

Tradition Makes the New: Practitioner Knowledge and the Making of Creative Igal

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how experienced Bajau dance experts draw on culturally acquired knowledge when producing and evaluating deliberate creative Igal performance. Igal is practised among Sama-Bajau communities in the Sulu-Sulawesi region, with this study focusing on Semporna, Sabah. Seven transcript files representing four expert practitioners are re-analysed within an ethnographic archive built through fieldwork in 2007-2011 and follow-up practitioner research in 2015. Across these four accounts, participation, mobilisation, transformation, and evaluation recur as connected moments in creative practice. Ros's encounter with the festival category kreasi (creative work) shows that practical creative competence may precede familiarity with an institutional vocabulary of creativity. Johan's compositional practice brings movement, musical repertoire, childhood memory, narrative, wedding practice, material culture, and professional artistic knowledge into new relationships as performance problems change. Ros, Johan, Haji Zainal, and Hajjah Intan also describe judgement through culturally learnt relations among movement quality, musical response, style, adat (customary conventions), and rasa (felt practical judgement). Knowledgeable transformation names cases in which prior knowledge can be traced directly into creative decisions, while practised recognisability describes the culturally learnt and socially situated practice of judging whether transformed work still reads as Igal. Festival classification makes such expertise public by giving creative work categories, stages, audiences, and consequences. The expert accounts also show that institutional categories do not replace practitioner judgement. Festivals expose creative decisions to comparison, but movement-musical relationships, repertorial distinctions, customary expectations, and accumulated teaching experience remain central to how new work is made persuasive. Across these four expert accounts, tradition operates as creative knowledge when practitioners draw on histories of participation to select, reorganise, and judge cultural resources in new artistic conditions.

Keywords: Igal, Sama-Bajau, practitioner knowledge, dance creativity, embodied knowledge

INTRODUCTION

When Hermelin binti Kaninari, commonly known as Ros, participated in the International Igal Festival in Semporna, Sabah, the festival required her group to produce kreasi (creative work), a term she initially did not understand. Ros was already an experienced Igal practitioner and teacher who had danced from childhood, learning through observation of her grandmother and mother, and who later founded Arung Sabah, a dance troupe based in Kampung Bangau-Bangau. Her group answered the festival requirement by reorganising familiar Bajau Laut practices, including head covering, bedak sejuk (cooling face powder), singing, dancing, and boat-related experience, for presentation inside a hall. Her account reveals a productive distinction between familiarity with an explicit institutional category of creativity and possession of the practical cultural knowledge required to create (Ros, personal communication, January 9, 2015).

Ros's account raises a broader question: how does knowledge associated with tradition become usable in deliberate creation? Anthropology, folklore, music, and dance have long moved away from treating tradition as a fixed inventory reproduced unchanged. Handler and Linnekin (1984) show how the past is selected and

made meaningful in the present, while Glassie (1995) brings continuity and making together by treating tradition as a relation through which resources from the past become available for future action. Creativity scholarship places creative action within socialisation, existing genres, constraints, and cultural recognition (Ingold & Hallam, 2007; Wilf, 2014). Studies of dance and traditional music similarly show inherited forms becoming resources for transmission, improvisation, and choreographic development (Dalidowicz, 2015; Wilcox, 2018; Yung, 2019). The practical issue is how practitioners draw on what they know when they make something new.

In dance, this question is inseparable from the body. Movement knowledge includes distinctions of weight, timing, force, continuity, posture, musical responsiveness, spatial organisation, and movement quality that become intelligible through sustained participation. Kaeppler's (2001, 2007) work on structured movement, style, and competence established that meaningful dance knowledge depends upon culturally organised systems of distinction, while Farnell (1999) and Sklar (2000) insist that bodily action itself constitutes culturally meaningful knowledge. Md Nor's (2001) analysis of old and new styles in Malaysian traditional dance locates stylistic continuity and transformation within a Malaysian context. These approaches place perception and judgement inside the practice itself: what practitioners sense in movement, how they coordinate change, and what makes a transformed performance culturally persuasive.

In Semporna on Sabah's east coast, Igal is organised through close relationships between bodily movement and *tagunggu* music, an ensemble built around *kulintangan* (a row of small kettle gongs), hanging *agung* (gongs), and *tambul* (drum). Earlier ethnographic research describes Igal as a culturally structured movement system embedded in Bajau Laut social life, cultural memory, worldview, and ritual, wedding, social, and staged performance contexts (Hamza, 2013). Subsequent publications document presentational restructuring, intercultural relations with *pangalay* (a closely related Sulu-region dance practice), *Regatta Lepa* as a site of stage recontextualisation, and the acquisition of Igal competence through observation, participation, emulation, and practice (Hamza, 2012, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). Hussin and Santamaria (2012) analyse the interpretation of folk narrative in Sama dance choreography, Hussin and Santamaria (2013) interrogate mixed or hybrid Igal, Santaella (2016) demonstrates the inseparability of sounding and moving in Bajau Laut Tarirai, and Santamaria and Abad (2016) examine Igal reconfiguration for the contemporary stage in a distinct southern Philippine Sama-Bajau context. This body of work establishes narrative choreography, mixing, stage adaptation, competence, and movement-music integration as important parts of Igal scholarship. The remaining question is how practitioners bring these forms of knowledge together when new work is explicitly required and how they decide whether the result still makes sense as Igal.

The expert accounts assembled here illuminate this problem from complementary positions. Ros draws upon intergenerational movement knowledge, teaching experience, social memory, clothing, maritime practices, and remembered everyday action. Johan bin Swajaan works across movement, *kulintangan* music, named *titik* (musical pieces), childhood games, narrative, wedding practice, composition, arrangement, choreography, and theatrical organisation. Zainal bin Jalaludin, commonly known as Haji Zainal, held the role *Ketua Adat dan Budaya Semporna*, a customary-cultural leadership position in Semporna, and evaluates performance through relationships among movement quality, music, customary expectations, and *rasa* (felt practical judgement). Intan Sulga binti KK Tiring, commonly known as Hajjah Intan, brings expertise in dance, music, teaching, costume, and material practice. Their combined accounts show how several forms of culturally acquired knowledge enter creative decisions and how different practitioner positions shape the evaluation of what is made.

Kreasi baru (new creation) was already documented in Indonesian dance discourse by this period, while Malaysian cultural institutions were also using *tarian kreasi baru* (new-creation dance) around the time of the 2015 Semporna interviews (Cerita, 2015; Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara [National Department for Culture and Arts, JKKN], 2015, 2016). Around this period, *kreasi baru* formed part of wider Indonesian and Malaysian institutional vocabularies for deliberate new dance creation. Its importance for the Semporna material lies in the way an explicit category of creation encountered an existing field of practitioner competence and made creative work more consciously classifiable, teachable, and assessable.

Ros's unfamiliarity with the word *kreasi* reveals the distinction between institutional terminology and practical creative competence. The festival introduced an explicit category under which new work was requested, while Ros and her group already possessed the cultural resources and practical capacities through which that demand could be answered. The festival defined a performance problem: produce work legible as *kreasi*. Ros's experience supplied the resources for solving it. Johan's recollection that younger performers later began requesting *Igal kreasi baru* (new creation *Igal*), new choreography, and new music shows how institutional classification made deliberate creative production more visible, teachable, and requestable.

The guiding question is: How do experienced *Igal* practitioners mobilise culturally acquired knowledge to produce and evaluate deliberate creative performance? Participation, mobilisation, transformation, and evaluation recur as connected analytical moments, while institutions shape the performance problems, audiences, and consequences within which they occur. I use knowledgeable transformation for cases in which acquired knowledge can be followed directly into creative decisions. Practised recognisability refers to the culturally learnt and socially situated evaluative practice through which a practitioner judges whether deliberately transformed performance remains intelligible as *Igal*. Tradition becomes creative knowledge when practitioners mobilise culturally acquired capacities and resources towards making something new.

Igal, Kreasi, and Institutional Problem-Setting

Igal practice already encompasses variation, selective movement construction, intercultural exchange, and choreographic reorganisation (Hamza, 2012, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). *Kreasi* becomes important when deliberate creation is named as an explicit category. Once a festival or cultural institution identifies work as *kreasi*, decisions about degree of difference, retained *Igal* markers, musical authorship, choreography, cultural persuasiveness, and competitive effectiveness become explicit objects of discussion and judgement. Creative activity can then be commissioned, rehearsed, taught, compared, and distinguished from work classified as traditional.

Malaysian institutional usage provides the immediate cultural context for this shift. JKKN's use of *tarian kreasi baru* during the same period as the Semporna interviews shows that new creation had become an explicit administrative and artistic category within national cultural production (JKKN, 2015, 2016). Within this wider environment, making, adapting, arranging, and performing could be consolidated under a named category of creative output. Within the 2015 expert accounts, that category gave practitioners a language through which new *Igal* work could be requested, presented, and evaluated.

Festivals and competitions make creative work explicit, comparable, and consequential. Comparative studies show how competition and heritage systems formalise stylistic distinctions and reshape relations between preservation and creation (Foley, 2020; Kim, 2023), while Ellorin's (2015) analysis of Regatta Lepa demonstrates how cultural staging organises representation and authority. In Semporna, such conditions were encountered by practitioners occupying different but overlapping positions. Ros, Johan, Haji Zainal, and Hajjah Intan brought different combinations of movement, musical, customary, pedagogical, and professional expertise to the problems that festivals and stages placed before them.

Research Context and Method

The analysis draws on a wider programme of ethnographic research on *Igal* in Semporna. Foundational fieldwork conducted in 2007-2011 combined observation, participant observation, movement learning, interviews, and audiovisual documentation across ritual, wedding, community, and staged contexts, including direct learning with practitioners and cultural groups (Hamza, 2013). Follow-up practitioner interviews in January 2015 extended that archive into questions of creative practice, music, institutional performance, and cultural judgement. Seven practitioner transcript files form the primary corpus for the focused re-analysis. Earlier observations, audiovisual documentation, and embodied participation provide contextual and movement-based grounding for interpretation. The corpus is purposive and expert-centred: it examines how differently positioned specialists describe creative knowledge and judgement rather than seeking demographic representation of all *Igal* practitioners in Semporna.

The seven transcript files represent four experienced Bajau dance experts and teachers: Ros, Johan, Haji Zainal, and Hajjah Intan. All four had taught Igal widely across Semporna and through cultural and teaching engagements beyond the district, including Kota Kinabalu and Kuala Lumpur. Ros founded Arung Sabah, a dance troupe based in Kampung Bangau-Bangau that became well known for presenting and promoting Bajau dances across Malaysia. In Semporna Bajau usage, arung is a title for a daughter of noble lineage or a princess. Ros's expertise combines intergenerational learning, performance, teaching, troupe leadership, and sustained cultural advocacy. Hajjah Intan founded Warisan Bajau, a dance-music troupe likewise sought after for Bajau performance and cultural teaching; her expertise spans women's and men's Igal forms, tagunggu' music, costume, sewing, and dance accessories. In 2012, Jabatan Warisan Negara (Department of National Heritage) recognised Hajjah Intan under Warisan Kebangsaan, Kategori Orang Hidup (National Heritage, Living Person Category), for Tarian Tradisional Bajau Laut (Traditional Bajau Laut Dance) (Jabatan Warisan Negara, 2012). Johan and Haji Zainal were both sought-after teachers of Bajau music and male Igal repertoires and were also knowledgeable about women's Igal movement. Johan additionally worked as a dancer, choreographer, composer, arranger, and artistic director, while Haji Zainal's position as Ketua Adat dan Budaya Semporna (Head of Customs and Culture of Semporna) gave weight to his knowledge of customary practice and musical-aesthetic judgement. Ros, Johan, and Haji Zainal were interviewed on January 9, 2015. Hajjah Intan's surviving transcript file records her expert testimony but does not preserve the exact interview date. The study is an expert-corpus analysis in which each practitioner contributes a distinct vantage point on acquisition, creative mobilisation, transformation, and evaluation.

Focused qualitative re-analysis was conducted manually across the seven transcript files. The unit of analysis was a meaning-bearing passage in which a practitioner described the acquisition of knowledge, the selection of cultural resources, deliberate alteration or recombination, evaluation or correction, or the institutional conditions shaping creative work. During full rereading, passages were coded into five working categories: participation/acquisition, mobilisation/resource selection, transformation/recombination, evaluation/correction, and institutional problem-setting. Additional analytic tags marked movement-music relations, adat, rasa, material and narrative resources, authority, and spatial or stage recontextualisation. Coding was iterative rather than frequency-driven: a passage could carry more than one code, and categories were refined as relationships among them became clearer. The accounts were then compared within and across practitioners to identify convergence, difference, and contradiction. The recurring relation among participation, mobilisation, transformation, and evaluation emerged through this comparison and was treated as recursive rather than sequential.

Interpretive claims were retained when they could be traced to explicit practitioner description, observable movement-musical distinctions, or corroborating material in the wider archive. Interpretations dependent only on retrospective inference were qualified or excluded. Negative and contradictory evidence remained part of the analysis, including rejection of roughness or excessive speed, movement-music mismatch, different positions on modern accompaniment, and departures from remembered adat. The same researcher generated the original archive and conducted the re-analysis. This continuity provides long-term contextual and embodied knowledge, but it also creates a risk of interpretive confirmation. The analysis addressed that risk by repeatedly returning to complete transcript passages, distinguishing practitioner terminology from later analytical language, checking movement and performance claims against earlier field documentation, and preserving disagreement rather than harmonising the four experts into a single position.

Movement-centred interpretation grounds competence in observable discriminations. Ros differentiates movement through hand use, bodily level, continuity, softness, and refinement. Haji Zainal distinguishes Limbayan, Tandak, and Tabawan through relationships among force, speed, position, foot action, and instrumental response. Fast Tabawan music, for example, can sustain comparatively slow bodily movement, while Tandak foot action answers the tambul (drum) through a different accented relation. These distinctions show practical knowledge operating relationally through culturally specific movement-musical expectations. Haji Zainal's use of rasa is interpreted as his own Malay-language description of felt practical judgement, particularly a felt relationship between music and dancing. The researcher's earlier embodied participation and dance learning provide movement literacy for interpreting these accounts, while practitioner testimony and documented field materials remain the evidential centre.

LIMITATIONS

This expert-corpus design provides depth rather than demographic representativeness. Four highly experienced practitioners cannot stand for every Igal practitioner, community, generation, or repertorial position in Semporna, so findings are treated as claims about the expert positions represented in this archive unless the wider ethnography supports a broader contextual statement. The archive is historically situated: foundational fieldwork was conducted in 2007-2011 and follow-up practitioner research in 2015, and the analysis does not claim to describe all present-day Igal practice. Transcript depth varies, and Hajjah Intan's surviving transcript is used for practitioner expertise and cross-domain knowledge rather than fine-grained chronology. The archive also reflects the researcher's original questions and documentation choices. These limits define the scale of the argument: the article offers an expert-practitioner analysis of how creative knowledge was mobilised and judged in the Semporna contexts represented here, not a comprehensive survey of Igal practice.

FINDINGS

Knowing Tradition Before Knowing Kreasi

Ros's experience at the International Igal Festival reveals a distinction between cultural competence to create and the institutional vocabulary through which creativity is classified. She recalled that the festival required Igal performances to contain kreasi and stated, "terus terang tidak tahu apa itu kreasi ... yang kakak tahu tradisi" ("frankly, I did not know what kreasi was ... what I knew was tradition"). Ros had begun dancing at approximately seven years of age, learning through observation of her grandmother and mother at home and at weddings. She described herself as the third generation in this line of learning, later taught Igal at SK Bangau-Bangau, and founded Arung Sabah in Kampung Bangau-Bangau. She also stressed that Igal comprised multiple repertoires and that her experience allowed her to recognise what another dancer was doing through movement even when the accompanying music differed (Ros, personal communication, January 9, 2015). Her unfamiliarity with the word kreasi sat alongside extensive creative, performative, and pedagogical competence developed through participation in Igal.

The way Ros's group answered the festival requirement makes that competence visible. She recalled that the ideas were developed tanpa meniru (without copying) another group and explained that the group knew what to use because these were practices associated with what their grandparents had done or told them. Among the selected resources were bedak sejuk, head coverings worn in the heat, singing, dancing, and activities associated with being on boats. The group treated these as cultural resources capable of carrying meaning into the festival setting. Ros explained that wearing bedak sejuk on stage was unusual as a literal dance practice, yet its inclusion helped spectators recognise the Bajau Laut community being represented. Practices associated with boats were similarly re-situated inside a hall. In her formulation, the principal difference was between sea and hall: the location changed, while the people and cultural references remained connected to the same social world (Ros, personal communication, January 9, 2015).

The creative operation consisted of selecting culturally meaningful practices and giving them new presentational functions. A head covering changed from an everyday response to heat into an element of visual representation. Bedak sejuk moved from personal and domestic practice into a public marker through which the group expected spectators to distinguish one Bajau community from another. Boat-based singing and dancing were separated from their original physical surroundings and reorganised for presentation in a hall. These decisions depended upon culturally acquired knowledge of what the practices meant, how they were recognised, and how their associations could be reactivated in another performance environment. What Ros knew as tradition provided memories, distinctions, associations, bodily experiences, and social references from which new performance could be constructed.

Here, authorship lay in recomposition rather than in copying another festival choreography. Familiar cultural resources were reorganised to answer a new presentational problem. The festival asked for kreasi, and Ros responded from the cultural world she knew, selecting practices whose meanings could be translated into

staged representation and combining them in a new configuration. Cultural knowledge, selection, and recontextualisation produced the creative work; practical competence preceded the institutional terminology that named it.

Ros could also articulate the criteria through which this knowledge operated. She explained why particular cultural references were selected, why she regarded them as recognisable, and why moving them into a hall preserved their relationship with Bajau Laut practice. Elsewhere in the same personal communication she distinguished movement qualities, repertoires, and relationships between Igal and different musical conditions. She argued that knowing the word Igal differed from understanding how Igal is carried in the body and used *dalaman* (inner quality) to describe a depth that experienced observers could perceive. She also identified the possibility of sustaining slow, controlled bodily action against rapid Tabawan music as one of Igal's distinctive movement-musical relationships (Ros, personal communication, January 9, 2015). Her creative decisions rested on an articulated capacity to discriminate among culturally meaningful possibilities.

Ros had already acquired the capacities that the festival later mobilised. Her experience of Igal supplied movement knowledge, memories, social references, and practical judgement before *kreasi* appeared as a named requirement. The festival added an explicit category, audience, competitive environment, and demand for deliberate new work. Participation had already produced the resources through which that problem could be solved.

Mobilising Cultural Resources

Johan's account allows this process to be followed across several connected domains. He recalled beginning traditional music-making at approximately nine years old, playing *kulintangan*, *tambul*, and *agung* with older musicians at weddings and other engagements. He later helped establish PETRAS, which he described as *Penggerak Teater Anak-Anak Semporna* (a local Semporna performing-arts group), moved from traditional musicianship into dancing, became a professional dancer with the Sabah state cultural organisation, studied at *Akademi Seni Kebangsaan* (National Arts Academy, now the National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage), and subsequently worked in choreography, music arrangement, composition, scenography, and artistic direction (Johan, personal communication, January 9, 2015). His creative knowledge accumulated through community participation, professional cultural production, formal arts education, music-making, choreography, and repeated collaboration with other artists.

His account of the song *Lampa-Lampa Pisang* provides a clear small-scale example. Johan begins with a childhood game that he remembers playing when he was young. The phrase *Lampa-Lampa Pisang* was retained and turned into the chorus of a newly created song, while the composition combined modern lyrics with rhythm and melody that he described as coming from local ethnic musical material. He further described the resulting work as carrying an Igal rhythm (Johan, personal communication, January 9, 2015). A remembered game supplied one resource, its repeated phrase supplied material suitable for a chorus, familiar musical idioms supplied rhythmic and melodic orientation, and contemporary songwriting supplied another organisational framework. Childhood memory, musical knowledge, language, and formal composition were brought into a relationship that had not existed previously.

His description of *titik kulintangan* (*kulintangan* musical pieces) shows a related form of musical selection. Johan explained that *kulintangan* melodies regularly become resources in his songwriting and identified *Limbayan*, *Lellang*, and *Tarirai* among the materials that inform his work. Slower *kulintangan* melodies provide resources for slower compositions, while the more aggressive character he associates with *Tarirai* becomes useful when producing more forceful Igal-related music. He summarised the relationship directly as "*berpaksikan muzik tradisi*" ("grounded in traditional music"), particularly *kulintangan* and *gong* (Johan, personal communication, January 9, 2015). His compositional practice depends on hearing these musical pieces as fields of melodic, rhythmic, and affective possibility and recognising which properties can be mobilised within another work.

Johan's account of the Arung Salamiah production at Regatta Lepa expands this process from musical composition into staged dramaturgy. The production began with the legend of Arung Salamiah and was constructed through several forms of Bajau cultural knowledge. Johan recalled incorporating the locally named practice luguk, wedding customs, Bajau music, and the practice of using seven layers of wedding cloth. In his account, luguk accompanied the sequential opening of the seven layers until the bride was revealed. He described these elements as part of a contemporary performance designed to present Bajau cultural material within Regatta Lepa. The work was collaborative: Johan worked with local cultural groups and practitioners, including Hajjah Intan and PETRAS, in developing ideas for an ethnically Bajau performance concept (Johan, personal communication, January 9, 2015).

The Arung Salamiah example shows practitioner knowledge extending well beyond a dancer's movement vocabulary. Narrative supplied the dramaturgical premise; luguk supplied performative material; the wedding cloth supplied material culture and sequential theatrical action; wedding practice supplied social meaning; Bajau music supplied an aural frame; and collaboration connected these resources with other practitioners' knowledge. The sequential opening of seven cloth layers became a dramaturgical device through which the bride was progressively revealed to an audience. The transformation depended on knowing what the cloth meant within Bajau wedding practice and recognising its visual and temporal potential within staged narrative.

Johan's practice shows that creative knowledge was not confined to movement vocabulary. Musical knowledge, movement experience, narrative, childhood memory, material culture, customary practice, theatrical organisation, formal arts training, and collaboration intersect in particular decisions. A childhood phrase becomes a chorus because Johan knows how it can function musically. A kulintangan melody or titik becomes compositional material because he knows its character. Wedding cloth becomes dramaturgy because he understands both its customary meaning and its presentational potential. A legend organises performance because he can connect story, music, objects, and staging into a coherent theatrical form.

Hajjah Intan's account confirms that cross-domain competence also operated through community-based expertise. As founder of Warisan Bajau, a sought-after Bajau dance-music troupe, she taught Igal bola-bola (Igal using wooden handheld dance accessories), hand-based Igal, Tabawan, Tarirai, and Limbayan, while also identifying her competence in tagunggu' music, clothing, sewing, salingkuku (traditional finger ornaments), and multiple Igal forms. Her account shows creative resources distributed across overlapping practitioner roles and demonstrates how movement, music, costume, and material knowledge could be held within one expert practice outside formal arts institutions (Hajjah Intan, personal communication, date not recorded).

Johan's account places creative knowledge across community and institutional experience. His practice developed through community music-making, professional cultural employment, Akademi Seni Kebangsaan, choreography, composition, and artistic direction. He worked simultaneously with dance organisation, scenography, musical arrangement, and song creation. His knowledge was historically layered: childhood participation and local practice remained active within formal training and professional production, and institutional experience extended the ways in which that knowledge could be organised and deployed.

The distinction Johan makes between spontaneous mengigal (also spelled and spoken as magigal; dancing Igal) and creating a coherent choreographed performance further clarifies the problem. He observed that an experienced Bajau performer could enter a space and begin to mengigal, while constructing a harmoniously organised work with a strong choreographic concept required another level of organisation. He linked that difficulty partly to the limited number of regular performance spaces available in Semporna (Johan, personal communication, January 9, 2015). Deliberate creative production mobilises existing knowledge under the demands of duration, presentation, music, narrative, audience, and stage. Acquired competence becomes an active resource that shapes what is selected, why it is selected, how it is altered, and how the resulting configuration solves a performance problem.

Johan's evidence also connects creative production with institutional demand. Following the International Igal Festival, he recalled receiving requests from school-aged performers asking him to teach kreasi baru, Igal kreasi baru, and to compose new music. He characterised their interest as entry into a newly visible world of kreasi baru (Johan, personal communication, January 9, 2015). His account documents the emergence of a named demand for new creative Igal and new music: young performers could request a specific kind of creative work, and a practitioner such as Johan could be recognised as someone capable of producing and teaching it.

Across these examples, creative mobilisation unfolds through a sequence of recognitions and choices. Johan's histories of participation and professional practice make particular resources available to him; his experience allows him to discriminate among their properties and reorganise their relationships for specific compositional and presentational problems. Lampa-Lampa Pisang, the use of Limbayan, Lellang, and Tarirai, and the Arung Salamiah production are different outcomes, yet each begins with resources made perceptible through prior experience and carries them into new relationships that are subsequently judged artistically and culturally.

Practised Recognisability

Creative practice also involves evaluating whether transformed work continues to make sense as Igal. Ros and Haji Zainal describe relations among movement quality, bodily position, musical response, repertorial character, and customary expectation, and they use those relations to distinguish more from less persuasive possibilities. Ros states that she can identify dancers associated with different Bajau and neighbouring communities through the way movement is carried. She points to hand orientation, bodily height, posing, and continuity, describing the Bajau movement she knows as comparatively level, continuously moving, lembut (soft), and halus (refined) (Ros, personal communication, January 9, 2015). These distinctions arise from her experience of overlapping Bajau and neighbouring practices in Semporna and function as expert criteria through which movement becomes culturally legible.

Haji Zainal's discussion of Igal Limbayan (Limbayan Igal) gives clear negative evidence of such judgement. He relates Limbayan to melambai (waving) and states that it "tidak boleh kasar dan tidak boleh laju" ("cannot be rough and cannot be fast"). Its movement must be refined, and the performer must attend to bodily position. He associates Limbayan with women and explains that salungkuku (traditional finger ornaments; Haji Zainal's spoken form is retained here, elsewhere commonly rendered salingkuku) can amplify the softness of the movement and display the pangigal's (Igal dancer's) skill (Haji Zainal, personal communication, January 9, 2015). His statement identifies a boundary of recognition: roughness, excessive speed, and arbitrary positioning weaken the qualities through which he recognises Limbayan.

The distinction between Igal Tandak (Tandak Igal) and Igal Tabawan (Tabawan Igal) makes the relational nature of this judgement even clearer. Haji Zainal describes the two as comparatively close in speed, but identifies different foot-music relationships. In Tabawan, he characterises the feet as walking lightly and finely, whereas Tandak requires accented stamping that answers the musical rhythm, especially the rolling pattern of the tambul. When a dancer performs without bola-bola (wooden handheld dance accessories, documented in earlier ethnography as bolak-bolak, wooden castanets), bodily movement responds directly to the sound of the tambul, agung, and kulintangan; Haji Zainal even vocalises the rhythmic pattern to demonstrate how movement should answer it (Haji Zainal, personal communication, January 9, 2015; Hamza, 2013). Recognising Igal depends on culturally learnt relations among movement, sound, force, and phrasing. Santaella's (2016) ethno-choreomusicological analysis of Tarirai provides a direct Sama-Bajau precedent for treating sounding and moving as interdependent domains.

These repertorial distinctions matter because they provide the learnt discriminations through which changed performance is judged. Ros brings such criteria to Igal performed with modern accompaniment, while Haji Zainal applies them to altered movement, music, and adat in then-current practice. Practised recognisability emerges at this point, when movement-musical knowledge acquired through long participation is used to read a transformed performance as more or less intelligible within Igal.

Ros provides a complementary example through Tabawan. She argues that rapid Tabawan music can support comparatively slow and controlled bodily action. For her, the contrast itself is one of Igal's distinctive qualities. In the same account she distinguishes merely knowing the word Igal from understanding how it should be carried, using *dalaman* (inner quality) and soul to describe a quality she believes experienced observers perceive in performance (Ros, personal communication, January 9, 2015). Read beside the concrete distinctions she supplies elsewhere, including continuity, softness, bodily level, hand orientation, and resistance to mechanically mirroring musical speed, *dalaman* names an embodied coherence produced through relationships among these qualities.

Haji Zainal's use of *rasa* adds another layer to this process. Describing earlier musical learning, he recalls instruments being left accessible around the home, children experimenting with the gong, *tambul*, and *kulintangan*, and older people correcting what they heard. He remembers his own grandfather correcting him when he made mistakes. In discussing Ros and the festival dancers, he contrasts this practical knowledge with explicit numerical counting and says they needed to "*rasa itu muzik itu ke dalamnya*" ("feel the music inwardly"). Once that relationship had been internalised, movement could be drawn from the music, producing what he described as *keaslian* (an authentic or original quality) (Haji Zainal, personal communication, January 9, 2015). In his account, *rasa* emerges through exposure, experimentation, listening, error, and correction and functions as felt practical judgement within the movement-music relationship. *Keaslian* is retained here as Haji Zainal's own evaluative term for the quality he perceived in such performance.

Evaluation also extends into *adat*. In his January 2015 personal communication, Haji Zainal contrasted then-current dancing with remembered expectations concerning the height of women's leg actions, the placement of the arms, gaze, clothing, and what he called *unsur-unsur Hindustan* (Hindustan elements, his terminology). He also observed that following the Igal festival and workshops in which *adat* was discussed, he perceived renewed attention to customary expectations. At the same time, he noted that younger performers were increasingly attracted to keyboards, bands, and other modern instruments, while earlier *tagunggu*' practice had allowed musicians to create different rhythmic patterns within strongly observed *adat* (Haji Zainal, personal communication, January 9, 2015). His customary-cultural position gives these judgements particular normative force within the archive and places questions of creativity directly alongside questions of conduct, musical practice, and cultural continuity.

Ros locates the boundary differently. She strongly advocates maintaining live *tagunggu*' so that younger generations continue to know the traditional ensemble, while also allowing Igal to continue with modern music provided the dancer "*tidak lari dari konsep Igal*" ("does not depart from the concept of Igal"). She explicitly avoids claiming that her group's version is uniquely *asli* (authentic/original) (Ros, personal communication, January 9, 2015). The disagreement between Ros and Haji Zainal is analytically productive. Haji Zainal gives greater normative weight to older *adat* and expresses stronger concern over contemporary influences; Ros permits greater flexibility in musical setting while maintaining embodied criteria of Igal. Their positions show culturally informed judgement operating through different histories, responsibilities, and forms of authority.

This distinction extends the communicative or performative competence discussed in earlier Igal research. Competence concerns the culturally acquired capacity to participate meaningfully in the movement system and to understand and produce its shared relationships (Hamza, 2017a). *Kreasi* adds the problem of judging performance that has been deliberately transformed. I use practised recognisability for the culturally learnt and socially situated evaluative practice through which a practitioner judges whether deliberately transformed performance remains intelligible as Igal. Practised recognisability concerns cultural intelligibility; aesthetic approval, customary correctness, competition success, institutional endorsement, and authenticity remain related but distinct judgements. Authority shapes whose recognition becomes consequential.

The bodily evidence grounds practised recognisability in relational criteria: rough versus refined *Limbayan*; light Tabawan walking versus the accented foot response of *Tandak*; mechanically accelerating the body

with fast music versus sustaining a slower movement quality; and movement that answers or fails to answer *tagunggu'* patterns. These distinctions show how learnt movement-musical relationships become evaluative criteria under transformation. A creative work can remain intelligible as Igal through the persistence of such relationships even as sequence, presentation, music, or context changes.

Institutions as Problem-Setters and Selection Pressures

The International Igal Festival made creative production an explicit institutional task. Ros encountered *kreasi* as a festival requirement, while Johan later recalled younger performers asking specifically for *kreasi baru*, Igal *kreasi baru*, and newly composed music. Cultural knowledge that had long operated through dancing, music-making, social performance, adaptation, and variation was reorganised in response to a category that demanded an identifiable creative product. The festival supplied a classification, occasion, audience, and task; practitioners supplied the knowledge through which the task was solved.

Johan's discussion of performance opportunities shows how institutional problem-setting changes the organisation of creative work. He described Semporna as having relatively few spaces in which traditional or creative performances could be developed and presented outside weddings and occasional festivals. In his formulation, an experienced Bajau performer could enter a space and begin to *mengigal*, while constructing a performance with a coherent concept and effective choreography posed a different organisational challenge (Johan, personal communication, January 9, 2015). Social competence supports situational performance; a festival or stage reorganises that knowledge around duration, group structure, audience orientation, musical arrangement, scenography, narrative coherence, entrances and exits, and repeatability.

This reorganisation is particularly visible in spatial practice. Haji Zainal recalled earlier wedding and communal dancing within a central performance area surrounded by spectators. A *pangigal* turned through the space because people were positioned around the dancer and, in his explanation, should be acknowledged respectfully. He contrasted this arrangement with the more frontal seating and staged viewing he observed in 2015 (Haji Zainal, personal communication, January 9, 2015). The difference is choreographically consequential. A surrounding audience produces directional turning, social acknowledgement, and distributed spatial attention; a frontal stage privileges another organisation of gaze, orientation, and group presentation. Changing the venue changes the relations that organise performance.

Regatta Lepa had already been documented as a site of spectacular stage production, choreographic restructuring, and stronger incorporation of *pangalay* and other presentational influences (Hamza, 2012, 2015). Seen through Johan's account, the festival is also an occasion that requires practitioners to organise knowledge they already possess. The Arung Salamiah production brings narrative, *luguk*, wedding cloth, music, local collaborators, and other Bajau cultural references into a staged sequence. Such work depends on deciding which elements communicate effectively, how they should be ordered, and how cultural knowledge can be made theatrically intelligible within the festival form.

Institutionalisation also makes normative distinctions more explicit. Haji Zainal was critical of some contemporary movement and musical changes that he regarded as departures from older *adat*, while recalling the Igal festival and associated workshops as occasions after which he observed greater attention to customary conventions (Haji Zainal, personal communication, January 9, 2015). Preservation and innovation operate together here: a category such as *kreasi* intensifies questions about continuity because deliberate difference places the boundaries of movement, music, and *adat* under closer scrutiny.

Competition adds selection pressure by placing transformed work under comparative judgement. Ros remembered the International Igal Festival as a highly competitive environment and interpreted winning as evidence that the group's attempt had succeeded, while losing identified areas for further learning (Ros, personal communication, January 9, 2015). Creative works were compared and ranked, converting practitioner judgement into public institutional outcomes. The festival added a consequential layer of assessment to creative practice and made the success of particular solutions visible to performers and audiences.

Johan's post-festival testimony shows the category operating beyond the event itself. Young performers asked him for Igal kreasi baru, new music, and direct instruction from someone recognised as capable of producing such work. Kreasi had become a recognisable artistic task around which expertise could be requested. Johan's authority as musician, dancer, composer, arranger, choreographer, and teacher became increasingly relevant to a new field of demand generated around creative Igal.

These institutional conditions generate both possibilities and constraints through categories, stages, deadlines, comparison, and expectations of presentational coherence. Across the four expert accounts, the festival made traditional and kreasi categories more explicit, increased demand for deliberately choreographed work, and elevated the value of practitioners who could compose, arrange, teach, and stage repeatable performance. The festival functioned as a selection environment in which creative solutions acquired public and competitive consequences. Across the findings, participation, mobilisation, transformation, and evaluation operate recursively: evaluation guides selection and revision while institutions alter the problems, audiences, and consequences within which those judgements operate.

DISCUSSION

From Cultural Competence to Creative Knowledge

Across these four expert accounts, creativity is best understood as knowledge-in-use. Handler and Linnekin (1984), Ingold and Hallam (2007), Dalidowicz (2015), Wilcox (2018), and Yung (2019) place creativity within ongoing cultural processes, inherited idioms, transmission, and choreographic development. The Igal literature offers close precedents: Hussin and Santamaria (2012) treat folk narrative as a choreographic resource, Hussin and Santamaria (2013) examine mixed Igal, and earlier Semporna research documents hybridity, stage restructuring, competence, and creative movement construction (Hamza, 2012, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). The Semporna expert accounts bring these strands together at the level of practice, revealing how several domains of knowledge are mobilised when practitioners face an explicit creative problem and how judgement enters the making of the transformed work.

Knowledgeable transformation is used here as a descriptive analytic term for cases in which prior knowledge can be traced into a specific creative decision. It differs from competence, which names the culturally acquired capacity to participate meaningfully in a movement system, because it concerns what happens when that capacity, together with musical, narrative, material, social, or professional knowledge, is deliberately mobilised to reorganise performance. It also differs from bounded adaptation (Wang et al., 2026), which concerns the negotiated limits within which change is considered acceptable. Knowledgeable transformation does not identify the boundary of acceptable change; it identifies the decision-making process through which existing knowledge is selected and reorganised for a new problem. Johan's conversion of a childhood phrase into a song chorus and his use of wedding cloth as dramaturgical sequence exemplify this traceability without requiring the term to stand for every act of creativity.

Practised recognisability addresses the evaluative side of the process. Cultural intelligibility describes the condition in which transformed performance continues to make sense within a cultural field; practised recognisability names the learned evaluative practice through which a situated practitioner arrives at that judgement. It is distinct from authenticity, which makes a claim about genuineness or legitimacy, and from embodied authority, which concerns who is socially recognised as capable of demonstrating, correcting, or judging performance (Wang et al., 2026). It also extends competence: knowing how to participate in Igal does not by itself explain how a practitioner assesses work that has been intentionally transformed. Practised recognisability captures the application of culturally learned movement-musical, stylistic, and customary distinctions to altered work, while authority shapes whose judgement carries consequences.

The distinction is visible in the different conclusions reached by Ros and Haji Zainal. Both draw on substantial embodied knowledge, yet Ros permits greater flexibility in accompaniment when the dancer remains within what she calls the concept of Igal, whereas Haji Zainal places stronger normative weight on remembered adat. Their disagreement shows that recognisability is not consensus and does not automatically

equal approval. A transformed work can remain culturally intelligible as Igal and still be criticised for the way it has changed. Gilmore's (2000) treatment of authenticity as negotiated across differently positioned communities and institutions helps situate this difference, while the Igal material shows the evaluative practice at the level of movement, music, and customary judgement.

Institutions intensify these processes by changing both the creative problem and the consequences of evaluation. Comparative work shows how competitive and heritage systems formalise stylistic distinctions and authorise particular forms of change (Foley, 2020; Kim, 2023; Wilcox, 2018). Across the four accounts, the International Igal Festival named *kreasi* as a task, placed works into comparison, altered presentational conditions, and generated subsequent demand for new choreography and music. These conditions did not generate practitioner knowledge; they reorganised when and how that knowledge was mobilised, taught, compared, and publicly assessed.

Within these expert accounts, institutional classification and practitioner evaluation operate together. *Kreasi* made deliberate new work more visible and assessable, while movement-musical relations, customary expectations, and repertorial distinctions continued to shape whether new work was persuasive. This extends earlier Igal analyses of hybridity and intercultural restructuring by locating creative change in the practical use of accumulated knowledge (Hamza, 2012, 2015).

Across these accounts, tradition becomes creative knowledge when histories of participation furnish capacities that can be mobilised under new performance conditions. Continuity also includes deliberate maintenance (Heywood & Yarrow, 2026). Haji Zainal's insistence on particular *adat*, Ros's commitment to sustaining *tagunggu*, and the preservation of repertorial distinctions show maintenance, restriction, and transformation operating together. The generative force lies not in an abstract tradition acting on its own, but in practitioners' learned capacities to hear differences, remember social practices, recognise material possibilities, organise bodies and sound, interpret contextual demands, and judge transformation.

Taken together, the four accounts show participation, mobilisation, transformation, and evaluation as recursive analytical moments rather than fixed stages. Participation makes resources and distinctions available; mobilisation brings particular knowledge into a new problem; transformation reorganises selected resources; and evaluation guides both revision and judgement. The model links transmission, creativity, choreography, embodied judgement, and institutionalisation without assuming that every practitioner follows the same path or reaches the same conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Across the four expert accounts, deliberate new work emerges from resources accumulated before creativity is named as an institutional demand. The analysis develops two distinct terms from this evidence. Knowledgeable transformation describes the traceable use of prior knowledge in deliberate creative decisions; practised recognisability describes the culturally learnt and socially situated evaluative practice through which transformed work is judged culturally intelligible as Igal. The first concerns making; the second concerns evaluation. Neither assumes consensus nor equates recognisability with authenticity, approval, customary correctness, or institutional success. The contribution is therefore an expert-practitioner account of creative knowledge in the Semporna contexts represented by the archive. Earlier Igal scholarship established structured cultural knowledge, intercultural and stage transformation, narrative and mixed choreography, and performative competence (Hussin & Santamaria, 2012, 2013; Hamza, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). This analysis connects these strands through deliberate knowledge mobilisation and situated evaluation. Institutions name and organise some conditions of creative production, but the practical resources come from histories of participation in movement, music, social life, material culture, and teaching. Studying creative change through what practitioners know, select, reorganise, and judge makes visible the knowledge through which tradition becomes generative. These findings support a broader approach to creative change in dance that begins with practitioner knowledge rather than novelty alone. The claims remain grounded in the four expert positions and the Semporna contexts represented in the archive, while the analytical distinction between making and evaluating transformation can be tested comparatively

in other dance traditions. Tradition is part of the knowledge through which practitioners make the new possible.

Ethical Considerations

Formal institutional ethics approval was not obtained for the research. At the time of the January 2015 follow-up practitioner interviews, the author was not affiliated with an institution. Participants provided recorded verbal informed consent before taking part in the interviews. The recorded consent explicitly covered future scholarly use of the interview material and the use of participants' real names. This re-analysis involved no new participant recruitment or data collection. The original consent recordings and research documentation are retained by the author. Real names are retained in accordance with that consent and because the analysis depends on the practitioners' distinct expert roles and public cultural positions.

Conflict Of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

Data Availability

The underlying interview archive is not publicly available because it contains identifiable ethnographic material and was not collected for open archival release. Relevant excerpts supporting the analysis are included in the article.

Declaration of Generative Ai Use

Generative AI (OpenAI ChatGPT) was used as an editorial assistance tool for structural and language editing. The author independently verified the cited sources, determined the analysis and interpretations, revised the manuscript, and accepts full responsibility for the content.

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