

CHAPTER 5. PRIMARY CATEGORIES OF SEXUALITY

Among students at SWU,¹ there are two primary categories of *phêet*: *phêetyǐng* (literally woman's sex, or female) and *phêetchaay* (literally man's sex, or male).² I use the term "primary" here specifically because it suggests primacy in terms of both importance and structure. Students in Mahasarakham understand male and female are two naturally occurring categories of both humans and animals,³ though here we consider only the meanings associated with the human categories. *Phêet* has both biological and social meanings, so *phêetyǐng* and *phêetchaay* do, too. Beliefs about the biological reinforce and are reinforced by the social.

Students interpret and explain much about sex in relation to these two cultural categories, though in actual practice, one doesn't hear the terms used very often. When speaking of the sexes, students usually use the words *phûuyǐng* and *phûuchaay* (female person, or women/girl, and male person, or man/boy). These terms are also not rigidly tied to biological sex (as woman and man tend to be in the USA), though in most instances they are. In other words, it is conceptually possible for a *phêetchaay* to be a *phûuyǐng* and I know of at least one instance where a *phêetyǐng* lived life as a *phûuchaay*. Before I discuss intermediate (or intersexed, or third gender) categories, let's consider the meanings of *male* and *female* for SWU students.

Key Categories: Male and Female

As concepts, male and female convey many, many meanings depending on context. But students also have some strong ideas attached to *male* and *female* that are fairly consistent across contexts.

¹ From this point on, I am talking specifically about students at SWU, though they share many of these ideas with other members of their culture.

² The Lao word for male is the same (*phêetchaay*) and the word for female has different tone (*phêetying*).

³ As mentioned previously, Thai linguistically differentiates sexes for humans and sexes for animals. Also, it should be mentioned that monks are theoretically not human and therefore may warrant their own category of sex, though I would tend to disagree.

Physical Bodies

One's body conveys information not only about one's biological sex (*phêetyǎng* or *phêetchaay*), but also one's gender (*phûuyǎng* and *phûuchaay*). Males and females are physically differentiated, mainly by their reproductive and muscular systems. Males have a penis and scrotum and females have female sex organs: labia, clitoris, and vagina. Normally, males adopt men's social roles and females adopt women's social roles. Masculinity and femininity are further demonstrated through the active shaping of the body, which projects particular meanings to others. And, when they aren't successful at shaping their bodies, they sometimes express their desire for change verbally or otherwise, conveying similar kinds of information. Femininity is demonstrated by a petite build and a general softness. Masculinity is demonstrated by strength and muscular development. Bodily appearance is more significant for women than for men and is part of a general concept of beauty. Masculinity is enhanced more by social action and social role than by bodily shape or facial appearance, though a firm, muscular (but not excessively developed) build is desirable. Students' consciously reinforce sexual dimorphism through their choice of physical activities.

Women by and large do not want large muscles and limit their participation in activities that build muscle. Defined musculature is considered masculine and unattractive on women. Several women students specifically said to me that they did not want to do aerobics or run because they were afraid of getting "big legs." Sports are very popular at the university and students are fit and healthy overall. Men are particularly avid playing *tàkrôøw*,⁴ basketball, baseball, and soccer players. But women are infrequently seen playing these sports. Their

⁴ *Tàkrôøw* is a Southeast Asian game played with a woven rattan ball. There are two main styles of the game: hoop *tàkrôøw* and net *tàkrôøw*. In hoop *tàkrôøw*, players encircle a hoop suspended high in the air, bouncing the ball off various body parts. Net *tàkrôøw* is played on a court and is similar to volleyball, except no hands or lower arms may be used.

preferred athletic activities are volleyball and jogging.⁵ Volleyball involves more skill than strength, and jogging is known to reduce weight (a concern of many young women).⁶

This does not mean that female students are prohibited from playing non-traditional sports, though socially they may experience discouragement. My own experience was that female students discourage female participation in "men's sports" more than male students. Students are non-confrontational in general and do not impose direct restrictions on who can participate. Women do not seem very interested in playing soccer, baseball, *tàkrôow*, or basketball. This was confirmed by my own experiences. To offset the sleepiness I often felt from the heat my first year teaching in Thailand, I made it my routine to jog or play sports every evening, usually accompanied by my 8-year-old neighbor, Tao. On only a few occasions did we have any luck recruiting women to join us in a game of basketball. We usually played alone or with men. Later, during this research, my housemate,⁷ Laura, and I decided to learn to play *tàkrôow*. The *tàkrôow* coach, Ajaan Boon, an anthropology teacher and acquaintance of mine, invited us to join him and his team at practice. We tried not to interfere with the experienced players and usually practiced off to the side by ourselves. Ajaan Boon offered us advice and demonstrated techniques. No one seemed interested in or surprised by our attempts to learn this men's sport. Two or three times, some of our English students joined us. Boys usually knew at least the basics, but the women were as unskilled as we though a few said they had played with siblings when they were younger.

The body is seen as a product of nature that should be accepted and must be dealt with. Students express very low levels of dissatisfaction with their bodies, though women have a few more complaints than men. Beauty has been one measure of a woman's worth for a very long

⁵ Students sometimes play tennis, but the tennis courts are primarily occupied by teachers.

⁶ Doctors in Mahasarakham told me that abuse of laxatives, as a weight loss method, is a growing problem particularly among teenagers. There is national concern with slimness, fed by media (movies, television, magazines) images coming from within and outside Thailand.

⁷ I shared a townhouse for a couple of months with a 22-year-old Chinese-American woman who was teaching English at SWU. Then I was given a puppy and so moved into a larger, more Thai-style house not far away.

time, especially in the central region (Van Esterik, 1989). As was mentioned earlier, unlike Siamese culture, Isan culture traditionally emphasized women's skills over physical beauty in their appeal as wives, though it was never a non-issue. Siamese culture, however, has for at least 150 years emphasized women's physical beauty as the main criterion by which they should be judged. Among students, beauty is associated with the female body and both men and women consider female bodies more beautiful. As Daeng (2nd year female) wrote in her journal, "The women's body is very beautiful. The women are suave, neat, and nurturing."

Women are strongly encouraged to take care of their appearances in traditional literature, song, and modern media. Beauty is not only aesthetically pleasing, but reflects the merit of the person, and thus is one indicator of morality. Physical beauty is a reward for merit accrued in past lives; physical unattractiveness is, likewise, punishment for past sins. Beautiful features include slender bodies, pale unblemished skin, shiny hair, and a graceful manner. Beauty pageant standards, increasingly based on Western contest preferences, also now suggest that height and large breasts are desirable features of women.

Both men and women view the female body as more attractive. It is more beautiful, sexier,⁸ and more fragrant than the male body. Males are not normally smelly or dirty (Thai in general are exceptionally hygienic), but sometimes they become that way as a result of working and playing hard. Female bodies are purer, more *bøørisùt*.⁹ In addition to being less sexually active (and thus literally more "virginal"), females do not abuse their bodies with tobacco and alcohol to the extent males do.

Even menstruation, a source of defilement and pollution in many cultures, carries relatively benign significance for the students in everyday life. Menstrual blood is believed to

⁸ Female bodies appear to be much more of a stimulus for men, than men's bodies are for women. Female students almost never commented on men's bodies, but did appreciate a handsome face. Female students overwhelmingly see eyes as the sexiest feature on men, followed by lips. Of below-the-neck body parts, men's shoulders were viewed as sexiest.

⁹ pure, innocent, virginal, unblemished

have the ability to negate the power of magical objects, but it is not perceived as dirty or polluting. Menstruation is natural and normal and is considered feminine, in that it demonstrates femaleness. It is neither something to be feared nor celebrated; it simply is a fact of life. Menstruating women are not considered unclean or impure (provided they otherwise continue their normal bathing habits). Girls unabashedly purchase large quantities of sanitary napkins¹⁰ in the presence of friends of both sexes. I observed young men purchasing them (presumably for friends or family members) along with their laundry detergent, snacks, and drinks at Sermthai department store.¹¹

This matter-of-fact approach to bodily functions carries over to some extent, to sexual desires and behaviors. Sex is natural and necessary and is a positive thing in appropriate contexts. But while sexual behaviors are regarded as normal and natural, they are also constrained and controlled by social rules of propriety.

Sexual Feelings

Based on literature and reports by locals, Isan culture traditionally recognized women's sexual needs and it was one of a husband's duties to satisfy them. In my research, however, I noted a strong tendency in Mahasarakham to minimize women's sexual needs and interests. This may be a result of Siamese influence, which I would argue, has traditionally maximized the significance and strength of men's sex drive and played down women's.¹² SWU students express somewhat different beliefs in different contexts. At a cognitive level, such as when asked directly, they recognize that both men and women have very strong sexual feelings (*khwaam tôong kaan*

¹⁰ In Mahasarkaham, only sanitary napkins are sold. Both male and female students know about tampons, but they are not widely available.

¹¹ There is only one department store in Mahasarakham, Sermthai. Shopping at Sermthai is a popular activity for students. Other small groceries are scattered about town, but students prefer Sermthai for its size and selection of most goods.

¹² There is not much consensus in the ethnographic literature on male and female sexual desire. Some have written that the dominant Thai view is that sex is primarily for men's pleasure and women aren't really interested and don't enjoy it (Muecke, 1992). Others have said Thai view women as having greater sexual appetites (Hanks & Hanks, 1963; Thitsa, 1982; P. Van Esterik, 1982).

thaang phêet). In the questionnaire, the majority of students reported that male and female sexual feelings are the same or similar. However, in their writing and in conversations, students associate males with strong sex drives, strong sexual feelings, and strong sexual needs. Most attribute this to male nature. In some instances, it seems as though they think the male sex drive is uncontrollable.¹³ But some students, even some of those who say males are naturally highly sexed, believe this can be changed if ideas held in Thai culture change. A few students claim that men are more highly sexed because they can be; society has built-in systems and support for facilitating male sexual behavior. Men stand mostly to gain (status, sexual variety, experience) through sexual behavior. Outside of marriage, women mostly lose (status, reputation, trust, self-esteem). Some female students complained about the sexual double standard to which men's and women's behaviors are held:

In Thailand the men can have a lot of wives, but women can't have a lot of husbands. If the husband have a lot of wives the people will say it is smart, but when the woman have a lot of husbands the people will say that it is bad thing and immoral. It have a lot of thing not fair for women in Thailand. (Journal entry, Bua, 2nd year female)

Men are socially permitted to express their sexual feelings and act upon them in a limited range of contexts.¹⁴ One previously acceptable target of men's sexual energies was prostitutes. They are widely available and relatively inexpensive. But for these young people, who grew up during the national AIDS campaign, visiting prostitutes is no longer seen as harmless. Students are wary of the risk of disease. Those who regularly visit brothels are looked at as foolish. And if they have girlfriends, they are seen as uncaring for putting their girlfriends' health at risk. A second reason visiting prostitutes is no longer as acceptable is because it violates a new understanding of monogamy. Loyalty to one's spouse used to mean that a woman would have no

¹³ More than handful of students told me that if prostitution were stopped, the number of rapes would increase. Men would have no release for their sexual urges and resort to raping women.

¹⁴ Men can be described as promiscuous, too (e.g., *sǒmsǒon* describes a promiscuous man or woman). Promiscuous women are often described as *phûuyǐng rāan* (a lustful woman, woman who makes passes).

other sexual relationships, and that a man would have only one wife. Ideally, the man would keep no minor wives, but even these might be tolerated if a man adequately provided for both families. Men have always been permitted to have multiple sexual partners, even lovers if they didn't divert family resources. Monogamy, in a strict sense meaning only one sexual partner, is a fairly new concept in Thailand. It emerged as a part of the national AIDS campaign, and is based on a Western marriage ideal to which students have been exposed in movies and television shows. This stricter understanding of monogamy is increasingly talked about. It is a fairly radical departure from previous beliefs about fidelity and imposes much greater restrictions on men's sexual behavior. It is desirable, particularly to young women, but few express confidence that their future partners will adhere to it.

For most young men, a strong sex drive is natural to their kind and sexual experience enhances their masculinity. So some still see prostitution as a legitimate and viable option with no harm resulting if precautions are taken (i.e., condom is used). Further, there are a small number who continue to believe that if they are strong and healthy enough, HIV will not infect them.¹⁵ Some girls, too, continue to support prostitution as a way of protecting their own chastity. Even though students intellectually acknowledge a similarity between men's and women's sexual feelings, the cultural meanings around them emphasize the male sex drive over the female.

The Heart/Emotions

Men are understood to be more naturally emotional and expressive than women. They initiate courting and dating and express love more. They display anger. They are more humorous. Females are said to have more self-control, including control of displays of emotion. Female students feel they must suppress their emotions. This is difficult for some when they are interested in a young man or when one is interested in them. A social emphasis on maintaining

¹⁵ At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in Thailand, many people believed that the health of an individual could be known by observing his appearance. Sick people looked sickly. It was not for several years after the AIDS campaign was underway that this understanding of health was discredited, at least regarding HIV and AIDS.

harmony and avoiding extreme emotions, especially in public, places limits upon the extent to which men express themselves. But because they are believed to tend to this naturally, they are given more leeway. This may help to explain why females are regarded as more polite, and expected to be more polite.

Students also believe that women are more *jayðøon* (yielding, weak, easily influenced, literally "soft hearted"). They are often referred to in this way. It is rare to describe a man as *jayðøon* except as an insult, intended to emasculate. The quality of *jayðøon* is generally not a positive trait. It is perceived as a primary weakness of women, though in a way it also suggests femininity, since by comparison it makes the non-*jayðøon* male seem more masculine. *Jayðøon* is similar to *khwǎnðøon* (easily frightened, literally "soft-souled"), another quality associated with females. In common use, *khwǎnðøon* is used to indicate timidity whereas *jayðøon* suggests a kind of impressionability. A person who is *jayðøon* is easily misled. Since both are found in women's character, women are in need of protection and leadership.

One might think that being *jayðøon* would also render women more given to emotions. But this is not the students' perception. In observation and experience, I noticed no difference in expression of emotion between men and women, if drunk men are discounted. Drunk men can be very emotional, but their behavior is attributed to the alcohol, rather than any natural temperament.¹⁶ The social tolerance for men's activities such as drinking may partly account for students' belief that men are more emotive than females. They have this kind of opportunity in which to do it. Women have no such socially accepted opportunity.

¹⁶ An Australian high school student studying in Mahasarakham described to me a fight that broke out in the bar Texas while she was there. This is the antithesis of maintaining social harmony, a strong value discussed more in chapter 6, and under normal circumstances would be absolutely unacceptable. However, the bar workers and other witnesses dismissed it because the boys involved were very drunk. This response by observers is itself an action promoting social harmony, since to criticize the boys would invite further conflict.

Intellect

Sex does not carry any special meaning about intellect. That is, there is an equivalent range of intelligent and unintelligent people in both sexes. But it is interesting to note that those few students who believe there exists a difference in overall intelligence were women who thought that men were naturally more intelligent. I observed little which suggested that one sex is valued more for its intellectual ability than the other. Intellect is more of an individual quality.

One skill that may not be perceived as directly related to intellect, but is a skill of the brain, is speaking. Isan women are perceived as better speakers. This is both a positive and negative thing. In *mǒlam* performances, one style of which involved bantering between a man and woman, the female *mǒlam* often seems the cleverer of the two and the male *mǒlam* sometimes struggles to keep up with the woman's verbal sparring. Women speak well, but they are also overwhelmingly seen as more talkative and gossipy. Whether women actually gossip more is something that should be left up to empirical study, though Isaners certainly think so. I personally was unable to detect any noticeable difference in the quantity of gossip generated by men and that generated by women; Isaners of both sexes seem to enjoy gossiping.

Male and female are two primary categories of sexuality, reflected in social life as the categories man/boy and woman/girl. SWU students understand much about sexuality in relation to or through these categories. The sexed world is also understood in relation to these categories. Each carries meanings derived from associated imagery and experience. However, male and female are not absolute categories. Infants born with ambiguous genitalia, for example, have elements of both -- physical manifestations of both male and female. But even those born with clearly defined male or female genitalia can fall into intermediate categories. There are more than two kinds of sexual identity, but they are all described in relation to the "normative" male and female.

Intermediate Categories? *Kàthəy, Kee, and Thəom -Dī*¹⁷

Western understandings of homosexuality cloud cross-cultural discussions of homoeroticism and sexual identity. Homosexuality in Western discourse is primarily about behavior and sexual attraction, which define sexual identity. In Thailand, sexual behavior is almost irrelevant to a discussion of sexual identity.

A "homosexual" (identity) is distinguished from a "heterosexual" (identity) in Thailand not by specific sexual behaviors, but by sex role, sexual preference, and lifestyle. Heterosexual men (*phūuchaay th[]* literally, "real men") may engage in same-sex behavior and remain straight. Heterosexual women may engage in same-sex behavior and remain straight. This is facilitated by a certain amount of ambiguity in physical and emotional affection demonstrated in same-sex friendship. Same-sex friendships sometimes include a physical element and even infatuation.

Friendships are very complex and students recognize many levels of friendship, from acquaintance-type friends to friends who would die for you.¹⁸ But deep friendships are rare. In Khon Kaen, one hour from Mahasarakham, a mass male bonding ceremony called *phūuk siaw* (Isan for "to bind good friends") is held each year in November or December at the annual silk festival. It symbolizes the binding of two individuals in a lifelong friendship. I never observed a *phūuk siaw* ceremony, nor did any students report on participating in one. Jackson (1995) writes,

In Thailand most men expect to obtain their most reliable and intimate psychological and emotional support from other men, rather than from wives or girlfriends. The male-female relationship is not as idealized in Thailand as in the West, and physical intimacy between men, as an expression of friendship, is less threatening to Thai men than to Western heterosexual men. (p. 53)

Friends provide students with emotional support and physical affection. This is even truer for unmarried women whose access to physical affection is limited to females and family. Same-

¹⁷ I have left English-derived Thai words in their transcribed spellings rather than using the English word in order to emphasize that the meanings are different, though the words are the same.

¹⁸ The deepest and most valued friends are known as *phūan taay*, literally "die friends," or friends to the death.

sex contact carries far less social stigma than it does in the United States. Students freely walk hand in hand or embracing around campus and around town. There are limits, however. No one should be seen, for example, kissing anyone of any sex in public. And male-female public contact is strongly discouraged. But contact that happens in private, though perhaps socially inappropriate, has few negative consequences if handled discreetly. It is well known that sometimes same-sex friendships develop into physical relationships. This is thought to be quite harmless if the participants do not become full-time lovers.

Stories about female students forming physical relationships with other females are familiar to nearly all students and several second-hand examples were recounted to me. Female-female intimacy is called "*lên phũan*"¹⁹ and this term is also occasionally applied to lesbians (people who *lên phũan*). According to Chetame (1995, p. 3), it is an old term and was used to describe the behavior of the King's concubines in the Ayuthaya period. It is regarded as fairly common and harmless behavior among girls, something they will grow out of when they are mature.

At a male gay bar in Bangkok, I learned some of the "servers" have wives and children or girlfriends. For most, it is just a job, not a lifestyle. The servers fawn over customers, suggestively touching them and flattering them. Some perform in the "Cabaret" and "Gay Fucking Show" which my research assistant and I declined to watch.²⁰ The men receive a bar salary and 300 baht to have sex with customers after work (after 2:00am). Even the "straight" ones do this. "Dancers" (they stood onstage in underwear shifting their weight from one foot to

¹⁹ *Lên phũan* is understood to mean "have sex with friends." Friends here are friends of the same sex and sex here may be any sexual behavior, not necessarily involving penetration.

²⁰ The bar boys encouraged us to stay and watch for our research, but neither my assistant nor I wanted to. The acts themselves do not bother me, though admittedly, their public display does. It is not something considered appropriate in either my own or Thai society. I do not believe it would have contributed to my research, and I did not want to be a part of the sexual exploitation of others.

the other in a vaguely dance-like step) performed throughout the evening and at the end of their songs, *wai*-ed the club's spirit house, which was to the right of the stage, then the audience.²¹

As Wirasit, Brown, and Virulrak (1991, described in Jackson, 1995) found, same-sex sexual acts are not regarded in the same way as male-female sexual acts. For some, they do not even count as "sex" (p. 54-55). The authors surveyed almost 3,000 Thai men and women about the meaning of "having sex" (*rûam phêet*). Male and female responses were very consistent. Nearly everyone considered penile-vaginal intercourse as "having sex." Less than half included male-male anal intercourse, one third included male/female oral-genital contact, and less than one quarter included male/male oral-genital contact. The survey did not include questions about female-female contact. As Jackson sums it up, "Much homoerotic contact in Thailand, even involving orgasm, is not regarded as 'really having sex.'" (p. 56). Penetration seems to be one criterion for "having sex." Another is that it involves both sexes. *Rûam phêet* literally means to "join the sexes" which linguistically suggests heterosexuality. In practice, it is used for both heterosexual and homosexual intercourse, but a different choice of words may have resulted in different responses. On the other hand, *rûam phêet* is a common expression and the Wirasit et al. respondents' interpretation of it as excluding homosexual behaviors may indeed mean that these behaviors fall into a different category, perhaps even one which "doesn't count."

In my own study, male students reported that straight men sometimes fool around with other men for fun, for variety, or to just to try it. Although it is not something they brag about, neither is it something about which they are ashamed. It has no bearing on their masculinity, particularly if the man takes the insertive sexual role.²² Any person may occasionally engage in

²¹ I am curious to know if the performers in the Gay Fucking Show do the same. I did not ask this question at the time.

²² Similarly, Parker (1985, 1992) reports that in Brazil, heterosexuality and homosexuality are much less meaningful than are "activity" or "passivity" in sexual behavior. "Performance of the active role in same-sex interactions need not call into question an individual's fundamentally masculine identify, while performance of the passive role *is* conceptually linked to notions of femininity and submission" (1992, p. 113).

same-sex (i.e., homosexual) sexual behavior; it does not necessarily indicate sexual identity, nor does it threaten masculinity or femininity. The term *homosexual* can be very misleading and confuse the issues when applied to Thai situations. In Thailand, it most accurately describes a person who has a consistent preference for emotional, social, and sexual relationships with members of the same sex. But it also implies a person who rejects normal male and female social roles (i.e., husband, father, wife, mother), though this is not always the case.

The concept of bisexual has been introduced to Thailand. Students are aware of it, and some use the term "*bay*" (from bisexual) to describe people who are attracted to both sexes,²³ though they have some difficulty explaining exactly what this means. No doubt, there are some individuals in Thailand who are equally attracted to men and women. This is different from engaging in sex acts with a person of the same sex, since it suggests a preference (in the case of a *bay*, an equal preference for men and women). In this research, although a few students mentioned the category *bay*, it was never in reference to any particular person or situation. Two explanations are that in Mahasarakham, people either fail to identify *bay*, or there are no *bay*. The former explanation is more likely since *bay* (especially male *bay*) could comfortably fulfill their expected social roles, while also engaging in sexual activities with people of their same sex. In Mahasarakham, sex behaviors are not equated with sexual identity or even sexual preference. The next sections explain the meaning of *kàthæy*, *kee*, and *thøom-dii*, as categories of sex and their relationship to *male* and *female*.

Kàthæy: Male Women

The word *kàthæy* is an indigenous one and *kàthæy* are documented in Thai society at least back to the 1800s (Jackson, 1995, p. 192). *Kàthæy* is used in both Thai and Lao and

²³ . "*Sǎa bay*" (bi-tiger) is another word that is used to describe a very masculine bisexual man (Jackson, 1995, p. 61).

originally meant "a male or female hermaphrodite" (Jackson, 1995, p. 194).²⁴ Lao also uses the term *phûu-m[]* which has an almost identical meaning, though students typically use *kàthæy*. *Kàthæy* are usually thought of as cross-dressing, often colorful, frequently entertaining males who consider themselves women on the inside. *Kàthæy* may also be females who adopt men's roles, though this is less common.²⁵ They are stereotyped in the media and popular culture as hypersexed, loud, dramatic, and rather obnoxious.²⁶ In Mahasarakham, many are quiet, reserved, and polite. *Kàthæy* commonly use feminine language (though some of the louder, more flamboyant *kàthæy* use language that would make a woman blush), including the feminine polite particle ending *-kha*. Some *kàthæy* have sex change operations, but many choose not to. What Westerners would simply categorize "homosexuality" is more complex in Mahasarakham. During an interview, my research assistant continued referring to the interviewee as "*kee*" though the interviewee, a *kàthæy*, explained several times that she is not *kee*. There is no indigenous equivalent of *kee*, it was borrowed from the English "gay," so there is some confusion in the general population as to its meaning. *Kee* are men, take on the social roles of men, and form sexual relationships with other *kee* men. *Kàthæy* are males, take on female social roles, and form relationships with "real men" (*phûuchaay th[]*). Real men are attracted to them because of their character and skills as women. Another expression for *kàthæy* is "second kind of woman" (*phûuyĩ ng praphêet sǎong*).²⁷

²⁴ *Pen kàthæy* (being a *kàthæy*) is the definition of the English word "sexless" in the New Model English-Thai Dictionary (Sethaputra, 1994).

²⁵ I never encountered this situation, nor did my informants ever describe it. However, Lefferts (2003, personal communication) described to me a man in the village in Khon Kaen province in which he did his research. Lefferts had been in the village for a while, when a villager pointed out to him that the man working in the rice fields was a female, a *kàthæy*.

²⁶ The Iron Ladies (Poolvorlaks & Thongkongtoon, 2001), the second highest grossing film in Thai history, is the story of the 1996 national champion men's volleyball team. The team is made up of gay, straight, and *kàthæy* men. Although it both touching and amusing, the humor often comes at the expense of the *kàthæy* and relies heavily on stereotypes.

²⁷ Jackson (1995) speculates that this term reflects the role of the *kàthæy* as an alternative sexual outlet for young men. I think it more likely, and more in line with students' discourse, that it reflects the women's identity and social roles that *kàthæy* adopt.

Noi is a 30 year-old *kàthæy* and SWU graduate student who has had three or four *f[]h* (sweethearts) since he was a teenager.²⁸ They have, he says, all been real men. Noi has always had a dream that one day he will have a husband and a rich life as a woman. His ideal man has a large, tall body because Noi is rather small and would like someone who is able to protect him. He must take care of him and be understanding when he needs it. He also wants someone who is sincere and respects him. Noi expresses the same wishes of many female students and hopes some day to be a good "wife" with a good husband.

Noi believes the first cause of his sexual identity was when he was 2 or 3 years old and his mother taught sewing. Her students used to make little skirts for him to wear. Later, his teachers noticed that he was very talented at drama and dance and looked rather feminine, so they encouraged him to dress up like a girl and perform in dramas in the school auditorium. At first his parents thought his tendencies were cute. They didn't think they would continue forever and eventually he would change into a normal boy. But after he got to be 12 or 13 years old, when his body began to change, a boy he liked touched him and he first realized he had feelings for boys. His parents realized they couldn't change him but they didn't approve of it. Noi wanted to be like most men, but wasn't able to be attracted to women. Noi tried very hard to understand himself. He spent much time at the temple listening to sermons and reading until he finally came to grips with the fact that he likes men. He believes that everyone is born pure and is subjected to various experiences; everyone has a good side and a bad side.

A male who displays (*sad[]hg òøk*) a feminized appearance and/or manners and believes she is a woman in a man's body is a *kàthæy*. The *kàthæy* described here are not medical hermaphrodites, though they do belong to an intermediate sex category. *Kàthæy* may or may not take hormones or have sex reassignment surgery. They are frequently stereotyped as comical,

²⁸ I use the masculine pronoun "he" for Noi because as a male, he is not permitted to fully adopt a woman's role at school. It is considered inappropriate and would result in some kind of conflict. He dresses unusually, in flowing pants and shirts, but neatly and politely. He also applies cosmetics lightly and speaks in a soft, sweet voice.

caricature-like versions of drag queens. And indeed, *kàthæy* have found a certain amount of success in playing a social role as entertainers. Thailand offers world-class cabaret (transvestite) shows in the cities, and less professional though equally entertaining shows in the smaller towns. *Kàthæy* receive positive feedback for expressing ideas and behaviors that only cross-dressing males could; and people think it's wildly amusing when done in appropriate contexts, such as in shows. However, some *kàthæy* adopt a queen-like character permanently. This kind of behavior sometimes offends the sensibilities of more conservative people, especially more conservative *kàthæy*. There are as many polite, reserved, low-key *kàthæy* as flamboyant ones. *Kàthæy* students dress neatly in the required dark pants and white shirt, and may wear cologne or makeup.

Young *kàthæy* are still learning about themselves. They find a balance in expression between the male role that is expected of them, and the female role with which they identify. One way they express their femininity is through artistic performance and social entertainment. Another is by engaging in and excelling at women's activities. For example, *kàthæy* are known to be very good at sewing, dancing, cooking, and design. Most people admire them for these abilities. But despite their attempts to be normal by taking on normal female roles, they are looked at with profound pity and sometimes disdain by much of Thai society, especially in rural areas.

Kàthæy are not real women in the eyes of most students. As Noi said, "Real women are a sex which has respect, has value ... women are mothers of humans." This inability to be mothers is the most significant difference between *kàthæy* and female women. They identify with roles (wife, mother) they can never fully achieve. A woman's value in Thailand is very much realized in becoming a mother. *Kàthæy* lack this capacity. They are an anomaly: individuals trying to be women in male bodies. But there is no belief that *kàthæy* are inherently sinful or bad. Their condition is most commonly explained as the result of karma: They committed some sexual

impropriety in a past life. They are working off their *bàap* (sin) through their suffering in this life. And surely most students see the life of a *kàthøey* as one filled with suffering.

But if the life of a *kàthøey* is difficult, the life of a *kee*, should his sexual identity be made public, may be more so. *Kàthøey* do not fall within the natural primary categories of sex, but they live within the sexual social framework. Provided they act like good women (i.e., are polite, keep up their appearance, and skilled at women's activities), people understand them as a product of either the karmic system or poor or imbalanced parental role models. It is not a conscious choice made by the *kàthøey*.

Kee: Men Who Love Men

A "*kee*" person is a man who adopts the social roles of a man and who loves and is sexually attracted to other social men. Their appearance, including dress and manners, is like that of the general male population, though obviously that allows for a lot of variation. *Kee* men use the language of other men, including the polite particle ending *-khrap*. If one didn't know a *kee* man well, one probably wouldn't know that he is gay. Ad, a *kee* student, estimates that there are about 30 *kee* students at SWU who "show out" and about another 30 who are closeted.

There are two main categories of *kee* which are defined by the role taken during sex: the insertive (male) role, *kee khing*, and the receptive (female) role, *kee khwiin*.²⁹ Sexually, the *khing-khwiin* division of (literally) sexual labor mimics the male-female roles during penile-vaginal intercourse. There is also *baay-kee*,³⁰ a gay man who can play either role in the bedroom. The literature has depicted the *khing-khwiin* roles as very static. But based on letters written to gay magazines and also anecdotal evidence, it is clear that many *kee* are not so limited in practice and may derive pleasure from either the insertive or receptive role. Regardless, these roles do not appear to extend beyond the interpersonal relationship. *Kee* are men in society and play male roles there. Because of social pressures to conform to normative social roles, *kee* men sometimes

²⁹ from the English "gay king" and "gay queen"

³⁰ an abbreviation form of the English "bisexual-gay"

marry and have children to try to get over their feelings or to create a normal appearance and avoid upsetting their families. There is intense social pressure for *kee* to stay closeted, feigning being *phûuchaay th[]* while engaging in secretive same-sex relationships.

Gays fall outside the framework: They are men in men's bodies who defy both men's primary social roles as husbands and fathers and women's roles as wives and mothers/nurturers. Consequently, Jackson says, they are regarded as a "perverted form of manhood" (1995, p. 238). There is a persistent social belief that being *kee* and lesbians (called *thøom* or *thøom-dii* and discussed in the next section) is a form of mental illness. This belief, internalized by some *kee* and *thøom-dii*, has led some to try to change their sexual identity by forcing themselves into normative social roles (i.e., marry and have children).

Very few *kee* come out publicly. This is evidenced by the absence of famous acknowledged gays in Thailand. *Kàthæy* have made names for themselves as fashion designers, make-up artists, and even a few television and movie celebrities, but famous outed *kee* and *thøom* are virtually unheard of. One *kee* student suggested that people would be very disappointed to know a famous man is *kee*, so coming out would not enhance his career.

Some students know the student Ad is gay because he mostly hangs out with gay friends. But he also has casual friends, both male and female, who don't know he's gay. And, like Noi, he prefers to stay at home in his free time in order to maintain a low profile and focus on his studies. Ad has known he is *kee* since he was a child. Like most *kee* and *kàthæy*, he believes his sexuality is largely a result of his environment. His role model was his mother. Ad hated his father and was afraid of him. But Ad also says that being *kee* is his "nature." Students do not generally blame *kee*, *kàthæy*, or *thøom* for being what they are, though the idea offends some. Most students describe the cause of these forms of homosexuality as primarily environmental. Phim, a fourth year female student, holds a view typical of students. During a discussion about homosexuality, she said that children who grow up in a bad family situation may be repulsed by it and become

thøøm or *kee* (as Ad did). But when asked if being *kee*, *kàthæy*, or *thøøm* is immoral or not, students commonly respond that their situation is the result of having committed adultery or another sexual indiscretion in a past life. This suggests that they are born *kee*, *kàthæy*, or *thøøm*. In either circumstance, responsibility does not lie with the *kee*, *kàthæy*, or *thøøm* present decisions and behaviors.

Thøøm-Dii: Women Who Love Women

As mentioned earlier, the expression traditionally used to describe female sexual relationships is *lên phư̄an*, "to play with friends." It is generally seen as harmless so long as the phase of infatuations with girls comes to an end and the individual matures (Jackson, 1995, p. 45).

SWU students don't have as much to say about lesbians as about *kee* or *kàthæy*. This may be because lesbians are less visible, or because women are less powerful and these relationships less consequential, or perhaps both. It is notable that this runs counter to Jackson's (1995) observation, "Thai lesbians face more active resistance to their sexuality than do homosexual men" (p. 71). Everyone acknowledges that there are lesbian students, that is, females who have romantic or sexual interests in and desire relationships with other females. Chetame's (1995) study on lesbianism in Thailand found that the Thai stereotype of lesbians is that they are "counterfeit men" and that they are women who have been rejected by men (p. 2). This, she says, is not accurate.

SWU students typically refer to lesbians as *thøøm*³¹ or *dii*.³² People refer to lesbians in general by term "*thøøm-dii*" or sometimes, just *thøøm*. The latter illustrates the social stereotype of lesbians as masculinized. Chetame reported that Thai lesbians tend to reject the term "lesbian" because of the negative connotations it carries (i.e., that lesbianism is a mental illness that can and should be treated and cured), and prefer *thøøm-dii*. But *létbian* (the Thai pronunciation of the

³¹ from *tomboy*, roughly corresponding to the lesbian category "butch" in the United States

³² from *lady*, roughly corresponding to the lesbian category "femme" in the United States

English word) is sometimes used by SWU students, most notably among English majors, not always in a derogatory manner.

Thøøm express masculine characteristics and show this in their appearance. They often cut their hair into short, masculine styles, and wear pants and t-shirts under their button-down shirts. *Thøøm* may also engage in masculine behaviors such as drinking, smoking, and using male language (e.g., the male polite ending *kháp*). *Dii* are more feminine and are almost impossible to distinguish from other females. In terms of appearance and behavior, *thøøm-dii* relationships mirror heterosexual relationships. It has been said that *thøøm* do not generally partner with *thøøm* and *dii* do not partner with *dii*. As with *kee khing* and *kee khwiin*, it is ridiculous to think that all lesbians conform to these heterosexual-type roles.

Despite the fact that lesbians do not fulfill expected social roles as women and mothers, they don't seem to raise the hostility and disgust that *kee* do. They seem almost inconsequential to most people who typically write off questions about lesbians with comments such as, "Oh, yes. There are lesbians. They live together and don't marry men" as if they are missing out rather than behaving unnaturally or abnormally. More and more women in Thailand are choosing to remain single, whether they are straight or *thøøm-dii*. As long as they can support themselves, and especially if they can also contribute to their parents, women generally find social approval. As the value of economic wealth grows, so the pressure for single people to marry declines since there are a number of economic benefits to staying single. Women have opportunities to gain status in ways other than through their family. This may also create greater social freedom for lesbian couples. However, the pressure for women to marry and have children can be quite strong, especially when women are younger and more so in rural areas.

Because I collected little data on lesbian students besides heresay, I rely on the literature. Chetame (1995) interviewed a villager in Nongkhai Province (Isan) in 1994 about an incident involving a lesbian relationship:

The community didn't accept it and the parents tried to force their daughter to get married. The daughter didn't want to, but didn't know what to do. Finally, she hung herself because nobody allowed her to get married to a woman. The parents didn't care and the neighbors thought that she deserved it and they thought that this kind of person should be extinct from the world. (p. 9)

This incident seems rather extreme given SWU students' relative indifference to lesbians. This story is second hand information, and may be overly dramatized. But at the very least, it reflects the narrator's view that pursuing a lesbian lifestyle violates social norms and may bring about serious social conflict.

Most *thøøm-dii* choose not to come out for fear of parental disapproval (Chetame, 1995). Children's obligations to their parents are taken very seriously. Parents care for children when they are young. Then children must repay their parents and care for them when they are old. This responsibility falls especially heavily on girls. Without a husband, it would be difficult for a woman to care for her parents in rural setting. But with a cash economy and urban opportunities for jobs, there are now other options for women. They do not want to disappoint their parents or cause them worry. So they hide their sexual identity. If they can adequately support themselves, even if single, they will draw little criticism and can continue their relationships as a single woman.

Intermediate Sexualities in Mahasarakham

Despite a reputation for being a haven for gay men, Thai people are in general very unaccepting of gay and lesbian lifestyles (Jackson, 1999, p. 227). They do not oppose *kee* and *thøøm-dii* on moral grounds; Buddhism says nothing against homosexuality. Rather, Thai oppose homosexual lifestyles because they are "unnatural" (*phìt thammachâat*). They do not fit into the "natural" (i.e., dominant) order of society in that they do not accept normative social roles. I specify here, "homosexual lifestyles" because Thai aren't so concerned with homosexual behaviors, as long as the men and women fulfill their "natural" roles in society. *Kàthæy* who conform to normative women's social roles can fit rather smoothly into society, even village

life.³³ Homosexuality is not illegal and public expressions against it are strong, but subtle as long as individuals are closeted. Thus, society demonstrates at one level a tolerance for it and at another, disapproval.

Most outed *kee* and *kàthæy* have experienced some kind of harassment. The harassment is largely verbal, but some is physical. Nuu, a *kàthæy* in Borabue district who is not a student, was once hit by a man who said, "Why do you have to be a *kàthæy*?" Nuu excused the man's behavior because, Nuu believes, the man's parents didn't teach him how to behave properly.

Daeng, a *kee* student, says, "Thai society doesn't approve of gays, not at all ... They [straight men] say not to do this or that only once the men have tried it already." *Kee* students receive little parental support for their sexual identity. Chai says that when he was a child, his parents didn't approve and tried to change him. Many times *kee* students don't even tell their parents.

Students at the university know many of the *kee* students and their individual personalities and accept them. But if they go to the village, people are "*[[htî]*"³⁴ and ask, "Why weren't you born a good man?" *Kee* students perceive the villages as being narrow-minded and outdated in their thinking (*hǔa booraan*).³⁵ Those who are more educated are more tolerant and understanding. The students believe that those of their age have more freedom than previous generations and that it must have been very hard for older *kee* men.

Success and wealth seem to ease social restrictions about sex roles. For example, several recent, prominent Thai political leaders are rumored to be gay (Jackson, 1995, p. 65).

³³ And as the example given in footnote 22 illustrates, female *kàthæy* who adopt normative men's roles can also fit in.

³⁴ Students use this word meaning "against," borrowed from English prefix *anti*-.

³⁵ As the female *kàthæy* in Leffert's research village demonstrates, villagers may not be as intolerant of homosexuality as they are of nonconformity to established roles.

Coincidentally, General Chawalit Yongchaiyut³⁶ was dining at the Bangkok karaoke restaurant below the gay bar where my research assistant and I were collecting information. There were no women in the restaurant and it was located in a well-known gay sex district, next to the infamous Patpong.³⁷ As one of my students observed (not in response to this particular incident), "People with money can do anything and no one will criticize them." Provided they do not flaunt their behaviors excessively, there appears to be more than a grain of truth to this statement.

The Western understanding of homosexuality has shaped the discourse on same-sex issues in Thailand. It tends to categorize people based on their sexual practices rather than sexual identities, lumping people into two major groups (male and female) each with two subgroups (heterosexual and homosexual). *Kàthæy* have been an established part of the Thai and Isan social order for a long time. In the 20th century, Thai adopted the Western perspective, labeling gays and lesbians as mentally ill, defective versions of the normal male and female. *Kee* have probably suffered most from this attitude, though it has likely contributed to many lesbians remaining closeted. Some students at SWU also reflect this attitude, some more subtly than others. However, the more educated and the more urban experience people have, the more tolerant they are reported to be of *kee*. *Kàthæy* who adopt men's or women's normative social roles draw less disdain. But those who fail to act appropriately for their chosen roles, open themselves up to harassment.

Students often lump *kee* and *kàthæy* together, particularly when they are using English (i.e., talking about "homosexuals" or "gays"). My research assistant did so during her interview with one *kàthæy*, until the interviewee had corrected her several times. This may reflect the influence of Western notions of homosexuality, or it may be that both are sexual oddities. But

³⁶ Gen. (Ret.) Chawalit became Prime Minister in 1996-1997, and later Deputy Prime Minister under Prime Minister Thaksin Chinnawat.. The night of our visit to the gay sex bar, the live sex show was delayed until Chawalit left the restaurant.

³⁷ Patpong is a street in Bangkok, and probably the most famous sex district in Thailand. Although the government has tried to clean up its image by setting up a tourist-g geared night market in the middle of the road, sex shows and (female) prostitutes abound.

putting *kee* and *kàthæy* in a single category because they are both biological males who have sexual relations with biological males ignores the internal sexual identities of the *kee* and *kàthæy* themselves. *Kee* identify with male social roles. *Kàthæy* identify with female social roles. *Kee* men do not identify with the female; *kàthæy* do. *Kee* men are attracted to the same social sex, *kàthæy* to the other. Furthermore, men who are attracted to *kee* men are attracted to the masculine (and thus are also *kee*). Men who are attracted to *kàthæy* are attracted to the feminine (and thus are *phûuchaay th[]* real men).

With this understanding, one can conclude that *kee* fall within the male realm (except when they are receptive in anal intercourse) except that they do not entirely adopt male social roles (e.g., marrying women, fathering children, visiting female prostitutes). Their position in society is, therefore, ambiguous. *Kàthæy*, however, are more of an intermediate sexual category, possessing elements of both male and female.³⁸ Their bodies are male, but their sexual identities are female. I did not speak directly with any *thøom-dii*, so I am not able to describe their sexual identity with any confidence. *Thøom-dii* students are more closeted than *kee* students. This suggests they conform to most normative female roles, at least publicly. However, if *thøom* (who express masculine characteristics and take on the "male" role in a relationship) believe they possess male identities, then perhaps they should be considered in a category more akin to *kàthæy*. Regardless, a *thøom-dii* acting on her identity does not conform to all female roles (e.g., marrying a man, giving birth) and, like *kee*, are in a somewhat ambiguous position in society. Figure 5.1 is a visual representation of the sexual categories as understood by SWU students. It is a forced consensus since not every student interprets them in the same way. There are two main aspects to each of the primary sex categories, one based on social roles and social performance,

³⁸ Jackson (1995) argues against this: "However, in developing an etic or external account of kathoeyes, it is necessary to recognise that such people are, in fact, overwhelmingly considered to be a variety of male, not female, and so are not a genuine intermediate category" (p. 195). They are, he writes, "alternate categories of Thai maleness" (p. 195).

and one based on biology, here primarily meaning genitals since that is how biological sex is determined.

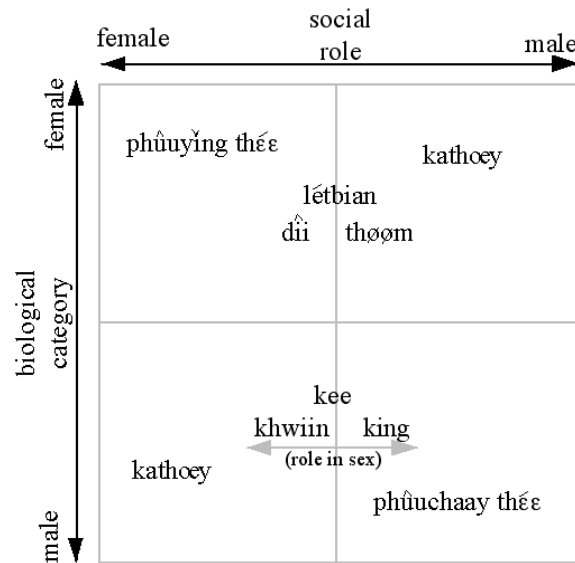


Figure 5.1. Categories of sexuality

Biological and Social Sex

No one is 100% male or 100% female. Each person has characteristics or elements of both. So male and female are not exclusionary categories. At the same time, most people are clearly one or the other as evidenced by their bodies, character, sexual preference, and social roles and they fall into either the top left corner of this figure, or the bottom right corner. *Kàthœy* are biologically male but perform female social roles to varying extents. The Isan word for *kàthœy* is *phuu-m[]*³⁹ or male-female, suggesting their intersexed status. *Kee* and *thøøm-dii* are more difficult to place on this chart. *Kee* are biological males and *thøøm-dii* are biological females. But there is a societal questioning of the mental status, and many believe they are mentally ill, an idea being directly challenged by *kee* and lesbian organizations. However, because they are not believed to be fully mentally sound, I have oriented them in a more biologically unclear position than real men and real women. *Kee* (both *khing* and *khwiin*) and *thøøm-dii* may express social

³⁹ SWU students more commonly use *kàthœy*.

qualities of the other sex, particularly in language and mannerisms, but much of this is done amongst themselves, and not in public. For the most part, they perform appropriate social roles for their biological gender.

Compared to reports on Thai society in general, SWU students are much more tolerant of alternative sexual identities. *Kee* and *kàthæy* students report few if any problems on campus or with other SWU students. But there are still a few students who are disturbed by non-normative men and women. One male student, after listing qualities of men and women, wrote in his journal, "Men and women are good in their statuses but I do not know why some man want to be a woman and some women want to be a man! Oh! my world." *Kee* and *thøøm-dīi* are anomalies, variations on the normative categories of male and female who do not fit neatly into the existing social order. *Kàthæy*, on the other hand, can adopt normative roles and find general acceptance, even in villages.

From the anomalies, the cultural rules become clearer. Conceptually, students differentiate between biological sex and social sex roles (i.e., gender). A biological female who adopts women's social roles is a real woman. A biological male who adopts men's social roles is a real man. A biological female who adopts men's social roles, or a biological male who adopts women's social roles, is *kàthæy*. *Kee* and *thøøm-dīi* are less acceptable because they do not fully adopt either set of roles. One's biological sex and social sex need not "match" to fit into Isan society, but one must conform to normative social roles.