

Kathoey Sub-culture and *Ronggeng* Dance at the *Orak Lawoi Pelacak* Festival in Southwest Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Orak Lawoi (semi nomadic sea people) in Phuket and Ko Sireh islands and their biannual ritual celebration called Pelacak, celebrated for three days during the full moons in May and October. During this celebration, sea-gypsy communities in Sapam, Rawai and Ko Sireh perform ceremonial ritual through an elaborately decorated model boat that is launched into the sea with ritual items to accompany the recently departed spirits out to the sea. This festival encompasses songs, music and dance performed at the periphery of the ritual space as well as during the procession of the model boat. During this celebration, I witnessed the presence of kathoeyes (an identifier for transgendered women, effeminate men and transsexuals in Thailand) in different circumstances as spectators, as backstage disco dancers and visible ronggeng or rong ngeng (a social dance or folk-dance form), performers. I discuss the visibility of kathoeyes and the ways in which they negotiate their identity in different spaces. I suggest that within the Orak Lawoi mainstream group, kathoeyes emerge as a sub-culture gender/sexual group, whose participation in these spaces is unavoidable but

ambivalent, depending on the level of tolerance of the community towards the non-normative gender/sexual groups.

Keywords: *kathoey, sub-culture, ronggeng, Orak Lawoi, Pelacak, Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

Our research group, which comprises seven members, arrives at the village in Ko Sireh. Gathering our belongings from the sport utility vehicle (SUV) that transported us there, we walk around observing villagers making preparations for the *Pelacak* festival. At an open space in the middle of the village, we notice a group of women decorating an archetypal boat with flowers, while a few men, sitting several feet away under a small cottage, tuning and playing their musical instruments. The musicians provide musical accompaniment to a veteran female dancer-singer, Mak Jiu, who begins to sing. Moving away from this scene, I continue walking. At the wide veranda outside one of the houses, I hear sounds of people giggling. My first impression is that the giggling comes from a group of young women. From behind, the adult women move gracefully, have curvy figures and dress beautifully in *kebaya* (a traditional tight-fitting blouse-dress worn by women in many countries in Southeast Asia. It is commonly worn with a skirt-like long cloth, *sarong*). They get ready hastily for a performance. They apply make-up and put on their ornaments. I move closer to introduce myself and to begin a conversation with them. I also intend to snap some pictures if permitted by the women. When one of them greets me, I realise astonishingly that I misconstrued their gender identity. There is not just one transgendered person, but, three in the team. The group also comprises effeminate young men and teen-aged girls. I have mixed feelings. While I am caught unprepared for this encounter, I cannot take my eyes off them. I admire their beauty. I observe the meticulous attention given by them to attire, make-up and comportment. One of the transgendered persons in the group, who converses fluently in the Malay language, explains that they are

getting ready for the soon to begin *ronggeng* performance. After a while, we walk together to the area where Mak Jiu sings and where the decorated ceremonial model boat is placed. Upon reaching the area, the three transgendered performers perform *ronggeng* to the live musical ensemble, at first, in front of the model boat and then, moving gradually around the boat. Following their simple and repetitive hand and feet movements, other middle-aged and elderly women dance around the boat tailing the performers. The latter wear common attire except for a small number who wear knee length colourful skirts made from raffia string on top of their black tights. Soon, another three transgendered persons arrive at the scene dressed in Bollywood style *lehenga* (a full ankle-length skirt worn by Indian women, commonly for celebrations) skirts and *ghagra cholis* (blouses). The *ronggeng* dance led by the transgendered dancers and the seemingly fashion parade of three other transgendered artists attract a larger crowd. Slowly, the ceremonial procession ensues.

The above scene is recounted from my ethnographic field study conducted during the *Pelacak* celebration in Phuket, Thailand, in October 2013. *Pelacak* is a key event celebrated by the *Orak Lawoi*, coastal/sea gypsies, in Southwest Thailand. It is a three-day festival celebrated around the full moons in May and October each year. During this festival, the villagers of three chosen sites, Sapam and Rawai in Phuket island and Ko Sireh island,¹ perform rituals and make boat-shaped offerings. Ross describes that the *Pelacak* of *Orak Lawoi* is based on a specially constructed model boat that carries ritual items. This boat, which is then launched into the sea, is believed by the villagers to carry away "malevolent elements and return the souls of the recently departed to the ancestral homeland" (Ross 2015: 69). It is a ceremony to restore balance, a ritual to connect *Orak Lawoi* with their ancestors and to seek blessing and protection. While the festival is centered on the boat rituals, *Orak Lawoi* celebrates this festival with music and dance. Ross also points out that this is one of the few occasions in which the *Orak Lawoi* still perform *ronggeng*. During the *Pelacak* festival, I noticed the presence of a transgendered and transsexual group (commonly referred as *kathoey* in Thailand), either openly or discreetly, inevitable in all three sites. This group was more visible during performance in Ko Sireh compared to Sapam and Rawai. I discuss

the participation of *kathoey*s as performers and spectators as they navigate between central and peripheral spaces during the course of the events (the politics of these spaces will be explained in the later part of this article). Despite the fact that their involvement throughout the festival is ambivalent and varies at different sites, they cannot be studied as isolated individuals since they are part of the culture. Although a minority group, their presence and contribution during this festival warrant a study. I frame *kathoey* as a sub-culture within the mainstream Thai culture, but here, I investigate this sub-culture more closely in relation to this festival. In Halberstam's seminal work, *In a Queer Time and Space: Transgender Bodies and Subcultural Lives*, she frames transgendered people in opposition to the institutions of family and heterosexuality so as to highlight the importance of the "queer" group's way of life, subcultural practices, embodiment and forms of representations. I use this theorisation as a mode of entry into my own study, in which I have noticed *kathoey*s as being distinct in terms of their gender identity and expression. Although they exist within the normative gender culture, they do not mix well with the mainstream group. They isolate themselves through groupings and express their gender culture rather differently, in opposition to the mainstream culture as mentioned by Halberstam. Gender and sexual non-normative identities are quite complex in Thailand since there are numerous gender and sexual non-normative groups in this country. It is equally difficult to precisely define and categorise what constitutes the *kathoey* identity, but seminal scholarships, which I would discuss in a short-while, have attempted to define *kathoey*. Within the larger non-heteronormative sub-culture group, I examine *kathoey*, as one entity of the subgroup, to situate the processes of identifying and discoursing this subversive gender group. An analysis of *kathoey* as part of sub-culture examined through the intersection of dance in the *Pelacak* festival, I posit, adds to the discourse on *kathoey* by opening up epistemological understanding of how artistic practices allow visibility, agency and empowerment with regards to one of the most popular third gender/sex groups in Southern Thailand. To enrich the discussion on gender and sexual politics examined through culturally constructed *Pelacak* festival, I insert key observations from the field² to contextualise the events for the purpose of analyses and interpretations.

***Kathoe* within the Discourses on Gender and Sexuality in Thailand**

There is a growing body of literature in the humanities and social sciences that has fundamentally changed our perceptions about homosexuality across cultures. Focusing on the emergence of non-normative gender/sex categories in Thailand, the works of gender theorists, particularly, Morris (1994; 1997) and Jackson (1995; 2000; 2011; 2016), are seminal works exploring the discourses of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender/transsexual (LGBT) identities. Both have argued that Thai gender/sex diversity is unique and is not in tangent with the Western/Eurocentric models. Gender/sex is culturally constructed and as such, non-Western transgender and transsexual should be examined through a theoretical lens that respects cultural differences and takes into consideration the specificities of each culture. Barea points out that the "separation between gender and sex is almost non-existent in Thailand" (Barea 2012: 191), whereas, "in western queer theories, there is a separation between gender and sexuality" (Barea 2012: 192). Jackson explains that "queer" is not used in Thailand but the Thai term *phet* which encapsulates notions of sex, gender and sexuality, whether to refer to heteronormative identities or non-heteronormative (queer subjectivities), is used. Discourses on *phet*, Jackson asserts, reflect proliferating gender/sex diversity in Thailand (Jackson 2011: 3–6). Given the diversity of Thai gender configurations, academics and LGBT activists have been struggling relentlessly to find a common term for non-normative genders and sexualities in efforts to fight for their rights and uplift the status of gays, lesbians and *kathoeys*.

Previous scholarships have historically traced the shifting meanings of *kathoe*. Before the 1960s, all those who transgressed normative sex and gender norms such as feminine men, masculine women and intersex people were known as *kathoe*. However, after the 1960s, Thai media was reported to have resorted to differentiating male and female *kathoey*s through different means of expressions. By the 1970s, *kathoe* was used for effeminate males and transwomen, those who transitioned from male to female and not for masculine women or transmen, those who transitioned from female to male (also known as *tom*). Jackson clarifies that *kathoe* also refers to man who "exhibits cross-gender behaviour and speech" (Jackson 2016: xxv).³

Regardless of the gender and sexual spectrum in Thailand, generally, these non-conforming gender/sexual groups are not seen as sinful even though these groups are considered as morally inappropriate. Historical records retrieved from the translated palm-

leaf manuscript about the origin of the universe, *Pathamamulamuli*, from Northern Thailand (Lan Na Kingdom) and Theravada Buddhism itself advocate the tripartite system through the emphasis on the presence of the third category – third gender/sex. In her critical analysis of the aforementioned text, Morris reiterates the interpretation of sexual trinity by highlighting that "the sexual trinity is central and fundamental to the origin of humanity" (Morris 1994: 20). Similarly, in the legacy of Theravada Buddhism, a strand of Buddhism, to attain *nirvana* (enlightenment) and the suffering of rebirths, the gender or biological sex of a person is not described as a matter. Scriptures demonstrate that the physical being of a person, regardless of whether one is male, female or transgendered, are all equal in attempting to achieve *nirvana* (spiritual liberation). Thus, the religious discourse allows the third gender/transgender through the system of three or even four. In addition, the concept of karma views *kathoe*y as a result of karma (a result of failure to perform expected role in the reproductive process in the previous lives and that anyone has chance of becoming *kathoe*y in earlier life/lives). As such, the act of acceptance of any transgendered person is a lesson of compassion (Chennery 2015: 10–11).

Contemporary Thai society's stances about transgender, however, go beyond religious discourse. Although genderscapes continue to proliferate and evolve, Thailand is not a transgender/gay paradise since fear, anxiety and confusion loom large in different contexts within the nation. On the one hand, there is some form of tolerance, if not acceptance, of transgender people in Thai society, hence reflecting non-confrontational attitudes for and against these groups, on the other hand, misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the concept of transgenderism/transsexualism have led to the groups being ridiculed and discriminated by certain sectors of society. Morris points out in another scholarship that non-heteronormative groups often become objects of scrutiny, condemnation and violent acts (Morris 1997). In line with this observation, Barea states that "maybe there are not direct sanctions against homosexuals but in their social environment, they can experience emotional damages as results of insults and gossips" (Barea 2012: 193). Suffice to say that this could be one of the reasons why homosexuals choose to isolate themselves when they are present in general public and could "only act openly within a circle of extremely close people" (Sinnott 1992: 102). Articulating the paradox of visibility of the homosexuals, he expounds that some types of homosexuals are more visible than others. He proclaims that transvestites, who have become part of the institutional images of *kathoe*y, are more visible and less problematic compared to lesbians or *tom*. Within the context of homosexuality, female homosexuality is more challenging compared to male homosexuality due to heavy policing of "gender bending" among women by the Thai patriarchy.

In this research, I locate and refer to the subjects of study as *kathoe*, a term that widely circulated during conversations when I conducted my fieldwork in islands in Southwest Thailand. Their blurred identities often obscure our understanding of their true gender status, no matter how hard we try to categorise and define them. From my observation, it remains unclear and difficult to identify whether a transgendered woman known as *kathoe* has undergone a complete sex reassignment surgery or partial surgery or only behaves effeminate through feminine gestures and cross-attires. It is also not always possible to clarify this doubt because it is not easy to have this conversation with them. Amongst them, however, they instantaneously recognise each other, cling to each other in a group and create their own community. I find this sense of *communitas* developed by them during the *Pelacak* Festival as a crucial support and a way for this sub-culture group to co-exist within the hegemonic normative gender/sexual culture.

Significance of the *Pelacak* Festival

Pelacak festival is important for the maritime communities in Southwest Thailand, particularly the *Orak Lawoi*, the "semi-nomadic sea people" (Ross 2015: 69; Mohd Anis 2015: 84), whose main livelihood depends on the sea. They celebrate this bi-annual festival with rituals and performances. The *Orak Lawoi* communities in Sapam, Rawai and Ko Sireh (as shown in Figure 1) construct a *Pelacak* boat (Photo 1) and perform dance, music and songs to celebrate at the ceremonial event. Rituals are followed by the "circumambulation parade" of the boat and the launching of the boat into the sea at daybreak the next morning. The *Pelacak* boat carries ritual items to accompany the recently departed spirits out to the sea. The launching of the boat is seen as nostalgic since it is intended to connect them to their ancestors in Gunung Jerai (Kedah Peak) (as shown in Figure 1), who are believed have resided there.⁴ Jerai is the highest known mount within the geographical area. This ritualistic practice is an important signifier for *Pelacak* since Gunung Jerai is the spiritual centre of the *Pelacak* festival. This spiritual ceremony bridges the spatial dislocation/displacement between the villagers and their ancestors. Apart from Jerai being a geographical connector between two regions, it is also pivotal from an artistic perspective. It connects the *Orak Lawoi* from Sapam, Rawai and Ko Sireh with the coming of *Ronggeng* from Penang via Lanta and eventually Phuket and Ko Sireh islands.⁵ The geographical mapping of *Ronggeng* is important for this study.



Figure 1 Map showing Southwest Thailand with main settlements of *Orak Lawoi*.
Map by Wong Jyh Shyong.

The preparation to construct the model boat begins on the first day after the rituals. Village men gather to worship and offer food to their ancestors and guarding spirit deities. Once the boat is built, it is decorated with flower garlands and lights and ritual items are placed into the boat. On the second day, the procession of the boat begins. Everyone in the village takes part in the procession. Accompanied by musical instruments such as drums, gongs, cymbals and clappers, a group of men (four or more) lift the large ceremonial boat on their shoulders and parade it around the village. The distance of the procession varies between villages. Other men, women, children and *kathoeys* follow the procession. Some walk quietly with the procession, while others consume liquor, sing and dance along the way. The parade does not reach the beach. At a chosen site, the boat is kept on the sand above high tide mark next to the *berana*⁶ (percussion ensemble). This is a sacred space where rituals that involve ritual offerings, among others, rice, flowers, betel leaves and nuts, incense, liquor, candles and money are initiated by the village shaman. This is followed by the

performance of a *berana* ensemble, which plays tunes to "beseech the *Datuk*" (spirits evoked for worship) and ceremonial counter-clockwise dancing around the *Pelacak* (*pusing berana* or circumambulation) takes place throughout the night and early morning. Next to this space is the secular space (community hall/open space with a stage) where *ramwong* (Thai circle dance)⁷ and other performances are staged. This space is filled with *Orak Lawoi* villagers, youths from neighbouring Thai communities and tourists. Though the secular space becomes the attraction through nightlong music and dance activities, the rituals around the *Pelacak* are given utmost attention throughout the night under the careful observation of the presiding shaman. The following day, the boat is launched into the sea at daybreak after the final set of rituals.⁸ These rituals differ among communities.



Photo 1 *Pelacak* Boat in Ko Sireh. This photo is from the author's personal collection.

Orak Lawoi's Ronggeng (Rong Ngeng) during the Pelacak Festival

Dancing and singing play an important role as a social entertainment throughout the festival. *Pelacak* is celebrated with dance performances accompanied by live music and by pre-recorded music. The selection of dances varies at different venues and range between *ramwong*, Bollywood, Zumba and *ronggeng*. *Pelacak* stands as a transient vessel between rituals and performances.

It was observed that *Ronggeng* was more prominent in Ko Sireh as compared to Sapam and Rawai. *Ronggeng* was performed before, during and after the procession with live music by a group of three *kathoeys*. In Ko Sireh, *ronggeng* was not performed during rituals but only while parading around the village and in-situ social dancing. At these secular sites within the temporality of *Pelacak*, *kathoeys* took the lead in the performances. The *Pelacak komunitas* embraced *kathoeys* quite differently during these events. They were allowed to enter the public sphere without much confrontation for the purpose of entertainment. These sites allowed a certain kind of openness and non-homophobic atmosphere during the festival. In such a case, placing *kathoeys* in-between and betwixt *Pelacak* made them tangible and intangible at the same time.

In Sapam, meanwhile, *ronggeng* was performed by teen-aged female dancers in *kebaya* after the boat procession. There was no *ronggeng* performance in Rawai during the period of observation, even though, traditionally women championed the *ronggeng* performance as singers-dancers (Ross 2015: 71). Today, where are the beholders of *ronggeng* or trained female performers in these sites? What led to the emergence of *kathoeys* in *ronggeng* performances?

The *Pelacak* festival offers one of the rare opportunities for surviving practitioners and troupes of traditional performing arts to perform this dying art form today. Artists mention that *ronggeng* has failed to capture the attention of youths today, who consider it as a "less exciting" and a "boring" form. This was not the case in the mid-20th century. Ross and Mohd Anis elucidate that *ronggeng* migrated from Malaya to southern Thailand, particular Lanta, in the 1930s. Mohd Anis stresses that Malay gramophone popular songs of the 1950s and newly choreographed *ronggeng* repertoires in Malaya hugely influenced the repertoires of Malay speaking southern Thai communities, particularly, *Ronggeng* in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat in southeast Thailand (Mohd Anis 2015: 85). The Malay speaking Thai communities

incorporated parts of the Malayan *ronggeng* repertoires into their own repertoires. However, Mohd Anis argues that the choreographed *ronggeng* had not affected the *Orak Lawoi* simply because they were minorities residing in small villages in Phuket and due to their "isolation from the influence of mainstream Malay movies and popular songs" (Mohd Anis 2015: 85). As such, their *ronggeng* is largely influenced by *ramwong* style, particularly hand movements that replicate the *ramwong* dance. Further, Mohd Anis, in his persuasive scholarship on intercultural encounters in *ronggeng* dance of the *Orak Lawoi*, asserts that the *Pelacak* festival opens up a "communal space, autonomous and imagined as exotic sea-gypsies" (Mohd Anis 2015: 87) by the Thai government. He argues that this autonomy distinguishes *Orak Lawoi's ronggeng* from the *ronggeng* performed by other communities in Southwest Thailand. He claims that since the *Orak Lawoi's ronggeng* is "free from the mediation of the nation-state", it is distinct in the sense that it embraces "intercultural dialogues" and embodies diversities (p. 87). *Orak Lawoi's ronggeng* emulated the Andaman *ronggeng*, pronounced as "*Rong Ngeng*" by the Malay-Thai speakers. This *ronggeng* is also known as *Rong Ngeng Tanyong*. *Tanyong* refers to *tanjung* (cape) in the Lanta Island (Ross 2015; 2011). The *tanyong* style is rather gender specific. It is the domain of female dancers-singers. Male musicians play violin, *rebana* (a form of drum) and gong to accompany the female dancers-singers. This style is preeminent, refined and contains certain decorum. We witnessed this style in a non-*Pelacak* context during our fieldwork in the Krabi Province. The offshoot of this style is the altered *ronggeng* performed by *kathoeyes* and young dancers at this festival, performed partially as ritual and partially as showcase. The traditionally performed dance movements, in terms of hand, foot and torso movements, have now been replaced with *ramwong* movements. Mohd Anis (2015) succinctly describes the changes in technique as follows:

Young performers can no longer perform Andaman *ronggeng* dance techniques such as *melayah* or *melapai* (lowering, decentering and extending the body forward and backwards towards the floor), languid arm sways and pedestrian steps and *terancang* (side skips and forward diagonal foot gesture) which are key signifiers of the Andaman *ronggeng* or *Ronggeng tanyong*. Instead, *ronggeng* dancers have copied *ramwong* staccato footsteps and circular hand gestures, eliminating *terancang* (side skips and forward diagonal foot gesture) all together. (p.87)

From the structural comparisons above, it is obvious that the movement elements of *ramwong* dance (feet and hand gestures) accompanied by Thai music (*luk thung* melodies and *mor lam*),⁹ a traditional form of song in Laos and Isan communities in Northeast Thailand, have altered the aesthetics and have taken predominance over the older *ronggeng* movement techniques. As mentioned by Royce, creativity allows for recombination of criteria or even to go beyond criteria to produce an artistic expression that is "new" but still culturally acceptable (Royce 1980: 181). Creative processes of changes in *ronggeng* through adaptation and borrowing have created a "new" style of *ronggeng* that is unique to the *Orak Lawoi* people.

Over the decades, the lack of seriousness in this art form can be noticed through the disappearance of female dancers. While *ronggeng* music migrated to the Lanta Island through Abu Qasim, the violinist from Malaya, in the 1930s (Ross 2011),¹⁰ the dance was introduced to local villages by a woman named Bunga between 1936 and 1939. She taught local young women and teen-aged girls and trained them to become professional singers-dancers. It was a common practice for women to dance while they sang. While men predominated as musicians during a *ronggeng* performance, women emerged as visibly empowered singer-dancer public performers. Women embodied and preserved the tradition by forming troupes and performing extensively in celebrations at villages and urban cities. Mak Jiu, mentioned in the scene earlier, is an example of a professional *ronggeng* performer, who is also a master teacher and a troupe leader. *Ronggeng* lost its popularity gradually. It was once pursued by women as a serious art form, but today, the young generations have resorted to either other salaried professions or other lucrative forms of entertainment. Even if women learn and perform *ronggeng* today, they do so as a part-time profession.

With *kathoe*y entering the dance scene in Phuket and neighbouring islands, the performativities of *ronggeng* in these islands have shifted from gendered to transgendered. I must pause here and clarify that the reason for the domination of *kathoe*ys in *ronggeng* and other dances in Phuket could be due to the fact of it being a cosmopolitan site of touristic attraction, but the same could not be said about more conservative Muslim-Thai dominated Lanta and Krabi, where a few aged female practitioners are still in control of the form although they rarely perform today. I have mentioned elsewhere that in the early decades of *ronggeng* in Thailand, there was no presence of *kathoe*ys in troupes as female dancers predominate this form. However, their presence in the dance scene began in the 1960s (*Pers. comm.*, 2013). In this framework, the emergence of the *kathoe*y sub-culture within the *Pelacak* festival is

possible due to the increasing number of transgender people and transsexuals within the larger heteronormative communities of *Orak Lawoi*. As a result, the style and meaning of *ronggeng* has shifted today. Mohd Anis describes *Orak Lawoi's* current Andaman *ronggeng* as a dance that resembled a "fringe performance executed by effeminate males and transgendered dancers for the curious gazes of tourists and younger generations of the *Orak Lawoi*" (Mohd Anis 2015: 88). Since the continuity of Andaman *ronggeng* is uncertain due to lack of interest, religious constraints and declining bearers of tradition, the survival of *ronggeng*, as both participatory and presentational form, depends largely on the artistic involvement of multi-talented *kathoeys*. During *Pelacak*, *ronggeng* transformed from a communal practice to a touristic spectacle.

KATHOEY AS SUB-CULTURE IN PELACAK

Kathoeys were spotted as performers and spectators throughout this festival. At times, they were found amidst the larger community, mingling with village men and women and at other times, they detached themselves through a form of distancing. It is through dance that the *kathoeys'* multi-layered roles and challenges were identified in this study. Their dance styles, which varied according to the contexts and spaces of performance, complicate the discourse surrounding access and power of visibility.

In some villages in Phuket and other islands, *kathoeys* were visible and not concealed. For example in Ko Sireh, the transgendered artists sang, played musical instruments and danced *ronggeng* along with the effeminate men and teen-aged girls (as shown in Photo 2).

Photos 2 and 3 show the *ronggeng* performance of three transgendered/transsexual performers, dressed in pink *kebaya* blouses and sarong, before a decorated *Pelacak* boat. Dancers performed *ronggeng*, swaying their hands at the side, moving forward and backward in the traditional *ronggeng* style. After several repetitions of this motif, they moved forward and performed *pusing berana* by dancing around the boat. The movements of these dancers were imitated by the village women, who tailgated these dancers while performing the motifs repeatedly (as shown in Photo 3). Later, three other *kathoeys* dressed in Bollywood styled *lehenga* and *ghagra cholis*, joined the group. The colourful and variety of attires of the participants provided a glimpse of a fashion parade. *Kathoeys*, along with the effeminate men and teen-aged girls also dressed in traditional *ronggeng* attire, followed the procession. They

sang and danced inexorably until the procession came to a halt. Throughout the event, the *kathoeyes* and effeminate men fluidly changed roles as singers, dancers and musicians. Their dancing became a focal point of attraction, which gradually drew a larger crowd of mostly men to dance with the performers. The dynamic social dancing scene created an entertaining spectacle for onlookers.



Photo 2 Kathoey in a *ronggeng* performance. This photo is from the author's personal collection.



Photo 3 *Kathoey*s and local women were dancing around the boat. This photo is from the author's personal collection.

As performers of *ronggeng*, *kathoey*s fascinate male and female audiences with their ability to remain attractive, appealing and gendered, but at the same time presenting gender at odds with the heteronormative gender group. The multi-skilled transgendered and transsexual artists are hypervisibilised by their artistic acumen and flexibility. They stand out due to various reasons during the *Pelacak* festival in Ko Sireh such as dynamic showmanship, performance competencies and their minute attention to costumes and make up as opposed to the middle-aged and older women, who perform in the crowd during the procession and around the boat. The lack of women's interest in performing *ronggeng* in Ko Sireh enables the transgendered performers to construct a space to visibilise their artistic talents. In addition to this, they also complicate the gendered division of labour by flexibly adopting multiple roles. They dance, sing and play musical instruments. Some *kathoey*s, who join the parade from neighbouring villages, also dance along with the main performers and cheer the performers as spectators. By the end of the procession, almost the entire village participates in dancing

with the dancing centred on *kathoey* artists, who spontaneously lead the dance numbers. Their energy and spontaneity entice drunken men to dance with them. Their presence in this event can be construed as both significant and a much-looked forward spectacle that maintain the liveliness of the celebration. The phenomenon of *kathoeyes* dancing with teenagers and children was also noticed during a showcased performance in Rawai where young dancers between the age of 10 and 15 years old performed *ramwong* along with a few *kathoeyes* on the stage. This evening showcase was staged before hundreds of audience members comprising villagers and tourists. They do not commonly perform with middle aged or older women, a choice that could be interpreted as either a deliberate distancing to attract the attention of the general public in the absence of real women or for better social acceptance through relegation of their status to the level of young dancers.

While the hypervisibility of *kathoeyes* as *ronggeng* performers was evident in the daytime at Ko Sireh, there was a contrast in terms of visibility of this group during the events that took place in the evening after the procession. Villagers, regardless of men, women or *kathoeyes* except for children, resorted to heavy drinking and disco dancing at the community hall that contained a small stage. Compact disc (CD) jockeys played all sorts of pre-recorded music hyping the ambience for dancing. The mini hall was filled with people from all age groups, who improvised their dance movements based on the songs played. Our research team made way through the crowded hall. When we reached the stage where the CD jockey was making announcements and playing different tracks of music, we noticed that that space was occupied primarily by a group of drunken *kathoeyes*, who danced profusely. Two *kathoeyes* sat beside the disc jockey and helped him to select music tracks while others stayed at the semi-dark side-stage and backstage. They were hidden from the rest of the crowd, who danced at the much brighter down-stage. Even then, some young drunken men located the *kathoeyes* and made their way towards them with the intention of dancing with them. One of the *kathoeyes* said that she and her friends looked forward to this event as it enabled them to meet other *kathoeyes* and socialise with them.

Social events also open up opportunities for *kathoeyes* to dress up. In fact, transgendered women have better fashion sense compared to actual women. In the late evening celebration, *kathoeyes* stood out in terms of sartorial and cosmetic choices as well as dancing. Some wore "party" dresses with high heels accentuated with special hair-do and make-up while few others appeared naturally in shorts and blouses but applied heavy

make-up. Since *kathoeys* socialised in a discreet manner during the evening event, it was not immediately clear whether anyone could join them. They only mingled with their own sub-culture group and did not mix with the general crowd. Their attire, attitude, body language and communication varied from non-*kathoeys*. We approached them with uncertainty, but to our surprise the exclusionary space opened up for us. We were regarded as "friendly" tourists, who we did not pose any threats to them. The *kathoeys* communicated more willingly with us and allowed us to dance with them. It remains a puzzle whether the choice of semi-visible spaces is influenced by the fear of being ridiculed or harassed by the wildly dancing drunken men and women or by the personal choice of the *kathoeys* to occupy a seemingly "safe" space that grants them freedom of speech and expression without mockery and unwanted attention or both.

Distancing of *kathoeys* was also seen during the *Pelacak* festival in Sapam. Transgendered artists in Sapam did not dance in the open space for public viewing. They joined the ceremonial boat procession with the rest of the crowd but did not participate in the dance performance at the secular space after the procession. Only teen-aged dancers and children participated in a mixed performance of *ramwong*, Bollywood, Zumba and *ronggeng*. Adult women merely cheered the young dancers. Occasionally, some women danced in the outer edge of the performance area either in excitement or to encourage the dancers. They only entered the performance space to offer token money to the young dancers. *Kathoeys*, who stayed about 100 metres away from the main performance space, closely watched and imitated dances, while at times, improvised movements at a semi-visible corner. Their activities at the fringe, however, were not intended to be concealed from the public gaze because gradually this space drew more people. A group of transgendered/sexual people gathered at that peripheral space to socialise and watch both performances – those presented by children (at the public space) and those mimicked by *kathoeys* (at the semi-private space). The spectators' moral support is meaningful enough for the dancing *kathoeys* to derive much pleasure and fulfilment.

The *kathoeys* group marks a strong presence by moving proactively between villages during *Pelacak* festivals. The members exist alongside other men and women, sometimes in harmony and at other times, in tension. The existence of this group resonates with the concept of queer subculture, a form of subcultural identity foregrounded by Halberstam. Firstly, what is sub-culture? Clarke et al. argue that cultures are non-homogeneous and as such, unequally

ranked and stand in opposition to one another, in relations of domination and subordination (1976: 11). Groups that do not reside at the "apex of power" (1976: 12), nonetheless, find other ways of expressing their culture. Subordinate cultures may not always be in conflict with the parent/hegemonic culture but they may co-exist by negotiating spaces in it. The above-mentioned scholars describe sub-cultures as "sub-sets – smaller, more localised and differentiated structures within the larger cultural networks" (1976: 12) that should be distinctive enough in terms of "activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces etc." (1976: 14) to be seen different from the hegemonic culture but there should be important things that bind them with the "parent" culture. In other words, while sub-cultures co-exist with the parent cultures, they must be distinct enough to develop their own identities. While there are many groups distinguished by age, class and ethnicity, Halberstam theorises a gender based sub-culture, referred to as queer sub-culture, as a group whose gendered practices fall "outside naturalised, internalised and normalised ways of being" (Halberstam 2005: 7). In this study, I frame the *kathoeys* group in *Pelacak* as part of the contextualised sub-culture. I do not intend to reduce *kathoeys* as queer because *kathoeys* has always been a localised and a distinctive categorisation. Members of this group develop their own culture and identity. They walk, talk and act differently but they exist within the dominant culture. This subordinated group gets limited opportunities for social mobility. For instance, a few *kathoeys* stated that they could not undergo formal dance training, but learned only through observations and imitations due to the stigma associated with the subversive gender group. The level of participation as public performers depends generally on the level of tolerance and acceptance of the community in which they live. This social stigma, nonetheless, has not deterred some from performing music and dance and participating in larger societal events. This is where the sub-culture group is important as it marks their identity, supports them and strengthens social relations between members.

One of the *kathoeys* disclosed that the ritual and the social event offered her friends a chance to travel from village to village. Festivals and other communal activities enable the *kathoeys* to affirm and broaden their network since these events create access and mobility. Here, the *Pelacak* festival opens up chances for *kathoeys* to strengthen and develop social networking through gatherings and performances. They are versatile as they are able to perform dances ranging from *ronggeng* to disco dancing (as shown in Photo 4). Today, *ramwong* and disco dancing have superseded *ronggeng* as forms of secular and social entertainment.



Photo 4 Disco dancing at *Pelacak* evening social event in Ko Sireh. This photo is from the author's personal collection.

The time and space during which the *kathoey* group is visible and hidden are ambiguous. While their artistic activities are repressed at certain *Orak Lawoi* villages and islands, they are allowed to perform in other communities. A *kathoey*, who participated in the *Pelacak* festival in Ko Sireh, declared this during our conversation and enlightened that this is the reason why they often travel between villages during period of festivities.

CONCLUSION

Although negative stereotypes of *kathoey*s exist in the *Orak Lawoi* communities in Southwest Thailand just as how prejudices occur in larger Thailand, there is an ambiguity in the level of tolerance among the communities, which then opens up opportunities for *kathoey*s to be visible at public spaces. This is witnessed during the *Pelacak* Festival. The presence of *kathoey*s as performers and spectators is evident at various sites during this festival, to the extent that this group could be considered as a sub-culture, a subordinate culture comprising those who fall under non-normative gender and sexuality identity and expression. Their participation as performers of *ronggeng* is particularly fascinating in this study. The absence of the older generation of *ronggeng* female dancers as public performers and the declining interest

among the younger generation of female dancers have slowly given rise to the emergence of *kathoeyes* as visible performers of *ronggeng*. The *ronggeng* dance of the *Orak Lawoi* is unique. The traditional Andaman *ronggeng* has evolved into "new" and hybrid compositions and choreographies of *ronggeng*, which today is being preserved through the dancing bodies of teenaged female dancers, effeminate males and *kathoeyes*.

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NOTES

1. Although the *Orak Lawoi* communities reside at the islands between Langkawi and Phuket (Ross 2015), the *Pelacak* festival is popularly celebrated in Sapam, Ko Sireh and Rawai, located on the western and southwest coast of Phuket. The *Orak Lawoi* comprises the sea people of southwestern Thailand's Andaman sea coast islands. This research is keen to examine the cultural practices of these people, found to be hugely influenced by Malay and Thai cultures.
2. Some key observations and sections have been revised and rewritten from my earlier paper that was published in the *Proceedings of the 3rd Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Performing Arts of Southeast Asia* in 2015.
3. Numerous articles written by gender theorists, namely Jackson (1995; 2000; 2016) and Morris (1994; 1997), provide detailed accounts of the proliferation of various categories of transgenderism and transsexualism in Thai and the historical emergence of the category, *kathoey*. Please refer to them for further discussion.
4. This piece of information was gathered during interviews with the people of the community.
5. The circulation of people and culture between Malaysia and Thailand has been described in detail by Ross. Refer to Ross' article "Between Malay and Thai: The *Orak Lawoi's* cultural mediation of a Malayan musical legacy" (Ross 2015: 60–74).

6. According to Ross, *berana* is a responsorial singing style between two singers or a singer and a chorus, accompanied by a percussion ensemble composed of six or more frame drums (*berana*), a gong and often including small cymbals and wooden or bamboo clappers (Ross 2017: 171–176). See Ross for detailed explanations on *berana* songs.
7. Ramwong was introduced by Phibun Songkram during his tenureship as the Prime Minister of Thailand (1938–1944 and 1948–1957). He made changes to the national cultural policies through *Ratthaniyom*, which contained twelve edicts that relate to different aspects of culture. It was an attempt to bring modernisation through the control of local culture. It slowly grew popular among youngsters and tourists to the extent that it replaced *Ronggeng* in certain villages and emerged as a representation of the status of the Thai people. This is a circle dance performed by male and female, introduced by Phibun Songkram to counter western dance forms such as foxtrot and waltz. Under his patronage, Thai Fine Arts Department created *ramwong* as a national social dance of Thailand between 1945–1955 (Mohd Anis 2015: 89). Also, please refer to Sainuy's dissertation entitled "The impact of Thailand's cultural policies on folk culture: A study of *rongngeng* in Ramad, Krabi Province" written in 2017 for a detailed analysis of *ronggeng* and Thai cultural policies.
8. Ross mentions the rituals that take place at the beach before the launching of the boat. He says that *Orak Lawoi* "playfully scoop water from the sea and splash it at each other". Then, the men "vociferate and sway side-to-side to a percussion accompaniment of drums and gongs" and finally, they "dash halfway toward the sea [several times] where they and the music descend into a chaotic disarray" (*Pers. comm.*, 2015). Please refer to Ross (2017) for detailed a discussion on rituals and boat procession during the *Pelacak* festival.
9. *Luk thung* means "child of the fields". It is a slow Thai country music that reflects daily trials and tribulations of rural Thai people. It is also regarded as peasant music. *Mor lam* is a folk music from Northeast Thailand region, populated predominantly by Lao and Isan communities. Since both music have much in common, both have gone through changes over time and have come together since the 1990s to produce a vibrant new genre called *luk thung Isan* or *prayuk* (translation).
10. Please refer to Ross' doctoral thesis written in 2011 for more information about the Andaman *ronggeng*, the migration of *ronggeng* from Malaya to Lanta Island in the mid-1930s. He describes Lanta Island as the "physical centre and spiritual heart" (Ross 2015: 71) of the *Orak Lawoi*. It was the point of entry and the point from where *ronggeng* launched.

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