

Gay vs. ‘Kathoey’: *Homosexual Identities in Thailand*

Research >
Thailand

In December 1996, the largest Thai government institute of higher learning, the Ratchaphat Institute, announced that they were banning homosexuals from their nationwide system of teacher’s colleges. The ruling was withdrawn after widespread criticism, but only after lengthy public debate in which NGO activists and liberal academics, calling for the protection of human rights, rallied against state officials. Yielding to critics who claimed the college’s actions violated the newly ratified ‘people’s constitution’, Ratchaphat modified the ban to the point of nullity in a face-saving retreat.

By Megan Sinnott

Ratchaphat’s action was newsworthy not because it was a typical repressive action by the Thai state. On the contrary, men and women engaging in homosexual relationships in Thailand have been relatively free of the kind of official legalistic discrimination and harassment that gays and lesbians in Western countries have historically faced. Unlike its southern Muslim neighbour, Buddhist Thailand is without religious or legal injunctions against homosexuality, apart from a brief and unused law dating from legal reforms in the early part of

the twentieth century. Ratchaphat’s official condemnation of homosexuality appears oddly out of place given the historical lack of official concern with homosexuality.

The significance of this brief yet sensational controversy concerning the Ratchaphat ban lies in its articulation of a relatively new discourse of public sexual morality in which homosexuality has become a marked, lived, and challenged identity. In the past thirty years, Thai society has witnessed both an increase in anti-homosexual statements propagated by the state, and the rapid growth of communities of men and women who are

engaged in long-term homosexual relationships. These men and women have formed hybrid identities in which traditional notions of gendered identities have combined with newer concepts of sexual orientation.

The more traditional understanding of what is now called ‘homosexuality’ in Thailand relies on the primacy of gender (visible markers of masculinity or femininity) rather than sexual behaviour per se. The imagery of a third gender within Thai culture dates back hundreds of years, evident in pre-Buddhist myths and the Thai concept of *kathoey* (Morris 1994). *Kathoey* means an indeterminate gender or a

combination of masculine and feminine gender, and is usually translated into English as either ‘hermaphrodite’ or ‘third sex’. In contemporary usage, *kathoey* is commonly used to refer to a man who appears to embody what are understood to be feminine characteristics. ‘Homosexuality’ (*rak-ruam-pheet*) is a mid-twentieth-century addition to the Thai vocabulary but is largely understood as existing within this model of gender inversion represented by the *kathoey* (Jackson 1997). Therefore, homosexuals are commonly understood to be emotional *kathoey*, such as men who feel they are women, or women who feel they are men.

In the past three decades, some homosexual Thai men have formed a personal identity that distances itself from the transgendered *kathoey*. These men use the English term ‘gay’ as a positive self-referent in which they position themselves as extensions of a

transnational gay identity. However, even within this gay identity are referents to gendered positions. While these distinctions may not be obvious to the general Thai population, gay men often mark themselves as masculine or feminine in terms of sexual roles, appearance, and mannerisms (Jackson 1995).

Over the past twenty years, Thai women have followed this tradition of gendered distinctions by forming a distinct masculine identity for women. These masculine women refer to themselves as *tom* using the first syllable of the English word ‘tomboy’. *Toms* are a new phenomenon in that they are a formalized category of specifically masculine women. However, their feminine partners, marked as *dee*, using the last syllable of the English word ‘lady’, are the truly novel phenomenon in the Thai social landscape because they rely on sexuality

continued on page 8 >

continued from page 1 >

rather than gender as a significant dimension of their identity. *Dees* are understood to be distinct from heterosexual women only in their sexual attraction to masculine women. Thai female same-sex relationships are thus a hybrid form of older gendered categorizations (they are marked as masculine or feminine) and newer sexualized personal identities.

Alongside this growth of gendered/sexual identities is the production of largely state-sponsored discourses in which 'homosexuality' is marked and vilified as a threat to the national culture. The Ratchaphat controversy is not an isolated instance of state attempts to regulate the discourse of homosexuality. A survey of recent history in Thailand reveals a persistence, if not an actual increase of anti-homosexual positions taken by officials. For example, in October 1998, a leading professor in the film department at one of the most presti-

gious Thai universities, Chulalongkorn, attempted to ban a gay/lesbian film festival organized by a junior faculty member of the same institution, by claiming the films were not appropriate for Thai audiences or Thai culture. The senior professor, using her seat on the national censorship board, mobilized reluctant local police to attempt to prevent the films from being shown. The police, knowing they were being manipulated by the influential professor, awkwardly attempted to follow her instructions without causing undue conflict by performing a perfunctory inspection of the films, amidst jeers from the audience, and then quickly leaving after deeming the films acceptable. After a brief visit by police officers on the opening night, the festival continued uninterrupted. These often-contradictory efforts by agents of the state to repress homosexuals become largely symbolic gestures rather than sustained campaigns of persecution.

The simultaneous growth of the large, visible communities of *kathoey*, gays, *toms*, and *dees*, and that of anti-homosexual discourses makes definitive statements concerning the 'Thai attitude' towards homosexuality difficult. Local gay and lesbian activists argue that these state actions are evidence of an enduring sexual conservatism, and anti-homosexual attitudes in general. This perspective, however, assumes that Thai society has a longstanding anti-homosexual disposition that is gradually changing into a more tolerant and accepting society of gay and lesbian sexuality. In this scenario, these scandals and controversies reveal the remnant prejudice towards homosexuals that must still be overcome.

In a post-Foucauldian world such a position is hard to maintain. The cultural categories and personal identities of gay, *tom*, *dee*, and *kathoey* are products of recent historical transformation. The medical/psychological/soci-

ological discourses that have been produced and appropriated by the state to regulate and define homosexual men and women are products of an urbanizing, industrializing twentieth-century Thailand, not leftovers of some timeless past.

Postmodern deconstructionists have made a living claiming that binary labels are semiotic strategies rather than accurate descriptions of reality. The inability of binary terms to encompass complex reality is obvious in the case of Thailand's homosexuals. Thailand is no more a 'repressive' society than it is a 'liberated' one (see Jackson 1999). In Thailand there is both a growing demand for positive self-identities as gay and lesbian, and state intrusions into defining sexual morality. ◀

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