HOW "TRADITIONAL" ARE SO-CALLED TRADITIONS? : THREE CASE STUDIES OF MALAYAN FOLK PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

This article challenges perceptions of "traditions" as being long-standing and unchanged practices by showing several cases in which so-called traditional musical genres were created relatively recently, and reworked over time, partly in response to prevailing social trends. Through musicological and ethnographic methods, this study ascertains sources for local musical repertoires, and situates them as forms of expression within their particular communities. The locus of this study is the border region shared between Malaysia and Thailand, where rural communities — whose social patterns are often under prolonged, and often changing external hegemonic pressures — have managed a complex array of identities and affiliations. The three case studies included here are (1) an idiomatic form of Malayan *ronggeng* social dance called *rong ngeng*, created in the 1940s and '50s by Thai-speaking performers in Krabi Province; (2) *main berana*, an evolving repertoire of songs performed by Andaman Coast Orak Lawoi 'sea people,' for their festive rituals; and (3) *gendang silat* 'martial arts musical accompaniment' performed in Malaysia's Kedah State. This study finds that, despite the ambiguous historical meaning that musical traditions hold for the people that perform them, they are a window into understanding how local communities navigate social changes, and possible indicators for future trends of expression.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mencabar persepsi terhadap "tradisi" sebagai sesuatu yang lama dan amalan yang tidak berubah, dengan menunjukkan beberapa contoh muzik tradisional yang telah dicipta dalam hanya beberapa dekad kebelakangan ini, dan diolah dari masa ke masa bersesuaian trend sosial semasa dan menjadi penunjuk trend ekspresif pada masa

depan. Lokus bagi kajian ini adalah kawasan sempadan Malaysia dan Thailand, di mana masyarakat luar bandar sering di bawah tekanan hegemoni luaran dan terpaksa melayari pelbagai jenis identiti. Tiga kajian kes dimasukkan di sini merangkumi (1) satu bentuk muzik dan tarian pergaulan tempatan yang dipanggil rong ngeng (berasal dari ronggeng Melayu) yang dicipta di Wilayah Krabi pada 1940an dan 50an oleh pemain berbahasa Thai; (2) main berana, satu pemainan orang laut di kawasan maritim lautan Andaman untuk upacara perayaan mereka; dan (3) pemainan muzik gendang silat di Negeri Kedah. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah muzikologi dan etnografi untuk menentukan sumber repertoir muzik tempatan, dan meletaknya di kalangan tertentu sebagai jenis-jenis ungkapan suatu komuniti.

Keywords : Tradition, folk performing arts, rituals, Malaysia, Thailand, Andaman Coast, ronggeng, berana, gendang silat, tanyong

Introduction

To illustrate how notions of what is "traditional" are continually developed and reworked over time, this article focuses on the rural border region encompassing southern Thailand and northwest Malaysia, to examine briefly three performance genres: (1) an idiomatic form of Malayan *ronggeng* social dance called *rong ngeng*, created in the 1940s and '50s by Thai-speaking performers in Krabi Province; (2) *main berana*, a repertoire of songs performed by Andaman Coast 'sea people,' the Orak Lawoi, in their festive rituals; and (3) the *gendang silat* 'martial arts musical accompaniment' performed in Malaysia's Kedah State. Far from being disparate, all three examples have deeply intertwined historical and cultural connections, and each genre, in its own way, provides a unique perspective into how locals manage a complex array of identities and affiliations.

In Hobsbawm's well-known formulation, "invented traditions" are those practices that invoke and "impl[y] continuity with the past," and become formalized and ritualized through repetition (1983:1-4). Traditions, whether ingrained through the effects of time or deliberately contrived, are enmeshed in ideologies that, in various ways, touch many aspects of our lives. And because "tradition" has such a strong bearing on individual and group identity, it is often those who benefit most from promoting particular ideologies who seek to broaden its appeal, maintain its relevancy, or ascribe to it a mystical aura. Thus, a broader question raised through this article is how might demystifying the traditional and

taking a fresh look at local culture help us better understand ongoing social processes that are incubators of future traditions.

Hobsbawm provides a clue where to look for invented traditions when writing that—ubiquitous throughout history—they may "occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed" (ibid, 4). As such, communities that populate border areas, where social patterns are often under prolonged, and often changing external hegemonic pressures, would appear suitable for identifying and studying new traditions, including understanding how they came to exist, and what they might indicate about the future.

The Border Region

First, some brief background to explain how modern political realities have redrawn the cultural geography in the border region. For generations prior to the Second World War, the Andaman and northwest Malaya were interrelated in many respects. As Penang Island (located in the latter region) grew in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to become a cosmopolitan center, its hybrid culture—including music, dance, and theater—became a popular export to the rural, coastal areas of Kedah, Perlis, and southern Siam (now Thailand). During the early- and middle-twentieth century, this cultural circulation declined when national boundaries between the two modern states became less ambiguous. The Andaman subsequently became firmly within the central Thai cultural sphere, as the Malayan states, in their own way, also turned culturally inward. As a result of this social realignment, new traditions formed, though the region still retained a legacy of many shared cultural aspects.

A half-century of Thai state hegemony and modernization has brought considerable changes to the lives of three communities populating the rural Andaman Coast including most germane to this discussion, (a) island-dwelling Malay-speaking Muslims, (b) the migratory, strand-dwelling Orak Lawoi (a cognate of *orang laut*, Malay for 'sea people'), and (c) mainland-dwelling Thai-speaking Thai-Muslims. The first two—island Malays and Orak Lawoi—have a long history of intermarriage, cohabitation, and shared traditions. They speak a mutually intelligible dialect of northwestern Malay similar to Kedah and Perlis dialects, an area to which they both have longstanding connections, although younger generations have become primarily Thai-speaking.

Mainland-dwelling Thai Muslims, to a large degree, do not consider themselves to be Malay, but rather "Thai Islam." Although they

are ethnically heterogeneous, some from this background might be seen as related to the non-Malay Muslim Samsam of northwest Malaysia and Satun described by Kobkua (2000) and Kuroda (2002). In a wider regional context, there have been historical connections between Andaman Muslims and east-coast Patani Malays, but their separation across a considerable distance and a lack of sustained cultural ties between the two areas makes the latter peripheral to this study.

Methods for collecting and analyzing data in this brief study derive from both musicological and ethnographic approaches. Musicology of performance phenomena informs understanding of the history and development of genres and their repertoires that have been central to their societies, whereas ethnography helps situate local expression within broader discourses. The study draws from prolonged fieldwork conducted since 2005 in a research area extending from Phuket in the north to Penang in the south, and focuses on what rural island and mainland communities perceive as their traditions.

Rong Ngeng Tanyong

As a case study, *rong ngeng* shows the transformations undergone by a popular cultural form (*ronggeng*) after taking root in a very different social, economic, and linguistic milieu. It figures prominently in the recent half century of Andaman Coast social history, and much may be learned from its legacy regarding movements and migrations of individuals and communities, and shifts in political and cultural dominance in the region during the mid-twentieth century.

In the mid-1930s, an itinerant violinist named Abu Qasim from Langkawi Island in northwest Malaya traveled up the coast into Thailand (then called Siam), and settled for a time in a fishing village on Lanta Island. Acknowledged as the region's first *rong ngeng* pioneer, he taught locals his repertoire of *ronggeng* songs and dances—a mishmash of contemporary popular songs heard in Malaya's urban *bangsawan* theaters, dance halls, and amusement parks, combined with regional folk tunes found in Kedah and Perlis. He proceeded, in subsequent years, spreading *rong ngeng* among Malay-speaking communities further up the coast. To borrow from North American folklore, he was a musical Johnny Appleseed (Ross 2009).

In his path, Abu Qasim's students continued playing the *rong ngeng* songs he had taught them. Accompanied by the Malayan-style *ronggeng* ensemble consisting of a violin to play melodies, two *rebana* frame drums to provide interlocking rhythms, and a hanging gong to

punctuate the musical meter, they held nightly village dances, which evolved into professional training sessions. Later, they formed performing troupes that toured the neighboring islands and mainland, often traveling for weeks upon end, under uncomfortable conditions that involved walking from village to village in search of gigs, without guarantee of money or food. Through this process, however, *rong ngeng* was introduced to Thai-speaking audiences, and entered a new historical phase.

Thai-speaking communities embraced the form. New performers transformed it by singing with a hybrid local variation of the Thai poetic form, *klon*, and expanded its musical repertoire by adding tunes adapted from local lullabies, courtship songs, and folk theater. This distinctive new Thai-language repertoire became known as *rong ngeng tanyong*, or just *phleng tanyong* '*tanyong* song,' and became a mainland counterpart to the Malay-language island style introduced by Abu Qasim. During its heyday in the 1940s and '50s, *rong ngeng* was ubiquitous entertainment and, among Andaman youth, the most prominent courtship medium. In contrast to contemporaneous Malaysian *ronggeng*, *rong ngeng* was not burdened by negative social implications. Quite the opposite, for those who lived through that period, it was a polite and creative medium, and tantamount to a rite of passage, as in many areas it was common for young women, ranging in age from their early teens to their twenties, to dance professionally and be courted by their male patrons.

Among subsequent generations, however, *rong ngeng* lost its popular appeal, and was mostly abandoned for more fashionable forms such as the central Thai social dance, *ramwong*. Amid rising Thai nationalistic ideology, *rong ngeng* became an anachronistic symbol of something old and foreign (that is, Malay). Additionally, *rong ngeng*, like *ramwong*, became encumbered with a bad reputation for the drinking and fighting that often took place at public dances during the 1960s and '70s. It did not, however, disappear completely, and continued to be performed by several Thai-speaking performing communities who adopted stylistic elements from *ramwong* and other popular music, such as physically revealing costumes, sexually suggestive dances. In this manner, a new form was created that contrasted greatly with the genteel *rong ngeng* of the past. Partly in reaction to this "*ramwong*-style" of *rong ngeng*, in the last decade, there has been renewed interest in preserving *rong ngeng* as a cultural symbol of Andaman identity. Groups in the revivalist mold generally eschew the risqué, but fully embrace novel innovations to the music and song texts introduced by the Thai-speaking performers in the postwar decades.

Thus three *rong ngeng* styles remain practiced today: (1) island

rong ngeng whose Malay-language repertoire is closest to that of Abu Qasim; (2) the modern, suggestive "*ramwong*" style; and (3) the revivalist, Thai-language *tanyong* style that invokes postwar *rong ngeng* as its ideal. In spite of these stylistic differences, much of the roughly thirty to forty *rong ngeng* songs extant are shared by all groups (the exception being that the island groups play very few *tanyong* tunes)—and particularly those which are identifiable as Malayan-origin—are perceived by performers and audiences alike as *dang derm*, 'traditional,' or *ton chabap*, 'original manuscript,' implying that they have a long, deep history, when in fact many were products of 1920s and '30s popular Malayan theater.[1] Exactly how deep the tradition is for the two other principle sources of this repertoire—northwest Malayan, and Andaman folk songs—is an open question, though evidence suggests that they too may be popular songs of a slightly older vintage.[2]

For the most part, what makes *bangsawan* theater tunes identifiable as relatively recent modern compositions is their form, which is very often based upon contemporaneous Western models, such as the well-known American Tin Pan Alley, with some markers of Asian-ness or exoticisms from Chinese, Indian, and Arabian music. Indeed, many of the gramophone recordings from the *bangsawan* era—including songs that made their way into the *rong ngeng* repertoire—were Western-style melodies performed using pianos and other Western musical instruments, such as some titles that are still-familiar in Malaysia: "Siapa Itu," "Che Mamat," "Kayuh Sampan," "Aladom," "Siti Payung," "Che Siti," "Trek Tek Tek," and "Burung Putih," to name a few.

Northwest Malayan folk sources in the *rong ngeng* repertoire include at least six tunes from rural Kedah and Perlis, several of which are still well known in their place of origin, "Yangong" (known in Malaysia as "Canggung"), "Ayam Didik," and "Cinta Sayang," as well as a few—"Sinadong" (known in Malaysia as "Senandung Sayang"), "Sayang La" (known in Malaysia at "Layang Layang"), and "Pari Satun" (which resembles the "Mak Inang Jawa" melody)—that are not heard today, but whose existence in Malaysia in the past has been confirmed through oral accounts. It has been suggested that some of the antecedents to the canon of northwest Malayan folk songs may have belonged to the repertoire of *mak yong laut*,[3] an extinct and poorly documented rural folk theater genre, which in the early decades of the twentieth century was a popular counterpart in the region to the urban *bangsawan*. If this was truly the case, then traditional folk songs today may have originated as contemporary popular songs of yesteryear. Such a phenomenon problematizes normative and ahistorical concepts of "tradition," and the act of elevating particular cultural forms as "authentic."

Such generational "layering" of old and new extends beyond *rong ngeng*'s musical repertoire and is found in bundles of mythologies and ritual practices that, in just a few generations, have formed around the genre. In more than one community, for example (including those of Thai-speaking Muslims as well as Orak Lawoi), *rong ngeng* "guardians" venerate their "original teachers" (*khru mo rong ngeng*) with regular physical offerings of food, ritual objects, and recitations, and have created founding myths for the genre, which like other folk genres found throughout Southeast Asia, describe the beginning of a performance tradition, which may have some historical basis, but details of which over numerous generations have become lost, altered, and/or re-written to suit contemporary times. It is not unusual that *rong ngeng*, which did not have such practices among Malayan performers prior or subsequent to its migration to Siam, would acquire them—considering the multitude of such examples in the region—but its appearance within the span of roughly a half-century is a fascinating glimpse into one type of process that invents tradition.

Berana

The Orak Lawoi comprise a network of Malay-speaking, strand-dwelling, migrant fishing communities populating the islands between Phuket and Langkawi. When the Andaman Coast was a thinly populated wilderness, and only dotted with small settlements, the Orak Lawoi lived as seasonal migrants among its islands and strands, making their livelihood harvesting fruits of the sea, forest products, and in small-scale planting of rubber, fruit trees, and rice. Absent any definitive historical records, we must rely on Orak Lawoi oral history, and outside manuscripts to theorize that they once migrated from the bordering Malayan states to the south, northward into a then politically ambiguous region that, over the last two hundred years, has been moving toward Thai dominance. From oral histories portraying a migratory life in continual retreat from the advancing Siamese, to contemporary tourist literature that depicts them as "sea gypsies," the most profound and frequently lamented lifestyle change for the Orak Lawoi over the past half century has been the loss of their ability to roam unencumbered.

According to origin tradition, Orak Lawoi ancestors once lived at Gunung Jerai in Kedah, and though that area today no longer has a pre-Malay indigenous population, there is some evidence to support that belief. In 1824, British Colonial official John Anderson noted a particular group of Semang who "formerly inhabited all the Islands of the Archipelago [in]

small parties… [and are] still to be found on many of them," and were "most numerous in the interior of [Yan], a small River to the Northward of the [Merbok River], near the lofty mountain [Jerai], in the [Kedah] territory" (Anderson 1824: xxxviii). The present Orak Lawoi community, numbering about several thousand, is spread out over a broad geographical area and united through numerous kinship ties and close communications. Their semi-annual festivals provide regular opportunities to travel and reconnect with distant relatives.

Generally speaking, Orak Lawoi practice animistic worship of ancestors and spirits, and shrines dedicated to both may be seen in all of their major settlements. Supernatural guardian spirits, referred to as *datuk*, are believed to animate physical features of their surroundings, such as the islands' looming peaks, and the large rocks that emerge from the sea. Although differentiated by their spiritual beliefs, Orak Lawoi express a close affinity with local Malays—more so than they generally do with Thais. Orak Lawoi and Malays live side by side and intermarry freely in a number of places such as Ko Lanta, Ko Jam, Phuket, and elsewhere. They share a similar language and social and cultural practices. That many of their folk songs contain Malay *pantun* (quatrains) is both a testament to this affinity as well as to their propensity for borrowing and reworking in their creative arts.

Orak Lawoi *berana* music is, by all appearances, something that could be described as a hoary tradition: It is performed for rituals, dances and processions, uses local instruments, is sung in the native language, and makes references to local practices and beliefs. It is likely quite old, but at the same time should be seen as undergoing continual transformations, accreting repertoire and styles, and thus redefining the meaning and function of tradition within the community. *Berana* is performed on a beach, at shrines or graveyards for annual rituals, in front of private homes for vow-fulfillment ceremonies, or more recently, as staged events for cultural festivals. Typically, events take place during Orak Lawoi festivals, the most prominent of which is the semi-annual full-moon *pelacak* (or *pelacang*), which centers around the preparation and launch of a model boat, which carries away bad fortune and souls of the departed to a mythical homeland on Gunung Jerai.

Berana songs are typically responsorial, between two singers, or a singer and a chorus and accompanied by a percussion ensemble comprised of six or more frame drums (called *berana*, cognate with the Malay term for the same drum, *rebana*), a gong, small hand cymbals, and bamboo clappers called *cerek*. Some ensembles also use a pair of barrel drums (*gendang panjang*). In concert with the music, dancers "*pusing berana*" in

a counterclockwise direction around sacred objects such as the boat, ancestor and spirit shrines, or other items.

The Orak Lawoi distinguish *berana* repertoire by two separate functions: as having a ritual purpose, or being festive entertainment, though in practice these categories are not mutually exclusive. Ritual *berana* songs are essentially "communications" with the supernatural world; their strophic melodies are brief and simple entreaties for forgiveness and protection. For example, the text of "Datuk Gunung Jerai" is addressed to the guardian spirit of that their mythical mountain homeland. Part of the song declaims, "*O Datuk Gunung Jerai, minta maaf minta ler ampun, tolong jaga tolong bela, anak cucu semua rata*" (Oh spirit of Gunung Jerai, we ask [your] forgiveness, please look after [us] your children and grandchildren everywhere).

Sandwiched as they are between larger Thai and Malay realms, the Orak Lawoi have long been accustomed to adopting and reworking cultural sources from outside their community. Their entertainment songs account for the greater part of *berana* performances, and borrow liberally from a hodgepodge of old and new Malayan and Siamese sources. They typically alternate between a chorus, sung by the group, and interpolated with verses sung by individuals. The former are a heterogeneous repertoire based on popular songs of yesteryear, such as the *bangsawan*-era tune "Terang Bulan," or the well-known Thai *luk thung* song "Siang Nang Long." The animistic Orak Lawoi also sing a melodic rendition of the Islamic *shahadah* 'creed,' ("there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger"), which they admit to have "borrowed" from their Malay neighbors. These choruses provide points of departure for verses of Malay *pantun*, which according to the singers, have been handed down and modified from previous generations. *Pantun* texts invoke rural Malay society, making references to rajas, rice fields, and other aspects that in many cases are external to the Orak Lawoi experience.

The implicit messages in *berana* songs are often didactic, relating to their customary lives and livelihoods—aspects unaddressed by the modern Thai education system. They express the community's close relationship to the sea and their place within the natural environment. It is one of the last cultural bastions from which they collectively confront their shrinking habitat, assimilation into the Thai state, and the deluge of contemporary Thai and globalized culture. There is some anxiety within the community on how such changes will affect how they represent themselves and define their traditions, and how current forms of expression—music, dance, and other types of performance—will adapt as the Orak Lawoi move further away from their migratory roots, and

increasingly into settled existences.

The consequences have not been entirely calamitous, however. In at least one case, social change has paralleled a blossoming in a significant form of Orak Lawoi expression—the ritual *pelacak* boat model that is a centerpiece to the *pelacak* festival. Over the years, it has been transformed from a simple palm-sheath vessel, such as those used in the *tolak bala* rituals of their Muslim neighbors, into an elaborate and ornately decorated *objet d'arte* that has become intrinsic to the identity of the Orak Lawoi community.

For *berana*, a major concern is its sustainability. Only a few surviving singers are literate in its song repertoire and are capable of singing *pantun*. The younger generation, for the most part, does not speak Orak Lawoi, and few appear interested in *berana* songs. Should this art of singing disappear along with the Orak Lawoi language, it can only be speculated what new forms of expression might emerge, and whether they would still borrow from past musical models, and/or provide connections to their former migratory lives.

Gendang Silat

Located to the south and east of the Andaman, near the northern slopes of the aforementioned Gunung Jerai in Kedah and extending northward to the Thai border (encompassing large areas of Kedah and Perlis states), communities of Malay Muslim males of all ages gather regularly to perform *gendang silat*, a music performed with two barrel drums (*gendang panjang*), a shawm (*serunai*), and a vertically suspended gong. It is a long-standing practice, yet taken as a whole, a number of elements considered to be traditional are relatively new to the form.

Gendang silat music provides accompaniment for a variety of occasions including martial arts competitions, weddings, official functions, and casual village gatherings. It has changed considerably in recent decades. Until the 1960s and early '70s, it was performed principally by older men, whose repertoire was limited to *silat* accompaniment and processional music. Youths were not encouraged to participate, partly because its performance during that time also contained extra-musical rituals meant to beseech supernatural guardian spirits. Such exclusivity and the aging pool of performers resulted in *gendang silat* gradually falling into obsolescence during the '70s and '80s.

In the 1990s, however, it was revived and updated with several changes. First, participation opened up to youths as well as grown men. Second, it was shorn of most supernatural elements; though certain vestiges remained as part of initiation rituals, it was updated to conform to Islamic social norms. Third, the repertoire changed: the combat repertoire was codified into a region-wide standard (*gendang silat baku*) that extended to pedagogy and intramural competitions, and as a whole, the repertoire expanded to incorporate songs for pure entertainment.

Gendang silat repertoire today is categorized as either music for combat (*lagu silat*) or entertainment (*lagu hiburan*), with certain pieces from the latter category also played for stylized dances, processions, and other events. The entertainment repertoire of *gendang silat*, as with *rong ngeng* discussed earlier, comprises tunes from various sources including *bangsawan* theater and regional folk tunes. The two genres, in fact, share a number of tunes in common. They also differ in that the accretion of popular songs has taken different routes. Although entertainment tunes are relatively recent additions to *gendang silat*, they draw from sources that formed the basis of successive popular musics in the region over many decades: in other words, they comprise a generational "layering" of songs.

In contrast with *rong ngeng*, which became effectively isolated from influences of postwar Malaysian popular culture, the continual succession of songs that percolated through northwest Malaysian society comprised a varied and vibrant mix. In addition to *bangsawan*-era songs, new sources came to include Malayan film music (particularly those by renowned entertainer P. Ramlee), Latin American cha-chas and mambos, the *ghazal pati* wedding music that drew from popular Arab and Hindustani tunes, Indonesian *dangdut*, various styles of rock 'n' roll, and numerous other forms. Today's performers have become even more connected to globalized culture through YouTube and other online media.

Despite these novel innovations, and the fact that its repertoire is a work in progress, *gendang silat* is accepted as a "tradition" among its practitioners and their audiences. The networks of its performers have negotiated this seemingly endless font of possibilities by reworking them into a common idiom and standardized repertoire. In doing so, their renditions of popular tunes need not always sound like their original versions, and there are physical reasons why they might not (for example, the limited melodic range of the *serunai*, and the need to conform to the four or five discrete rhythms found in non-combat drumming styles). Thus, listeners with a less-pedantic understanding of tune provenance perceive the ensemble texture—the sound itself—as a marker of "traditional." By incorporating outside melodies into a relatively fixed timbral system, a

tradition has been created, and to a large extent, is embodied in the musical texture.

Conclusions

If, as Hobsbawm suggests, invented traditions are "symptoms (…) of problems that might not otherwise be recognized, and developments which are otherwise difficult to identify and date" (op. cit., 12), then in these particular cases, the question is how do "invented traditions" correspond to changes within the communities that perform them? The case studies presented here provide some indications.

Although *rong ngeng* is, for the most part, an anachronistic part of Andaman culture—it has seen little growth, and has vanished from most of the places it once flourished—it does reflect some ongoing social trends. The revivalist trend of *rong ngeng* in Krabi may be seen, in part, as a reaction to the overwhelming influence of Thai national media, and the growing, internal pressure from conservative religious discourse that discourages performing arts in general. On the other hand, the so-called *ramwong* manifestation of *rong ngeng* is in itself a testament to the dominant position of central Thai popular culture. Both forms acknowledge the unique and local character of *rong ngeng*, and use it in their distinctive ways to assert an Andaman, rather than a homogenous Thai, identity. This is no small matter for them or for other local communities throughout Thailand, where such newfound liberties represent a new blossoming of regional expression, and until fairly recently, would have contradicted prevailing notions of citizenship.

In the case of *berana*, the Orak Lawoi perform from a position of a community squeezed from all sides, even though expressions of this condition are not explicit in their folk arts. Perhaps one area in which the social conditions do reflect upon their cultural production is in the strengthening and developing of the Orak Lawoi character in their arts: the songs they adopt become their own; their ritual practices, such as the *pelacak* boat construction, become distinctively their own. The ongoing process of creating such traditions for this community does not promote "invariance" in character .

Whereas *berana* and *rong ngeng* music has been steadily losing its relevance among younger generations, the *gendang silat* has reversed this trend over recent decades to become stronger. For its performers, amid an increasingly Islamized and Malay-centric national landscape,[4] they have reinvented the fading tradition by adapting it to prevailing social norms. Thus it became performed without taboo practices such as spirit

veneration, which allowed for greater participation within the community, and in turn came to reflect popular culture through the expansion of its tune repertoire. In contrast to Hobsbawm's suggestion that invented traditions are characteristically invariant (op. cit., 2), each of the three examples discussed here show some flexibility in terms of continually adapting new elements to their performance, although without diminishing the idea that the practices themselves are traditional. Concepts of what is traditional, in these and perhaps future cases may be understood as embodying expressions of current and local interest.

Notes

[1] See Ross (2011) for his explanation of tune provenance in *rong ngeng* repertoire.
[2] Melodies and rhythms appropriated from popular, post-war, central Thai song (such as *ramwong* and *luk thung*) account for a negligible presence in the *rong ngeng* repertoire, and are typically played by isolated groups, rather than being performed widely.
[3] This was first suggested by Rejab (1962), and supported by data obtained through this author's fieldwork.
[4] See Ross (2013) for a discussion of *silat* martial art's intertwined relationship with contemporary Malay identity politics in Malaysia.

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