

การแสดงและนักแสดงเควียร์: การสร้างอัตลักษณ์เควียร์ของสังคมไทย ผ่านละครนอก

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษาละครนอกซึ่งเป็นการแสดงดั้งเดิมของไทยประเภทหนึ่ง อันประกอบด้วยผู้แสดงชายซึ่งแต่งกายเป็นตัวละครหญิง การแสดงประเภทนี้สามารถศึกษาได้ด้วยกรอบทฤษฎีเควียร์ของตะวันตก จากการศึกษาในที่สุดพบว่าชนบททางการละครและและเชื่อในสังคมเอื้อต่อการแต่งกายเป็นตัวละครหญิงของนักแสดงชายในละครนอก ซึ่งส่วนใหญ่เป็นผู้มีอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศแบบเควียร์ ทำให้การแสดงเป็นที่ยอมรับ ในสังคมไทย ดังนั้นสังคมไทยจึงยอมให้อัตลักษณ์เควียร์โดยเฉพาะคนข้ามเพศนั้นดำรงอยู่ได้

คำสำคัญ: ละครนอก, การแสดงดั้งเดิมไทย, ทฤษฎีเควียร์, อัตลักษณ์เควียร์ของสังคมไทย

* บทความฉบับนี้ดัดแปลงจากวิทยานิพนธ์ระดับปริญญาโทเรื่อง “Meditations of Thai Queer Identity through Lakhon Nok.” มหาวิทยาลัยไมอามี รัฐฟลอริดา ประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา, 2011.

Queer Performance, Queer Performers: the Shaping of Thai Queer Identity Through Lakhon Nok*

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ABSTRACT

The article is aimed to explore Lakhon Nok , a genre of Thai traditional performances which feature male cross-dressing. Potentially, the genre could be understood within the framework of Western queer theory. Ultimately, due to the acceptance of theatrical traditions and social norms embedded within Thai traditional Lakhon Nok performance, which features the cross-dressing of male performers, who are mostly queer, the performance is accepted in society; as a result, Thai queer

* *This article was adapted from the MA thesis “Meditations of Thai Queer Identity through Lakhon Nok.” Miami University, Ohio, U.S.A.*

identities, particularly the transgendered, are widely tolerated in Thai society.

Keywords: Lakhon Nok, Thai Traditional Theatre, Queer Theory, Thai Queer Identity

Introduction

Lakhon Nok is a genre of Thai traditional performance with an all male cast. The plays are based on established text(s) and traditions, which feature male cross-dressing. Potentially, the interplay of gender and sexuality within *Lakhon Nok* performances could be understood within the framework of Western queer theory. However, it is important to note that Western queer theory cannot articulate the culturally specific performances and might overlook the significance of Thai cultural practices. Queer theory posits that sexual identities such as the “hetero” and the “queer” are not fixed; performance and identity vary throughout different cultures. Observers with different socio-cultural norms might consider male cross-dressers in *Lakhon Nok* performances ‘queer’ or ‘unnatural’. I would argue that, due to the acceptance of theatrical traditions and social norms embedded within Thai traditional *Lakhon Nok* performance, which features the cross-dressing of male performers, who are mostly queer, the performance is accepted in society; as a result, Thai queer identities, particularly the transgendered, are widely tolerated in Thai society. Ultimately, it is my contention that the cross-dressing of queer performers reflects the fluidity in Thai society of the tolerance of queer identity. It is also a powerful reminder that gender is a social construct.

Origin and Characteristics of *Lakhon Nok*

First of all, the origin and aspects of *Lakhon Nok* performances, particularly official performances given by the Office of the Performing Arts at the Department of Fine Arts of Thailand, are essential to gaining a deeper understanding of how it utilizes the all-male cast. Brandon and Banham (1993, 236) have shown that *Lakhon Nok* literally means “a play outside the palace.” It originated in the southern areas of Thailand and was subsequently introduced in the Bangkok region in central Thailand. Initially, *Lakhon Nok* troupes were all-male, but, by the mid-19th century, women began taking female roles. However, the National Theatre in Bangkok nowadays stages the performances with all-male casts. Prangwatthanakun (n.d., 111-118) states that *Lakhon Nok* shows originally employed an all-male cast which consisted of two to three actors. These actors would switch roles and play multiple parts during the performance. Later, more actors were added. Jokes included sexual innuendos and satire to excite laughter in the audience.

According to Nimnetiphan (1989, 125-27), the performances were staged as part of the celebrations in several secular and religious auspicious occasions, but not royal ceremonies. Originally, the costumes in *Lakhon Nok* performances were as simple as ordinary

people's clothing which allowed the actors to move conveniently on stage. An actor was draped in a white cloth from the waist to the left shoulder to remind audiences that the actor was playing a female. The actor put on specific makeup, a thick line around his mouth to make it look more pronounced, or a demon mask which was usually green and had two lower fangs to signify the demon character. For *Lakhon Nok* performances, there are fourteen repertoire plays: *Karaket*, *Khawi*, *Chaiyathat*, *Phikulthong*, *Pimsawan*, *Phinsuriyawong*, *Manora*, *Mongpa*, *Maneephichai*, *Sangthong*, *Sangsilapachai*, *Suwannasilpa*, *Suwannahong* and *Sawat*.

Anantasan (1994, 15-17) states that the subject matter of *Lakhon Nok* usually involve royal families and superstition and share similar themes. Generally, there are two major types of subjects. The first one is the hero's journey toward experience and maturity. The hero is required to take a "learning journey" to gain more knowledge. In some circumstances, the hero has to depart from his hometown and then return home. During the journey, the hero will encounter numerous interesting incidents such as meeting the heroine, getting married, and facing villains and obstacles through which he can prove himself a mature man. The second subject matter in *Lakhon Nok* is a dispute over love. A large number of *Lakhon Nok* performances deal with jealousy

and disputes over love between the wife and the husband's mistresses—a commentary on polygamy in ancient Thai society. The mistresses usually employ tricks to win the husband's heart.

According to Virunrak (2004, 89-99), *Lakhon Nok* performances follow the national model performed by those at the Thailand's Department of Fine Arts. The performances were developed from simple folk performances into more sophisticated court dramas under the influence of King Rama II, who ruled Siam or Thailand during 1809-1824. There are eight significant characteristics of *Lakhon Nok* performances that have been vigorously preserved and passed by professors and scholars in Thailand. First of all, performances emphasize plot advancement, not the slow, elegant choreography. Secondly, words in the scripts are more concise to fit the mood of characters in each episode and the choreography of performers. King Rama II himself revised five scripts, *Chaiyachet*, *Maniphichai*, *Khawi*, *Sangthong*, and *Kraithong*, based on former *Lakhon Nok* scripts. Thirdly, performers are not required to sing; there are singers who are responsible for narrating and commenting on the story. However, performers have conversations in dialogue. Next, the choreography of *Lakhon Nok* is impressively sophisticated; however, they tend to be more swift and forceful than other traditional dance types. The fifth characteristic is that, in the *Lakhon Nok* performances, kings can freely and humorously

converse with their noble men and peasants. Moreover, as the sixth characteristic, major characters tend to be extroverted. The final characteristic is that customs or traditions in the palace, perceived through royal characters, have been rigidly maintained.

Western Queer Theory: Gender as a Social Construct

The conceptual vocabulary of queer theory and cross-dressing in general can offer insight into an analysis of cross-dressing in *Lakhon Nok*. According to Jagose (1996, 3), queer theory broadly “describes those gestures or analytical models that dramatize incoherencies in the stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting the model of stability that claims heterosexuality as its origin, queer theory focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire. This theory has been associated with lesbian and gay subjects. Its analytical framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, and sex-reassignment surgery”. Furthermore, Fortier (2002, 122-126) states that the category of “queer” includes not just homosexual, but bisexual, transsexual, cross-dressers, hermaphrodites and anyone else who does not feel particularly “straight” for some reason. There is a continuum of practices and

identities between the homosexual and the heterosexual. The study of queer theory “gives rise to the ubiquitous gerund ‘queering’ describing an activity wherein alternative queer practices and attitudes are found at the heart of a culture, institution, or period traditionally taken as heterosexual”. The focus of this study is on what lies between two poles of the dichotomy, the male and the female. This means that a queer study of *Lakhon Nok* performers would not be only restricted to individuals considered queer, homosexual, or gay men, but also in “queering” the entire performance.

According to Bertens (2001, 229-230), “queer theory has taken a special interest in cross-dressing, and in particular cross-dressing by males. Cross-dressing destabilizes generally accepted views of gender and sexuality. A man in a long evening dress or a pleated skirt will in most places draw a good deal of attention. Men in drag are interesting to queer theorists since they simultaneously position themselves on the wrong end of two oppositions. On the gender opposition, they identify with the feminine pole, in spite of their position on the male pole. Besides, on the axis of sexual orientation with its hetero or homo opposition, they take up the homosexual position.” For queer theorists, drag and other unusual intersections of gender and sexuality become visible; we are confronted with the fact that there are only ever-shifting

differences". Similarly, Allen (1996, 6-7) offers terms of cross-dressing generally accepted in the U.S. A cross-dresser is a person who dresses in the clothing of the opposite sex. Another classic term is "transvestite" which is a combination of the Latin "trans" meaning across and "vestire" meaning clothing. Transvestite therefore means someone who dresses differently from his or her normal sex. "Female impersonator" is a term applied to stage performers who limit their cross dressing to the stage. "Drag queen" is a general term used to describe public transvestites and those cross dressers who dress in a highly sexualized and fetishistic fashion. Many advanced practitioners of cross-dressing, particularly those who dress and live full-time as a woman, prefer the term "transgender" that places the emphasis on gender rather than sex and also raises questions in regard to the potential of sexual reassignment surgery.

As previously mentioned, the idea of gender varies based on each society's norms: gender is culturally constructed in each society. That is why there are just two genders, the male and female, in Western countries where the idea of gender has largely been constructed through a reading of the genesis story in Christianity. In the Christian origin myth, God creates Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. The idea of gender as a social construction has been well-argued by Butler (2006, 8-14). Her theory can be applied

to *Lakhon Nok* performances in terms of the social or cultural construction of queer identity. Gender binaries do not fit queer performance methods. Butler delineates how gender is socially or culturally constructed whereas sex is biologically established from birth: “originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex”. Butler elaborates that the concept of gender is not fixed and always changeable depending on each culture. This critique of the binary gender system is illustrated in examples of third gender as portrayed in *Lakhon Nok* performances.

Thai Queer Identities: Striking Differences from Western Gender Dichotomies

Western queer theory can help develop the framework of queer identities in Thailand; however, it unsatisfactorily articulates the ideas underlying practices because there are culturally specific factors that shape queer identities as well. The three gender system of Thailand is strikingly different from the binary gender system of the West. Buddhism plays the most significant role in

the belief of *kathoei* in Thailand. Totman (2003, 47-52) states that approximately 95 percent of Thais practices Theravada Buddhism which was embraced as the country's official religion in the thirteenth century AD. Buddhism emphasizes the significance of each individual's karma. He or she accumulates karma, a kind of metaphysical credit, through the worthiness and selflessness of his or her deeds and the serenity of his or her everyday demeanor. Conversely, the person loses it, or gains negative karma, through yielding to and indulging all cravings and worldly concerns. One can reach the state of nirvana or the ultimate extinction by accumulating positive karma or good deeds. Therefore, people in Thai society can tolerate anyone who performs constructive deeds, especially those based on religious teachings. Despite the rule of uncontrollable circumstances in a person's life, one acquires good or bad karma which affects the next life. All these beliefs absolutely prevail upon Thai Buddhists. Therefore, they do not have prejudices towards *kathoei* or homosexuals as long as they behave themselves.

Moreover, *kathoei* or the in-between gender has long been recognized by Theravada Buddhists in a neutral way. The Theravada Buddhist origin myth *Pathamamulamuli* describes three original human genders; male, female, and *kathoei* or biological hermaphrodite (Peltier 1991, 200-209). Totman (2003, 51-57)

further the explanation of the word *kathoey* stated in the Tipitaka, the basic scriptural canon of Buddhism. The scriptures identify four genders: male, female, ubhatobyanjanaka and pandaka. Ubhatobyanjanaka is defined as having the characteristics of both sexes—a biological hermaphrodite. This can also be defined in Thai as *kathoey thae* (true *kathoey*). Pandaka means a eunuch weakling, a *kathoey*, or a castrated man. It also means a person who has a deficiency in the signs of masculinity or femininity and a person who takes pleasure in having relations with a man while feeling that they are like women. This last definition equates the word pandaka with the word *kathoey*. The traditional Buddhist system of beliefs maintains that the identity of a *kathoey* is predetermined before birth and is the direct result of negative karmic debt committed in a previous life. This negative karmic debt is due to him or her performing actions violating sexual mores. Such misdeeds include adultery, being a female prostitute, sexually abusing one's children, or failing to fulfill an expected role in the reproductive process, such as a man's unwillingness to have children. This suggests that identity is an unavoidable destiny of *kathoeys* and this places them outside the arena of moral sanction. They are to be pitied, not judged. Likewise, Nanda (2000, 74) indicates that Buddhists view *kathoeys* as natural phenomena, whose condition was a result of karmic

debt, preordained from birth and thus beyond their capacity to alter. This view is still commonly held in Thailand both by ordinary people and by *kathoeys*. This position is that *kathoeys* are people who are different or disabled because of their karma and should be sympathized with rather than ridiculed. Kathoeys are not sinful because their behavior is beyond their control.

According to Peter A. Jackson (1999, 226-228), there are controversial and exoticized perceptions of queer people in Thailand. Briefly, they theorize that Western observers, including many foreign gay visitors, commonly view Thai culture as expressing liberal, even accepting, attitudes towards male transgenderism or kathoey and masculine-identified male homosexuality or gay. Since the 1970s, Western gay travel guides, in particular, have portrayed Thailand as a gay paradise. Such presentations have continued into the 1990s by international press networks as well as through gay media. Despite outward appearances, the circumstances in Thailand towards gay people is not paradisiacal: the international press failed to report that the “Flower Town,” a gay real estate venture, subsequently collapsed due to a lack of investor interest and local people’s opposition to the idea of living next door to thousands of gay men. Another example of Thai intolerance to homosexuality is within Thai academic writing. These writings commonly problematize male

homosexuality as a perversion (i.e., “This perversion needs to be treated, or this disease needs a cure”). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the hostility against homosexuality including transgenderism is much less severe in Thailand than in Western societies. Homosexuality is neither illegal under Thai law nor immoral according to Buddhist teachings. Consequently, for those who are aware of or who have experienced first-hand the intensity of anti-homosexual sanctions in many Western societies, they may at first perceive Thailand as a gay paradise. Although there is a general saying that homosexuality is not a problem in Thailand and that gay men and transvestites are widely accepted, the example of Seri Wongmontha, the well-known former academic and a flamboyantly public gay man, can prove the intolerance of some people in Thai society. He resigned from his post as Dean of the Faculty of Mass Communications at Thammasat University in Bangkok in 1987, in part due to colleague’s criticisms of his openness about his homosexuality.

The prejudice towards Thai queer identities was created after Thai society was reformed to promote modernization; at that point, a gender binary system then became influential. Pramoj Na Ayutthaya (2003, 13-15) describes the modernization of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram’s administration. Although there were many reforms in the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910) and

while the country had been guided by the absolute monarch to westernize the country, the government, during the administration of Phibunsongkhram, tremendously affected Thailand. There were official announcements to Thai citizens that the most significant policy of the government was to lead the country toward civilization. The government modeled the development of Thailand after developed or modernized countries in the West. Publicly, Phibunsongkhram vigorously persuaded Thai people to stop wearing *jongkraben* which is Thai traditional pants for people of all genders. Men should wear pants, he argued, while women should wear skirts. Above all, modernization in Thailand sought to create financial stability, national unity, and a normative culture. The results of the policies of Phibunsongkhram clearly distinguished between responsibilities of men and women. Men had the responsibility to do their best in their jobs and to defend the country from the invasion of enemies from other countries; they were represented as “*rua khong chat*” (the Fence of the Nation). In contrast to men, women were responsible for doing their best in their housework; they were represented as “*dokmai khong chat*” (the Flower of the Nation). Women were supposed to be decent wives, mothers and housewives. Moreover, they had to be well-groomed and attractive. Additionally, the government launched an agenda for Thai citizens to have names which

reinforce stereotypical characteristics of men and women. Names for the male were supposed to indicate chivalry and courage according to the metaphor of the fence of the nation such as Kriangsak, Suraphon, and Surayut. By contrast, names for the female were supposed to indicate delicacy and sweetness based on the metaphor of the flower of the nation such as Chuanchom, Saiyut, and Sanguansri. People who had gender-neutral names were persuaded to change their names. The government continually and vigorously promoted those policies through media such as radio, newspapers, and billboards. What Phibunsonkhram had launched in the first stage of his administration was continued during his second term. As illustrated in Thailand: A Country Study, policies launched by Phibunsonkhram's second government (1948-57) were quite similar to those its first government had initiated in the late 1930s. Laws to force Thai to practice social behaviors reflecting Western standards initiated by him before the World War II (1939-45) were reintroduced (Federal Research Division 1989, 32-33). From that moment on, anything which did not fall into the category of the male or the female was considered queer and appeared as a challenge to the hetero-normative. This is the historical context of shifting and contradictory views towards homosexuality in this country.

Thai Queer Identity through the Practice of Cross-dressing by Queer Performers

Cross-dressing, which highlights Thai queer identity, is emphasized by the costume, dresses and ornaments of male performers who wear Thai traditional attire for female dancers. As demonstrated in the illustration below from Chaisongkram's *The Preliminary Thai Dances* (2001, 108), on the right, a male character or “*phra*” wears pants and epaulettes on shoulders whereas, on the left, a female character or “*nang*” wears a long skirt.



Fig 1. Female and Male Characters (Chaisongkram 2001, 108)

Cross-dressing in *Lakhon Nok* performances delineates Thai queer presence and identity. All actors enacting female characters dress in traditionally female attire. Specifically, they wear long skirts and have long cloths across their shoulders. The practice of cross-dressing in established performances is indicative of tolerance towards Thai queer identity. Men are allowed to become women by dressing in women's attire without protest or condemnation from people in society because the hetero audiences have accepted the terms of performance. The performances remain popular. As I explored in my MA thesis, "Meditations of Thai Queer Identity through *Lakhon Nok*" (Intamool 2011, 50-84), most performers who play female characters are *kathoey* or homosexual. The conclusion is drawn from interviews with *Lakhon Nok* performers with the Office of Performing Arts at Thailand's Department of Fine Arts. The interviewees were Mr. Chaowalit Sunthranon, Mr. Khomsannatha Huamueanglat, Mr. Kitti Chatuprayan, Mr. Sarawut Aromchuen and Mr. A (pseudonym). Mr. Chaowalit Sunthranon stated the following.

“Most of the performers are *kathoey* or homosexual. That’s the reason why they can play female characters spontaneously. Generally, those who in reality behave like women can do their parts fantastically on stage. Their performance is better than those who are heterosexual men, but on occasion some heterosexual-appearing men might perform better than some gay men or *kathoey*.” However, there is doubt if those men are actually heterosexual. Probably, they might be closeted and might not realize it themselves. Personally, I think that the arts, including the performing arts, are delicate and beautiful. Men in general are not interested in creating artistic work. Basically, those men who are attracted to the creation of arts tend to be gay or *kathoey*.”

Likewise, Mr. Chatuprayun agrees with Mr. Sunthranon that most of the performers who play female characters are *kathoey* or gay. Personally, Mr. Chatuprayun thinks that it is essential for performers to be *kathoey* in order to play one of those roles.

“It is appropriate for a *kathoey* or gay man to play a major female character so that he can effectively convey the delicate feelings of the female character to

audiences. Moreover, by the structure of the male body, a *kathoey* or a gay man can dance energetically and gracefully since a fantastic Thai traditional dance requires lots of energy to perform. Besides, as a tradition of this genre of performances, it requires verbal and physical clashes because it is a performance for common people outside the palace. If a female character is performed by a heterosexual woman, it will not be as entertaining as that performed by a *kathoey* or gay man.”

Mr. Aromchuen has also experienced some performances when all of the performers who played female characters were either *kathoey* or gay. Similar to Mr. Sunthranon, Mr. Chatuprayun and Mr. Aromchuen, Mr. A confirmed that the majority of performers that play female characters in *Lakhon Nok* are *kathoey* or gay, and they know exactly how to entertain the audiences. Therefore, based on Mr. A’s information, those who organize *Lakhon Nok* performances prefer *kathoey* or gay actors as performers in the performances. Those performers, it is believed, are able to perform extremely well. Consequently, Mr. A believes that it is a waste of time to train homosexual men to play female characters. Queer performers can be tolerated and even respected by Thai audiences as is apparent from the example of Mr. Khomsannatha

Huamueanglat. According to my interview with Mr. Huamueanglat, he is a skillful *kathoeys* *Lakhon Nok* performer who is considered beautiful and elegant in his conduct. He said that he has become the role model for several *kathoeys*. As a *kathoeys* who has been trained in Thai traditional performances for approximately 40 years, Mr. Huamueanglat regards himself as a role model for younger *kathoeys* and, particularly those who dream of being the heroine of performances organized by the Office of Performing Arts at the Thailand's Fine Arts Department. Mr. Huamueanglat realizes that many younger *kathoeys* dream of becoming like him; therefore, he behaves himself in an appropriate way to be accepted in society. Mr. Huamueanglat always teaches or advises younger *kathoeys* on how to behave if occasions allow. He has been a guest lecturer at many institutes, including schools, dramatic arts colleges and universities for several years. Once, after a performance, a *kathoeys* student brought him a flower garland, candles, and incense sticks to pay respect and ask to be his student. Certain *kathoeys* students travel across the country to ask him to be their teacher.

Ultimately, Thai queer identity can not be restricted to isolated social phenomena; *Lakhon Nok* is as one of multiple cultural artifacts which can illuminate the entire society like threads

intertwined to create fabric. Edward Burnett Tylor, the founder of academic anthropology in the English-speaking world, identifies culture as the major key to comprehending a specific society. “Culture...taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of society” (as cited by Green and Troup 1999, 172).

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