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The Changing Space: Kathoey Self-expression and Interrelation behind the Curtains of Thai Popular Folk Theatre

LUXSNAI SONGSIENGCHAI

ABSTRACT

This paper is a part of the ethnographic research of transgender female performers in the 21st century. The study gives the account on a particular performance called "*Likay Sao-Praphet-Song*." *Likay* is a Thai popular folk theatre emerged in the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). Nowadays, it remains in popularity among the rural population and is appreciated amid working classes in the outskirt areas. *Likay Sao-Praphet-Song* or the *kathoey* version Thai popular folk theatre has received feedbacks of *likay* audiences very favourably since the first founded professional *kathoey* troupe in 2011. This paper mainly focuses on "the changing space" or the life behind the curtains of the folk performance stage. The paper aims to explore how the changing space marks a site of the articulation of rural *kathoey* identity. The ethnographic research for the study was conducted in October 2017 July 2018 based on participant observation and in-depth interview with performers from three professional *kathoey* troupes, including community members in central Thailand. I will argue that the characteristic features of this space show the overlap between privacy and publicity, which become a platform for *kathoey* self-expression and later creates the interrelation between *kathoey* performers and the communities where they perform.

Keywords: kathoey, transgender (MtF) performer, folk theatre, backstage, rural context, Thailand.

INTRODUCTION

The word *kathoe*y displayed in the same categories as “*hijra*” in India, “*pondan*” in Malaysia, “*bakla*” in the Philippines and “*waria*” in Indonesia. These words are local terms refer to a person who was biologically categorised as male at birth, but later classified themselves as female and recognised as third sex or neither man nor woman (Nanda, 2014). The term carries a specific set of historical meaning, mythology and also negative connotation in its culture. At present, the term “*kathoe*y” has been used in broaden meaning included hermaphrodite, male to female transgender, transsexual, transvestite, or effeminate gay male in Thai society. Some of them are not comfortable with being called *kathoe*y but prefer official terms as “*sao-praphet-song*” (a second type of woman), or “*phuyingkam-phet*” (crossed woman), or most variously called Lady-boy by foreigners (Totman, 2003). From the concepts of *kathoe*y as mentioned above shown that Thai society mixed the cognitions of sex, gender, and sexuality altogether.

Rural Thai areas are apparently home to a conservative Buddhist society; the sacred bond interweaves through the whole population under “the laws of karma.” In indigenous beliefs, *kathoe*y is not explained as sick or disordered that Western discourses of medicalisation have contributed to the transgender. It is neither caused by raising a boy with girls nor their own choices but rather a fate from supernatural causes as karma and cannot be cured. The karmic causes of being *kathoe*y are similar to the belief of being born with a disability. Thai people do not laugh at or ridicule *kathoe*ys, but rather sympathise or pity them because they might be a *kathoe*y themselves in the next cycle of life (Bunmi, 1986 cited Jackson, 2000). Although Thai people are quite tolerant towards *kathoe*y practices in general, the tolerance is not the same thing as acceptance (Jackson, 1999).

Likay is a Thai popular folk theatre since the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). Nowadays, it remains in popularity among the rural population and is appreciated amid working classes in the outskirts of the city. Theatrical elements of *Likay Sao-Praphet-Song* or the *kathoe*y version likay performance are quite similar to those in likay standard (Brandon, 1967; Smities, 1971; Virulrak, 1980), except the female characters were played by *kathoe*y performers. In other words, not a single woman can be found amongst the members. It is also slightly different from all-male cast production because the gender of performers as “*kathoe*y” is revealed and is highlighted in order to create an identity of the troupe. This “unique identity” is necessary for the survival of individual likay troupes in the contemporary period (Virulrak, 1995). In the aspect of the audience, it is obvious to see at least one *kathoe*y as a member of general likay troupes. However, they are lack of stage recognitions even high-performance skills. Therefore, the founding of *kathoe*y likay troupes not only put the spotlight on *kathoe*y performers as the professional likay artists but also provide the platform for an understanding of *kathoe*y identity in rural context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research applied ethnographic methods, which usually involves the researcher participating (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Using ethnography will be consist of seeking ‘converse’ and produce ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) as a prerequisite for analysis to understand what going on in rural *kathoe*y cultures, and the meaning of it to both oneself and the others through the performance. The study focuses on three professional *Likay Sao-Praphet-Song* troupes which have been continuously performed for more than five years; they are as follows:

1. Likay Soh. Samruamsil Look Banpan troupe
2. Likay Nhong Ohmmy Yodrak troupe
3. Likay Ka-Lhong Wattana troupe

The fieldwork was conducted from October 2017 to July 2018. It was taken place in rural areas in Ang Thong, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, Pathum Thani, and Samut Prakan; they are four provinces in the central of Thailand where *Likay Sao-Praphet-Song* usually performs. These provinces' areas are small but are well known as the backbone of likay communities. Moreover, they are surrounded by traditions and cultural heritage.

The data of the fieldwork based on the activities and expressions of *kathoe*y performers. It brought out individuality within the backstage area, and involved series of semi-structured interviews and personal communication with a range of people: including *kathoe*y performers, troupes' members, likay audiences, and community members.

Interview scripts, along with reflexive methods of note taking, video recording in participant observation will be useful for interpretation and analysis. Tools of observation and interviews included audio recordings, video recording, photographing, and note-taking. The consent forms were signed from participants to conduct interviews, documentation, and publish in the academic world.

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF THE CHANGING SPACE

Likay Sao-Praphet-Song uses a temporary stage from performance to performance. It is usually held outdoor of the temples, which are the centre points of rural communities. The power of religious beliefs in a rural community has built a reputation as a subcultural space which is sustained with a relaxed approach towards non-heteronormativity. The religious condition of the performing space becomes a significant factor that influences people not only to be able to tolerate but also accept *kathoe*y self-expression in public. Consequently, performing within the temple precincts protects the troupes from agitators and violence.

In theatrical aspects looks at space as a primary concern. According to Peter Brook in *The Empty Space* (1968), space is crucial in every performance because it connects the performers and the audience together. The theoretical term of space expanded than the physical building for staging a play in height, width, and depth. However, it refers to the place that occupied by the performers and the audiences (Ubersfeld, 1999) and creates the relationship between the performers, audience members, and between performers and audience through the theatrical event (Pavis, 2003). Therefore, the significances of the changing space do not refer to the physical place behind the curtain which performers use for dressing-up, but include expressions and actions of people that have an effect on the reception and interrelation of oneself to others as well.

The general concept of backstage is a private area of performers which is hidden from the audiences. It is the place where the performers rest and get dressed in their costumes. However, the characteristic of the changing space in *likay* performance welcome the audiences to visit and observe. Because this space is casually set up behind the front stage and is separated from it by the backdrop, and the three side walls are open. The space position depends on where the front stage display is, usually adjacent to the parking lot or temple walls. The height is about 1.20 meters from the ground, on the one hand, creating privacy among troupe members. On the other hand, it is visible to the entire audience to see from a distance what happens within this space.

Looking at the elevation view of the whole *likay* stage in the figures below, the physical characteristics of the changing space show the overlap between privacy and publicity, and it can simulate as another performing area. Space is cluttered with performance stuff, and the performers and all activities are caught up in someone's eyes, which seems to be a reality performance under dimmed light.

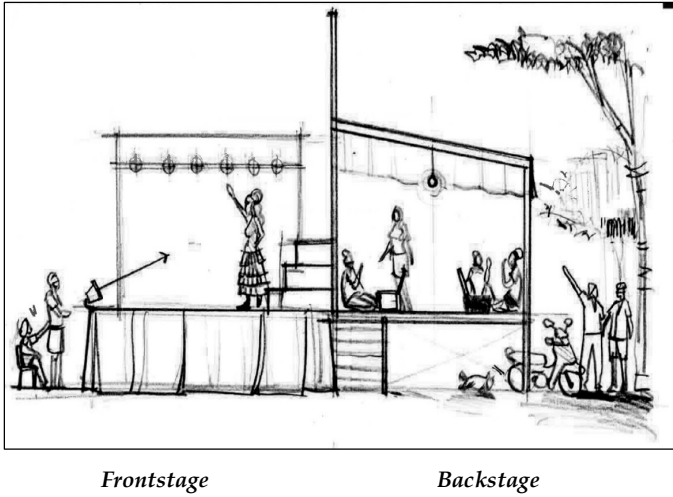


Figure 1: rough sketch shows the elevation plan of Likay Sao-Praphet-Song stage in the fieldwork (drawing courtesy: Luxsnai Songsiengchai)



Figure 2: The side view of Likay Sao-Praphet-Song stage shows the contrast of the front and the backspace. (Photo courtesy: Luxsnai Songsiengchai)

THE PRESENTATION OF LIFE AS KATHOEY PERFORMERS BEHIND THE STAGE

The performer who arrives early will occupy the space at anywhere they prefer; the troupe leader always sits in the middle; the famous actors usually sit at the edges of the stage for the contenance to greet with likay fans. Each actor creates their own space with their own mat; they put beauty box sets and costumes surrounded them. The intimate *kathoey* actors prefer to sit next to each other for chatting and sharing the news, experiences, or other life problems among *kathoey* members.

From the observation of the 31 performers who openly identified themselves as *kathoey*, only two of them have undergone breast augmentation and cross-dress in everyday life; five people are slight and slender, one member of this group takes female hormones regularly, and three of them wear their hair long. About 24 – or most of the *kathoey* performers – express their body under masculine appearance. For example, they have husky voices, are muscled, have dark skin, do not shave, and wear men's clothes. Out of performing likay, most of them still working in the agriculture and labour sections. Those with a body which is not close to being the ideal or perfect female body are defined by Thai society as '*kathoey kwai*' (*kwai* means buffalo). Even though *kathoey*s generally do not like to be called *kathoey kwai*, still they are happy to see themselves occupying a space in the spectrum between femininity and masculinity without cutting each part off. Probably, poverty in rural areas forces them to spend the day making a living rather than obsessing about feminine beauty.

The gorgeous elements and the stylisation of likay form help performers to cover their masculinity and create feminine appearances. For example, they shave off their mustaches and apply heavy makeup to assist in creating the female face and fair skin, put on long-hair wigs and wear a long-layered skirt to cover their genitals and hairy legs. This space seems to be very

busy when the show time is about to start. Kathoey performers really enjoy competing others with wonderful makeup and colourful costumes. They use the term “*mong long*” (literally means win the crown) to praise the most glamorous *kathoey* of the day. The “beauty masks” fulfil their self-satisfaction in beautiful appearances, which is not able to do in everyday life. Actors do not mind to strip in front of others, also, help others to change their costumes for the next scenes. The uncertainty of the *kathoey*'s body back and forth between masculinity and femininity happen along with being on and off stage for *kathoey* performers, and the process of body transforming was showing to the people who observe this area.

The sexual orientation of *kathoey* performer is individuality and was noticed from the partner whom they accompanied and introduced to off-stage members. The power of intimate friendship gave them opportunities to share and reveal their sexual orientation through conversations. Consequently, the new terms: such as “*lesbian-kathoey*,” “*husband-kathoey*,” and “*earthworm-kathoey*,” are created and being used amongst them to refer to the specific sexual desires of each person.

THE INTERRELATION BETWEEN KATHOEY PERFORMERS AND THE AUDIENCES

Likay Sao-Praphet-Song is always sponsored by a host and is open for free to be a part of religious occasions and temple fairs. People in the community usually gather for these events. Attending a *likay* performance gives people the powerful sense that they are part of the community. Therefore, people in the audience are defined as the “members” rather than “consumers” who have to pay for the admission of *kathoey* show in an enclosed theatre in tourist areas. Moreover, the charismatic appeal of *likay* actors: with elegant manners and glamour on stage, represented the “ideal of human images” and paved the way for actors to be given celebrity status (Mitchell, 1991).

Involving with actors, therefore, give a feeling to likay audience as they are close to famous stars. The audience's participation and the sign of admirations to their favourite actors do not happen only to the front stage, by giving the money clipped-garlands, but also engaged with the changing space or the backstage as well. This paper emphasises two types of audiences, which are:

a) Mae Yok or Female Patroness

The audience who visit backstage is predominantly middle-aged women called '*mae yok*.' Bringing food or souvenirs is a kind of regular practice to encourage their favourite performers before the show. They spend approximately 10 minutes greeting and watching the performers dress up, making comments about the *kathoeys*' makeup or gossiping about someone. These *mae yok* are kind of happy to make conversation with *kathoeys* performers and then leave to occupy the audience seats. Unlike seeking for the romantic relationship which regularly found in likay cultures, these female patronesses adore *kathoeys* performers as a mother kinship. Though most of *mae yok* have less experiences related to *kathoeys* practices, social relationship with *kathoeys* performers tends to continue with a high level of acceptance in everyday life.

b) The Observers

The process of body transformation shows that one's body can be created, removed and repeated to perform gender. This moment is appreciated by the audience who are observing this changing space. Surprisingly, the old men and middle-aged men are the groups who would spend time observing thoroughly what was happening within the changing space from a distance. In fact, these male group typically do not pay attention to the likay performance, usually, drop by and leave the performance before its end. Nature of male group is not comfortable to

engage with *kathoeys* in day-to-day life and have lower tolerant towards *kathoeys* self-expression when comparing to the *mae yok* group.

However, in the field notes of this study, there are approximately 5-15 male audiences appeared near the space throughout each performance. Sometimes they had come alone, and sometimes in a group. Mostly they acted like they were searching for a convenient area to park vehicles or they simply walked around smoking or surfing the internet on their phones. They take photos and talk among themselves with activities for gender switching. Spending time to observe the changing space was a clear sign that the subject of *kathoeys* had become one of their interests.

All actions within the changing space are not only captured by people in performance space, but also the audiences from any parts of the world. Oftentimes, *kathoeys* performers use Facebook Live and Instagram to broadcast their activities while they are dressing up. The audiences who are watching on social media can directly interact with *kathoeys* and give a reaction to what is happening behind the stage in real time.

CONCLUSION

Likay is a genre of folk performance which evokes participation from its audience as being a part of the performance than just a passive watcher. This paper emphasizes the engagements between performers and audiences behind the likay stage as it should also be in concerns in order to understand the reception of the community towards *kathoeys* performances. The characteristic features of the changing space show the overlap between privacy and publicity. *Kathoeys* performers are comfortable to illuminate their gender expression and real self. The permission for outsiders to visit and to keep an eye on what is happening within the changing space create the great social relations of mother kinship and give the role of the audience as

an observer. Consequently, this space presents an opportunity for community members, who may not be familiar or have less chance to connect with *kathoey* identity in daily life, to engage as a springboard to understand *kathoey* identities in the communities where they perform.

I would like to conclude by noting that the understanding of *kathoey* identity through the off-stage site is a part of the whole image which I try to examine as *kathoey* life in likay troupes in a Thai rural context. However, the characteristic features of likay performance can break the walls to reveal the true self of an individual *kathoey* within the gender spectrum and build bridges to social relationships within the community where they perform. In other words, the performance of *kathoey* identities and the social relationship through folk theatre does not limit itself only to the stage but starts before the show itself, in the changing space behind the curtains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to pass my gratitude to The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) for the funding of my research project. I also would like to thank for the warm welcome and hospitality of three *kathoey* troupes during my fieldwork in Thailand.

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