The Hybrid Melodic and Textual Repertoires of Southwest Thailand’s  
*Rong Ngeng Tanyong*

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This paper examines aspects of hybridity in melodic repertoire and texts of *rong ngeng*, a genre of social dance and music found in southwest Thailand that developed as two principle styles: one that resembles an idiomatic style of northwest Malayan *ronggeng* (from which it derives its name) that was introduced to the region prior to the Second World War, and a second that developed as a unique new Thai-language style, known as *tanyong* song, when locals modified and expanded the repertoire during the 1940s and ’50s. I begin with a brief explanation of *rong ngeng*’s historical background, followed by a comparison of repertoires in Malay- and Thai-speaking communities, a classification of tunes into four groups based upon their geographical and stylistic sources, an overview of each category, and finally an analysis of some common *rong ngeng* texts.

The ‘first-phase’ of the melodic repertoire comprised pan-Malayan urban theater tunes and folk songs found in rural performers’ repertoires in northwest Malaya that migrated to Lanta Island—situated roughly in the middle of Thailand’s Andaman Sea Coast between Phuket and Langkawi—and took root among Malay and Orak Lawoi islanders. The pioneers of *rong ngeng* on Lanta were itinerant violinists Abu Qasim of Langkawi and Che Mat bin Saad of Satun, who settled for several years in the mid-1930s in a Malay-speaking fishing village known then as Tanjung.1 Abu Qasim and Che Mat’s students, through peregrinations and migrations, propagated *rong ngeng* and taught new performing communities along the mainland Andaman coast. Many of those communities were Thai-speaking and would become central to the transformations that would remake *rong ngeng* as *tanyong* song.

*Tanyong* song was not a form of public performance prior to its incorporation into *rong ngeng*. It was an informal, maritime-region style of lullaby, courtship, and work song, analogous to *sinandung* or *nasib* ballads found in Malay fishing communities of the Malayan peninsula and Sumatra. According to oral accounts, it first appeared in this new form around 1942 or ’43, when Lanta’s performers were pioneering the spread of *rong ngeng* to new areas of the mainland. A young, bilingual, female singer-dancer from Tanjung named Isao is reported to have been the first to sing those melodies in *rong ngeng* performance, and adapt existing Malayan melodies to Thai. Though largely forgotten today for her role in the transformation of *rong ngeng*, Isao was also important to its dissemination. After she married and moved to Langda, her husband’s Thai-speaking village on the mainland, she trained several young women who became some of the earliest proponents of *tanyong* song and established mainland Krabi as an active region for this new style.

**Comparison of Malay- and Thai-speaking Communities’ Song Repertoires**

While the history of *rong ngeng*’s diffusion among Andaman communities is a rich topic for discussion, I will proceed to the subject of formations of its melodic repertoires beginning with comparisons of performances by contemporary Malay- and Thai-speaking groups. Over the past forty or fifty years, these repertoires have decreased in diversity, many tunes have become