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The Folk Performing Arts in ASEAN

Edited by
Narupon Duangwises and Lowell D. Skar

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Editor



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Introduction

Narupon Duangwises

The essays in this collection were prepared for the SAC International Conference on Folk Performing Arts in ASEAN, hosted by Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, September 4th-6th, 2015, on the special occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Birth of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The conference, entitled “Southeast Asian Folk Performances in Contemporary Life and in Transition,” focused on the diverse ways that local artists accommodate their artistic work to the dynamic socio-cultural and transnational contexts of their lives. The accommodations of these folk performers are part of debates and activities involving practitioners, artists, educators, cultural activists, policy makers and government officials. The great social changes and global interconnections in recent years have altered and weakened many folk traditions and cultures, risking the loss of local peoples’ identities. Such a situation creates difficulties for local artists who want to recreate and restore their arts as part of their efforts to refashion cultural identities in the new

cultural spaces of Southeast Asia's consumer-driven and interconnected world.

The conference had ten different themes, which aimed to cast light on how local artists and folk practitioners negotiate their relations to their rich traditional arts and their complex contemporary cultural situations. These artistic negotiations can lead to positive and negative results, with local artists able to work with many cultural agencies and institutions. Given this complex situation, we need to view folk culture as a dynamic part of contemporary cultural life here in Southeast Asia.

The first theme, *outputs and expectations of folk performing arts in ASEAN education*, starts by recognizing that many educational institutions of ASEAN countries have made courses and programs on their diverse folk performing arts, whether music, theatre or dance. But it notes that by reevaluating these courses, we can improve how they encourage and support their graduates to promote folk performing arts, and increase public awareness and interest. Most importantly, we need to examine the knowledge that these educational institutions produce and distribute, and develop better ways for teaching institutions to remain a vital part of a changing social and cultural environment.

Understanding how to protect ASEAN folk performances forms a second theme for the conference. Currently, many folk performing arts in ASEAN countries receive less support than previously, meaning that they are in danger of disappearing. To address this problem, cultural organizations and local communities need to seek legally recognized ways of recognizing, registering and protecting

folk performances, as well as preserving them as cultural heritage. Part of this involves sharing the experiences of how different ASEAN countries have done these things. This sharing among our neighbors will make us aware of the diverse problems in establishing relevant and effective cultural protection policies, but also remind us that managing folk cultural forms is both essential and learnable.

A third theme on *folk performances in tourism, consumerism and the economy* recognizes that authentic local performances we see today are not pure, unaltered forms of culture in any conventional sense, but rather the managed creations of people and groups who live in capitalist, consumer, and transnational societies. Since some folk performances show this aspect in tourist events or spectacular cultural shows, studying folk performance in our contemporary lived situations will help to make sense of actual folk cultural practices. We also see the various ways that folk performances have been modified to suit modern consumer culture, and how these folk performances and their performers are part of commodity and consumer-driven businesses, that often promote folk images and works as part of commercial activities. A better understanding of folk culture's dynamic involvement in our consumer society will allow us to know how folk performance and performer work in the global capitalist economy.

Folk performances and their roles in popular culture as the fourth theme, looks to how folk performers have intentionally introduced their performances and lives into today's media universe and inserted themselves into

various forms of popular culture. Many folk performing groups now regularly use new media to increase the public awareness and appreciation of their performances. Blending folk performances and modern popular culture encourages us to examine the links between the old and new forms of cultural expression emerging in commercialized modes multicultural and cosmopolitan media.

A fifth theme, *folk performances and gender*, looks at how ASEAN folk performers' movements onstage are not necessarily based on their own biological sex, but parts of a complex gender plurality. Feminine and masculine characteristics are learned cultural forms rather than rooted innately in biological bodies, and those who are active in folk performances, whether in dance or other aesthetic movements or in various types performing arts demonstrate forms of sexual appearance and gender roles which performers have learned to communicate in specialized skills and in nuanced ways.

A sixth theme concerns *artists who transmit the knowledge and sustainability of folk performances*. Folk performers create cultural identities for local and ethnic groups. In passing down cultural forms, local specialists are often involved in both performing and training performers. Because authentic folk performances in our world are less popular and sometimes at risk of disappearing completely, we need to learn how to make folk performances sustainable and vital parts of local communities. Local artists embody folk performance traditions, working in communities as specialists and teachers, and they need to have a younger generation embrace and learn the folk performance tradition