

***Nora Rong Khru* Ritual: Roles of the Ritual in the Context of Ban Plairamai, a Siamese village in Kedah, Malaysia¹**

Preeyarat Chaowalitprapan²

Abstract

Nora Rong Khru is regarded as a significant ritual for southern Thai people, especially for ones who believe that they belong to *Nora's* lineage or who consider *Nora* as their ancestor. This ritual has persisted not only in the southern part of Thailand, but also among the Siamese communities in the northern states of Malaysia, i.e., Kelantan, Perlis, Kedah and Perak. The forefathers of almost all the Siamese people now living in Syburi (Kedah) moved from Phatthalung, Nakhon Sri Thammarat and Songkhla to Syburi before it was colonized by United Kingdom and subsequently becoming one of the Malaysian states. The Siamese nowadays still live their lives, use Thai language and keep Southern Thai traditions as when the area used to be in the Southern part of Thai territory.

This article aims at examining the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual in Ban Plairamai (Kg. Titi Akar), Pendang, Kedah, Malaysia. The findings from the fieldwork that was conducted show there

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² PhD Candidate, Department of Thai, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

are two kinds of *Nora Rong Khru*: the “vow fulfillment” *Nora* ritual and the *Nora* topknot-cutting initiation rite for *Nora* performers. This article argues that the performance of *Nora Rong Khru* Ritual in Ban Plairamai has the following roles: 1) preserving and transmitting Siamese cultural identity in Malaysia’s multicultural society; 2) strengthening and uniting Siamese Thai people and their community; 3) providing spiritual security and support for the people; and 4) providing entertainment. In addition, this study can be perceived as cultural evidence of Siamese people in a multi-cultural society in a Thai-Malaysian trans-border and trans-national context.

Introduction

Nora Rong Khru [โนราโรงครุ] is an important ritual of the Southern Thai people, especially ones who regard themselves as *Nora*’s descendants, that has exists not only in Thailand, but also in “Siamese communities” in Malaysia, i.e., Kelantan, Perlis, Kedah and Perak, resulting for the migration of people from the south of Thailand to the north of Malaysia more than 100 years ago. The ritual was brought with the migratory persons and has continued to take place until today. This article aims at studying the purposes and the roles of the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual in Ban Plairamai [บ้านปลายระไม] (Kg. Titi Akar), Padang Kerbau, Pendang, Kedah, together with its functions in context of the present day.

Background of Ban Plairamai

Ban Plairamai is a Siamese community in Padang Kerbau, Pendang, Kedah, Malaysia. The village is approximately 30 kilometers from Pendang and 50 kilometers from Alor Star, the capital city of Kedah. There is no clear evidence about the migration of Siamese people to Ban Plairamai. Arun A/L Boontiang, however, explained the economic crisis in Songkhla and Nakhon Sri Thammarat in the 18th-19th centuries caused

a great movement of Siamese people to Syburi.³ There were approximate 20 families who resettled in Ban Plairamai. All of their descendants continue to live there, even though the area has become a part of Malaysia.

In addition, there is a legend of Nai Khu Man [นายคู่มั่น] or Nai Man [นายมัน], a man who was freed from slavery, the first ancestor of the Siamese people in Ban Plairamai. Nai Man's son, Nai Muat Chai [นายหมวดชาย], the owner of a jewelry business who rode an enormous tiger on the Songkhla-Syburi merchant road, had many wives who produced the old generation of the "Ban Plairamai Siamese". It can be implied from this narrative that the community has existed at least since the period of King Rama V, the last period of slaves in Siam, making this quite an old Siamese community in Malaysia.

In the old days of Ban Plairamai there existed about 20 communes, some contained 2-3 families. Under colonization of the United Kingdom, as well as to find ways to cope with Malayan Communist Army in 1936, General Sir Harold Briggs was appointed. According to The Briggs Plan, illegal possessory interest holders were asked to take up residences in a restricted area surrounded by barbed wire call "stables" to protect them from the Communist Army. After the crisis ended and housing estates were arranged, the government sent them back so that the community became even larger. The place was named Ban Plairamai (Malay: Kampung Titi Akar) since it was situated at the end of Rammai Canal (Malay: Sungai Rammai) and *rammai* trees were found there. Until today, people here still call themselves "*Khon Siam* [คนสยาม]" and Malaysian people call them "*Orang Siam*".

Physical Landscape of Ban Plairamai

Ban Plairamai community is in front of Mount Perak to the east, with flooding areas around for paddy farming and foothills for rubber plantation, which nowadays have increased. Rammai Canal (which has become shallow) flows through the community as well. Although Ban Plairamai is located near the equator, the weather is not too hot as it is

³ Arun A/L Boontiang, sited in Thiraphong, *A Study of Folktales of Thai Buddhist In Ban Plai Lamai*, 1.

surrounded by the forest and plantations. There, summer starts from May to August and the rainy season from September to April.

Social and Economic Appearances

The population of Ban Plairamai contains 1,800 people. Almost all are Theravada Buddhists, with ten Chinese people and two Indians, but no Malay.⁴ Most of the villagers do rubber plantation, paddy farming and fruit/vegetable cultivation. Some are employees or merchants. The average monthly incomes are 751-1,500 baht per family.

Wat Plairamai or Wat Wisutthiphradittharam [วัดวิสุทธิประดิษฐาราม] is the community temple, was built more than 100 years ago. In the monastery, there is a sermon hall (rebuilt in 2013) and an ancient monk's cell with an old Buddha image regarded as a community sacred object. There is a Thai-teaching school for both local students from kindergarten to grade 4 and for Buddhist study system.

Cultural Appearance of the Siamese at Ban Plairamai

Language

The Siamese in the village speak Southern Thai to communicate with people of the same ethnic group, but Malay with others. Moreover, some know more than two languages e.g., English, Chinese, Tamil, and some of the new generation can speak central Thai from not only watching Thai television, but also Thai lessons in Thai-teaching school (Sekolah Bahasa Siam Wat Titi Akar) such that they regard central Thai language as being more polite and melodious than the local dialect.

⁴ 12 Feb 2013 <http://titiakarwatt.pjl.com.my/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1>.



Figure 1: Siam Language School, Wat Titi Akar (Wat Plairamai).

Marriage and Family

The Siamese at Ban Plairamai usually are extended families, where the men are considered as the patriarch, and typically containing three generation of 3-5 persons each. It is not very popular for families to have many children, just 2-3 per house – four children is considered “a lot of children”. Each family has their own arable land inherited from their ancestors. The villagers know each other well since almost all of them are relatives, from lineage or marriage.

People from the new generation generally go to work in a large city, such as Penang or Kuala Lumpur, but come back home on special occasions, such as traditional New Year (the advent-departure of divine beings), during the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual period in the 6th-7th lunar months and the annual festival in the 10th lunar month. The Siamese there always have their child marry a man/woman from the same ethnic group or a Chinese, not a Muslim because of religion restriction that make their married child be apart from their family.

Religion and Belief

The Ban Plairamai Siamese are Buddhists, and their living ways traditions, rituals and social charters are related to Buddhism such that

monks and the monastery are given precedence. On Buddhist holy days, such as Magha Puja, Asalha Puja or the beginning/end of Buddhist lent, religious rituals take place. On an ordinary day, the people bring food to the village temple to offer to monks in the morning and at 11 a.m. for the monks who do not go out to beg for foods due to the rubber tapping. The Siamese men, also, who are at the proper age, typically are ordained as a Buddhist monk in order to show gratitude to their parents. Many prefer to become ordained or to study Buddhist lessons in Wat Phra Borommathat, Nakhon Sri Thammarat province, Thailand.

Apart from Buddhism, there are some local beliefs, such as the belief in guardian spirits and *Khru Mo Nora* spirits. According to the latter, the people often “make a sacred vow” to *Khru Mo Nora* spirits for help. They also have superstitious beliefs about changing one’s bad fortune through ritual.

Definition of *Nora Rong Khru*

The Royal Institute Thai Dictionary defines the word “*Nora* [โนรา]” or “*Manora* [มนโหรี]” as a noun “for a performing art from the south of Thailand which has the same main dance figures as *Lakhon Chatri* [ละครชาตรี].”⁵ Those who perform this artistic dance to earn a living are called “*nora*”.

Nora Rong Khru (or *Nora Long Khru* [โนราลงครุ]) is a significant ritual in southern Thai, especially for those who belongs to *Nora* lineages. The *Nora Rong Khru*, the invitation of divine mentor/ancestor spirits, will be perform in order to: 1) worship these sacred spirits; 2) fulfill one’s vow or “*Kae Mroei* [แก้หมรุย]”; or 3) indoctrinate *Nora* pupils. The word “*khru*” (mentor) for “the *Nora*” has two meanings: 1) Persons who teach them or their ancestors the *Nora* art of dancing; and 2) the *Nora* art creators mentioned in *Nora* creation myth and invocation.

To perform the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual, mediums for the possession of *Khru Mo Nora* [ครุหมอนโร] (or *Khru* or *Taa Yai Nora* [ตายายโนรา]) spirits are needed. It is believed that the medium are usually selected by “ancestor spirits” after the death of the old ones and inherited through lineages. In southern Thailand, the head of a *Nora* theatre, who has

⁵ *The Royal Institute Thai Dictionary*, 833.

experienced the *Nora* initiation rite and who knows the mysterious incantation and behaves properly, will perform this ritual.

History of *Nora Rong Khru* in Ban Plairamai

There is no evidence of *Nora Rong Khru* in Ban Plairamai before the migration of the Siamese, thus implying that the migration from southern Siam brought this indigenous belief about 100 years ago. Most of the elderly villagers said that the *Nora* practice has occurred since they were young and the *Nora* congregation has existed in Ban Thungkae [บ้านทุ่งแค] for very long time. The *Noras*, boys with long-tufted hair, live together in their teacher's house in order to practice the *Nora* dance and work as housekeepers. There the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual is performed 1) to commemorate the *Khru Mo Nora* spirit every three years and 2) to fulfill one's vow if it is requested.

In addition to the *Nora* theatre in Ban Thungkae, another theatre is located in Wat Plairamai. Nai Iad [นายเอียด], the founder, was born in Pakphayun district in Phatthalung, Thailand and escaped from prison, fleeing to Syburi. After an investigation, the sheriff learned that Nai Iad was able to perform the *Nora* art since he acted as a *phran* (hunter) character. He then asked him to teach this kind of art instead of being imprisoned and, thereby, “transmitted” the art and the belief of *Nora*.

During the Malayan-Communist crisis (1959), the government of the United Kingdom commanded that the local people live together in a “stable living” situation in order to cope with such hard situation easily. The *Nora* scattered, but the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual could still be performed. After the crisis ended, they came back and managed the *Nora* practice again in Wat Plairamai.

At that time *Nora Lan* [โนราลั่น], an important *Nora* of Ban Plairamai, move the *Nora* theatre from the temple to his own house in Kampung Baru. He taught several *Nora* performers including *Nora Phrim* [โนราพริ้ม], *Nora Phian* [โนราเฟี้ยน], *Nora Sathian* [โนราเสถียร] and his son, *Nora Suthin* [โนราสุทิน]. *Nora Lan* and *Nora Sian* [โนราเซี่ยน], Nai Iad's student, performed the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual in Ban Plairamai and other places. Later *Nora Phrim*, Nai Iad's grandson, separated to run his own ritual. After the death of *Nora Lan*, *Nora Sian* became the head of the theatre. *Nora Phian*, the first female *Nora* there, applied to be the head as

she was the oldest performer after Nora Sian died in 2010. The *Nora Rong Khru* ritual is performed during the 6th-7th lunar months. Each host has to get in queue at least a year in advance. A ritual performance takes from one day to three days.

Now there are two *Nora* troupes in Ban Plairamai: 1) Nora Phian's troupe: Nora Phian, Nora Sathian, Nora Suthin, Nora Phum and Nora John (who performs only in the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual); and 2) Nora Phrim's theatre: Nora Phrim, Nora Cheuam, Nora Boy and some *Noras* from Thailand who join them occasionally.

Classification of *Nora Rong Khru* in Ban Plairamai

The Ban Plairamai *Nora Rong Khru* can be classified into two types according to its purpose: 1) *Nora* performed to fulfill one's vow; and 2) *Nora* performed in a topknot-cutting ritual.

***Nora Rong Khru* performed to fulfill one's vow**

The Siamese people in Ban Plairamai believe in supernatural spirits called *Khru Mo Nora*, so they "make a vow" and promise to remunerate *Khru Mo* after getting what they wish, such as passing the government admission exam, getting a higher position, recovering from an illness, winning the prize in the lottery, not being sent to jail after being caught by the police, etc. Small items, such as a drink or a pack of clothes, will be return for trivial matters, but a *Nora Rong Khru* ritual will be sponsored for more significant matters.

The *Nora Rong Khru* ritual will be performed if someone achieves a really important wish, especially recovering from a mysterious illness that cannot be cured by modern medicine. If it is determined that the cause is that the patient is being punished by *Nora* spirits for forgetting to fulfill a vow, the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual will be performed after a family member offers a bowl filled with flowers, candles, and coins to the invited *Khru Mo*, along with long fake fingernails, all putted in the same bowl to make a wish. The bowl, called "Cham Mroei [จําหมฺรฺย]", will then be kept in the patient's house to bring back to use in the ritual. In addition, for someone who succeeds in business, gets an extremely high position or wins a big lottery prize, this ritual will be performed to show gratitude to *Khru Mo Nora*.

Ritual processes

Invitation of *Nora*: A bowl filled with flowers and betel nuts is carried to Nai Rong Nora [นายโรงโนรา] or the head of the *Nora* troupe to make a traditional appointment.

Performance of the Ritual: The ritual is performed from one to three days depending on the vow. Before the ritual starts, a pavilion is built to the east or south of the house. The pavilion can be made of wood (the traditional-style pavilion) or of built-in materials, but the central shelter where the “vowed wrap” (Ho Cham Morei [ห่อจำหมวย]) is located, must be made of wood and roofed by thatches of *nipa* leaves.

The Ritual Processes for Three Days

The first night or the night when *Nora* come inside the pavilion: On this day, the ritual begins at dusk with mentor-ancestor spirits worship to invite them, together with gods and other sacred spirits that have possession of the host’s Khru Mo spirit, to meet his descendants. If there is time left, the *Nora* apprentices will have a chance to show their dancing skills.

The first two days: The first ritual period begins in the late afternoon at about 3 p.m. and the second period begins at 8 p.m. A *Nora* chants the invitation to summon the spirits in order to meet his descendants coming from other villages or returning from their workplaces. The descendants talk to the Khru Mo begging for wishes or asking for some advice. Anyone who has made a vow offers some drink to the Khru Mo. A performance by the *Nora* apprentices will take place if the possession ends not too late at night.



Figure 2: A built-in *Nora* pavilion.

The last day: The first period begins at 8 a.m. with mentor-ancestor spirits worship. After that, the descendants come to beg for wishes once again and then the offerings are given to the Khru Mo. The second period begins at 1 p.m. as “the dancing time” of the Khru Mo and the descendants. Anyone whom the Khru Mo calls out to dance must obey since it is believed that they are honored by the Khru Mo’s preference. The Khru Mo, then, gives parting conversations and goes out of the mediums’ bodies.

Singing and dancing to please the Khru Mo occurs just for the *Nora*. In Ban Plairamai, the young *Nora* usually runs this process. They dress traditionally and completely with *Nora* crowns, upper garments made of beads, breast chains, long necklaces, shoulder loops, belt girdles, closed fitting trunks, decorating cloth stripes and bangles. The oral lyrics inherited from the past tell about the wild elephant round-up so it is assumed that the ritual might have been formerly arranged by hunters. The last part of this process is to sing 12 short lyrics derived from Thai literature. After finished singing, the spirits are sent back to the sacred world by the utterance of departing, then a traditionally dressed *Nora* cuts

the *Cham Mroei* wrap to cut off the vow, as well as lift the pavilion away. The one day ritual has just the first night and the vow fulfilling processes.

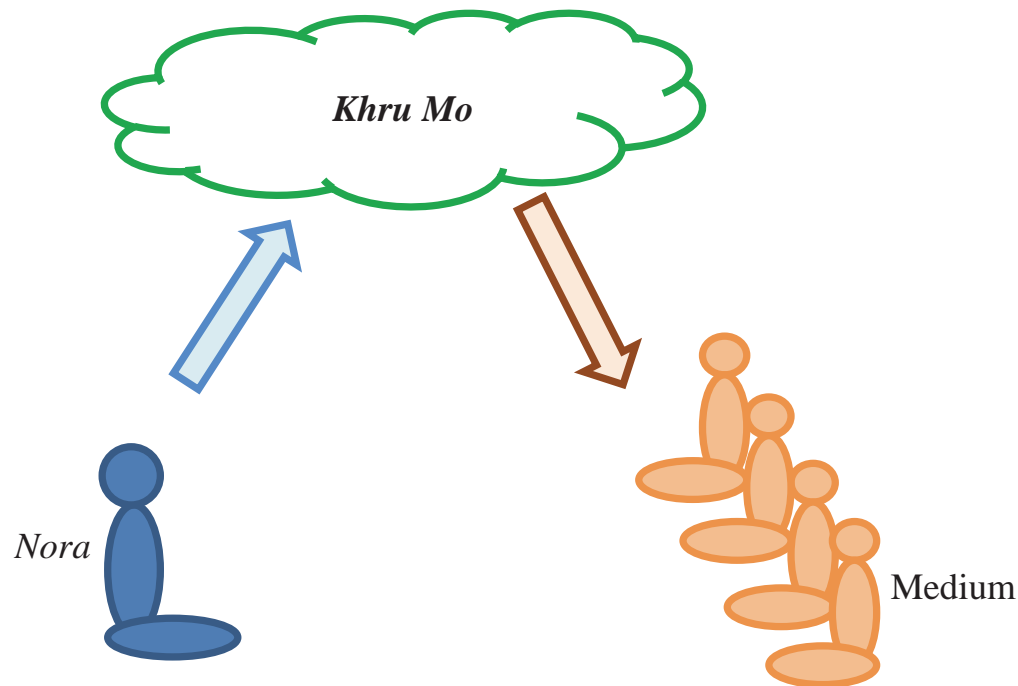


Figure 3: A model of the possession process.

***Nora* performed in topknot cutting ritual**

The topknot cutting ritual transforms the *Nora* apprentices to professionals who can perform the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual by themselves. The name topknot-cutting ritual came from an old precept that a *Nora* apprentice boy had to have a topknot and cut it off when he was 21 years old. Instead, he wears a *Nora* crown to show his professionalism.

In the old days, only boys were allowed to be the *Nora* apprentices for they had to become ordained and practice miraculous incantations. Later, Nora Phian, who was ordained as a Buddhist nun instead of a monk, became the first female *Nora*.

Parents have to bring their son (or daughter) to the house of a *Nora* teacher. Then the teacher starts teaching the main dancing figures and allows the students to participate in the “secular process” of *Nora Rong Khru* ritual. The apprentices “must” keep their virginity, therefore if some want to get married, they must leave the theatre. Anyone who leaves the

Nora stage can join the *Nora Rong Khru*, but are not able to cut the *Cham Mroei* wrap. The ones who remain are taught all the artistic features, together with incantations.

Ritual Process

The *Nora Rong Khru* performed in the topknot cutting ritual can only be the three-day process and only a wood pavilion is allowed. Another pavilion is built rightward from the first one to be the “monastic boundary:” Almost all the processes are the same as *Nora* performed to fulfill one’s vow, although the last day process is different.

Morning Period

The topknot cutting ritual starts at about 8 a.m. and has to finish before noon. The *Nora* worships their mentor-ancestor spirits, utters the special chanting to summon the gods, and invites *Khru Mo* to possess the mediums’ bodies. After that, the apprentice wearing *Nora* dress without a crown, accompanied by his minder wearing complete *Nora* dress with a crown, comes to the ritual stage. He, together with his relatives, follows the minder walking clockwise around the pavilion three times, then sits in a big bowl under a hanging crown.

While the invited monks are chanting, the abbot, the teacher and the parents cut off the topknot.⁶ The hair must be kept in a lotus leave for auspiciousness. Then the *Khru Mo* lowers a red rope close to the apprentice’s head and cuts it off by fire.

Afternoon Period

The ritual starts at about 1.30 p.m. with a dance performed by the *Nora* newcomer. After the show, the process of departure and “*Mroei* cutting” takes place. At about 5 p.m., according to old tradition, the newcomer has to show his *Nora* skill in three monasteries and three houses. Today, however, to perform just in a temple is accepted. The newcomer must be ordained for a period during the Buddhist lent in that year. He receives the whole *Nora* status after he leaves the monkhood.

⁶ Nowadays, the apprentice has no topknot, so he will cut tufts of his hair instead.



Figure 4: The process of departure and “*Mroei* cutting”.

The Roles of *Nora Rong Khru* in Ban Plairamai

The Siamese Community in Ban Plairamai exists in a multi-cultural setting in Malaysia, with the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual playing various roles as follows.

Preserving/Transmitting Siamese Cultural Identity in Malaysia’s Multicultural Society

Living as a minority group among other larger ethnic groups with distinctive cultures, such as ethnic Chinese, Malay, and Indian, in the multicultural context of Malaysia, the ethnic Siamese in Ban Plairamai have been able to preserve their ancestor’s culture and tradition. The prominent cultural identities are their Southern Thai dialect, Buddhist practices, and the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual.

The *Nora Rong Khru* ritual, which is still held annually by the village’s two remaining *Nora* bands, is usually crowded with both ethnic Siamese participants in Ban Plairamai and their relatives from other villages. The ritual reminds and marks both performers and participants

as ethnic Siamese descendants of Southern Thai ancestors in Malaysia's multicultural context.

Siamese cultural identity is presented through several cultural markers in the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual context. Firstly, it is presented through a significant traditional value, e.g., the gratitude for masters and those who prevent danger and disease, help get rid of troubles, and provide support. Secondly, cultural identity is presented through certain traditional practices in a ritual context, such as the practice of entering the ritual pavilion, the ritual time, and *Nora's* mores. Thirdly, it is presented through the many important songs in Southern Thai dialect, such as the master-worshipping song, the master-inviting song, and the songs for dancing. Lastly, Siamese cultural identity is presented through the reciting of 12 pieces of different literature and performing of two pieces of literature, Phra Suthon and Manora, and Phra Rot and Meri. The villagers proudly claim these two folktales belong to ethnic Siamese.

In addition, not only will the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual present and preserve ethnic Siamese's cultural identity, but also the *Nora* dance is proudly performed by Ban Plairamai's students, as the dance of *Orang Siam* student group, in secondary schools where only Malay and English are the official languages.

Strengthening and Uniting the Community

Arranging the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual needs not only a significant amount of money, but also many people's assistance so that the connection with friends, relatives, and even persons from the same lineages is required – men for building, women for cooking, and elderly for traditional practices

An invitation must be sent before the ritual time for no one dares to come without being invited. The news will be widely spread to every family in the same village and to relatives from other places. People from nearby come to give the host their assistance, while ones from faraway come to join at nighttime, especially on the possession process that many people join to worship, beg for wishes and fulfill their vow. If anybody cannot help the host himself in the ritual, he will give the host 10 Malaysian coins. If the ritual takes place several times within a year, villagers have to join every chance to show their spirit and friendship.

For the *Noras*, the *Nora Rong Khru* is the time that those who work in different places have an obligation to come back to see each other. Thus, the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual ties people in the “same community” together, establishes harmony and strengthens the community.

Providing Spiritual Security and Support for the People

Even though the Siamese in Ban Plairamai are Buddhists, they believe in *Khru Mo Nora* spirits on whom can they depend for spiritual help, such as an unsolved problem, unhealed sickness, losing property, lawsuit. They make vows to *Khru Mo Nora* spirits and then fulfill the vow after success.

The *Nora Rong Khru*, therefore, is performed because of nostalgic reasons in that the Siamese of the old days could easily visit their relatives with no boundary. On one hand, Siamese people in Ban Plairamai regard themselves as Malaysian citizens, but on the other, they also mention their “Thainess”, such as speaking Thai, being Buddhists, visiting relatives in their motherland, traveling to parts of Thailand, and watching Thai programs. They perform the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual to fulfill their “nostalgic feeling” as the meeting with *Khru Mo Nora* makes them feel as if seeing their “missing relatives” from Thailand.

In the possession process, people are able to talk with *Khru Mo*, their ancestors from Siam. *Khru Mo* embraces their descendants and asks them to dance together. The descendants come to pay respect, introduce new members of the families and present handsome gifts to show their gratitude. Even though it is a bit sad when the departure comes, they know that the happiness will take place again next year.

Providing Entertainment for the People

Although the *Nora Rong Khru* ritual has a sacred aspect, it is considered as entertainment because of the apprentices show their dance abilities on the first day and there is a performance on the last day when the *Nora* who dress magnificently perform with “the hunter character”. At the end of the procession process, the spirits possessing the medium calls the descendants (usually the aged ones) out to dance with them some show the *Nora* figures, others act like a hunter to make jokes with the audience.

Concluding Remarks

The *Nora Rong Khru* ritual has been transmitted and persisted in the Siamese people in Ban Plairamai for over a hundred years, perhaps as long as their settlement in that area. The ritual has not been abandoned, even in times of crisis and has been handed down from generations to generations.

The *Nora Rong Khru* strengthens the community through people's cooperation, has become a spiritual anchor of the society (especially for nostalgic reasons), plays important roles in spiritual fulfillment, preservation and transmission of Siamese identity, and entertains people. Significantly, this ritual makes "the Siamese-Malaysian" proud of their "*Orang Siam*" identity within a multi-cultural society.

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