vessel of ancestral memory. Each movement recalls not only maritime lifeways but also kinship ties, ritual obligations, and community histories. In this sense, *igal* is a mnemonic practice that Connerton (1989) calls "embodied memory", inscribing collective identity in the body. To perform *igal* is to participate in a form of remembering, one that affirms continuity with ancestors while also enacting the present. In this sense, *igal* is not simply a Sama dance. It is an embodied archive, a seascape cosmology, and a living practice of identity. Its movements encode the sea as the primary frame of existence, distinguishing Sama identity from their Tausug and Yakan neighbors while situating them within the broader cultural tapestry of the Sulu Archipelago. To reduce *igal* to entertainment is to miss its deeper meanings, including ritual, memory, and philosophy in motion. To honor *igal* is to recognize it as both art and life, a practice that sustains the Sama people's relationship with their past, their environment, and their collective future.

Variations of *Igal*

Although *igal* is often described as "the Sama dance", it would be misleading to treat it as a single, uniform tradition. Instead, *igal* encompasses a constellation of localized practices shaped by environment, ritual contexts, and community histories. Each island or settlement in Tawi-Tawi interprets and performs *igal* in distinctive ways, resulting in a spectrum of variations rather than a monolithic form. This plurality reflects the wider cultural logic of the Sama, whose maritime orientation fosters openness to movement, adaptation, and exchange (Nimmo, 2001; Sather, 1997).

The Sama are a people of movement across waters, across borders, across generations. Anthropologists have long remarked that their identity is not rooted in fixed territoriality but in relational engagements with the sea (Sather, 1997). This maritime sensibility extends to cultural expression, where dance, music, and ritual are rarely static but rather circulate across islands, reconfigured in response to local needs and contexts. It is unsurprising that *igal* itself exists in multiple forms, each carrying the imprint of its social and ecological milieu. Some communities emphasize ritual austerity, while others experiment with spectacle for tourism or school-based performances.

In Sibutu, for example, *igal* is remembered and performed primarily within ritual and domestic contexts, marked by restrained movements and spiritual undertones. In Bongao, by contrast, *igal* has become closely associated with festivals, tourism, and formal education, leading to more stylized, public-facing performances. These sites are not the only ones where *igal* thrives—Sitangkai, Simunul, Mapun, and Tabawan in South Ubian (often referred to as the "Home of Living Traditions") each have their own nuanced practices—but Sibutu and Bongao serve as productive case studies for illustrating the spectrum of ritual continuity and modern adaptation. They are also ethnographically significant due to the life history of Nursida Jaluddin, a respected *igal* master and culture bearer. Jaluddin first

learned *igal* in Sibutu, where she absorbed its ritual dimensions, and later relocated to Bongao, where she now teaches and choreographs *igal* in more public and educational settings. Her trajectory encapsulates the shifting forms and meanings of *igal* across space and time.

Sibutu: Ritual Continuity and Restrained Forms

Sibutu, located on the southern edge of the Sulu Archipelago near the maritime border with Malaysia, is often regarded by Sama elders as a repository of older cultural forms. Due to its relative isolation, many ritual practices, including *pag-duwaa* (ceremonial prayers or invocations), continue to be observed with minimal modification compared to the more urbanized areas of Tawi-Tawi (Nimmo, 2001). Within this context, *igal* is closely bound to ritual and ancestral memory.

The aesthetic of restraint is central to Sibutu's *igal*. Movements are subtle, quiet, and controlled: the slow flexing of the wrist, the gentle swaying of the torso, the measured pacing of the feet. Unlike the large, theatrical gestures seen in festival performances, Sibutu's style emphasizes internal discipline and spiritual orientation. Elder practitioners explain that these restrained movements echo the Sama value of *mapia* (goodness, propriety), which discourages unnecessary display or extravagance (Sather, 1997). The quiet grace of the dance, thus, reflects a broader ethical disposition toward humility and balance.

In ritual contexts, *igal* may accompany *pag-duwaa*, weddings, thanksgiving ceremonies, or healing rites. Its movements are not merely decorative; they function as acts of communication with ancestors, spirits, or the wider community. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) describes such practices as "ritual processes", in which performance becomes a liminal medium for negotiating human and spiritual relationships. In Sibutu, *igal* is precisely such a medium, blurring the line between prayer, art, and memory.

What makes Sibutu's *igal* distinctive is its embeddedness in everyday ritual life. Performances are often held in modest spaces, such as a family courtyard during a wedding, a seaside clearing during a healing rite, or within a temporary structure erected for a communal gathering. The absence of elaborate costumes or stage lighting foregrounds the dance itself, unadorned but deeply resonant. In this setting, *igal* is not primarily for entertainment but for sustaining relations with kin, community, and unseen forces.

It was in Sibutu that Nursida Jaluddin first learned *igal*. Under the guidance of elder relatives and community mentors, she internalized not only the gestures but also the ethical and spiritual sensibilities tied to the dance. For Jaluddin, *igal* was inseparable from ritual life, and learning the dance meant learning how to conduct oneself appropriately in moments of reverence, thanksgiving, and communal solidarity. Her formative experiences in Sibutu shaped her conviction that *igal* is more than choreography; it is a moral practice and a vessel of ancestral wisdom.

Cultural workers have described this Sibutu style as the "ka'mbo'an" form of *igal*, a term that echoes *igal ka'mbo'an* (of the ancestors). The association with ancestry highlights how performance functions as an act of remembering. Each gesture is not only a movement but a citation of past generations, an embodied way of saying: we remember, we continue.

Bongao: Modern Adaptations and Public Display

If Sibutu represents continuity, Bongao, the capital town of Tawi-Tawi, represents transformation. As the province's administrative and educational hub, Bongao has long been a crossroads of cultural exchange, attracting migrants, traders, and state institutions (Kiefer, 1972; Majul, 1999). In this setting, *igal* has evolved to address the demands of public performance, cultural representation, and pedagogy.

One of the most visible platforms for *igal* in Bongao, as shown in Figure 4, is during the festival *Kamahardikaan sin Tawi-Tawi*, which commemorates the province's founding anniversary. During the festivity, schools and community groups present choreographed *igal* performances as part of parades and cultural showcases. These performances often feature bright costumes, stylized movements, and synchronized group routines, designed to appeal to audiences beyond the Sama community. Here, *igal* is framed as a marker of regional identity, representing Tawi-Tawi to outsiders and reinforcing Sama pride in the public sphere. Importantly, *Kamahardikaan sin Tawi-Tawi* includes an annual competition night dedicated to "authentic" cultural practices called *Awal Jaman* (Time Long Past), where performers are required to stage traditional Tawi-Tawi practices, including *igal*, following specific guidelines. In 2025, Jaluddin served as one of the judges in the *Awal Jaman* Night, further underscoring how local cultural authorities actively intervene in the calibration and safeguarding of tradition within festival contexts.

Figure 4

Igal Performance Aboard a Traditional Lepa (Source: National Museum of the Philippines, 2025)

Note. Participants of the *Kamahardikaan sin Tawi-Tawi* performing *igal* aboard a *lepa* (traditional Sama houseboat).

Theatrical adaptations in Bongao have introduced innovations that distinguish them from Sibutu's restrained style. For instance, group choreographies are common and are designed for stage visibility rather than intimate ritual settings. Costuming is often standardized, with performers donning brightly colored attire inspired by traditional textiles but tailored for spectacle. Music is amplified through sound systems, and performances are timed to fit programmatic schedules. These changes reflect the logic of modern festivals, where cultural expression is compressed into formats that resonate with media coverage, tourism promotion, and government-sponsored cultural programs.

Educational institutions also play a significant role in shaping Bongao's *igal*. At MSU-TCTO, cultural workers such as Nursida Jaluddin have worked with students to systematize *igal* instruction. Workshops, planned by the Sama Studies Center, and campus events provide younger generations with structured opportunities to learn the dance, often emphasizing both technique and cultural context. In this way, *igal* in Bongao becomes not only an artistic performance but also a pedagogical tool for transmitting Sama heritage in a rapidly changing society. However, these adaptations come with trade-offs. The focus on spectacle and stylization can sometimes obscure the ritual and spiritual dimensions that remain central in *igal*. Some elders worry that *igal* is being "flattened" into mere entertainment, disconnected from its ancestral meanings (N. Jaluddin, interview, 2024). At the

same time, others see these adaptations as necessary innovations that keep the tradition alive and relevant for younger audiences shaped by media, tourism, and global cultural flows. This tension is not unique to Tawi-Tawi. Scholars of intangible cultural heritage note that many traditions risk being "museumized" or commodified when adapted for public consumption, but such adaptations can also secure visibility and support for preservation (Hafstein, 2018; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004).

Jaluddin herself embodies this tension. Having brought her ritual-inflected style from Sibutu, she now choreographs performances in Bongao that balance authenticity with accessibility. In schools and festivals, she encourages students to learn the foundational movements while also adapting them for stage presentation. For Jaluddin, this dual role is not contradictory but complementary: *igal* must remain true to its roots while also evolving to meet new contexts. Her life history mirrors the broader trajectory of *igal* in Tawi-Tawi, a dance rooted in ancestral memory yet compelled to adapt within the modern cultural economy.

The Significance of Diversity

The coexistence of Sibutu's ritual *igal* and Bongao's public *igal* highlights the plurality of Sama cultural expression. Rather than framing one as "authentic" and the other as "diluted", it is more productive to view them as complementary modes of sustaining tradition. As Stuart Hall (1990) reminds us, cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a "positioning," continually redefined through history, geography, and social practice. In this sense, the diversity of *igal* across Tawi-Tawi reflects both continuity and change. Sibutu's restrained style safeguards ancestral connections and ritual integrity, while Bongao's adaptations ensure visibility, transmission, and institutional support. Both are necessary for the dance's survival: one anchors it to the past, the other projects it into the future.

This plurality also resists the tendency to essentialize or homogenize Indigenous traditions. Just as Sama communities themselves are dispersed across multiple islands and shaped by complex histories of mobility (Sather, 1997), so too are their cultural practices varied and dynamic. The Sibutu and Bongao examples provide just two snapshots within this larger mosaic. In Sitangkai, for instance, *igal* is sometimes performed on floating platforms, reflecting the community's close relationship to the sea. In Simunul, *igal* may incorporate influences from Tausug neighbors, blending stylistic elements across ethnolinguistic boundaries. In Tabawan (South Ubian), *igal* is situated within a community well-known for maintaining highly conservative cultural lifeways and autonomy. Tabawan is frequently described as a site where Sama traditions, values, and livelihood practices have been preserved to a high degree, and, in this context, *igal* is performed with an emphasis on ancestral forms. These local variations demonstrate the capacity of Sama culture to absorb, reinterpret, and re-situate practices across shifting contexts.

From an anthropological perspective, the multiplicity of *igal* underscores the concept of "tradition as process" rather than static inheritance (Handler & Linnekin, 1984). Tradition is not a fossilized relic but a living, contested, and negotiated practice. The Sibutu-Bongao spectrum illustrates how communities navigate the tension between preserving ancestral values and responding to contemporary demands. Both restraint and spectacle, both ritual and tourism, both memory and adaptation—these are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive elements of Sama cultural survival.

In examining the variations of *igal*, this section underscores the importance of attending to both localized practices and broader cultural processes. Through the life and work of Nursida Jaluddin, we see how *igal* travels between ritual continuity and modern adaptation, embodying both ancestral values and contemporary creativity. The plurality of *igal* is not a weakness but a strength, demonstrating the Sama's capacity to negotiate tradition and change in ways that sustain their identity and lifeways. By situating *igal* within this framework of variation, we not only document stylistic

differences but also illuminate the broader dynamics of cultural resilience. The Sama's dance, like their seafaring lifeways, thrives in movement and adaptation. To appreciate *igal* fully is to recognize it not as a singular form but as a constellation of practices, each reflecting the interplay of ancestry, environment, and history.

Teaching *igal* to Younger Generations

The survival of *igal* as a living tradition rests heavily on its transmission to younger generations. For the Sama people, this transmission has historically been embedded in the rhythms of everyday life: a child would observe an elder dance rituals, family celebrations, or communal gatherings, and then slowly begin to mimic the gestures, eventually embodying the form through repetition and immersion. Unlike the structured pedagogies of Western dance traditions, the learning of *igal* has been deeply experiential, oral, and embodied, relying on proximity to elders and immersion in ritual contexts (Nimmo, 2001).

At the core of this intergenerational transmission are elder performers and culture bearers, who act as both repositories and interpreters of memory. The role of elders in Sama society goes beyond teaching technical steps. They safeguard the symbolic, ritual, and cosmological dimensions of *igal*. For instance, when elders describe the extension of the arms or the delicate movement of the wrists, they often link these gestures to the sea, the wind, or the movements of birds and fish – metaphors that root the dance in the seascape epistemology of the Sama. In this way, elders transmit not just a dance but also a worldview. As Nursida Jaluddin, a renowned *igal* master from Sibutu who later made Bongao her home, has emphasized, the dance cannot be separated from the lifeways of the Sama, because each gesture embodies aspects of daily survival, spirituality, and identity.

However, intergenerational transmission today faces difficulties, as younger Sama often grow up in contexts increasingly detached from the ritual and communal settings in which *igal* once thrived. Urbanization, migration, and the influence of mass media have introduced new forms of entertainment and self-expression, often overshadowing traditional practices (Pertierra et al., 2002). In Bongao, for example, young people are more likely to encounter *igal* in staged performances during festivals or school events than in intimate ritual contexts, which changes not only how the dance is learned but also how it is valued. Elders lament that while students can imitate the outer form of *igal*, they often lack the deeper cultural grounding to appreciate its significance.

This observation mirrors documented cases in which youth encounter ICH primarily through mediated or institutional settings rather than immersive community contexts, which can weaken embodied transmission (Abdul Aziz, 2023; Pastera, 2024). Abdul Aziz's community-based education model underscores that active participation and locally grounded curricula significantly increase youth awareness, positive attitudes, and the likelihood of continued practice, a model directly applicable to SLT and MSU-TCTO initiatives for *igal*.

Institutions like MSU-TCTO have stepped into this gap by creating spaces where the transmission of *igal* can be facilitated through workshops, student training, and public performances. At MSU-TCTO, *igal* has been integrated into cultural events and student organizations, particularly through the Sama Studies Center, the Tambuli Cultural Troupe (as shown in Figure 5), and the Office of Cultural Affairs and Development, providing a platform for young Sama to encounter the dance in a structured manner. These initiatives are valuable because they provide visibility for Sama traditions in academic and cultural contexts, positioning *igal* not merely as entertainment but as a vital part of the region's heritage. Furthermore, by inviting culture bearers like Jaluddin to conduct workshops, MSU-TCTO ensures that the knowledge transmitted remains grounded in lived tradition. This model of collaboration between elders and institutions parallels the national movement of establishing SLTs, spearheaded by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA, 2025a).

Figure 5

Nursida Jaluddin with the Members of the Tambuli Cultural (Source: CCP Bunnal, 2024)

However, despite these institutional efforts, challenges persist in teaching *igal*. One of the most pressing issues is the scarcity of traditional instruments, such as gongs and drums, that provide the rhythmic foundation for the dance. Without these instruments, practice sessions are often limited to a cappella movements or improvised substitutes, which risks diminishing the embodied connection between sound and movement. Furthermore, the lack of dedicated rehearsal spaces, whether in community halls or cultural centers, forces students to practice in makeshift venues that may not be conducive to the meditative and communal aspects of *igal*.

Equally concerning is the absence of standard teaching materials. Unlike ballet, which has codified notation systems, or modern dance, which benefits from widely accessible manuals and visual archives, *igal* remains heavily dependent on oral instruction and direct observation. While this ensures the preservation of embodied authenticity, it also renders the tradition fragile, particularly as the number of skilled masters continues to decline. The reliance on memory and demonstration makes the process vulnerable to gaps in transmission, especially if younger Sama lack consistent access to elder teachers. Fernando-Amilbangsa (1983) has noted a similar challenge in *pangalay* transmission among the Tausug, where codification has been attempted as a preservation strategy but has sometimes clashed with the tradition's fluid, improvisational nature.

Despite these challenges, the teaching of *igal* also presents profound opportunities. The reliance on elder culture bearers highlights the concept of the "living archive," wherein embodied knowledge is transmitted not through written records but through lived performance. Elders carry within their bodies not just the steps of the dance, but also the accumulated wisdom, ritual significance, and historical memory that give meaning to each gesture. Their role is irreplaceable, for while videos and written descriptions can document form, they cannot replicate the nuanced weight of a pause, the emotional tone of a hand gesture, or the spiritual context in which movements emerge. As scholars of intangible heritage argue, safeguarding such traditions requires not only documentation but active practice in community contexts where knowledge can be meaningfully embodied (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; UNESCO, 2003).

MSU-TCTO's involvement demonstrates how collaboration between institutions and community elders can strengthen the teaching of *igal*. In this regard, it is also important to recognize the contribution of Hja. Sakinur-ain M. Delasas, who worked closely with MSU-TCTO throughout her career and whose guidance has shaped much of the contemporary pedagogical landscape for Sama cultural transmission. By bridging traditional pedagogy with academic resources, the university provides continuity and visibility to Sama heritage, even as societal contexts shift. Furthermore, this collaborative model resonates with national frameworks of cultural safeguarding, including the Gawad sa Manlilikha ng Bayan (GAMABA) program, which institutionalizes the recognition of National Living Treasures and underscores the irreplaceable role of master practitioners in transmitting cultural memory. However, the long-term survival of *igal* depends on sustained investment: the provision of instruments, creation of culturally appropriate teaching materials, and continued recognition of elder culture bearers as indispensable teachers. In this sense, the teaching of *igal* is not simply about preserving a dance but about safeguarding a living testament to Sama identity and a seascape-based worldview.

The act of teaching *igal* to younger generations, as exhibited in Figure 6, thus reveals a delicate balance between tradition and adaptation. On the one hand, the intimacy of elder-to-youth transmission must be preserved to retain the depth and meaning of the practice. On the other hand, new spaces such as universities, schools, and cultural festivals can provide the visibility and structure necessary to sustain interest among young people who may otherwise drift away from traditional practices. This dual approach ensures that *igal* remains both rooted and relevant, a dance that speaks to the ancestors while resonating with the present.

Figure 6

Igal Instruction for Young Students (Source: MSU-TCTO Sama Studies Center Facebook Page, 2025)

Note. Sama culture bearer Nursida Jaluddin and Gawad sa Manlilikha ng Bayan recipient and *igal* master Hja. Sakinur-ain M. Delasas teaching young students the basics of *igal*.

Challenges and Opportunities

The transmission and preservation of *igal* in contemporary Sama society face significant challenges, many of which are rooted in broader issues of cultural sustainability and the pressures of modernization. One of the most pressing concerns is the persistent lack of funding allocated to cultural initiatives in Tawi-Tawi. Traditional performance requires not only skilled dancers but also costly instruments, attire, and rehearsal spaces. The *kulintangan* ensemble, which provides the musical backbone of *igal*, is complicated to source, as authentic sets are both expensive and increasingly rare. Costume production presents another barrier, with beadwork and woven textiles demanding specialized knowledge and labor-intensive processes. In the absence of stable financial support from local or national government units, cultural groups often rely on ad hoc fundraising or personal contributions from practitioners, which limits the scale and continuity of their initiatives (NCCA, 2025a). This resource scarcity leads to an uneven transmission process, with only a few schools or communities able to sustain regular training, while others are left behind.

The scarcity of skilled masters further compounds this issue. As elder culture bearers age, their embodied knowledge faces the risk of being lost if not passed on in a timely and deliberate manner. Oral and embodied pedagogies, though central to the authenticity of *igal*, remain fragile in the absence of systematic documentation or apprenticeship programs. The passing away of an *igal* master does not simply mean the loss of a performer but the loss of generations of layered memory, ritual knowledge, and interpretive nuance that cannot be easily replicated. While younger teachers and students exhibit enthusiasm, their authority and depth of knowledge often remain limited compared to those of older practitioners. This tension reflects a broader challenge observed across many Indigenous traditions: how to maintain authenticity while ensuring continuity when the original culture bearers are no longer present (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004).

Equally troubling is the limited institutional support available for sustaining *igal*. While schools such as MSU-TCTO have initiated programs to showcase Sama dance traditions, these remain largely event-based rather than integrated into long-term curricula. The absence of designated cultural centers or consistent spaces for instruction hampers the continuity of training. Without a dedicated infrastructure, *igal* is often relegated to the margins of school programs or performed only for special occasions. Moreover, in the national cultural discourse, the focus often falls on more widely recognized traditions, such as the Ifugao hudhud chants or the Maranao okir carvings, leaving Sama practices underrepresented in heritage funding priorities. This structural marginalization reinforces a cycle where Sama cultural expressions receive less visibility, further reducing the likelihood of sustained institutional investment.

Large-scale analyses of ICH threats confirm that marginalization and mismatch between local practices and international or national heritage priorities are common drivers of vulnerability (Falk et al., 2025). These studies show that many ICH elements suffer from both internal pressures (aging bearers, shifting tastes) and external pressures (tourism commodification, institutional neglect), underscoring that effective safeguarding must combine local stewardship with strategic engagement at national and international policy levels.

Modern audience preferences also pose a challenge to the preservation of *igal*. In contemporary settings, particularly among younger Sama, dances influenced by global popular culture, such as hip-hop, K-pop, and TikTok-inspired choreographies, dominate social spaces and digital platforms. By contrast, *igal* is often perceived as slow, restrained, or lacking in spectacle. This perception risks framing *igal* as an outdated or irrelevant practice, alienating youth from their heritage (Pertierra et al., 2002). The issue is not that younger generations reject tradition outright, but rather that their modes of cultural consumption are shaped by media and peer trends that privilege rapid, visually stimulating forms of expression. As a result, *igal* performances in festivals or school events are sometimes restyled

to appeal to contemporary tastes, which, while ensuring visibility, may also dilute the depth of their ritual and cultural significance. The challenge, then, lies in bridging generational expectations without compromising the authenticity of the tradition.

Yet despite these difficulties, the landscape of *igal* preservation also offers several promising opportunities. One of the most notable possibilities is the establishment of a School of Living Tradition (SLT) specifically dedicated to Sama cultural practices. SLTs, a model pioneered by the NCCA, have proven effective in other Indigenous contexts by providing spaces for culture bearers to transmit knowledge to youth in community-based settings. Unlike universities, which often impose structured pedagogies, SLTs allow for continuity through informal, experiential, and intergenerational learning (NCCA, 2025a). For the Sama, such a space could serve not only as a hub for *igal* but also for associated practices such as *kulintangan* music, weaving, and oral traditions. Anchoring *igal* within a holistic cultural ecosystem would strengthen its resilience by tying it to broader aspects of Sama identity and lifeways.

The development of an *igal* guidebook also presents an important opportunity. A well-crafted manual incorporating visual documentation, movement descriptions, and oral histories would provide a tangible resource for learners, teachers, and researchers. While codification can never fully capture the embodied subtleties of performance, it can offer a reference point that prevents knowledge from disappearing altogether. Similar initiatives for *pangalay* among the Tausug have shown how manuals and video archives can support transmission while still allowing space for improvisation and localized expression (Fernando-Amilbangsa, 1983). If undertaken collaboratively with elder practitioners like Nursida Jaluddin, an *igal* guidebook could balance preservation with authenticity, ensuring that younger generations engage with the dance as both a technical form and a cultural practice.

Another promising avenue is integrating *igal* into school curricula. Embedding the dance within the Department of Education's Music, Arts, Physical Education, and Health (MAPEH) program, or within cultural studies modules at the tertiary level, would institutionalize its transmission and legitimize its importance alongside mainstream art forms. Curricular integration would provide not only regular exposure but also an avenue for interdisciplinary learning, linking *igal* with lessons on history, anthropology, and environmental studies. This formal recognition could counteract perceptions of *igal* as merely ornamental or recreational, framing it instead as a vital part of Philippine intangible cultural heritage.

Encouraging young performers through incentives is another strategy that could revitalize interest. Local government units, cultural organizations, and tourism boards could offer stipends, scholarships, or awards for students and community groups dedicated to *igal*. Beyond financial incentives, recognition through festivals, competitions, and performance grants can foster pride and visibility. When young Sama see *igal* not only as a cultural obligation but also as a viable avenue for achievement and recognition, they are more likely to invest time and effort in mastering it. At the same time, care must be taken to avoid over-commercialization that reduces *igal* to mere entertainment. Balancing incentive structures with cultural sensitivity will be key to ensuring sustainability.

Finally, opportunities also lie in deeper ethnographic and historical research on *igal*. While existing studies have documented aspects of Sama dance traditions, much remains unexplored, particularly regarding the connections between *igal*, spirituality, and seascape epistemologies. Further research could uncover the role of *igal* in mediating human–environment relations, in embodying Sama cosmology, and in negotiating identity within broader Philippine society. Comparative studies with neighboring traditions such as *pangalay* and *pansak* could also highlight the unique contributions of Sama performance to the broader Southeast Asian cultural landscape. Importantly, involving Sama communities in participatory research ensures that knowledge production remains collaborative and

empowering, reinforcing *igal*'s role as both an artistic and social practice (Nimmo, 2001).

In sum, the challenges confronting the transmission of *igal*—limited funding, the scarcity of masters, inadequate institutional support, and shifting audience preferences—are significant and urgent. Yet they do not represent insurmountable obstacles. Instead, they underscore the importance of intentional and collaborative action. By establishing SLTs, developing guidebooks, integrating *igal* into curricula, creating incentives, and pursuing deeper research, the Sama community and its partners can transform these challenges into opportunities for revitalization. Preserving *igal* is not merely about sustaining a dance form. It is about affirming Sama identity, safeguarding cultural memory, and ensuring that the rhythm of the sea continues to flow through the movements of future generations.

Conclusion

Igal, as practiced among the Sama of Tawi-Tawi, is not merely a performative art but a living archive of memory, cosmology, and relational identity. Across its manifestations—from the ritual-centered restraint of Sibutu to the public adaptations of Bongao—it reflects the adaptive resilience of Sama cultural life. Its gestures, inspired by sea, wind, and ancestral presence, embody a maritime worldview that situates identity not on fixed ground but within shifting tides of continuity and change (Nimmo, 2001; Sather, 1997).

Yet resilience cannot be assumed. Safeguarding *igal* requires more than reverence – it requires coordinated and sustained action. Three interlocking strategies emerge from this study. First, community-anchored transmission must be strengthened by establishing a School of Living Traditions (SLT) dedicated to Sama performance practices. Such a space, grounded in apprenticeship and elder authority, would ensure that ritual forms remain embedded in lived community contexts rather than confined to festival stages. Second, the collaborative development of an *igal* guidebook, produced with master practitioners and housed within local institutions, would provide pedagogical continuity without reducing the dance to rigid codification. Third, curricular integration within local schools and universities would normalize *igal* as a foundational component of regional heritage rather than an occasional cultural display.

These efforts require material support. Local government units in Tawi-Tawi can allocate cultural development funds under tourism and heritage budgets, partnerships with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) can provide technical and financial backing for SLT programs, and UNESCO's frameworks on intangible cultural heritage offer avenues for documentation and safeguarding grants (UNESCO, 2003). Collaboration with NGOs and private cultural foundations may further expand resources for instrument procurement, costume production, and youth workshops. Safeguarding must therefore be multi-scalar: community-driven yet institutionally supported.

Equally important are measurable indicators of sustainability. *igal* may be considered thriving not simply when it appears in festivals, but when: (1) multiple trained youth can independently perform and teach the dance; (2) ritual variants, such as *pag-igal* and *igal* jin, continue to be practiced within ceremonial contexts; (3) elder practitioners remain actively engaged as instructors rather than symbolic figures; and (4) new generations adapt the dance without severing it from its ancestral grounding. The vitality of *igal* will ultimately be measured not by documentation alone, but by whether it continues to circulate within weddings, healing rites, communal gatherings, and everyday expressions of Sama identity.

Digital platforms also present emerging possibilities. Community-curated archives, responsibly produced online tutorials, and youth-led documentation initiatives can expand access while

maintaining cultural protocols. When guided by master practitioners, such platforms may complement and not replace face-to-face transmission, ensuring that *igal* resonates within contemporary modes of communication. Recent scholarship also explores how responsible digital technologies can extend the reach of living heritage without substituting embodied transmission. Digital dissemination models and audience experience studies indicate that carefully curated online archives, tutorials, and community-led content can increase intergenerational engagement and public recognition—provided they are co-designed with tradition bearers and incorporate cultural protocols (Yi, Huang & Song, 2025). Such digital complements could help MSU-TCTO and SLTs expand access to *igal* while safeguarding contextual authority.

Safeguarding *igal*, then, is a collective endeavor requiring elders who teach, youth who embody, institutions that resource, and policies that protect. It demands balance between preservation and innovation, between ritual integrity and public visibility. If sustained through collaborative stewardship, *igal* will remain more than a heritage discourse. It will continue to move—through bodies, across waters, and into future generations—affirming the Sama people's enduring relationship with ancestors and sea.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Disclosure

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the writing, analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

References

Abdul Aziz, N. A. (2023). Community participation in the importance of living heritage conservation and its relationships with the community-based education model towards creating a sustainable community in Melaka UNESCO world heritage site. *Sustainability*, *15*(3), 1935. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15031935.

Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge University Press.

Eichler, J. (2021). Intangible cultural heritage, inequalities and participation: who decides on heritage? *The International Journal of Human Rights*, *25*(5), 793–814. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1822821

Falk, M. T., & Hagsten, E. (2025). Intangible cultural heritage differently exposed across continents. *npj Herit. Sci*, *13*, 600. https://doi.org/10.1038/s40494-025-02169-w

Fernando-Amilbangsa, L. (1983). *Pangalay: Traditional dances and related folk artistic expressions*. Filipinas Foundation for the Ministry of Muslim Affairs.

Gasing, M. A., & Al-Saggaf, M. A. (2025). An archival study on the linguistic state of Obo Manobo and Kinamiging Manobo. *Southeastern Philippines Journal of Research and Development*, *30*(2), 165–183. https://doi.org/10.53899/spjrd.v30i2.1041

Hafstein, V. (2018). *Making intangible heritage: El condor pasa and other stories from UNESCO*. Indiana University Press.

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.

Handler, R., & Linnekin, J. (1984). Tradition, genuine or spurious. *Journal of American Folklore*, *97*(385), 273-290. https://doi.org/10.2307/540610

Jacinto, M. (2015). The Pangalay dance in the construction of Filipino heritage. *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*, *22*(1), 1-24. https://tinyurl.com/3bmd9y6x

Kealiinohomoku, J. W. (1981). Dance as a rite of transformation. In C. Card, et al. (Eds.), *Discourse in ethnomusicology II: A tribute to Alan P. Merriam* (pp. 131-152). Indiana University Ethnomusicology Publications Group.

Kiefer, T. (1972). *The Tausug: Violence and law in a Philippine Moslem society*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (2004). Intangible heritage as metacultural production. *Museum International*, *56*(1–2), 52-65. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1350-0775.2004.00458.x

Maceda, J. (1998). *Gongs and bamboo: A panorama of Philippine music instruments*. University of the Philippines Press.

Majul, C. (1973). *Muslims in the Philippines*. University of the Philippines Press.

National Commission for Culture and the Arts [NCCA]. (2025a). S*chool of living traditions (SLT):*

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. https://tinyurl.com/2vd533v8

National Commission for Culture and the Arts [NCCA]. (2025b). *Intangible heritage – Philippine ICH inventory*. https://tinyurl.com/2pndpdtw

Nimmo, H. A. (2001). *Magosaha: An ethnography of the Tawi-Tawi Sama Dilaut*. Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Pastera, R. J. (2024). Unveiling the veil: Intangible cultural heritage and Filipino college students. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, *11*(2), 25–41. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1818

Pertierra, R., Ugarte, E., Pingol, A., Hernandez, J., & Dacanay, N. (2002). *Txt-ing selves: Cellphones and Philippine modernity*. De La Salle University Press.

Pil, P. M., Ingilan, S. S., Olmedo, K., & Ali, A. (2025). Language encounters in public parks: Mapping the linguistic landscape of Davao City, Philippines. *Southeastern Philippines Journal of Research and Development*, *30*(2), 137–164. https://doi.org/10.53899/spjrd.v30i2.1289

Sather, C. (1997). *The Bajau laut: Adaptation, history, and fate in a maritime fishing society of South-Eastern Sabah*. Oxford University Press.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO]. (2003). Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO.

Yi, C., Huang, J., & Song, L. (2025). Enhancing intangible cultural heritage dissemination through digital experience: An Affective Events Theory approach. *npj Herit. Sci*, *13*, 438. https://doi.org/10.1038/s40494-025-02017-x