

Language and Identity in Transgender: gender wars and the case of the Thai *kathoey*.

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Introduction

We are all familiar with the war between the sexes; a war long fought, and perhaps still in progress. Maybe less well-known is another struggle playing across the world, and involving transgenders ranged against their respective mainstream societies. In some places (Hong Kong for example) the struggle is quite polite and muted, in others (for example the USA) it is quite loud and energetic. It is fought in newspapers, magazines, and T.V., committees, tribunals and courts. In the UK it has even been fought, though viewers may not have known it, on the nation's best known T.V. soap opera – Coronation Street – where viewers have for some time been able to follow the fortunes of Hayley, a male-to-female (MtF) transgender. A similar drama has been played out on the set of *Ally McBeale*.

The conflict is all about what makes us male or female; do we give primacy to the physical reality into which a person has been born or his own private mental reality? We might call the first 'sex' and the second 'gender'.

To the transgendered community the course of this conflict is a matter of great concern; the outcome will have consequences for the documents they carry in their pockets (or purses), the passports upon which they travel abroad, their social welfare rights when they grow old, their marrying and parenting rights, their opportunities for getting a job and advancing within it, and even their sense of security when they walk down the street.

Throughout this paper I will use MtF transgenders (those who were ascribed a male sex at birth but choose to live a broadly female gender role) to illustrate key points about transgender. In doing so I do not mean to ignore FtMs (female -to-male transgenders), or suggest that this gender war does not involve them. In some societies (my own Hong Kong for example) there may be more of them than MtFs, and their struggles are just as real.

In this paper I will examine the conflict as reflected in four areas (a) the overall emphasis upon physical or mental reality in questions of maleness and femaleness, (b) perceptions of MtFs as male or female, or indeed a third category, (c) views of MtFs as homosexual or heterosexual, (d) notions of MtFs as ‘wrong’ minds or bodies, as well as disordered or different. In each case I will outline the viewpoints that are expressed in the West (to be honest, the English-speaking West), and then outline the viewpoints that one comes across in a culture very different to the West, unusual (if not unique) both in terms of the numbers of people living as transgenders (our observations indicate that as many as one male in every 170 may be living as a transgender), as well as in terms of the commonly-held perceptions of what transgender is. That culture is Thailand. The transgenders there are called by many names (more of that later), but I shall refer to them by one of the most widely used – *kathoey*. In using this term I am conscious of the fact that many Thai MtFs would prefer other terms available in their language.

Physical or mental reality

In determining who we are Western societies appear to place a high value upon our physical reality –specifically the anatomy with which we were born. This is not entirely surprising. After all, in all but a few difficult ‘intersex’ cases, it is our birth-anatomy upon which parents, nurses and doctors base their judgment about our sex. Thereafter a person is regarded as being of the sex into which he/she was born. A baby is labelled ‘male’ because he has a penis at birth. More interesting is that the Western view appears to argue that he remains essentially ‘male’ all his life, regardless of how his identity develops regardless of what he may do to change his body.

We may call this the physical view. In the West it is so well accepted by the medical, academic and legal worlds (and yes, much of the psychological world too) that we may also call it society’s mainstream view - says that a person may be defined in terms of his body.

A rather different - radical psychological - view is that, while, for example, a person may be labeled as ‘male’ at birth, he retains that label only if, as he develops, he feels male inside, or at least is comfortable with a male identity. According to this view, the sex into which we are born matters little at all in the long run. What matters is our gender – our identity.

The Thai view appears to share something of the radical psychological view. Buddhism teaches that each of us is composed of five aggregates of elements – broadly associated with our physical state, our sensations, our

perceptions , our thoughts and our consciousness – none of which has any supremacy over the others. Note that only one of the five aggregates is physical, and this, like all the others, is characterized by impermanence. To the extent that we can talk about ‘self’ (a centre that coordinates and reflects, an individuality that sets us apart from others) then that self is characterised by our mental reality as much as if not more than our physical reality.

As we will see, this perspective lends great flexibility to the notion of sex and gender, even allowing for the possibility that there may be more than two.

Male, female or a third category

In the West the mainstream view is evident wherever transgender is being discussed – in the media, in academia, in bureaucratic decision making and in the law courts. We see the MtF often called a ‘transgendered male’, and referred to by male pronouns. In many jurisdictions she is regarded as legally male, with the FtM equivalent regarded as legally a woman.

The bureaucratic and legal consequences of the mainstream view are enormous. Let’s consider a few examples from home life and employment that impinge on the MtF. First home life. Depending on the society in which she lives, a MtF who is attracted to a male may not be able to marry him, since the law may regard this as a same-sex marriage, and same-sex marriages may be proscribed. Where the transgender manages to keep her birth sex a secret and then marries she runs the risk of later having the marriage declared invalid. So living together may be the only viable option. But if the couple are living together they may have difficulty arranging an adoption.

Let’s now turn to employment. A transgender may find it difficult getting a job simply because his/her identity, appearance and papers fail to match. Her potential employers may point out the likely difficulties with co-workers and customers that employment of a transgender might bring. Almost inevitably they will point out the difficulty that staff toilets will represent. The employer may point to duties that the transgender could not effectively perform. For example, a MtF in the U.K. recently encountered difficulties getting a job as a policewoman because it was argued that she would not be able to perform intimate searches on either men or women, the latter because they or their legal counsel might object.

The difficulty getting a job is only exacerbated where one ‘doesn’t look the part’, a risk greatest where the transgender has failed early enough in his/her life to get a doctor to prescribe the hormones that can change his/her appearance. Failure to get a job may in turn jeopardize the success of the two year real-life test (two years living successfully in the transgendered role) that psychiatry requires that transgender to take before sex-reassignment surgery is granted (SRS). The sad truth is that failure to get a job may mean failure to get the SRS. More about psychiatry and SRS later.

Problems can dog the transgender even towards the end of her working life. In the UK a MtF will draw ‘his’ pension at 65 as opposed to the age of 60 enjoyed by women. As her supposed age of retirement approaches, the MtF may feel obliged to leave her job early to avoid any government department letter to her employer that might signal her birth sex.

All of these consequences flow from the mainstream view that MtFs are men and FtMs are women. How then do transgenders view themselves? The answer is, very differently indeed. Many MtFs refer to themselves and others as transgendered *females* (not males). Many FtMs label themselves and others as transgendered *males* (not females).

Note that the emphasis here is on what they have moved towards rather than what they have moved away from. We have plenty of examples of this sort of thing in English of course – terms in which a past participle is used to indicate a change of status, with a noun referring to the status after the change. For example, we speak of an ordained priest or a qualified psychologist. Indeed it would be a little queer to speak of an ordained novice or a qualified student. And yet logically this is what we do whenever we refer to an MtF as a transgendered male.

Interestingly, I have noticed recently that some transgendered are adopting an even more radical labeling approach. An MtF may not only describe herself as a transgendered female, but will go on to say that she are now female but was born *transgendered*. Note, not even male, but transgendered. This poses a real challenge to our established ways of thinking; the mainstream view is that there are two sexes and two genders, certainly at birth. The radical transgender raises the possibility of at last three.

What is the Thai view on the maleness or femaleness of MtFs? The most used word for MtFs is *kathoe*, a word that historically used for any non-gender-normative male, and was therefore extended to gays as well as transgenders (less so now that the word *gei* is being increasingly used to refer to gays). Historically the collapsing together of these two categories

seemed to rest on the notion that maleness is defined in terms not of what anatomy you have, but what you do with it. Viewed in that light, the transgender and gay lose much of their claim to maleness simply by engaging in non-gender-normative sexual activities. Both become in some important sense 'non-male'. This view contrasts sharply with the common Western view that a man can engage in same-sex activities, even as a passive partner, and still be a man.

Other terms for transgenders in Thailand suggest that the MtF Thai goes beyond being simply 'non-male', defining them as (a) a merger of the two sexes (for example, *pumia / pumae* - 'male-female') (b) a subset of female (for example *sao praphet song* - 'second kind of girl' - and *phuying praphet song* - 'second kind of woman') or even (c) a third gender/sex category (for example *phet tee sam* - 'third gender/sex').

A final term - *nang fa jam leng* ('transformed goddess') - echoes the use of the term 'transgendered female' that is increasingly being used in the West by MtFs – an adjective that describes a transformation, linked to the noun that describes the status after the transformation.

Nowhere have I found any term that parallels the mainstream Western term 'transgendered male'. The nearest to this I can find is (a) *kathoey phom yao* ('long-haired *kathoey*') and *kathoey tee sai suer pha phuying* ('*kathoey* dressing as a woman'), both of which, following on from the discussion of *kathoey* earlier, might imply she is essentially a non-male living as a woman, and (b) *ork sao* ('outwardly a female'), which might, I suppose, imply that she is not actually female.

In summary the names which Thais use for transgendered males suggest a occupation of a range of gender-spaces, extending from non-male through a blend of male and female, to a subset of female or even a third sex/gender. How then do they see themselves?

One of the interesting linguistic features of Thailand is that vocabulary is gender-linked. A person uses different word forms according to whether he / she is a male / female – or sees him/herself as either of those things. The first person pronoun provides a nice example. Males will use just one word - *phom* - whereas a female can choose between *chan*, *dichan*, *noo* (literally 'little mouse') and even her own name as a pronoun. Each of these can be used to mean 'I', 'me', 'my' or 'mine'. Another nice example is provided by the polite particles that Thais attach to the end of a phrase or a sentence; *krap* for males and *ka* for females'.

What word-forms do the *kathoey* use? Invariably the female pronouns and particles. When a *kathoey* cannot find a book she may say ‘Excuse me. I wonder if you have seen my book. Because I can’t see it now at all’. In Thai she will say it just like a female: ‘*Khor tod ka. Mei sap wa khun hen nang seu khong chan mai. Phroh thon nee di chan mong mei hen nang seu khong di chan loei ka*’ (gender-markers underlined).

Such speech patterns develop at an early age. In our study of 190 *kathoey* MtFs we found that some respondents started using the female pronouns (*chan, dichan* etc.) almost as soon as they could talk, with 50% using it by age fourteen. the polite particle (*ka*) came soon after, with some reporting using it from age five, and half using it by age 15. Given that half of our respondents were 16 before they started taking hormones, 17 before they started growing their hair long, and 18 before they were living full-time in female clothes, it is clear that female word-forms were one of the earliest expressions of cross-gender behaviour for our sample; a sort of harbinger of what was to come.

Arguably language may not be a good indicator of identity. A more direct indicator might be to ask people what they think they are. We asked our 190 MtFs to say whether they thought of themselves as men, women, *sao praphet song* or *kathoey*. None thought of themselves as male, and only 11% saw themselves as *kathoey* (i.e. ‘non-male’). By contrast 45% thought of themselves as women, with another 36% as *sao praphet song* (i.e. as a subset of female). Unfortunately we did not include the category *phet tee sam* (‘third sex/gender’); conceivably if we had done so there may have been many respondents who would have chosen that term.

More recently I have begin to ask ordinary (i.e. non-transgendered) Thais about their perceptions of Thai MtFs. I am still collecting data, but for the moment I find that Thais are pretty evenly split on this issue, with around 50% seeing them as males with the mistaken minds, but the other half seeing them as either women born into the wrong body (around 15%) or as a third sex/gender (35%). I would be very surprised if one could get these figures anywhere in the West. I suspect that, in line with the mainstream view of what makes a male, the commonest response would be that MtFs are men.

In summary then, a common Thai perception is that MtFs are female, or indeed a third sex. What distinguishes Thailand from the West is that it is not only the *kathoey* who perceive their condition is this way. Ordinary (non-transgendered) Thais often believe this too.

In my view this reflects a more liberal and accepting attitude towards transgender than is found in most Western societies. To the Westerner, the extent of this acceptance can be almost mind-boggling. When asked how their parents first reacted to their transgender our sample of 190 *kathoeys* revealed that 36% of fathers and 50% of mothers had accepted or even encouraged it! Indeed, 37% of our sample said that Thai society generally accepts or encourages transgender. Even allowing for some bravado, these figures are high, and almost certainly higher than one would get from a similar study in the West. No wonder then, that transgenders can be relaxed about their own status, and can lead relatively unproblematic lives. Only 5% described themselves as lacking confidence or low in self-esteem, 7% as depressed, and 28% as anxious. Indeed, while the vast majority expressed a desire to be a woman in their next life, a substantial number (12%) actually said that they wanted to be transgendered in their next life too. As we will see, the Western mainstream view would see this as a desire to be psychiatrically disordered!

Finally, the conflict between the two views of transgender is nowhere more evident in the West as in the names given to the operation in which a person's genitals are altered. The mainstream name for this procedure is 'sex reassignment surgery' or (a more colloquial name) 'sex change'. The connotation is one of moving away from a sex that one more properly belongs to. In contrast many transgenders talk about 'sex confirmation surgery', the connotation being of moving towards the sex one always should have been. In this at least the Thai view matches the mainstream Western view. They too talk about *plaeng pet* ('change sex'). My Thai informants tell me that there is no other term.

Homosexual or heterosexual

If one's view of the MtF is that she is male then any attraction she has towards males will be viewed as homosexual. Indeed, this is the mainstream view. One sees it in academic papers, sometimes even those of a psychological nature.

The less informed public in the West probably finds it difficult to distinguish between gays and transgenders at all, a difficulty that rests in part on the fact that these two groups have been seen living in close physical association, socialising together at the margins of society. 'Drag' has been seen as a part of gay culture, and the effeminate male has been seen as a gay stereotype. Never mind that the effeminate male may be entirely comfortable with his identity as a male, but the MtF transgender is certainly not. In a conceptual confusion that makes transgenders no more than a subset of gays, as well as

drawing on classic homophobic paranoia, one occasionally hears the view that MtFs live their cross-gendered lives just so that they can catch men more successfully.

A word on effeminate men here. Many transgenders argue that what is often called homophobia is actually transphobia. They point out that when, as happens all too commonly on the streets of cities in the West, a gay is beaten up it is not because of whom he has slept with (none of his assailants will even bother asking him). Rather it is because of the way he looks, and the way in which he walks and speaks. A masculine appearing male is far less likely to be set upon.

Time to turn to the transgendered view of sexuality? Let us consider the case of an MtF who is attracted to men. She feels female, and may have felt thus as long as she can remember, and in all likelihood back to a time predating any feelings of sexual attraction. She is conscious that her attraction towards men is consistent with, and post-dates her feelings of identity. In this context, it is entirely understandable that she sees herself as heterosexual. She probably sees her partner's attraction to her in the same light, as indeed he might.

What of Thailand? With so many people (transgenders as well as onlookers) apparently viewing them as female or third sex, is an attraction to men seen as homosexual or heterosexual? Here we run up against a problem; these two terms are recent imports to Thailand and seem to have no close Thai equivalents. For the moment we can say that 90% of our *kathoeys* were attracted exclusively to men. The others were attracted to women, transgenders or a combination of all three. Around one in three saw such an attraction as heterosexual. Interestingly, about 10% saw an attraction to women as heterosexual too. What then is homosexual behaviour? For some of our respondents a *kathoeys*' attraction was only homosexual if it were towards another *kathoeys*. In short it seems that there are a number of Thai transgenders who, like most of us in the West, define homosexuality as a sexual attraction within the same sex/gender category, but that, unlike most of us in the West, they are operating in three categories, not two.

The wrong mind or the wrong body, disordered or different.

Because the established view is that the MtF is in essence male, the mainstream view is that he has something wrong with his mind. Enter psychiatry, taking centre stage and giving the disorder a name – “Gender Identity Disorder’ (GID), described in great detail in the fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

(DSM-IV), as well as in the tenth edition of UNESCO's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10).

Western psychiatry bolsters its case that transgender is a psychiatric disorder by (a) pointing out its rarity (which of course makes it a *de facto* abnormality, albeit that those who would like to transgendered lives may be more numerous than is commonly believed), and (b) pointing out that it is an identity that is at variance with reality, one that is associated with emotional difficulties linked to frustration, anxiety, depression, helplessness and hopelessness (all of which suggests that these people need treatment).

The irony is that the only treatments that seem to work for transgenders are the ones that help them live their transgendered lives – things like hormone therapy, voice therapy and social skills training designed to help them pass more effectively in their chosen gender role, and surgery. One might observe, tongue in cheek, that it is a strange mental disorder indeed for which the best shot at treatment is to change the patient's reality to match his/her fevered mind.

How do transgendered people view all this? Very differently indeed. They will commonly argue that that they have been born into the wrong bodies, that their minds are fine, and that it is their bodies that are wrong. Whatever mental problems they suffer come, they say, from their experience of (or anticipation of) reactions from family, friends and society to their transgender. They may add, pointedly, that much additional frustration and depression comes from the way in which they are treated by psychiatrists and doctors(!)

Incidentally, if transgenders are disordered, then what of those who are physically attracted to them? One of the most interesting pieces of research I have come across in the field of transgender was titled 'Men with a sexual interest in transvestites, transsexuals and she-males'. The article itself was fairly mundane. What interested me was that it appeared in the Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease. Mainstream academia apparently considers even the sexual partners of transgenders to be disordered. So far there is no suitable category for them in DSM-IV or ICD-10. Perhaps one day there will.

What of the Thais? What sort of pathology, if any, do they ascribe to transgender? Interestingly, in our (ongoing) study of Thai attitudes towards *kathoey* we have found that only one in five people believes that they suffer from some sort of mental illness. The vast majority seem to feel that *kathoey*, though different to the rest of us in an important way, are ordinary

people like you and me. The Thai person's perceptions of the *kathoey* fly in the face of Western psychiatric orthodoxy.

Accepting that *kathoey* are different from the rest of us then what is the reason for this difference? We have asked *kathoey* this question. The vast majority believe it was something they were born with (84% of our sample). But of course this begs a question as to what they were born with. For around half (48%) it appears to be *karma*; the accumulation of consequences for acts in previous lives. A sizable number (51%) additionally believe that they became *kathoey* at least partly because of friends – particularly other *kathoey*. However, apart from that they admit to very little other social influence: parents (30%), brothers or sisters (25%), and other relatives (23%). We are not yet in a position to say what ordinary (i.e. non-transgendered) Thais think about this question. Colleagues in Thailand are currently engaged in a study that should answer this question.

Thai society broadly operates in accordance with the view expressed by our respondents; that is, that transgender is a difference rather than a disorder. It stands by as *kathoey* transition in large numbers in ways that bypass psychiatry entirely. True, psychiatric services would be expensive anyway, but the point is that no one seems to think them necessary, or even helpful. When young boys begin to act in a feminine way, use female language forms, grow their hair long, and dress as female, neither parents nor school appear to feel the need to refer them to professionals. When they decide to change their bodies they do not need to visit a psychiatrist (or even a doctor). Instead they just go to their local pharmacy and buy some hormones (a major chain keeps 23 different brands in stock at its urban branches) or else borrow some from older *kathoey* (every school, every street seems to have at least one). Some *kathoey* take hormones from the age of ten years. When they dress in female university uniform few if any teachers will complain. They are unlikely to be referred to the authorities. And if they decide that they want surgery, they just save up or borrow the money and then approach a surgeon. There are cases of *kathoey* who have had sex-reassignment surgery at age 15.

Concluding comments

In writing this paper I may be accused of presenting a somewhat simplified view on all sides. In the West some academics, clinicians and lawyers are indeed arguing, alongside transgenders themselves, that MtFs should be viewed as essentially female (with all that means for classification of sexual attraction), that transgenders are different rather than disordered, and that GID should accordingly be removed from the psychiatric manuals. In the

worlds of bureaucracy and law we see moves to remove the discriminatory barriers facing transgenders. But there are still many who resist these developments. And there are worrying turns in the discourse. As apotemnophilia (a desire to be an amputee) reveals itself as a new (apparently fast growing) disorder, parallels are being drawn between it and GID, for if a desire to be an amputee is a disorder then surely the desire for SRS is one too. To the extent that all this is happening we can continue to talk in terms of a battle fought between two opposing views of transgender; a gender war indeed.

Turning to Thailand, I may be guilty of oversimplification in what I have written about the circumstances in which *kathoey* live. They do not live unproblematic lives. Even in Thailand, some parents do not react well to their son's transgender. Some classmates may tease. They may be mistreated at school, at home and occasionally on the streets. They are forever marked as male in their documents, even after SRS. Even those who pass as female may therefore encounter difficulties getting a job where their potential employer is in any way prejudiced, or fears prejudice among his other employees or his customers. The *kathoey* travelling abroad may encounter problems at immigration points, all the more so if she passes successfully as a female.

In short, one can see Western views of transgender may not be as uniformly 'physical' as I have suggested, and indeed that the mainstream view may be moving gently towards a more radically psychological view, more in tune with that of most transgendered people themselves. It is also apparent that the apparently accepting views of transgender evident in informal Thai society find little resonance in the bureaucratic and legal worlds. Nevertheless, for the moment the common man's (and woman's) view of transgender in Thailand provides a more accepting environment than the one in which transgenders live in the West.

This difference may have massive consequences for the development of young transgendered individuals. Consider the young Thai boy, growing up characterised by gentleness, mildness, sentimentality and weakness, excitability and emotionality. He is told he has these characteristics and is treated accordingly. He knows that these traits are stereotypically female (as they indeed are in Thai culture). Perhaps this boy has some female stereotyped interests too – a love of play with dolls, a liking for dressing up in girls clothes. He and everyone around him may, rather than being inclined to shrug them off as evidence that here is a boy who does not quite fit in (as might happen in many other societies), instead may in Thailand see them as

evidence that he is indeed not really a boy at all. Another label is close-at-hand. He is a *kathoey*. His family, neighbours, friends and schoolmates use the label without any alarm. He learns to too. As the young *kathoey* grows up she (I use the female pronoun here) will meet other *kathoey* who mentor her along a path towards her new gender. At every step of the journey her choices (regarding what she is, and what she will do about it) have been validated by the theological and social context in which she lives.

Now consider an identical boy, this time growing up in the English or Hong Kong Chinese cultures with which I am familiar. He, his parents, siblings and peers may interpret his feelings quite differently, viewing them as evidence that he is a sensitive boy, perhaps an effeminate one, a sissy, but a boy nonetheless. Those around him may press him to do the things other boys do, and be like other boys are; to toughen up a bit. Family doctors, child psychologists and psychiatrists may be called into to help. All involved adopt the same basic approach – they see the boy, not as a female with the wrong body, but as a male with the wrong mental attitude, an attitude that needs to be changed. The end result is that he may live his whole life labelled as a male.

I am not suggesting here which road is right (although the large numbers of late onset TGs gives cause for us to wonder about the Western way). For the present I am just trying to suggest that different roads are offered by different cultures.

(5145 words)