



Thailand

by Andrew Matzner

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Kathoey working as go-go dancers in Bangkok's Nana Plaza entertainment area.

When it comes to alternative genders and sexualities--not to mention sex itself--Thailand enjoys an international reputation for openness, acceptance, and (in terms of sex work), availability. Yet in spite of media stories that portray "The Land of Smiles" as a gay paradise or a society in which transgendered people have full freedom of expression, the realities surrounding gender and sexual diversity in this country are complex and ambivalent.

Located in mainland Southeast Asia, Thailand is roughly the same size as France, with a population of approximately 62 million people. Bangkok, the nation's capital, is the largest city, with over six million inhabitants.

Although home to vast geographical diversity, cultural assimilation of different ethnic groups has taken place in Thailand as a result of a national policy that asserts one official language (central Thai), one religion (Buddhism), and one culture ("Thai"). Nevertheless, cultural and linguistic variation continues to exist within Thailand's borders, resulting in a wide range of identities and practices related to gender and sexuality.

Constructions of Sexuality

Among the Thai, sexual orientation is tightly bound up with gender identity, in that same-sex attraction has generally been considered to be indicative of cross-gender identity and behavior. For example, a male who is sexually attracted to another male is thought to have a "female mind" and as such is identified as *kathoey*, a term which refers to effeminate and female-identified males. On the other hand, the sexual partners of *kathoey* are not necessarily designated by a special term and instead are considered simply to be "men." Accordingly, these sexual relationships are based on a heterosexual model.

In addition to *kathoey*, there are men who self-identify as *gay* (a word adopted from the English). These are gender-normative, masculine-identified males who are sexually attracted to other gender-normative, masculine-identified males. Some scholars believe that this type of egalitarian relationship is not indigenous to Thai culture but rather is a recent influence from the West.

In the past, the Thai language apparently did not have specific words to refer to lesbians. The closest equivalent was the phrase "*len peuan*" "playing with friends." Today, females who are sexually attracted to other females generally refer to themselves as either "*tom*," an abbreviation of "tomboy," or "*dee*," from "lady." These identities are similar to the Western categories of butch/femme, and such gendered identities and role playing is prevalent in the lesbian community. Unlike Thai men who have embraced the English word *gay* to describe themselves, *toms* and *dees* generally shun the word "lesbian," due to its association with pornographic films produced for straight men.

Gender Diversity

It would appear that gender diversity has a long history in Thailand, although research is still limited. In some versions of northern Thai creation myths hermaphrodites appear among the world's first people. There are also written accounts by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europeans that describe the apparent social acceptance of transgendered males in the northern city of Chiang Mai. *Kathoey* also play a role in northern Thai religious ritual as spirit mediums.

Transgenderism is a visible part of contemporary Thai culture. Transgendered males may self-identify using one or more of a number of different terms, including *kathoey*, *sao braphet song* ("a second type of woman"), *phuying* (woman), or *gay*.

In the popular media, stories about *kathoey* are often found in newspapers and magazines, and they frequently appear in television dramas and comedies. In everyday life, *kathoey* are quite noticeable as well, whether in urban, suburban, or rural areas. *Kathoey* can be found working in occupations ranging from street peddlers and shop clerks to tour guides and teachers, and are a strong presence in the entertainment, beauty, hair, and make-up industries. Cabaret shows featuring *kathoey* are also easily found in most towns and cities.

Kathoey are popular subjects in the Thai mass media, as well as in Western newspapers and magazines, which are often all too eager to pick up stories about transgenderism in exotic Thailand. Coverage is mixed, however. For every story on *kathoey* cabaret shows, there is another warning about sexual deviants who make their living by robbing tourists.

One example of positive imagery is the Miss Tiffany beauty pageant. This contest, open to *kathoey*, occurs each March at the same time as the Miss Thailand competition. In recent years both Thai newspapers and Western media outlets (such as CNN and Reuters) have carried stories comparing the femininity of contestants in each of the pageants, with headlines such as "Thailand's newest beauty queen no lady," "Battle of Queens on national TV," and "Tiffany boys out to prove gender gap narrowing."

In terms of negative coverage, Thai media has a fascination with crimes featuring *kathoey*. A major media event occurred in December 1996, when a *kathoey* studying education at Chiang Mai University made national headlines by committing the brutal murder of another university student.

As a result of the publicity surrounding the incident, the Rajabhat Institutes Council, which decides policy for Thailand's 36 teacher training colleges, shortly afterwards publicly announced that it would begin prohibiting "sexually deviant" students from enrolling in teacher training courses. Its argument was that transgendered and homosexual teachers were bad influences on young people. Apparently, such a ban had already been implemented by the Rajabhat Institute on a "limited and selective basis" since 1993.

The ban led to widespread debate within the Thai media and English language newspapers published in Thailand. Opponents of the ban consisted of academics and human rights advocates, who argued that such discrimination was unconstitutional and violated basic human rights, as every Thai citizen was entitled to equal protection under the law. Although it was never clear exactly how and to what extent the ban was being enforced, by the end of 1997 both domestic and international pressure caused the Rajabhat Institutes to relent and repeal it.

The Social Climate

There are neither legal nor religious sanctions against same-sex relations or the violation of gender norms. However, the great value placed upon preservation of family units and preserving lineage through marriage and procreation can lead to intense social pressure to be in conformity with the expectations of family and culture. Indeed, because of the Confucian emphasis on the continuation of the family line, Thai parents of Chinese descent are particularly intolerant of children who identify as gay, lesbian, or transgendered.

At the same time, the Thai value of harmony and distaste for confrontation and open disagreement or conflict ensures a relative lack of public harassment and violence against those who openly flaunt gender norms. This freedom to express oneself in public has led some Western observers to imagine that non-normative behavior is accepted in Thailand. Nevertheless, severe penalties for the transgression of gender and sexual norms can occur, but in ways less visible to those who are unfamiliar with Thai culture. These range from the destructive power of gossip and ostracism to job discrimination and rape by family members.

In the Buddhist scriptures, attitudes towards homosexuality and transgenderism are ambiguous and inconsistent. In contemporary Thailand, some Buddhist writers believe that one's homosexuality or transgendered identity is determined by karmic influences. Karma refers to the Buddhist law of cause and effect: moral actions produce positive results, either in present or future lives, while immoral actions result in negative results.

Thus, some Buddhists believe that sexual misconduct, such as engaging in prostitution, adultery, child molestation, or abandoning a woman one has made pregnant, can cause a person to be born in their next life as a *kathoey*. Accordingly, one's homosexuality or transgenderism is not sinful, because it is involuntary repaying of a karmic debt. Thus, *kathoey* are not to be hated but rather pitied.

On the other hand, in the mid-1980s intolerant attitudes towards homosexuals and *kathoey* began to surface among Buddhist authorities. This was apparently because of the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in Thailand. Influenced by media reports that pinned the blame for the virus on gay men, conservative Thai social commentators argued that engaging in homosexual activity was a voluntary act that arose from a lack of self-restraint and an over-abundance of sexual lust. Thus, people who engaged in homoerotic relations were responsible for their actions, and hence taking part in sinful behaviors.

Research indicates that people's attitudes towards *kathoey* are complex and often dependent on context. For example, one study found that university students' feelings about transgenderism were often influenced by their relationship to *kathoey*. A person who was loath to have a child who was a *kathoey* could also respect and admire the artistic abilities of *kathoey* in general. At the same time, students generally felt positively about *kathoey* who "behaved themselves" in public by dressing and acting modestly, in contrast to the negative feelings they held about *kathoey* who drew attention to themselves through loud voices, sexy clothing, or aggressiveness.

Regarding glbtq community organizing, Thailand has had a small but vibrant lesbian movement since 1986. In that year a small group of women created an organization called Anjaree. Based in Bangkok, Anjaree coordinates and facilitates social and support group meetings for lesbians. Politically minded, it has also organized and hosted a number of activist and educational events, including the first Asian Lesbian Network meeting, held in 1990. The group also publishes a quarterly magazine called *Anjareesarn*. While this publication is typically only mailed to members of Anjaree, occasionally it is made available publicly on newsstands across the country.

For many years Anjaree was the only glbtq group with a significant presence in Thailand. A positive recent development, however, is that gay men and *kathoey* are also becoming visible and active in community organizing. Since 1999 there has been an annual Bangkok Gay Festival, which includes a Pride Parade, a film festival, panel discussions, and a fair at Lumpini Park called "Pink in the Park," that features booths representing gay, lesbian, human rights, and women's groups.

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