

Masking the Inner Ocean: Proposing the Use of Mask in *Igal* Dance for the Next Phase of the Interipe Model

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the integration of mask work within the next phase of the Inclusive Treatment Experimental Ritual Performance (In TERiPe) model - a culturally grounded therapeutic framework rooted in the Bajau-Sama *Igal* dance tradition. While the first two In TERiPe pilot workshops (2023–2025) with forty-one People with Different Abilities (PwDA) successfully explored the healing dimensions of *Igal*-dramatherapy without the use of masks, new insights from practice-based research suggest that masking can deepen emotional accessibility and symbolic transformation in participants. The proposed phase, supported by the Ministry of Education Malaysia grant (2025–2026), aims to develop and test mask-integrated movement sequences through smaller pilot rehearsals and at the International Mask Festival (IMF) 2025, leading up to a major inclusive workshop scheduled within nine months from August 2025. Drawing from theories of ritual performance, dramatherapy, and Southeast Asian aesthetics, this article articulates the cultural rationale, psychophysical potential, and humanistic implications of introducing masks into *Igal*-based therapy. It positions mask work as a bridge between tradition and innovation, body and psyche, personal emotion and communal empathy — proposing a new, inclusive grammar for Malaysian performing-arts-based therapy.

Keywords: Mask; *Igal* dance; InTERiPe model; dramatherapy; Bajau-Sama; inclusive arts; therapeutic performance; practice-based research; PwDA; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION: FROM RITUAL MOVEMENT TO EMBODIED THERAPY

The Inclusive Treatment Experimental Ritual Performance (InTERiPe) model was conceptualised through an interdisciplinary understanding that traditional performance carries inherent therapeutic, symbolic, and cultural intelligence that can be reactivated for contemporary healing purposes. Rooted in the Bajau-Sama *Igal* dance, InTERiPe positions movement, rhythm, gesture, and ritual consciousness as dynamic channels for emotional expression, somatic grounding, and psychological resilience for People with Different Abilities (PwDA). The early development of the model was inspired by the recognition that Malaysian Indigenous performing arts are not merely aesthetic or heritage practices; they are embodied systems of knowledge that encode communal memory, cosmological values, and strategies for surviving emotional turbulence. The Bajau-Sama people, whose relationship with the sea permeates their worldview, transmit this cosmology through *Igal*—an elegant, fluid dance tradition where movement is shaped by water, wind, animal symbolism, and ancestral embodiment. InTERiPe draws from this philosophy by framing *Igal* not only as a cultural performance but as an embodied method for healing, identity affirmation, and emotional renewal.

The first two InTERiPe pilot workshops, conducted between 2023 and 2025 with a total of forty-one PwDA participants, provided an important foundation for the model's evolution. These two-day sessions integrated *Igal*-based movement exploration, dramatherapy methods such as role-play and symbolic storytelling,

phenomenological reflection, and group ritual performance. Participants included individuals with physical disabilities, wheelchair users, and those with varying emotional and psychological needs. Across the workshops, participants consistently demonstrated the therapeutic potential of movement sequences inspired by *Igal*, particularly the fluidity of the upper body and hands, the emphasis on breath, and the rhythmic relation to imagined environmental forces. Many participants, especially those with limited lower-body mobility, found *Igal*'s movement vocabulary accessible and adaptable, allowing them to participate fully and expressively without feeling physically restricted. The cultural grounding of *Igal* also provided a sense of identity continuity and belonging, especially for Sabahan participants who recognised the dance as part of their heritage.

The workshops revealed that *Igal* served not only as a somatic exercise but also as an emotional metaphor. Participants frequently described experiencing feelings of spaciousness, clarity, and inner balance during and after the sessions. The gentle oscillation of the wrists, the controlled spiral of the arms, and the sustained focus on fluid transitions became avenues for emotional circulation, enabling participants to "move" emotions that had previously felt stuck or heavy. Dramatherapeutic components, including guided improvisations and movement-based storytelling, facilitated expressions of personal history, challenges, trauma, and aspirations in symbolic rather than literal form. This approach allowed participants to articulate difficult emotions without overwhelming their internal coping systems. Furthermore, the communal structure of the workshops cultivated a supportive environment where participants witnessed each other's stories, affirming shared experiences of resilience and struggle. For many participants, this form of collective witnessing became as healing as the movement work itself.

Despite these positive outcomes, the research team observed a recurring phenomenon: emotional inhibition at critical moments of expressive depth. Certain activities that required close introspection or personal vulnerability were often met with hesitation, self-consciousness, or withdrawal. Participants expressed feelings such as "I want to show more but I feel shy," or "I don't know how to express this feeling with my face," or "I feel too exposed when I try to tell the deeper part of my story." These indicators suggested that while *Igal* provided a strong base for emotional expression, some participants needed an additional symbolic layer that could mediate between their private inner world and the social-expressive space of the workshop. In therapeutic theory, such a symbolic layer is often referred to as a transitional object—an entity that carries emotional weight, absorbs psychological tension, and provides a buffer that enables participants to express more safely and freely.

The mask emerges at precisely this juncture. Unlike other transitional tools such as cloth, props, or handheld objects, the mask holds a unique position in human culture and performance history. It affects both the wearer and the observer simultaneously by shifting the site of emotional expression away from the personal face and toward the entire body. In this way, the mask supports the psychophysical integration essential to dramatherapy and somatic healing. For PwDA participants, many of whom experience societal gaze, stigma, or internalised shame regarding their physical conditions, masking offers a sense of protection and liberation. It allows them to express without feeling judged. It allows them to step into roles, archetypes, or symbolic representations without risking personal exposure. It enables them to explore emotional terrains that might otherwise feel too confronting to navigate openly.

The integration of mask work into the next phase of InTERiPe is therefore not an arbitrary artistic innovation but a direct response to the observed needs of participants and the emerging patterns within the workshops. Supported by the Ministry of Education Malaysia research grant (2025–2026), the forthcoming phase will introduce mask-integrated *Igal* movement sequences through a series of small-group exploratory rehearsals and iterative testing routines. Early prototypes will be tested at the International Mask Festival (IMF) 2025 in Solo City, which serves as an intercultural performance laboratory for evaluating symbolic clarity and audience reception. The insights gained from these explorations will shape a major inclusive workshop cycle scheduled within nine months from August 2025. This upcoming phase aims to integrate movement, mask, ritual aesthetics, and dramatherapy into a coherent, layered, and culturally grounded therapeutic framework.

In its essence, the introduction of mask work marks a significant evolution in the InTERiPe model. It shifts the model from exploring the therapeutic potential of traditional movement to integrating symbolic transformation as a deeper pathway for healing. It acknowledges the psychological and cultural layers of the PwDA experience.

And it reinforces InTERiPe's foundational philosophy: that healing is a somatic conversation between body, culture, identity, and community—a rhythm that must be lived, moved, and witnessed together.

The Cultural and Symbolic Significance of the Mask in Southeast Asian Performance

The mask has occupied a profound position in Southeast Asian ritual and performance traditions for centuries, functioning not merely as an aesthetic object but as a symbolic vessel through which transformation, communication, and ancestral presence are mediated. In the diverse cultural landscapes of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines, the mask often appears at the intersection of ritual, spirituality, and communal identity. Its presence can be observed in forms such as the Balinese Barong, Javanese Topeng, Banjar Hudoq, Thai Khon, and local healing rituals among various Indigenous groups. What unifies these traditions is not the specific design or function of the mask but the underlying worldview that sees the mask as more than a physical covering. Rather, it is an embodiment of spiritual essence, ancestral memory, and symbolic identity—a conduit for entering states of transformation that are not accessible in ordinary life.

Within Malay and Nusantara cosmology, the face, or *wajah*, carries deep metaphysical meaning. It is the site where identity is revealed and where the spirit or *semangat* is most visibly expressed. Because of this sacred relationship between face and consciousness, the act of covering the face with a mask is never neutral. It is a powerful gesture of shifting identity, blurring personal boundaries, and inviting alternative forms of embodiment. To wear a mask is to temporarily suspend one's everyday self and allow another consciousness—symbolic, mythical, ancestral, or imaginative—to manifest through the body. This concept resonates strongly with Victor Turner's (1982) notion of liminality, where individuals entering ritual enactments occupy an in-between state, neither fully themselves nor fully other, but instead inhabiting a threshold realm ripe with transformative possibility.

Although the Bajau-Sama tradition does not historically contain formal masked performances like some other Southeast Asian cultures, the cosmological values embedded within *Igal* dance reveal an implicit “mask logic.” *Igal* is traditionally connected to the world of the sea, spirits, nature, and ancestors. Dancers often describe *Igal* not as an act of performing but as an act of “becoming”—becoming the movement of the waves, becoming the flight of birds, becoming the presence of unseen forces guiding the hands. The Bajau-Sama worldview, deeply rooted in animistic and maritime cosmology, understands movement as a medium for communicating with non-human and ancestral realms. In this sense, *Igal* dancers already engage in a symbolic transformation that resembles the metaphysical purpose of masks, even without wearing physical masks. Their gestures, facial expressions, and body rhythms become the spiritual face through which another identity or consciousness emerges.

Introducing physical masks into the *Igal*-based therapeutic framework does not distort or disrespect the tradition. Instead, it amplifies a metaphysical layer already present within Bajau-Sama dance culture. The mask externalises what is internal, giving form to the symbolic personas, ancestral presences, and emotional archetypes that *Igal* gestures inherently carry. Masks provide a visual and embodied manifestation of the energies, emotions, and identities that move through the dancer. In a therapeutic context, this becomes particularly meaningful for PwDA participants whose internal emotional states may be difficult to verbalise or embody openly.

Culturally, the mask also serves as an object that reorganises the spectator-performer relationship. When a masked figure enters a space, audiences shift their mode of witnessing. They no longer perceive the performer as an individual with a personal identity but as a symbolic entity—an archetype, a metaphor, or a manifestation of a collective story. This transformation of perception is vital within the InTERiPe framework, where public performance is not merely a showcase but a therapeutic ritual of communal witnessing. For PwDA participants who may feel judged or scrutinised because of their disabilities, the mask offers a liberating equaliser. Under the mask, they are not seen through the lens of disability but through the lens of archetype, story, and symbolic embodiment. Their movements are read for their metaphorical resonance rather than their physical limitations.

From a psychological standpoint, masks provide a protective shield that allows deeper emotional exploration. The face is one of the most vulnerable parts of the body; it reveals fear, sorrow, shame, and hesitation. PwDA

participants often express discomfort with the emotional exposure that direct facial expression requires. The mask softens this vulnerability by absorbing emotional intensity and redirecting expressive energy into the body. This shift is especially compatible with *Igal*, which already prioritises upper-body and hand movements. When a participant wears a mask, their expressive identity expands beyond the face and into the entire body, encouraging fuller somatic engagement. For participants who are wheelchair users or have motor limitations, this redirection of expressive focus enables them to create rich emotional narratives through the areas of the body they can control, without feeling inadequate or self-conscious.

Furthermore, masks facilitate what dramatherapist Phil Jones (2007) describes as distancing—a technique that enables individuals to express difficult emotions indirectly through symbolic representation. Rather than saying “I am afraid,” a participant may express fear through the trembling hands of a masked sea spirit or the slow, heavy movements of a masked guardian figure. The mask mediates the expression, allowing emotional truths to emerge without overwhelming the psyche. This is especially valuable in contexts of trauma, shame, or identity conflict, where direct confrontation may be too intense.

The symbolic potential of masks also aligns with Indigenous Malaysian understandings of illness, wellbeing, and transformation. Many Indigenous healing rituals involve intermediaries, symbolic tools, or representational objects that help bridge the physical and non-physical worlds. In this sense, the mask becomes not an external borrowing but an extension of Indigenous logic—an aesthetic technology that activates ancestral ways of healing through performance.

In essence, the cultural and symbolic significance of the mask in Southeast Asian and Bajau-Sama contexts lies in its capacity to transform identity, protect vulnerability, express emotional truth, and deepen ritual meaning. InTERiPe’s introduction of mask work honours this legacy while forging a new pathway in Malaysian therapeutic arts. It allows PwDA participants to step into the liminal, imaginative, and emotionally rich spaces that performance makes possible, expanding the healing potential of *Igal* from a movement-based practice into a symbolic and transformative ritual journey.

Practice-Based Research Trajectory and Preceding Workshops

The development of the InTERiPe model has been deeply informed by practice-based research methodologies, drawing upon heuristic inquiry, phenomenology, performative research, and dramatherapy frameworks to investigate how traditional performance can serve as a therapeutic tool for People with Different Abilities (PwDA). Unlike conventional research approaches that rely heavily on abstract theorising or quantitative measurement, practice-based research situates knowledge within action, embodiment, and lived experience. In the case of InTERiPe, knowledge was generated through the body—through movement, rhythm, gesture, story, and relational interactions observed across two pilot workshops held between 2023 and 2025. These workshops functioned as living laboratories in which cultural, artistic, therapeutic, and somatic dimensions converged, allowing the research team to examine how *Igal* could be reinterpreted not simply as a heritage dance but as a healing method grounded in embodied intelligence.

The first pilot workshop introduced PwDA participants to the foundational elements of *Igal*, dramatherapy exercises, and reflective dialogues. Participants engaged in guided improvisation, movement mirroring, rhythmic entrainment, and symbolic gesture exploration. The facilitators, who included practitioners from performing arts, dramatherapy, and Indigenous cultural studies, approached the workshop with sensitivity to the participants’ varied physical abilities, emotional needs, and cultural backgrounds. What emerged from this initial stage was a profound recognition of how participants resonated with the fluidity of *Igal*’s movements. Many of them, especially wheelchair users and individuals with limited lower-limb mobility, found *Igal* uniquely accessible because of its emphasis on upper-body expression. Its circular and continuous gestures did not demand strenuous physical exertion but instead encouraged a gentle, flowing quality that supported somatic ease and emotional release.

As participants developed familiarity with the movements, facilitators observed how the rhythm of *Igal* began to evoke emotional shifts. Some participants described feeling “lighter,” “calmer,” or “as if the body was breathing differently.” Others spoke of sensing a connection with nature—the sea, wind, or memory of

movement patterns from childhood or familial traditions. This emotional resonance is consistent with phenomenological approaches, which emphasize lived bodily experience as a site of meaning. It also aligns with Indigenous Southeast Asian understandings of movement as a conduit between the physical body and the wider cosmos. Through *Igal*, participants appeared to reconnect with aspects of their identity that had been marginalized or forgotten due to disability, social exclusion, or personal trauma.

The second pilot workshop expanded upon the first by integrating more dramatherapeutic elements, such as role-play, embodied storytelling, and symbolic enactments. Participants were encouraged to explore narratives from their lives using movement rather than words. These narratives touched on themes of loss, resilience, isolation, hope, belonging, and aspiration. Facilitators observed that when participants used symbolic gestures to express these themes, they felt safer and more comfortable than when attempting to articulate them verbally. For many PwDA individuals, especially those who have faced chronic stigma or discrimination, verbal expression can feel exposing or confrontational. Movement provided a non-verbal alternative that allowed emotions to surface organically.

A particularly significant discovery emerged during a reflective circle in which participants discussed their experiences of performing without speaking. One participant shared that they could “speak more with hands than with voice,” and another said, “I feel less judged when I move than when I talk.” These reflections illuminated a central principle of the InTERiPe approach: that embodiment can serve as an emotional language through which participants communicate safely, authentically, and creatively. The facilitators took note of these insights and began to consider what additional tools could deepen this embodied communication while also supporting emotional safety.

Throughout the workshops, however, the research team also noticed recurring patterns of emotional inhibition. There were moments when participants appeared to want to express something deeper—perhaps sorrow, fear, or long-suppressed memories—but hesitated before crossing the threshold. Their bodies would begin a gesture but then retract; their breath would quicken; their gaze would fall to the floor. These moments revealed the limits of unmasked expression for some participants, suggesting that while *Igal* provided a culturally grounded entry point into emotional exploration, certain layers of the psyche required additional mediation.

Dramatherapy theory describes these moments as “edges,” thresholds at which participants approach difficult emotional material but require symbolic support to move further. In many therapeutic traditions, masks serve precisely this purpose. They create a transitional space where individuals can express emotions indirectly, safely distanced from their everyday identity. The mask absorbs the intensity of the emotion, allowing the participant to project internal experiences onto an external object. This is especially helpful for PwDA participants who may feel hyper-visible or judged in social settings due to their disabilities. The mask subtly shifts attention away from the face—which often carries social expectations of expression—toward the body as a whole. This shift aligns harmoniously with *Igal*’s gestural vocabulary.

As facilitators reflected on these observations, it became increasingly clear that the mask could act as a bridge across these emotional edges. Participants who hesitated to embody grief or fear with their natural faces might be able to express these emotions through the embodied persona of a masked figure. The mask would provide psychological safety, reducing the pressure of being personally seen while enabling the emotional truth to emerge symbolically. The research team noted that this potential transformation was not merely a technical or aesthetic adjustment but an extension of *Igal*’s cultural logic. *Igal* already functions as a dance in which the performer becomes “other”—a bird, a fish, a sea spirit, an ancestral presence. The mask would make this transformation explicit, allowing participants to step more fully into symbolic roles without the burden of representing themselves.

The emergence of mask work as the next phase of InTERiPe was therefore not imposed from outside but arose naturally from the data and lived experiences observed during the workshops. The participants’ tendency to retreat at emotional edges, the facilitators’ recognition of the need for symbolic mediation, and the cultural foundation of transformation within *Igal* itself all pointed toward the mask as the next logical progression. The forthcoming research phase aims to harness this potential, exploring how mask-integrated *Igal* sequences can

facilitate deeper emotional expression, symbolic storytelling, and therapeutic transformation for PwDA participants.

Projected Implementation and Movement Testing (2025–2026)

The next phase of the InTERiPe model, scheduled to run from August 2025 to mid-2026 under the Ministry of Education Malaysia research grant, represents a critical period in the project's evolution where mask work and *Igal* dance will be systematically integrated, tested, and refined. Unlike the earlier pilot workshops, which primarily focused on exploring the therapeutic potential of *Igal* as a movement practice, this phase positions the mask as a core instrument of symbolic transformation. The implementation structure is intentionally designed through iterative cycles, enabling the research team to examine aesthetic, somatic, psychological, and cultural dimensions of mask use within therapeutic and performance contexts. The entire nine-month timeline is conceived not simply as a research schedule but as an unfolding ritual journey in which movement, identity, and imagination are constantly negotiated, tested, and deepened.

The first stage, beginning in August 2025, focuses on movement research and mask prototyping. This phase involves a smaller ensemble of performers, facilitators, cultural advisors, and PwDA representatives working in a laboratory-style environment. The ensemble will explore various mask designs inspired by Bajau-Sama aesthetics, maritime symbolism, and Southeast Asian mask traditions. These masks may draw from motifs such as fish scales, sea spirits, wave patterns, or cosmological elements associated with Bajau identity. The goal is not to replicate any specific mask tradition but to create hybrid forms that honour Indigenous symbolism while remaining accessible and meaningful within a therapeutic context. The research process will involve experimenting with how different mask shapes influence posture, movement quality, breath flow, and emotional expression. Participants will test how the mask affects their ability to enter symbolic roles, maintain grounding, and engage with *Igal*'s rhythmic vocabulary. This early stage also examines practical concerns such as weight, grip, comfort, visibility, and adaptability for participants with diverse mobility needs.

Once initial prototypes and movement responses are documented, the next significant milestone occurs in October–November 2025: the presentation of selected sequences at the International Mask Festival (IMF) 2025 in Solo City, Surakarta, Indonesia. This event functions as an intercultural testing ground for the mask-integrated *Igal* approach. Unlike a therapeutic workshop where the focus is entirely on participant experience, IMF offers a public, performative, and intercultural context where the symbolic clarity, aesthetic coherence, and emotional resonance of the mask-*Igal* fusion can be evaluated through broader witnessing. IMF gathers mask practitioners, scholars, cultural bearers, and performance ensembles from around the world. Presenting InTERiPe's evolving form at this festival situates Malaysian Indigenous healing-performance research within global discourses on mask work, traditional arts, and contemporary embodiment practices. The festival becomes a space where the research team observes how audiences respond to the movements: whether they grasp the symbolic intentions, whether the transformation reads clearly, whether the mask enhances emotional intensity or obscures meaning, and whether the performance resonates across cultural boundaries.

Participation in IMF also reinforces InTERiPe's philosophy that healing is communal and relational. The act of performing before an international audience invites a level of ritual witnessing that deepens the performers' sense of purpose and embodiment. For PwDA performers who may participate in the festival, the experience carries additional significance: it challenges assumptions about disability in high-performance contexts and repositions them as cultural ambassadors rather than recipients of charity or therapeutic intervention. By including PwDA performers in this phase, the project affirms their agency and redefines performance as a space of empowerment, cultural affirmation, and artistic legitimacy.

Following the IMF presentation, the research trajectory returns to Malaysia for an intensive cycle of pre-pilot workshops. These workshops involve small groups of PwDA participants who will test the mask exercises developed from the earlier movement labs. This stage investigates how mask work affects emotional accessibility, psychological safety, identity exploration, and group dynamics. Facilitators will assess which mask designs support comfort and expressivity and which may be physically or emotionally challenging. The workshops will examine how participants adapt movement patterns while masked, how they navigate breath control, how they embody symbolic roles, and how they respond when observing others wearing masks. These

experimental sessions serve as crucial feedback loops, enabling the research team to refine exercises, adjust sequences, adapt mask designs, and identify specific therapeutic benefits or risks associated with masking.

Equally important is understanding how mask work interacts with cultural and disability-sensitive frameworks. PwDA participants may have varying comfort levels with covering the face, especially if they have sensory sensitivities, breathing challenges, or past traumatic experiences. Some may find the mask empowering, while others may initially feel anxious or constricted. The facilitators' role during this phase is to ensure psychological safety by providing options, alternatives, and supportive scaffolding. The presence of cultural advisors—such as Bajau-Sama practitioners and heritage experts—is essential to ensure that mask integration remains sensitive to Indigenous epistemologies rather than appropriating or misinterpreting them.

These pre-pilot workshops will also incorporate structured reflection sessions where participants articulate their experiences, emotions, and narratives associated with mask work. These reflections will allow the research team to examine phenomenological shifts such as changes in bodily awareness, emotional depth, or identity perception. If participants describe feeling "more free," "more protected," or "more in touch with another side of myself," these insights will help map the therapeutic impact of mask integration. Conversely, if participants describe feeling disconnected, overwhelmed, or constrained by the mask, the facilitators can adjust the methodology accordingly.

The final stage of the research implementation, scheduled for early to mid-2026, is the main inclusive workshop. This extended program integrates *Igal*, mask performance, dramatherapy structures, phenomenological inquiry, and Indigenous healing philosophies into a cohesive therapeutic arc. It includes warm-ups, breath and grounding practices, guided mask rituals, symbolic movement journeys, role exploration, partner and group exercises, reflective sharing, and a culminating performance ritual. The aim is to examine how PwDA participants undergo emotional transformation, narrative expansion, and somatic healing over a sustained period, rather than within short-term sessions. This stage documents the longitudinal effects of mask-integrated movement practice, examining how therapeutic impacts unfold across time. The culmination of the workshop is a final performance ritual attended by community members, cultural representatives, and academic observers. This event functions not merely as a showcase but as a communal witnessing ceremony through which participants affirm their narratives, identities, and transformations.

Across all these stages, the nine-month implementation framework serves as both a research methodology and a ritual journey. The mask is not introduced abruptly but emerges through layers of exploration, testing, cultural consultation, and participant feedback. Movement, identity, community, and imagination become continuously braided together, allowing InTERiPe to evolve in ways that are culturally grounded, ethically attuned, and therapeutically potent.

Humanities Perspective: Mask as Dialogue Between Self and Society

Understanding the significance of integrating mask work into the InTERiPe model requires engaging with the humanities, for it is within the humanities that we confront the core questions of identity, embodiment, vulnerability, culture, meaning-making, and the human condition. The mask, in this context, is not a mere performance prop; it is a philosophical, psychological, cultural, and symbolic device with profound implications for how individuals understand themselves and how they communicate their inner worlds to others. The humanities perspective allows the InTERiPe model to situate its innovations within the long-standing global and regional traditions of ritual performance, symbolic expression, and culturally grounded healing.

Throughout human history, the mask has served as a medium for dialogue between the self and society. It enables individuals to explore alternative identities, confront subconscious narratives, and express emotional truths that might be suppressed in ordinary social contexts. In many ritual traditions, the mask is considered an intermediary between the human and the metaphysical—a liminal object that enables the wearer to speak, move, and feel from a place that transcends everyday identity. This capacity for transformation is central to the psychosocial challenges faced by People with Different Abilities (PwDA). Many PwDA individuals navigate societal expectations, stigmas, and identity constraints imposed upon them by cultural norms. The mask offers a counter-

narrative space where participants can move beyond the labels assigned to them and explore identities that reflect strength, imagination, cultural belonging, and emotional depth.

For PwDA participants, the mask becomes a vital intervention into the social politics of visibility. Society often positions disability as a hyper-visible identity, where the body is observed, judged, or scrutinized before the person is acknowledged as a full human subject. Under the mask, the PwDA participant is no longer positioned within that gaze. The mask becomes a protective mediator that diffuses the societal gaze and shifts the focus to the symbolic identity of the wearer. A participant is no longer “the wheelchair user” or “the disabled performer.” Instead, they become a sea spirit, an ancient guardian, a weaver of stories, or a symbolic embodiment of resilience. This transformation disrupts the social narrative surrounding disability and returns agency to the participant to define themselves anew.

Within the humanities discourse, performance is understood as a site of embodied knowledge where individuals negotiate cultural identity, memory, and meaning. The integration of masking into the InTERiPe model allows participants to inhabit this site of negotiation with greater emotional depth. Masks enable them to explore archetypal identities—archetypes that transcend personal limitations and reflect universal human experiences. For example, the archetype of the “healer” may allow participants to explore self-compassion; the archetype of the “warrior” may help them embody courage; the archetype of the “sea guardian” may allow them to express longing, grief, or ancestral connection. These archetypes, when embodied through masked *Igal* movement, create a symbolic language that participants can use to articulate narratives that might otherwise remain unspoken.

Moreover, the use of masks aligns with decolonial approaches to healing and therapy. In conventional Western psychological frameworks, healing is often understood through cognitive-verbal pathways. However, for many Indigenous and non-Western communities, healing is somatic, symbolic, communal, and ritual-based. It involves the body, the land, the ancestors, and the stories that shape collective identity. The integration of masks within *Igal* echoes these epistemologies by foregrounding embodied ritual as a valid and culturally resonant form of emotional processing. It challenges the dominance of Western therapeutic paradigms by centering Indigenous Malaysian knowledge systems, symbolic logic, and performative healing traditions. As scholars like Ndlovu (2023) argue, decolonizing therapeutic practice requires reclaiming local forms of knowledge and integrating them into healing frameworks rather than relying solely on imported models.

The humanities perspective also reveals how masks cultivate empathy—not only for the performer but for the audience and the community. When workshop participants witness another person performing under a mask, they witness not the literal body before them but the emotional and symbolic world that movement conveys. They interpret gestures differently, noticing metaphor instead of surface appearance. This transformation in perception dissolves barriers between individuals, allowing participants to resonate with one another’s stories and emotions through symbolic witnessing. The audience becomes attuned to the rhythm, breath, and embodied narrative of the performer, enabling what performance theorist Richard Schechner describes as “deep play”—a state in which performance generates profound emotional and social meaning. In the context of PwDA participants, this witnessing becomes a communal act of recognition that affirms their stories as worthy, meaningful, and culturally significant.

Another important dimension of the mask within humanities discourse is its capacity to facilitate psychological distancing. Distancing, as discussed in dramatherapy, enables individuals to express difficult emotions indirectly through metaphoric or symbolic representation. Instead of confronting trauma head-on, participants can engage with it from a safer vantage point. A participant may never speak directly of their fears, but through the trembling gestures of a masked figure, those fears can be expressed, seen, held, and processed. The mask becomes a container that carries emotional weight without overwhelming the person. For participants who have experienced chronic marginalization or internalized shame, this capacity for symbolic projection is essential.

Additionally, mask work enhances somatic awareness, a key component of both humanities-based embodiment studies and therapeutic practice. The presence of the mask changes the performer’s relationship with their body. With the face obscured, the body must speak more fully—through posture, breath, gesture, and rhythm. This is especially significant for PwDA participants with physical limitations. When expressive emphasis shifts to the body’s abilities rather than its restrictions, participants are empowered to discover movement possibilities they

did not realize they possessed. The mask invites them into a richer somatic vocabulary that celebrates expression rather than limitation.

In Bajau-Sama cultural contexts, the integration of masks also echoes deep-rooted understandings of relationality between humans, nature, and the unseen world. Although formal mask traditions may not be central to contemporary Bajau-Sama communities, the cosmology underlying *Igal* dance reflects similar concepts of transformation, ancestral connection, and symbolic embodiment. *Igal* movements mimic the flow of water, the flight of birds, and the play of wind; they express relationships between the body and the environment. The mask amplifies this relational worldview by giving participants a physical tool through which to embody more-than-human identities and narratives. The transformation becomes tangible, allowing movement and ritual to merge into a more layered expressive practice.

Ultimately, from a humanities perspective, the mask in the InTERiPe model serves as a bridge—a bridge between self and society, between vulnerability and strength, between the visible and invisible, between cultural roots and contemporary expression. It becomes a way for PwDA participants to rearticulate their identities, reclaim their narratives, and participate in a therapeutic process that honors their humanity, culture, and emotional truth. In this way, the integration of masks strengthens InTERiPe's core belief that healing emerges at the intersection of body, culture, community, and symbolic imagination.

Policy Frameworks and the InTERiPe Model: Aligning Therapeutic Innovation with National Cultural, Disability, and Educational Priorities

The development of the InTERiPe model does not occur in isolation from Malaysia's broader socio-cultural, disability, and educational landscapes. Instead, it operates at the intersection of national policy frameworks, institutional aspirations, and global heritage discourses that increasingly recognise the importance of inclusive, culturally grounded, and community-responsive approaches to wellbeing. The integration of mask work into the *Igal*-based therapeutic system deepens this relevance, positioning InTERiPe as a model that not only advances artistic and therapeutic innovation but also responds directly to Malaysia's evolving policy commitments. Understanding these alignments illuminates how InTERiPe may serve as a future-ready, policy-supported cultural therapy framework with national significance.

Malaysia's cultural policies, particularly the Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan (DAKEN) 2021, explicitly highlight the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while ensuring that traditional arts remain dynamic, innovative, and responsive to contemporary social needs. The policy emphasises cultural continuity, adaptive revitalisation, and the role of arts in strengthening mental and emotional wellbeing. Within this context, InTERiPe resonates strongly with DAKEN's vision because it transforms a traditional dance form—Bajau-Sama *Igal*—into a therapeutic practice that serves both cultural preservation and modern societal needs. By integrating mask performance, an element that reinforces symbolic and ritual aesthetics, InTERiPe contributes to the reactivation of heritage practices within new interdisciplinary domains. This aligns with DAKEN's emphasis on ensuring that cultural forms are not fossilised but continue to evolve in response to community realities.

Another key cultural policy framework is the Dasar Kebudayaan Komuniti (DKK), which emphasizes grassroots cultural engagement, cultural-based community empowerment, and accessibility of cultural experiences for marginalized groups. InTERiPe directly aligns with this commitment by centering People with Different Abilities (PwDA) in its therapeutic design. Rather than treating PwDA as passive recipients of charity-based programming, InTERiPe positions them as active cultural participants, performers, and knowledge-bearers. The model enables PwDA to re-enter cultural spaces from which they have historically been excluded, whether due to infrastructural barriers, stigma, or limited program design. Through mask-integrated *Igal* movement, PwDA are not merely learning culture; they are performing it, transforming it, and inscribing themselves into its future.

The national development philosophy of Malaysia MADANI, which emphasizes sustainability, respect, care, empowerment, dignity, and innovation, also offers a relevant policy alignment. MADANI envisions a society where vulnerable groups are empowered through culturally meaningful and socially supportive systems. InTERiPe embodies this ethic through its emphasis on cultural dignity (maruah budaya), psychosocial empowerment, and inclusive participation. MADANI's commitment to mental health and community wellbeing

is particularly noteworthy, as it echoes InTERiPe's goal of using embodied cultural practices to support emotional healing and psychological resilience. By incorporating masks—an aesthetic object that enhances expressive freedom and symbolic identity—InTERiPe strengthens its alignment with MADANI's emphasis on imaginative, compassionate, and culturally rooted innovation.

Disability policy frameworks provide another important context. Malaysia's Pelan Tindakan OKU 2016–2022, the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, and the ongoing national OKU transformation agenda (under KPWK and most recently KPLB for inclusive community-based empowerment) call for increased accessibility, inclusion, and holistic wellbeing for PwDA communities. However, these policy documents also highlight gaps in psychosocial support, community integration, and arts-based therapeutic interventions. InTERiPe fills these gaps by offering a model that combines therapeutic embodiment, cultural participation, and structured creative engagement. Mask work plays a critical role in this alignment because it expands expressive accessibility for participants who may struggle with facial mobility, speech, or emotional exposure. The mask becomes an inclusive gateway that equalises the expressive field across diverse PwDA embodiments.

The Ministry of Education's mandate—particularly through the Higher Education Blueprint's emphasis on holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates (HEB)—also resonates with InTERiPe. The model contributes to knowledge generation at the intersection of arts, health, heritage, and community empowerment. It represents innovation in practice-based research methodologies, responds to national calls for interdisciplinary scholarship, and demonstrates how universities can collaborate with communities (such as Bajau-Sama cultural bearers) to generate culturally meaningful therapeutic models. The Ministry's growing interest in mental health initiatives, especially post-pandemic, further underscores the relevance of developing arts-based, non-clinical therapeutic modalities that can support diverse populations—including students, educators, and community members.

At the global level, InTERiPe's grounding in *Igal* aligns with UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which emphasizes not only the preservation of cultural forms but their transmission, revitalisation, and adaptation to contemporary contexts. The UNESCO Convention acknowledges that cultural expressions must remain living, relevant, and socially embedded. InTERiPe embodies these principles by situating *Igal* within a new therapeutic framework that ensures its continuity and cultural vitality. By integrating mask work—another globally recognised intangible heritage element—the model expands its cultural significance while maintaining respect for local values.

This policy alignment becomes especially significant when considered in relation to disability arts advocacy. Globally and nationally, there is a growing movement to recognise that PwDA are not simply beneficiaries of welfare services but active contributors to cultural life. Malaysia's increasing involvement in disability arts initiatives, inclusive festivals, and community-based rehabilitation (CBR) programs reflects this shift. InTERiPe contributes to this evolving ecosystem by providing a structured, research-based model through which PwDA may engage in cultural performance in ways that are empowering, therapeutic, and grounded in heritage. Mask-integrated *Igal* becomes a symbolic and practical expression of cultural citizenship—the right of PwDA to participate fully, visibly, and creatively in the cultural life of the nation.

Policy relevance is also reflected in the model's scalability. InTERiPe has the potential to influence arts education curricula, community-based arts programs, and national heritage initiatives. Its structure offers a replicable template for other Malaysian traditional dances—Mak Yong, Zapin, Jikey, Sumazau, Silat, or Sewang—to be explored for therapeutic potential. By positioning itself within national cultural and disability frameworks, InTERiPe demonstrates that the convergence of traditional performance and therapeutic practice is not only artistically innovative but strategically aligned with Malaysia's policy aspirations for inclusivity, wellbeing, cultural integrity, and community empowerment.

Mask work, in this context, strengthens the policy connection by offering a multicultural, pluralistic layer to the model. It resonates with Malaysia's plural society, where symbolism, transformation, and ritual performance connect across Malay, Indigenous, Chinese, Indian, and East Malaysian cultural landscapes. The mask allows the model to converse with regional traditional arts policies, such as those in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, further positioning Malaysia as a leader in Southeast Asian therapeutic performance research.

Through this alignment, InTERiPe becomes more than a creative or therapeutic experiment. It becomes a policy-relevant, culturally grounded, and socially transformative model with the capacity to inform public health, national heritage, arts education, and disability inclusion strategies. The integration of masks strengthens this alignment further, making InTERiPe simultaneously traditional and innovative, Indigenous and contemporary, personal and communal, artistic and therapeutic, cultural and policy-responsive.

CONCLUSION

The integration of mask work into the *Igal*-based InTERiPe model marks a pivotal evolution in Malaysian therapeutic performance research, extending the model beyond its initial grounding in movement, rhythm, and cultural embodiment into a more symbolically complex and psychologically expansive terrain. Throughout its earlier phases, InTERiPe demonstrated remarkable potential in engaging People with Different Abilities (PwDA) through the fluidity of *Igal*, enabling participants to access emotional release, reconnect with cultural identity, and participate in communal ritual performance in ways that were accessible, empowering, and deeply meaningful. Yet, as the practice-based research unfolded, it became increasingly apparent that certain emotional thresholds remained challenging for participants to cross. Many PwDA individuals, shaped by experiences of societal stigma, internalised judgment, or fear of vulnerability, moved with hesitation when faced with deeper layers of emotional exposure. These moments illuminated a fundamental insight: that therapeutic movement grounded in cultural logic must be expanded with additional symbolic tools capable of mediating the emotional and psychological weight carried by participants. Within this context, the mask emerges not as a decorative addition but as an essential evolutionary step in the InTERiPe journey.

By introducing masks into the therapeutic structure, InTERiPe opens a new pathway for participants to inhabit transformative identities that transcend their everyday self-conceptions. Masks enable PwDA participants to move beyond the boundaries imposed by disability labels and societal expectations, freeing them to express from a symbolic persona rather than a personally exposed position. Under the mask, participants become protectors, healers, sea spirits, guardians, storytellers—archetypes that align with the symbolic vocabulary present within Bajau-Sama cosmology and Southeast Asian ritual traditions. This symbolic expansion allows emotional truths that might remain suppressed in ordinary contexts to surface with greater fluidity and safety. The mask absorbs the intensity of expression, creating a buffer between internal experience and external gaze, and in doing so, enables participants to articulate grief, joy, anger, longing, or hope through embodied metaphor rather than direct verbalization. For many participants, especially wheelchair users or those with particular mobility or sensory sensitivities, this shift of expressive focus from verbal and facial expression toward the body's accessible gestures is not only empowering but transformative.

At the same time, mask work repositions InTERiPe within a broader cultural and philosophical discourse in Malaysia. The model now occupies a meaningful intersection between intangible heritage preservation, Indigenous epistemologies, disability inclusion, psychosomatic healing, and policy-aligned cultural innovation. By grounding its methodology in Bajau-Sama movement and Southeast Asian ritual philosophy, InTERiPe affirms that healing in Malaysia need not be limited to Western clinical modalities but can instead emerge from local traditions, community values, and embodied cultural memory. The mask strengthens this decolonial approach by drawing from regional aesthetics and symbolic forms, enabling the model to resonate across ethnic, cultural, and spiritual contexts within Malaysia. This inclusive resonance reflects the multicultural ethos of Malaysia and supports national policy commitments under DAKEN, DKK, and Malaysia MADANI, all of which emphasize cultural revitalization, community wellbeing, and inclusive participation in the arts.

The nine-month mask-integrated phase supported by the Ministry of Education Malaysia further solidifies InTERiPe's position as a pioneering therapeutic model within higher education research. Its structure—encompassing movement laboratories, mask prototyping, international presentation at the International Mask Festival (IMF) 2025, pre-pilot workshops with PwDA, and a culminating inclusive performance—ensures methodological rigor, artistic depth, and cultural authenticity. Through this multi-layered implementation process, the research team not only investigates the therapeutic efficacy of mask work but also contributes to knowledge generation in performance studies, disability arts, phenomenology, and dramatherapy. The involvement of IMF 2025 elevates the research to an international platform, allowing Malaysian therapeutic

arts—rooted in Bajau-Sama tradition—to converse with global mask and ritual performance practices, positioning Malaysia as a regional leader in innovative, culturally grounded therapeutic research.

Furthermore, this upcoming phase transforms participants from workshop attendees into co-creators, cultural interpreters, and performers. PwDA participants will not merely engage in therapy but will actively shape the evolving aesthetic and symbolic language of the model. Their lived experiences become integral components of the artistic and therapeutic discoveries emerging from the research. The public witnessing inherent in IMF and the final performance ritual reinforces the model's emphasis on community affirmation, societal visibility, and cultural citizenship for PwDA. Instead of being confined to therapeutic rooms or institutional settings, participants step into cultural and performative arenas, reclaiming the right to be seen in ways that honour their creativity, humanity, and cultural belonging.

The introduction of mask work also deepens InTERiPe's philosophical relationship with the body. In Bajau-Sama and wider Southeast Asian worldviews, the body is not merely a vessel of physical function but a site of cosmological connection. The body communicates its truths through rhythm, gesture, breath, and relation to the environment. When a PwDA participant wears a mask and performs *Igal*, their body becomes an expressive archive, transmitting stories that bridge personal history, cultural memory, collective emotion, and embodied imagination. The mask becomes the face of these narratives, while the body becomes their movement. In this way, healing becomes a somatic dialogue—a movement-based reclamation of identity, agency, and emotional coherence.

InTERiPe's evolution through mask work contributes to national dialogues on wellbeing, arts education, and cultural sustainability. As Malaysia strengthens its commitment to disability inclusion, community-based mental health support, and cultural revitalisation, models like InTERiPe become increasingly relevant. They provide tangible, culturally embedded strategies for addressing emotional and psychological needs through creative, participatory, and heritage-based frameworks. They offer alternative pathways for social integration and self-expression, especially for marginalized communities whose experiences often remain invisible within mainstream therapeutic or cultural institutions. Through the integration of masks, InTERiPe demonstrates that healing is not merely a private experience but a communal and cultural one, shaped by shared stories, embodied rituals, and collective witnessing.

In conclusion, the introduction of mask work within the InTERiPe model represents a profound strengthening of its therapeutic, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. It deepens emotional accessibility, enriches aesthetic articulation, and reinforces cultural grounding. It aligns with national policy imperatives, honours Indigenous knowledge systems, and amplifies the voices, bodies, and stories of PwDA. Perhaps most importantly, it reaffirms the central philosophy that has guided the model since its inception: that healing is a rhythmic conversation between body, culture, community, and imagination—a conversation that must be lived, moved, and continuously renewed. InTERiPe, now expanded through mask-integrated ritual performance, stands as a testament to Malaysia's capacity to innovate by embracing its cultural roots, affirming its diverse communities, and cultivating healing practices that are as beautiful as they are transformative.

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