

# Rong Ngeng of the Urak Lawoi: Identity and Identity Negotiation of the Sea People on the Andaman Coast, Thailand

Supansa Suwan<sup>1</sup>, Supachai Singyabuth<sup>2\*</sup>, Rungrat Thongsakul<sup>3</sup>, Patamas Pinnukul<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Thailand. Email: ajsupansa@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Fine-Applied Arts and Cultural Science, Mahasarakham University, Thailand. Email: supachaisingyabuth@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand. Email: rungrat.t@pkru.ac.th

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand. Email: pinnukul.p@gmail.com

\*Correspondence: Email: supachaisingyabuth@gmail.com

RITA\_23  
June 2025  
ISSN: 2340-9711  
e-ISSN: 2386-7027

Received: 12-01-2025  
Revised: 28-02-2025  
Accepted: 23-04-2025  
Published: 30-06-2025

**Abstract**

This qualitative research study focuses on the Urak Lawoi's use of Rong Ngeng performances for ethnic maintenance and identity negotiation. Data was collected through fieldwork, interviews, observation, focus group discussions, and related documents. The research had three main objectives: 1) to explore the historical development of the Urak Lawoi ethnic group in the Andaman Sea, Thailand; 2) to examine Rong Ngeng performances in the context of ethnic maintenance and cultural identity of the Urak Lawoi in Phuket Province; and 3) to investigate Rong Ngeng performances in the context of identity negotiation as Thai citizens. The findings revealed that the Urak Lawoi utilized Rong Ngeng performances as a significant means to preserve their ethnicity and to connect with the boat floating ceremony, a tradition that reflected the social identity of the seapeople. This ceremony took place twice a year on Sire Island, Laem Tuk Kae Village, Phuket Province, and included a Rong Ngeng performance alongside a sacred ceremony led by a shaman for identity negotiation. Additionally, Rong Ngeng was performed at local festivals such as the Retrospective Festival, Chinese New Year Festival, Thao Thep Kasattri-Thao Si Sunthorn Festival, and Por Tor Festival, with performance styles adapted to suit different social contexts. As a result, the Urak Lawoi's Rong Ngeng performances were embraced as part of Phuket Province's identity and became a significant aspect of its tourism industry, serving as a bridge to foster connections between the seapeople and other members of society.

**Keywords:** Urak Lawoi people's Rong Ngeng, sea people's ethnic identity, sea people's ethnic identity negotiation, the Andaman Coast in Thailand

## INTRODUCTION

Phuket Province, Thailand, is a city with a long history. In the past, it used to be the center of tin mining, rich in natural resources, and a trading hub between India and China. Moreover, Phuket is also home to ethnic groups with distinctive cultures and lifestyles, especially the Urak Lawoi, who live on the Andaman coast. The Urak Lawoi are a nomadic ethnic group living on the islands of the Andaman Sea. They rely on natural resources and have spiritual beliefs related to the sea. One of their important traditions is the boat-floating ceremony, held twice a year in the 6th and 11th months to ward off bad luck and pay respect to their ancestors.

In the past, these sea people lived independently<sup>1</sup>. However, when government agencies began defining boundaries, allocating land, and introducing land ownership systems, the sea people faced housing issues because they did not have title deeds to the land they had inhabited for generations<sup>2</sup>. As a result, they were evicted from their original areas. The main problem faced by the Urak Lawoi people was the violation of their right to live and being evicted from their ancestral lands<sup>3</sup>. A significant example was the case of the sea people in Rawai who engaged in a legal battle with capitalists who had obtained title deeds overlapping the sea people's community areas. They were pressured to leave their lands despite historical evidence and aerial photographs confirming their longstanding presence in the area. Another factor contributing to the neglect of the sea people was the perception of the state and society that economic development and tourism were more important than the rights of indigenous peoples<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the sea people's illiteracy and lack of legal knowledge put them at a disadvantage.

The sea people had to confront a major change in their way of life<sup>5</sup>, transitioning from a nomadic existence at sea to settling on land<sup>6</sup>. They had to adapt to the capitalist economic system and explore new occupations such as driving long-tailed boats, working in hotels, or being hired as laborers in the tourism industry<sup>7,8</sup>. As a result, traditional aspects of sea people's culture, such as the Urak Lawoi language, began to diminish. The younger generation increasingly used central Thai language and southern Thai dialects instead of their own language. Additionally, traditional arts and cultures like Rong Ngeng, a performance that reflects their identity, were influenced by external cultures<sup>9</sup>. The role of Rong Ngeng in the sea people's identity negotiation went beyond being a folk performing art<sup>10</sup>; it served as a tool for preserving their ethnicity<sup>11</sup>, expressing their identity, and creating negotiating power with outside societies<sup>12</sup>. In the present context, Rong Ngeng was utilized as a cultural mechanism to help them gain acceptance by the state and be recognized as part of the national cultural heritage<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, the state leveraged Rong Ngeng performances to promote tourism, which, while increasing the income of the sea people, also required modifications to meet the needs of tourists<sup>14</sup>.

The major solutions to the aforementioned problems include the following: (1) certifying the sea people's housing rights based on the principles of community rights<sup>15</sup>; (2) allowing them to manage their own resources<sup>16</sup>; (3) developing laws that consider indigenous ways of life instead of enforcing laws based solely on land title deeds<sup>17</sup>; (4) promoting the sea people's participation in policy-making to give them negotiating power and maintain their culture<sup>18</sup>; and (5) restoring and preserving their cultures, such as the Urak Lawoi language and traditional arts, to ensure the new generation is aware of their heritage roots<sup>19</sup>. The problems faced by the Urak Lawoi sea people originated from developmental processes and the modern state's expansion, which overlooked the rights of indigenous people, pressuring them to leave their original habitats and adapt to unfamiliar economies and laws<sup>20</sup>. Rong Ngeng performances have become an important mechanism for identity negotiation and presentation to outsiders. Simultaneously, the state has used Rong Ngeng performances as a tool to promote tourism, increasing the sea people's income but also posing a risk of losing their cultural identity. Therefore, solutions to the Urak Lawoi sea people's problems should focus on strategies that emphasize community rights, their involvement in the solution processes, and finding a balance between economic development and the conservation of local cultures.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative research methodology was used to find answers to the question of associations between Rong Ngeng performances and the identity negotiation of the Urak Lawoi people in Phuket Province. A high level of cultural understanding of practices, beliefs, and experiences was based on the research design. The methodologies of data collection entailed thorough fieldwork, semi-structured interviews with members who may serve as key

informants, including community leaders and entertainers, and participant observation of actual Rong Ngeng performances and local festivals. The use of focus group discussion allowed an understanding of shared narratives, and document analysis allowed for historical depth. This varied procedure allowed for a broader picture of the cultural aspects of Urak lawoi and its heritage.

The sample group was a mixed group in which old community members, young people, and cultural specialists were included. Purposive sampling was the rule for choosing the sample as an individual who knew both Rong Ngeng and ranked the history of the community. Data regarding the collected evidence were analyzed through thematic analysis, where some of the themes found were identity preservation among members and how external influences shaped the customary aspects. The triangulation of the results presented in the study helped to solidify the findings obtained during the interviews, observations, and documents, which gave the research a better insight into the lives of Urak Lawoi. The ethics of the study were taken seriously and all participants signed informed consent forms. The study ensured that everyone was anonymous and confidential. To provide proper reflection to participants, member checking was also applied. Although the paper may be limited in the extent of voices that were captured among the Urak Lawoi community, the findings will contribute to the important insights on the role of Rong Ngeng performances as a form of cultural expressions and claim of identity, the impact of such practices to the indigenous identity in Thailand.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sea people, also known as the “sea gypsies”, was an ethnic group that have lived on the coast and islands of the Andaman Sea in Thailand for a long time. The Urak Lawoi were one of the three main sea gypsies in Thailand, along with the Moklan, and Moka. This current research studied the historical development of the Urak Lawoi sea gypsies, especially those in Koh Sire community, Tuk Kae Cape, Phuket Province, which was considered an important source of learning about sea gypsies’ cultures.

The Urak Lawoi sea people have long historical roots. It is believed that they were descendants of nomadic sea people in Southeast Asia. Originally, the Urak Lawoi lived a life that depended mainly on the sea, using boats as the major means of transportation and making a living. Their settlements were usually along the coast and on the islands of the Andaman Sea. In former times, they fished and gathered seafood, living a nomadic life, unattached to permanent residences<sup>21</sup>. However, in the past few decades, they were forced to settle more permanently due to government policies, the expansion of the tourism industry, and the declaration of marine preservation areas, which prevented them from maintaining their traditional ways of life<sup>22</sup>.

The Urak Lawoi have their own spoken language, which is different from Thai and Malay. The Urak Lawoi language has some roots that is related to the ancient Malay language, but has developed its own unique identity in terms of rituals and beliefs. They have a belief system that is connected to nature and spirits, for example, the boat floating ceremony, an important ritual held annually to ward off evil and to pray for peaceful and happy lives<sup>23</sup>. It also includes the beliefs about their ancestors’ spirits and the natural sacred things.

Although the Urak Lawoi sea people had retained some of their ways of life and cultures, they were facing several challenges, including:

1. Loss of habitats and traditional lifestyles. Development of the tourism industry and large-scale construction projects limited the traditional areas of the sea gypsies<sup>24</sup>.
2. Cultural assimilation. Integration into Thai mainstream society had led to a gradual decline of their traditional cultures<sup>25</sup>.
3. Access to citizenship rights. Although many of the sea people had Thai nationality, some were still denied such basic rights as the right to own farmlands and the right to education<sup>26</sup>.

The Urak Lawoi sea people had a unique history and cultures, but they were facing changes that could affect their future existence. Ethnographic research and studies could help promote awareness and the preservation of their cultures in the context of the modern world (Figure 1).



(a)

(b)

**Figure 1:** The settlement of the sea people in the middle of the Andaman Sea before the 2004 Tsunami: (a) A house with ties, called “Nam,” in southern dialect; (b) A sea people’s village on the Andaman coast (Source: [www.morgesiew.com](http://www.morgesiew.com)).

### Development of historical, social, and cultural contexts of the Andaman Sea area

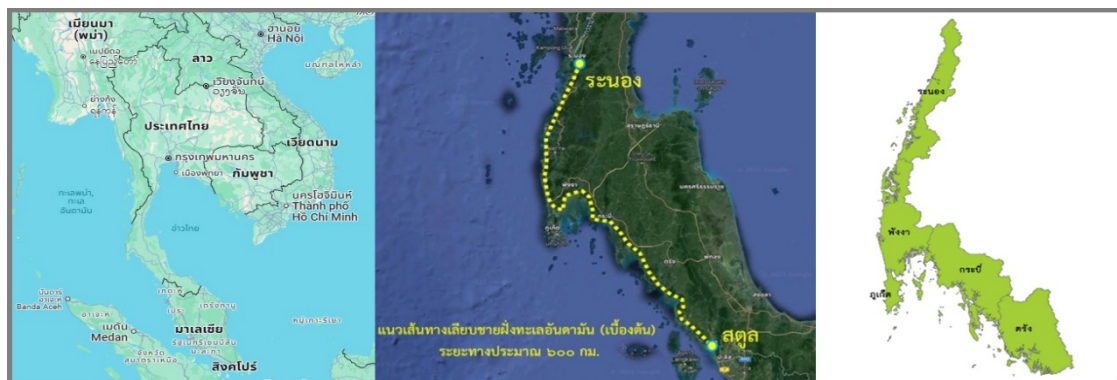
The Andaman coast of Thailand has a long historical development, especially Phuket Province, which had been an important center for many eras, from prehistoric times to the present. The influence of the landscape, natural resources, and the contact with various civilizations had shaped this area to its distinctive characteristics<sup>25</sup>.

**Prehistoric era and early settlements:** Archaeological evidence indicated that humans began to settle in Phuket and the Andaman coast as early as 3,500 years before the Buddhist era. People at that time worked as hunters, gatherers, and fishermen<sup>27</sup>. There were two main groups: the land people, for example, Semang and Sakai, who lived in the forests, and the sea people, for instance, Urak Lawoi, Mokan, and Moklan, who lived along the coast and on various islands<sup>28</sup>. The cultures of these ethnic groups developed according to their environments and their contact with outsiders.

**Historical era and Influences from external civilizations:** During the 5<sup>th</sup>– 12<sup>th</sup> Buddhist century, the Andaman Sea coast began to be influenced by the Srivijaya civilization, which was the center of Mahayana Buddhism. There were trades with India, China, and Java, which led to the spread of Hindu-Buddhist cultures, arts, and construction techniques that can still be seen in some ancient sites<sup>29</sup>. During the 13<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> Buddhist century, Islam spread to the Malay Peninsula and southern Thailand through trades with Arab and Persian merchants, resulting in the expansion of Muslim communities in such areas as Satun, Krabi, and Phang Nga provinces. In addition, influences from China and such Western nations as Portugal, Holland, and England resulted in economical and architectural changes, especially in the construction of Sino-Portuguese buildings, which could still be seen in Phuket and other port cities<sup>30</sup>.

**The mining industry and urban growth period:** From the Ayutthaya period to the early Rattanakosin period, Phuket was the center of tin mining, which was an important natural resource of the region. Many Chinese people immigrated to work in mining, resulting in large Chinese communities, whose cultures still influenced the ways of life and traditions in Phuket today, for example, the Vegetarian Festival.

**The present era and the role of tourism:** In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tourism began to play an important role in the economy of Phuket and the Andaman coast, especially after the decline of mining. The Thai government signified the development of the tourism industry, emphasizing the development of infrastructure, utilities and various facilities. In addition, the 2004 tsunami disaster had a severe impact on the area, yet it was also the beginning of standardized disaster prevention and sustainable development of the tourism industry. The Andaman coast of Thailand is of great historical, social and cultural significance, from being a settlement of the original ethnic groups, being influenced by external civilizations, being a center of mining and developing into a world-class tourist city today (Figure 2). The cultural diversity and abundant natural resources caused this region to still play an important role in the economy and to be a destination for tourists from all over the world (Table 1).



**Figure 2:** Maps showing the location and territory of the Andaman Sea on the west coast of Thailand (Source: Google Maps, 2022)

**Table 1:** Historical Development of the Urak Lawoi Ethnic Group

Year/Period	Key Events/Changes	Impact on Urak Lawoi Community
Pre-20th Century	Nomadic lifestyle and independence at sea	Strong cultural identity and preservation of traditional practices
20th Century	Introduction of land ownership laws and government regulations	Eviction from ancestral lands and loss of autonomy
21st Century	Shifts towards tourism and economic development	Adaptation to new occupations and resulting cultural changes

**Historical, social and cultural development of the Urak Lawoi people as Thai citizens in Phuket Province from 1969 to 2022**

The Urak Lawoi people has been living in the Andaman coast of Thailand for hundreds of years. They had a way of life that relied heavily on the ocean and they have a unique culture. However, in the past, this ethnic group had been overlooked by the Thai society for a long time until the 2004 tsunami event, that their stories became known to outsiders. The Urak Lawoi people had a long history of settlement, even before Thailand became a nation-state. Up to present, there were many hypotheses about their origins. Some believed that they were from the Malayo-Polynesian group who moved from various regions in Southeast Asia. Others believed that they were indigenous people who migrated from southern China via the Mekong River, or may have traveled from Malaysia or Langkawi. They had settled in many areas, including Koh Lanta, which is considered the original center, before spreading to other islands and coasts, for instance, Phuket, Trang, Krabi, and Satun (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Urak Lawoi people’s society, lifestyles and cultures as Thai citizens (Source: Researcher, 2022)

The Urak Lawoi people lived on traditional coastal fishery; boats were a significant part of their lives. Their culture emphasized their dependence on nature and their close relationship with the ocean <sup>31</sup>. The Urak Lawoi language belongs to the Austronesian language family. The word “Urak Lawoi” means “people of the sea”, and they have specific terms for other ethnic groups, reflecting their long-standing interactions with various people in the region. Such traditional Urak Lawoi rituals as the boat floating ceremony, which honored their ancestors’ spirits and associated with the changing direction of the monsoon winds, were an important part of their cultures. They also believed in natural spirits and ancestors; however, at present, some of them were converted to Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam due to external influences. Although the government policies currently promoted cultural diversity; yet in reality, the mainstream development and the expansion of the tourism industry had significant

impacts on the Urak Lawoi people. As land prices in the coastal areas raised, many of them faced farmland shortages and housing insecurity. They were pushed out of their traditional areas or forced to change their ways of life from traditional fishing communities to working in labor and tourism industries. Land rights had been a long-standing issue for the Urak Lawoi people, as they historically placed little importance on title deeds. Many families living in Phuket and nearby islands found that their lands were sold to outsiders without their consent. In addition, tourism development and urban development projects reduced the natural resources that these people used to rely on for their livelihood. Although the Urak Lawoi people faced various challenges, they still maintained their cultural identity in many aspects, for instance, the continuation of their language and traditional rituals. However, the younger generation tended to be increasingly assimilated into the mainstream society, both through education and employment systems that forced them to adapt to urban lifestyles<sup>32</sup>. Balanced development that took the ethnic groups' rights into consideration, as well as increasing opportunities for fair economic development, were keys to preserving the Urak Lawoi's cultures and ways of life. Emphasizing on educational development and providing economic opportunities without destroying their traditional ways of life would help this ethnic group survive without losing its identity.

### **Rong Ngeng in the context of preserving ethnicity and cultural identity of the Urak Lawoi sea people in Phuket Province**

Rong Ngeng was an important performing art for sea people ethnic groups, especially the Urak Lawoi who lived along the Andaman coast of Thailand. This performing art was not only a cultural heritage passed down from their ancestors, but also reflected their identity and ethnic consciousness. Research related to the Urak Lawoi's Rong Ngeng performances had been conducted in Phuket Province, especially in Koh Sire and Tuk Kae Cape, which were important centers of sea people cultures in this region. Rong Ngeng was considered an important performance in the spiritual ceremonies of the sea people, especially in the boat floating ceremony, which had a profound meaning, regarding the floating away of sins and predicting future careers. This ceremony was held twice a year on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> lunar months, when the sea people would stop working in order to prepare for the ceremony. The process of boat floating ceremony began with the preparation of sweets, popped rice, flowers, and items to worship ancestors, known as "wai tuad". After that, the sea people would gather at the "La Tuad" area, a sacred area within the community. "Toh Mor", or the ritual leader, performed the ritual. Then a Rong Ngen performance, imbued with cultural and spiritual meanings, would begin.

**Table 2: Rong Ngeng Performances and Their Contexts**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Description of Event/Performance</b>	<b>Significance to the Urak Lawoi</b>
Boat Floating Ceremony	Ceremony held bi-annually featuring Rong Ngeng performance	Tradition to ward off bad luck and honor ancestors
Retrospective Festival	Local festival featuring Rong Ngeng adapted for community celebration	Reinforces identity and preserves cultural heritage
Chinese New Year Festival	Incorporation of Rong Ngeng to celebrate multicultural diversity in Phuket	Promotes engagement with other cultures and communities
Thao Thep Kasatri Festival	Rong Ngeng performance included in historical reenactments	Strengthens community bonds and fosters cultural pride
Por Tor Festival	Rong Ngeng performed during this ancestor worship-related festival	Highlights spirituality and ensures cultural continuity

In addition to its role in the ceremony, Rong Ngeng would be performed in the Urak Lawoi people's other important occasions, for example, weddings, vow fulfillment ceremonies, and housewarming ceremonies (Table 2). However, Rong Ngeng has now become a part of the tourism industry. Various hotels and resorts included Rong Ngeng performances as an activity to attract tourists as a part of sea people's cultural experience. Although this helped to spread sea people's cultures, it also led to commercial changes that forced Rong Ngeng performances to be adapted away from its roots. Research studies related to the Urak Lawoi people's Rong Ngeng performances were, therefore, aimed to explore and analyze the role of Rong Ngeng as a tool for creating and negotiating the sea people's ethnic identity. Data from relevant documents and fieldwork showed that the preservation of the Rong Ngeng as a cultural heritage was significant, as it was both a symbol of ethnic identity and a link between the past, present, and future of the sea people. Therefore, the study of the Urak Lawoi people's Rong Ngeng was more than a study of performing arts, but also an understanding of the profound meaning of cultures, changes, and an existence of this unique ethnic group in the context of Thai society and the modern world.

### Ethnicity and cultural identity of the Urak Lawoi sea people

Ethnicity and cultural identity of any ethnic group were important elements that determined their identity<sup>33</sup>. In the case of the Urak Lawoi sea people, an ethnic group living along the Andaman coast of Thailand, their identity had been formed through social and cultural processes that had been passed down for generations. Ethnic identity is something that is created through social interaction processes. It is not constant over time, but can be changed through the relationships between people and the environment in which they live. Anthropologists studied the sea people's physical characteristics and found that they were like the Malay and Melanesian tribes, with dark skin, wavy or curly hair, and the facial features that were different from most Thai people. The legends of the sea people reflected their beliefs regarding their origins. One legend stated that they were born from a woman who gave birth to humans in different directions, which reflected the sea people's perspective regarding the origin of humans. In addition, legends about their migration also reflected historical events about pirate invasions and an escape from the power of the state<sup>34</sup>.

The sea people's beliefs involved lifestyles and rituals that emphasized the respect for ancestral spirits and natural sacred things<sup>30</sup>. They had such important rituals as the boat floating ceremony to ask for forgiveness from the ancestors' spirits and to ward off disasters. This belief was influenced by religions and cultures to which they had been exposed throughout their migrating journeys. The sea people's language was divided into two main groups: the Urak Lawoi language and the Moken language, both of which were related to the Malay language. Comparative studies compared the sea people's language to other ethnic groups' languages revealed that a language was another element that helped reflect their ethnic roots. Although the identity of the Urak Lawoi sea people was strong in the inheritance of their traditional cultures, they were currently facing rapid changes due to economic and social factors, for instance, inter-ethnic marriages and an adaptation to the Thai mainstream society, which led to the integration of new cultures and identities.

Table 3 defines the intergenerational changes in the use of language in the Urak Lawoi community. The native language of the elderly generation is the Urak Lawoi language, which shows a great cultural identity and heritage. The middle generation is also seen to be of the bilingual trend and speaks Urak Lawoi and Southern Thai, which shows a change and slowing shift in language. Conversely, the younger generation speaks Central Thai and Southern Thai most of the time, which implies that the usage of the indigenous language is greatly reduced. This change means that there is a possibility of losing the traditional knowledge and cultural presentations, question arises on the sustainability of the Urak Lawoi linguistic and cultural heritage in the long run.

**Table 3:** Changes in Language Use Among the Urak Lawoi

Generation	Primary Language(s) Spoken	Language Shift Impact
Older Generation	Urak Lawoi language	Strong cultural ties and maintenance of ethnic identity
Middle Generation	Mixed use of Urak Lawoi and Southern Thai	Transitional phase with signs of identity dilution
Younger Generation	Predominantly Central Thai and Southern Thai	Decline of traditional language and loss of cultural nuance

Table 4 describes the economic opportunities that emerged in the Urak Lawoi community regarding the rising need for tourism and development. People operating long-tailed boats are a source of transport to both tourists and locals, creating revenue and making the economy highly dependent on tourism at the expense of the traditional means of making money at sea. The hospitality sector, in which hotel employees are employed, requires the acquisition of new skills as well as language expertise to perform in various locales, thus a prospect and a challenge in relation to cultural integration. Employment in tourism (both labour-intensive construction and service work) provides more opportunities to increase access to income but in most cases results in the slow depreciation of traditional behaviour, which raises the concern regarding the maintenance of cultural identity of the community under the impact of economic change.

**Table 4:** Economic Opportunities for the Urak Lawoi

Occupation	Description	Impact on Community
Long-tailed Boat Operators	Provide transport services for tourists and locals	Economic dependence on tourism; loss of traditional livelihood
Hotel Workers	Employed in hotels and resorts	Requires skill development and language proficiency
Laborers in Tourism Industry	Work in various roles (construction, service, etc.)	Risk of cultural erosion; reduced engagement in traditional practices



## Rong Ngeng performances in the context of preserving the Urak Lawoi people's ethnic identity in Phuket Province

Rong Ngeng as a performing art that preserved the Urak Lawoi people's ethnic identity in Phuket Province was one of the famous and prominent performances in the southern region of Thailand. This form of performance was not only for entertainment, but also an important medium for preserving the Urak Lawoi people's ethnic identity. Rong Ngeng in the context of Phuket Province played a significant role in connecting community cultures, in passing on cultural roots from generation to generation, and in expressing pride of one's own identity. Rong Ngeng was also a traditional Thai Muslim dance that was elegant in the movement of feet, hands, and bodies. Both male and female performers' costumes also conveyed their uniqueness, ranging from the beauty of performing art to its cultural meaning. Hence, Rong Ngeng was not simply a dance, but an expression of ethnic identity, a spiritual connection, and significant evidence of the local culture's vitality on the Andaman coast of Thailand.

### The Rong Ngeng performances of the Urak Lawoi in Phuket

Rong Ngeng was a cultural heritage of music and dance of the Andaman Sea. It was a folk performing art that had its roots in Malay culture and was influenced by the Portuguese and Dutch through the trade in the past. This performing art traveled across the sea to the Malay Peninsula before gradually spreading to the southern part of Thailand, especially Phuket Province, where the Urak Lawoi or sea people ethnic group inherited and preserved it in their own unique style. Folk Rong Ngeng found in the sea people's community was simple and wide-opened, unlike the royal style Rong Ngeng that emphasized meticulousness. The dance style of the folk Rong Ngeng emphasized naturalness, was not strict to the forms, and allowed audiences to freely join in the dancing and singing, adding excitement to every festival. One of the important figures who was considered the pillar of the continuation of Rong Ngeng performing art in Phuket was Ms. Jiew Pramongkit, also known as the "Rong Ngeng singer of the Andaman." Ms. Jiew was an artist, directly descended from the Orang Lawoi tribe. Growing up with the sound of the violin, rammanna, and the courtship songs of sea people, she began learning Rong Ngeng since she was young. With her outstanding talent, she became a singer, dancer and musician at the same time.

Mae Jiu's Pornsawan Rong Ngeng troupe became widely known for its beautiful dance moves and ability to compose and sing all night without repeating any songs. Mae Jiu's talent was recognized nationally with an award from the Fine Arts Department and a plaque of honor from Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The components of Rong Ngeng performances included elaborate local costumes, local musical instruments, for example, rammanna, gongs, and violins, the paired dance lines that matched the rhythm of the music, and the songs that had both slow and fast rhythms. The titles of the songs were in Malay, such as Lakhu Du Wo, Lanang, Pu To Pi Sang, and Jin Ta Sayang, which deeply reflected the sea people's love, ways of life, and emotions.

In terms of rituals and beliefs, a "Wai Khru" ceremony would be performed first to pay respect to their teachers, and a ceremony to surrender as a disciple, using the items that has been done for generations. The performance would begin and end with the teacher's song, which was considered a tribute to the transmitter of knowledge and the connection with sacred things. However, despite the immense cultural values of Rong Ngeng, it currently faced challenges due to the declining interest among the youth and the death of older artists. Hence, conservation artists had attempted to preserve Rong Ngeng by translating the lyrics into Thai to make them easier to understand and to record video clips for instruction. Rong Ngeng was, therefore, not only a form of entertainment, but also a cultural heritage that profoundly reflected the coastal ethnic groups' identity (Figure 4). It was a memorable image of the colorful coexistence of people and the sea, songs and life, and the beauty worth for forever perseverance.



**Figure 4:** Rong Ngeng performance related to the boat floating ceremony to preserve Urak Lawoi people's ethnicity in Phuket Province (Source: Researcher, 2022)

## **Rong Ngeng performances related to the boat floating ceremony in preserving the Urak Lawoi people's ethnicity in Phuket Province**

The Rong Ngeng performance was an artistic power of preserving the Urak Lawoi people's ethnicity in the boat floating ceremony, which was an important tradition that reflected their belief and deep connection with their ancestors. One of the centers of this ceremony was Rong Ngeng performances, a traditional dance combined with folk music and had become an important tool in preserving their ethnicity. The art of dancing moves in the boat floating ceremony started from the procession of the sacred wood, inviting the spirits of the ancestors into the Pla Jak boat, to dancing around the ghost-repellent wood, all of which were processes embedded with cultural symbols. When the "Toh Mor", the person conducting the ceremony, started to sing the spirit invitation song, the atmosphere of the ceremony would be more intense with the sounds of drums, singing, and fast-paced dance rhythms. Participants of all ages would dance freely around the boat located on the beach, a symbolic area between the human world and the spirit world.

The legend that had been passed down from the sea people also reinforced the power of faith in Rong Ngeng dances, be it the legend that they were dancers in their past lives or that they were inspired by the "iron-fire crab" whose unique postures became the model for the dance. These beliefs made Rong Ngeng performances not simply an entertainment, but a "prayer" through gestures wishing the supernatural to grant them blessings of fertility, safety, and the purification of the village from evil energy. The role of the Rong Ngeng in the boat floating ritual also had profound social value. It united people of all ages, reduced physical and mental stress, and provided a safe space for people to vent their conflicts or feelings toward each other, whereas the continuous drinking and dancing for three days and three nights released pent-up emotions and strengthened new relationships. Symbolically, Rong Ngeng was also a channel for communicating with the sacred through musical rhythms, dance moves, and songs about the community's legends. The selected location on the beach that was closest to the sea but not flooded was a sacred space that connected them with their ancestors. Similarly, selecting the full moon cycle reflected their belief that it was the time when the ancestors' spirits could clearly perceive and participate in the ceremony. Finally, the dance in the boat floating ceremony opened up opportunity for the inheritance of race. In the past, it was a place for meeting, courting and selecting partners for youngsters. Therefore, Rong Ngeng was not simply a performance, but a life, a shared memory and a sacred power that continued to preserve the Urak Lawoi people's identity in a constantly changing world.

## **The Urak Lawoi boat floating ceremony was a mechanism to maintain their ethnicity to express their identity and firm negotiation in Phuket Province**

The Urak Lawoi boat floating ceremony was an important ritual that reflected the cultural roots, beliefs and identity of the sea people living along the coast of the Andama, especially in Phuket, Phang Nga, Krabi and the nearby areas. This ritual not only reflected the relationship between humans and nature but also served as a mechanism for maintaining their ethnicity, social negotiation, and presenting the Urak Lawoi's identity to the outside world. The boat floating ceremony was held twice a year during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> months, which were the time when the monsoon wind changed its directions. This ritual was directly related to the sea people' ways of life. The important characteristic of the boat floating ceremony was the gathering of community members from both inside and outside. Male members played a role in preparing the place, building the Pla Jak boats and performing the rituals, while female members were responsible for preparing snacks, offerings, and joining the circle dance for entertainment and to please the spirits of their ancestors. The Pla Jak boats, which were the heart of the boat floating ceremony, were considered an art that the Urak Lawoi people had meticulously created. There were elements that conveyed beliefs, memories, and cultural values, for instance, the figures used to represent family members to ward off bad luck, flowers, working tools, and animals that were once used as food. All of these were placed in the boat to show redemption and to send spirits back to their original homeland, "Khurung Chirai", which was equal to heaven in the sea people's the cosmic view.

The various patterns on the Pla Jak boats, be it birds, turtles, snakes, or flowers, had symbolic meanings. They revealed the communication between the human world and the spirit world, and also reflected the artistic knowledge accumulated over generations. In addition, during the ceremony, prayers were chanted in "Central Malay", which although the participants did not understand what was said, they believed it had a sacred power as had been told for generations. Those who participated in the process of the boat floating ceremony were not limited to the sea people. The ceremony was open to outsiders both as spectators and participants. The atmosphere of the ceremony

was, therefore, a combination of faith and fun. It provided a space for the youth to learn and build relationships within their family and community. At present, although the boat floating ceremony had been affected by economic changes, technology, and external pressures, for instance, tourism or land encroachment by capitalists, this ceremony had been able to adapt through “flexible rules”, for example, allowing a representative from the household, instead of the whole family, to participate in the ceremony, and adjusting the forms of the offerings to be in line with modern lifestyles. Furthermore, the construction of the Pla Jak boat itself was embedded with the learning process, the transfer of knowledge, and the artistic value that deeply reflected the Urak Lawoi people’s unity, delicacy, and spirit. The boats were not mere objects but were considered “containers of memory” and “cultural language” that strongly reflected the identity of this ethnic group. The boat floating ceremony is, therefore, not just a ritual to ward off bad luck, but the one that connected the ancestors’ world with that of their descendants. It was a place where the Urak Lawoi people negotiated, communicated, and the gracefully expressed amidst a constantly changing society. It was obvious evidence that art, culture, and beliefs could firmly preserve ethnicity through a beautiful and valuable ritual like the boat floating ceremony.

### **Rong Ngeng in the context of a negotiation process of the Urak Lawoi’s identity as Thai citizens in Phuket Province**

Folk performing arts were one of the powerful forms of cultural expression, especially when they were used as a tool to express the ethnic groups’ identity<sup>25</sup>. One interesting case was “Rong Ngeng”, a folk performance that played an important role in identity negotiation of the Urak Lawoi, an ethnic group of the sea people living in Phuket Province. They used Rong Ngeng as a medium to declare their identity and to negotiate their status as Thai citizens in the Andaman coastal area. The present study used the community area of Koh Sire, Tuk Kae Cape as the main research field because it was the largest source of learning about the sea people’ cultures in Phuket and is home to many Urak Lawoi people. The Rong Ngeng in this area was, therefore, not only a cultural activity for entertainment, but it also had social and political significance in declaring their ethnic identity to the outside world. One of the important figures who represented the continuation and transmission of Rong Ngeng performances was Ms. Jiew Pramongkit, an outstanding Thai heritage conservation artist who had been dubbed the Rong Ngeng Queen of the Andaman. Her ability to skillfully dance, sing, and memorize various songs had put the Urak Lawoi’s Rong Ngeng art on the map and caused it to be recognized nationally and internationally. The beautiful melodies, refined lyrics, and graceful dance moves clearly reflected the uniqueness of the sea people’s culture and the image of the Andaman in the eyes of the audience.

In addition, Ms. Jiew Pramongkit also played an important role in transferring knowledge to various school children and was honored to be presented in front of Her Royal Highness Princess Srinagarindra. These were sources of pride as a “new Thai citizen”, reflecting the identity transformed process of the Urak Lawoi people. Not only could they maintain their cultural roots, but they could also gracefully become a part of the Thai nation-state. Within the context of tourism in Phuket Province, which was nicknamed the “Pearl of Asia”, Rong Ngeng had become a part of the provincial ethnic performing arts. The Urak Lawoi people used this performance as a channel to interact with the outside world, be it the government, private sector, or tourists. Hence, Rong Ngeng played a role of a performance for cultural conservation, and a tool for negotiating and asserting their identity. It showed that the Urak Lawoi people were valuable citizens of culture and creatively participated in Phuket activities as their hometown. From the aforementioned information, the researcher had collected data from academic documents, journals, and fieldworks to comprehend the context of the usage of Rong Ngeng in the process of identity negotiation by the Urak Lawoi people (Figure 5). This was an interesting case study of how to utilize cultures as a tool to create ethnic groups’ spaces and voices in the contemporary society.



**Figure 5:** The entire family of Mae Jiw Pramongkit (Source: the Facebook page of Mae Jiw’s Rong Ngeng, Phonsawan Group, Koh Sire, Phuket, March 10, 2022)

### **Rong Ngeng of Koh Sire, the identity of the sea people on the tourism city's stage**

In the context of a tourist city like Phuket, folk arts and cultures played an important role in creating identity and merging the diversity of the community. One of them was “Rong Ngeng”, a performing art inherited from the Urak Lawoi sea people, an original ethnic group of Phuket Island. It was not only an entertainment, but also a medium that conveyed their beliefs, faith, and profound ways of life. Mr. Somchoke Pramongkit, a 24-year-old man, is the blood heir of Ms. Jiw Pramongkit, the Rong Ngeng Queen of the Andaman Sea, who passed away in 2021. Mr. Somchoke was the one who proudly carried on the mission of preserving his ancestors' culture. Even though he had to stop studying to help his family make a living, he was even more confident in the path he had chosen because he believed that the Rong Ngeng art was the sea people's heart, a valuable treasure that had to be preserved so that it did not disappear with the globalized current. The song “Layu Ta Lak Tak Tak”, composed by Mae Jiw and sung by Somchoke, reflected the sea people's spirit that combined patriotism, gratitude to the land, and belief in the philosophy of a sufficient economy. This song was not just a beautiful melody, but also a cultural lesson that conveyed the value of living with dignity as a Thai. In the sea people's boat floating ceremony, which was held twice a year, Rong Ngeng was both a performance and a part of sacred rituals. The songs “La Su Pra Hu Nga Jeh”, “La Yu Du Wa” and “La Yu Tabe Jeh” were used in each part of the ceremony to ask for blessings, to pay respect to teachers and to bid farewell. It was a bridge between the world of people and the world of spirits and was a tool to avert bad luck and to ask for forgiveness from the sea that had been the source for their living. The boat floating ceremony also consisted of many minor rituals, for example, the ancestor-worshipped ritual, the planting of ghost-repellant-sticks ritual, and the dance around the boat. It was considered a gathering of the community to connect past and present through music, dances, and intangible beliefs. With its true uniqueness, Rong Ngeng had become a charm that tourists admired. It was a pure folk performance that was hard to find anywhere else.

In addition to the boat floating ceremony, Rong Ngeng also played an important role in various festivals in Phuket Province, for instance, the Phuket Old Town Festival, the Thao Thep Kasattri-Thao Sri Sunthon Festival, Kathu Cultural Street Festival, and Songkran on the Beach Festival. They were stages for Rong Ngeng to reveal the sea people's identity to the outside world. At the time when Phuket was attempting to recover its economy due to Thailand's free visas for tourists' policy, Rong Ngeng became an important tool to move forward the tourism industry, along with preserving their cultural roots, allowing the sea people communities to increase their income, opportunities, and pride in who they were. The role of Mr. Somchoke Pramongkit was, therefore, metaphorically the new shining “Andaman diamond.” He inherited the performing arts, preserved the community spirit and continued the ancestral beliefs through the singing, the drum beats, and the Rong Ngeng performers' smiling under the lights of the folk-art stage.

### **Rong Ngeng in the context of identity and identity negotiation as Thai citizens**

“Rong Ngeng” was not merely the sea people's musical and dance performance, it was also a place for self-expression, cultural roots preservation, and a powerful process of their identity negotiation as Thai citizens, especially when Rong Ngeng was performed in the “boat floating Ceremony”, their most sacred and important ritual, combining their beliefs, art, rituals, and social expressions. In the boat floating ceremony, Rong Ngeng was an important element in every step of the ceremony, starting from the procession of wood, the laying of the Pla Jak boat, the planting of the ghost-repellant sticks, to the dance around the boat filled with faith and belief. The “Toh Mor” led the dance and sang the song, inviting their ancestors' spirits to dwell in the boat. Songs, music, and dances were, therefore, the ritual language that connected the human world to the spirit world and were also the cultural language that declared the sea people's identity in a public space of Thainess.

The sea people had been connected to Rong Ngeng since they were young. Babies were brought into the dance circle. Growing up with music, rhythms, and dance moves, learning took place through the body and direct experience, before they could speak or walk. Both the legends about their past lives as dancers and the imitation of the iron-fire crab movements reflected the sea people's efforts to preserve their shared cultural memory and created meaning for the dances in the ritual. Furthermore, Rong Ngeng in the boat floating ceremony had its many dimensions of social functions, including uniting people, reducing generation gaps and social status, and releasing both physical and mental stresses. Dancing without restrictions for three days and three nights and drinking white liquor during the ceremony allowed participants to freely express their profound feelings, which may include working fatigue or

conflicts that had built up in their minds. Therefore, it was normal that dancing in this ceremony became a process of restoring the community's spirit and maintaining solidarity. Ultimately, the Rong Ngeng in the boat floating ceremony was not merely an artistic performance, but the sea people's negotiation of identity space in the wider context of Thai society. It is a connection between an individual and a society, nature and culture, past and present, and it was also a powerful mechanism for the survival of an ethnic group that, despite being marginalized, could still speak through their bodies, rhythms, and songs with elegance and dignity.

### **Mae Jiw Pramongkit, the Rong Ngeng Queen of the Andaman Sea**

In the Andaman coastal area of Phuket Province, on Sire Island, Ban Laem Tuk Kae, Tambon Ratsada, Mueang District, there was an artist who was honored as the Rong Ngeng Queen. She was more than just a singer and dancer; she was a teacher, an artist, and a true local cultural heritage conservationist. Mae Jiw Pramongkit was born in 1934 and passed away on December 22, 2021, at the age of 89. Mae Jiw was the youngest of five siblings. She was half-sea gypsies with Orang Lao ancestry. Her mother was from Koh Sire and her father was from Koh Lanta. The Rong Ngeng artist blood ran in her family. Growing up surrounded by music and dance moves made Mae Jiw deeply immerse herself in this folk art. Mae Jiw began practicing singing and dancing Rong Ngeng when she was only eight years old. With her determination and her parents' training her to be diligent and practice regularly, Mae Jiw was able to sing and dance many songs skillfully until her troupe was named "Phonsawan troupe", which toured both in Phuket and other provinces, especially in the sea people communities along the Andaman coast, from Satun to Phang Nga. Traveling by a PrahU boat, her family, including her parents, her older sister, and herself, became the image of the traveling Rong Ngeng troupe that brought happiness to the villagers in various communities through their songs and dances.

At one time, almost all the sea people on Sire Island could sing and dance Rong Ngeng. A large Rong Ngeng troupe consisted of 30-40 people. The songs used in the performances included ancient songs in the Urak Lawoi language, Thai country songs, and live songs called "Hat Yao" that were sung and played back and forth in a fun way. This type of songs required speed in improvising verses, memorizing melodies from the violin and ramana, and communicating smoothly with the audience. Mae Jiw told that after hearing her mother sing just once, she was able to sing and dance along accurately. Although her education was limited to the second grade of elementary school, Mae Jiw became a knowledgeable and talented person who was loved by people in the folk-art circle. She had the ability to improvise, to respond to songs with sharpness, and to have a high-pitched, powerful voice that could amazingly drown out the music and the waves of the sea. She was honored as the "Rong Ngeng Queen" of the Andaman (Figure 6).



(a)



(b)

**Figure 6:** (a) Mrs. Jiw Pramongkit, the Andaman Rong Ngeng queen, performed a Rong Ngen dance in front of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and received a plaque and a badge of honour for preserving Thai heritage from Her Royal Highness on July 17, 1992, at Chitralada Royal Palace, Bangkok. (b) Mrs. Jiw Pramongkit performed a Rong Ngen dance in front of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn (Source: Researcher, 2025)

Throughout the 76 years that Mae Jiw had devoted herself to Rong Ngeng, she passed on her knowledge to many students and was honored by the Fine Arts Department as an outstanding artist who preserved Thai heritage. In 1992, she was honored to perform Rong Ngeng for His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej at Chitralada Royal Palace and for Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn when her visiting the sea people on Sire Island. However, the popularity of traditional Rong Ngeng had declined in the present era, with only a few performances in the boat floating ceremony, vow fulfillment ceremonies, or cultural performances. Nonetheless, Mae Jiw's Pornsawan Troupe remained a symbol of the continuation of folk art and was evidence that confirmed the Urak Lawoi sea people's wisdom and spirit that remained in the local culture. Mae Jiw Pramongkit was, therefore, not a mere artist, but also a pillar of the Rong Ngeng culture in the South, a teacher, a conservationist, and a living memory of the Andaman sea people, who deserved to be honored and remembered.

## CONCLUSION

Rong Ngeng was an important performing art of the Urak Lawoi sea people. It was both a cultural expression and a way to maintain ethnic identity. Amidst social, economic, and political changes on the Andaman coast of Thailand, their settlements were nomadic or semi-permanent, depending on the abundance of natural resources and spiritual beliefs. The sea people had a deep connection to the sea and the land that was the home of their ancestors. Currently, the sea people face challenges such as the loss of land rights, encroachment by capital groups, and urban development that affect their traditional ways of life. However, the Urak Lawoi sea people have used the performing art called "Rong Ngeng" as a tool to express themselves, communicate their beliefs, maintain relationships with their ancestor spirits, and create interactions with other groups in society. Rong Ngeng has become an important element in connecting the human world with the sacred world. In addition to its ritual role, Rong Ngeng is also used to negotiate identity within the local area. This performing art has been adapted to fit the tourism context and has been elevated to become the identity of Phuket Province and a part of the creative industry as the nation's soft power. Mae Chiew Pramongkit, also known as the "Andaman Queen of Rong Ngeng," is an important figure who has continuously preserved and passed on the Rong Ngeng dance until it was recognized at the national level. Although the sea people are considered marginalized in society, through Rong Ngeng art, they have asserted their existence and value as "New Thais" who have the same rights and dignity as other Thais. Rong Ngeng performance art is full of cultural power and adaptation to the modern world. It is an identity construction that demonstrates the ability of ethnic groups to maintain their identities amidst the constant flow of capital, development, and changes in the world.

## Acknowledgment

This research project was financially supported by Mahasarakham University.

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