

Review

***Igal!*: Appreciating Sama-Bajau Culture in UP Asian Center's Pesta Igal Series, 2010-2015**

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I was moved and touched when I witnessed *Pesta Igal* for the first time in 2010. Being a Tausug exposed to the rather politically incorrect notions of my ethno-linguistic group's superiority over the Sama and Bajau, I could not help but appreciate the opportunity given to them in this series of performances. I was one of the excited spectators to see real Bajau dancers on stage. I could not help but think that they have indeed come a long way from the piers of the southern Philippines and the streets of Metropolitan Manila to one of the country's newest performance space, the GT-Toyota Asian Center Auditorium at the University of the Philippines Diliman.

I remember, when I was a child, my mother had some Bajau friends who delivered to us fish for breakfast every morning in exchange for some *liy-is panggi* or grated cassava, the staple substitute for rice. I wondered why some Tausug in the neighborhood treated them very differently. At my tender age, I was puzzled by this treatment and was grappling for an explanation of what I would later come to understand as instances of discrimination. I heard some friends and neighbors refer to the Bajau as *luwaan*, from the Tausug word *liyuwa* which means "spitted out." This discriminatory labelling technically meant that the Bajau people were outcasts.

Many folk narratives in the Sulu Archipelago attempt to explain the origin of *luwaan*. One of the stories handed down from generation to generation recounts that once upon a time a group of Bajau neglected the time for prayer as they rushed towards sea to harvest fish when the waters inexplicably withdrew afar from the shoreline, leaving many fish along the beach. According to this story, the Bajau's excitement over the abundant supply of fish led them to desert their responsibility of observing prayers. This behavior was considered unacceptable, and from that time on, they were considered "spat out" by God. As such, as the story goes, they were spurned from dry land and treated as outcasts. However, this story has no basis in the major sources of Islamic traditions like the Holy Qurán.

To this day, the Bajau are seen or portrayed as “sea gypsies” or wanderers. A few of them who still maintain a sea-dwelling lifestyle find comfort and feel more secure in their houseboats than on dry land. Presently, as many of them continue to maintain rituals that are associated with ancestor worship and other so-called “pagan” practices, the Bajau are described as the “least Islamized” among the 13 major ethnolinguistic groups of the Muslims in the Philippines. This syncretic or “folk” attitude toward religion, with very little doubt, accounts much for their continuing marginalization among the Muslim groups in the Philippines.

At the *Pesta Igal* 2015 performance, my thoughts of the past were momentarily interrupted when my friend Ridwan, a Sama from Tabawan arrived and introduced me to the *manglulugo* (traditional chanter), who started the program. Hubita Alibasa, a Sama Bangingi woman, was originally from Zamboanga City, and migrated and established herself with her family in Barangay 704, Dakota, San Andres, Manila. She beamed with pride, wearing a beautiful yellow dress with glittering accessories. Her overall visage reminded me people of the Sulu and Tawi-Tawi Archipelagos, the Tausug, Sama and Bajau, truly loved jewellery. Gold accessories were considered to be sources of personal security as well as status symbols. The elderly *manglulugo* gave me a warm embrace. I told her that I will be among those who will love to see her perform. To this remark she said, “*Makuyag tuod ako nakakari pa UP ini misan ha taga-inop way ko natanto maka kari kami pa UP ini na Alhmadullilah!*” (I am very happy to be here in UP. I have never entertained this thought, not even in my dreams, thanks to Allah!). Obviously, for a poor Sama migrant like her, being able to perform on stage was already a great achievement and a great honor to herself and to her family. Ridwan encouraged her to do her best on stage. The old lady beamed with pride and said she will do so. Before going on stage, she closed her eyes and her lips moved in silent prayer. Slowly, other performers followed her up to the stage. I could not help but be impressed by Hubita’s sincerity and spirituality as an artist. These qualities were quite apparent in the melismatic and sacred strains of her *lugu* (chanted prayer), truly a rare performance in Metro Manila’s Hollywood and Broadway-centric cultural habitus.

I made sure not to miss the *Pesta Igal* performance this year because I believed in the philosophy behind it. Also, being a student of Philippine Studies, I saw this event beyond its stage performance as I continued my *attempts* in inculcating among Christian Filipinos an appreciation for the cultural traditions of the southern Philippines. In a way, this event provided a window for people in Manila to have a closer look at the depth and richness of one of the most marginalized among Muslims in the country.

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Dr. Ma. Bernadette Abrera, Chair of the History Department of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy of the University of the Philippines Diliman and one of the audience members, recalls her first encounter with the traditional dance in Tawi-Tawi: “I saw the connection of the dance performance in its totality seeing each movement connecting toward the culture of the people ... But when I saw *Pesta Igal* in UP, I realized that the dance I saw in Tawi-Tawi is now removed from the holistic environment where it came from. But when the *Igal* performers started to dance onstage what I saw was really an art, the impact of the dance as a technique, as a discipline is amazingly beautiful!” Dr. Abrera believes that the *Pesta Igal* in UP Diliman provides an alternate artistic context for the dance performance. She observes that “Western-influenced viewers” may easily relate and appreciate Michael Jackson’s technique in his celebrated moonwalk, in which viewers can really see the isolated movement of the body parts. She says, however, that the *igal* dance movements are totally different where the body moves as a whole like the flow of water and this speaks greatly of our very holistic culture as Filipinos. She further notes the crucial role of the academe in “creating circumstances and opportunities in order to give dignity and importance of our culture amidst the threat (monopoly of the culture) of globalization. Without an understanding of our own culture, events could be interpreted from a colonial framework that may indicate a passivity that is not actually present and we could miss seeing important events, characters, and landscapes.”

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE *PESTA I GAL*

Initially, *Pesta Igal* was conceptualized as a research project with two important components, namely, (1) research in traditional dance choreography and (2) performance as cultural exchange. The project team behind *Pesta Igal* was composed of an international team of scholars from three countries and three prestigious institutions. The tripartite nature of the team reflected the three-country distribution of the Sama-Bajau peoples who live in the border regions of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Representing Malaysia is Dr. Hanafi bin Hussin. Dr. Hanafi is currently Deputy Dean at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Malaya (UM). At the time of *Pesta Igal* 2010, he was Chair of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies of UM. He is a prolific writer and has written many

articles and chapters on Bajau rituals in Malaysia. He also heads the Maritime Culture and Geopolitics of the Institute of Ocean and Earth Science of UM. Representing Indonesia is Dr. Rachmi Diyah Larasati. Dr. Larasati teaches at the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Minnesota. She is a product of the Institute of Arts (*Sendrati*) in Jogjakarta, Indonesia, where she concurrently serves as a member of the faculty. She has written numerous articles on dance, and many of her choreographic works have been shown in Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the United States. Representing the Philippines is Dr. Matthew Constancio Maglana Santamaria. Having received training as a political scientist from the Kyoto University Graduate School of Law, Santamaria has a decidedly social science approach to dance research. He is currently professor of Asian and Philippine studies at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman.

For its initial concert in 2010, the *Pesta Igal* project received a generous grant from the Asian Scholarship Foundation under the royal patronage of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand. It was produced by Teatro Filipino-Integrated and directed by well-known actor and playwright, Ron Capinding. Subsequent *Pesta Igal* concerts were produced by Bunga Arts Link (BAL) in cooperation with Sama-Bajau communities supported by nongovernment organizations such as God's Love for Indigents Ministry (GLIM) and Sun for All Children. It regularly receives support and funding from the UP Asian Center, the UP Diliman Office of Initiatives in Culture and the Arts (OICA), the Social and Technology Bureau (STB), and the Department of Social Work and Development of the Republic of the Philippines. *Pesta Igal*, therefore, effectively continues to be a collaborative event among Sama-Bajau communities, academic institutions, and government and nongovernment agencies.

THE *IGAL* DANCE AND INDIGENOUS VOCABULARIES

Igal is a Sama term referring to the traditional dance of the Sama-Bajau peoples. The Sama or Sinama-speaking peoples refer to themselves according to island community, for instance, Sama Sitangkai (Sama of Sitangkai Island), Sama Tabawan (Sama of Tabawan Island), and Sama Simunul (Sama of Simunul Island); or according to geographic orientation, such as Sama Dileya or Sama Deya (Sama of the Land), Sama Bihing (Sama of the Coast), and Sama Dilaut or Sama Laut (Sama of the Sea), aka Bajau. In the Philippines, the term "Bajau" (aka Badjao, Badjaw, and Bajaw) refer to the Sama Dilaut or sea-dwelling Sama. In Malaysia, the term refers to all Sama or Sinama-speaking peoples. In Indonesia, they are all known as "Bajo." Regardless of labelling, the Sama all share the *igal* dance which is called *pamansak* or *pansak*

by the Sama Siasi, Sama Bangingi and the Yakan, another Sinama group based in the Island of Basilan. A related yet distinct tradition called *pangalay* can be found among the Tausug.

The dances of the peoples of the Sulu and Tawi-Tawi Archipelagos express connection with nature and their immediate sea environment. They are articulated in some artistic bodily movements and rhythmic swaying of the hands. One cannot fully appreciate these movements without knowing their kinaesthetic origins. The *Pesta Igal* series does not only seek to present dances. It also strives to educate the audience about the symbols, meanings, and contexts attendant to dance performances. This is most felt and well-received in the “introduction to igal” segment that is always performed in the beginning of every concert. In this segment, the ritual, social, and technical aspects of the dance tradition are carefully explained along with notes on costumes, property, musical instrumentation, and dance terms or vocabularies. The kinetic demonstration and explanation of origin of dance terms are particularly helpful in gaining an understanding about the aesthetics of the dance itself. Some of the dance terms, partly reproduced from the 2014 program, are as follows:

Limbai is a movement that evokes the swaying of coconut fronds. Arms are raised and lowered alternately at the sides.

Kello' is the outward rotation of the palm of the wrist.

Kollek is the reverse of *Kello'*.

Taut -Taut is the act of over-extending the elbows.

Ebed-Ebed is the shimmering or flicking of the fingers.

Kidjut-Kidjut is the jerking movement of the shoulders.

Ingsud-Ingsud is the lateral movement feet executed through a shuffling movement through the ball and the sole of each foot evoking the movement of the sea snail.

Kapo-Kapo is a movement that simulates wading into the waters.

Engke-Engke is like the kapo-kapo except that the feet are raised from the ground. The term literally means “raise-raise” or “up-up,” obviously a cognate of “angkat-angkat” and “angkat-angkat.”

Kagis-Kagis comes from the movement of a chicken scratching the earth.

Ketchek-Ketchek is a mini kagis-kagis.

Tendek is an emphatic stamp of the foot.

Tendek-Tendek are small stamps done in a series.

Oyoh-Oyoh is a trembling movement of the knee as the ball of the foot is tapped on the floor.

A traditional igal performance can be a composition made up of a combination of the above-mentioned movements. Dancers must be able to execute each movement correctly with grace and confidence, but they are, for the most part, allowed to improvise and to choreograph their performance along the way. Anyone watching a good igal performance can easily see how a dancer slowly drifts into a dimension where one's body moves in rhythmic cadence connecting the soul in submission to the force of nature. I believe that this is best reflected in the *limbai* movement in which the dancer imitates the swaying of the leaves and the waves of the ocean.

For me, the *taut-taut* movement is most interesting as it has another meaning among the Tausug. For the Tausugs, the word "taut" means moving the baby's hammock back and forth. If the hammock uses a spring then the taut movement bobs up and down. It is intriguing to note that, in given contexts, the grace of the dancer performing the taut reflects how a mother carefully moves the baby's hammock to send her beloved to a deep slumber. This may imply that "affection" underscores or constitutes a subtext of the performance.

Generally speaking, in local performances, self-projection is very important as the goal of the dancer is to catch the attention of the audience. If satisfied or impressed by a dancer's performance, members of the audience come forward to pin peso bills all over the dancer's body or insert it in between the fingers. This act is called *mag-panji*. This interactive aspect of the performance of igal has gained acceptance in local areas as a source of fun and entertainment, thus good igal dancers are in great demand during festivities or wedding ceremonies. This practice has evolved into a supplementary source of income for the dancers as well as fun for the spectators. *Pesta Igal* does not disappoint by encouraging the practice, much to the joy of the participating Sama-Bajau artists!

SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PESTA IGAL PERFORMANCE SERIES

Each *Pesta Igal* concert performance is different from the other. This section discusses the highlights of each year's performance and assesses them in terms of cultural achievement as well as contribution to knowledge production and public education.

Pesta Igal 2010 saw the participation of Sama-Bajau groups from Tabawan and Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, and Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia. Its main contribution to performance and dance scholarship can be seen in its conceptualization of types of igal as reflected in its program sections. The program

was eloquently annotated by Babylyn Kano-Omar of Tawi-Tawi and Patricia Regis of Sabah, Malaysia. The first type of igal is the *kamahatuan* or classical style. As performed by women (*igal kamahatuan denda*), the dance characterized by a decidedly slow tempo, a refined approach to movement that favors subtle—if not nearly—unnoticeable changes in position, an inward projection of consciousness and soften non-angular bodily lines evoking the smoothness of a ripple or a gentle wave. As performed by men (*igal kamahatuan lella*), for the most part it continues the slow and smooth unfolding of the *denda* style but occasionally breaks it with flourishes of darting footwork, stamping, and accented movement of the shoulders. The second type is the *igal pakiring*. It is a contemporary form of igal that is characterized by a vivacious, light, and contagious quality. It also follows a relatively fast tempo that feature. It can even be performed to popular songs, and it revels in a liberal appropriation from external sources such as Filipino novelty songs like the “Ocho-Ocho.” The pakiring dance has gained popularity not only among the natives of Tawi-Tawi but for a time even invaded the domains of popular culture in Metropolitan Manila. The juxtapositioning of classical and contemporary forms gives emphasis to the idea of living tradition in constant transition.

Pesta Igal 2012 (Igal-Igalan) featured igal choreographies from the Bunga Arts Link (BAL), a group composed largely of non Sama-Bajau individuals who were engaged in the study of igal and related performance traditions, and Tanghalang Ateneo, a student theater group based at the Ateneo de Manila University under the direction of two-time Aliw Awardee, Dr. Ricardo Abad. The first part of the program consisted of traditional choreographies by Abdul Said “Rio” Hailaya, a dance master from Tabawan, Tawi-Tawi, as well as works by the resident artists of BAL. Abdul Said Hailaya’s participation in this program broke new ground as it was one of the very rare instances when a Sama artist from the field was invited to choreograph and have his works featured in a dance concert of a Manila-based performance group. In this vein, *Pesta Igal* breaks the hegemonic and extractive mode of creation usually found in many traditional dance performances in the country. The second part of the program features igal used as the movement vocabulary in *Sintang Dalisay*, a Filipino adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* as performed by Tanghalang Ateneo and directed by Ricardo Abad. Emphasizing the importance of the concept of “convivial theatre,” Abad invited Abdul Said Hailaya and three other masters for the field (Calsum Telso, Nur Perong, and Dalino Kamami) to train his actors in igal dancing and *kulintangan* (graduated knobbed gong) ensemble playing. The result is a rarefied form of Philippine theater that is culturally embedded in its use of traditional forms from the southern Philippines. Shakespeare is localized

and “effaced” (Abad’s word) to the point of non-recognition, and in this manner rendered “Philippine.” *Pesta Igal 2012*’s contribution can therefore be located in the realm of cultural transformation making Philippine expressions at par, if not better, than Western classical forms. The play eventually won the Aliw Award for best director and best (non-musical) production for 2012.

Pesta Igal 2013 (A Celebration of Sama-Bajau Dance and Music) proved to be even more successful than the first two concerts. Bunga Arts Link shared the stage with Sama-Bajau delegates from Bongao, Tawi-Tawi; Apalit, Pampanga; and San Andres, Manila. The Tawi-Tawi delegation’s repertoire included *Igal Djin Lella*, a trance dance performed by Hadji Musa Malabong from Sitangkai. (Sadly, it was to be Hadji Musa’s last performance in Manila as he passed away early this year.) Garnering much attention from the audience was Abtahil Rudy Abdulla’s rendition of *Silat Awal ka Islam*, a local version of the martial art form of the Malay world. Apart from the haunting lugu of Hubita Alibasa, the San Andres group showcased two virtuoso *igal denda* performances by Janna Hajie and Radzmina Tanjili. The Apalit, Pampanga delegation also surprised the audience with “Sangbaian Pangigalan Jolina Magdangal,” a song-dance tribute piece accompanied by a *batang tambul* drum improvised from PVC pipes and biscuit cans. The performer’s admiration for singer-actress Jolina Magdangal showed the uncanny ability of the Sama-Bajau to translate their emotions into dance and song. *Pesta Igal 2013* showed that the Sama-Bajau peoples continue to create and perform music and dance pieces both in their traditional homeland in Tawi-Tawi and in their new places of residences in Manila and Pampanga. It also debunks discourses that refer to their expression as “dying traditions” that need the intervention of the scholars of the hegemonic center for survival.

The other delegates from San Andres and Tawi-Tawi islands took turns in showcasing their respective variations of the *igal denda* and *igal lella* accompanied by the lively instruments and the “paglugu” (chanting) rendered by the older women in the group. The dancers showcased authentic talents which greatly entertained the people watching the show.

Pesta Igal 2014 (Maglami-lami Kita!) showcased the performances of individuals who participated in the BAL *igal* dance and *kulintangan* music ensemble workshops. Over 50 students and professionals participated in the *igal* dance workshops, while around 20 individuals took part in the *kulintangan* music ensemble workshops. Both workshops were conducted by Sama-Bajau artists with members of the BAL served as coordinators/facilitators. Janmar A. Pajarin from the San Andres delegation taught *igal lella*, and Radzmina Tanjili taught *igal denda*. As for the *kulintangan*

music ensemble workshop, Marana Kapala taught the playing of the kulintangan instrument; Mirita Adhani, the *tungtung* or solembat (ostinato percussion); Lapila Calvi, the *tambul* drum; Hubita Alibasa, the *agung* (large gong); and Salasina Hunaini, the *agung dua* (aka *duwahan* or paired gongs). What was most impressive in this exercise was the intercultural encounter function performed by both the workshops and the concert. *Pesta Igal 2014*'s contribution to culture can therefore be summarized in the phrase transmission across ethnolinguistic lines, a process that needs to be done more often in order to truly foster a national integration.

Finally, *Pesta Igal 2015 (Igal-Pamansak Recital)* showcased BAL's collaborative works with the San Andres group and the performances of the participants in its annual igal workshop. Radzmina Tanjili conducted the *igal-pansak* workshop for women, while her father Julpi Tanjili handled the *igal-pansak* and *silat* workshop for men. One of the highlights of the program was the turning over of kulintangan instruments by BAL to Roman Von Arx, executive director of Sun for All Children, a nongovernmental organization working with Sama-Bajau communities in Manila. The donation of instruments was made possible by BAL's "Kulintangan Project," which started in 2014. The project aims to provide kulintangan instruments to Sama-Bajau communities in the Metro Manila area and nearby provinces. One kulintangan set was donated by GLIM in the previous year, while a *gabbang* (bamboo xylophone) was donated to Cabanatuan City's Sama Bajau Activity Center in Bakod Bayan. Another highlight of the program was a performance of igal by Sama-Bajau children. Although their participation was a last-minute addition to the program, their performance drew the loudest and most sustained round of applause from the audience. BAL members take much comfort in the thought that these children will be learning to play kulintangan music from their elders through the instruments that were donated by the group. *Pesta Igal 2015*, therefore, goes beyond performance and contributes to the further transmission of Sama-Bajau expression.

BEYOND PERFORMANCE: MESSAGE AND CONTEXT

As an insider to the traditions of the Sulu and Tawi-Tawi Archipelagos, I look at the igal performances at the UP Asian Center beyond their entertainment value. First of all, I could not help but relate igal to the increasing presence of the Sama-Bajau people in Metro Manila. Many questions come to my mind. What brought them here? Why do they stay? Manila does not really promise a good life for those who are uneducated and discriminated against. Many of them often acquire only odd jobs in the metropolitan area. I see many Badjau women cuddling infants while

roaming around the streets begging for pennies. I see their children running after private vehicles and jeepneys with their improvised tambol, singing for loose change. But who cares? Do we need to care or be bothered? Some people think the Sama-Bajau represent the majority of the Muslim ethnic groups in the Islands of Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, and Basilan. To some extent, their presence in the streets of Metro Manila reinforces the negative stereotyping against Muslims being dirty, poor, and uneducated. What brought them here may be logically related to the abject poverty being experienced by the entire nation. With little doubt, they are also here because of the peace and order situation in the southern Philippines. Their plight and situation mirror the government's lack of political will and its inability to devise effective measures to address poverty in the countryside. The failure of the local governments to address their needs also has to be mentioned. They face the problems of unemployment, threats to personal security due to piracy and banditry, and worst of all, social discrimination. The Sama-Bajaus are aware of this discrimination. They are a peaceful people and would rather avoid problems rather than engage in acts of resistance. For this reason, they are often victimized by the so-called "pecking order" or social hierarchy with the dominant culture like that of the Tausug on the top. So, their presence in Metro Manila and the nearby provinces is a result of a choice that they made in order to build new lives in new communities away from the chaotic situation of Mindanao. Alas, Metro Manila and the nearby provinces have proven to be less than welcoming. Seen as a nuisance, they are either constantly resettled or sent back to the southern Philippines. (Yes, it is alright for the Tagalog and others to go to Mindanao, but the Sama-Bajau together with undesirable others should not come to Manila or any point of Luzon! This is the reality of social discrimination in the Republic of the Philippines.)

On the brighter side, the *Pesta Igal* in UP Diliman is a definite milestone in affirming the role of the academe in the promotion and preservation of the cultural traditions of some of ethnic groups in Mindanao like the Sama-Bajau. This particular work of scholars at the Asian Center and those based in institutions such as the University of Malaya and University of Minnesota is so commendable that their continuing research on the various types of performance expressions in the islands of Tawi-Tawi go so far as to bring culture bearers and locals to participate and celebrate living culture through intercultural productions in Metro Manila. Their efforts have made UP Diliman a "hot spot" of southern Philippine culture away from its homeland. The *Pesta Igal* series has provided an avenue for the development and transformation of positive discourses relating to *bangsamoro* culture in the country. I realize that presenting our cultural traditions can be an effective way to promote understanding among peoples of different cultures. As a space of convivial celebration, it undoubtedly contributes to achieving peaceful co-existence. *Wassalam!*

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