

LIKAY WIK IN BANGKOK AND THEIR “IMAGINING COMMUNITY”

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Abstract

This article is a study of Likay Wik, a traditional Thai theatrical drama examined through stage performances and social activities that are shared commonly by Likay performers and the groups of regular audiences. The study aims at acquiring a comprehensive insight into the contemporary life of people in Bangkok society between 2006 and 2007. The conceptual framework is based on Tanabe's “imagining community” (Tanabe 2008). The findings reveal a type of community that belongs to lower class people and their main method of creating a social network to open space for themselves in city living. There is fictive kinship creation which has emerged within 3 types of social space: 1) the interaction space in the daily life of the performers and the audience, 2) the performance space at the front of stage, and 3) the ritual space.

Introduction

Since the time of the transformation to modernity of Thai society which commenced concretely with various reforms during the reign of King Rama V, Bangkok, as the centre of modernity, has expanded physically and technologically with an increase in the number of people

especially those who have moved from the countryside and immigrants from China and India along with fast growing consumerism. As a result, Bangkok possesses a particularity, as Askew (2002) has argued, in that the society is a rich mixture of modernity and tradition ways. This kind of particularity has provided different living channels for various groups of people to earn their living and to create some social space or place for themselves.

Among these groups, this paper focuses on the cultural life and social activities that belong to the social group of performers in *Likay Wik* or small *Likay* bands² who peddle around suburban Bangkok in search of their audience. From over a century, *Likay Wik* has confirmed its status as the sole surviving example of Thai popular culture (when compared to other entertainments emerging at the same time) amidst crises, growing consumerism and the continuous widespread popular cultures of the age. *Likay Wik* survives by mixing with the daily life of the fans who are mostly the lower middle class people. These people enjoy entertaining themselves with *Likay* rather than consuming the

² The word “wik” is derived from “week”, which *Phraya Mahintarasakdamrong* originally used when announcing the weekly schedules of the Prince Theatre and eventually the word who used to refer generally to the show place or the *Likay* band for example *Wik Kluay Namthai* refers to the *Likay* theatre at the *Kluay Namthai* market and *Wik Niran Anchalee* refers to the *Likay* band of *Niran Anchalee*. For this article, the second meaning will be applied.

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cultural products or entertainment items from those entertainment industries that are the current trend of the new urban generation. In addition, it has been found that *Likay Wik* and activities which are co-constructed by the performers and their audience reveal another type of the lower middle class community in Bangkok together with the several means which these people have applied in creating their social network to negotiate or deal with problems and other city crises of city life.

Furthermore, the consideration of the above matters have been mentioned very slightly in the field of education and the study of performing arts, particularly *Likay*. In the past, it has been found that, even though there have been more than a hundred pieces of research on *Likay*, only 3 kinds of approach to comprehend *Likay* have been applied ;

1) *Likay* : role and responsibility in Thai society as an art and entertainment which focuses on biographical data collecting, performing traditions and detail, *Likay*'s social role and responsibility, and the ways of preserving and supporting *Likay*, for which Surapol Wirunrak's research entitled *Likay* (Surapol 1979) is a model.

2) *Likay* : a medium reflecting instinctive human desires in the study of Suriya Samootkupt, Pattana Kiti-asa and Silpkij Teekantikul (1998), which proposes that the *Likay*'s dressing up and embellishment is meant to mock and satirize secular truth or human and social "rawness".

3) *Likay* : processes in creating a community of actors in the study of Sirin Jaitiang (2002) which suggest that the processes of constructing a body of

knowledge carried out by a private development organization have affected the continuation of internal relations as well as those of kindred sympathy and care.

Although these 3 approaches provide great support to treasure trove of knowledge of *Likay*, their limitation occurs when they are unable to render the voice of the audience and their practices sufficiently. The audience is a significant aspect in Thai style performances and greatly influences the direction of *Likay*. This study, therefore, has to retrace the audience's perspective, especially, that of those who call themselves regular fans : what watching *Likay* means to them; what major means they use in constructing meanings ; and if such means possess any power or in what kind of social space these powers are obvious as well as how they lead to an insight into the case study of social grouping or "community" construction in the performing space. In so doing, Tanabe's concept of an imagining community (Tanabe 2008) will be mainly applied in explaining the use of my field work between 2005 and 2007.

Imagining community : the approach to understand *Likay Wik*

The "Imagining community" is an approach which Tanabe and a group of scholars applied in explaining the phenomenon of new kinds of social gathering or "community" which are caused, as Tanabe believed, by changes in the social structure resulting from the transformation into modernity of Thailand and its merging of its economy into a global one. All examples were compiled in a book, entitled *Imagining Communities in Thailand : Ethnographic Approaches*

(Tanabe 2008). The examples of the case studies carried with the mentioned new approach include an ideal community known as Srisa Asoka in Srisakase (Kanoksak 2008), an independent health care community like the community of HIV infected people in the north of Thailand (Tanabe 2008) and communities of small social networks located far away to world class communities of the merchants at the night bazaar, Chiangmai (Apinya 2008), or imagined communities under the surface of their former community through love stories and shopping activities belonging to some female workers in a factory in the north (Hirai 2008). All of them indicate that questions reflecting theoretical focus in considering communities are in processes that communities have constructed rather than taking each community as a whole with unity, the same social meanings and values as they are commonly understood in Thai society. In other words, this new type of “community” has become a “political project” to serve the mobility of power and also teamed itself with searching for and realizing value systems and aims.

Relevant to the above “imagining community” in Tanabe’s concept is not, therefore, a community as an homogeneous entity but the stage of striving, negotiating and creating activities that lead to its members’ aims at any particular time which is the process of becoming.

The heart of the process of the imagining community lies in the members’ social practices that turn their imagining community into a reality. With the variable capabilities of “small people” to construct their practices for themselves, they deal with problems or crises. Thus

this approach is significantly different from the “community of practice” of Lave and Wenger (1991) which tends to explain that all members in a community are likely to learn things similarly (leading to an understanding where everyone can create the same identity). This concept is also different from the idea of Anderson’s “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) in the way that Tanabe took this process as national unity creation rather than a process pointing only to discrepancies or real alienation (see Tanabe 2008 for a discussion on these issues in detail).

For the case study on *Likay Wik* in this article, I followed Tanabe’s approach by focusing on how the member’s social practices formulate their imagining community amid the varieties and differences of the performers and their audience. Also, I paid attention to how their social practices relate to the cultural background and social identity of each group.

***Likay* and Bangkok : from contemporary entertainment to the daily life of suburban people**

When examining its origin and its relationship with Bangkokians in the earlier phase, *Likay* can be categorized as a hybrid form of entertainment, *Likay* is a mixture of Thai dance drama, which emphasizes the extravagance and embellishment of costumes and graceful dance patterns, and Thai folk music, which focuses on eloquence and poetic improvisation with a fast moving plot as well as interactive conversations between the performers and audience. The reason *Likay* became so popular amongst the people of Bangkok at that time was because the population consisted of a combination of rice farmers, orchard

workers, housewives and labourers who were already familiar with this sort of show and some others from the rising middle class who were educated, received a monthly salary from companies and stores and had, at the same time, boomed with the town's expansion. *Likay* was so well received that some people built permanent stages and theatres to collect admission fees, as some contemporary drama theatres did at that time. These are examples in the work of Surapol Wirunrak (1979 ; 2000) *Wik Phraya Petchrapanee* (built around 1897); followed by *Wik Khun Wijarn* ("Khun" was a feudal lifetime title for a commoner) or *Wik Ban Tawai* (built 1898 or 1899); *Wik Mom Suparp* ("Mom" was the title for a Prince's wife) or *Wik Samyod* (built 1904); *Wik Luang Suntanakarnkij* ("Luang" was a feudal lifetime title for a commoner), *Wik Nai Chuang*, and *Wik Ban Khaolarm* (built around 1905-1907); *Wik Talard Durian Bang Lampu* (built 1933); *Wik Meru Poon* (built 1934) and *Wik Talard Nana* (built 1936).

After words some new forms of entertainment emerged, for example, the emergence of the Look Tung bands, peddling movie theatres and nightclubs which were popular both in Bangkok and other provinces.³ These *wiks* were closed down due to their inability to compete with those new entertainments. The *Likay* performers were scattered and some skilful artists formed their own *Likay* bands to perform anywhere people would hire them. Some bands that were hired less frequently travelled from community to community, finding a place to show and

earn their living. They were called wandering *Likay* or "*Likay Wik*." Therefore, it can be concluded that *Likay* has been part of Bangkokian daily life, firstly, in its appearance in the public space of religious ceremonies such as annual ceremonies, celebrations, contests, and, secondly, through its mingling in the daily life of the people by performing in fresh markets, open markets, temples and communities. These two types of *Likay* had different performing aims and different styles. When they were hired for religious ceremonies, the *Likay* band would concentrate on providing an excellent performance in accordance with the hiring conditions of time and space and the hirer's expectations, for example, the big sized bands as *Chaiya Mitrchai* Band and *Kung Suthirath* Band. Whereas the *Likay Wik* that appeared in fresh markets and so on would focus on interacting with the audience, displaying friendliness and informality, and thereby creating a social network rather than focusing on the acting dimension alone as did the ancient *Smerporn* Band which has regularly shown in the *Kluay Namthai* fresh market for more than 30 years. In other words, the *Likay* of this type passed beyond the artistic dimension into the people's daily lives.

Having crossed the division between the artistic dimension of a performer into that of participating in the audience's daily lives, the people in *Likay Wik* space, who seemed to have come from different walks of life, were encouraged to create relationships that suited their social and economic status as well as being within the specific rules and values of their social set. In this context, *Likay* is not only thought of as being merely a form of entertainment for relaxation but also as another type of space for creating an

³ Anyone interested in the issue of how the new emerged forms of entertainment affected the directions of *Likay*, should see Benjaporn 2008 for further information.

imagined community, which would be within the scope of each person’s current living environment.

***Likay Wik* in Bangkok and its place and position within urban communities**

The type of *Likay* bands to be analyzed in this article can be considered as another type of forced labour migration, the migration of central Thai folk music artists⁴ who sought for a source of income and a better life. The *Likays* moved into towns, firstly, transferring with the whole band in cases having their own band, and, secondly, by applying for a place in a local *Likay* band or being an apprentice *Likay* for the purpose of gaining more experience and some extra earnings. However, it is difficult to state the exact number of *Likay Wik* in Bangkok since there are no more permanent *Likay* theatres at present and landowners used their land for multiple purposes and not only for the *Likay Wik*, while these *Likay* bands often move to different venues. However, because of their lack of regular supporting fans, quarrelling and fighting with local gangster chiefs, complaints by neighbours for making excessive noises at night and being accused of causing family discord, the status of *Likay Wik* in Bangkok is at risk from uncertain income and the limited choices in their performing venues.

However, due to the various conditions of urban society and its limitations on living,

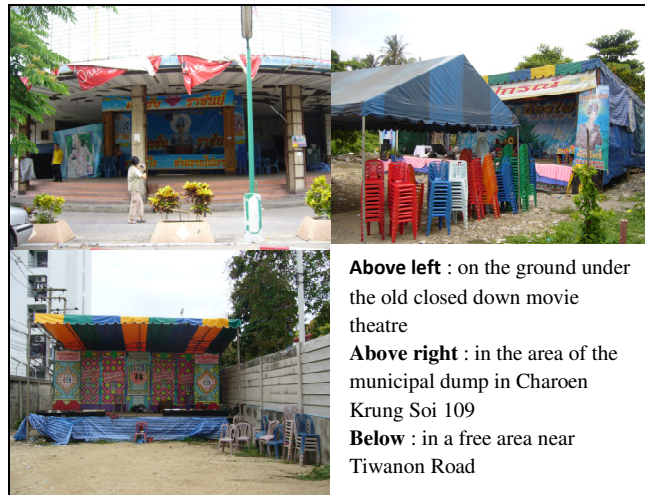
Likay Wik chose to attach themselves to either crowded or ancient communities in both suburban areas like *Tiwanon*, *Don Muang*, *Lak Si*, *Pathumtani*, for example, or central areas like *Sam Yak Fai Chai*, *Charoen Krung*, *Tanon Jan Rd*, and so on. All of the *wik* have different locations. For example, some were located in State Highway Department areas that are in the process of construction budgeting (as was found at that time was the area of *Sam Yak Fai Chai*), while some others were in private areas surrounded by houses and modern buildings near streets. Furthermore, some chose to be in crowded fresh market places, while others were in small side street walkways in ancient communities, and others were on the second floor of a closed down movie theatre, or at the end of a *soi* within a housing village, far away from the eyes of outsiders.

In terms of their physical properties and the planned land use or allocation, the types of place were some small sections of presently unused land from land development projects and real estate businesses, while development continued nearby. This allowed the *Likay Wik* to slip themselves into these areas with moderate rental costs, sometimes even without having to pay rental when they could negotiate with the landowners or property caretakers. For example, the *wik* of the *Sunchai Rachane Likay Band* in *Talard Mai*, *Tiwanon Soi 3* have been allowed to perform free of all rental, electric or water supply charges on the condition that the band has a show from 19.00-22.00 every day in order to attract people to this market place. This is meant to let everybody know that “There is a *Likay* show at the *Talard Mai* every day.” However, as soon as the apartment construction project in the same area

⁴As found in this research, the number expressed in descending numerical order will be as follows: *Ratchburi*, *Petchburi*, *Nakornsawan*, *Chainat*, *Singhburi*, *Supanburi*, *Angthong*, *Pichitr*, *Ayudhaya*, and *Chachengsao*.

belonging to the market owner is completed, the *Likay* band will have to

move out immediately.



Above left : on the ground under the old closed down movie theatre
Above right : in the area of the municipal dump in Charoen Krung Soi 109
Below : in a free area near Tiwanon Road

Figure 1: Some examples of *Likay Wik* in different locations

Interaction space in the daily life of performers and audience: the formation of the community on the tale frame

In “*Likay Wik* community”, the members consist of 2 main groups: the performers and the audiences. These 2 groups influence each other in directing the action and the interaction while performing. This includes interaction in other social areas that will be mentioned later.

Performer group: the representative of “the poor” and their ideal “children”

Based on my field studies, 98% of professional *Likay* performers have experienced desperation. They have struggled on behalf of their family. Most of them are from the provinces in the central part of Thailand where they are known as “upcountries”. The inspiration

or causes that led them to *Likay Wik* were diverse. Some of their parents were *Likay* performers and they followed them. Some responded to the dreams of their childhood. They dreamt the wildest dreams of being famous and some satisfied their parents by practising *Likay* while they were looking for a job. Only 2 % had been introduced by their friends and had become *Likay* due to kinship relations. Among them were those who wanted to experience Thai traditional performances. Such an ability would become one of their talents and could provide a bridge to stardom.

The *Likay* performers can be classified into 3 generations based on their acting experience.

1. The great generation are those who have performed for 15-20 years or more. The experience and the ages of these actors were mostly related. Thirty-five

years old and more was the average age. These actors have a high ability in various types of performance due to their age and experience. They know a lot of poems. They have strong abilities to improvise poems, compose *Likay* stories, cope with any serious situation both on stage and back stage, and can play any role. Consequently, most plays have been developed by these group. They have also helped to teach the new performers and are occasionally consulted both about the job and personal problems. If the *Likay* stage is compared to a family, these performers are likely be the esteemed elders of the family.

2. The middle generation are the younger performers with less experience than the first group. Nonetheless, they have been developing their abilities and acting techniques in order to increase their cultural fund by various means. They have learned from experts in the first group, have joined other *Likay* bands to practice and have also attended some other famous *Likay* master's academy, such as for example master *Boonlert Natphinit*, who is very well known in both *Likay* singing and dancing, master *Denchai Aneklap* who is famous as a *Likay* dancer and for master *Denchai's* academy, which is connected to a large number of superior folk artists. So the relationship among the *Likay* performers is like that of “travelers.” They always have something new to tell the others every time they come “home.” They have also acted as a source for those who share their knowledge and experience gained from travelling with the freshman generation.

3. The new generation are the young or new performers. Most of them are children; nieces and nephews of the chief of the *Likay* band or other performers. The

Likay stage is like a school where their children can practice, experience, and develop a good attitude. So the performers in this group only have 3 years or less performing experience, and that experience is not continuous, because they have to go to school. They can join the show only on weekends or their long holidays. However, some are able to manage their time and go on the stage every day. They are shown consideration and allowed to perform early so they can go back home before the end of the show.

The way they treat each other in these 3 groups simply forms a community bond; the road to professional *Likay Wik* is so rough and risky, and the income so uncertain. These factors cause the *Likay Wik* to be labelled the urban poor, who rely on the kindness of city people.

A 13 year-old teen leading actress, *Kwangkhao*, had been studying at secondary school in Bangkok. Poverty led her to the *Likay* circle. Her parents take her to the *wik* every evening. She first finishes her homework backstage, has dinner, and then gets dressed. She performs until finishing time and always goes to bed around 1 or 2 a.m. She has to get up at 5 a.m. to prepare herself for school. Since she has a great *Likay* talent, as well as an alluring appearance and youthfulness, she is cheered as a star and as a leading actress even though she has less experience.

The narratives about distress, goodness and being a grateful child are relayed through the show on stage, and told from mouth to mouth both among *Likay* members and regular fans. Because of his acting ability and personal submissiveness as a popular and professional actor, *Tom* fascinates his audiences, and receives

applause and intimacy from audiences, and especially from those who have faced similar crises in their lives. *Pi Tuan*, a regular fan, says that she has had to struggle for life like him. She knows the difficulties and now she has enough to be able to help and support him in his efforts to keep working. *Pi Muai* rewarded him with support and a large amount of money at one time as a leading *Likay* actor. She says that he was very industrious and she admires the way he loves and took cares of his family so well. Not only that, but he also pays attention to studying, so she rewarded the boy and encouraged him in his struggle. Auntie *Ni* also says that she is willing to help an actor who has had a more difficult life.

Audience group: the urban housewives and ideal mother

The regular audiences found in this research were all females of 30 years and up. They can be classified into 3 groups according to their social identity, for which I would like to use the terms the performer used in addressing their audience 1) the *Fan-Phan-Tae* (แฟนพันธุ์แท้) group 2) the *Mae-Yok-Tua-Jing* (แม่ยกตัวจริง) or the *Mae-Mae-Phu-Mee-Phra-Khun* (แม่ๆผู้มีพระคุณ) group and 3) the *Kha-Jow* (ขาโจ้ว) group. These 3 groups have different personalities and react and responded differently while viewing the performance. However, they all have one thing in common – motherhood – although their femininity is sometimes forced and controlled by the social structure or the family situation in their childhood or at other times in their lives. Entering the *Likay Wik* community has provided them with a new social area to escape their problems or other crises they might be

facing, such as their female state, motherhood and their kinship relations.

1. The *Fan-Phan-Tae* group, this group meaning the big fan – was primarily made up of rather poor housewives. They love to see *Likay* because *Likay* can link them to good memories from their childhood, create for them a group of friends and compensate for some nostalgic feelings for the past. This includes some aspects that are missing in their real lives. They go to see *Likay* every day except when they are ill or otherwise busy. These viewers know every detail of a performer's whole body, especially that of their favorite actor. However, they do not approach these actors too closely because they are not able to reward the actors with money as others can. Nevertheless, they are able to help by working in the ceremonies. The reason why they became big fans of a particular *wik* began with a good leading actor, the acting abilities and the person's appearance. Some fans have several photos of the leading actor in their purses and they can really tell every detail about those photos.

2. The *Mae-Yok-Tua-Jing* or *Mae-Mae-Phu-Mee-Phra-Khun* group, this group meaning the real sponsors are generally known as *Mae-Yok*. They are rich but their family lives are not absolutely perfect or they feel that they have not been successful at motherhood. Some have had abortions. Some have no son. And some cannot be near their children. They therefore compensate for these feelings of inadequacy by playing the perfect role of mother with the *Likay* actors. They frequently reward actors and sometimes lend them money as a reward. Most of the sponsors in this group patronize at least one actor. Some pay school fees. Some sponsor *Likay* costumes. Some pay for

medical care and some buy their favourite actor a new car. The interaction between these fans and the actors is very different from the first group. They can have privileged seats backstage or have special seats in the front row, or even have an actor drive for them.

However, these fans do not go to see *Likay* everyday like the first group. They go to see *Likay* only when they are free and on special occasions. There is an interesting situation among this group of sponsors. Although they may not be at the *wik*, they go there immediately whenever the actors need them. If the performers see only regular fans with few other viewers, they anticipate virtually no reward, which means no income, so they call their sponsor mothers. The sponsors arrive at the *wik* as soon as possible if they are free. If they are busy, they ask their friends to pay for them and pay them back later. This is called “reward delivery”

3. The *Kha-Jow* group, this group means the audience who have enjoyed life while watching the show. They are middle class but they are lavish and take lovers out. They have done everything to provide for their own happiness or to compensate for their sense of inadequacy in some period of their lives. This group is different from the other two groups. The *Fan-Phan-Tae* group is careful not to show off and tries to be polite and humble. They also show that they have never gone to other *Likay Wik*. But this group feels free to show off. They walk and dance at the front of the stage and dance with the singer. They often seat themselves backstage or around a corner. They eat, drink and talk while viewing the show. They are sometimes noisy, whistling, clapping their hands or stamping their feet while watching *Likay*.

They also feel free to talk about going to other *wik*.

Their personalities and the ways these 3 groups show off varies depending on the relationship level with the actors. In this case, the rewards distinguish the level of relationship. The greater the reward given, the closer the fans get to the performer. The size of the reward depends on whether the actor is still good. For example in the case of Auntie *Nee* who often awarded one *Likay* performer with a large sum of money because she knew that the performer had great responsibility and worked for his family, for his mother, his wife and kids in the country who are of school age but she stopped supporting him when learned that there was a woman infatuated with him though he denied having any deep relationship. It could be said that the relationships between the actors and the audience is in the form of mother and son or relatives but it is based on mutual advantage and directed by the contemporary social value system.

Kinship, master academies and friends: the social networks construction

As well as the above member relationship forms, the networks constructed among the members can be divided into 3 groups : the network among relatives, the network of kinship relation groups with famous master academies and the network of friends.

1. The network among kinship is the distinctive relationship within the actor group. Three quarters of the actors in a *Likay* band are related. The group starts with descendants of one family and gathers other relatives and close friends.

When facing the changes in urban life, they help each other to survive by devising a special programme and inviting other famous leading *Likay* actors as special guests or have their own children and relatives join the show.

2. The network in the relations group with famous master academies. Most *Likay* bands try to join the activities organized by the masters. However, because at present the culture of *Likay* apprenticeship at renowned masters' places has declined, many *Likay* performers learn from nearby trainers, "cassette tape masters" or "video masters." Thus, a concentration of the training to reach the "standards" of artistic skills does not occur. Consequently, after a period of time, some *Likay* bands realize this and have to send their band members to ask for some training from the masters to obtain the quality required for the profession of *Likay*. For example, in 2005 a *Likay* band from *Chachengsao* province took their band members to practice some refined dancing patterns and chanting accordingly to the style of the fully adorned *Likay* with Master Boonlert Najpinij and his pupils at the Homhuan house. This kind of artistry is Master Boonlert's and is in the direct line of *Homhuan* pupils' outstanding characteristics. The members of this band had to stay to practice and learn at the master's place for months till both master and pupils were pleased with the training. After having completed the training, they were allowed to place the term "Pupils of Boonlert" (ศิษย์บุญเลิศ) at the final part of their band's name as confirmation for being well accepted by the Master and highly skilful, as a result of which, the head of this band admitted, more people are interested in hiring the band. In addition some jobs come through

connections of the Master and he always passes on the jobs to them.

Another example is the charity *Likay* festival at the Thai Cultural Centre every year under the control and training of master *Denchai Aneklap*. The advantages of joining such a performance are as follows:

- The *Likay* actors can develop new dance routines
- They can enhance their own skill level, and,
- It is a good opportunity to present the *Likay* band to new groups of viewers, thereby widening their relationship.

3. The network among friends. This network improves the relationships between actors by providing mutual assistance. The assistance is not financial, but is only tips on technique. Another method is to duplicate the performances of 2 -3 leading actors or borrow other titles. This is done to reduce expenses, to ensure a reliable group of friends, and to receive approval from the original performers for permitting the new actors to perform their routines.

The groups of audience networks are formed through discussions about actors, the *Likay* band, and collective participation in some activities. Some fans like the same actors, some have the same jobs or have the same kinds of activities. However, it should be noted that these relationships are more fragile than the relations between actors. Furthermore, they can always change from one subgroup to another.

Fictive kinship: idealistic meaning of social network creation: Patterns of relationships and the means of creating social networks among performers and audiences as presented previously, reflect one type of relation which is called “fictive kinship,” referring to a system of relations formulated with intimacy or the construction of a familiar and intimate feeling of relations through calling and taking the others as sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles and so on as well as giving priority and value to seniority. All these are taken as a significant mechanism of kinship in Asian societies when they help or support one another during hard times, no matter how hard they are. One clear example of the “fictive kinship” relations in Thai society is that of the tradition of creating the bond of friendship (ผูกเกล็ด). The idealistic meaning of the tradition lies in the network of support and mutual help because southern society in the past was remote from the central authority that could save them from harm daily. Therefore, they had to rely on themselves and this created the kind of relationship which required becoming friends meaning becoming your friends’ family members, for example, calling and respecting the parents and relatives of friends as each other’s own family members and supporting them when needed. The bond remains for generations so a pair of friends in this tradition extend the bond to the 2 whole families. Likewise, in the northeastern society in the past when some areas were still barren and distant and filled mostly with the poor who lacked the chance and access to resources and better living, the tradition of creating the bond of friendship (ผูกเสี่ยว) helped in reducing the social gap and allowed those who seemed to be in need to survive under the reliance and support of the “relatives” in this all these.

system. Therefore, these 2 similar traditions are ways of creating and upsizing the kinship apart from getting help from direct blood lines or marriage in order to deal with the present problems and some future crises. In the case of the *Likay*, amid contemporary life crises of Bangkok, while the performers have to encounter the uncertainty of their income and relationship with audiences and their neighbouring communities and of their performing space, caused by rules and restrictions of the capital city, and for the audiences, who put their role of women as being mothers at risk, both parties have presented one set of “truth” through accounts of poverty, goodness and systems of idealistic social values which lead to kin-like help and support among them. This fictive kinship can be divided into 2 groups as follows:

Firstly, at the empirical phenomenology level—consisting of the leading actor representing the centre of the relationship. He presents himself as a son, and other members are relatives. The network is expanded to new members and other relatives through the story telling in the framework of being ideal children within the relationship and deriving advantages from each other.

Secondary, at the soul and mind level – the idealistic relationship between the *Likay* performers and the female audiences who want to create the “perfect femininity and motherhood” (as in the ways of the traditional Thai society) by providing financial support and patronage for the *Likay* through various means to keep them in the idealistic kinship relations. This is because their real life conditions do not provide them with the chance to do all these.

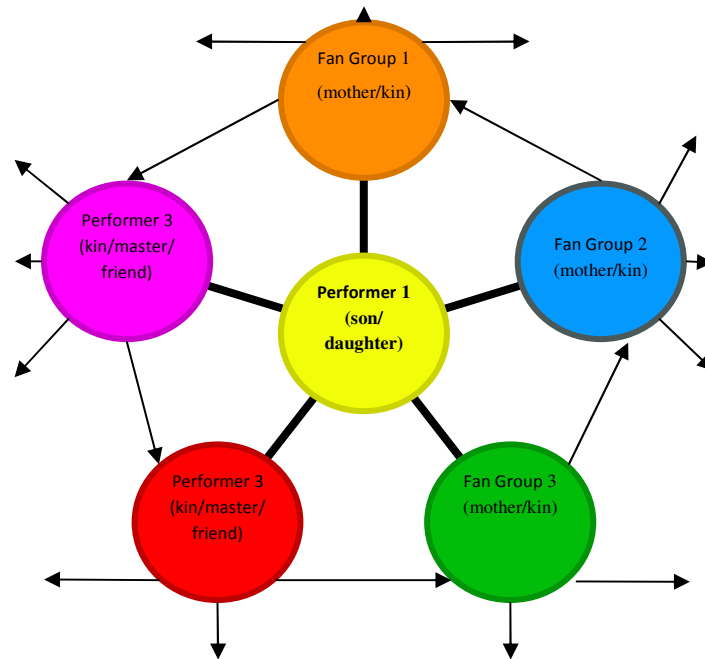


Figure 2: The fictive kinship relation models: the empirical phenomenology level

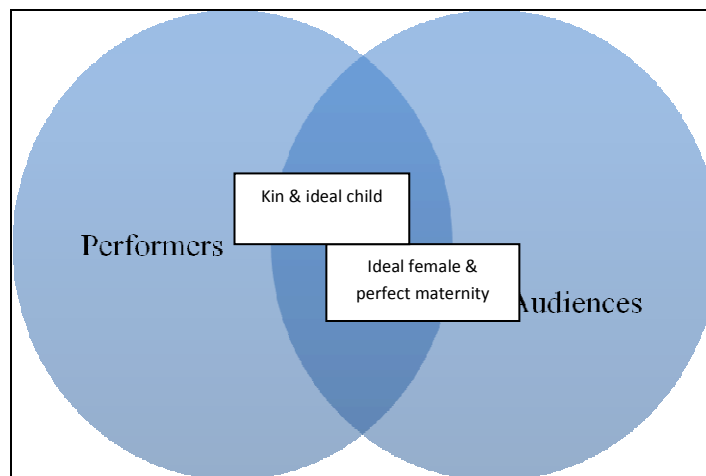


Figure 3: The fictive kinship relation model: the soul and mind level

Performance space at the front of stage : the construction of fictive kinship based on harmonizing real life and the play

I would like to suggest that underlying the relationships from within the *Likay Wik* is the use of a story telling framework of distress and being an ideal child, which binds the viewers and actors in a relationship, depending on the dimension of the performance and the interaction at the front of the stage:

The stories shown in *Likay* or other Thai dancing plays are generally adapted from *Jataka*, tales, fables, or folklore that is well-known. To perform *Likay* a script is not needed. The actors learn the script by hearts and pass it on to each other. This is the special characteristic of *Likay*. This might be because the actors do not have enough time to rehearse and each actor rehearses by himself. The audiences also hire only their favourite actors to play together. Because of these conditions, certain scripts cannot be made and the actors have to communicate with the viewers while performing. So the literary art of the folk plays depends not only on the beauty or the fulfilment of the story but also on the ready wit of the actors. As the results, the stories for *Likay* are highly flexible. This enables one story to be split into hundreds and become interesting even though the same story is performed several times. *Likay* can still make the viewers happy. So the new story or the complexity of the story is not the essence. It depends on how or which item is presented and can mostly communicate with the audiences.

The way *Likay Wik* communicates the sense and content with the viewers is what I call “harmonization between real life and

the play.” That means that the actors present the story with some issues from both the actors and viewers’ daily lives. For example, one actor takes the part of a kind, rich person without children and another actor jokes with him saying the truth is that he has a lot of debt with 7 children. Alternatively, a joker teases the chief of the *Likay* band, who represents a king whose town is being attacked, saying because the king has nothing but debt, it is not worth it for the enemy to conquer the town. Let’s give up and have them redeem the king’s debt. The viewers are satisfied by these exchanges and discuss them among their friends, embellishing the stories each time with more detail.

Thus, the characters in the imagined world seem alive in the real world and can be seen and touched by the audience. Gray (1997), a play expert, comments that viewers are highly impressed because it has validation. The viewers feel a sense of familiarity. The story is predictable and they can touch the transparency of the character.

As well as offering entertainment to the viewers, *Likay* also shortens the distance between actors and viewers because of the mutual familiarity between them. The viewers can see the actors’ real lives through the roles and the interactions. *Likay* actors are not admired only for their acting but also for the personal responsibilities they bear.

For example, fans admired leading actor *Yodkhwan Anchalee* for carefully saving his earnings to send to his family upcountry. The leading actor *Somkiat Luk Phor Kae* used his best efforts to practice *Likay* so he could earn enough money for his family, and spent a lot of money for

the ordination of his three brothers, as his parents wished. The leading actor *Niran Anchalee*, a grateful son, resigned during secondary school to perform *Likay* and earn a living for his family. And after that, he went back to school and earned a bachelor's degree. The leading actor *Sa-moeporn Semaphet* supported his actors and performed the shows even though he made a loss.

The explanation is in accordance with the concept of “*social life as drama*” by Goffman (1959), which refers to the performing space as relevant to the image that each “performer” would like to keep or the space that “the watcher” uses as a “front region” while referring to the space, prepared for a smooth performance, as a “back region.” The privacy of *Likay* actors should be behind the scenes but it is presented up front. This makes the two sides very close during performance. It seems as if the actors and viewers are relatives, especially the big fans. This group of fans also approves what should be said at the front region and what should not. This reflects the truth that the *Likay* stage is also the place to present the real lives of the actors and the viewers at the same time. Consequently, it could be said that mutual expectation is the director of the show.

Ritual space: the confirmation of fictive kinship

If the performance is the instrument that identifies the community web, the rituals bring all members together and confirm their relationship as part of the *Likay Wik community*.

One such ritual is the annual paying of respect to the master (*Wai Khru* ceremony), which can be held on any

occasion such as the chief's birthday or the establishment of the *Likay* band. Whenever a ceremony is planned, it will be announced several months in advance to allow members more time to prepare themselves and the necessary activities. Every little part of the activities needs close co-operation to make it successful.

There are 5 main parts to the activities which are directly influenced by the royal *Khon's* paying respect to the *Wai Khru* ceremony.⁵ They are as follows:

1. The prayer in the evening on the day before the ceremony. This is for wealth

⁵ For the *Likay*, there is no written record of how the ceremony was formerly performed. There is a general consensus among *Likay* masters that there are no specific details or patterns and simply some flowers, incense, candles and offerings to worship *Phor Kae Ruesi* and other symbols representing the ancient masters of each band is sufficient. Eventually, like many other Thai ceremonies, this ritual has become grander and more complex with the increase of *Likay* members through time. The royal ceremony of *Wai Khru* for *Khon* and Dance Drama and other related rituals in the reign of King Rama VI were revived as His Majesty King Rama VI wished to establish a unique pattern according to the ancient ways. This is essential for the annual *Wai Khru* ceremony of the *Likay* because most *Likay* of that time were once Thai dance drama performers. Some performers were both *Likay* and dance drama performers simultaneously. For example, *Homhuan Naksiri*, a renowned master, was trained directly by a drama master from the Department of Fine Arts.

and prosperity and to gather the members before the day of the ceremony.

2. The food offering to the monks in the morning of the second day, the day of the ritual. This is done to let every member make merit.

3. The *Wai Khru* or teacher’s respect ritual is composed of the gods congregation divine prescription reading and playing music to invite the gods to bless the participants.

4. The *Khrop Khru* ceremony, or rite of initiation includes covering the head with *Khon* masks, hand holding and weapon offering. The head *Khon* masks covering is done by the master of ceremonies. He covers the participant’s head with a *Khon* mask, such as, for example, the *Phor Kae Ruesi*’s head, the light head-shaped sculpture or mask representing the ancient forefather hermit, Ganesha’s head, or a pointed crown like a headdress, which represents the gods and teachers of music, together with small cup-shaped cymbals, which symbolize the acceptance of a disciple. This announces that the student has joined a certain master and academy. From that time on wards, the student obeys and follows the instructions of the master and accepts punishment for being rude or insulting the master. The hand holding is a sign of sharing knowledge and announces the higher level achievements of a student. The weapon offering is the symbolic action of giving a certain weapon like a sword, a pike, a lance or a javelin to the student to show that the student is qualified to teach others.

5. A performance is given to celebrate the ceremony. Most performances by the students are for “*Phor Kae*”, the god of all

kinds of arts. The show could be a fighting show or any other kind of entertainment.

Considerable expense is incurred because of the many details involved in the process and the many people involved, so it is difficult to manage the ceremony every year. To participate with the other *Likay* bands is the preferred choice. The yearly *Wai Khru* ceremony is not simply to show gratitude to the master but also to display other social meanings like the financial state of the *Likay* band owner, the big fan network and their sponsors.

To further demonstrate, the following is an example of the setting in the annual teacher’s respect ceremony of the *Likay Niran Anchalee Band*, which was held on 12th-13th December, 2007 and is an example of fictive kinship relations actions of “Auntie Om”, one of the most important members of the community.

The *Wai Khru* ceremony with the appearance of the *Likay* fan networks

“The *Wai Khru* ceremony *Niran Anchalee* 13th December, 2007, Free *Likay* at night.”

The text above was hand-written on a big yellow plastic sheet mounted post to post from the mouth of the alley on the highway of *Ban Pong* district in *Rachaburi* province to the mouth of the alley leading to the leading actor’s house. This was to show the way for the guests. I arrived there around 8 a.m. As soon as I parked my car, a young man came to invite me to the site of the ceremony. He told me about the guests and other details.

Most of the guests were *Mae Yok* from Bangkok and some other provinces.

Some had arrived the day before and were helping with the preparations inside. Their accommodation was at the leading actor's house or their relative's house nearby. They had cooked three meals and talked happily all night. Some hadn't slept at all. I used to be a member of this *Likay* band and then resigned to enter the monkhood. After leaving the monkhood, I returned... Today, you can see the *Pi Phat* grand band, the stage, the scene and the lights were absolutely perfect and more elaborate than they would be at the *wik*.

It was true. The stage was twice the usual size and completely hid the house behind it. On both sides of the stage were huge portraits of the leading actor dressed in pink *Likay* costume, which contrasted with the brand new scene they had painted of a gold castle in paradise, soaring above the vast blue sea. On the left side of the stage was the "*Pi Phat*" grand band area. No fewer than 200 red collapsible chairs were piled on the ground in front of the stage. Three lorries that brought all the equipment were parked behind the red chairs. The dressing room was a narrow space between the back of the stage and the side wall of the house.

The neighbour permitted the use of empty land for the temporary party. The place where the ceremony was to be held was the yard in front of the house. A big red cloth formed the background partition, which also matched the big rectangular stool covered with a red plastic sheet and topped with a white table cloth to hold the teacher's *Khon* masks, both gods and demon teachers. Also included were photographs of the human masters with some musical instruments to symbolize a complete "*Pi Phat*" band. The other props for the performance, such as some puppets, were also shown in this area. The

joss stick and candle holders, popped rice, bowls of flowers and the food offerings were placed in front of the stool. Two armchairs were set facing the stool, one for the master of ceremonies⁶ and the other for *khun Anchalee* (*Niran's* mother), who would be possessed by the spirit of "*Pu-Phra-Phirap*."⁷ On the right of the stool was the five instrument "*Pi Phat*"⁸ band, and about 10 metres away on the left side was an altar for the guardian spirit and devas.

Khun Anchalee was dressed in white. She welcomed me and my staff and took us into the house prepared for the ritual and the guests. She introduced us to the *Likay* teacher who was to play the role of master of ceremonies and the fans who had supported *khun Anchalee* since she began her *Likay* career. These original fans were the main hosts for this ceremony. The adult actors and actresses took their children to join the *Likay* show, and other fans from other provinces emphasized the fact that the needs in their daily lives had greatly distanced them from the existing relationship but the merit event was going to pull the relationship tightly back together again.

⁶ In some cases, this person is called *Phu-Aan-Aong-Karn* (ผู้อ่านโองการ) -the statement of invitation reader, because he will have to announce the heavenly invitation to request the gods and goddesses to join the ceremonies.

⁷ Particularly for the *Niran Anchalee* band, "*Pu-Phra-Pirap*" is a mighty demonic god who possesses *Anchalee*, the male lead *Likay's* mother, every year. The members believe that he brings them blessing and good fortune.

⁸ A kind of Thai classical music.

Auntie Om and her practice of fictive kinship

Auntie Om had been a strong fan of this *Likay* band for more than 7 years but she had never participated in the ceremony with this band before because her husband had not allowed her to. He said that just viewing the show was enough. It was not necessary to be too close because it might cause her to lose money and time from work, too. Auntie Om's husband was quick tempered and she might have been abused if she didn't obey him. However, this time she insisted on joining the ceremony. She believed in “*Pu-Phra-Phirap*,” and how he could get rid of all obstacles in her life, enhance her luck and give her more opportunities in her career.

The obstacles or troubles in Auntie Om's life at that time concerned the divorce of her eldest son. He had some health problems and could not work hard, so was sent back to his family. Her youngest son served in the military upcountry and needed a sum of money to free himself from a woman whom Auntie Om called “*Kai -Kae- Mae -Pla -Chon*,” or an experienced woman. The main income in Auntie Om's family came from her husband, who was a fortune teller. Auntie Om herself had known too little about fortune telling to earn enough. This had made her depressed. So when she had been sprinkled with holy water from “*Pu-Phra-Phirap*” and got lucky after that, she made every effort to participate in the ceremony.

The first thing Auntie Om did was call me and ask to be my assistant. She had tried to become acquainted by helping me gather information. She said that she would go to the ceremony with her eldest son, Wit, one day early and stay there overnight. Wit

could help by taking photos. Together they could help with anything I wanted to do. They did not want any payment only the bus fare.

Auntie Om told her husband that she and Wit were going to visit her sister. They had not visited for a long time, so there was no problem. At the site, Auntie Om helped the house owner to clean and cook. She did everything possible to help as much as she could, especially talking to the big sponsors and other actors. This was done to make it easier for me to gather the necessary information. In addition, Auntie Om had changed her common status of viewer into a close friend of the leading actor's family just overnight. The meaning of *Wai Khru* or teacher's respect ceremony for Auntie Om in this context was obviously seen as an important way to quickly develop imagined fictive kinship relations.

When the *Khrop Khru* ceremony began, I was among the female students and we were waiting for the rite of initiation. Auntie Om whispered to me that she would ask for “*Hua Phra*”⁹ because her father had been a *Likay* actor. Wit would be initiated only as the demon and the *Phor Kae Khon* masks were to give him strength and wisdom. “*Hua Phra*” might have made Wit weak, so Wit did not need it.

There were still some other reasons that made Auntie Om unhappy and feel in need of the luck she might get from joining this ritual, according to her belief. She had been seriously quarrelling with her very closest members. Consequently, others in

⁹ *Hua Phra* is a *Khon* mask, symbolizing gods and human protagonists such as Naraya the God, Rama and Luckshman.

her group had drifted farther and farther away. So she was an isolated viewer. She had no one to talk to except for her son, *Wit*. She had invited herself to this ceremony but there was something different and she seemed to be ostracized, even though she tried to be friendly with everyone, especially “*Mae Wan*,” the most important sponsor.

Critics of Auntie *Om* told me that she always exaggerated and was a busybody, meddling in other’s private affairs, while Auntie *Om* considered herself as simply frank. She wanted the rite of “*Hua Phra*” because it symbolized grace, influence, affection and admiration. She believed that such goodness would happen to her through the rite. Although a female, she claimed to be an exception because she was the daughter of a leading actor in the past, so she was an insider.

Wit, Auntie *Om*’s son, was not healthy and could not work, so his ex-wife had sent him back to his family. This made Auntie *Om* angry and her opponents also gossiped about it. She wanted her son to be strong like a demon and with the intellect of a hermit master. *Wit* himself was gentle and polite, which was enough.

The master of ceremonies did everything she requested. This made her and her son pleased and confident. It was not important whether they would be successful or not. Undergoing the rite of initiation confirmed that Auntie *Om* and her son enabled the fictive kinship relations within the social structure and various limits. She also designed such relations with her rationality.

Conclusion

What has been shown above about the *Likay Wik community* and the practices of the fans indicates that the relationship among relatives is still important in urban society and constantly mutates into new and different forms according to the conditions and the limits of each group. So, the “community” has never disappeared or been dispersed as some academics have claimed.

This work shows that the clearly displayed fictive kinship among *Likay* actors has become the strong point of family relationship formation within the tiny area where the *Likay Wik* set up. Such a relationship also spreads to the viewers and other members in three different group networks, which are kinship networks, master relation groups and networks among friends. These relationships are attached to the acting ability and the ideological social value system that are presented to the viewer who longs for such values, and which makes it easy to stimulate the imagining of relative relationships, which easily come true in the *Likay Wik community*.

The more important thing is that the construction of idealistic social relations in the community of *Likay Wik* has given an insight into the 3 levels of this new community which are:

- 1) The geographical community refers to gaining space for the rituals or

expression of common interests such as the *Likay* theatre with the stage. Even though the *wik* has to relocate several times, it can be considered as a real place for the self-identifying of the members.

This is to confirm that they have created a community through imagination or as Tanabe has called it an “imagining community” (Tanabe 2008). If you wish to bring it into life with power, there must be geographical space for members to participate in social activities and to be able to express themselves.

- 2) The community at the level of networking is an important characteristic of this

kind of community construction especially in the performing community of *Likay Wik* which relies on economic aid and support both directly and indirectly to exist outside of the competing spheres of other entertainment industries. Therefore, this kind of social network commences with its own costs to weave itself into the first level of the imagining community, which are the common basic interests in the performing arts, the smallest type of “capital.” Then members moved up to creating the fictive kinship relation network to make teachers, relatives and friends in order to support one another.

- 3) The ritual community is considered to be the powerful core in linking the

first 2 levels of community together since rituals will be held only once a year and relate to various types of all members, ranging from seeking pleasure, representing themselves as relatives, identifying themselves as pupils, upgrading their relations, searching for mental stability to their sincerity presenting through their financial support in organizing the yearly rituals and awarding the performers.

Also, if we count all the things constructed by the *Likay Wik* community as the symbols of morality and ancient social values, this kind of community has revealed to us the ability to co-exist between the old customs and modernity amid contemporary life in a metropolitan city such as Bangkok, where “the border line” has been blurred and faded.

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