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# Comparative Queer Southeast Asian Studies

Ward Keeler\*

Outsiders have long remarked on a relative tolerance of nonnormative gender and sexuality in lowland Southeast Asian societies. Appreciating the way hierarchical assumptions inflect all social relations in the region helps make sense both of Southeast Asia's long-standing gender binarism and of the ability of people of nonnormative gender and sexuality to find, at least at times, specialized roles for themselves. Those roles are based on enjoying not equal rights with their fellow citizens but rather distinctive obligations and privileges. Outside observers must be willing to suspend their egalitarian commitments long enough to recognize the significance of hierarchical assumptions for queer as well as other Southeast Asians if they are to understand common patterns in the behavior of, and responses to, the nonnormatively gendered in the region. Reports from several Southeast Asian societies are adduced to support this claim, complementing the author's own research in Burma and Indonesia.


**Keywords:** homosexuality, hierarchy, gender binarism, cultural comparison, Southeast Asia

In the village where I did fieldwork in Java in the late 1970s, one person stood out. During the day, dressed in quite fancy women's attire, they<sup>1)</sup> went to a nearby market and bought and sold diamonds. In the evening, at home with their family, they dressed like any other male villager. Village residents found this person's behavior somewhat amusing, but not scandalous. That was simply something they did. Although doubt was expressed as to whether they had actually sired their four children (doubt encouraged by recollections, laughingly recounted, of the individual feeling up their male peers in the boys' sleep when they were all adolescents decades earlier), they were still, of course, their sons' father. A woman told me that when neighborhood women gathered to cook for a big ritual event, such as a wedding, no one minded being crowded in close with them, now dressed as a woman—whereas it would be very much out of line for a man to enter

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1) Javanese pronouns do not indicate gender.

a crowded kitchen area like that.

The flexibility with which this individual negotiated their gender identity would arouse quite hostile reactions in several societies in the world. Yet it would not be surprising in many communities in Southeast Asia, where there has long appeared to be greater tolerance of nonnormative gender and sexuality than elsewhere. Nevertheless, data from the region can hardly be said to fulfill progressive hopes for real acceptance and equality for those people whose gender and sexuality depart from the norm. My aim is to show that the apparent contradiction lies not within the data so much as in the incommensurate nature of Southeast Asian versus internationally validated understandings of how to respond to people of nonconforming gender and sexuality.

I have written about Southeast Asian<sup>2)</sup> responses to queer<sup>3)</sup> people in earlier publications drawing upon my own fieldwork in Java and Burma (Keeler 2016; 2017).<sup>4)</sup> In this article I venture further afield, drawing upon ethnographic material from Thailand, Laos, and the Philippines as well as from Indonesia and Burma. This comparative move obliges me to rely on the reports of others. My purpose is not simply to review these accounts, however, but rather to show how they fit into and illustrate my overall argument, which is to claim that incorporating reported evidence about gender and sexuality within the larger frame of hierarchical understandings provides real analytic benefits.

As I will note toward the end of this essay, most of the material I cite dates from the 1990s. Much has changed for queer people in Southeast Asia in the intervening years. Nevertheless, I believe that hierarchical understandings continue to pervade approaches to social relations in the region, and those understandings illuminate long-standing patterns in attitudes and behavior toward and among queer people.

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2) I should specify that my examples are drawn from lowland Southeast Asian societies, not from “highland” (or perhaps less conventionally but more appropriately labeled, peripheral) Southeast Asian ones, with which I am less familiar.

3) I use the word “queer” to encompass all individuals whose gender presentation and/or sexual preference(s) diverge from the normative expectations linked to their biological sex. In line with increasingly widespread practice, I use this formerly pejorative term without pejorative intent, much as civil rights activists in the US took on the once-pejorative term “black.” I should note, however, that, for reasons that should become clear in what follows, none of the four Southeast Asian languages I know (Indonesian, Javanese, Balinese, and Burmese) has such an all-encompassing term. I use it as a relatively empty—nonspecific, and therefore multipurpose—label.

4) Burmese is the language of the ethnic Burmans but is used as the national language of all Burmese citizens. It is a diglossic language, with a spoken register and a formal one. The military regime decreed, starting in the 1990s, that people speaking Burmese or English stop using the colloquial name, “Burma,” for the country and instead use the name from the formal register, “Myanmar.” Claims made by the authorities that the latter term is more inclusive of ethnic minorities are without linguistic justification.

## Consistencies in Regional Patterns

A few common features of Southeast Asian attitudes toward nonnormative gender and sexuality can be summarized as follows. First, there has long been a certain visibility in the region of people who take on a gender presentation at odds with their biological sex, and such people have been subjected to relatively little physical violence. Indeed, in some regions they have enjoyed special and prestigious roles.

Second, most Southeast Asians assume a link between gender presentation and sexual role such that a masculine gender presentation is assumed to imply taking an active, penetrative role in sex, and a feminine gender presentation to imply a passive, penetrated one.

Finally, there is a widespread impression that long-term affective relationships between similarly gendered individuals are either counterintuitive or simply unthinkable. Bonds across gender difference are the only sort believed to be likely to endure through time, although anatomical similarity among partners poses no necessary obstacle nor even provokes much scandal.

### *Visibility of the Gender Nonconforming*

Several anthropologists as well as historians have remarked on the relatively little opprobrium cross-dressing individuals appear to have aroused in many Southeast Asian societies in the past, a situation that continues at least in some cases to this day. This fact has often been taken as a sign of tolerance for non-heteronormative gender presentation, and perhaps sexuality. The historical material is considerable, and some of it indicates that individuals who contravene the obvious in their gender presentation might for that very reason win for themselves special prestige. The most famous cases are probably those of Ponorogo in Java and in Sulawesi (both in Indonesia), and of Thailand's *kathoey* (trans women) and Burma's *natgadaw* (spirit mediums) (see Peletz 2009; Andaya 2018; see also Reid 1988; Brac de la Perrière 1989; Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Wilson 1999; Blackwood 2005; Davies 2001). At present, some of those ritual roles have been largely or at least partially effaced, as Michael Peletz (2002) has noted.<sup>5)</sup> Several scholars, furthermore, reject any such claim for the acceptance or tolerance of queer individuals in Southeast Asia (Jackson 1999; Boellstorff 2005; Garcia 2008). Still,

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5) To what degree cross-dressing spirit mediums enjoy public commendation or the opposite in contemporary Southeast Asian societies varies by region. Contributors to Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Peter Jackson's *Spirit Possession in Buddhist Southeast Asia* (2022) and Peter Jackson and Benjamin Baumann's *Deities and Divas* (2022) provide rich material about such people and their patrons. See also my review of the first of these two volumes (Keeler 2022).

trans women and trans men<sup>6</sup>) appear and act publicly in many Southeast Asian societies more easily than would be the case in most Western societies, as well as in others elsewhere in the world.

To take a case from my own experience: in Mandalay, Burma, I was surprised at how easily trans women (*meinmasha*) and trans men (*yau'cashu*) could socialize without constraint in many contexts—at the market, for example, or at public events such as weddings. Such public toleration applies to long-term relationships as well. In a village I visited a few hours' drive outside of Mandalay, two women lived, and had long lived, without disturbance as a couple, one of them taking on masculine presentation and duties, the other feminine ones. One of Mandalay's most prominent trans women, whom I will call Miss Ruby—not wealthy but by Mandalay's standards comfortable—told me that she had lived for many years as the mistress of a man who was already married when they first got together. The man's wife was at first deeply hostile, but the two eventually became friends, and this fact became widely enough known in the middle-class circles they frequented that when wedding invitations arrived all three of their names were listed—that of the man, his wife, and his trans mistress, Miss Ruby—just as they themselves would list their three names as sponsors on invitations they sent out when they sponsored important social events. Only when the man took up with a much younger woman did Miss Ruby decide that it was time to break off the relationship. No, she told me, this sort of arrangement, in which a man had both a wife and a trans mistress, was no longer likely in today's Mandalay. But she attributed the change not to attitudes toward trans people but rather to greater assertiveness on the part of women: wives would no longer stand for their husbands taking up with a mistress, no matter what the latter's biological sex.

Normatively gendered people in Mandalay usually spoke to me of trans women with a degree of amusement, and representations of them on stage or in Burmese films are invariably derisive. This response—a perhaps hurtful but hardly annihilating condescension—seems widespread in many Southeast Asian societies. Fanella Cannell (1995, 240) refers to the “peculiar mixture of acceptance and potential lack of respect or even contempt” that *bakla* (trans women) experience in Bicol society in the Philippines (cf. Garcia 2008, 137–143). And the Thai historian and commentator Nithi Aeusrivongse describes one segment of Thai public opinion as having attitudes toward *kathoey* similar to those “prevalent in ancient Thai societies,” that is, “approach[ing them] not with

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6) Terms for the nonnormatively gendered in Southeast Asian languages do not correspond precisely to the words I use here. I press these currently (perhaps only temporarily) accepted English terms into service here in order to make general statements, even though details vary for each ethnographic context.

hatred but with comic gentleness” (Nithi 2004, 76).

I do not wish to suggest that nonnormatively gendered people face no prejudice or discriminatory treatment in Southeast Asia. Some scholars greatly resent this characterization on the grounds that prejudice against queer people in the region is both real and often vehement. Thailand, especially, having come to attain a celebrated status among gay Westerners (especially males but also to some extent females) as a place where homosexuality seems surprisingly well accepted, has generated a considerable amount of writing intended to demonstrate, if not the opposite, at least the need to qualify any assertions as to how good queer Thais have it. Peter Jackson (1999) summarizes this point in the title of his essay “Tolerant but Unaccepting: The Myth of a Thai ‘Gay Paradise.’” Similarly, Tom Boellstorff (2005; 2007) demonstrates at many points that queer Indonesians feel discriminated against and disadvantaged in society: he quotes many informants’ words, often very affecting ones, attesting to their feeling beleaguered and alone.

Among the *meinmasha* I spoke with in Mandalay, some told of being beaten by their fathers as soon as they started showing signs, when they were still boys, of behaving like girls. Some were thrown out of their parents’ home, and many were treated as objects of contempt and derision. A schoolteacher who identified himself as a “hider” (*apoim*)—that is, a man who would like to take on a feminine gender presentation but fears the social consequences of doing so—said that he had to watch himself: he worried that the school principal would fire him if he comported himself in too effeminate a manner. Every several months or so, police in Mandalay harass queer people who gather in the evening near the city’s fanciest hotel. All of this sounds familiar, since such persecution is reported all around the world, and it should explode any myth that being queer in Southeast Asia is easy or unproblematic.

Nevertheless, the stories of mistreatment, threat, and ridicule cannot undermine the fact that to this day queer people, particularly trans women, can find a place for themselves in many Southeast Asian societies rather more easily than they can in other parts of the world. That place is not unconstrained: trans people cannot choose a profession or lifestyle as freely as the normatively gendered can. Yet within clear limits, they can attain respect and occasionally even wealth. J. Neil C. Garcia’s (2008, 198ff.) fond recollections of exploits and achievements he enjoyed along with other *bakla* as one among a group of high school students in the Philippines in the 1980s somewhat complicate his rejection of the notion of tolerance for *bakla* in that society. It is hard to imagine a group of effeminate males in a high school in other regions of the world being able to strut their stuff in the way he nostalgically recounts.

What seems particularly surprising is that cross-dressing individuals are better

tolerated in Southeast Asia than those people whose gender presentation is heteronormative (who are cisgendered) but whose preference in sexual relationships is for similarly gendered individuals. Such a preference is simply inconceivable to many, probably most, people in Southeast Asia—at least outside cosmopolitan circles. When known, such a preference is likely to arouse greater shock than the existence—altogether familiar—of individuals whose gender presentation diverges from what their biological sex would normally imply.

Boellstorff cites work in Thailand and elsewhere to qualify impressions “that most Southeast Asian countries [are] tolerant of nonnormative sexualities and genders, since such tolerance is not absolute and is often a tolerance of effeminate men or masculine women rather than of homosexuality” (Boellstorff 2007, 213). That a “tolerance of effeminate men” is, on the contrary, less likely in the contemporary US than of “homosexuality” per se is a point Boellstorff does not note. Yet the contrast with Southeast Asia deserves consideration, all the more so in light of current virulent attacks on everything concerning transgender in the US today.

### *Gender Presentation and Sexual Role*

Distinguishing between gender presentation and sexual role has proved very useful in social scientific literature. Yet as Jackson (1999) has pointed out for Thailand, and this probably applies in most of Southeast Asia, gender presentation is taken to imply sexual role, and breaking that link is not conceptually obvious to many people in the region. As mentioned above, masculine presentation is taken to imply that an individual takes the active, penetrating role in sexual relations, and a feminine presentation a passive, penetrated one.<sup>7)</sup>

Cisgendered males who have sex with feminine-gendered, male-bodied individuals are therefore not distinguished from males who have sex with female-bodied ones: they are all deemed “real men” in both Burma and Indonesia, and this probably holds true elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Individuals are sorted and labeled not according to the sex of their sexual partners but according to their own gender presentation and the sexual role that gender presentation is taken to imply. This helps explain why the biological sex of a sexual partner actually matters rather little. Furthermore, since penetrating another person sexually can be taken as an act of dominance, the virility of a man who penetrates another man’s body is in no way impugned. In the English-language Thai

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7) The contrast between penetrator and penetrated matters centrally to most men’s understandings of sexual activity, and it informs their commentary on sexual roles. It may not figure centrally in women’s understandings, in light of the importance of clitoral stimulation for their obtaining sexual pleasure. As a cisgendered male, I was not in a position to discuss such matters with women.



novel *Monsoon Country* (Pira Sudham 1988), a local tough can force a younger, weaker boy to perform fellatio on him as a means for enhancing, not diminishing, impressions of his virile power.

In Burma, tellingly, if a man who presents himself gendered male lives with a *meinmasha*, the masculine partner will be subject to some pejorative comments. However, the disapproval will stem not from the fact that he has sex with a biological male but rather from the fact that he is assumed to live off the income of his trans partner, who is thought capable of earning easy money as a spirit medium or beautician. No doubts are cast upon the masculine-presenting male's virility because he is assumed to be the penetrating party in sex. By living with a trans woman, however, he is assumed to be failing to live up to his role as a money earner, and in that respect—by appearing to be self-indulgent and indulged—he compromises impressions of his agency, and with it his social standing. He is still a “real man.” But a lazy one.<sup>8)</sup>

The example of cisgendered males who live with *meinmasha* shows that such men in Burma are not obliged to have sex only with females; they are simply expected to wish to have sex only (or mostly) with individuals who are gendered female. In both Java and Burma, people explained to me that if a man had sex with a transgender prostitute, it was because the latter's services were cheaper than those of a female sex worker. Whether or not this really explains their behavior matters less than that a supposed price difference suffices to explain, in the view of many, why some men opt to have sex with a trans, rather than a biological, female. One might pity or disdain such men for their poverty. But one would not judge them adversely because of the genitalia of the partner their poverty forces them to have sex with.

### *Gender Difference and Relationships*

Long-term relationships are thought to be possible only among individuals who differ from each other as to gender presentation (and so as to sexual role as well). No one I spoke with in Mandalay thought it likely that two men who both presented themselves as male could form a long-lasting relationship. A few people had heard that such things happened in the West, but they found the idea puzzling. Nor would two men in whom “a woman's mind has popped out” (*mèinmázei' pau'te*, which is the standard Burmese gloss on why a male should start acting in an effeminate manner) be thought inclined to become a couple. “Hiders” (*apoìn*, from the verb *poìn te*, “to hide”), like *meinmasha*, are expected to look for relationships with masculine presenting males (“real men”), not

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8) Javanese men have told me that Javanese hold the same impression of gender normative males who live with trans women: that they are not homosexual, but lazy.



other hiders like themselves. When I told a cisgendered jade trader from northern Burma that I had misunderstood the nature of his relations with one of his assistants, thinking the latter was his romantic partner, he said, “How could that be? We’re both hiders!”<sup>9)</sup>

In sum, it is hard for anyone in Mandalay to conceive of romantic relationships among similarly gendered individuals lasting very long, or at all. Granted, males, especially young males, are thought of as highly sexual and likely to jump at any chance to engage in sexual play, whether with women or with men. It surprises no one that such play, or random groping, should take place on a crowded bus. But such one-off occasions, should they occur among cisgendered males, are not thought of as in any way meaningful.

Jackson (1999, 233) reports much the same difficulty among Thais in conceiving of long-term bonds among cisgendered males. He writes about the multiple masculinities that explain how “a toleration of and fascination with male gender ambiguity” is sustained in Thailand. Yet in analyzing Thai academic discourse about queer people, Jackson (1997) finds that the impulse to pathologize homosexual object choice is particularly vehement when it is discovered to obtain among similarly masculine presenting males, whereas the same academic researchers urge acceptance of effeminate, cross-dressing *kathoeys*.

Megan Sinnott (2004) reported a parallel emphasis on gender binarism among Thai lesbians (at least until recently: see below) in her fascinating study, *Toms and Dees*. Remarkably, since the masculine role among Thais is considered to imply activity, and the feminine role passivity, she reports that many *tom* refuse to let their *dee* partners stimulate them sexually, with the result that only the *dee* can attain orgasm (Sinnott 2004, 147–153).<sup>10)</sup> In this instance, it seems as though gender ideology has been taken to such an extreme as to lead to its logical opposite: the masculine partner insisting so much on retaining the active role as to renounce all chance of attaining sexual climax, a kind of self-denial little probable among most males of my acquaintance.

## Gender, Difference, and Hierarchy

The above three commonalities about nonnormative gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia—some degree of tolerance for nonnormative gender presentation, an assumed link between gender presentation and sexual role, and the expectation that long-term

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9) Garcia (2008) reports the same aversion to romantic relationships among trans women in the Philippines, as does ethnographical material from elsewhere, such as Kulick (1998).

10) A young female researcher tells me the same pattern is to be found among queer women in Rangoon as well (Tenberg, personal communication). I am told that a similar pattern obtains in some lesbian relationships in the United States.

relationships are sustainable only among individuals of contrasting gender presentation—make sense in light of how hierarchical thinking, a pervasive characteristic of people’s views on social relations, takes difference as the *sine qua non* for all ongoing relationships.<sup>11)</sup>

Individuals, according to such understandings, have an interest in entering into long-term relations with each other precisely because they differ. As the most noteworthy recent analyst of hierarchical arrangements, Louis Dumont (1980), observed, it is because people differ in their bodies, in their skills, in their capacities—whether physical or affective or anything else—that they are inclined to link up with one another.<sup>12)</sup> His analysis may be summarized by stating that hierarchy posits mutual interdependence across difference. As Dumont also observed, every such link based upon difference implies, in addition to the difference along some specific axis—sex, status, complexion, or whatever else—a difference in value as well.<sup>13)</sup> Benefits flow in both directions from the exchange relations people enter into by virtue of their differences, even though one party will necessarily be taken to occupy a position of lesser prestige.<sup>14)</sup> Similarities promise no such advantages. Indeed, similarities are more likely to generate competition and strife.

A considerable literature underlines the importance of gender binarism in many Southeast Asian societies (cf. Atkinson and Errington 1990; Ong and Peletz 1995).<sup>15)</sup>

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- 11) Although hierarchical understandings inform attitudes and practices in lowland Southeast Asian societies, a few smaller-scale societies in the region exhibit more egalitarian inclinations, in some cases quite radically. See Gibson and Sillander (2011).
- 12) Dumont’s analysis of Indian society has been much contested (e.g., Appadurai 1986; 1988; Khare 2006). I draw upon his work here not for any relevance of his ideas about caste to Southeast Asia but rather because he took a close look at how hierarchical assumptions and egalitarian ones differ. It is gratifying that a number of anthropologists in recent years have found it worthwhile to look back upon his work as they develop an analysis of hierarchy, even while reworking or rejecting one or another element of his (cf. Robbins 2004; Iteanu 2009; Kapferer 2010; Piliavsky 2014; 2020; Robbins and Siikala 2014; Haynes and Hickel 2016; Haynes 2017). I have discussed my use of Dumont’s understanding of hierarchy at greater length—with respect not just to gender but more broadly—in my ethnography of Burman Buddhist monasteries (Keeler 2017).
- 13) He did, however, express confidence, but I believe it was more a hope, that difference and equality could be reconciled “in our day” (Dumont 1980, 265).
- 14) In a foundational essay on gender in Southeast Asia, Shelly Errington (1990) suggests that societies such as those I consider here structure gender relations hierarchically, whereas others in the region do so invoking complementarity, and so equality. The overall distinction she draws is useful. Yet complementarity need not implicate egalitarian relations: complementary parties may still differ in degrees of prestige.
- 15) Peter Jackson (personal communication) assures me that insistence on gender binarism as I describe here did indeed characterize Thai attitudes as late as the 1990s but no longer does nearly so pervasively. Patrick McCormick (personal communication) suggests that the increasing size and self-confidence of a middle class, particularly in Thailand but also in other parts of Southeast ↗

Peletz (2009) has shown it to be fundamental to Southeast Asian understandings of gender and sexuality over the long term, comparable to the sort of ongoing continuity in social relations Judith Scheele and Andrew Shryock (2019) have identified in the Middle East. Yet this gender binarism, applied to relationships whether heteronormative or queer, is encompassed within a larger hierarchical emphasis upon difference. That fact explains the relative ease with which Southeast Asians can make room for people whose gender and sexuality run against the norm, since those individuals still conform to the principle of difference. That is, Southeast Asians can accommodate non-heteronormative individuals because such people may contravene biology but usually still respect the importance of gender difference, and in that respect their take on gender is altogether normative.

Gender ambiguity is rare. Even if the effort apparent in someone's presentation to cross over to the other gender proves unconvincing, the fact that they usually pursue that goal consistently and sincerely means that the basic logic of mutual interdependence across difference has been maintained. This explains, furthermore, the greater tolerance demonstrated toward cross-dressing individuals than toward individuals whose gender presentation is normative but whose sexual object choice is not. The latter individuals arouse dismay or condemnation—their behavior is found threatening—because they put hierarchy's basis, in difference, into doubt.<sup>16)</sup>

What opting to go against the expected grain cannot be expected to do is to make no difference. Gender and sexuality are evaluated, as everything is in lowland Southeast Asian societies, for how they articulate with, affect, or confound hierarchical expectations, and those expectations invariably implicate an ongoing and often intense concern with relative standing. Since in hierarchical arrangements difference necessarily and properly

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↙ Asia, has made class disparities less determining in relations among same-sex partners, and with that change there is a diminishing emphasis on gender difference. I plan on addressing recent shifts in attitudes toward gender and sexuality in the region in a future essay, drawing once again on my own fieldwork in Indonesia and Burma as well as on recent publications by other researchers.

16) Anna Tsing (personal communication) has reminded me that Ben Anderson cited, with his characteristic delight in scandalous sexual matters, the reversal of roles in anal intercourse the classical Javanese *Serat Centhini*, an eighteenth-century text, recounts occurring among males, two of them low-status wanderers and the third a high-status official. That the latter, having enjoyed penetrating the first two in turn, then asks to play the passive partner in a third encounter contradicts my assertion that such versatility was, until recently, inconceivable in the region. However, Anderson makes it clear that the *Serat Centhini* deliberately undermines aristocrats' claims to superior status but does so only as a fantasy, not as a call to action. It never gets beyond what Anderson calls "embryo radicalism" (Anderson 1990, 288): "[W]hen the adipati's [aristocrat's] rectum heals, life reverts to what it was before. . . . Nothing changes" (Anderson 1990, 288). The power implications of reversing roles in sexual intercourse were clear, then, but that point promoted no rethinking of either sexuality or politics.

makes a difference,<sup>17)</sup> a lack of fit between a person's gender presentation and anatomy will necessarily have consequences in precisely this regard: differences, in this case a divergence between the expected (what someone's gender presentation implies) and the actual (their biological sex), necessarily matter. But the consequences follow not from what conforms or goes against nature, as much Western discourse, particularly since the later nineteenth century (Foucault 1990a), but even as far back as the fourteenth century (Boswell 1980), would have it. Rather, such a lack of fit will have consequences for the kinds of relationships that are deemed possible, with what kinds of other individuals, based on what sorts of differences.

When an individual contravenes the gender presentation and sexual role that their anatomy suggests, such a person blocks the elaboration of social relations in ways that anatomical difference usually implies. The question then becomes what other sorts of differences can be pressed into service to determine that individual's role in social relations, with what entailments, in light of that first, counterintuitive but not unprecedented move.

Most crucially, what sorts of differences will determine that individual's position vis-à-vis others? What sorts of exchange relations will he or she enter into and with whom, and what will determine his or her relative standing?

For males in Southeast Asia, deciding to give up masculine gender has very real, and in the view of most people lamentable, consequences. The "comic gentleness" Nithi alludes to is the best response a male-bodied individual can hope to encounter. As I have mentioned, derision, contempt, and occasional (if unpredictable) violence are also possible. But those responses follow from the status implications of choosing to forswear the prestige which males are due. Since hierarchical considerations incline everyone, and especially males, to compete for prestige quite fulsomely, giving up masculine privilege is a laughable or even contemptible step in any person's social career. (In Buddhist societies, giving up masculine gender has the further consequence of ruling out the possibility of becoming a monk, traditionally a greatly status-enhancing option, so it is a particularly disadvantaging move.) If fathers are inclined to go further and subject an effeminate son to violent reprisal, they do so because the son's behavior puts the prestige of the family as a whole (and of the father particularly) at risk. Significantly, should a *meinmasha* in Burma turn out to make a name for herself, her father, even if he vehemently or even violently opposed her initial show of effeminate behavior, is liable

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17) My phrasing, here and elsewhere, invokes Gregory Bateson's famous definition of information as "a difference that makes a difference" (Bateson 1972, 465). Although my focus falls far afield from cybernetics, the importance in my analysis of how distinctive traits differentiate and link people reflects a clear debt to Bateson.

eventually to come to terms with her nonnormative gender presentation. And if a young woman evinces a masculine gender presentation, she may well suffer less fulsome condemnation, at least in some Southeast Asian societies, Burma certainly among them. She does not gain masculine prestige by doing so, but she is not giving up privileges which she is otherwise due.<sup>18)</sup>

In some cases, furthermore, contravening the expected by giving up masculine privilege can afford other, compensating forms of prestige. The *bissu*, cross-dressing ritual priests in eastern Indonesia, are a paradigmatic example: Sharyn Graham Davies (2010) writes that they sit at the “apex of the Bugis gender system.”<sup>19)</sup>

The importance of difference as the basis for all long-term social relations explains why long-term relations among similarly gendered individuals make no sense to most Southeast Asians. Alluding to the importance of hierarchy in Thai social relations, Nerida M. Cook and Peter A. Jackson (1999) note in passing a point about Thai personal ads that provides a fascinating illustration of the way that gay relationships (that is, ones among cisgendered males) put Thai hierarchical arrangements under stress. Some gay Thai men describe themselves in such ads as looking for a man who

“loves democracy.” While in some cases this may reflect the advertiser’s public politics, more commonly it signals the desire for a relationship based on masculine equality rather than the enactment of masculine-feminine hierarchies of dominance and subordination that have historically structured male homosexual relations, just as they have heterosexual relations. (Cook and Jackson 1999, 9)

Egalitarian relations may strike some people as ideal: certainly progressive Westerners embrace such a view as an ideological stance, virtually without thinking. (Westerners’ own practice is, of course, spotty, contradictory, and often bewildering to those very actors themselves.) But that simply explains why gay personal ads in the West are more likely to mention a love of skiing, say, or cooking, with the understanding that similar interests would strengthen two parties’ bonds, rather than democracy. The fact that Thai males must borrow from the idiom of politics to describe an egalitarian romantic relationship demonstrates how much a relationship among two similar individuals— anatomically similar, similarly gendered, and of similar social position—remained conceptually strange at least through the 1990s to many Thais.

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18) I discuss both of these points about Burmans’ parental reactions to nonnormative gender presentation in their children in Keeler (2017).

19) Harriet Whitehead (1981) noted the same option of raising one’s status by means of nonnormative gender presentation among Native Americans.

## Hierarchy in the Absence of Gender Difference

The fact that difference is crucial to understanding queer issues in Southeast Asia more than any specific features of anatomy or even gender becomes all the clearer in those instances in which gender contrast is absent. In these cases, some other sort of difference is called upon to establish one (superordinate) party as of higher standing relative to the other (subordinate) one. I cite data from Thailand, the Philippines, and Laos to support this claim.

Materials reported by an anthropologist about men who have sex with men in Chiang Mai provide evidence of how a hierarchical understanding of mutual interdependence across difference can shape relationships men enter into with each other, even if they are similarly masculine presenting. In writing about his research among male sex workers in Chiang Mai, Jan De Lind van Wijngaarden notes the following: “The cultural expectations associated with the pervasive character of social hierarchy in Thai social life mean that young male Thai sex workers may not necessarily experience a threat to their masculine gender identity from engaging in sex work” (De Lind van Wijngaarden 1999, 200).

This is true even if they are obliged, despite their masculine presentation, to take a passive role in anal sex:

[T]he Thai system of social hierarchy, in which a less powerful person is supposed to submit to the wishes of a superior . . . means that even if male sex workers are anally penetrated by clients, they may not perceive this as resulting from an ascribed female gender identity, but rather as resulting from their (temporary or permanent) lower position in the power rankings with regard to their clients. (De Lind van Wijngaarden 1999, 215)

De Lind van Wijngaarden reports further that males who have engaged in sex work can, and usually do, leave the profession before long, reintegrating into their natal villages or other milieu without evidence of psychological trauma. They have, in other words, taken a subordinate role in a particular context, a commercialized sexual one, that can be assimilated to other contexts in which they would expect to take a subordinate role. As their standing improves (with increasing age and earning capacity), they can leave the role behind and suffer no apparent long-term effects.

So sex work, even including taking a passive role in anal sex, can constitute a passing phase in a young Thai male’s professional development without unduly damaging him (provided, of course, he avoids HIV infection or other risks to his physical health). We see, therefore, that gender and sexuality can enter into a person’s experience without constituting a defining or preeminent feature of it. Being penetrated in sex, De Lind van

Wijngaarden suggests, implies a subordinate standing in a specific encounter. Matters of gender presentation and sexual roles, then, have been drawn into the overarching matter of hierarchical relations: they do not constitute a free-standing analytic category, as an outsider might be inclined to treat them.<sup>20)</sup>

### Are Queer Southeast Asians Coming Around to Alternative Understandings?

Although I have alluded above to Southeast Asians' assumption that long-term relationships are possible only among individuals of contrasting gender presentation, recent publications suggest that categories have grown more fluid and pairings more diverse in Bangkok, at least, and perhaps elsewhere in Southeast Asia, since the beginning of the current millennium (Jackson 2011; Blackwood and Johnson 2012). Dredge Byung'chu Käng (2012), for example, writes:

[T]he disgust associated with similar-gender coupling is diminishing. New [Thai] terms such as *sao-siap* (penetrating girl, referring to *kathoey* who are active in anal intercourse) and *tom-gay* (a *tom*, masculine female, in a relationship with another *tom*) describe variations that incorporate putatively discordant gender expression and sexual practice. These changes point to the breakdown of the heterogender sexual matrix, in which only sex between individuals of opposite genders is socially acceptable. (Dredge Byung'chu Käng 2012, 478)

To a degree, David Gilbert's research (2013) suggests a similar expansion in people's understandings in Rangoon as well, although I have seen little such increased flexibility in relationships in Mandalay.

Yet even in the face of explicit claims to the effect that an older insistence on gender contrast has lost its hold on people's thinking, some researchers report a tendency to revert to long-standing patterns. So, for example, Megan Sinnott (2012), whose earlier work on *toms* and *dees*—that is, masculine- and feminine-presenting Thai lesbians, as mentioned above—showed how important gender differentiation was to couple-formation

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20) A similar concern with relative status, rather than with anatomy, appears to explain a point Michel Foucault (1990b) overlooked in his discussion of homosexual relationships in ancient Athens. Foucault's attention focused on the ambiguities surrounding a young free male citizen taking on a subordinate role, as a passive partner in homosexual intercourse. Yet Greek authors, who wrote copiously on the subject of such relationships, must also have worried about an older male citizen becoming so smitten with his younger beloved as to grant the latter a good deal of power over himself—upsetting the proper distribution of power between them, one in which an older, higher-status male should never be in thrall to a subordinate. By the same token, in many societies—and this appears to include ancient Greece—when sexual activity does not risk throwing hierarchy off, it does not arouse much comment.



among them, writes that all the familiar oppositions, and the pairings they entailed, were said by her informants to have gone by the boards by the time of her later research in the 2000s. Yet in the end she noticed subtle reassertions of precisely those kinds of differences, if in attenuated form, among the couples she interviewed.

An apparent exception to my general statement that difference enables rather than prevents individuals from pairing up over the long term actually proves the rule. Ronald Baytan (2000) reports that the upper-middle-class Chinese Filipino gay men he interviewed in Metro Manila were wary of choosing Filipino partners because they, Baytan's informants, would be expected to foot every bill. Nevertheless, they invariably did end up with Filipino partners, and most of them said that having a Sino-Filipino partner would feel "incestuous." Even if they were, exceptionally, not averse in principle to having a Chinese partner, this never happened. Baytan writes, "[T]hose [gay Sino-Filipino men in his sample] who wished to have one [a Sino-Filipino lover] as an ideal always ended up with a Filipino or a non-Chinese foreigner" (Baytan 2000, 398). Even in the face of stated preferences, difference—in this case ethnic, racial, and/or of class—turns out still to obtain in the relationships these men actually enter into.

In cases in which contrasting gender no longer distinguishes partners, furthermore, that fact does not necessarily imply an egalitarian rather than hierarchical tenor to relationships. I have cited De Lind van Wijngaarden's work on cisgendered male sex workers in Chiang Mai above to suggest that differences in class and standing can substitute for gender difference. I would also contest some reports in which claims are made to the effect that egalitarian notions are gaining ground.

A research team writing about men who have sex with men<sup>21</sup> in Laos (Lyttleton 2008) provides evidence of how a hierarchical understanding of mutual interdependence across difference can shape relationships men enter into with each other even if they are similarly masculine presenting. Chris Lyttleton reads his research team's findings about men who have sex with men in Laos to imply that not only is a difference in gender presentation coming to mean less than was previously the case, but that in the process more egalitarian relationships are coming to the fore. Yet what Lyttleton and his research team report raises other possibilities, particularly if we take into account broader features about the individuals entering into these relationships.

Lyttleton notes that in the past Laotian men did not consider it possible for two males to have long-term sexual and affective relationships, for reasons consistent with what I have set out above:

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21) This term, often abbreviated to MSM, serves much the same purpose as my use of the term "queer," as a neutral descriptor of individuals (in this case only males) who engage at least at times in same-sex sexual activity. I use it here out of deference to Lyttleton's (2008) usage in his work.

[T]he lack of clear role distinction [in relations among cisgendered males] is seen as a prohibitive obstacle. Rather than complementary roles, two men were regarded by many of our informants as not being able to share domesticity together precisely because they would always be in competition. One partner would always have to be the “leader,” financially and, perhaps, emotionally. The other partner would end up feeling subordinated, which would prove an untenable situation in the long run. (Lyttleton 2008, 54)

Sameness breeds competition, not closeness; subordination, in a context of sameness, is galling. But Lyttleton adds that the increasing number of gay Western (and some non-Laotian Asian) males who enter into relationships with Laotian men is expanding understandings of what is possible. In contrast to previous patterns, wherein male-male relations were marked first and foremost by difference,

the emotional possibilities within male-male relations and the potential for long-term love relationships are gradually becoming refigured through both Western and westernized Asian visitors to Laos. Gay identity is emerging, in part, for the hope it represents for potentially long-term and more equalised relationships. (Lyttleton 2008, 55)

The point suggests an important shift: “The evidence that growing numbers of Laotian men are now imagining longer-term relations as possible, premised on more even-handed emotional and sexual interaction and based on visible examples, is profound” (Lyttleton 2008, 55).

Yet I would urge analytic caution. Lyttleton goes on to observe that long-term relations among Laotian men remain rare. I think he underestimates the way that status differences between Laotian and Western or other Asian men substitute for other kinds of difference in relationships, and that to see more “equalised” relations in such bonds may constitute as much outsiders’ fond hopes and preconceptions as any real changes in Laotian attitudes.

Even if gender presentation need not differ greatly between a foreign and a Laotian male, making the relationship between them look like a gay bond that Westerners and other outside observers would assume to be marked by little in the way of hierarchical distinctions, such an inference may be unwarranted. Instead, differences in assumed wealth and social standing appear sufficiently radical to reinstate the sorts of difference upon which Laotian men presume all long-term relationships must be based. As a result, in these relationships, status differences make up for the absence of contrast in gender presentation.

## Changes Taking Place

In as dynamic and fast-changing an environment as Southeast Asia, we may well see new ways of thinking about sex and gender, difference, and relationships developing, and I do not wish to argue that nothing is changing for queer folk in Burma, Thailand, or elsewhere in the region. Still, it would be precipitous to assume that in the long run people will come to share what progressive outsiders, such as I assume Lyttleton to be, may think of as the ideal of egalitarian relationships among romantic partners.

In a fascinating account of Thais' shifting erotic desires but ongoing preoccupation with social standing, Dredge Byung'chu Käng (2017) points to the way that the unwanted inference that any Thai male with a Western male companion must be a sex worker, or at least the subordinate member of a gay pair, leads many middle-class Thai men to prefer what he calls "white Asians," that is, Asians of East Asian extraction. These are men (such as Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese) whose economic capital and social status are assumed to be considerable: these features are admired along with their putatively fair complexions. Yet such men do not stand out physically as obviously foreign among Southeast Asians, and a Thai man accompanying them in public is not assumed to be their (necessarily lower-status) companion. Thus, Dredge Byung'chu Käng's white Asians are different in ways (with respect to class and complexion) that account for Thai men's attraction to them, while being subtly different enough that the status difference between them can go unremarked and does not compromise the Thai partner's own status when they are out and about. Here, difference still enables a relationship, yet the difference is mitigated enough to dissemble the fact of the very relationship it enables.

## Sameness, Difference, Rights Campaigns, and Drag Shows

A number of organizations have sought in recent years to counter widespread discrimination against individuals displaying nonnormative gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia.<sup>22)</sup> Sometimes enjoying foreign funding, but often not, such organizations have focused attention on legal codes that reflect long-standing prejudices, ones in large part introduced by colonial Western authorities. For example, in Burma, colonial-era legislation giving legal sanction to the persecution of homosexuals, laws first promulgated by the

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22) Erick Laurent (2005) discusses the contrast between Western rights-focused efforts and Asian attitudes toward LGBT concerns, emphasizing how an Asian insistence on obligations to kin encourages people to keep queer inclinations secret while allowing them a certain latitude in sexual behavior provided they marry and have children.

British but long since abolished in the United Kingdom, remains on the books. The organization Colors Rainbow has mounted a concerted campaign to have these laws dismissed (Colors Rainbow n.d.).<sup>23</sup> Similar organizations mounting campaigns against official persecution are to be found in many countries in Southeast Asia.

Outside observers have nevertheless noted that much more activity in queer circles in Southeast Asia focuses on other sorts of matters: not campaigns for legal rights but rather dance events, fashion shows, and beauty contests. Boellstorff (2007) remarks, for example:

Gay organizing has rarely been oriented [in Southeast Asia] around political goals like changing antisodomy laws or establishing laws protecting gay men and other individuals with nonnormative sexual and gendered subjectivities from discrimination. Instead, gay organizing has historically focused on community-building events like drag shows. (Boellstorff 2007, 201)

Garcia (2008, 406), too, remarks on the absence of a gay liberation movement in the Philippines, and even when he recounts the many advances LGBT advocates have made there since the turn of the millennium, not all but most of those accomplishments are in media and the arts (Garcia 2008, 420–430).

I do not wish to minimize the importance or value of campaigns for LGBT rights in Southeast Asia. I support such efforts' goals wholeheartedly. Yet I suggest it worth considering the reason why other kinds of activities, those that imply performance, competition, and attention seeking, often prove more appealing to queer Southeast Asians than does political work. I would attribute the appeal of the former to an ongoing preoccupation with social prestige, a preoccupation queer Southeast Asians share with a great many other members of the societies in which they live.<sup>24</sup>

The contrast between political activism and drag shows turns once again on the matter of sameness and difference. Human rights campaigns suggest that everyone should, no matter how they differ, enjoy the same legal status. Their nonnormative gender and sexuality should make no difference. Competitive events in which individuals show off their abilities—at how effectively they perform their unexpected gender presentation—play up difference, the differences that order people by degrees of skill and so prominence. The competition that takes place in such events as the Muslim transwomen's beauty pageants Mark Johnson (1997) reports upon in the southern Philippines may well be pursued in a convivial (Boellstorff's "community-building") atmosphere. Yet the point is not, obviously, to point up similarities but rather to establish differences, in degrees of prestige, among the participants as they compete for prizes.

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23) Lynette J. Chua (2019) provides a nuanced account of queer rights activists in Burma.

24) The article by Dredge Byung'chu Käng (2017) discussed above makes vividly clear how much status concerns preoccupy his Thai informants.

Hierarchical assumptions always encourage people to compare themselves in a spirit of competition to others who are similar, and so in fact comparable, to themselves: to find ways to distinguish themselves, and so raise their standing in one or more domains. In emphasizing the desire of his Indonesian informants, whether *gay* (masculine presenting) or *waria* (trans women), for acceptance in Indonesian society, Boellstorff downplays how much such a desire for social prominence informs their thinking. His focus on their desires for belonging deflects attention from their desire to stand out. Yet an editorial in a gay zine Boellstorff (2007, 68) quotes makes the latter desire vividly clear: “Is it right that we [*gay* people] be ‘goat-class’ citizens, that only have sex? Of course not! There are many *gay* people who have reached the heights of status.” “Goat-class” (*kelas kambing*) in Indonesian refers to the *hoi polloi*, people of no social status worth noticing. They belong to Indonesian society as much as anyone else, yet they lack any claim to social dignity. What provokes the editorial writer’s ire is not that they are denied the sorts of jural rights that motivate activists to wage public campaigns. What he resents is that queer Indonesians are denied the prominence they deserve, or may have earned.

Boellstorff suggests that such large indoor events as drag shows exclude the public and so maintain queer people’s privacy. But political organizing is just as likely to promote community building as drag shows, and many queer fashion events are promoted very publicly. The two types of activities differ, rather, in that political activism is predicated on individuals uniting in pursuit of common goals, whereas drag shows and beauty contests are predicated on individuals competing with each other in pursuit of first prize. Indeed, what the latter performances suggest is the return of circumstances wherein the nonnormatively gendered can take advantage of that fact to distinguish themselves. Not only would they then be allowed to make public show of their inclinations without fear of scorn, they would also be able to make use of their nonnormative inclinations to try to win exceptional, if unconventional, prestige, much as their cross-dressing forebears did in earlier Southeast Asian history.

Because seeking social prestige (“social climbing”) is ideologically suspect in the view of people committed to egalitarian principles, my pointing to the importance it has among queer Southeast Asians, and its place in more general hierarchical understandings, will disturb some readers, who will see in it an outsider’s put-down. Or worse. The late David Graeber (2018) denounced the work of those of us anthropologists investigating hierarchy as reflecting a conservative move to protect the privileges of the powerful. Yet his wrong-headed critique illustrates the important point that although the label “egalitarian” has positive connotations in most contemporary academic as well as popular circles, and “hierarchical” has negative ones, such value judgments must be put aside if we are to gain a better understanding of what we observe in Southeast Asia.

## Conclusion

A recent backlash against queer people in Indonesia, precipitated in part by queer rights campaigns,<sup>25)</sup> raises a more general question: whether international scholars and activists are imposing their own visions of what is right or just on other societies, in what would then be only the latest version of Orientalism. Joseph Massad (2007), arguing along precisely these lines, finds nothing liberatory or positive in efforts to promote gay rights in the Arab world (cf. Gopinath 2005; Garcia 2008). To him, such efforts reflect yet another violent imposition upon Arabs of Western understandings of sexuality, ones that, like all the rest of the colonial and neocolonial ideas and practices he finds objectionable, serve the interests only of foreigners and a local elite that fraternizes with them. His critique has aroused vehement reactions, not least among activists who see in his argument an Orientalist snubbing of indigenous queer Arab activists' efforts (Amer 2010; Atshan 2020, 183–212).

I would try to clear a path through the firestorm Massad's writing ignited by suggesting that the current model of sexual identity promoted by gay rights activists reflects a more generalized take on difference, an egalitarian one. Under a hierarchical dispensation, difference is the building block upon which all social relations are constructed. So difference will always make a difference. What a great deal of progressive thinking, both inside and outside the West, holds to be true is, on the contrary, that difference should make no difference. Whether it concerns physical appearance, religious commitments, ancestral origin, degree of able-bodiedness, or anything else—including, of course, gender and sexuality—every individual's dignity and rights should be deemed of equal value. Which is why a general label for such convictions is egalitarian.

It is true that an egalitarian perspective on social relations has gained enormous persuasiveness among some segments of Southeast Asian as well as many other societies in recent decades. It is nevertheless not one that can be championed as correct or as a standard against which all other understandings should be measured. To do so would be to take it as a universally valid understanding, rather than as the logical (and historical) outcome of a set of assumptions that many people find convincing but still represents only one possible approach toward social relations. An egalitarian ideology is a cultural artifact like any other: it consists of a set of assumptions or understandings with a particular history, an ongoing one for that matter, just as notions of hierarchy vary and

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25) In recent years, an increasingly virulent homophobia has come to the fore in Indonesia, and the topic of recent measures directed against queer people there deserves attention in its own right. I cannot address it here but plan to do so in future (cf. Boellstorff 2007; Liang 2010; Thajib 2015; Davies 2016; Human Rights Watch 2016).

undergo revision and change through time. So an egalitarian perspective deserves respectful yet still critical attention, just as much as any other, including a hierarchical ideology, does.<sup>26)</sup>

Ultimately, egalitarian as much as hierarchical assumptions entail trade-offs, advantages in some respects and disadvantages in others. We (those of us committed to egalitarian values) must be ready to acknowledge that simple fact. To insist that only an egalitarian approach, whether to gender and sexuality or anything else, is valid is to rest assured, just like our forebears did, that we are in possession of the truth, one which we are sure the rest of the world will eventually come around to sharing. Or one that it is our responsibility to teach them to share. To insist, alternatively, that our others already share the convictions we hold dear and to say otherwise is to disrespect them means that our others do not enjoy the freedom to think or act differently from us, a time-honored but untenable position.

Although I myself share progressive academics' and LGBT activists' support for egalitarian principles, it is essential that we stand ready to grant other people the possibility of thinking differently from ourselves. Anything short of such readiness simply reproduces long-discredited habits of insisting that our others measure up to standards we have set for them.

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26) People particularly well positioned to appreciate the contrast I have described between hierarchical and egalitarian commitments, and whose work confirms or counters Massad's to varying degrees, are the primarily diasporic Asian scholars in queer studies whose work has grown very influential over the past couple of decades (Manalansan 2003; 2018; Gopinath 2005; Dredge Buyung'chu Käng 2012; 2017; Diaz *et al.* 2018, to name only a few). Their advantage stems from the fact that they are familiar with views propounded in conservative Asian societies, which are based on hierarchical assumptions, and yet they are also familiar with recent political and theoretical moves intended to promote egalitarian goals. Many of them living in the West, they tend, much like Garcia (although he has chosen to remain in the Philippines), to find traditional attitudes unacceptable, because condescending and demeaning, and yet contemporary ones also highly questionable, because "homonormative." They often take recent thinkers and activists to task for continuing to cling to a Western binary, since this fails to acknowledge the flexibility that traditional arrangements often allowed, even if only on the condition that non-heteronormative practices be engaged in very discreetly. But these scholars themselves display a deep-seated ambivalence toward difference: they often wish to lay claim to a privileged analytic acuity by virtue of their own eccentric positionality, that is, their difference from Western commentators, even as they decry all ideologies, such as nationalism, racism, sexism, etc., that use difference, rigidified in binary oppositions, to deny people equal rights.



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