

Source: Walter L. Williams review essay of *Male Homosexuality in Thailand: An Interpretation of Contemporary Thai Sources*, by Peter A. Jackson (Elmhurst, N.Y., and Amsterdam, Netherlands: Global Academic Publishers, 1989). In *Journal of Homosexuality* 19 (4): 1990, pp. 126-138.

There has been a disturbing tendency of late, in gay academic circles, of dismissing as unimportant the study of anything other than "the modern homosexual." To the contrary, studies like this book suggest that we have much more to learn from the configurations of same-sex eroticism in other cultures, than we do even of homosexuality in the contemporary West. By expanding the boundaries, by seeing how other societies organize sexuality, we can better understand the wide range of possibilities, and can transcend the limited vision that Western gays persist in focusing upon. Such a limited view not only has perpetuated an ethnocentric attitude among American and European scholars, but also deprives parts of our diverse gay/lesbian community of realistic and respectable role models that might be adapted from other cultures.

The value of this study of male homosexuality in Thailand is partly because this is the first scholarly book devoted specifically to homosexuality in Southeast Asia. There is precious little scholarship on male-male sex in any Third World area, and practically none on female-female sex. Despite this dearth of research, it seems

that instead of compiling the data, scholars of homosexuality have spent their time arguing about the best theoretical approach. To my mind, it is particularly tragic that, within the field of anthropology in particular, so much energy and attention has been placed on the essentialist-constructionist debate, that scholars are avoiding their responsibility to go out into the field and do what anthropologists have historically been trained to do: intensive ethnographies of other cultures.

The need is great, particularly for the study of societies that are non-homophobic. During fieldwork I did in Java in 1987-88, and among Alaska native peoples in the summer of 1989, it became particularly clear to me the extent to which fundamentalist Christian groups are exporting homophobia to non-Western peoples who were formerly accepting of homosexuality. Barraged with American missionaries, movies, television, literature, and outdated psychoanalytic theories of sexual deviance (that are still being propounded by many western-educated teachers), many Third World peoples are rapidly changing their attitudes toward sexuality. If we do not gather this research soon, it will be too late to learn about the vast array of differing institutionalized forms of same-sex eroticism in non-Western cultures.

Given this situation, is it not time to call a truce in the theoretical debates, and get on with the work at hand? We desperately

need a more complete data base for a broader understanding of "human" sexuality, as college courses are so often misleadingly titled, rather than just for sexuality in the modern West.

In this context, this book on Thailand is particularly valuable, because Thai attitudes on homosexuality provide a possible perspective for a new synthesis. Peter A. Jackson, of the Thai National Curriculum Project, in Canberra, Australia, is well qualified to write this book. A fluent speaker of the Thai language, Jackson wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Thai Buddhism, and lived in Thailand for over two years (1983-85) while conducting this study.

As a gay Australian, Jackson participated in the gay subculture in Bangkok. My research living with homosexually-inclined people on American Indian reservations, in Mexico, and in Indonesia leads me to agree with him that gay people have a great advantage over other foreigners in being able to integrate themselves quickly into the local culture. Because native homosexuals often see themselves as different, sometimes as "outsiders" in their own culture, they are likely to feel an immediate identity with others like themselves -- even if those people are from another culture.

Since he is not trained as an anthropologist, Jackson did not try to write an intensive ethnography of the gay subculture in Bangkok, even though his familiarity with that scene is obvious from his comments in the text. Jackson has instead given us another window on

understanding the world of Thai homosexuals, by his imaginative use of a valuable source that anthropologists might have overlooked. Since the early 1970s, a column has appeared in several Thai mass-market publications that is written by an acknowledged homosexual. Under the name of Aa Go (translated "Uncle Go"), this columnist reprints letters from homosexually-inclined Thais from throughout the country, and then offers them advice.

The very fact that popular periodicals, directed to a general audience and akin to *The National Enquirer* in the United States, would include a gay writer offering "Dear Abby"-type advice to gay readers, immediately tells us that Thailand is quite different from the West. Thai culture is not afflicted by homophobia, at least of the institutionalized sort that is seen in America. The most important factor in this non-homophobic outlook is that Buddhism, the major religion of the country, does not condemn homosexuality. In addition, there are no laws against homosexuality, and the Thai government has not considered it to be an area of political concern to try to repress people's private sexual behavior. Homosexuals seldom experience job discrimination, police harassment, anti-gay violence or any of the manifold evidences of homophobia that are common occurrences in Western nations. Many foreigners, especially tourists who have enjoyed Bangkok's uninhibited gay sex scenes, have looked at Thailand as something of a gay paradise.

Yet, Jackson uses the texts of the letters in Go's advice columns to show that gays still experience problems in Thailand. He argues that, in a culture where people do not normally divulge intimate details of their sex lives, this advice column represents a valuable insight into Thai attitudes. I agree that letter-writers, with the anonymity of an advice column, might divulge more than they would to a foreign interviewer. However, my experience doing interviews among Indonesian villagers (who have a similar reticence) leads me to believe that much additional valuable information could successfully be gathered by ethnographic methodologies.

While Go's advice column is undoubtedly a valuable source, there are problems in depending too heavily on it. Most apparently, since the column deals with problem-solving, those gay Thais who are settled into a happy lifestyle are unlikely to write a letter. Another weakness of the book is that the author does not include biographical information on Uncle Go himself, and evidently did not attempt to interview the columnist so as to see how Go's attitudes have changed over time. Beyond this, the most glaring problem is that Jackson does not include the date of the letters he translates. Consequently, there is no way to analyze changes in these letters over time.

Jackson recognizes that the gay subculture has developed rapidly in Bangkok over the last two decades (partly aided by the information provided in Go's columns themselves), yet he has made no bibliographic

notes to these letters that would provide information for further scholarly analysis. I hope that future printings of this book will insert the date of each letter, at the least.

Still, these criticisms should not detract from an appreciation of an enormous amount of information and insight that is packed into this book. Jackson's approach has the advantage of a nation-wide perspective, rather than just focusing on the Westernized gay Bangkok subculture. He shows that both intergenerational and gender-mixing traditions exist within Thai culture. In the Thai language, there is a word for a boy being raised by a man as a foster child as well as a sexual partner (literally translated as "love child"). Another word, *kathoey*, is traditionally defined as "a hermaphrodite," but Jackson usually defines it as a "transvestite." From gender-role evidence in the letters, I would suspect that this role might be similar to the American Indian berdache (even though no evidence is presented that the *kathoey* role has the berdache's spiritual component). Clearly, more ethnographic study is needed on this group.

Thai language has terms for sexual acts between two males, and between two females, yet it does not have an all-encompassing term for "homosexual" as a category of person. Since language terminology reflects the nature of the society, it is clear that Thais do not set off those males who have sex with another male as any different from most males. As long as he conforms to the heterosexual norm enough to

get married and have children, a man may participate in sex with males to his heart's content, without being socially defined as deviant. In this sense Thais evince a social constructionist attitude. On the other hand, Thais see the effeminate kathoey as essentially different from the average man. Also, new terms are borrowed from English to indicate emerging additional categories. "Gey Queen" means a passive homosexual male, while a "Gey King" indicates a male who takes the active role in same-sex relationships. "Tut" (from the American movie "Tootsie") means a gay drag queen or an effeminate male, sometimes being used as a synonym for kathoey. "Tom" (from "Tom boy") means a masculine lesbian, and "Dee" (from "lady") indicates a femme woman in a relationship with a lesbian.

Thai popular attitudes thus reflect a dual understanding of homosexuality. The Kathoey, Gey Queen, and Tom are seen as a fixed inborn orientation, while the gender-conformist persons who have sex with these are seen as being no different from the general population. Can we learn something from this dual perspective, that some individuals might be best understood as essentially oriented toward mixed-gender and/or same-sex feelings, while others' sexual preferences are more socially constructed? In contrast to Western thought, which persists in perceiving reality as "either/or" opposites, Thais (like many other cultures) explain human behavior in more complex and multi-causal ways.

No doubt those who have taken a strong stand on one side of this essentialist-constructionist debate will disagree with me, but I would like to suggest that it is time for scholars to get on with their research, by incorporating both perspectives. I will contend that it is entirely consistent for scholars to proceed on two assumptions: (1) that every society constructs sexuality in widely divergent ways, and that most humans display an amazing flexibility to orient their sexual preferences in the ways that their society says is most appropriate, and (2) that this reality does not deny the fact that there might be a minority of individuals in any society who are in their basic character (however that might be defined) "essentially" oriented toward a mixed-gender and/or a same-sex preference. The depth of this orientation in this atypical personality is what leads some of them to resist society's constructions which say that males and females should interact sexually and follow conformist gender roles.

Social construction, as a top-down model, is much more appropriate for the understanding of dominant categories favored by social establishments, than it is to the understanding of non-conforming powerless minorities. Yet, as in other aspects of scholarship which leave unexamined the dominant white/heterosexual/male group, mechanisms of privilege typically are not considered problematic and open to critical analysis by scholars of sexuality.

It is thus ironic that research has focused on the social construction of homosexuality, rather than on the social construction of compulsory heterosexuality. This is an example of how we fall into playing our subordinate role in the "politics of knowledge" that feminist scholarship has so rightly critiqued.

As I have seen happen in the past, with scholarly debates on other subjects, specialists on homosexuality now seem to be moving toward a new synthesis, having absorbed both essentialist and constructionist viewpoints. From the perspective of this emerging synthesis, what is now most needed are intensive analyses for every culture in the world and for every historical epoch. When that is accomplished, it is likely that Thai attitudes toward sex will be seen as more typical than Western attitudes. Thais see sex, at least for males, as a means of releasing a bodily need, and of achieving pleasure. It is not so bound up with the idea of romantic love. Marriage is done more as an economic arrangement, and for the purpose of producing children, than for love or companionship. If Western gays can incorporate these worldwide realities into our thoughts about how we might structure our relationships, we might think twice before merely apeing American heterosexual norms.

This book has even more value for the emerging gay communities in the Third World than it does for Western gays. Though Thai society has a more liberal attitude toward sex than the West, there is a

strong taboo in Thailand about public discussion of sex. Third World people so often think of Americans as sexually obsessed, because our media is so open about talking about sex. The implication for the future improvement of life for gay people in Thailand is therefore that Thai gays might best pursue a different strategy than public discussions, which has been the main approach used by gay liberationists in America. For Thailand, a better strategy might be for gays to gain enough self-confidence to settle down into stable economic households (of lovers or best friends), in which they live openly as a couple for everyone to see. Just as sex is not talked about between husbands and wives, it is not necessary that sex be publically talked about by same-sex couples. But, I do feel that it is necessary, in the Thai cultural context, for gay households to adopt children. Since heterosexual marriage in Thailand is mostly for having children, in order to have someone to provide for oneself in one's old age, perhaps gays should do likewise. Much of the social stigma against gays in Thailand is not based on any idea of sinfulness or sickness, but simply because they are outside the family structure and thus will be left alone and unprovided-for in their old age.

At this point, stable gay households do not often exist in Thailand, since for economic reasons most gays live with their parents. Being so enamored with Western gay styles, Thai gays search for a lover with romantic notions imported from the West. The letters

to Go indicate that sexual infidelity is the major reason why gay relationships fall apart, in contrast to heterosexual marriage which is more sexually open--at least for men. From my experience in Indonesia a similar pattern emerges, where male lovers in Westernized urban gay relationships are often fiendishly suspicious about their partner's sexual attractions to others. Articles in gay periodicals are commonly romantic stories of two males falling in love and living happily ever after, with no mention of the realities of sexual infidelity. The gay media in these countries thus has important work cut out for it, in terms of creating a more realistic discourse about the realities of male non-monogamy. Perhaps gays could be encouraged to establish more stable households with best friends rather than with sexual partners, if jealousy is a problem.

The other thing which is required for improved Thai acceptance of gay people, besides greater stability in household relationships, is the economic need for people to have children. In Third World societies without governmental welfare support systems for the infirm and aged, and without adequate economic resources for most individuals to dependably set aside enough money to support themselves in their old age, people survive by their reliance on kin. My research on the American Indian berdache leads me to feel that one of the most important reasons why berdaches are so socially accepted in their community is that they have traditionally been seen as the logical

persons to provide care for their young nephews and nieces, and as adoptive parents for orphan children. This has two beneficial social functions: to provide caring households for orphans, and to provide care for elderly non-reproducers.

This perspective implies that Third World gays should not necessarily look to a Western-style romantic relationship for their long term good, as much as they should strive to fit themselves into a kinship system. They can do this by providing economic and emotional support for siblings' children, and/or by adoption. Given the massive numbers of homeless children in many Third World countries, gays could thus fulfill an important beneficial economic role for their society. Even the man-boy "love child" foster-parent/lover relationship seems to offer more potential for a longstanding intergenerational support system, than Western-style gay partnerships. Research needs to be done on the longevity of these man-boy relationships after the boy matures, to see if the boy does indeed help out the man in his old age.

The adoption issue is clearly a crucial one for the future of gay communities in the Third World, if not in America as well. In the United States, as our population ages, and there are fewer young people to help support and take care of the "baby-boom" elderly, gays might profitably push for adoption rights of orphans and homeless children, both in the United States and from abroad. Nothing is more

effective in creating long-term personal loyalties than raising a child. An anthropological perspective suggests that gay political leaders should therefore push for adoption rights as a prime gay issue.

Thai attitudes toward sexuality of youth also differ from the West. Youths are given freedom to choose where they want to live, and many do live with other people besides their parents while they are teenagers or even earlier. In this context, it is not uncommon for an adult pedophile to informally adopt a boy. Though sex with a boy below thirteen may generate some social criticism, after that age a boy is considered able to make his own decisions. For example, in one letter from a fourteen year old boy who had been in a relationship with a 42 year old man, Go advised the boy to be grateful to the man for all the help this man had given him in the past. That this advice favoring a man-boy sexual relationship appeared in a national mainstream publication gives some indication of the relative lack of homophobia in Thai culture. Letters from young men who had been involved in these pedophile relationships earlier show that they usually sincerely feel love toward their adult male partner, and do not feel taken advantage of, even when the man originally sexually seduced them. The columnist does not condemn men for engaging in sex with boys, but does condemn them if they abuse their position of trust and do not adequately assist the boy economically. This fits in with traditional Thai attitudes supporting the development of patron-client

relationships between two individuals.

Concerning homophobia, Jackson explains its absence in Thailand as being due to childrearing techniques [see especially pp. 149-51 and 167-69]. Starting from Freud's view that most children have a polymorphous sexuality, the fact that boys in traditional Thai families are given great freedom of action after age three, that they are allowed high degrees of want satisfaction, and that "having fun" is given high value in Thai culture, they therefore grow up without much sexual inhibition. While Thais will go to great lengths to keep their sexual activities secret from others, they do not seem to feel guilt for engaging in sex with a male. Jackson sees homophobia as a fearful reaction of a man to his own repressed homosexual feelings. Childhood absorption of anti-homosexual or gender-nonconformist attitudes leads Americans to view their homosexual feelings with alarm and disgust, whereas Thai men are more accepting of these inclinations without feeling guilty. If there is not much sexual repression in one's childhood, there will not be much homophobia. This view suggests that homophobia is primarily learned in the home and the school, and must be broken at those levels. Therefore, as long as parents are afraid that their child will be gay, and as long as teachers do not address the issue, homophobia cannot be overcome.

Jackson also suggests that Thai people are so accepting of homosexual behavior (as long as it, like other sexual behavior, is not

talked about) because they have very strong traditional values that people should be able to "follow your own heart," (p. 108), that people should mind their own business, and should avoid open confrontation. This implies that gay leaders in America can best challenge homophobia by appealing to traditional American values like freedom of expression, and freedom of individual choice. American ideas that people should not psychologically repress themselves can be used to highlight the damage done to children by repression of their sexuality. Greater publicity of suicides among gay youth, of violence against gay people, and of discriminatory laws (immigration rights for gay spouses, lack of legal right of marriage and adoption, etc.), can be shown to violate traditional American notions of fair play and equal opportunity.

In Chapter 6, Jackson deals with the Kathoey. Traditionally, every village has at least a couple of transvestite male kathoeyes, who live openly and peaceably with their neighbors. They are not ridiculed by their neighbors, but on the contrary are popular, especially with children. Every village fair and festival typically has a kathoey beauty contest. I attended one of these while in Thailand, and it was interesting to see the families with their children calmly watching the drag queens strut on stage. Most kathoeyes make their living as prostitutes, and are regarded by men as suitable substitutes for female prostitutes. Still, despite this

acceptable social niche, a kathoey is considered lower than a man, not because of homophobia but because of male dominant attitudes toward women. They may be regarded as "fair game" by men for sexual assault, and though there is not homophobic violence they might be subject to rape. The man who has sex with them, as long as it does not interfere too much with his obligations to his wife and children, is not stigmatized or considered deviant in any way.

While Jackson's study is quite insightful, he presents too rigid a view. Even before the rise of a 1980s gay subculture in Bangkok, there was more flexibility in male-male sexual interaction than just a man/kathoey distinction. A careful reading of the texts of Go's letters themselves show that the reality of homosexual Thai lives is much more diverse, with many persons not being easily classifiable into one or the other of these opposite roles. This diversity accords with my own research, in which I have found practically as great a variation among American Indian "berdaches" as among individuals in Western gay communities.

Jackson acknowledges "top bureaucrats, military men" (p. 263) who are known as homosexual, a veiled reference to General Prem, Thailand's highly respected prime minister. Though it is widely acknowledged that General Prem has relationships with his handsome young military aides, he never felt the need to marry a woman or to deny that he is homosexual. Neither Prem nor his partners fit into the

man/kathoey roles. Instead, his particular sexual behavior is just accepted without comment. Because of the lack of homophobia as a public issue, whether in the form of "sex scandals" involving public figures or in the form of anti-gay laws, there has been no need for a politicized gay movement in Thailand. If it had not been for the relentlessly anti-gay activism of the American right wing in the decades since World War II, I doubt that there would have been an American gay political movement as well.

Even without a movement, an urban gay subculture has grown dramatically in Bangkok since the 1970s. Prompted first by the establishment of gay bars and hotels for tourists, and by an increasing number of jobs in urban businesses that pay enough money for an individual to survive on their own, larger numbers of homosexually-inclined young people migrated to the city. Whether they came to work in Thailand's internationally-famous sex industry, as bar workers or as prostitutes (both male and female prostitution continues to be a major attraction of the tourist industry), many of these migrants settled in the same neighborhood that has now become a budding gay ghetto. Through Go's column and other news sources, Bangkok became publicized as a place of social and economic opportunity for gay people. Since 1984 there has been a critical mass of gays large enough to support growing numbers of bars, which have increasingly turned to Thai men as their main source of customers, as

well as gay magazines and a gay radio show. Openly gay young people, sporting the latest styles and parading themselves in the most fashionable shopping malls, have made gay rather chic.

This chic style is definitely Western in orientation. Jackson provides an especially valuable discussion explaining the major reasons why gays in particular have been at the forefront of Thailand's westernization, and why foreign gays are considered such attractive partners by Thai gay men. There are several reasons. First, foreigners in Thailand tend to be more prosperous than most local people, and do not care much about local class divisions. Lower class gay Thais can more easily advance across class boundaries with a prestigious foreign lover, and can gain important economic advantages. Second, since foreigners are not very tied into local gossip networks, individuals can be more protected from loss of face if disaffections arise. Third, whites are associated with world power and internationally chic forms of prestige. From what I saw of Bangkok gay life when I was there in June and July, 1987, Jackson's thesis seems accurate. And it certainly applies to Indonesia. Jackson suggests that a "colonization of fantasy life" exists in the neo-colonial Third World today, wherein Western films and television have had an especially big impact on creating an image of attractiveness for Euro-Americans.

Inevitably, the sudden emergence of this urban gay subculture has

provoked a reaction from the establishment, as much because of the subculture's western materialism as of its openly discussed sexuality. University seminars on "The Problem of Homosexuality" have been held, but even though generally antagonistic to the gay subculture they have, by their publicity, contributed to a greater public discourse on homosexuality. While this discourse has been moving in the direction of accepting gays, the increasing concern over AIDS reveals the possibility of a greater anti-gay backlash. Jackson recognizes that, if AIDS becomes a major problem in Thailand, especially if it weakens the sex-oriented tourist industry on which much of the nation's economy has been based, this could be the beginning of an anti-sexual reaction against gays and prostitutes.

Because Thai homosexuals have never had to organize politically, there has been no gay political activism. I agree with Jackson that a political rights approach may not be the best for Thailand, but I do not share his pessimism for the future. Certainly gay relationships do not have the social respect given to heterosexual marriages, but as more respectable Thais come out to their families and live stable and openly-gay lives, I think those social attitudes will change. With no homophobic religious and legal establishments attacking them, the main prejudice facing gays comes from their families. As gays have learned in the West, the best way to change that prejudice is to be open and self-accepting about their relationships.

An example of my reasons for optimism deal with Dr. Seri Wongmontha, a gay spokesperson about whom Jackson is quite critical. While Jackson may be accurate in seeing Seri as a negative apologist in the mid-1980s, when I interviewed him in 1987 he expressed a quite positive gay viewpoint. He is a prominent professor at Thammasat University, a consultant for several United Nations projects, host of his own television talkshow, and one of the most famous people in the nation. He lives openly with his lover of several years, a gay young man who has no intention of going back into the closet. While I was in Bangkok, I attended a sold-out performance of a gay play in which Seri was the producer and star, held in one of Bangkok's first-class hotels. I do not know of an equally prominent openly-gay person in America, and certainly not one as multi-talented as Seri. If Seri is a basis for Jackson's opinion that Thai gays are not yet powerful enough to organize against an increasing homophobia in Thailand, then Seri is an example of the ability of Thai gays to respond to the needs of their rapidly changing nation.

I do agree with Jackson that gay political theory is not yet sophisticated enough to be applied to non-Western societies, and that an American-style "gay rights" approach may not be the best for Thailand or other nations of the Third World. He concludes, "There is no need for Thai homosexuals to mimic Westerners.... Thai society and culture also provides its own potentials for homosexuals. Thai

homosexuals will find their own fulfillment by recognizing and accentuating the positive strengths of their cultural heritage."

(p. 270). For giving both Western and Third World gay people this insight, Peter Jackson deserves many thanks and highest acclaim.