Proceedings of the 4th Symposium
THE ICTM STUDY GROUP ON PERFORMING ARTS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Performing Arts and the Religious Impulse in Southeast Asia
Endangered Performing Arts - Maintenance and Sustainability Efforts
New Research
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In May 2008, I attended a rare event in the small village where I was living at the time in southwestern Thailand. An 82-year-old man, one-time leader of a folk theatre troupe, and in his final years (as it would turn out), decided it was his social responsibility to end his association with his supernatural spirit companions. He would do so with one final ritualised performance, a rong khru, dedicated to the ancestral teachers of his like pa (pronounced li-gay-pa) folk theatre genre. That this rong khru took place in an entirely Muslim community meant there were special implications to the staging of its performance, which I shall relate to changing beliefs and practices of Muslims in this region over the past half-century.

I begin with a personal observation that the Andaman Coast of Southwestern Thailand (henceforth "the Andaman," though not to be confused with the Andaman Islands) is as complex and distinctive an environment for Islam as I've encountered in Southeast Asia. And being quiet and peaceful—unlike the Patani region on the east coast, made infamous because of its long-running conflict—it gets relatively little attention. It is not just war and peace that separates the Andaman from its neighbours, but culturally, linguistically, and religiously, it has had a very different historical trajectory from other Muslim communities on the Malayan Peninsula.

The village at the centre of this study is Ban Khrang. In terms of regional performing arts, is distinctive in two respects: first, for decades—from the 1920s until the 1960s—it produced performing troupes in several genres (like pa, mak Yong folk theatre, ronggeng social dance, and silat martial arts), which were well-known around the Andaman; and second, Ban Khrang is one of the few remaining Muslim villages that in recent years has tried to revive those traditions amidst and against a rising tide of Islamic consciousness.

The broader issues that Ban Khrang presents for this paper and panel on endangerment and sustainability are how village performers negotiate religious changes when pressured by increasingly conservative community norms, and the types of work they do to preserve endangered traditions. And perhaps lessons drawn from their experiences might offer useful models for the wider region, because despite the distinctiveness of this case, the trends and factors found in this study are not unique to Ban Khrang, but are challenges faced by Muslim performers throughout Southeast Asia. I focus here on two separate, but interrelated revivals: one is the revival of Islamic identity that began in the early 1970s, and continues to be embraced enthusiastically by many Muslims today; the second is a revival of cultural identity that began taking root just over a decade ago, partly in response to the cultural impoverishment left in the wake of the aforementioned Islamic revival.

My point of reference is the rong khru mentioned earlier, which was perceived to be a transition between old and new guards. However, my purpose here is not to talk about what took place in the performance, but rather discuss the transitions it exemplified for Muslim performing arts as a whole in the region. To put it briefly, the "retiring" of the spirits from the village allowed a new generation of performers to emerge, unburdened by past practices. This liberated them, in a sense, to rearticulate the community's cultural identity within the new conservatism.

Performing Artists and the Supernatural World

I now return to discuss the troupe leader, Pak Dun, whom I mentioned earlier, and the village. Pak Dun was the nai rong “troupe leader” of the village like pa theatre. The group was founded in the 1920s by his uncle and other village players, and his personal involvement dates back to 1947 when he assumed the principle role, held previously by his uncle, of Khaeo, the Indian trader: a character that dresses colourfully, wears a bearded mask with a large nose, and speaks a pseudo-Indian patois, while being playful, comedic, and a bombastic singer and dancer (see Ross, 2017).

Pak Dun was a respected elder of the close-knit Ban Khrang community (population: approximately 1,000), but his practices had become anachronistic, and provided something of a conundrum for the