

Of transgender and sin in Asia.

Sam Winter

Faculty of Education,

University of Hong Kong.

sjwinter@hku.hk

Introduction

I was born male and identify as one. Until recently I hadn't asked myself why I had turned out this way.

Yet many transpeople I know have long asked this question of themselves. What's more, there is a small army of researchers trying to uncover answers to the same question. Relatively few seem interested in going up to a trans person and simply asking him or her 'Why do you think you turned out this way?'

From 2002-2003 I engaged in a study of transwomen in Thailand (n = 195, mean age 23.6 years) and the Philippines (n = 147, mean age 23.0 years). Participants were ascribed 'male' at birth but by the time of the study were living transgendered lives; presenting as stereotypically female, wearing long hair, female clothes and accessories, and, in some cases, make-up. Many had taken hormones to change their appearance, some had undergone surgery. All identified as either transgendered, or simply as female. None

identified as male.

We administered a questionnaire (in either Thai or English with Tagalog / Cebuano). We examined, *inter alia*, participants' subjective experiences of being trans, their lifelong development of identities (and gender presentation), family responses to transgender, and participants' beliefs about being transgendered. One item asked participants why they thought they had grown up transgendered. The data for that item forms the basis for this paper.

Transgender in Thailand and the Philippines

There are vibrant transgender communities in both Thailand and the Philippines (e.g. see Winter, 2006; Winter, Sasot and King, in prep.). Yet the languages of Thailand and the Philippines lack single words that correspond to our words 'transgender' / 'transsexual'. In Thailand the commonest word for transwomen is *kathoey*. Originally used to describe hermaphrodites, the word later broadened to embrace any male contravening gender role expectations (gays, effeminate males etc.), only recently (with the word 'gay' entrenched in Thai) used more specifically to describe transwomen. The word *kathoey* can carry negative connotations; transwomen are not always comfortable with it. One reason may be that the word implies that one is a variant of male rather than female. Whether it is taken offensively depends a lot on how it is used. In this paper I use the word respectfully, seeking to reclaim it in the way that Western gays have

done with the word 'queer'.

The Thai language offers other terms for transwomen; e.g. '*sao* (or *phuying*) *praphet song*' ('a second kind of woman'), and '*phet thee sam*' ('the third sex/gender'). Unlike the word *kathoey* (which suggests a subset of male), these terms portray transwomen as either a subset of female or an entirely different gender.

In the Philippines, transwomen are often labeled *bakla* (in the north) or *bayot* (in the centre / south of the country). As once the case for *kathoey*, these words describe those deviating from the male gender norm - not only transwomen, but also gays and effeminate males. Indeed, even a passing display of cowardice can earn a male these labels. In the absence of more concise vocabulary, the concept of transgender demands entire phrases; e.g. *bakla na kinikilalang ang sarili bilang isang babae* - bakla identifying as woman (Tagalog) or *bayot panghunahuna pariha sa babaye* - bayot living as a woman (in Cebuano). The words *bakla* and *bayot* are often used derogatorily. As for the word *kathoey*, I seek to reclaim them as terms of respect.

A more recent English language import into each country is 'ladyboy', a word often used (like 'shemale') on internet porn sites, implying someone neither male, nor female, nor a third sex (but rather a mix of the first two), and more often found objectionable by Western researchers than by the transwomen themselves.

Kathoey and *bakla / bayot* are a common sight in their respective countries. One easily observes them going about their everyday life; shopping, meeting friends, going to the cinema, eating and drinking in cafes, using public transport, visiting the temple or church. They appear on television, they compete in beauty contests. In both countries their numbers as a proportion of the population appear much higher than for most Western cultures. In Thailand around 6 in every thousand born male may be living female lives; around 180,000 nationwide (Winter, 2002).

Kathoey and *bakla / bayot* typically transition early. Most leaving school or college exhibit a stereotypically female manner, gait, gestures, voice, hairstyles and dress, and use of cosmetics. They display stereotypically feminine personality traits (Winter and Udomsak, 2002a, b; Winter et al., in preparation) and vocational interests. In Thailand, where there are gendered word forms, *kathoey* employ vocabulary normally restricted to females.

In both cultures the transwoman's outward presentation as female reflects her inner identity. Among our Thais 47% quite simply identified as *phuying* (women), 36% as *phuying praphet song* (women of the second kind) and only 12% as *kathoey* (the term most commonly used by others, and connoting maleness). Among our Filipinas 58% identified as *babae / babaye* (Tagalog / Cebuano for 'woman'), and 30% described themselves as *bakla na kinikilalang ang sarili bilang isang babae / bayot panghunahuna pariha*

sa babaye (Tagalog / Cebuano for *bakla / bayot* living / identifying as female). A few (11.0%) identified as 'both man and woman'. In neither place did anyone describe herself as *phuchai / lalaki* (Thai or Tagalog/Cebuano for 'male'). Not surprising then that many *bakla / bayot*, and even more *kathoey*, had taken steps to alter their bodies to match their identities, whether by way of injections, implants or hormones.

No matter how long they have lived as female, how successfully they pass, or how much they have changed their anatomy to make it female, all *kathoey* and the vast majority of *bakla / bayot* are regarded in law as male. This exposes them to whatever prejudice lies out there each time they have to show their documents; applying for a university course, opening a bank account, travelling abroad. Job applications pose difficulties. Even employers who claim themselves unprejudiced may worry about how other employees and customers will respond to a transgendered co-worker. The outcome is a quite hostile employment environment. Some *kathoey / bakla / bayot* manage to get jobs serving at cafés, at market stalls, in boutiques, at beauty counters, in tourist agencies and in offices. In the Philippines, where so many speak English fluently, some get jobs tucked out of sight in call centres. Relatively few in either country enter the middle-class professions. Many *kathoey / bakla / bayot* graduates, even those from top universities, have difficulty entering preferred careers, and at the level they might otherwise expect. Some survive by hiding their transgender, at least during working hours. Others have difficulty getting any job at all. We all know that TGs are lured into sex work by the promise of high income, as well as the chance to

reaffirm their identity as female. But they are also pushed by the absence of other opportunities for employment. This pushing force is seldom sufficient credited by commentators.

Though *kathoey* / *bakla* / *bayot* both experience prejudice and discrimination, the lot of the Thai transwoman in many ways seems better than that of her Filipina counterpart. I asked *kathoey* participants about their parents' reactions to their transgender (a) when they had first started transition, and (b) currently. Among mothers 57% had apparently accepted / encouraged the transgender initially, with 80% doing so nowadays. Among fathers the corresponding figures were 38% and 62%. Attitudes beyond the family seem pretty positive too, extending through Thai society; 41% of participants believed that Thais were generally encouraging or accepting towards transgendered people. Among the parents of our *bakla* / *bayot* participants, 46% of mothers had initially been encouraging or accepting, with 60% displaying these attitudes nowadays. Among fathers the corresponding figures were 30% and 42%. Twenty six per cent of our *bakla* / *bayot* believed that their culture was generally encouraging or accepting towards transgender. Notice that all these figures are substantially lower than for Thailand.

The attitudinal differences identified in our questionnaire seem to be reflected in real daily experiences. Thais seldom mistreat *kathoey*, at least openly. When speaking to them they generally do so in a warm, relaxed and courteous manner, addressing them as female. By contrast, I have heard *bakla* / *bayot* in the Philippines addressed as 'sir', jeered at, or get taunted in the street as 'gay' or 'bakla' (each term used to

convey undiluted abuse). I have heard tales of sexual harassment. In Thailand, few higher institutions appear reluctant to take *kathoey* students. They are usually allowed to wear the standard female university uniform. They graduate without difficulty. But in the Philippines numerous tertiary institutions demand school reports rating applicants on 'masculinity', seek to screen out those who are 'effeminate', impose rules aiming to prompt conformity, provide 'counselling' to difficult cases, and finally withhold a degree (sometimes because the student refused to cut her hair or participate in male uniformed activities). The result is, for some *bakla / bayot* who are unwilling to compromise, even greater difficulties getting decent employment.

Unable to pursue chosen careers (or even get a job) or lead a normal married life, some transwomen (both *kathoey* and *bakla / bayot*) finally decide to revert to male identity and behaviour. The figures reflect the *bakla / bayot's* greater difficulties. Among our *kathoey* 11% anticipated living, or at least presenting, as a man by the time they were aged 50. Among our *bakla / bayot* the figure was almost double: 21%.

What is it that underlies the apparently more enthusiastic embrace of gender diversity in Thailand as compared with the Philippines? Leaving aside northern Thai creation folk-myths involving three genders, and folk-traditions of transgender shamanism, it seems likely that, in a culture as genuinely spiritual as Thailand, the religious discourse on transgender may play a role.

Buddhism teaches that transgender is karmic consequence; that being *kathoey* is a punishment for sexual transgressions in a past life. The implication is that we may all have been transgendered in at least one previous life, and that we should therefore be tolerant towards transgendered people we meet. A senior scholar underlines the point:

‘If they studied the causes of being a *kathoey*, the life of the mind,, all those who like to laugh at and ridicule *kathoey* would not be able to laugh any more. Because the very people who laugh at *kathoey* were themselves once *kathoey*...Absolutely everyone without exception has been a *kathoey* because we have been through innumerable cycles of birth and death, and we don't know how many times we have been *kathoey* in past lives or how many times we may be *kathoey* in the future...’ (Bunmi Methangkun, reported in Jackson, 1998) .

Though being *kathoey* arises out of bad karma, leading a *kathoey* life does not bring about more. Even altering one's body is acceptable:

‘Changing one’s sex is not sinful... The intention to change one's sex cannot have any ill karmic consequences’ (op.cit.)

The upshot is a high acceptance for transgender within Buddhism, making possible a situation in which

kathoey visit temples on equal terms with their compatriots, Buddhist monks bless marriages between men and transwomen (though these marriages carry no legal status), and beauty contests can even take place in temple grounds (often aimed at raising funds for the upkeep of the building).

As in Thailand, transgender in the Philippines throws down deep cultural roots. Early European reports wrote of male-to-female transgender *bayog*, *bayoc*, and *asog* shamans, and *babyalan* healers who were viewed as either female or a third gender. One senses that the high regard which transgendered people once enjoyed has been lost in the modern Philippines. Why might this be? One factor may be a Hispanic culture of machismo, a remnant from several hundred years of Spanish colonial rule. But one must try to look beyond that, and ask where this machismo (idealising stereotypic gender roles and demonising those that deviate from them) comes from. Once again, in a deeply devout and largely Catholic culture, it is worth looking at the religious discourse on transgender.

In the eyes of Catholicism (as well as more conservative Christian denominations elsewhere) transgender arguably involves two basic sins; (a) presenting (or wanting to present) as a member of the other sex, and (b) changing one's body. For those who are heterosexual (and are therefore erotically attracted to persons of their own birth sex) and those who take hormones or undergo genital surgery (and are therefore no longer able to procreate) a third sin awaits; that of entering into a sexual relationship which cannot result in childbirth.

Deuteronomy 22:5 clarifies the biblical line on cross-gender presentation:

'A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment,
for all those who do so are an abomination to the Lord your God' (Holy Bible; Gideon's Edition)

Paul's teachings in Corinthians I, 6: 19-20 arguably pronounces on those who change their body:

'...do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have
from God and you are not your own. For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your
body and in your spirit, which are God's' (op.cit.)

Deuteronomy 23,1:1 is more specific, proscribing the body change central to the lives of many
transgenders:

'He who is emasculated by crushing or mutilation shall not enter the assembly of the Lord' (op.cit.)

As for sexual relationships, Paul viewed chastity as the ideal, and marriage as the next best thing; at least
it helped people avoid all that immorality out there (Corinthians I, 7: 1-2). Rome has put a rather different

slant on the matter, pretty much ruling out any basis for a marital relationship other than for the procreation of children. This position was recently restated in the Vatican pronouncements on gay marriage (pronouncements underscored by the signature of Joseph Ratzinger shortly before becoming Benedict XVI):

'Marriage involves a man and a woman who 'cooperate with God in the procreation and upbringing of human lives' (Vatican, 2003).

The emphasis on sex for procreation dovetails nicely with the old testament proscriptions against homosexual behaviour:

'You shall not lie with a man as with a woman. It is an abomination' (Leviticus 18, 22, Holy Bible, Gideon's Edition),

'If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.

They shall surely be put to death. Their blood *shall be* upon them'. (Leviticus 20, 13, op.cit., italics in original)

as well as Paul's homophobic thoughts on the condition of man, expressed in Romans 1: 27:

'Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due' (op.cit.).

A relationship between an MtF TG and a male would be regarded by the Catholic Church as this sort of shameful abomination.

The upshot then, is that the Vatican regards trans people (like gays) as sinful. Trans people in the Philippines do *not* walk into Church on equal terms with their compatriots. Catholic priests do *not* bless marriages between men and transwomen. Beauty contests are *not* organised to raise funds for the local church. Some *bakla / bayot* remain attached to the church, accepting that their transgender is sinful, and incorporating it into their confessions. Some refrain from changing their body so as to avoid violating their 'temple'. Many others, understandably, grow disillusioned with the church, and become lapsed Catholics.

The recent rise in evangelical and fundamentalist churches in the Philippines means that the Vatican is losing some of its influence. But *bakla / bayot* can expect little benefit. A conservative Christian website in the UK talks care and compassion, but walks intolerance:

'The problem ...is psychological.....The Christian response to a transsexual, as with any other person, should be prayer, care and counsel as for any with psychological difficulties and where necessary repentance and faith in Jesus Christ' (Christian Institute, 2002).

Looking at the origins of transgender

The data on origins that underpins this paper came from one item on our questionnaire. The item asked for an opinion from each participant on why she had become transgendered (this last word replaced by culturally-appropriate terminology). Several alternative responses were provided (these based on several years of discussions with transgendered people):

- (a) something biological I was born with,
- (b) influence of parents,
- (c) influence of siblings,
- (d) influence of other relatives,
- (e) influence of friends,
- (f) God's will (Philippines) / Karma (Thailand).

Participants could ring as many of these alternatives as they wanted, or indeed supply another cause via an

open-ended 'other' category. In the event, hardly anyone in either Thailand or the Philippines supplied a reason for their transgender beyond the six provided.

We found that both *kathoey* and *bakla / bayot* took a strongly biogenic view; that is, they cited biology as the most common cause for their transgender (82% and 74% of our samples respectively). In both cultures divine forces (karma or God's will, as appropriate) played a role too (47% and 43% too). The two were relatively independent. Divine forces, it appeared, did not necessarily express themselves through inborn biology. Inborn biology was not necessarily an expression of divine forces.

Beyond biology and karma / God's will, all similarities between the two samples ended. Whereas *kathoey* quite commonly cited a broad range of sociogenic influences - parents (30% of participants), siblings (23%), other relatives (22%) and friends (47%), *bakla / bayot* hardly cited any of them at all (4%, 7%, 8% and 12% respectively). The end result is that, viewed as a proportion of all origins cited across each sample, the four sociogenic origins accounted for 49% of the *kathoey* responses, but only 21% of those from the *bakla / bayot* . In short, there was a greater readiness among *kathoey* to draw on social explanations than among *bakla / bayot*.

Actually, the disparity between the Thais and Filipinas was even more marked than the above figures suggest. Among both *kathoey* and *bakla / bayot*, those who chose one sociogenic explanation tended to

choose another. For example, the correlation between endorsements for parents and siblings ran to 0.44 in Thailand and 0.49 in the Philippines (both significant beyond $p=0.01$). The upshot was that these sociogenic responses came from a relatively small number of participants. So I conducted a cluster analysis to try to identify, within each sample, participant subgroups, each distinguishable from each other in terms of their response patterns. Among *kathoey*, it appeared that 76% fell into a group that explained their transgender in terms of biology and / or karma. The remaining 24% were a more eclectic group who (in addition to biology and karma) cited a range of sociogenic causes. Two rather similar sub-groups were apparent in the *bakla / bayot*, but in this case 97% of participants fell into the biology and God's will group. Only 3% cited fell into the eclectic group, citing sociogenic causes as additional factors. Put baldly, for our *bakla / bayot* biology and God's will were the only games in town.

Why might all this be?

Of transgender and sin

One possibility is that the *bakla / bayot*, having grown up in a less favourable social environment, had less reason to believe that they had been influenced by parents, siblings, other relatives and friends. But this seems unlikely. True, *kathoey* reported more favourable reactions to their transgender than did *bakla / bayot*. But *kathoey* whose parents had reacted positively were more numerous than their *bakla / bayot*

counterparts by only one or two out of ten. It seems unlikely that this could account for the eightfold difference in endorsements for 'parental influence'. Statistical analysis confirms this; within each of the two samples there was no significant relation between, on one hand, parental reactions to transgender and, on the other hand, perceptions that they had influenced one to become transgendered. Nor should there be. After all, a person's reaction (to an event) and influence (to make the event occur in the first place) are plain different things.

Another possibility relates to early transition. In both cultures the proponents of biogenics were commonly those who had experienced gender incongruity earliest in their lives. Not surprising really -- anyone who questions their identity early in their lives will likely be drawn to biological explanations for their experiences. Importantly, *bakla / bayot* had on average questioned their identity earlier than the *kathoey* (for example first feeling they had a mind different to other males at an average 8.9 years, compared to 10.9 years for *kathoey*, and feeling they were female at an average 9.8 years, compared to 10.9 for *kathoey*). Could it be that the *bakla / bayot* sample was more biogenic because more of them had questioned their identity early? The answer turned out to be 'no'. The differences in mean age of gender incongruence simply weren't great enough to account for the difference in emphasis on biogenics.

Having searched unsuccessfully for any characteristics of the participants that might account for the different ways in which *kathoey* and *bakla / bayot* explain their transgender, I realised that the answer may

lie elsewhere; not in transwomen themselves but in the ways transgender is viewed in the cultures in which they live.

Explanations of personal characteristics in terms of divine or inborn biological forces carry a clear subtext.

It is that free choice, and therefore sin, was not involved. Explanations in terms of social influence suggest that somewhere along the road a life choice was made. And life choices can be sinful. *Bakla / bayot* may be less willing than the *kathoey* to consider and / or admit to sociogenic origins of transgender, precisely because to do so would leave them defenceless against accusations of sin. Their reliance on a divine and biological theory of transgender may give the best available defence against the majoritarian Catholic / Christian discourse; that transgender is an offence against God.

This is speculation, and the research has limitations; (a) transwomen only (no transmen); (b) one multichoice questionnaire item; (c) an ambiguous wording (failing to distinguish explanations for the feelings of gender incongruence, from those for the expression of those feelings); (d) possibilities for dishonest self presentation.

Nevertheless, we might be seeing here how the culture in which a transgendered woman lives can influence how she thinks about herself. I am currently doing research in Thailand and the Philippines (and perhaps soon in other countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia) designed to confirm the extent to which

culture can have this effect.

Acknowledgement

Research benefited from a grant from Clinic of Dr Suporn Watanyusakul, Chonburi, Thailand.

References

Christian Institute (2002) 'Transsexualism: Mind over Matter'. URL

<http://www.christian.org.uk/html-publications/transsexualism.htm>. Accessed 5/9/05.

Jackson, P. (1998) Male homosexuality and transgenderism in the Thai buddhist tradition.

In Leyland, W. (Ed.) Queer dharma: Voices of gay buddhists. San Francisco, USA: Gay

Sunshine Press.

Vatican (2003) Considerations regarding proposals to give legal recognition to unions

between homosexual persons. URL

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20

[030731_homosexual-unions_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20030731_homosexual-unions_en.html). Accessed 5/9/05.

Winter, S. (2002) Counting kathoey. TransgenderASIA website. URL

http://web.hku.hk/~sjwinter/TransgenderASIA/paper_counting_kathoey.htm. Accessed

5/9/05

Winter,S. (2006). Thai transgenders in focus: demographics, identities and transitions.

International Journal of Transgenderism (in press)

.

Winter, S, Sasot,A. and King,M. (in preparation) Transgender in the Philippines: a close

focus

Winter,S. and Udomsak, N. (2002a). Male, female and transgender : Stereotypes and self in

Thailand. International Journal of Transgenderism, 6, 1

Winter,S. and Udomsak,N. (2002b). Gender stereotype and self among transgenders:

Underlying elements. International Journal of Transgenderism, 6, 2.