

### CHAPTER 3. OTHER RESEARCH ON SEX AND THAILAND

Sex is not a new topic in anthropology -- Malinowski described in detail *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929) over 70 years ago -- nor is the position that sexuality is culturally constructed. Mead made the case for variable cultural interpretations of biological sex in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). Anthropological research in gender and sexuality has increased profoundly since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, stimulated especially by post-women's-liberation-movement interest in a cross-cultural examination of the status of women, family planning programs, and later by the worldwide spread of AIDS.

Through the 1960s, women's perspectives were rarely given in ethnographies (exceptions include Fernea, 1965, Goodale, 1971, Kaberry, 1939, 1952; Leigh-Ross, 1952; Strathern, 1972) and one initial goal of gender research was to add the experiences and viewpoints of women to the existing literature. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the focus shifted to asymmetry between the sexes, both cross-culturally (Chodorow, 1974; Ortner, 1974; Rosaldo, 1974; Sanday, 1981) and within specific cultures (Wolf, 1974; Hoffer, 1974). Other researchers brought attention to women's roles in society (Weiner, 1976) and a few challenged the notion that males are universally dominant (Leacock, 1972; Sacks, 1974). Research in Southeast Asia followed a similar pattern of development.

Studies of gender in Southeast Asia grew slowly, and also began with the addition of women as subjects of study (Firth, 1943; Ward, 1963). The now almost clichéd perception of the "relatively high status of women"<sup>1</sup> in this region was supported by studies on family social structure and economics (e.g., Burling, 1965; Dewey, 1962; Firth 1966; Geertz, 1961; Potter, 1977; Szanton Blanc, 1972). However, little of this research explored gender ideology specifically or in depth. Later studies took a more analytical and critical perspective (Karim,

---

<sup>1</sup> This "high status" is presumably relative to their Asian sisters in India, Japan, and China, but its criteria were undefined.

1995; Ong, 1987; Stoler, 1977; Tan, 1974; P. van Esterik, 1982). Several studies in Thailand examined how Buddhism informs gender ideology, especially the status and roles of men and women (Hanks, 1962; Keyes, 1984; Kirsch, 1975, 1982; Tambiah, 1970, 1976; Van Esterik, 1982). While recognizing that Thai women do, indeed, enjoy higher status than women in many other cultures, these studies affirmed that Thai women are regarded as being of a lower spiritual status than men. This will be discussed later in this chapter. These researchers laid the groundwork for a theoretical understanding of sexuality in Thailand.

A historical picture of sex roles, sexual meanings, and erotic sexuality must be pieced together from studies that were largely devoted to other, though in some cases related, topics (Andaya, 1998, 2002; Barmé, 2002; Cohen & Wijeyewardene, 1984; Davis, 1972, 1974, 1984; Douglas, 1973; Kaufman, 1953; Keyes, 1975; Mills, 1999; Moerman, 1962; Phillips, 1965; J. Potter, 1976; S. Potter, 1977; Turton, 1972). Historical documents for the most part ignore women, and the lack of literacy among some groups (e.g., Isan commoners) rendered them virtually absent from written history.

Recent studies have provided more extensive information, particularly in terms of sexual behavior. The AIDS epidemic has renewed interest in this area and highlighted its potential impact on the economy and political relations. Sociology and public health have contributed much to the literature now frequently using qualitative research methods (e.g., focus groups, interviews) due to the complexity of the dynamics of sexuality (Ford & Saiprasert, 1993; Havanon, Knodel, & Bennet, 1992; Knodel, Saengtienchai, VanLandingham, & Lucas, 1999; Podhisita, Xenos, & Varangrat (2001); Safman, 1993; Sittitrai, Phanuphak, Barry, Sabaiying, & Brown, 1991; VanLandingham, Saengtienchai, Knodel, & Pramualratana, 1995; VanLandingham, Suprasert, Sittitrai, & Vaddhanaphuti, 1992). This focus on sexual behaviors has been valuable in creating AIDS education and prevention programs and in predicting the spread of HIV. From an anthropological perspective, it is important to understand not only what

people do, but the meaning attached to the behaviors and how they fit into a larger framework of sex ideology.

### **Historical Influences**

Much of what has been written about Thailand pertains specifically to Central Thai culture, or Siamese culture. Siamese culture is the dominant cultural force in the nation of Thailand, and so has mixed with, for example, local cultures in the North and Northeast. Although Isaners are descendants of Lao and the area where they live was part of the Lao kingdom, they are now Thai and currently identify with Siamese history. Their relationship to the Lao culture is somewhat limited to language, the arts, and religion. Unless otherwise noted, the literature is primarily about Siamese culture.

The chapter on Mahasarakham gave a brief overview of the history of the area. It was at different times under the control and influence of the Khmer, Lao (Lan Chang), and Siamese kingdoms. Each of these empires left an imprint on the local culture evidence of which can be found in folktales, archaeological features, and place names. Early Brahmin and Chinese culture left their marks, too, including on views of women (Tantiwiranond & Pandey, 1987). The exact extent to which they influenced sex ideology is not known, for they affected different groups and areas to different extents.

Kabilsingh (1991) notes that Brahminism and early Buddhist teachings (influenced by the politics of Indian society) resulted in social and legal subordination of women. However, women were some of Buddhism's most ardent supporters. Andaya (2002) proposes that Theravada Buddhism's successful spread across Southeast Asia was due in part to the opportunities it gave women to participate in their own spiritual development and community ritual. Women's traditional activities such as food preparation and weaving "became a kind of religious currency that could be 'exchanged' for the expectation of future reward, both spiritual and material" (Andaya, p. 29).

Siamese laws from the 1400s through the mid-1800s treated women as property, owned first by fathers, and then husbands. The situation for women deteriorated somewhat during the turbulent Ayutthaya period (1350-1767), when monarchs had absolute authority, and continued into the 18<sup>th</sup> century (p. 2-4, 15-16). Women's status improved during the Thonburi (1767-1782) and Ratnakosin (1782-present) periods, when several kings reduced the influence of Brahminism in Buddhism. King Mongkut, Rama IV, after being petitioned by a woman who had been sold into slavery by her husband, declared the old laws unjust and said they treated women like buffalo (Koizumi, 2000, p. 154). The King created new laws which are generally regarded as having improved the legal standing of women, though they did not bring equality to marriages; a woman could still be sold if she agreed to it, and men could still beat their wives, a right abolished in 1935. Koizumi (2000) argues that this is an oversimplification. Although the new law may have increased women's status in some ways, it also served to redefine marriage and the family in a way that further established the King's legitimacy. For example, prior to his proclamation, a slave wife was a category of wife, who had legal recourse if she were treated too harshly. Mongkut's law recategorized her as a slave, not a wife (Koizumi p. 262-263). Furthermore, his changes gave to elite fathers control of children's mate selection and distribution of children upon divorce (Koizumi, p. 263-264).

After the revolution of 1932, when the political system changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, the new constitution gave all Thai women many more rights. Under the new laws, a man could have only one legal wife though women were still the property of their fathers or husbands. Things were surely different in the rural areas where families were dependent on the cooperation of all members. But despite their roles in production and reproduction, they could not become monks. And since temples provided education, these women were left uneducated and illiterate (Tantiwiranond & Pandey, 1987).

People living in trade zones would have had more contact with the Chinese, though as Chinese immigrated to the region, they intermarried with locals and moved farther inland. Chinese descendants are now found throughout Thailand, including the Northeast. Chinese patriarchy is reflected in the five negative characteristics of women: a) easily manipulated, b) always unsatisfied, c) jealous, d) insulting, and e) of lesser intelligence (Kabilsingh, p. 19). Many people in Isan are familiar with them, and some of these qualities, coincidence or acculturation I cannot say, are reflected in students' characterizations of women. Andaya (1998) reports that records from 15<sup>th</sup> century Siam show the offering of women for sexual relations with Chinese traders as a gesture of welcome (p. 13). A practice of "temporary marriages" developed in which elite Siamese women entered into relationships of varying duration. Though it may seem like these exchanges exploited women, they also brought prestige to the women and their families through the association with the exotic and wealthy outsiders. The relationships, easily forged and easily dissolved, were based on ongoing exchanges of goods and services (Andaya, p. 14-15). However, Tantiwiramanond & Pandey (1987) argue that upper class women were treated as agents of the nobles and used to unify the monarch's administration through marriage (see also Koizumi, 2000). These practices created an attitude of political passivity among women who internalized their subordinate position. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these temporary wives were not only from the elite, but also the peasantry.

Andaya (1998) reports that by this time, a double standard had begun to develop. An earlier acceptance of elite men and women entering into beneficial sexual relationships was replaced by an emphasis on female virginity before marriage and male accumulation of wives (p. 17). Concubines began replacing temporary wives which, Andaya argues, further reduced women's autonomy and status (p. 28). Thus, there was a major shift in the perception of women's sexuality in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ironically, this overlapped with an improvement in the legal status of women in Siam.

Historically, the Siamese social training of women "aimed at producing 'good women' who are well-equipped in the traditional 'home sciences'" (Kabilsingh, 1991, p. 13). Women were not thought of as having intellectual ability, but were primarily described as "flowers," an image repeated in modern Thai verse and song. Siamese characterizations of women (and those of men, too) probably did not reach the rural northeast until the late 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These changes trickled into Isan from the 1800s on as Siamese influence grew in an attempt to intensify direct control in the region. Siamese culture, law, and politics increasingly imposed on the daily life of the people in Isan. Though many aspects of rural life continued as before, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, industrialization, modernization, and the conversion to a cash economy introduced new gendered meanings. As Isaners incorporated a Thai national identity into their own local one, while they recognized the legitimacy of the national agenda even as it related to gender, they maintained an independence that resulted in a number of domains emphasizing women's roles

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of talking about Thai culture as if it were a homogeneous system because of the strong national cultural identity which has been forged out of Bangkok. The nationalist elite culture of Bangkok is part of the culture of modern Mahasarakham, as is the modern global culture that seems to be particularly influential among youth, but it has not completely erased local history and culture.

People in Mahasarakham told me that in traditional rural Isan culture, women and men were more equal than in Thai culture. We can find evidence of this in Isan folk literature (Tossa, 1992) and in textile production and consumption (Lefferts 1992). Isan history and legends are primarily oral, and so their content and meaning were dependent upon the storyteller, the audience, and the context in which they were being told. Some were written on palm leaf manuscripts by monks. But these, too, were dependent in part on the writer for content and

meaning. How they changed over hundreds of years is not known. In recent years, these oral treasures have been put into books, giving them a fixed quality that didn't exist before literacy.

In an examination of women in literature, Tossa (1992) contrasts traditional expectations of Thai women with those of Isan women. Isan women, she argues, were treated more equally to men because they made important contributions to life. In modern times, among both peoples, she says, women are taught that they are validated through marriage. Both cultures have the proverb "A woman is worthy only when she has a husband."<sup>2</sup> Both have requirements for women relating to being gentle, soft-spoken, and unexpressive. But Thai women face stricter requirements than do Isan women. Tossa suggests that the Thai image of women is built around pleasing husbands because the elite were defining women's ideal character in Thai society. She writes, "Working women ... work as hard as men to survive in the changing society. As a result, these women are not treated as inferior beings and would not tolerate such unequal treatment and inferior status" (p. 8). In Rakow's study of Lao morality tales, she (1992) found the most recurring theme to be "how much a woman is respected for her ability to work -- farming the fields, or weaving, cleaning, and managing the household" (p. 7). Women were valued for their contributions to the family. In rural farming villages, kinship and household and family social organization is a major organizing principle of society.

### **Household Organization**

Arguments for female prominence or complementarity to men in Thailand (e.g., Davis, 1984; Hanks & Hanks, 1963; Turton, 1972; P. van Esterik, 1982) frequently cite the position of women in family organization.<sup>3</sup> Family organization in Isan, like that in the North (and other cultures in Southeast Asia such as Laos, Burma, Java, and Iban; Cohen & Wijeyewardene, 1984; Davis, 1972, 1974; Keyes, 1975, 1977; S. Potter, 1977; Turton, 1972), appears matrilineal because

---

<sup>2</sup> *phūuyǐng jà dii phró mii phǔa* (Thai); *phūuyǐng sǐ dii yōon mii phǔa* (Isan)

<sup>3</sup> I have intentionally used the word *organization*, rather than *structure*, here because organization seems more dynamic and amenable to change. Structure suggests a rigidity that doesn't describe the Isan household organizational situation.

of the well-documented preference for youngest married daughters continuing to live with the parents (Keyes, 1975; Tambiah 1970, 1973). This is not a rule of descent, but does result in clusters of closely related women in villages. Keyes (1975) reports that villagers reason that because of maternity and infant care, it is better for a woman to be among familiar women.

In terms of division of labor, women were generally responsible for matters inside the household, and men for matters outside the household. Women handled childcare, child rearing, food preparation, weaving, care for domestic animals near the home, housework, and family finances. Men primarily focused on farming and grazing domestic animals and village political affairs. Jobs in the rice fields were also sex-delineated. Some researchers have projected this complementarity onto the general status of men and women, describing it as a balance in the structural dominance of women and ideological dominance of men (Davis, 1984; Hanks & Hanks, 1963; Vaddhanaphuti, 1984).<sup>4</sup> Both Davis (who did his research in the North) and Hanks and Hanks (who did theirs in the central region) cite a hodge-podge collection of cultural examples to support their position. This is a problem with attempting to tally up status -- the variables one selects determine the relative status differences. Analyses of structural and social dominance (or status) are often tricky since they usually ambiguously define "dominance" (or "status").

Some aspects of family organization suggest male dominance. Husbands and wives are both involved in ownership of land and heading domestic groups, but men are more active in village affairs (Hanks & Hanks, 1963; Keyes, 1975). Tambiah (1973) find a structural inequality between males and females (males superior) in his analysis of parallels between rules concerning eating of animals and marriage (sex). While his analysis is interesting, his approach does not explain how these structural inequalities are understood and played out in real life.

---

<sup>4</sup> Most of the studies which put forth this structural-ideological balance have been done in the North. However, the structural organization is similar in the Northeast as is the public role of men and acknowledgment that the husband is the head of household.

Studies of family organization usually describe in detail roles and relationships of family members. The husband-wife relationship has received far more attention than have either the parent-child or sibling relationships. Like Keyes (1975), most studies focus on social roles as they pertain to marriage. Husbands are typically regarded as the leader of the family. Researchers usually attribute this to their sex, and it may well be, but it is also possible that it is at least in part due to their age, since husbands are usually older than wives. Within the marital relationship, each partner has responsibilities toward the other. The husband's leadership role is tempered by the reality of many dominant wives in Thailand, a great source of material for jokes and cartoons, and according to many women in Isan, a reality.

No doubt the marital relationship is one of great significance as it is the center of reproduction. However, it is unfortunate that much less attention has been given to the roles of sons, daughters, and siblings except in relation to the overall family organization. The role of the son has been characterized as a source of labor, financial support, and ideally, merit (upon ordination). With fewer men ordaining, the question arises as to whether the role of the son has changed. Daughters are caretakers for parents. One way this role has been transformed into social action in a modern context is in the tremendous number of young women who migrate to cities to find work. Most send money home to families (DaGrossa, 1989; Ekachai, 1990; Mills, 1990, 1992, 1999; Muecke, 1989; Phongphaichit, 1982). The marital/parental roles are not the only ones which impact society. More studies of the roles and cultural transformations of sons/daughters and siblings would contribute a great deal to an understanding of sexuality and sex roles.

One of the functions of the family noted throughout Thailand is the regulation of sexuality. There are two primary ways this has been considered in the literature: control of women's sexuality and control of incest. There is little done to of control male sexuality in lay life, but the opposite is true in monastic life (Keyes, 1986). Masculinity is largely defined by two

extremes of sex activity: the monk, who refrains from sex and other worldly pleasures, and the *nák leeng* (rogue, rascal), who embraces sex, gambling, and drinking. Keyes has theorized on this topic, but relies on Buddhist texts to support his position. Unfortunately, he fails to tie the meanings in text to the meaning of masculinity in the daily life and practice of people.

Two different Thai views of the female sex drive have been given in the ethnographic literature. One is that it is strong and almost threatening (Hanks & Hanks, 1963; Thitsa, 1982; P. Van Esterik, 1982) and others that it is weak, and women are indifferent to sex (Muecke, 1992). Presumably, either would justify the sexual constraints placed upon women. However, scholars who have argued that Thai see women as more libidinous (whose view supports the notion of women as more worldly, to be discussed later), offer little evidence from social practice to support their claim. In either case, the social response is controlling women's sexual expression, and there may even be two understandings of libido that emerge in different contexts and on the whole, play off each other.

In many parts of Thailand, including Isan, one function of family spirits was/is to regulate sexuality and marriage (Boontawee, 1988; Davis, 1984). It was believed that sexual improprieties offended the spirits who had to be propitiated. Failure to do so resulted in family misfortune. In the past, there were strict rules about public contact between unmarried and unrelated men and women. Potential suitors were forbidden to touch even the weaving loom of an unmarried girl. And researchers largely assumed these rules were followed. The actual effectiveness of the family spirits for preventing sexual contact was never studied. Evidence picked from the ethnographic literature suggests that they weren't as effective a behavioral regulator as villagers sometimes suggested they were (Davis, 1984; Kaufman, 1976<sup>5</sup>; J. Potter, 1976; S. Potter, 1977, p. 108-109, 117; Tambiah, 1970, p. 18). For example, Sulamith Heins. Potter wrote in a response to a statement in the 1968 Area Handbook for Thailand (Smith, 1968):

---

<sup>5</sup> Kaufman's data is considered deeply suspect by some Thai scholars.

They say, for example, "In the Northern Thai region, sexual liaisons may occur before marriage. Elsewhere, however, even the suggestion of physical intimacy is avoided." This is simply not the case. In Chiangmai Village, as I shall call my field site, there is a rigid standard of sexual morality. (p. 11)

But both her own and her husband's (1976) descriptions, there is evidence that sexual activity probably takes place: Young men hope their courting will lead to "something more, short of marriage" (S. Potter, 1977, p. 108); men's status is increased among their peers if they seduce many women (S. Potter, p. 108); there are pre-marital pregnancies (S. Potter, p. 109); if a young woman does sleep with a man, she must tell her mother in order to placate family spirits with propitiatory offerings (S. Potter, p. 117); and in the single example of courtship given by J. Potter, both the man and woman have multiple sexual partners. These suggest that the rigid ideal sexual standard is less rigidly applied in real life and that cultural mechanisms are in place to deal with these behaviors precisely because these behaviors occur with some regularity.

Less has been written about incest in terms of an analysis. Tambiah (1970) detailed the incest taboo in a village in Udonthani province (in the Northeast). Marriage was forbidden across generations and between blood siblings. First cousin marriages were not considered incestuous (i.e., forbidden), but were believed not likely to succeed. Incest violation does not seem to be a preoccupation of people in Mahasarakham nor has it been reported much in the literature.

Traditionally, there were two structural centers of village life: the household and the temple (Kaufman, 1976; Moerman, 1962). With the development of a cash economy and wage labor, and especially with increasing migration to cities, the structural and social significance of the temple has changed, though Isaners continue to formulate their worldviews around Buddhist cosmology and notions of magic and power. An understanding of how Isaners interpret and apply Buddhism in their everyday lives is necessary for understanding the meanings of sex. The next section describes some of the literature on sex and Buddhism in Thailand.

## Significance of Buddhism

Thailand has the largest percentage of population who identify as Buddhist of any country in the world, commonly reported at greater than 90%.<sup>6</sup> Buddhism is a part of the national identity (e.g., the motto and representation on the national flag "Nation -- Religion -- Monarchy"). Its long-time influence in the region is undeniable. And, because supernatural beliefs so often provide a framework for a culture's worldview, many scholars looked to Buddhism for an explanation of Thai gender ideology. Discussions of Buddhism have tended to rely on texts and theory rather than what it means to the people who practice it in everyday life (Tannenbaum, 1996, p. 190; see, e.g., Keyes, 1983; Spiro, 1970; Tambiah, 1968, 1970). But there are certain major metaphysical concepts about how life works that are understood in similar ways by Thai Buddhists.

The universe is an inherently hierarchical place. Above earth are many realms of heaven and below the earth are many realms of hell. The heavens, earth, and hells are occupied by various beings who are ranked hierarchically based on their karma. Karma (*kam*) is conceived of as the consequence of all actions (and intentions). Actions that are good or moral (*bun*) accrue positive karma, and actions that are bad or immoral (*bàap*) accrue negative karma.<sup>7</sup> The sum balance of these two results in one's karmic position. Through cycles of rebirth, beings move up or down through the cosmic hierarchy based on their karma. The highest place of enlightenment is nirvana (*nippaana*). This is the state achieved by the Buddha, total detachment from the world and worldly concerns. Scholars agree that this is not the goal of laypersons in Thailand. Most hope to reborn in a better human position in the next life.

On Earth, all humans are hierarchically ranked, from the King (who has an almost god-like status) down to movie stars, on down to crippled beggars. Karma is evidenced by one's

---

<sup>6</sup> The next highest proportions are found in Cambodia and Burma, Thailand's neighbors.

<sup>7</sup> Hanks (1962) explains this as operating effectively (merit) or ineffectively (demerit). "Effective" actions are those that reduce suffering and "ineffective" actions are those that increase suffering.

situation in this life. Though it is sometimes said that men are in a better karmic position than women, SWU students do not make such an absolute observation. A wealthy and powerful businesswoman displays higher karma than a poor, powerless farmer. Animals are ranked, too, from elephants, to dogs, down to the lowest form of life, but animals lack the volition humans have to make merit and pass it on. Although karma is not tangible, it is believed to manifest itself in tangible ways, though these can be misleading. Wealth, success, and power all evidence past accumulation of merit, or moral virtue (Mills, 1999, p. 180; Tossa, 1992; Van Esterik, 1989, 2000). But when horrible circumstances befall a beautiful or rich person, it may be explained as a consequence of past actions. Beauty, wealth, and power are just a few of many ways virtue is revealed.

It might seem that Thai Buddhists would be fatalistic in their outlook. But within this life, people can change their position to some degree. Hanks (1962) argues that the concept of mobility is a major structuring principle of Thai life. Understandings of karma give Thai a general acceptance for inequality in life. But one's karmic balance is constantly in flux. This concept of mobility ensures that Thai are not exceptionally fatalistic.

There is an ambiguity in merit in that it can be accumulated through moral behavior or transfer. Karma is the result of one's own actions, but others can affect one's karmic situation through merit transfer. The most often cited example of merit transfer is when a son ordains: The merit accumulated from that action (which is great) is transferred to his parents, especially his mother (Kaufman, 1960, p. 123; Lehman, 1996, pp. 26-27). This is regarded as the greatest source of merit in a mother's lifetime. It is a son's way of thanking and repaying her for the care she gave him as child.

Another way merit is accumulated is through adherence to Buddhist precepts (Lehman, 1996, p. 69).<sup>8</sup> The five major precepts are a) refrain from taking life, b) refrain from taking that which is not given, c) refrain from wrong-doing in sexual matters, d) refrain from false speech, and e) refrain from intoxicants (Rogers, 1989, p. 127). Precept keeping is admired, but few people do it. A few laypersons, mostly older ones, observe the five precepts daily, but more often it is done on holy days. The most devout followers agree to observe eight, novices 10, and monks 227.

In village society, accrual of merit was primarily thought of as related to specific actions such as ordination, giving alms to monks, and contributing money to build a temple. The emphasis on these specific kinds of actions for gaining merit, however, is giving way to a more general association of merit with moral behavior (Brown, 2001, p. 8-9), particularly among those whose situations prevent them from participating in merit-making activities on a regular basis.

Blessings (Tannenbaum, 1991, 1996) are part of Buddhist culture, but are rarely commented upon by researchers (1996, p. 181). They are frequently given by Buddhist monks, and impart on laypersons safety, health, security, wealth, and success and may, Tannenbaum says, be a way of transferring merit. Blessings are often given in ceremonial contexts, such as weddings and funerals (p. 184). But monks aren't the only ones who give blessings: Parents can bless children when they ask for forgiveness or come to pay respect (p. 184). Blessings are believed to relieve misfortune and bring good things, much as tattoos or amulets do, artifacts that are instilled with power. Tannenbaum states that in everyday Shan (a Northern Thai ethnic minority) life, merit and blessing "are the same sort of thing" (p. 196). She argues for a very strong connection between merit, power, and blessing. Analyses of gender ideology that rely

---

<sup>8</sup> Precepts are different from commandments. Commandments are absolute rules to be followed without exception (Thou shalt not...). Precepts are guidelines for behavior (I endeavor to refrain from...)

solely on Buddhist metaphysical beliefs may neglect significant supernatural concepts, such as power (for an exception, see, e.g., Hanks, 1962).<sup>9</sup>

Various authors use "power" to gloss *kh[ɨ]g* (strong or hard; Hanks, 1962), *kaengraeng* (physically strong; Hanks, 1962), *amnâad* (might or authority; Hanks, 1962), *dèet* (might; Mulder, 1979) or *sàksit* (sacred or magical power; Tannenbaum, 1991). There are many kinds and applications of power, but the common quality of each of these "powers" is the control of people or situations. Power is usually regarded as amoral (morally neutral) because it isn't inherently good or bad; it depends on the user's goals and intentions. Anyone may possess amoral power. If used in a virtuous way, it can lead to accumulation of merit. Tambiah (1985) describes a meditation leader who is not concerned with spiritual salvation (nirvana), but with gaining merit, virtue, and potency in order to change the world. He argues that meditation leads to merit and mystical powers, in this case ability as a curer.

Power exists in unequal distribution throughout the universe (Hanks, 1962; Tannenbaum, 1991, 1996). Buddhas have the greatest power and the beings in the lowest hells the least, further supporting the argument that power and merit are related. Tannenbaum (1996) is clearly writing about *sàksit*, or magical, power rather than might. However, one might draw similar conclusions about strength and might.

Power implies protection. If one has access to power one is protected; if one is protected one has the power or freedom to do as one chooses ... One reason why people need blessings is to protect them from ... dangers. The essence of power is its ability to protect and ward off the consequences of behavior. Power-protection does not cause good things to happen; it passively prevents bad things from happening. (p. 185-186)

Mulder (1979) and Tannenbaum (1991) see the quest for merit<sup>10</sup> and the quest for power in Thai society as complementary. They interpret it as a perfect marriage between Buddhism and

---

<sup>9</sup> Although not about Thailand, Anderson (1972) gives a very clear explanation of power as understood in Java. Though the concept is not identical, this reading helps to better grasp the Thai understanding of power.

animism. Tannenbaum specifically addressed Buddhism's influence on gender ideology arguing that power is the primary force shaping gender ideology. In their discussions of Buddhism and gender Kirsch (1982, 1984), Keyes (1984), and Van Esterik (1982) did not incorporate the notion of power, perhaps because it does not fit well in their analogy of worldly attachment:supernatural detachment::women:men. It is a somewhat serious omission given that notions of power are evident in the everyday supernatural practices and beliefs of people throughout Thailand.

Amoral power appears to be of greater concern to men who appear to more often seek out protective amulets and tattoos (Davis, 1984; Hanks & Hanks, 1963; Spiro, 1970, pp. 274-275, on Burmese; Tannenbaum, 1991, on Shan). Women are believed to be destructive of power, and so are unable to accumulate it. Contact with women's skirts, for example, is believed to reduce the power of certain amulets.<sup>11</sup> Women are not allowed in certain parts of the temple because its where some of the most sacred events, events handled by male monks, take place. Tannenbaum further argues that at a practical level, women have little interest in accumulating magical power because it is not relevant to their concerns. Unfortunately, she does not explain how this relates to the social relations between men and women. Nor does she explore how individuals act and interact in relation to power. Women do have an interest in supernatural power in particular contexts such as at times of illness and when seeking love, though this may not be true among the Shan that Tannenbaum studied. The negative power (i.e., the power to destroy power) that she accords women, even things symbolizing women, may be a very useful idea to consider when looking at Thai sexuality. It may be that men and women relate to power differently, or that there are different forms of power based on the experiences of men and women.

---

<sup>10</sup> Mulder uses the term *khuna* (or *khun*) to describe this quest for merit. *Khun* is a term that means goodness or virtue. Following a path or virtue brings merit (*bun*).

<sup>11</sup> Women's menstrual blood is a potent destroyer of magical power. I have been told that soldiers sometimes use menstrual blood or vaginal fluid (similarly destructive of power) on their guns to counter protective magic practiced by their enemies.

The different experiences of men and women are perhaps what led Keyes (1977, 1984) and Kirsch (1982, 1985) to describe an association of women with worldly concerns and men with the otherworldly.<sup>12</sup> Their analyses of Buddhist views of gender were more similar than different, but reflected different emphases. Keyes (1977) observed that "...the essence of femininity is nurturance, the essence of masculinity is potency" (p. 132). Female images associated with the earth, such as the rice and earth goddesses, reinforce this. Women, the earth, and rice, all have nurturing qualities. Men's potency is expressed in the ability "to fertilize [the Earth and women]...to govern others...and to reject the world [through ordination]" (p. 132). In "Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk" (1984), Keyes outlined images of gender expressed in certain Buddhist texts. He presented three dominant images of women: nurturing mothers, passionate lovers, and impassionate mistresses. The most dominant image is that of mother because it is tied to religious assumptions and thus is more convincing.<sup>13</sup> He argued that Buddhism doesn't relegate women to an inferior status and both sexes face the same problems and have the same opportunities. Men, too, are burdened by worldly concerns because of their involvement in administrative and political matters. The sexes are differentiated by natural attributes, but neither has a naturally greater propensity for salvation, though they do follow different paths to get there.

Kirsch (1982, 1985) explained sex differences in a similar way, but by relating Buddhist values to social roles, rather than symbolic images. Women do not have access to the highest Buddhist position (monk); they must be reborn as men first (a point argued against by Kabilsingh, 1991). A woman achieves her greatest source of merit through "giving" a son to be ordained. A man achieves his through ordination (p. 27). Women's connection to and expression of religion is

---

<sup>12</sup> This loosely parallels the nature/culture binary (Ortner, 1974), which was largely discredited in the 1980s. Penny Van Esterik (1982) also subscribes to the worldly-otherworldly dualism. But, she says, it describes a feminine and masculine metaphor only, not real people.

<sup>13</sup> It should be reiterated that Andaya (2002) suggests that the role of the mother in religious life was a major part of the attraction of Buddhism to Southeast Asians women.

through the world. This, he goes on, helps us understand why Thai women have traditionally played such an active role in the economy, and men in religious and political matters. They are religiously disadvantaged, but not spiritually inferior.

Both Keyes' and Kirsch's approaches suffer the same primary weakness: They oversimplify the relationship between men and women. Kirsch also noted two flaws in Keyes' approach: Buddhist texts are not the same as how Buddhism is practiced in everyday life, and texts cannot be "read" out of context. The main text used by Keyes was a story told primarily at ordination ceremonies. Kirsch interprets the story to be about the value of ordination, not the "qualities of men versus women" as Keyes had suggested. Texts must also be situated historically, understood in the contexts in which they were created. Buddhism and many popular Buddhist texts (e.g., Jataka tales) originated in India. Kabilsingh (1991) described their historical context in good detail. They were recorded by monks in the interest of monks. As Thai adapted Buddhism to their own situation, they tended to minimize the religion's patriarchal aspects. Kirsch and Keyes carefully avoid concluding that women are spiritually inferior to men, though they don't commit to them being quite equal (as Hanks and Hanks, 1963, do since both are subject to suffering and both are free to pursue the path of enlightenment).

Buddhism and power influence sex in Thai society inasmuch as they influence most all aspects of life there. Gender constructions cannot be reduced to supernatural concepts, or abstractions from Buddhist texts, without neglecting equally influential aspects of secular life. As applied in daily life, it organizes the big picture rather than specific behaviors. The underlying Buddhist moral order, one based in the concept of karma, puts much of the responsibility for determining what is moral and what is immoral on the individual (Keyes, 1987). And so we find strong social norms juxtaposed with people who find their place in society on the margins.

## Marginal Types of People

Moving away from macro-level explanations of gender to an examination of narrower, marginalized groups refocuses attention from the social norm, to the social anomaly. This has proven very revealing and allowed researchers to reflect more critically on norms and ideals of sexuality.

Studies of socially marginal categories of women such as Buddhist nuns (e.g., Brown, 2001; Kabilsingh, 1991), meditation teachers (e.g., J. Van Esterik, 1982), spirit mediums (e.g., Irvine, 1984; Morris, 1994), and prostitutes (e.g., Andaya, 1998; DaGrossa, 1989; Ghosh, 2002; Muecke, 1989; Peracca, et al., 1998; Phongpaichit, 1981, Thitsa, 1980; Truong, 1990) and their clients (Ford & Koetsawang, 1991; Maticka-Tyndale, Elkins, Haswell-Elkins, Rujkarakorn, Kuyyakanond, & Stam, 1997; VanLandingham, et al., 1995), moved toward focusing on expressions and constraints of sexuality among those who fall outside the social mainstream for their sex. Male marginal types have been less studied, though scholars have begun to look at male prostitutes (e.g., McCamish, Storer, & Carl, 2000; Snell, 1995), transgendered men (e.g., Matzner, 2001, 2002; Totman, 2003), and gay men (e.g., Jackson, 1989, 1995).

Women have found religious leadership roles within the existing religious social organization, primarily as Buddhist nuns (*māchii*) and meditation leaders. Buddhist nuns do not hold a particular spiritual status (the most experienced *māchii* is inferior to even the newest monk), but their general spiritual status is regarded as higher than other laypersons because they have religious knowledge. They are typically older women, but both Brown (2001) and Van Esterik (1982) describes *māchii* who decided to "go forth" as a young women. Van Esterik says that younger women are viewed as running from something when they reject roles as wives and mothers to devote themselves to religion. Brown (pp. 34-35) described the politics of the status of *māchii*, particularly in relation to the *sangha*, the national assemblage of monks. Despite their formal limitations, *māchii* are

gaining influence in a fast-changing society. By dedicating themselves to Buddhism, these women obtain freedom, places to live, friendships to foster, religious meaning, and sometimes formal education. By remaining single and cultivating a role outside of the usual expectations for women, they develop useful perspectives. (Brown, p. 137).

Taking a different route to spiritual growth, a few female meditation teachers have developed large, devoted followings, primarily in the Bangkok area (J. Van Esterik, 1982). Despite their influence, they are not considered threatening to monks, men, or women because, J. Van Esterik (1982) argues, they fall so far outside normal women's social roles. The *sangha* generally emphasizes scholarship over practice, and so does not usually concern itself with meditation.<sup>14</sup> Women meditation teachers are not interested in challenging the established order and roles of monks. Further, these women teach from different texts than do monks, so do not presume to engage in monk's activities. Their elite followers respect the women because they facilitate a new and beneficial way of incorporating Buddhism into modern city lives.

Spirit mediums, intermediaries between the human and spirit world, are found throughout Thailand (see Irvine, 1984, for a description of mediums in Chiang Mai, and Tambiah, 1970, pp. 271-277, for mediums in the Northeast). They provide physical and spiritual healing and give advice. Spirit mediumship is strongly associated with females; most are women and a small number are *kàthæy*,<sup>15</sup> transgendered males (Van Esterik, 2000, p. 44).<sup>16</sup> Throughout Thailand, spirit mediums express some kind of sexual ambiguity or fluidity. Irvine describes the spirit mediums in Chiang Mai as entering into a masculine space in identification with the spirit's maleness. Some deny menstruation, and refrain from sexual activity, emphasizing the sacred and

---

<sup>14</sup> *Phrá thudong*, ascetic monks who roamed the forests and countryside practicing meditation, are an exception. See Kamala Tiyavanich (1997) for a detailed description of the plight of *phrá thudong* in the twentieth century.

<sup>15</sup> Irvine interprets their possession as a way of mitigating the social stigma attached to being *kàthæy*. There is no way to prove or disprove this.

<sup>16</sup> In the Northeast village where Tambiah (1970) did his study, there are two levels of mediums: chief mediums and "subsidiary" mediums. The former are almost always male, but the majority of the latter are female (p. 282-283). Female mediums speak in male-like voices, and male mediums speak in female-like ones.

supernatural. Women are regarded as "weak-souled" (*khwǎn òøn*), and so are, as Tambiah says, "more effective hosts" (p. 283). *Kàthæy* are considered to have women's souls, and so they, too are effective hosts for spirits.

Spirit mediums can develop large followings and if so are rewarded well (financially and/or materially) for their services. Because of this, some regard them as profiteers (Irvine, 1984). I visited a very successful *kàthæy* spirit medium in Chiang Mai. His possessing spirit (*jâw*) was female and his voice become higher and more feminized while possessed. He cured people of illness, helped people with matters of love, and even advised numbers for the lottery. One follower was so pleased with the medium's assistance that he gave him a pickup truck. Spirit mediumship is a role through which women and *kàthæy* can gain social status and wealth. But unlike *m[Chii* and women meditation teachers, it relies on mainstream sex ideology for its legitimacy.

One of the most studied male or female marginal groups in Thailand is female prostitutes. The bulk of studies began in the early 1980s and increased remarkably with a growing concern about AIDS and child prostitution (e.g., DaGrossa, 1989; Ghosh, 2002; Lyttleton, 1994; Muecke, 1989; Odzer, 1994; Phongpaichit, 1981, 1982; Podhisita, Pramualratana, Kanungsukkasem, Wawer, & McNamara, 1994; Peracca, et al., 1998; Tannenbaum, 1995; Truong, 1983, 1990). Evidence of prostitution is documented as far back as the Ayuthayan period (1350-1767; Barmé, 2002, p. 5). It is not a new phenomenon, but its meaning for society and the women involved has most certainly changed over hundreds of years.

Andaya (1998) makes a convincing case for the connection between "temporary wives" of the pre-modern trading days and modern prostitutes. The relationship of the temporary wife (a woman who takes up short-term relationships with foreign traders), she proposes, was one of prestige. These women were not from the poor and impoverished, but were of some means. Only later when it was transformed by a new political climate did it become stigmatized, regarded as a

form of prostitution. The existence of the temporary wife did not preclude the existence of prostitutes. It was more a change in terminology and categories of women.

The boom of studies of prostitution in Thailand, which started in the late 1980s, initially looked at explanations for its prevalence. Some of the reasons given are the belief in men's greater sex drive, status associated with multiple female partners, poverty, and the obligations daughters have toward their parents (DaGrossa, 1989; Lyttleton, 1994; Muecke, 1989). These, when combined with modern social and economic conditions, particularly a cash economy, materialism, and consumerism, have created a situation ripe for prostitution.

Many, of not most, prostitutes send money home, though not always to starving families. Their money allows their families to pay for education for siblings, medical care, and donations to temples, in addition to televisions, VCRs, and appliances, things that evidence success for the family. Through their work, they contribute to their families' status.<sup>17</sup> Those who do this, says Muecke (1989; see also DaGrossa, 1989) are regarded as good daughters. But those who make too little money or who don't send it home are seen as bad. A prostitute's ability to provide for her family mitigates the stigma normally associated with her job.<sup>18</sup>

There are at least two kinds of prostitution that are driven by different factors. Foreign-oriented prostitution is a multi-million dollar industry, a vital part of tourism, which for several decades has been Thailand's largest earner of foreign exchange. The clients are primarily foreigners, most tourists (Odzer, 1994; Phongpaichit, 1981, 1982). Odzer's 1994 study is one of the most recognized and describes the life of prostitutes working in Patpong, a famous sex district in Bangkok. Another kind of prostitution that generates less money, but is more widespread I refer to as domestic prostitution. The clients of these prostitutes are non-elite Thai men, though

---

<sup>17</sup> Lyttleton (1994) describes regional differences in prostitution. In the Northeast, agents who procure girls are uncommon and the prostitutes themselves are uncomfortable bringing their money home to put on display, as is done in the North (pp. 261-261).

<sup>18</sup> Peracca et al. (1998) found that the social stigma attached to prostitution is mild enough so as not to seriously limit a woman's chance for marriage.

the prostitutes may be Thai, hill tribe, or other minorities. The bars, restaurants, and brothels associated with domestic prostitution can be found throughout the country in virtually every small town, and according to some studies (e.g., Lyttleton, 1994), even villages. Women engaged in domestic prostitution usually earn less money and often do the work for fewer years (DaGrossa, 1989). When Thai men talk about going to prostitutes, this is the kind to which they refer.

The role of the prostitute runs counter to many aspects of ideal femininity in Thailand, and especially in more rural areas, which tend to be more sexually conservative, at least on the surface. But prostitutes also fulfill some of their obligations (e.g., to family) and personal goals (e.g., economic independence). Prostitutes also benefit other women by diverting the sexual energies of men away from their wives and girlfriends. There are both positive and negative understandings of prostitution. This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 7.

### **Sexual Behavior**

Information on the history of sexual behavior in Thailand is sketchy at best. Several scholars have managed to piece together histories for specific groups (Andaya, 1998, on prostitutes; Jackson, 1995, on male homosexuality). Despite a general matter-of-factness about sex (Phillips, 1965), it is not a matter appropriate for public show or personal revelation. Sexual behavior has been mentioned to some degree in most ethnographies, but usually in passing or in the context of social ideals. But Thai ethnographers (indeed, most ethnographers) have resisted doing research focused on sexuality, despite the casualness with which they offer off-handed comments and assertions of sexual norms.

Obviously, the privacy of the behavior makes it exceedingly difficult to study. But there has been some success, to varying degrees in both anthropology and sociology. Thai males are freer with this information and have "less to lose" than do women. The most convincing studies of women have been on married women who are allowed and expected to engage in sex, though talking about their own experiences is somewhat inappropriate and thus remains a challenge for

researchers (e.g., Knodel, VanLandingham, Saengthienchai, & Pramualratana, 1996).

Jamornmarn (1982) studied post-marital behaviors of couples of reproductive age and found it difficult to discuss sexual behavior with her informants (p. 2). This continues to pose a challenge. The importance of learning about youth sexuality came to the fore in the early 1990s, but was suggested much earlier than that (Muangman, 1979).

More and more Thai scholars are studying sexuality head on, not only in anthropology, but also in sociology, history, and literature. In 1995, the conference "Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand" was held at Australian National University in Canberra. *Genders and Sexualities* (1999), edited by conference organizers Nerida Cook and Peter Jackson, is one result of this meeting. It is a collection of articles by some of the most contemporary researchers of the topic. Through a multi-disciplinary effort, a clearer understanding of sex ideology in Thailand and its relationship to politico-economic factors and social change is developing.

It is recognized by Thai researchers that Thai men have more sexual contacts than Thai women, as men's sexual behavior is more socially condoned. There is a prevalent belief that men require more sex and of a greater variety than women (Knodel, Saengthienchai, VanLandingham, & Lucas, 1999). Wives generally prefer that their husbands engage in sexual relationships with prostitutes rather than non-commercial sex workers (Saengthienchai, Knodel, VanLandingham, & Pramualratana, 1999), because they pose less of a threat to the family and the men's responsibilities towards the family. Men engage in a substantial level of sexual risk behaviors that puts both them and their female partners (e.g., wives, girlfriends) at risk of contracting HIV (Sittitrai, Phanuphak, Barry, Sabaiying, & Brown, 1991).

In the interest of curbing the spread of HIV, several survey-type studies were done to determine risks to the Thai population (Havanon, Bennett, & Knodel, 1993; Knodel et al., 1999; Sittitrai, et al., 1991; VanLandingham, Suprasert, Sittitrai, & Vaddhanaphuti, 1992). National surveys have been effective at gathering sexual data on large numbers of people across the

country, though it is not possible to know to what extent the data reflects reality. They have provided excellent information that has been used to create AIDS education campaigns. And, indeed, the rate of HIV infection has fallen since AIDS awareness campaigns were implemented (Phoolcharoen, Kumnuan, Sittitrai, & Brown, 1998). Surveillance studies on specific groups (e.g., people in urban areas, soldiers, adults, men, prostitutes, pregnant married women) provide information on groups determined to be at especially high risk and repeated administration of surveys to these groups assists in monitoring the spread of HIV (AIDS Epidemiology Group, 1999; Xenos, Pitaktesombat, & Sittitrai, 1993).

Some studies enhanced survey data with in-depth information obtained from focus groups and interviews (Havanon, Knodel, & Bennett, 1992; VanLandingham, et al., 1992). These have shown that many men and women are unaware of the sexual "networks"<sup>19</sup> created by their behavior that facilitate the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. The acceptance by married women that their husbands visit prostitutes increases their own risk of infection, especially if the men are inconsistent with condom use. In 1991, Havanon et al. found that men in the central region still believed the HIV status of a prostitute could be determined by observing her general health and appearance (p. 15). This kind of misinformation abounds throughout Thailand. In 1991, between 13 and 22 percent of Mahasarakham's prostitutes were infected with HIV (Havanon et al., p. 2).

Sexual behavior appears to be affected by other factors, such as drinking. Perhaps it should not be surprising that other behaviors that enhance masculinity are associated with sexual activity. VanLandingham, et al. (1992) found a strong association between drinking alcohol and visiting prostitutes. Safman (1993) also suggests that drug and alcohol use are associated with increased use of prostitutes (p. 9). Increased alcohol consumption was also associated with

---

<sup>19</sup> *Sexual networks* refer to "patterns of sexual activity with two or more partners, whether concurrently or serially" (Xenos et al., p. 104).

decreased consistency in condom use. Another factor affecting sexual behavior is social class. Those of higher socio-economic class become sexual active later (VanLandingham, et al., 1992).

Male homosexual behaviors have not been adequately studied. VanLandinham et al. (1992) reported that 10% of clerks and 17% of soldiers reported having had sex with another man, but they do not provide information about the context or meaning of these relationships. Thai men who identify as both gay and straight are known to engage in male-male sex but there is very little in the literature on the latter group. More gay and lesbian studies in Thailand are now being done.

Peter Jackson's work on male homosexuality in Thailand is unprecedented (1989, 1995, 1999). Thai society has a history of tolerating homoerotic behavior while disapproving of it. Gays and *kàthay* do not conform to normative social roles and so are considered abnormal. Despite a reputation as a "gay paradise," Jackson (1995) concludes that being gay is still deeply stigmatized in Thailand. However, male-male sexual activity is not always, or even often, considered "having sex" (1995, p. 54-55). Thai regard same-sex sexual activity differently from inter-sex sexual activity. Homoerotic behaviors, therefore, is not always tied to a homosexual identity. This will be discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6.

Women's sexuality, particularly outside of a marriage context, is not well documented. There appears to be strong social pressure for women to remain virgins until they marry, or at least until choosing a permanent mate. Knodel, Saengtienchai, VanLandingham, and Lucas' (1999) found that virginity was a desirable, but not required, quality. And, when one considers the sum of the literature it appears that virginity is not always maintained until marriage.

Tambiah says that sexual relations without marriage are not prohibited in the Northeast (1970). Davis (1984) reported that most girls in a Naan (northern Thai) community are not virgins when they marry. J. Van Esterik (1976) writes that girls in a village in Chiang Mai sometimes tell young men that they are virgins, when they are not (p. 107). Although it has been suggested that

increasing female sexual behavior is at least partially related to modernization, elaborate social procedures for handling sexual transgressions suggest that it happened often enough to warrant such procedures. In the Northeast, there were traditionally three ways for a couple to marry: "One, the man asks for her, and there is a wedding ceremony. Two, they run away together. Three, *chûu sǎaw*"<sup>20</sup> (Boontawee, 1988, p. 87-88). In the Northeast, women's sexual activity is permitted in the context of a committed relationship, one that is expected to lead to marriage.

Thai generally believe that women's sexual desire is more tempered than men's, and extramarital sexual activity is completely unacceptable (Knodel et al., 1999, p. 111). Sexuality and reproduction are considered natural and desirable for married women, and fertility and reproduction are less sensitive topics for them. Thailand has had phenomenal success with family planning campaigns since the 1960s. Mougne (1978) suggests that traditional beliefs, social organization, and work patterns, as well as new demographic and environmental factors have facilitated this acceptance, rather than challenging it. She conducted a demographic analysis using anthropological tools (detailed questionnaires, extended interviews, surveys, participation, and observation) to reveal not only behaviors, but the cultural processes involved. Women repeatedly show a certain practicality associated with sexual behaviors. However, Burnright and Leoprapi (1975) found in a sample of married rural women, that over 20% had never discussed birth control with their husbands. This may not necessarily be because it is an embarrassing topic, but more likely because birth control is a female domain and the women would have no reason to consult their husbands.

Although sexuality among youth, especially girls, has always been discouraged, there is evidence that it has also always been present. In more recent years, it has become an issue for researchers. Anderson (1986), Muangman (1979), and Chompootawee (1988) studied adolescent

---

<sup>20</sup> *Chûu sǎaw* is an option for marriage, usually opted for by those too poor to have a formal ceremony. The man spends the night in the woman's bed and in the morning they ask forgiveness from the family and the family's ancestors.

sexuality in central Thailand and found a higher prevalence of sexual activity than previously thought. Social standards for both male and female sexual behavior are changing due in part to fear of AIDS, a desire for modernity, and increasing mobility. This is most noticeable among the young. Among men, social restrictions on sexual activity appear to be increasing somewhat. The threat of AIDS has resulted in a decrease in the utilization of the services of prostitutes (VanLandingham et al., 1992, p. 8, 10), especially among the educated youth. While having sexual experience is still regarded positively for young men, sex with prostitutes is increasingly considered foolish, thus limiting their actual opportunities for sexual activity. Young women, on the other hand, have more opportunities to engage in sexual activity. The desire of men to have "safer" sex (i.e., with wives and girlfriends rather than prostitutes) puts more pressure on women to be sexually active. Women are living farther from their families for work and school, resulting in increasing loneliness and fewer eyes watching out for their virginity. The image of the modern women is also strong; sexuality is part of that image.

Changing values associated with modernity have contributed to an increase in sexual behaviors (Soonthornhada, 1995; Whittaker, 1999). Sex roles and behavior are increasingly affected by factors such as consumer power, education, and the need for cash income. They also result in people migrating to other areas for education or work. Lyttleton (1999) found that villagers in Khon Kaen (Isan) are in agreement that young people are more likely to have pre-marital sexual relationships than previously, primarily due to increased opportunities away from family. Unmarried young people are more often out of their parents' sight. Lyttleton points out that mobility is facilitated by access to motorcycles (also Ford and Saiprasert, 1993, p. 10). Young men and women can ride into town or to another village on their own. When a male and female ride together, it gives them an opportunity to sit close and even touch each other.

Men consistently prove more forthright than women with information about sexuality in Thailand (e.g., Ford & Saiprasert, 1993). And while women may talk about sexual behavior in

general, they are less likely to talk about their own sexual experience. There is still a strong double standards regarding sexuality: Men are expected to express theirs and women are not, except in the context of marriage. Overt sexual expressions (in appearance, attitude, or behavior) are looked down upon. Young men have only to gain, and young women only to lose, by having sex. It is a male domain. Young women engage in sexual relationships primarily to keep a boyfriend (Ford & Saiprasert).

It has been found that sexual behavior refers to heterosexual behavior for Thai youths (Jackson, 1995, p. 54-55; Soonthornhdada, 1995, p. 2). Most Thai do not consider same sex sexual behaviors (touching, kissing, even oral sex and anal sex) to be sex. So behaviors between same-sex individuals are not particularly offensive, and do not define the sexual identity of the participants. Young people are known to engage in such behaviors. Boys seek emotional and physical affection from other boys since girls are inaccessible to them. This kind of behavior is part of some friendships and is something some boys do just for fun. There are very few studies of Thai lesbians. Chetame (1995) cites only one other study of which she is aware. The acceptance of *lên phưan* (literally, play a friend), a euphemism for affectionate, physical, contact between two women, has facilitated the closeting of lesbians. The normality of same-sex contact conceals relationships of greater passion.

From the literature, a picture emerges in which, in general, young men seek sexual experience (largely from commercial sex workers) and young women avoid it. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that rates of male-female sexual behavior among youth occurs, though research has yet to demonstrate this convincingly.

### **Current Directions in Research on Sexuality**

Studies in the last decade examining broader aspects of sexual ideology in real-life contexts have contributed to a greater understanding of gender in everyday life in Thailand (e.g., Jackson, 1995; Mills, 1999; Tannenbaum, 1995, 1999; van Esterik, 2000). These have moved the

focus of anthropological discourse on gender in Thailand away from the relative positions of men and women to the meanings and possibilities of sexuality in Thailand. This approach allows us to consider a whole range of sexual meanings under the singular rubric of Thai sexuality. Changes in the way we examine sex in Thailand have been encouraged by trends in the larger literature on sexuality. This includes greater attention to sexual categories, the relationship between gender and class, and the effects of modernization on gender systems.

Henrietta Moore has criticized the western tendency to divide the world up into dualisms, which may or may not exist in other cultures (1993, 1994). Some groups' categories of sexuality are more fluid, or simply different than that. Anna Meigs' research (1990) among the Hua of Papua New Guinea is instructive to those who would consider biology the ultimate sexual classifier. The Hua classify people by genitalia, but also by the amount of *nu*, a kind of life essence, in each person. People gain or lose *nu* over their lifetime, changing the gender category to which they are assigned. Literature on "third genders" abounds and also represents a departure from the exclusive male/female binary (see, e.g., Andaya, 2000, on *bissu*; Herdt, 1994; Nanda, 1998, on *hijra*; Roscoe, 1993, 1998, on *berdache*). Anthropologists must move beyond their own dualistic cultural understanding of sex in order to effectively examine sex in any culture.

Research is also moving into complex analyses of relationships between gender, class, ethnicity, and politics (see, e.g., Enloe, 1989; Ong, 1987). Sex is understood and lived through these discourses and cannot be extracted from them without affecting its meaning. Identity is a complex tangle of all one's statuses in all one's relationships.

Finally, the processes of globalization and modernization have stimulated social change around the world. Their effects on systems of gender are typically profound (see, e.g., Bauman, 1991; Mills, 1990). Migration has brought the modern world to even small, rural communities. Some aspects of culture change are obvious, but others are less so. The very existence of long-

held cultural symbols obscures the constant reinterpretation being applied to them in their rapidly changing context. Even the most powerful, enduring symbols may acquire new meaning.