

## Homosexual Space in Thai society: Media, ritual and daily life<sup>1</sup>

### Homosexuality, Identity and Social Space?

Peter Jackson, Assoc. Prof. from the Australian National University, who has published a variety of works on gender and sexuality in Siam, began the discussion by tracing back to the time during the reigns of King Rama V and VI. Many adages in those days reflected succinctly the notion of homosexuality between men and men and women and women, i.e. “*Mai Pah Deaw Kan* (the same sexual persuasion)” or “*Len Puan* (“fooling around with the same sex”), “*Len Swat* (having sexual intercourse with the same sex)”. In ancient Siamese literature such as the “*Three Seal Law*” or ancient scriptures in the North, words referring to transgender are mentioned including “*Pu Mia*”, or the Pali term “*Napungsaka*”, which is interpreted by some to refer to a transgender. Though it appears that the terms and sayings reflecting the behavior of MSMs (Males who have sex with males) or lesbians can be found in ancient scriptures, they do not necessarily reflect the identity of homosexuals in the modern context. With the influence of media, nowadays, even the village folks are aware of and have heard the terms such as tomboy, ladyboy, etc. But actual behavior of MSMs and lesbians may not match the identity projected by media. As far as the link between identity and social space is concerned, Jackson had this to say;

“At present, gays have gained more social space from appearing in media, pubs and bars. In the past when no one identified himself as a gay, there was of course no space for gays. In other word, our identity must be made known in society first through forming as a group, and then we shall gain our social space. In modern day villages, there are of course MSMs who do not identify themselves as gays. They may simply call themselves MSMs or just fall in love (with another man). There are also tomboys there. Asking if they know they are tomboys, they probably are not even aware of the term. They simply know they love those of the same gender. To ask if the space of homosexuality exists, one must be able to tackle issues concerning identity...”

According to one participant in the discussion, two decades ago in rural area, those who are inclined toward loving others of the same gender were perceived of being ill. They were then often taken for treatment at the temples. Similar to encouraging young men to get ordained to turn from “raw persons” to “cooked persons”<sup>2</sup>, it was believed that people who loved those of the same gender were “raw”, and needed to be instilled with Dhamma and the teaching to transform into “cooked” persons. But the speaker had the direct experience that those persons who had been sent to temples for treatment simply abused people of the same sex there.

A postgraduate student in Social Development of Chiang Mai University who is working on a thesis concerning tomboys and Dee<sup>3</sup> in Lamphun Industrial Estate reflected on the views shared by a group of working class lesbians that women who

---

<sup>1</sup> Summarized and edited by Sopida Werakultawan and Vorawan Wannalak, from the public discussion “Homosexual Space in Thai society: Media, ritual and daily life” held on 18 June 2008 at Lao Bookshop, Chiang Mai. The event was organized Heinrich Boell Foundation’s Southeast Asia Regional Office as part of its Gender Democracy program.

<sup>2</sup> The term of “raw person” or literally as “Khon Dip” in this context is referred to the immature and/or uncivilized person and “cooked person” or literally as “Khon Suk” is the person who has become to be mature.

<sup>3</sup> “Dee” is literally the term for women/girls who have passions with tomboys or are sexual partners of tomboys.

are tomboys identify themselves as a “Tom”, but their female partners prefer to identify themselves as women rather than “Dee”. In this regard, Dr. Phairote Khongtaweesak, Ph.D., from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, CMU, shared that self-definition has something to do with social spaces. It has been found that by omitting to identify oneself, one can comfortably live in both spaces.

“Similar to folks in the factories, in general societies, husbands whose wives are kathoey<sup>4</sup> do not identify themselves as husband of kathoey. They simply don’t refer to themselves as husbands of kathoey. And why they have to do so, since even though their wives are kathoey, but they themselves are men? Meanwhile, the kathoey acknowledge their status of being transgender. To identify oneself as a tomboy, a dee, a kathoey or a kathoey’s husband is very relevant to an attempt to claim social spaces. Those who acknowledge their status as such shall have their own spaces. Those who are ambivalent and may sometimes acknowledge their status, sometimes not, may have different kinds of spaces.”

### **Medium-Cabaret-Tiffany: Spaces for self-expression of kathoey**

Another postgraduate student in CMU’s Social Development who is working on a thesis regarding “*Makhee*” or “medium” in the North shared information from field work that the number of kathoey who work as mediums has increased in the past two years. They come from different backgrounds including village folks and university graduates, both men and women. Some performed the roles of mediums for more than four or five times a day and have gained much respect from the public. They take leading roles in rituals performed at the City Pillar Hall in the North and other high profile ceremonies.

Concerning the roles of kathoey as mediums, Prempreeda Pramoj Na Ayutthaya, a researcher and secretary of Thai Queer Resource Center (TQRC) observed that generally, performance spaces are legitimate for kathoey. Most people tend to find it proper for kathoey to perform in various kinds of shows including cabaret, or beauty contest<sup>5</sup>.

“Through performances or participating in beauty contests, kathoey have gained acceptance from general public. Yet, their perception is still fixated on being women. Many still take for granted that kathoey are women and as a result kathoey have no space of their own.”

According to Prempreeda, the perceived roles of kathoey as women are not confined to the performance realm only, but are the same or similar in private relationships as well. The kathoey are often expected by their male partners to feature feminine beauties. The ideal status of a beauty queen haunts many kathoey and does impact their daily life. It thus prompts many kathoey to pursue their dreams to undergo transsexual operation.

Another participant shared that kathoey are expected to be beautiful, have fair skin and have no shin’s hair. It thus prompts many kathoey to manage to get surgery. The path toward perceived feminine identity includes hormone taking, castration, and transsexual operation.

Prempreeda further reflected that a number of media tend to treat the perceived connection between being a kathoey and beauty yearning as a personal problems and continues to raise questions such as “why do they want to have

---

<sup>4</sup> “Kathoey” is literally the term for transgenders in Thai society who full-time present themselves and act as women.

<sup>5</sup> The most popular beauty contest of kathoey is called “Miss Tiffany Contest” which all of the beauty pageants are transgender.

castration?”, “why do they really crave to beautify themselves?” The speaker wants to shed light on a wider issue and suggests that as experts, medical doctors should attempt to provide information in order that an informed decision can be made, rather than to solely pursue commercial interests. In other words, kathoey have the rights to be informed of possible impacts before the medical doctors make any decision on their behalf. One reason that motivates kathoey to undergo a sex-change operation is that it is believed that such an operation shall help them to live more conveniently in society. In addition, abuse of the rights to privacy of kathoey has been taken for granted as well. For example, a question such as “have you had sex change?” has been raised to a kathoey even when they are dining with others. For the speaker, such a question is really insulting.

Another participant suggested that should society acknowledge the roles and accept kathoey more properly, they may not find it necessary to have transsexual operation. In this regard, Prempreeda had this to say: “It is possible for them to live with their male sexual organs. A term such as “*Sao Siab* (penetrating girls)” refers to quite a progressive concept of sexuality beyond the traditional notion of transsexual: It means those transgenders who are femininely beautiful, but can still use their male sexual organs.”

### **Gays and kathoey in media**

Jackson proposed that there has been an increase of gay magazines in Bangkok whose targets are gays. And as we are discussing issues concerning tomboys, dee, gays and kathoey, there are also the MSMs whose identity is not in the clear.

“What we see happening in the West is opposite to here. For example, in the world famous film, *Brokeback Mountain*, we see men who love each other, but they are not transgender. It should be observed that in Western society, this type of men comes before the notion of transgender or gays. But here in Thailand, when it comes to transgender or gays, the initial image is often related to that of men with feminine trait or Kathoey. Such a notion is clearly reflected in Thai flicks such as “*Puan Ku Rak Muang Wah*”, inspired by *Brokeback Mountain*. It’s clear that the Thai culture does different from the West in this regard”. Concerning public and private spaces, Jackson tends to think that both tomboys and kathoey have gained more space in public, whereas gays have gained more personal space. This can be attested to by a number of entertainment parlors catered to the needs of particular groups.

As for the projection of identity of tomboys, dee, gays and kathoey, Dr. Pairote observed that the latter tends to be given the funniest image. Prempreeda added that kathoey are not simply upset with the projected image by media, they feel very bad for being treated as bad persons, or laughable figures. The issue of public toilet use has caused much embarrassment for kathoey. When entering a lady’s restroom, they are often watched by people, and it could be interpreted as an intention to ask if “they have had castration already or not”. All these projections do affect their daily life. A transgender, Doi has this to say: “While watching TV news late last night, an SMS sent from viewers and shown on TV said “Premarital pregnancy is fine, since it assures us that our wives are not kathoey”, and the two news anchors were laughing at the message. For me, this is a kind of violence struck on me.”

But in general, it seems there has been widening space and acceptance for sexual diversity. Yet, a few of them are still subject to violation of privacy in both public and private arenas. Such reflections should lead to change of the practice, rules and ethics in order that respect of freedom and human dignity among us can be upheld.