

## THE POJA BUGIS DANCE IN SELANGOR: CULTURAL RE-CREATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the evolution and re-creation of the Poja Bugis dance in Selangor as a pivotal mechanism for cultural identity formation within the Bugis community. Despite its prominence in state ceremonies, the dance remains critically under-documented and lacks comprehensive academic analysis. This study employs a qualitative case study methodology and draws on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and rigorous document analysis to examine its development. The theoretical framework synthesizes Shils' conceptualization of tradition, Hobsbawm and Ranger's "invention of tradition," and Hall's theory of cultural identity. The findings indicate that the Poja dance emerged through a process of cultural adaptation and reconstruction from the Pakkuru Sumange dance of South Sulawesi, shaped significantly by the institutional, political, and social dynamics of Selangor. The study further demonstrates that the dance embodies the concept of "identity as becoming," whereby cultural identity is continually negotiated and reconstructed within a diasporic context. This research significantly contributes to the discourse on cultural sustainability, ethnic identity construction, and the politics of heritage performance in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Poja dance, Bugis identity, cultural reconstruction, heritage performance, Selangor

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Poja dance emerged as a prominent cultural expression in Selangor during the late 20th century, particularly gaining visibility in the 1990s as a symbol of Bugis heritage within the Malaysian cultural landscape. Historical accounts and oral testimonies suggest that the Poja dance is a localized reconstruction of the Pakkuru Sumange from South Sulawesi, introduced to Selangor in 1988 through the efforts of cultural practitioners such as Andi Ugie Kamariah. This initiative was strategically supported by the Selangor State Government through the Sultan Alam Shah Museum, now the Selangor Malay Custom and Heritage Corporation (PADAT) with the objective of studying and applying cultural elements from Indonesia, including customs, attire, and architecture, to the local context (Sunarti et al., 2022; Taim et al., 2025).

The development of the Poja dance is fundamentally rooted in the theory of tradition as defined by Edward Shils, which emphasizes the transmission of heritage through the interaction of internal and external factors (Oromaner, 1983; Roth, 1984). Furthermore, the formalization of this dance in Selangor serves as a clear example of the "invention of tradition" as conceptualized by Hobsbawm and Ranger (Ross, 1983). This process involves the reconstruction of cultural practices to establish symbolic continuity with a historic past, often tailored for specific modern functions and institutional purposes (Picton, 1989; Ross, 1983). Within the Bugis diaspora in Malaysia, such artistic revivals are essential for maintaining collective memory and negotiating a distinct cultural identity amidst a multicultural society (Georgiou, 2005; Sunarti et al., 2022).



**Figure 1.** Sultan Alam Shah Museum/ Selangor Malay Custom and Heritage Corporation (PADAT)

While the Poja dance retains symbolic elements of the original Pakkuru Sumange specifically as a gesture of respect and a prayer for the well-being of guests its transition to the Selangor stage has necessitated significant adaptations. The reconstruction process often results in changes to the dance's form, structure, and style to suit contemporary performance contexts (Nor, 2023; Taim et al., 2025). These adaptations reflect what Stuart Hall describes as "identity as becoming," where cultural identity is not a static inheritance but a dynamic process of reconstruction through representation and history (Escosteguy, 2008, 2024). Consequently, the Poja dance in Selangor is not merely a preserved relic but a living manifestation of cultural sustainability and the integration of civilizational elements into modern Malaysian choreography (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023; Taim et al., 2025).



Figure 2. Opening Ceremony of the Sultan Alam Shah Museum in 1989

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study is constructed upon a robust theoretical foundation, drawing from seminal works in dance scholarship, sociology, and cultural studies to analyze the re-creation and development of the Poja Bugis dance. Central to this inquiry is the concept of "invented tradition" as articulated by Hobsbawm and Ranger, which provides a critical lens for examining how contemporary practices are formalized to establish symbolic continuity with the past (Picton, 1989; Ross, 1983). Their work illustrates that traditions are often constructed through a set of practices governed by rules and rituals, designed to instill certain values and norms of behavior (Ross, 1983). In the context of this research, the transition of the Poja dance from its origins in South Sulawesi to its current form in Selangor mirrors the Scottish Highland tradition described by Trevor-Roper, where a new cultural identity was forged through replication, creative adaptation, and the influence of political and institutional intervention (Picton, 1989; Ross, 1983).

Complementing this perspective, the research integrates Edward Shils' comprehensive analysis of tradition, which defines it as a traditum anything handed down from the past to the present across generations (Oromaner, 1983). Shils identifies both endogenous (internal) and exogenous (external) factors as primary drivers of change within a tradition (Oromaner, 1983; Roth, 1984). This framework is instrumental in analyzing how the reconstruction of the Pakkuru Sumange dance into the Poja Bugis dance was shaped by external institutional pressures in Selangor while maintaining internal cultural resonances within the Bugis community (Sunarti et al., 2022). The study examines how these factors allowed the dance to evolve from a historic Sulawesi practice into a contemporary symbol of Selangor's heritage, ensuring its survival through a process of continuous transmission and adaptation (Roth, 1984; Taim et al., 2025).

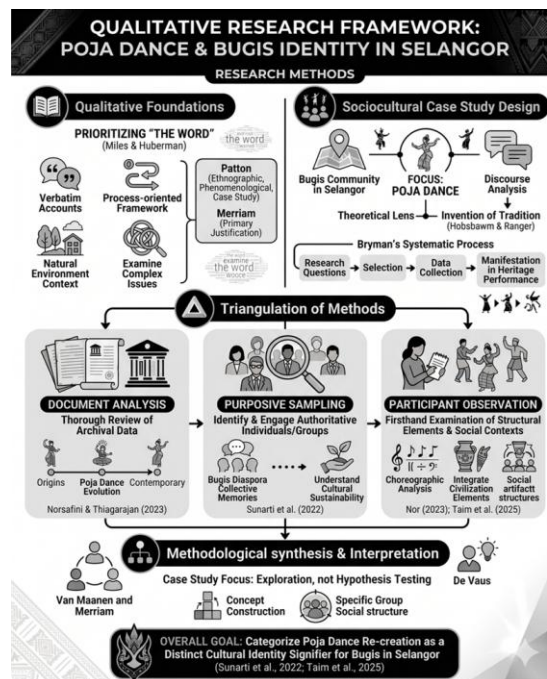
Furthermore, the study utilizes Stuart Hall's dual conceptualization of cultural identity "identity as being" and "identity as becoming" to justify the Poja dance as a modern ethnic signifier (2024). Hall argues that identity is not a static essence but a dynamic process that is perpetually negotiated through representation, history, and culture (2024). For the Bugis diaspora in Malaysia, the Poja dance represents "identity as becoming," where the community reconstructs its heritage to navigate its position within a multicultural society (Georgiou, 2005; Sunarti et al., 2022). This perspective allows the research to view the Poja dance not merely as a relic of the past, but as a living manifestation of collective memory and a "quest for cultural identity" among the Bugis descendants in Selangor (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023; Sunarti et al., 2022).

Methodologically, the analysis of the dance's form and structure is guided by Adrienne Kaeppler's structural approach, which employs a linguistic analogy to decode human movement (Nor, 2023). This model categorizes dance into hierarchical units from the smallest movement components known as kinemes and morphokines to larger structures such as motifs, choremes, and phrases culminating in the complete dance form (Nor, 2023). By applying this "emic" approach, the research systematically categorizes the re-creation of the Poja dance, distinguishing its unique choreographic style from its Indonesian precursors (Taim et al., 2025). This structural analysis is further enriched by local historical accounts, such as those by Syed Mahadzir, which highlight the diversity of versions and the fluid authenticity of the Poja dance, providing essential data on the specific movements, attire, and musical ornaments that characterize its performance in Selangor.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on a qualitative research approach, as defined by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña who describe it as an emphasis on "the word" to support descriptive reporting and verbatim accounts, avoiding reliance on statistical data. This process-oriented framework aligns with Patton's conceptualization of qualitative inquiry, which encompasses ethnographic, phenomenological, and case study approaches. According to Merriam (2009), the primary justification for such a methodology is its ability to foster a deep understanding of a phenomenon within its natural environment, enabling the researcher to examine complex cultural issues as they manifest in real-world settings.

The specific design chosen for this research is a sociocultural case study utilizing discourse analysis to interpret the meanings behind the practices, ethics, and philosophies of the Bugis community in Selangor (Sunarti et al., 2022). Central to this investigation is the reconstruction of the Poja dance, analyzed through the theoretical lens of the "invention of tradition" as proposed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (Ross, 1983). This approach follows the systematic process outlined by Bryman, which initiates with the formulation of general research questions and proceeds through the selection of subjects, data collection, and the iterative interpretation of findings to determine how theories and concepts, such as cultural identity, are manifested in heritage performance (Sunarti et al., 2022, 2024).



**Figure 3.** Qualitative Research Framework: Poja Dance & Bugis Identity in Selangor

The implementation of this study involves the systematic collection of information through a triangulation of methods: document analysis, purposive sampling, and internal participant observation. Document analysis involves a thorough review of archival data and dance reconstruction records to trace the evolution of the Poja dance from its origins to its contemporary state in Selangor (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023). Purposive sampling is employed to identify and engage authoritative individuals and groups within the Bugis diaspora whose collective memories are vital for understanding the dance's role in cultural sustainability (Sunarti et al., 2022). Furthermore, participant observation allows for a firsthand examination of the dance's structural elements and the social contexts of its performance, ensuring the integration of civilization elements is accurately captured in the choreographic analysis (Nor, 2023; Taim et al., 2025).

As a form of inquiry, the case study focuses on a specific location or phenomenon to explore interpretations rather than to test rigid hypotheses, a distinction emphasized by Van Maanen and Merriam. De Vaus further notes that such in-depth exploration is essential for concept construction, particularly in cultural studies where the research aims to observe phenomena specific to a group of individuals. By integrating these methodological authorities with an observational focus, the research effectively categorizes the re-creation of the Poja dance as a distinct cultural identity signifier for the Bugis community in Selangor (Sunarti et al., 2022; Taim et al., 2025).

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this research indicate that the development of the Poja Bugis dance in Selangor is not a mere chronological progression but a deliberate historical-cultural reconfiguration initiated by the Selangor state government's official visit to South Sulawesi in 1987. This event served as the primary catalyst for a cross-cultural "quest for cultural identity," enabling the strategic transfer of Bugis civilizational elements into a localized Malaysian context (Sunarti et al., 2022; Taim et al., 2025). By interpreting this visit as a transformative "turning point," the study reveals how the subsequent introduction of the Pakkuru Sumange dance in 1988 by Andi Ugie Kamariah provided the raw cultural material for what would eventually be institutionalized as the Poja dance. This process highlights a significant shift from the dance's original Sulawesi roots to a symbolic representation of the Bugis diaspora within the social and political landscape of Selangor (Omar et al., 2020; Sunarti et al., 2022).



**Figure 4.** Poja Dance Performance for Honored Guests

The transition from the ancestral Pakkuru Sumange to the contemporary Poja dance exemplifies the "invention of tradition" as conceptualized by Hobsbawm and Ranger (Ross, 1983). The dance was not a direct, unmodified continuation of a prehistoric practice; rather, it was selectively adapted and formalized to meet the institutional requirements of the Sultan Alam Shah Museum for its 1989 opening ceremony (Picton, 1989; Ross, 1983). This deliberate reconstruction confirms that cultural practices are often formalized to establish a sense of symbolic continuity with a historic past, even when the specific form is modified to serve modern functions in this case, the legitimization of a distinct Bugis-Selangor heritage (Ross, 1983; Sunarti et al., 2022). The formalization of the dance through the Selangor Malay Custom and Heritage Corporation underscores how state-led initiatives can "invent" traditions to strengthen regional identity and provide a structured medium for heritage performance (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023; Sunarti et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the analytical results demonstrate that the Poja dance functions as a dynamic signifier of "identity as becoming," rather than a static "identity as being" (Escosteguy, 2008, 2024). In alignment with Stuart Hall's theoretical framework, the Poja dance represents a continuous process of negotiation where the Bugis community in Selangor reconstructs its *jati diri* (identity) through the lens of migration and cultural adaptation (Sunarti et al., 2022, 2024). The dance acts as a living bridge between the collective memories of the diaspora and their current multicultural environment, illustrating that identity is perpetually "under construction" (Georgiou, 2005; Sunarti et al., 2022). By performing a reconstructed version of their ancestral dance, the Bugis community in Malaysia actively negotiates its position within the broader Malaysian cultural narrative while maintaining a symbolic and psychological link to its origins in South Sulawesi (Omar et al., 2020; Sunarti et al., 2022).

The structural evolution of the Poja dance characterized by changes in movement, music, and performance style reflects the interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors as defined by Edward Shils (Oromaner, 1983; Roth, 1984). The simplification of complex choreographic elements was a pragmatic, exogenous adaptation necessitated by the involvement of non-professional performers within the museum's art group (Nor, 2023; Taim et al., 2025). This functional adaptation ensures the continuity of the tradition in a new cultural setting, as it allows the dance to be transmitted across generations of performers who may not possess specialized training in classical Sulawesi forms (Oromaner, 1983; Taim et al., 2025). Ultimately, the Poja dance in Selangor is a dynamic cultural construct that successfully integrates ancient civilizational elements into a contemporary choreographic framework, serving as a foundational model for the sustainability and creative expansion of performing arts within the region (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023; Taim et al., 2025).

## **5. ISSUES OF IDENTITY AND THE HISTORY OF THE POJA DANCE**

The development of the Poja Bugis dance in Selangor exemplifies a complex process of cultural identity formation, intricately shaped by historical, social, and institutional contingencies. While the dance has achieved prominence in state-level ceremonies, its historical lineage is characterized by a "lack of systematic documentation," forcing a heavy reliance on oral transmission and social memory (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023; Sunarti et al., 2022). This absence of a verifiable archival trail has led to a fluid interpretation of its origins, where the dance is viewed not as a static relic of the past, but as a "reconstructed cultural form" emerging from the historical interaction between Selangor and South Sulawesi (Omar et al., 2020; Sunarti et al., 2022). The 1987 official state visit to Indonesia serves as the primary "critical juncture," initiating a strategic transfer of civilizational elements that would eventually be formalized into the Poja tradition (Sunarti et al., 2022; Taim et al., 2025).

Applying Stuart Hall's theoretical lens, the Poja dance is best understood through the concept of "identity as becoming" (2024). This perspective posits that cultural identity is a dynamic, ongoing process of negotiation rather than a fixed inheritance (Escosteguy, 2008, 2024). The Poja dance, therefore, does not represent a "frozen" Bugis tradition; instead, it reflects a continuous dialogue between the ancestral heritage of South Sulawesi and the contemporary social realities of the Bugis diaspora in Malaysia (Georgiou, 2005; Sunarti et al., 2022). Through this "quest for cultural identity," the community utilizes the dance as a medium to bridge their

historical roots with their localized existence in Selangor, transforming the original Pakkuru Sumange into a distinct signifier of ethnic presence (Omar et al., 2020; Sunarti et al., 2022).

However, the establishment of the Poja dance as a formal cultural identity in Selangor faces several dialectical challenges. First, the tension between "oral transmission" and the need for "systematic documentation" creates a perceived crisis of authenticity (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023). Without a rigorous archival basis, the dance's legitimacy is often contested by those seeking "exact authenticity" rather than "functional continuity" (Oromaner, 1983; Ross, 1983). Second, the multi-ethnic demographic of Selangor complicates the institutionalization of a single ethnic form, as the state must navigate the "politics of representation" in a multicultural society (Georgiou, 2005; Taim et al., 2025). Third, the dance's external origins in South Sulawesi can lead to perceptions of it being a "foreign" rather than a "local" form, necessitating a deliberate process of "cultural adaptation" to ensure its acceptance within the Selangor heritage framework (Sunarti et al., 2022; Taim et al., 2025).

Despite these obstacles, the findings suggest that the Poja dance has been successfully "institutionalized" and accepted as a legitimate cultural signifier. This transition was facilitated by the interaction of "endogenous" community desires for continuity and "exogenous" institutional support from the Sultan Alam Shah Museum and the Selangor state government (Oromaner, 1983; Sunarti et al., 2022). The 1988 reconstruction by Andi Ugie Kamariah was a pivotal act of "inventing tradition," where traditional elements were purposefully modified to suit local performance contexts and modern institutional functions (Nor, 2023; Ross, 1983). Since its formal debut in 1989, the Poja dance has evolved from a state-sponsored performance into a meaningful reference point for collective memory, demonstrating how "reconstructed traditions" can gain deep-rooted cultural legitimacy over time (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023; Sunarti et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the Poja Bugis dance in Selangor serves as a living testament to the "dynamic nature of cultural identity" (2024). It bridges the gap between the ancestral Pakkuru Sumange and the contemporary aspirations of the Bugis community, illustrating how heritage is not merely inherited but actively "constructed and redefined" through the integration of civilizational elements into the performing arts (Norsafini & Thiagarajan, 2023; Taim et al., 2025).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the development and re-creation of the Poja Bugis dance in Selangor, framing it as a pivotal mechanism for cultural identity formation within the Bugis diaspora. The research findings confirm that the Poja dance is not a static heirloom but a "reconstructed" tradition, born out of a strategic historical-cultural exchange initiated by the Selangor state government in 1987. By transforming the Pakkuru Sumange of South Sulawesi into the Poja dance of Selangor, cultural practitioners and institutional actors notably Andi Ugie Kamariah and the Sultan Alam Shah Museum successfully "invented" a tradition that establishes symbolic continuity with an ancestral past while serving contemporary social and political functions.

Theoretically, this research demonstrates the utility of integrating Shils', Hobsbawm's, and Hall's frameworks to understand heritage performance. The evolution of the dance through endogenous community desires and exogenous institutional support illustrates Shils' view of tradition as a dynamic traditum that adapts to ensure its survival across generations. Furthermore, the transition of the dance from a localized Sulawesi greeting into a formalized signifier of Selangor's heritage epitomizes the "invention of tradition," where cultural forms are modified to bolster regional identity and legitimize institutional narratives. Most significantly, the Poja dance encapsulates Stuart Hall's concept of "identity as becoming," proving that for the Bugis community in Malaysia, cultural identity is an ongoing process of negotiation, representation, and reconstruction.

In conclusion, the Poja Bugis dance serves as a living manifestation of cultural sustainability in a multicultural society. Despite the challenges posed by a lack of systematic historical documentation and the reliance on oral transmission, the dance has gained deep-rooted legitimacy as a marker of ethnic presence in Selangor. This research contributes to the broader discourse on Malaysian heritage by highlighting how the integration of civilizational elements into modern choreography allows diaspora communities to maintain collective memory while navigating their position within a new national landscape. Ultimately, the Poja dance stands as a testament to the resilience of Bugis culture, demonstrating that tradition is most vibrant when it is allowed to evolve, adapt, and be redefined by the community

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