Sounding the Dance, Moving the Music
Choreomusicological Perspectives on Maritime Southeast Asian Performing Arts

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How music and movement connect an erstwhile semi-nomadic people to their vanishing history, environment and culture

*Lawrence Ross*

The past half-century has seen extraordinary transformations in the lives of the Orak Lawoi (Urak Lawoi’, Lumu’ Lawoi), a semi-nomadic maritime people living at the one-time ‘fringes’ of Thai and Malay dominions on south-west Thailand’s Andaman Sea coast. Most saliently, the changes have brought increased limitations upon their freedom of movement, and greater encroachment by outsiders upon their habitat. As they have adapted to settled lifestyles and modern transformations to their surroundings, the ‘motion’ once intrinsic to their traditional migratory lives has acquired new meanings.

This chapter examines music and motion within the Orak Lawoi’s principal customary celebration, the semi-annual, three-day *usik pelacak* festival (or *pelacak*, for short), an occasion for venerating the spirit world, participating in a wide range of communal activities and launching a ritual boat to sea. As their traditional migratory lifestyle has declined, these festivals have grown in importance for the greater Orak Lawoi community, yet they are among the few remaining occasions for carrying out their distinctive cultural practices. Such practices, which encompass a diverse spectacle of songs, dances, processions, symbolic acts and rituals, serve as repositories for knowledge of Orak Lawoi history, environment and culture, and strengthen their collective identity as a minority group within a modern, Thai-dominant society.

Drawing from my musicological and ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2006 and 2014, I highlight two types of musically accompanied motion that bond the Orak Lawoi to their historical and cultural identity: a unidirectional, *point-to-point* processional movement that links the community to their supernatural beliefs and imagined homeland; and an *anticlockwise circle* that is performed to venerate sacred objects. These spatial relationships have parallels with Kartomi’s classifications in Acehnese music, dance and visual arts (2004:1), but within the context of Orak Lawoi society and their worldview they offer different possible interpretive frameworks. The *point-to-point* movement is linear, like Kartomi’s *upstream–downstream*, but the relationship between points is more unidirectional than reciprocal, and moves from a local sacred high point to a distant one, traversing the mundane lower world of village and sea along its path. As with