

Social Acceptability of Gay Monks in Thai Theravada Tradition¹

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Abstract

Controversies over “gay monks” have lately become widespread among Thai Theravada Buddhists. In social media, gay monks and novices are often condemned by conservative groups as destroyers of Thai Buddhism, while at the same time they are defended by human right activists and social liberals on the grounds that religion should open opportunities to LGBT individuals. Some people seek to resolve this question by looking to the wording of the canonical Pali Buddhist scriptures concerning ordination. This paper chooses to leave that particular issue of textual hermeneutics unresolved. Instead, it attempts to outline the degree to which gay monks are accepted in Thai society. However, the majority of Thai Buddhists today do not view gay monks as problematic. This paper argues that the general acceptance of gay monks among the less “fundamentalist” and “elite” classes stems partly from the way that Theravada Buddhism has been localized in Thailand. Moreover, the secular idea coming with the global stream facilitates Thai Buddhists to open up for the sexual equality. Specifically, according to local belief and practice, monks are normally expected to function primarily to serve their patrons’ needs through ritual performances such as funerals, ceremonial chanting, and receiving alms. Interestingly, gay monks can serve these functions just as well

as non-gay monks. In addition, many of these monks are good at managing interpersonal relations with lay devotees and high-ranking monks.

Keywords: Buddhism, gay, gender, modernity, monk

1. Introduction

The issue of gay monks (and novices) is not new in Thailand, the country where LGBT's right and activities are also growing fast in Southeast Asia. Regarding to the statistic provided by the National Office of Buddhism, there are approximately 300,000 monks and novices (National Office of Buddhism, 2016). This number is quite static for a decade (2005-2015). In fact, it is not easy to assume the total numbers of gay monks because their sexual behaviors are very complicated and diverse. However, most of discussions on the gay monks are primarily based on two themes; monastic codes and human's rights. While the first group maintains that gay monks, as suggested by the Buddhist scriptures according to their interpretation, are prohibited to join the monastic community, the second group, who is influenced by folk Buddhism and the Western knowledge, appreciating ritual performance and individual decision, supports gay monks to play roles in the religious space.

Chaay Varadhammo (2013), the only Thai monk who received the University's degree, tries to solve this problem by searching the primary sources, Pali canon, in order to support the gay's rights. His conclusion is similar to Gross Rita (1993), who proposes that religious texts are very diverse and opened for different interpretations, for instead, gender is one of many issues that is treated with bias by male religious leaders. This paper argues

that Thai people can accept the gay monks because of the special locality of Thailand namely; (1) the negative view on LGBT was not found in the Thai history, especially in religious and cultural spaces. As a result, gay monks are condemned by individual Buddhists who consider such girly behaviors as improper. In addition, the anti-gay monk movement is never officially established in Thailand. (2) Globalization, the new wave that comes with freedom and human's rights partly, encourages Thai people to appreciate individuals' genders and decisions. This new group of people, some may identify themselves as atheists, view the gay monk as an alternative gender rather than psychological symptom.

For previous studies, Coleman, Philip Colgan, and Louis Gooren (1992) had studied the male with cross-gender behavior in Burma. As a Buddhist country, the cross-sexual people are always condemned. However, according to the local belief, someone is believed to be possessed by a female *Nat*, *Manguedon*. As a result, his behavior changed to be the female manner. However, the one who plays a vital role in rituals will be respected. Gay with *Nat*'s sanction is therefore considered to be more positive. It may not be wrong to claim that gay monks in Thailand are also accepted because of their important role in the religious space. However, it should not be forgotten that gays in every space, political and educational spheres for examples, according to the Thai context, are increasingly accepted.

Interestingly, Penny Van Esterik suggested that the Buddhist doctrine contributes fixed gender identities in Thai society. The concept of Non-Self and Impermanence have discouraged essentialisms and facilitated a greater fluidity of notions of normative masculinity and femininity. It also brings to particularly fixed binary gender identities (Esterik, 2000: 6). This hypothesis is fascinating. However, the elaborate example is needed. In consequence, this

paper scrutinizes the daily activity of gay monks and lay devotees who really interact in both folk religious and secular spheres. That is because, according to Swearer, Buddhism in the Southeast Asian people's perspective should be considered as folk religion rather than philosophical principle as depicted from the Pali-scriptures (Swearer, 2003: 9-10).

Regarding to the global influence, Peter A. Jackson (2009) employed Anderson's concept of *Imagined Communities* to explain the modern Thai queer identities. The development of a national level market and the rise of print capitalism, newspapers for example, are a key source of modern ideas of nationhood and the support of modern Thai gay and *kathoey* identities (Jackson, 2009: 22). Moreover, Siam's royal elites responded to Western's criticisms by announcing the standard of dressing to Siamese men and women which looked differently from each other. From the 1890s, the Thai style of dressings has been standardized and consequently becomes a tool to identify the citizen's gender which is not opened for the third sexual identity. Nowadays, Thailand has been receiving both global streams; (1) modernity, a stream that the gay is seen as mental problem, and (2) postmodernity, a stream that the gay is considered as an alternative gender. In this paper, people who are influenced by the first stream seem to condemn the gay monks, while people who are influenced by the second stream do not. In addition, the local belief practiced by villagers seems to support the gay monks in Thai society.

Methodologically, this study is based on ethnography. Data was collected and analyzed from the author's experience in the monastic life for a decade (2002-2015). Participant-observation was conducted both in the public rituals performed by gay (and non-gay) monks, and conversations with them in the private spaces.

This paper is organized into four parts. It begins with Introduction, which provides some backgrounds about gay monks (including novices) in Thailand and previous studies. Second, Conceptual Framework, the concept of globalization and localization are briefly demonstrated. Third, Khun Lamyai and Phra Vaseline are depicted as two case studies. At this stage, some specific characteristics of gay monks, norms of folk Buddhism in Thailand, and interactions between gay monks and lay devotees will be elucidated, which will provide the reasons why gay monks are not regarded as problematic and not excluded from the monasteries. In addition, some discussions are added in this part to trace the history of Thai Buddhism which is influenced by several streams. Finally, all main issues are briefly restated in Conclusion.

2. Conceptual Framework

This paper aims to understand the globalized face of Thai society through the case of gay monks in Theravada Buddhism, therefore the concept of globalization that effects religious aspects will be employed to analyze my case studies. In general, globalization is perceived as a Western stream that dominates many parts of the world. However, in terms of religion, globalization does not unify all kinds of faiths, but it supports religions to have their own version of globalized theology. Notably, the global stream also comes with the trends of freedom and democracy, it consequently views the condemnation of different faiths as aggressive act and cultural colonialism (Roberts and Yamane, 2012: 382). Religious minority is sometimes protected. Moreover, due to the global stream, new religious movements (NRMs) are also formed in order to respond to such new wave. This phenomenon can be called, according to Eduardo Mendieta, invented religion, because faiths in every

place are changing and adapting over times (Eduardo Mendieta, 2010: p. 52). Buddhism in Thailand is of course included.

For more understanding, globalization in this paper does not refer to the bigger stream that dominates local beliefs without compromising and adapting. Localization is therefore a new technical term invented to fill that gap. According to Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013: 376), locality is dealing with socio-spatial scales which are (1) not given a priori, but rather socially produced; (2) simultaneously fluid and fixed; and (3) fundamentally relational, meaning that each community always interacts with other communities. Based on this definition, globalization refers to the process of social interactions that local people are able to select, abandon, and adapt some substances, meanings, and symbols for their communities.

It is also necessary to refer to Andaya Barbara's work, "Localizing the Universal: Women, Motherhood and the Appeal of Early Theravada Buddhism (2002)." While other scholars believed that Buddhism in Southeast Asia began to play important roles among the high class people, monarchy in particular, she argued that Buddhism was firmly established among the villagers first. Vessantara Jataka is a story which is often reproduced through the ritual in order to transmit and maintain the mother's role in communities. Buddhists attend this ceremony because it fulfills the family's relationship rather than to glorify the king's power as suggested by Patrick Jory (1996). According to her hypothesis, Theravada Buddhism was localized to function for the villagers' lifestyle. In this paper, the social acceptability of gay monks will also be explained as a localized stage that Buddhism and the global streams can be adapted to serve the locals' need.

3. Social Acceptability of Gay Monks

This part demonstrates two case studies; Khun Lamyai and Phra Vaseline, who are identified by others and also identify themselves as gay (Thai: *krathoey*). In both cases, brief biographies in their monkhood, their relations with lay devotees and high-ranking monks, will be elucidated. Khun Lamyai was from the poor family, maintains in the monastic life longer than Phra Vaseline, who was from the middle class family, and who already retired from monkhood in 2015. The family's status of monks is in fact likely to be an important condition to determine the monks' decision in living the monastic life. Whereas Khun Lamyai graduated M.A. in Public Administration from the Buddhist University, Phra Vaseline had graduated only secondary school. As a result, their social services are also different corresponding to their educational levels as we will see below.

3.1 The Story of Khun Lamyai

Lamyai is a gay monk in Southern Thailand.³ His behavior is similar to a girl. He entered the monastic life at the age of thirteen as a novice (Thai: *samanaen*) and pursued the secondary school in that particular temple. There were totally 90 students in his temple in 2002, and about 10 of them were recognized as gay (*krathoey*). There were of course some gay monks and novices who became those *krathoey*'s partners. Because their gay behavior was not clearly expressed and did not attract the devotees' attention, this paper intentionally skips those kinds of monks' stories. However, not all *krathoey* monks clearly expressed a gay behavior in the public sphere, therefore some novices, in lay devotees' eye, were not considered as gay.

Lamyai was one of them who extremely identified himself as krathoey, and who I was familiar with because we were in the same Pali class. Actually, Lamyai is not his original nickname, it was entitled according to a very popular song at that time, Khun Lamyai, the song telling a story of an ordinary girl who was from the rural area but tried to pursue the modern fashion. In terms of education, Lamyai was good in English and Pali subjects. Regarding to the GPA in each semester, he was a number one student in his class. In other students' view, both seniors and junior, he was a funny gay due to his girly performances. Interestingly, he was familiar with all teachers. In this regard, some teachers, both clergies and lay men were gossiped in having sexual relationships with him.

Lamyai became a monk when he was fully twenty years old. After graduating 3 year-program B.A. in Political Science from the Buddhist University, he was immediately approved to teach English subject in the Clerical Secondary School, his old school. Not only playing role as a teacher, he also worked as a secretary of the abbot and a secretary of the school's principal. He was well known not only by his secondary students but also students' parents who participated in the orientation program and other activities. Therefore, Lamyai was often invited to perform religious rituals in the devotees' homes, while other monks are rarely requested.

In terms of his lifestyle, Lamyai can sing most of pop-country songs. He also can imitate both male and female voices. His singing and dancing helped entertain other monks and novices. Though singing a song is prohibited by the monastic codes, it seemed to be funny and acceptable in the senior monks' eye. Moreover, it finds that Lamyai and his group of gay monks were talkative and be able to discuss any issue without hesitation. They also warn their members in the desirable manner. For example, nine monks were invited

to arrange a wedding ceremony. Three of them were gay and they were likely to fall in love many handsome participants till some of them out of control. Lamyai, as a senior gay, warned all members to be more conscious by a sentence “we have to know the proper time and place.”

Aspiration words can always be heard from his mouth. He often encouraged monks and novices not to disrobe. The monastic life, he said, is the best way to serve Buddhism. Lay livelihood must involve with hard work and family members, look at me, I am single and can work hard for Buddhism. Not only the motivating statement having shown above, Lamyai, as a gay monk, perceived himself as a supporter of Buddhism in the way of encouraging monks and novices to continue their monastic lives and study Buddhism. This perception contrasts to those who view gay monks as destroyers of Buddhism.

Nowadays, Lamyai, as a temple’s secretary and a school teacher, can arrange the annual Program of Samanera Ordination which is joined by around 30 candidates. He also became one of the MCs in various clerical meetings in his province. Whenever gay monks are condemned by social media and TV news-reporters, Lamyai and his clerical team are never warned by the abbot. Moreover, the level of respect that lay devotees give him seems not to decline. Lamyai’s case explicitly shows that Thai Buddhists, both monks and lay people who are familiar with the temple, do not view gay monks as a problematic issue.

3.2 The Story of Phra Vaseline

On the contrary to Khun Lamyai’s case, Vaseline had joined the monastery when he was already 22 years old, in 2012. Of course, Vaseline is also not his original name. It became his well-known title since a bottle of Vaseline was found in his room. Due to the late participation in the monastic

life, Vaseline was full of worldly experiences. According to the interview, the time he first became gay cannot be specified, but he never loves a girl. Before ordination, he worked at 7-Eleven, went to Bar Gay every night and also consumed drug. His salary was thus not enough and he must gain supports from his mother and older sister. Finally, all family members required him to ordain on the ground that Buddhism would change his behavior. Notably, the term “behavior” here denotes only the acceptable acts, meaning the habit of saving money, responsibility for one’s life and so on. He was not expected to quit a gay behavior, as mentioned by his mother.

Vaseline was not successful in learning. As previously noted, he graduated only the secondary school with the low GPA. After three years of monkhood, he still could not pass any Dhamma-exam. However, it is undeniable that his working skill developed so fast. He ordained in Wat Phrahammaka, Pathumthani province, and chose to stay there for two years. His duty was responsible for food preparation for a thousand monk twice a day. Of course, a total 10 members in his group were gay. He was so functional that his queerness is relegated to the sphere of private and protected. In the following year, he was recommended to arrange the ordination program before the Buddhist Lent in Nakhon Sri Thammarat. He chose my temple as a center and began to persuade lay men to join the program. All monks and novices were well taken care by him throughout the three-month program. He satisfied all members by different kinds of beverage at night, and occasionally delicious food from the famous restaurants before noon. Notably, whole money spent for those beverages and food were from his own pocket. Due to his middle class family, THB 15,000 was monthly transferred to his bank account.

One of important policies of Wat Phradhammakaya is to initiate the connection with the local high-ranking monks in order to gain supports, or at

least to make sure that those monks would not protest Wat Phradhammakaya's programs. At this stage, Vaseline became familiar with the district clerical leader (Chao Khana Amphher) and was invited to become a permanent member of his temple. Due to Vaseline's strong body, he alone could help prepare every ceremony that arranged in Chao Khana Amphher's temple. When his own program was ended, he moved to stay with Chao Khana Amphher and generally accompanied him to several invitations. Eventually, Vaseline became well-known among monks and lay devotees not different from Chao Khana Amphher within few months. In that particular district, a temple was lacking of an abbot, so villagers invited Vaseline to replace that position. Though he was a Dhammakaya's member, relationships with Wat Phradhammakaya after the three-month program was still going on, but most villagers did not know this because of his flexible behavior. However, he decided not to receive that position on the ground that becoming the abbot would reduce his time and capacity to serve the Chao Khana Amphher.

Vaseline spent a lot of time with mobile phone, of course chatting with his boyfriend(s). Everyone, including Chao Khana Amphher, knew this but they viewed it as a personal business. As a protector of Buddhism, he joined the monk groups to march at Phutthamonthon, Nakhon Pathom, in February 2016, for requiring the government to issue Buddhism as a state religion in the constitution. During the *Kathina*, an activity that Buddhists gather money to support the temple's projects, Vaseline always collected a lot of money, THB 40,000 minimum, from his rich relatives to support the temple. By so doing, he could satisfy the abbots. Meanwhile his family was also pleased with his meritorious behavior. He could change from a selfish to a moral person. Unfortunately, Vaseline decided to disrobe and currently helped his older sister to do the business.

3.3 Additional Discussions

It can be seen that the temple becomes one of various destinations of those Buddhist parents who want the changing of behaviors of their sons. Notably, they do not expect their sons to quit being gay. The case of Phra Vaseline is an elaborate example for this claim. Indeed, those gay monks will be educated, trained in monastic manners and ritual performances, and finally become desirable monks who spread Buddhism in different contexts, based on their ability.

Probably, gay in the religious space can be accepted because the monastery, which is recognized as a solely male area, needs somebody to play the nurturing role. Newly-ordained monks want someone to pay a special attention. Young novices also need someone who plays with them as a friend or mother. This kind of request can be completely fulfilled by gay monks. Notably, I do not claim that anyone who tries to play this role must be gay. As a consequence, their tangible works become a key index to make them acceptable. Moreover, to accompany and serve the old high-ranking monks is considered to be very boring task. On the contrary, most of gay monks are pleased to do this. This is possibly a reason why high-ranking monks never want to eradicate those gay monks from the monastery though they are condemned by social media and TV news-reporters.

It can be argued that the acceptability of the gay monks among Thai people is in the high level. When those gay monks extremely express their girly behavior in the public sphere or have sex, which is prohibited by the monastic code, they will be condemned and eventually expelled from the monastery. However, such case can be rarely seen in Thai society. In Lamyai's case, he was once accused to have sex with a certain guy. About 4 villagers complained that he should disrobe for the sake of the reputation of the

monastery. Nonetheless, most villagers in that area disagreed on the grounds that “anyone can make mistake, being gay is a personal life, Lamyai contributes a lot of benefits to our temple and village.” Nowadays, Lamyai is staying in that temple and his reputation is increasingly popular.

It is often forgotten that Theravada Buddhism in Thailand (and elsewhere) is not a pure doctrine, which totally based on the Pali scriptures. Not only in Thailand, but religion must always be localized to function for the local needs. However, there are some efforts to purify Buddhism, Vajirayana Bhikkhu (King Rama IV), Buddhadasa and P.A. Payutto, are prominent actors. According to Rachelle Scott, authentic Buddhism widely claimed by many monastic orders, is in fact the modern Buddhism of the nineteenth century. Its main aim was to distinguish authentic Buddhism (which was newly reinterpreted) from its popular practices. Notably, this form of Buddhism emerged within contexts of colonialism, Christian proselytization, and emergent discourses on the nature of religion, reason, and progress (Scott, 2009: 8).

As mentioned earlier, modernity has been changing the face of Thai Buddhism to be more reasonable, authentic, and attaching the Pali texts, whereas daily activities of Buddhists are still involving with local beliefs; ancestral worships, fortune telling, respecting spirit guardians, and so on. Folk beliefs are therefore accused as distorted Buddhism. For those who are influenced by the modernist idea seen to have a duty to moralize and purify other whose behavior seems to destroy their authentic doctrine. Gay monk is one of those who has been victimized. However, the stream of modernity in Thailand is not strong as the local practice, which people need monks to perform a ritual rather than investigating monks’ behavior through the monastic codes. In addition, the new stream of postmodernity that comes with the human’s rights and freedom help to shape the Thai people’s perspective to view gay behavior as a personal right. This idea also penetrates the religious space.

4. Conclusion

Gay monks are not considered as problematic in Thailand, where Buddhists follow Theravada tradition. That is because of two reasons; (1) Pre-modern Thai society had been shaped from the local beliefs, which monks were needed to fulfill the religious rituals. Anyone who was able to accomplish the villagers' needs would be counted as a good and desirable monk, no matter he would be a gay or involving with the supernatural power. However, when Thailand encountered with the modern stream, authentic and rational doctrine were employed to define Theravada Buddhism, King Rama IV, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, P.A.Payutto, and so forth, tried to purify Buddhism by differentiating it from the local beliefs. Something is not based on the Pali texts would be accused as the distorted doctrine. Gay monks are also condemned due to this point of view even though interpretations of the text are diverse and still blurred. However, this stream is not strong as the folk practice.

Moreover, it is also overwhelmed by the next stream, postmodernity, which gay is perceived as an alternative gender that one can behave as long as he does not harm other. At this stage, gay monks who are educated in Buddhist knowledge, trained in ritual performances, and are good at managing interpersonal relations with lay devotees and high-ranking monks, can make various contributions to Theravada Buddhism. In addition, abbots, other monks, and lay devotees, view gay monks as particularly predisposed to nurturing, meritorious acts. Their queerness would then not merely irrelevant, but would actually become a central component of their meritorious, effective, and respected positions within the Sangha. In short, gay monks in the religious space are protected rather than excluded as generally assumed. Case studies of Khun Lamyai and Vaseline are excellent examples.

Endnotes

- 1 This paper was presented at the 1st International Symposium on Thai Studies ‘The Globalized Face of Thai Studies’ on June 16-17, 2016, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. The author must thank to Arnika Fuhrmann, Ph.D., the keynote speaker who also provided various useful comments.
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- 3 In Thailand, the term “gay” is commonly used to identify a man who loves a man. His behavior is like a boy. For those who behave like girls or lady boys are called krathoey. According to these definitions, Lamyai and Vaseline should be mentioned with the term krathoey. However, for the sake of understanding of those who are not familiar with the Thai context, this paper identifies these two lady boys with the term gay. In addition, though this paper does not refer to many other kinds of gay monks, it should be noted that if the lady boy monks are accepted, the monks who behave as real men must not have any problem in terms of their genders in the Buddhists’ eyes.

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