

Hikayat Abu Qasim: The Legacy of a Twentieth-Century *Rong Ngeng* Pioneer in Thailand's Andaman Coast Region¹

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Abstract

In the mid 1930s, a violin player named Abu Qasim from Langkawi Island in Malaya arrived in a small fishing community on Lanta Island in southwest Thailand and taught a local community to play a social dance music he called *rong ngeng*. A couple of years later, a young woman named Bunga returned home to Lanta, also from Langkawi, and became the village's first *rong ngeng* dance teacher. From this confluence of music and dance emerged traveling troupes of local performers that propagated the form throughout the region—from Phuket to Satun—where it flourished for decades as a popular medium for social entertainment among Malay- and Thai-speaking communities.

¹ This article is the first of three parts documenting *rong ngeng* history and accompanies a broader study of the social changes and musical aspects that characterize the genre over this period. I compiled this history from over 150 hours of oral interviews conducted in southwest Thailand and northwest Malaysia between 2006 and 2009. Of the informants who contributed to this study, Lat Khlongdi deserves special mention. Pak Lat was an eyewitness and participant in the earliest period of *rong ngeng* as a young boy on Lanta Island. During our dozens of hours of interviews, he provided me with a wealth of information for this study during, only a fraction of which I have presented here. The research for this article was partially funded by The Project of Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University with support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF).

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Using oral accounts from some of its earliest practitioners, this article looks at *rong ngeng*'s place in the Andaman Coast society in the context of major socio-economic and political changes that were occurring in the region, and uncovers unwritten histories of the individuals that built its first communities.

Introduction

Sometime around 1936, the *rong ngeng* social dance arrived in southwest Thailand for the first time in a small, rural Malay-speaking community on Lanta Island, brought there by an itinerant violin player named Abu Qasim from Langkawi Island in Malaya, who taught villagers to play its musical repertoire. A couple of years later, a local woman named Bunga returned from Malaya and introduced formal dances to accompany the music. As the form flourished on Lanta, it was professionalized. Villagers formed touring groups and propagated *rong ngeng* widely until it was adopted by the Thai-speaking communities in the region. As its popularity spread, locals transformed it into a unique Thai-language medium that came to reflect a hybrid identity, characteristic of Andaman Coast communities.

Rong ngeng spread and reached its peak of popularity in an era marked by major economic, political, and social changes in the region. While the songs themselves were not explicit commentaries on these changes, the form as a whole was reflective of those large-scale transformations. Abu Qasim's life recounts like a modern version of the Malay prosaic historical literature *hikayat*, chronicling the travels, magic, influential events and people that were fundamental to the creation of this cultural icon.

The first part of this article studies the history of *rong ngeng* and the earliest stage of its development in southwest Thailand during the 1930s and '40s through the examination of the lives and legacies of key individuals who were instrumental in its introduction, propagation, and transformation. This history places the emergence of

the form on Lanta into a context that first looks at cultural and geographical conditions in northwest Malaya that formed Abu Qasim's development as a musician, and oral legends of a violin-playing namesake that would befit an old *hikayat*.

The following sections set forth a chronology of *rong ngeng*'s early development through descriptive accounts of the community of early performers compiled from oral histories of its surviving members; describing now-vanished lifestyles from a lost era, in which wandering youths spread throughout the lower Andaman basin propagating the form and new performing communities appeared in their paths. This chronology ends at the cusp of a new era of widespread popularity and growth for *rong ngeng* when local players transformed it into a Thai medium, performers proliferated throughout every district, and its social dances became a creative medium for courtship.

What is Rong Ngeng?

Rong ngeng derives in name, repertoire, and style, from the Malayan *ronggeng*, a popular early- to middle-twentieth-century social music, dance, and song that acquired specific regional variations and a distinct history in maritime southwest Thailand.

It was performed by rural Malay- and Thai-speaking Muslims and Urak Lawoi groups of three or four musicians that included a violinist, two drummers playing *rebana* frame drums,³ and a gong player, as well as several (most often unmarried) female singer-

³ Most of the local terms used in this article are Malay, reflecting the period when that was the principle language spoken and sung by performers. Names of items, such as drums, or descriptive terms typical to *rong ngeng*, such as the act of touring, changed as the form assimilated into Thai-speaking society, so certain common Thai glosses are given beside the Malay terms as well. Malay usage here mostly follows standardized spellings used by the Malaysian government's Institute of Language and Literature. (Hajah Noresah bt. Baharom, ed., *Kamus Dewan Edisi Ketiga* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1996) xxxviii.) Exceptions are noted in the text. Thai terms use the Thai terms, including proper names, are Romanized here using the Royal Thai General System of Transcription.

dancers.⁴ Its repertoire originally comprised Malay-language folk and contemporary popular tunes that later, as it spread to Thai-speaking communities, incorporated new melodic, textual, and stylistic elements adopted from local Thai folk songs, and twentieth-century central Thai social dance. Performances were social events that took place at weddings, *lepas niat* (vow-fulfilling) ceremonies, new-house 'raising' celebrations, circumcisions, municipal festivals, as well as public dances held outdoors in villages and markets. They were often pecuniary ventures that saw men paying small amounts of money for a three- or four-minute round with a female singer-dancer.

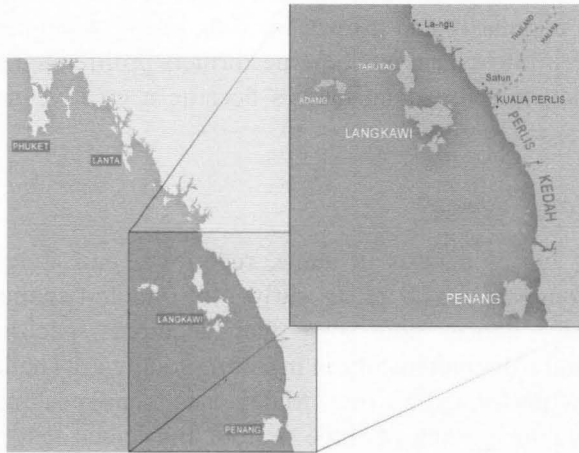


Figure 1: Langkawi Island and its environs

⁴ Female singer-dancers today are referred to in Thai as *nang rong ngeng*, synonymous with the Malay *perempuan rong ngeng*, both meaning 'rong ngeng women.' Local Malay speakers also use the genderless term, *penari* (dancer). In Malaysia, where these performers are called *perempuan joget* (joget women), the term often carries negative connotations associated with immorality. Paul Cressey used the term 'taxi-dancer' to describe women who dance professionally, receiving a fee for each round. (Paul G Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: a sociological study in commercialized recreation and city life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932) 3.)

Sources of Early *Rong Ngeng*

In the pre-Second World War period Langkawi, along with neighboring mainland Malayan (now Malaysian) states of Perlis and Kedah, and Satun Province in southwest Thailand, formed a border region at the margins of nascent Thai and Malayan polities; an often-lawless hinterland situated at a midway point between larger commercial centers in Penang and Phuket. This rural backwater was populated with local migratory Malays, Urak Lawoi, as well as immigrants from Malaya, Thailand, and Sumatra, living in maritime- and agricultural-based communities.⁵ It was a diverse and dynamic confluence of languages and cultures, an amalgam of those seeking better livelihoods, fugitives from justice, or escaping from the more rigid social norms of mainland society.

Langkawi had several indigenous folk performances groups scattered around the island, and traveling *bangsawan* theater troupes occasionally set up camp in local villages for a few weeks at a time; but until the post-war period, there were no native *rong ngeng* troupes. Local folk performers in various genres learned their craft from outsiders, or traveled to the mainland to become apprentices with established groups and returned to form their own ensembles. Their destination was typically Kuala Perlis, a vibrant port town at the mouth of the Perlis River, the largest and closest mainland settlement to Langkawi, and a cultural hub where folk theater and music groups from around the region traveled to perform for local festivals and celebrations.

⁵ This article does not attempt to explain ethnic identities in complex borderland society, but among Malay and Urak Lawoi (the two most significant ones in the context of this discussion of *rong ngeng*) generations of intermarriage and individual identity choice has blurred any distinctions. In very simplistic terms, religious faith is a defining characteristic of these two groups; Malays are Muslims and Urak Lawoi believe in a folk religion. However, as both groups live together and have many shared cultural practices—especially prior to the rise of Islamic missionaries in the region, beginning in the early 1970s—those postulates do not hold up under scrutiny.

Abu Qasim's musical repertoire coalesced from Perlis' heterogeneous musical environment of Malay and Thai folk theaters, itinerant '*tok selampit*' and '*awang belanga*' singer-storytellers, shamanistic rituals and popular social dances. It combined traditional folk songs, contemporary *bangsawan* tunes, and shared many characteristics with a contemporaneous Perlis social dance genre called *canggung*. *Canggung*, which began as a rice-pounding tune sung by Perlis farmers, said to originate in a now-extinct local folk theater called *makyung laut*,⁶ grew, similar to *rong ngeng*, to encompass a diverse range of regional folk songs and pan-Malayan popular tunes. In a broader context, both *rong ngeng* and *canggung* became essentially localized versions of the *ronggeng/joget* social dance that was popular throughout Malaya during that period; a form that was played at country fairs, urban amusement parks,⁷ by traveling *bangsawan* groups, and distributed as commercial gramophone recordings.⁸

Langkawi Legends of Abu Qasim

Abu Qasim came from my village and was the same generation as my father who told me stories about him. When he was a young man, he went to Perlis and came back a great violin player. He was associated with a gangster, also named Abu Qasim, who took him to perform

⁶ F. I. Rejab called *makyung laut* a "Siamese form played at the edge of the beach" in which one of the dances was called *canggung*. (Rejab, F. I. "Tarian Changgong," *Mastika*, October 1962 (1962): 8.) A number of performers in their seventies or eighties throughout the region say that their parents were *makyung laut* practitioners, but musicians in Perlis and Langkawi have mostly forgotten the form, although they often cite it as a source for *canggung*'s style and repertoire.

⁷ A 1942 advertisement described a Second World War-era *canggung* performance at Penang's Yachiyo Amusement, Park as "Ronggeng Perlis". (Yachiyo Amusement Park. Advertisement, *Penang Shinbum*, 23 March 1942: 2. Print).

⁸ *Bangsawan* songs were the most popular of all gramophone recordings in the 1930s and were "accessible to the general population" through their public performance at amusement parks. (Tan Sooi Beng, "The 78 Rpm Record Industry in Malaya Prior to World War II," *Asian Music* 28. 1 (1996): 14-17.)

at islands all around the region. The gangster used magic to transport the musicians and dancers underwater, inside a protective bubble, so that the police and pirates could not catch them. They always traveled this way. Abu Qasim, the violin player, disappeared around the time I was born and no one ever saw or heard from him again.

–Lah, Pinang Tunggal, Langkawi

Abu Qasim traveled all around these islands playing his violin. He played so beautifully that sea cucumbers would crawl out from the sea and birds would descend from the sky to listen to him. He traveled from Langkawi up to Thailand, to Bulon Island and Lanta. Everyone knew who he was. He died on Lanta and the ‘orang laut’ took him for burial in Phuket.

–Mahim, Tuba Island, Langkawi

Among folk performers on Langkawi, the name Abu Qasim elicits memories of a legendary individual recognized as the one-time apotheosis of violinists. According to local legends, he was a young man who traveled to Perlis to learn to play the violin, and returned later as a master of the instrument, a *ronggeng* ensemble leader, and an *orang megah*, a glorified person believed to possess extraordinary powers.

The Abu Qasim of the previous two accounts and other anecdotes survives only in the imaginations of living Langkawians who imbue ‘him’ with mythological qualities that reach beyond the storytellers’ embellishments to reflect their own lives and environments. The narrator and subject of these tales share the same home village or travel similar journeys.⁹ They have common underworld associations, as in the first account, and live as *orang laut*, literally, ‘sea people’, in the second. Although it may be tempting to

⁹ I have replaced the names and villages of these two narrators with pseudonyms at their request. Elsewhere in this chapter, I have used actual names and places in documenting oral histories.

interpret these legends as confirming a connection between the Abu Qasim of Langkawi legends and the Abu Qasim who later pioneered *rong ngeng* in southwest Thailand, there is no conclusive proof that they were the same musician or even that the first Abu Qasim was anything more than an aggregation of several musical (or other) personalities whose histories were particularized in Langkawi folklore. But even as circumstantial as these connections may appear to be, they not only set the stage for the accounts that follow, but set forth a diachronic connection between a violinist named Abu Qasim who disappeared from Langkawi, and the Abu Qasim who arrived on Lanta at more or less the same time.

Sea Travel in the Andaman Coast Region

*I was twelve the first time I traveled to perform outside of Lanta. Wa Yusuf brought eight of us to play in Nam Ron for three or four days.¹⁰ Saman played rebana along with Una from Ko Cham and Pendek. I played gong. The dancers were Mijjah, Reah, and Halui. We played at the village headman's house. While we were there, a crazy person stole our boat and hid it in the mangrove swamp. They told us it had been taken for repairs. There were no other boats so we had to stay in the area and perform for a month until our boat came back. I think they liked *rong ngeng* and wanted to keep us there.*

—Lat Khlongdi, Laem Pho

<i>yang dok re</i>	The <i>senduduk</i> flower ¹¹
<i>samak rak khon thale</i>	I am willing to love the sea girl
<i>mai mi ruea cha khe</i>	(but) there is no boat
<i>pai ha nong</i>	to go find her

—local Thai verse sung by Yafat Wahakrak, Laem Kruat

¹⁰ 'Wa,' short for *tua* (old), designates the eldest in a family or generically describes an older person. In this case, Wa Yusuf was the eldest brother of Lat's mother. He took them to perform in Bo Nam Ron, Khlong Tom District, Krabi. Also, see the note for 'Long' below.

¹¹ *Pokok senduduk* is a common Malay name for *Melastoma malabathricum*.

Sea travel was the primary mode of transportation in this region and, since very few roads connected coastal villages and towns, communications, commerce, kinship ties, and the first *rong ngeng* communities developed along commonly traveled sea routes.¹² Until motorized sea travel became common in the 1950s, most people traveled by *perahu*, a narrow wooden oar- or sail-powered vessel that could carry a dozen or more passengers. A trip by *perahu* could take anywhere from a several hours to a couple of days, depending upon the distance traveled and seasonal winds; longer journeys were broken up with overnight stops. There were relatively few *perahu* in those days so that even a short trip could require a wait of weeks or months until transportation became available. This was the case for Lat when he traveled to Nam Ron on the mainland with Yusuf in 1939 and for Hassan Rasoibut when he returned to Lanta from Langkawi with his wife and three children at the onset of the Second World War.¹³

Hassan's trip, which took even longer, offers some insight into how Abu Qasim might have traveled between the same points a half-decade earlier. The first leg of the journey took the family to Pulau Babi 'Ko Mu'¹⁴ on a trader's private vessel. There, they waited for several months until there was another boat available to take them further north to Hat Yao, at the mouth of the Trang River, and a layover of several more months. A third boat trip took them to Pulau Mutiara 'Ko Muk' where, again they spent months waiting for a boat. Finally, a year and a half after leaving Langkawi, they arrived on Lanta. While Abu Qasim's trip to Lanta almost certainly did not take as long as Hassan's (for reasons discussed below), it likely took him

¹² Even with today's well-constructed, mostly paved, and comprehensive network of roads, travel among littoral communities by land is circuitous in comparison with sea travel.

¹³ Hassan Rasoibut, or 'Jan' as he was commonly known, was an avid *rong ngeng* singer and dancer and member of Lanta's first *rong ngeng* group to perform in Bangkok. His son, Ahmad Rasoibut of Ban Thung Kha, Krabi, who was twelve at the time, recounted the story of their journey.

¹⁴ Ko Mu, in Trang Province, is also called Ko Sukon.

along a similar route, perhaps calling at these islands and littoral communities.

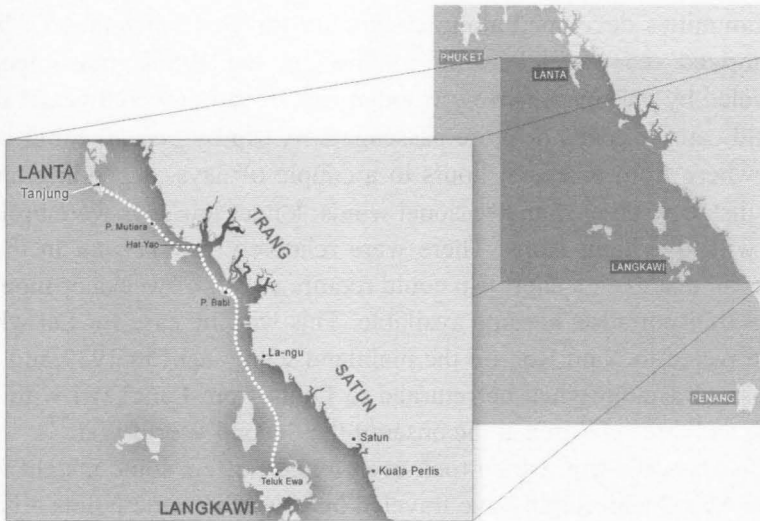


Figure 2: Hassan Rasoibut's route from Langkawi to Lanta in 1941

Why Abu Qasim went to Lanta in the first place remains speculation. According to Lat Khlongdi, he arrived just as an itinerant traveler and had no kinship ties to the island (although many islanders' antecedents were from northwest Malaya). Perhaps he knew people there, or stopped in transit while traveling somewhere else, such as Phuket—a likely proposition since that was his eventual destination and where he ultimately died.

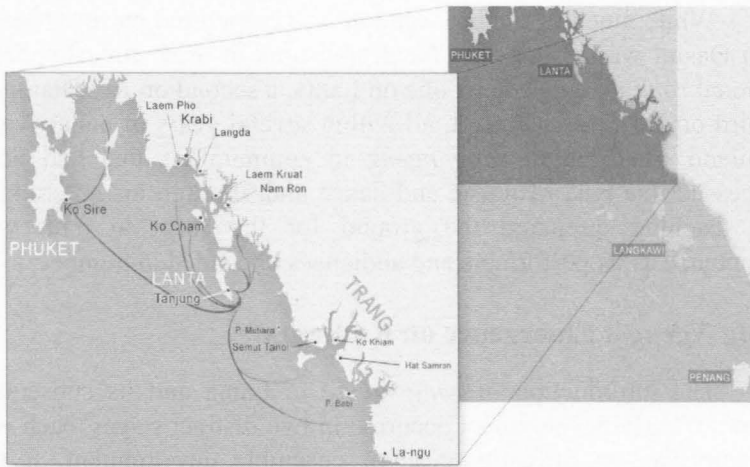


Figure 3: Routes of dissemination for *rong ngeng*

Abu Qasim's life was devoted to traveling, playing violin, and teaching his songs like a musical Johnny Appleseed.¹⁵ He sowed seeds of *rong ngeng* in local communities wherever he went. His routes and modes of travel, from his arrival on Lanta until his death on Phuket in the 1960s, are a map of *rong ngeng's* propagation in southwest Thailand, radiating outward from Lanta beginning in the late 1930s. However, the form does not appear anywhere else in the region prior to that time, suggesting that his passage from Langkawi, traversing Satun and Trang provinces, was transitory at most, without any sojourns of the length endured by Hassan and his family.

¹⁵ John Chapman was an "American pioneer and orchardist" whose nickname, Johnny Appleseed, is used here as a folk expression, describing a traveler who propagates something. ("Chapman," *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 25 Oct. 2009 <[Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Chapman](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Chapman)>.)

While much of the propagation was carried out by his students, Abu Qasim was responsible for establishing at least three important regional *rong ngeng* centers; one on Lanta, a second on Ko Cham, and a third on Ko Sire in Phuket, all within several years of his arrival in Thailand. He brought *rong ngeng* to communities that had never witnessed this type of music and dance and, through his entertaining and teaching, prepared the ground for the form to gain wide acceptance as its performers and audiences expanded in number.

Rong Ngeng's Emergence on Ko Lanta

The introduction of *rong ngeng* to Lanta and its subsequent period of early development occurred in two distinct stages, each with an emphasis on different areas of ensemble development. It was initially an informal village entertainment played at social gatherings in which training in music and song repertoires were predominant. Later, when Lanta performers turned their focus to the cultivation of dance, the form was professionalized, commercialized, and disseminated throughout the region. The two men who led the first stage were violinists Abu Qasim and Che Mat bin Saad of Satun.

Abu Qasim (known as Ma'asem to the Urak Lawoi) was a man of average size and weight, and dusky '*damdaeng*' in complexion. He played left-handed and was considered a fine violinist with a large and diverse repertoire of songs that 'resided in his heart'¹⁶ rather than as written musical notation. He suffered from partial deafness that worsened later in his life. However, this handicap was not evident to all and does not appear to have been more than a minor obstacle to his musicianship, although it could explain his idiosyncratic playing style. He apparently compensated by adjusting his violin technique to make hearing the instrument easier. He tuned its strings tautly to high pitches and held its body high on his right shoulder with his right ear close to the sound hole. As Abu Qasim played, he sat with his back to the audience and hummed or "made noises" to himself.

¹⁶ Local folk musicians often use the expression "*duduk dalam hati*," or its Thai equivalent, to describe how they remember their music without using written notation.

Che Mat was a corpulent man with thick fingers who, in addition to working as a *rong ngeng* performer, had taught at a *pondok* (Islamic religious school) in Satun,¹⁷ and was a powerful *bomoh* (shaman) who treated illnesses and maledictions, assisted fishermen, and performed love magic. During his lifetime, he acquired a unique and respected position in the communities where he resided on Lanta, later on Ko Po, and in Semut Tanoi. Locals regarded him as a well traveled, educated, and a pious man who prayed regularly and always wore a white skullcap.¹⁸

Around 1936, Abu Qasim and Che Mat arrived in Tanjung Village, a small Malay and Urak Lawoi fishing and agricultural community on the island. These two travelers played and taught Malayan songs to local villagers at nightly gatherings held at private homes. These were the island's first *rong ngeng* training sessions, where people of all ages from Tanjung and its neighboring communities went to play, dance, and socialize.¹⁹

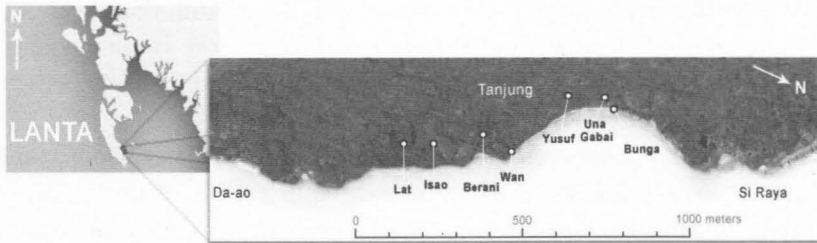


Figure 4: Map of Tanjung Village, its environs, and homes of some noteworthy individuals

¹⁷ Personal communication from Bao Che Mat, Ko Muk.

¹⁸ Descriptions of Abu Qasim and Che Mat came from numerous personal correspondences from people who lived, traveled, and performed with him including Husein Barem, Tilid Barem, Bida Chaipet, Bao Che Mat, Dollah Dibut, Kameh Hapon, Phueak Khiaosot, Lat and Sabu Khlongdi, Hamid Kimbasi, Man Matdiya, Baya and Chio Pramongkit, Pak Rahman, Pak Son, Ngem Thaleluek, On and Yafat Wahakrak.

¹⁹ Personal communication from Lat Khlongdi.

Tanjung, meaning ‘cape,’ encompassed several small mixed Malays and Urak Lawoi coastal settlements stretching approximately one mile along a small bay and promontories on the island’s southeast coast.²⁰ To its north was Si Raya, the island’s ‘*amphoe*’—administrative and commercial center. To the south and west (inland) was a dense, tiger-filled jungle that surrounded most of the village. Villagers built wood and thatch homes on the beach or on higher inland ground near their fields and orchards. Most people made their livelihood from the sea, fishing, shrimping and collecting shellfish. Those with land planted rice, fruits, or Pará rubber trees. Young men often worked as wage laborers, cutting and burning mangrove wood into charcoal and shipping it to markets in Penang and Singapore.

Abu Qasim was approximately thirty-two years old when he arrived from Langkawi. Che Mat was about twenty-five.²¹ They went to Tanjung as travelers and stayed as guests of Yusuf, their first local violin student, who lived at the edge of his small rubber estate. In the evenings they went to play *rong ngeng*, usually at ‘Old Man’ Wan’s,²² who lived on the beach, or at the homes of their other violin students, Una Gabai, who lived near Yusuf, or Berani, a fisherman who lived about three hundred yards to the south.

The first generation of Lanta *rong ngeng* musicians also became the first local teachers of the repertoire and leaders of the village’s earliest touring groups. They included Yusuf, Una Gabai, and Berani, all in their late twenties and early thirties, and were the first violinists. There were several other men in this pioneer group: Pendek, in his

²⁰ Thai names for Tanjung and Da-ao villages are Ban Hua Laem and Ban Hua Laem Klang.

²¹ It is impossible to state exact ages for performers from this period because records, for the most part, do not exist or, if they do, as in the case of identity cards issued later in life, birth years are often off by several years or more. I have tried to narrow down the range of years by asking as wide a sample people as possible to give their estimate, and combine that data with the markers of relative ages and rank among siblings inherent in local forms of address. It is an imperfect system but improves as the sample of informants grows.

²² Personal communication from Lat Khlongdi.

early twenties, arrived from Laem Pho as a *phran* (jester) with a traveling *manora* folk theater troupe and stayed on and off as a guest in Yusuf's home;²³ Madiyya Butmin, who was Berani's paternal uncle, lived on nearby Pulau Dapur 'Ko Po'; A young man named Yob Yasen played *rebana*.

Bunga's Tanjung Rong Ngeng Academy

Not long after *rong ngeng*'s establishment in Tanjung, a local woman named Bunga returned from Langkawi and started teaching formalized dance movements to accompany the musical repertoire played at the gatherings. She was a popular teacher and attracted many students. Her home soon became a focal point for social entertainment in the village and, by the late 1930s, was an active training center—analogue to a vocational academy—that produced successive generations of musicians and young female singer-dancers. They formed a replenishable workforce of professional *rong ngeng* performers who carried a commercial variety of the form to nearby islands and coastal villages.

Bunga was a Tanjung native, born around 1914. She was small and slim with a light brown complexion, a kind-hearted, Malay-speaking woman, known to villagers as 'Long,' and to her mother, Juriah, by the pet name Bunga.²⁴ She moved to Langkawi and married a man there, but returned to Lanta, still a young woman in her twenties, after her husband passed away several years prior to the war. In Tanjung, Bunga lived with Juriah and her younger sister Bedah in a wooden home on posts on the beach at the fringe of her mother's coconut grove.

It is not clear what led Bunga to Langkawi in the first place, whether she traveled there alone or with her mother and sister.

²³ Personal communication from Lat Khlongdi.

²⁴ 'Long,' short for '*sulung*' (eldest), is the top level in a Malay taxonomy for siblings denoting the eldest sibling in a family. It is synonymous with '*Wa*' but does not occur as a generic form of address for older people.

However, it was there that she learned to dance and, upon her return to Tanjung in the late 1930s, she became the first to teach formal Malayan *ronggeng* dance movements in the nascent *rong ngeng* scene founded by Abu Qasim and Che Mat. Prior to that time, people danced at *rong ngeng* gatherings but did so in a free manner without instruction.²⁵

Two young Malay women in their late teens named Amewah and Ah became Bunga's first students²⁶ and, as more villagers became interested in learning, her dance group expanded to include a dozen or more women including most notably, Mijjah and Itam, who were in their early to mid twenties, Sima, who was several years younger, and Nih, a young teenager from Da-ao. These women all attained wide recognition beyond Lanta in the late 1930s and early war years as troupe leaders and dance teachers emulating Bunga's model.

The New *Rong Ngeng* Singer-Dancers

When I was a child, I lived in Tanjung. My teacher was an unmarried woman called Mak Long who moved from Langkawi. I did not want to go to school; instead, Mak Long invited me to learn rong ngeng at her home. There were ten or twelve people every evening playing music and dancing, mostly girls. We traveled by rowboat from Lanta to play in many places, leaving in the morning and arriving in the evening. The boat was full with dancers including Bida, Lijah, Che Mah, Chi, and others. 'Pak Long' Yusuf played violin. He was from Lanta but he lived in Semut Tanoi. I was still young at that time, not yet twenty years old and unmarried. Later, the people in Ko Khiam asked me to move there and gave me land to build a home. They wanted me to teach them to play the real rong ngeng.

—Pak Man, son of Itam

²⁵ Personal communication Lat Khlongdi.

²⁶ Personal communication Lat Khlongdi.

My father and mother used to train performers at Mak Long's home. I began learning to dance at age twelve, after I finished fourth grade and, after a month or two, Mak Long took me to dance in the 'amphoe.' She was always generous when she paid us. At age thirteen my mother took me to stay with Pan Yakob,²⁷ the leader of the Ko Siboya rong ngeng group whose daughter Piniah was the lead dancer. I stayed there for three years and did not see my parents until they came to fetch me. After that, I returned to Tanjung and led my own group together with my mother for several years. We toured everywhere. I stopped when I married at nineteen.

—Bida Chaipet, daughter of Amewah and Yob, Tanjung

Bunga never remarried or had children but, for more than two decades, until her death in the 1960s, she invited children from the village to her home every day to play, sing, and dance *rong ngeng*. Evening gatherings began to take place regularly on the beach in front her home and attracted people of all ages from around Lanta and elsewhere in the region. Every night they danced and played under the open sky until the sun rose, illuminated only by *nam man yang* oil lamps.²⁸

Bunga's training also included other aspects of *rong ngeng* performance, such as how to sing *pantun* (Malay quatrains), maintain appropriate social demeanor, and prepare love charms with makeup and accessories. The students spent about one or two months learning to become dancers, and 'graduated' by performing in public, often at shop houses in Si Raya. At her home, Bunga began to collect money from the patrons who danced with her students and, at the end of the night, divided the money among the dancers and musicians. This

²⁷ Yakob was a Kelantanese immigrant living on Ko Tulang and later Ko Siboya, who led *makyung* and *rong ngeng* troupes.

²⁸ Oil used in lamps, prior to fossil fuels (and later, electrification), was obtained from the sap of the forest tree, *Ton Yang* or *Ton Yang Na* (*Dipterocarpus alatus*).

economic model came to characterize professional *rong ngeng* performances for decades until the 1960s when groups began to command fixed fees.

Young women during that era were less independent than young men, but as *rong ngeng* performers, they had unique opportunities to travel and socialize. They benefited from becoming dancers in two significant ways: from their performance fees, they achieved some economic independence for themselves and support for their families; and through regular public exposure, they had a wide choice of prospective marriage partners. Becoming a *rong ngeng* dancer was a rite of passage for teenage girls on Lanta (and later in other areas as the form spread) rather than a social stigma and they were not generally thought of as 'loose' women or prostitutes, as were *ronggeng* taxi dancers in Malaya at that time.²⁹ In terms of local norms, their dress and behavior were modest, and they were always under the watchful eye of a *mak noi* (female chaperone), often an older 'retired' dancer. Some used their performing skills to elevate their status and many of the better-known performers married men from prominent positions in their communities.

To enhance their appeal and raise their socio-economic level, *rong ngeng* dancers commonly used *ilmu pengasih* (love magic) consisting of incantations and other rituals that they believed would make them appear more attractive, give strength and beauty to their voices, and provide endurance for hours of non-stop singing and dancing, which often lasted for eight hours or more. In pre-performance rituals, dancers applied magic charms to their handkerchiefs and face powder (the latter known in Thai as *phithi sek*

²⁹ Perceptions of the morality of *bangsawan* performers, who were often *ronggeng* singers as well, is discussed by Tan Sooi Beng. (Tan Sooi Beng, "Breaking Traditions: Women Stars of Bangsawan Theater," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Performing Arts in Southeast Asia* 151. 4 (1995): 611-12.) Baharoodin Ahmad mentioned in a personal communication that many female performers he interviewed were reluctant to talk about their *ronggeng* and *bangsawan* past due to embarrassment, but were happy to discuss their later careers as movie actors.

paeng, a ‘casting charms on powder’ ritual).³⁰ These practices typically incorporated esoteric texts in Pali, Malay, Arabic or Thai that were practiced by Muslim, animists, and Buddhists alike, and folk charms such as the ‘tears’ of a *duyung*, considered to be a potent charm obtained from a manatee-like sea mammal. Dancers held the white powder—a combination of rice powder and fragrant flower extracts—in their upward-facing cupped hands as the group leader read an incantation, and applied it to their faces in a single gesture at the ritual’s conclusion.

The female *rong ngeng* dancer’s handkerchief was another indispensable performance accessory that she held between the fingers of her right hand as she danced. It was a powerful article imbued with love magic that could beguile any man who brushed against it. According to local beliefs, love charms could make women who appeared normal during the daytime become irresistible at night, and local folklore abounds with stories and songs about men who, once charmed by *rong ngeng* dancers and their *duyung* tears, would swim across channels or walk for days to see their objects of adoration.

³⁰ Sathaphon Sisatchang discusses *sek paeng* and other rituals associated with *rong ngeng*, and implies that these are inherited Thai Buddhist practices. I think it is more accurate to characterize these as regional folk practices rather than the domain of a particular religious or ethnic group. (Sathaphon Sisatchang [สถาพร ศรีสังข์], “Social and Cultural Mixing of Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims Occuring in Rong Ngeng Performance in Kantang District, Trang Province [การผสมผสานทางสังคม วัฒนธรรม ไทยพุทธและ ไทยมุสลิมที่ปรากฏในการเล่นล้อแห่งของอำเภอกันตัง จังหวัดตรัง],” Thesis. Songkhla: Si Nakharinwirot, 2533 (1990). (In Thai)).

Ton rae
 lop ban mai rot sia laeo de
 thuk sane nam pla duyong
 khot khao sak wak
 khit theung khu rak kin khao mai long

 thuk sane nam pla duyong
 kin khao mai long sak kham diao

The senduduk tree
 I can't return home, I've lost
 been charmed with *duyong* tears
 scoop a single ladle of rice
 missing my love partner, I
 cannot eat
 been charmed with *duyong* tears
 I cannot eat a single bite ³¹

Out of Lanta: Early Propagation and Formations of Rong Ngeng Communities

During the war, we walked all over in search of gigs. The gong was large and heavy. Two men had to carry it on a pole over their shoulders. Other men carried the instruments and other things. The dancers did not carry anything. We went in the beginning of 'angin barat' and walked for days, sometimes a month or more, before returning home. People did not always come looking to hire us. When we arrived in a village, a host gave us food and a place to sleep. Life was difficult and we often just went to get rice to eat. If it was late and we were not earning much collection, we played 'Siapa Itu.' It was lively and people liked it because men put coins on the ground and the women, while still dancing, picked them up with their mouths. After a few days in a village, we set out on foot looking for the next performance.

—Lat Khlongdi

In the late 1930s, Lanta's *rong ngeng* troupes began traveling to neighboring islands and coastal villages in Krabi and Trang to

³¹ Klin Khongmeungphet [กลิ่น คงเหมือนเพชร], *Study and Analysis of Rong Ngeng Folk Songs and Tanyong Folk Songs in Krabi Province* [การศึกษาวิเคราะห์เพลงพื้นบ้านรอนงแงะ เพลงตันหยง จังหวัดกระบี่] (Krabi, Thailand: Withayalai Phalaseuksa Krabi, 2538 (1995)). (In Thai, translation by the author)

perform. Yusuf, accompanied by six to eight other performers, led many of these trips. A host, typically a *penghulu* or *puyai* (village headman) often initiated a journey by inviting them to play at a local celebration and sent a small delegation of villagers to Tanjung in a *perahu* to fetch them.

Villagers held celebrations, consisting of rituals, feasts, and entertainment, outdoors during the dry season, usually at the beginning of the *angin barat* (seasonal west wind) in March or April. They lasted for three days or more, and *rong ngeng* troupes would perform each night. Their host did not pay them performing fees but provided them with food, shelter, and a late night hot drink. For every dance round, the group's *ketua* (leader) collected a ten-*satang* coin (approximately the value of a cup of hot tea) from each participant.

When the celebration ended, people in other villages in the area often invited the troupes to play under similar arrangements, or the performers just set out walking from village to village. They proceeded to tour in this manner, '*jalan bangsai*,'³² for weeks or months. Traveling conditions were difficult. The troupes survived on anything they could earn or the generosity of their hosts; however, they regularly returned on the road to perform.

The *rong ngeng* performer of this era was peripatetic, flexible, and lived without ties to a fixed job. In many ways, this was characteristic of local lifestyles in general. Very few teenagers who became performers went to school and, if they did, rarely had more than four years of elementary education. It was common for them to spend long periods of weeks or months, traveling away from their homes and families when fishing or planting seasons ended. As *rong ngeng* performers, they traveled to neighboring and far-flung communities, but did so as part of larger, close-knit social groups.

Men and women generally had different tenures as career performers. For many men, *rong ngeng* became a life-long occupation

³² *Bangsai* is the local pronunciation of the Malay *bangsal* (barn or shed) which is used colloquially to mean a folk performance stage. *Jalan* means 'walk,' thus *jalan bangsai* is to walk from performance to performance. The Thai *doen rong* has the same meaning.

that supplemented other part- or full-time forms of work. Most women, on the other hand, began performing in their early or pre-teen years and stopped dancing when they married, usually in their late teens or early twenties. Women who continued dancing were generally those who established a name for themselves and became troupe leaders, often in partnership with their husbands if they were married. Each generation and region of performers produced its own female dance stars. In the pre-war and wartime years, the Lanta dancers with widely recognized names in the Andaman Coast region included Rong Ngeng Amewah, Rong Ngeng Mijjah, and Rong Ngeng Sima.

New Rong Ngeng Communities

Che Mat and Yusuf were the first to come and play rong ngeng in Semut Tanoi. At that time, the only groups were from Lanta. There were no local ones. People from our village used to go to Lanta to fetch them to play here. After that, Che Mat moved here with his wife Chao 'Poi' and daughter, Iat, and became the local 'ketua.' Iat became the dance teacher. Later, when Chao died, Che Mat married Sinang, a twenty-year-old dancer in his troupe. He was already in his sixties by that time. People said he used love magic because he was a powerful shaman. The two of them moved to Ko Muk where he died around 1988. He was around seventy-five years old then.

—Rahman, Semut Tanoi

As the Lanta performers fanned out in the region, new communities of *rong ngeng* performers emerged in their paths. In most cases, performers, who married along the way and resettled in their new spouse's village, established their own troupes there, while other communities solicited outside performers to move to their communities and teach them *rong ngeng*. Semut Tanoi 'Mot Tanoi,' a Malay-speaking fishing village just north of the Trang River, is one example of a village where receptive audiences, immigration, and formations of conjugal ties facilitated the creation of a new mainland foothold for *rong ngeng*.

Che Mat settled in the village prior to the war following several visits during his frequent trips of *jalan bangsai* with Yusuf. Several other first-generation Lanta performers followed him there, all of whom married locals. They included Yusuf, who arrived after his wife Bedah (Bunga's sister) passed away, his nephew and violin protégé Lat Khlongdi, Yusuf's niece Butui (Lat's first cousin and an early student of Bunga), and Mahmud, one of Abu Qasim's students from Ko Cham, who married Roah, one of the first village dancers.³³ From Semut Tanoi, these performers spread *rong ngeng* all along the Trang coast to the Satun border. Today's last active *rong ngeng* performers in Trang—in the Hat Samran area—trace their stylistic and repertoire origins to this founding community.

Isao and the Birth of *Tanyong* Song

Before Isao, there was no tanyong, not on Phuket or anywhere else. She was the first to sing it. She sang all of the rong ngeng songs and new songs like Hat Yao. She sang the words 'bunga tanjung' like they do today. Yusuf took us to perform in the Laem Kruat market during the war. Pendek played rebana, I played gong, and Isao—the daughter of my neighbor Abu—danced. She was an attractive woman, tall, slender, with a fair complexion, and fine voice. Ali from Langda saw Isao performing, followed us back to Lanta, and asked to marry her. He took her to live in Langda where she became a rong ngeng teacher. She had four students: Sao Taeng, Sao Noi, Sao Bang, and Tadam. They spoke only Thai so she taught them to sing tanyong style. However, she died young and no one remembers her. They only remember her student, Tadam, who married her teacher's husband, Ali, and became a famous rong ngeng.

—Lat Khlongdi

³³ Personal communication from Rahman, Semut Tanoi.

The transformation of song texts from Malay into Thai was one of the most significant changes to *rong ngeng* that occurred as the form took root in non-Malay-speaking communities outside of Lanta. It paralleled important social changes that were taking place in the region after the Second World War, including the increasing separation of Malayan and southern Thai cultural spheres, and the ascendancy of Thai as a national language. Malay was a *lingua franca* among maritime communities in the lower Andaman Sea region until Thai supplanted it in the post-war period, facilitated by the expansion of national schools in rural areas and increased immigration of Thai-speakers. Tanjung's early *rong ngeng* performers, such as Amewah, Sima, and Mijjah, spoke passable Thai, but they sang exclusively in Malay.³⁴ A young woman named Isao,³⁵ several years their junior, was the first of Bunga's students in that community, and by extension the region, to sing *rong ngeng* tunes in Thai.

Isao made two important contributions to modern *rong ngeng* repertoire. She sang existing melodies in the *phak tai* (southern Thai) dialect, using a poetic style found in local folk theaters containing descriptive allusions to the local environment, and introduced new melodies that were similar to local courtship songs or lullabies '*phleng klong dek*'.³⁶ These two new styles became assimilated into the *rong ngeng* repertoire alongside the original tunes, and constituted a musical and textual subset that later became an iconic form of expression and marker of southwest Thailand identity known as *tanyong* song (*lagu tanyong*).

Another legacy of Isao's was the rise of one of her first dancers in Langda, a young Thai-speaking woman from Ban Khuan named

³⁴ Personal communications from Lat Khlongdi, Yimah Barem, and Bida Chaipet.

³⁵ Isao is a southern variation of the Central Thai '*sao*' (young woman) and a common prefix for names of women in South Thailand.

³⁶ Several performers, including Lat Khlongdi, On Wahakrak, Yafat Wahakrak, and Kameh Hapon, as well as Klin, believe that local lullabies were a source for *rong ngeng tanyong*. (Klin)

Tadam Muangdi.³⁷ The two were rumored to have been rivals, and some believed that Tadam poisoned Isao, who became ill and died while still young. Tadam married Ali, became leader of the Langda troupe, and became one of the region's most popular *tanyong*-style *rong ngeng* singers in the post-war era. Isao's death at a young age and the success of her antecedents obscured the contributions she made to *rong ngeng*, but with Tadam and several other *tanyong*-style communities about to rise to prominence on the mainland, *rong ngeng* was set to enter a new phase.

Conclusion

The period following the war was a heyday for *rong ngeng* in which communities of performers took root in every corner of the region, especially among Thai-speakers. The rapid growth of the form was a result of several factors, most significantly that it became accessible to a wider audience once it was transformed into a Thai-language medium, but also because that audience base was rapidly expanding and becoming more prosperous with increased agricultural production in the region and an influx of migrants, many of whom came as laborers in rubber, tin, fishing and logging industries. For a brief period of a decade or more, *rong ngeng* was the most popular form of social dance. It gave the youth of that era a forum to *kiao pharasi* (exchange courtship verses) that was new and unique to southwest Thailand.

Abu Qasim remained active during this period. He continued to travel and teach, moving to Ko Cham and then Ko Sire until his fifties when he ended up destitute, sweeping streets in Phuket. By the mid 1950s, the first generation of Lanta performers also gradually ceased performing, with their children having taken their places.

Modernity was a major feature of this period. Lifestyles changed as motor boats and automobiles made it easy for them to make brief trips to perform at even long distances. The population

³⁷ According to Lat Khlongdi, Isao's original group of students in Langda were four young women: Sao Bang, Sao Nui, Sao Taeng, and Tadam.

began to settle down, whether it was because they now tended year-round rubber and palm crops, worked in full-time jobs, or, like the Urak Lawoi, lost their traditional migratory grounds to outsiders. Economic transactions between *rong ngeng* hosts and performers changed along with the times. Groups began to command fixed fees commensurate with their earning potential. They no longer played for bowls of rice on the road now that they could earn a stable income at home.

In the 1960s, *rong ngeng* gave way to *ramwong*, a contemporaneous social dance from central Thailand that became the era's dominant popular form. *Rong ngeng* and *ramwong* represented two very different forms of identity that were at the heart of cultural transformations taking place in the region.

At a time when young people were increasingly speaking Thai and adopting Thai names, *rong ngeng* was an anachronistic symbol of an older, rural Malay identity. *Ramwong* was new, Thai, urban, and carried the imprimatur of the State that promoted it as a national Thai form since the Second World War era.

Some performers switched to *ramwong* and others incorporated more *ramwong* tunes into their repertoire. The overall effect was that *rong ngeng* adapted or declined. In many areas, it became extinct. It remained viable by becoming stylistically more like *ramwong*.

Rong ngeng continues to be performed today, either as an abbreviated cultural show staged like a relic of the past—a *form* surviving but lacking its former *context*—or it exists as a *ramwong*-influenced performance style akin to a modern discotheque which has become denuded of the playful poetic interplay, graceful dances, and diverse song repertoire that characterized the *rong ngeng* of the past—where the *context* survives, but lacks its past *form*.

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