

The Remaking of a Cambodian-American Drag Queen

Research >
Cambodia

They returned to Cambodia to find family members they hoped had survived the Khmer Rouge purges. They went to meet their *khtəy* counterparts, the term used in their first language to describe those men (or women) who adopt the dress and comportment of the opposite sex. And, stuffed between the anti-malarial drugs and the Imodium, they packed their American sequin dresses, make-up, wigs, and lingerie to make their debut as 'drag queens' in Cambodia.



The Cambodian Americans (shown with their faces concealed) pose with their Cambodian 'sisters'. The photo illustrates the various ways in which Cambodian men who adopt the role of the *khtəy* present themselves. However, the young man on the far right is considered an eligible bachelor and occasionally socializes with the *khtəy*.

By Karen Quintiliani

For five Cambodian-American men the journey home in 1995 transformed their gay identities – identities imagined through the collective activities and memories of a Southern California Cambodian gay group they helped to establish. 'Real *khtəy*' in this group – or those who adopt transvestite lives – socialize with men who have sex with men exclusively as well as married men who have clandestine sexual relations with other men. However, the group members (like those taking the journey home) who successfully adopt a male appearance, work in male professions, attract (primarily) Anglo-American partners, and resist family pressures to marry, are the ones that define drag as the cultural equivalent to being *khtəy*, thereby legitimizing their unique gay identities. During drag performances, the members of the group depict Cambodian and American feminine cultural symbols – the traditional Cambodian Apsara dancer and Miss America – to temporarily embody their feminine selves. They also utilize drag performances to initiate 'closet' Cambodians into the group, and to educate non-Cambodians about the cultural role and (tacit) acceptance of being *khtəy* in Cambodian society.

The trip to Cambodia provided an opportunity to show their Cambodian 'drag queen sisters' how in America they can transform themselves while maintaining the 'heart' of a woman. I went on the trip as the 'real woman' of the group,

a designation that describes my role as a confidante and researcher in the gay group since 1992. However, being a real woman travelling with five Cambodians who appear to be men, provided a critical view of the expected separation between men and women's sexual worlds in Cambodia and the power held by Westerners in a country in the grips of poverty. The events that unfolded during our trip changed how these self-described gay Cambodian men saw themselves, and how the group members expressed their being *khtəy*, as they saw videos and heard accounts about the conditions of their *khtəy* counterparts in Cambodia.

In Battambang, the second largest city in Cambodia, the Cambodian Americans discovered how their *khtəy* counterparts carve out social positions and sexual spaces. Shifting between gender representations and sex roles – like drag requires – blurs the boundaries and the discreet way sexual relationships between men occur in Cambodia. Three of the *khtəy* live in a brothel and cook and clean for the women, only occasionally taking customers themselves. Mai Chaa, which means 'the old mother', is divorced and has grown-up children. He abandoned his family to fulfil his desire for male companionship. He is poor, homeless, and ostracized for having left his family, but not necessarily for having sex with other men. The other two *khtəy* live in the temple compound and have taken a vow of celibacy in order to serve the monks and honour the loss of partners during the Khmer Rouge years.

Sexual relationships between single men and *khtəy* in Battambang are either arranged or take place through random meetings; in either case the *khtəy* provides the young men with money or food as well as sexual gratification. The Cambodian Americans played the role of *khtəy* through the sexual exchange system, rather than as Cambodian-American drag queens. Before they left Battambang, they gave up their 'womanhood' by giving their sequined gowns and accessories to their *khtəy* counterparts, realizing that '[the cost of] one dress could feed a family for a year [in Cambodia]'.

The Cambodian Americans also reunited with a long-time Anglo-American gay friend running a social service agency in Cambodian villages in and around Phnom Penh, the largest and most urbanized city in Cambodia. Their friend offered the Cambodian Americans the choice of any 'macho' Cambodian man at the agency. The Cambodian Americans bristled at their friend's offer when they were told by some of the Cambodian men that they feared losing their jobs or access to English language classes if they did not agree to

engage in sexual liaisons. Their friend appeared to exploit the men's poverty and to misinterpret a social system that allows for male intimacy without the homosexual label common in contemporary Western societies.

Until these Cambodian gay group members could travel to their homeland, they imagined being *khtəy* through a set of social and cultural symbols available to them. When they returned to the USA they no longer held drag events as a way to portray their identities as Cambodian and gay. Rather, being *khtəy* became a social responsibility to financially support family members they reunited with in Cambodia, to sponsor HIV/AIDS fundraisers for Cambodia, and in some cases to return to their homeland and to nurture relationships with Cambodian men they met on their first trip home.

Stuart Hall (1990) describes identity as a 'production' constantly in flux as individuals and communities reinterpret experiences in diaspora and from the homeland. By understanding identity as Hall suggests, we gain an insight into how sexualities in Cambodia and in diaspora are influenced by transnational relationships and the conditions of poverty. <

Reference

– Hall, Stuart, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in: Jonathan Rutherford (ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, New York: New York University Press (1990), pp. 222–37.

Karen Quintiliani, MA is a PhD candidate in anthropology at UCLA. Her dissertation examines the impact of an eroding welfare state on Cambodian refugee families and the rise in neo-liberal forms of governance to solve social problems. kquint@ucla.edu



Mai Chaa, the 'old mother', feels awkward in high heels and the black sequin dress, but enjoys the opportunity to dress as a woman for the first time in her life.