

## **The Transgender's Sexual Identity Construction in a Cultural Practice Community: A Case Study of the Ganesh Chaturthi Ceremony**

Titiratana Wetsiriyanan, Viyouth Chamruspanth and Somsak Srisontisuk  
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Khon Kaen University, Thailand

---

**Abstract:** This study presents the transgender's sexual identity construction in a cultural practice community. This case study was part of the researcher's dissertation on creating meanings of Ganesha in the modern society of NorthEastern Thailand. The scope of this case study was the phenomenon at the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony in Nakorn Ratchasima Province in the Northeast of Thailand. This ceremony is annually held at shrines by believers in the Lord Ganesha. In this cultural practice ceremony, there were interactions among different groups of ceremony participants who shared the same faith. The focus of the case study was paid to the transgender who gathered in small groups. In each small group, they tried to construct and express their sexual identity through the ritual ceremony to be noticed and accepted by the whole assembly of the participants.

**Key words:** Transgender people, Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony, faith, ceremony, Thailand

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

Discussing on gender issues, we generally focus on masculinity and femininity which are classified by nature. Due to the belief that gender couldnot be changed, sex issues are related to thinking approach, belief and expressions. Any sex expressions which are apart from being male and female are stigmatized as abnormal or transgender. This sexual identity differs from the two major genders in the society. Individuals with this alienated sexual identity then have been classified as a minority or marginalized group in the society (The SouthEast Asian consortium on gender sexuality and Health in 2004). However, an identity is not something generated by nature but by cultural construction over a period of time and always varies from time to time (Sedgwick, 2006). The complexity of this alienated identity pushes the transgender to have a lower social status than males and females because the thinking approach on sex is still under an ideology of gender classification by nature (Stephen, 2001; Kathryn, 1997).

Until the present, the transgender in the Thai society have been regarded marginal people who are deteriorated and stigmatized by the society. Though, the modern society has been trying to create a new image of the transgender by giving more rights and chances equal to those of the majority group, the transgender are still perceived negatively by the society almost all the time. In the Thai society, the transgender tend to express their

identity with hope for acceptance from general people. The acceptance is, however, still limited. As transgender people are deteriorated in social negotiation they face marginalization in every social dimension including a ritual space which is an example of the community of cultural practice.

In this study, the data collected from the field study at the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony, an important ritual of celebrating the birthday of Ganesha, held in Nakorn Ratchasima Province, Thailand is presented. The focus of this study is the approaches and patterns that the transgender people employed to create and express their sexual identity in that ritual space.

**Research objective:** To investigate patterns and outcomes of sexual identity construction of the transgender in a ritual space, the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony.

**Research questions:** What were the patterns and outcomes of sexual identity construction of the transgender in a ritual space, a case study of the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony?

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research was aimed at investigating qualitative data on patterns and outcomes of sexual identity

construction of the transgender in a cultural practice community, a case study of the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony.

The target group was purposively selected based on the major objective of the case study. They were the participants of the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony held at the Vishnu's Shrine in Nakorn Ratchasima in the Northeast of Thailand. The participants were divided into three groups old, new and general believers. The old group referred to those who had had faith in Ganesha for >10 years. Those people prayed and worshipped Ganesha everyday and participated in the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony every year. The new group included people who had believed in Ganesha for 1-2 years. They prayed and worshipped Ganesha regularly. The general group was those who were interested in Ganesha.

As the research focused on the transgender only, the researcher selected ten transgender men from the three groups to be key informants.

**Research instruments:** To elicit data from the ten informants, the researcher conducted participatory and non-participatory observations as well as in-depth interviews.

**Observations:** The researcher conducted observation guidelines such as general physical ritual space, objects used in the ritual ceremony and grouping of participants. In addition, non-participatory observations were also performed including social behavior observations such as discussions within the transgender group and activities conducted by the transgender group during the ritual.

**Interviews:** The researcher conducted an in-depth interview by using semi-structured interview guidelines as a data collection tool. The interview guidelines were designed based on the research objective.

**Focus group discussions/field notes/audio-recorder:** These tools were used to collect data while the researcher was conducting the focus group discussions.

After the data collection, content analysis was done carefully to analyze the phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Who were the transgender:** This question led to rethinking of characteristics of the transgender. These were referred to as superficial images of males who have alienated behavior patterns from ordinary males in the society such as people who dress like women, who have

the similar physical characteristics to women's. These characteristics are what most people in the Thai society imagine or define when they think about the transgender.

In the past, we might refer to this group of people as "Kra Toey" (in the Thai language) which meant ladyboys. Jackson has defined the word "Kra Toey" as a person who has both sexual organs of males and females in the same body. Later, the term "Kra Toey" was used to describe to conform to the English word "ladyboy" as a man who took on the characteristics of a woman within himself (Winter and Udomsak, 2002). The term "Kra Toey" has been influenced by the Khmer culture. To clarify, in the modern Khmer culture, the word "Kra Toey" means being differences. The study of Totman (2011) proposed a meaning of "Kra Toey" as a class of people who have sexual conditions which differ from the norm (Non-normative). This could be said that the meaning of "Kra Toey" covers people who have their own mental and actions which are opposite to their original sex. To deeply consider the meaning of "Kra Toey", "Kra Toey" people have been given negative value of viewpoints. Moreover, when compared with norms of the society where only males and females live, "Kra Toey" then become a difference in the society.

As the meaning described above, "Kra Toey" is a tool of marginalization because the idea of human sexuality is on being male and female only. Kirati Sankatiprapa (2549) argued that "Kra Toey" is an alternative choice which is limited under the choice of being male and female, so "Kra Toey" is devoid of cultural identity in gender context. This thinking approach pushed "Kra Toey" having no space in the society and compared with the original gender all the time. This caused "Kra Toey" to be exploited in the society unavoidably. By the way, the another word "transgender" is used to describe individuals who define themselves as a person who has the gender role opposite to their anatomical sex. The attempts to create a new sexual identity were influenced by social elements such as families, schools, workplaces, friends and girl/boyfriends. The transgender were also socially forced to express their identity by the homosexual and even the transgender themselves. For these reasons, the transgender tended to gather to fight for their own identity and to build their space in the society (Plummer, 2002).

**Transgender in community of practice; Ganesh Chaturthi:** During the field study, the researcher participated in Ganesh Chaturthi, a ritual ceremony to celebrate the Lord Ganesh's birthday at Nakorn Ratchasima Province. It is believed that on this day, he will come down to the earth to give the blessings to believers who have faith in him within the ritual area

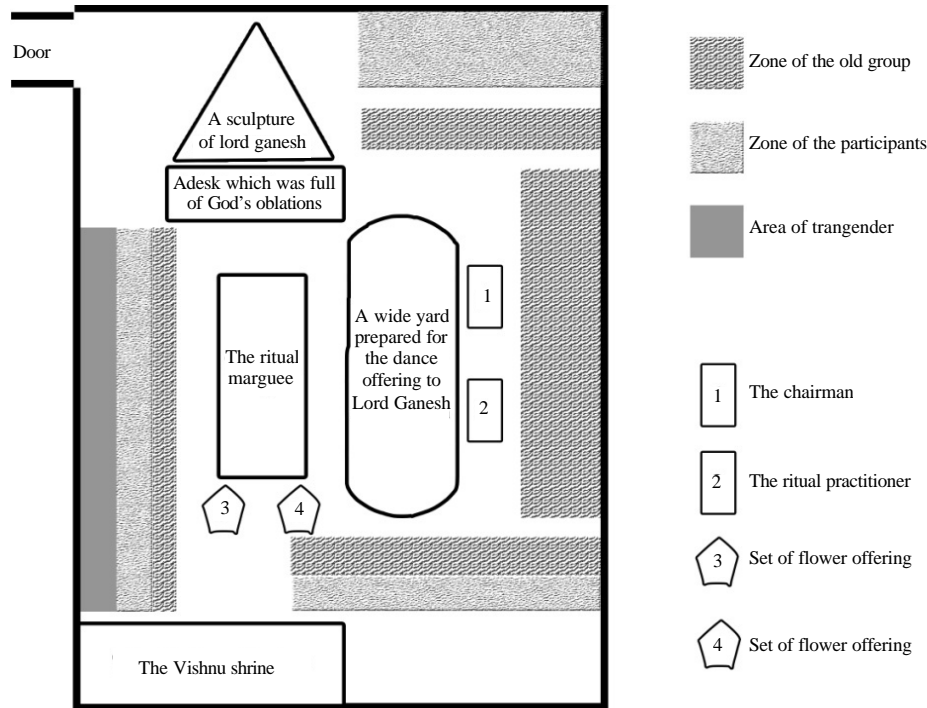


Fig. 1: Mapping of the genesh chaturthi

which is regarded as a space of community of cultural practice. The researcher found various patterns of relationships and interactions amongst groups of people in that community of cultural practice. They believed that the sacred ceremony accidentally brought them there. The researcher noticed the target group and divided them into the old group, the new group and the general believers (Fig. 1). In the cultural practice field, the researcher particularly focused on the new group because this was the group of people who experienced the faith of the Lord Ganesha for 1-2 years. The group consisted of individuals with various origins, gender types, ages, careers and etc. Nevertheless, the researcher had a special interest in the transgender. It was seen that while most of the new group of women and men were participating in the ritual and running the activity quietly, the transgender group were trying to reveal their identity. This posed a question for reasons why the transgender intended to express their identity in this important ritual.

**Position of the transgender in the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony:** The Ganesh Chaturthi is a community of cultural practice which gathers various groups of people to interact with one another. Roughly, there were two groups of the participants; the ritual practitioners and the ritual observers. In this case study, the group of the ritual observers who had faith in the Lord Ganesha was

focused. In the ritual space, the researcher found ceremony elements which were well-set. The upper area of the space was close to the entrance. The participants could find a sculpture of the Lord Ganesha turning the face to the east. In front of the Lord Ganesha was a desk which was full of God's oblations. Next to the desk was the ritual marguee which consisted of large and small pictures of the Lord Ganesha and his family surrounded by sets of flower offerings. In the south of the ritual space was a wide yard prepared for the dance offered to the Lord Ganesha. The chairs were set in this area for the ritual chairman, ritual practitioners and observers who were defined as the old group. The seats for the other groups were set behind the old's seats. The group of the transgender was likely to sit in the last two rows of the seat area. In addition, the researcher also found that the ritual practitioners gave the priority to the old group in every ritual activity.

The researcher had opportunities to attend the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony which was held in Bangkok for 2 times; at the Ganesh Foundation operated by the grand master (Brahman of the Royal Court) and at Thepmontien Temple (a Hindi temple) operated by the scholar (an Indian who directly experienced in the study of God worshipping). The researcher also classified the groups of the ritual participants in Bangkok into 2 groups which were the practitioners and the observers. However,

in the ritual at Nakorn Ratchasima, the researcher found many mediums in the ritual. Mediums expressed themselves outstandingly in the ritual and danced in every activity performed with singing and playing music. While participating in Bangkok, the researcher found the medium group attended the ritual quietly or not performed any outstanding behaviors in the ritual. The researcher conducted an interview with several mediums and found that most of them came from up-country Thailand including the North, the Northeast and etc. They attended the ritual to observe activities within the ritual. Most of the mediums were male and female in the middle age. The age of the transgender mediums was between 18-23 years old. There were 4-5 transgender mediums. The researcher observed that mediums who sat in this area were dressed in white just like the transgender mediums. They would not dress in colors and sat in their seat area quietly to observe the sequence of the activities. The transgender dressed in white because this place was not an area where they could express themselves. They thus, dressed like the others who were attending the ritual.

The Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony held in Nakorn Ratchasima Province was led by main practitioners who supervised the Vishnu shrine (a Thai man who supervised the Vishnu shrine, the ritual location). The researcher noted that the old group who were mediums would dress white clothes. Some of them dressed like the Indians. When the ritual song began they sat up and danced within their seat area or stepped forward to the center of the ritual marquee. Another interesting point was that the new group who were transgender dressed colorful Indian style clothes. The transgender group danced playfully at the center of the ritual while males and females of the new group sat in their seat area quietly observing the ritual (3-4 persons danced in a short time and sat down and observed quietly until the end of the ritual). It could be seen that the square next to the ritual marquee was set for the main practitioners and the ritual chairman and the old group. The new group and the general group sat in the position surrounding the old group. The movement of the transgender is a scene that the researcher focused on. It was interesting to study why the new group of the transgender stepped out of their positions to dance at the center of the ritual which was the area of the old group. They danced and stepped close to the chairman and then showed their respect to the chairman. The chairman would respond to the transgender actions with nice smiles. This implied that the chairman allowed the transgender to step into the sacred space at the marquee. When the transgender received permission to access the sacred space, a scene of a power contest occurred. The old group would stare and gossiped about

the actions of the transgender. The actions contrasted with the traditional ritual. This is to say the sacred space was a place for the chairman and the practitioners, and the old group only. The other groups were not allowed to access the space. When the music rhythm started, the transgender danced with playfully styles like in the traditional Indian ceremony. Compared to the old group, it was found that they would sit quietly. Some danced in the sacred space with Thai traditional dancing style. The dancing actions of the transgender received the interest from the others because they danced in the Indian style and dressed like the Indians.

While the ritual participants were focusing on the transgender. The old group would copy and change their dancing actions to conform to the transgender's. This could be analyzed that the contest of the ritual space was done successfully by the transgender. This was because they were accepted by the old group. The transgender chose to use the traditional Indian dresses and dancing patterns as tools to contest the space for their group. In addition, a scene of the space competition was also displayed as a view of dancing between the local dancing (traditional) and the modern dancing (Indian style dancing). Up to this stage of the ceremony, it had seemed that the transgender succeeded in occupying the social space for themselves. They were obviously accepted by the old group of believers. This was shown through the way the old believers danced in harmony with the transgender.

#### **Patterns of identity contest of the transgender in the ganesh chaturthi ceremony**

**The contest of power between the old group and the new group (transgender):** The old group adopted a conservative approach to construct their own space and identity in the community of practice (Ganesh Chaturathi). In contrast, the transgender, the new comers, performed social interactions in the ritual space to negotiate with the old group by participating in every ritual activity. For instance, 2-3 days before the ritual took place, the transgender would volunteer to help with the preparation of the ritual such as decorating sets of flowers in the ritual space. In addition, the transgender also created new sets of interactions within the ritual by showing respect to the Lord Ganesha sculpture and then danced and stepped into the marquee. At first, they were gossiped about their abnormal actions while accessing to the sacred space. After a while, the transgender were interested in by the ritual participants. The old group then started changing their dancing style to conform to the transgender's dancing.

In conclusion, the transgender used two strategic patterns in the space negotiation with the old group. They walked to the ritual chairman to ask for his permission to access to the sacred space in the marquee and used their own potential participating in every activity of the ritual.

**The contest of power among the group of the transgender:** The researcher found an interesting point. That was the group of the transgender defined themselves as mediums of the Goddess Uma (the wife of Shiva and the mother of the Lord Ganesha). When realizing who the mediums of the Goddess Uma were some transgender were respected by the others who were the mediums of the secondary gods. This was because the goddess Uma was the wife of Shiva and the mother of the Lord Ganesha. The identification of god's mediums among the transgender reflected the stratification of the transgender group. If some were incarcerated with greater gods, they had greater priority to define an interaction among the group. An interesting point was that someone defined themselves as the Kali's medium (another posture of the Goddess Uma, who was powerful and fierce sometime). This might be a reflection of his identity which was accepted by the society in his real life. Being the Kali's medium would symbolize power and receive respect among the transgender group.

#### **Outcomes of the identity contest of the transgender in the ganesh chaturathi ceremony**

**Identity expression:** The identity expression of the transgender was done within the ritual space. They dressed with clothes similar to the dress of the Indian which was colorful and glittering motifs while most of the new group dressed with white shirts or skirts like the other ritual participants.

This is a god's birthday. When we come to his ceremony, we have to dress colorful clothes. He is an Indian god, so we will dress like Indians today, said Jane Rattikarn (alias) from the new group during an interview on 19 September 2012. He is an Indian god and I am his medium. So, I have to wear an Indian dress to celebrate him. God's dress must be beautiful, said Orn Mongkolchai (alias) from the new group during an interview on 19 September 2012

Most of the transgender used dressing to express their identity in the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony. They dressed with colorful costumes and wore an ankle bracelet like Indian people and make-up as well. They could dress any colorful and beautiful clothes as they desired within the ritual space because they defined this area as a special

area for them. They also dressed similarly to god's dressing to identify the identity of being god's medium. In addition, the researcher also found an interesting scene that the transgender tended to be mediums of female gods. They never incarcerated with male gods because the transgender used the status of being female god mediums to emphasize the female status to them.

**Network construction and business opportunity:** Due to the fact that the ritual space was a sacred space which gathered groups of people from various areas and careers to do activities in the same day, it resulted in the occurrence of a community of cultural practice. The transgender group benefited from this space to construct networks and opportunities of business.

This ritual caused me know many other mediums of the Uma. Firstly, I thought there were a few but actually there are more than I expected. I'm glad to see them, said Suai Jaisa-ard (alias) from the new group during an interview on 19 September 2012. I worked as a florist. The Lord Ganesha is a god of beauty, so he will protect me and my career, said Chompoo Apichaiwong (alias) from the new group during an interview on 19 September 2012. I'm a medium of the goddess Laksamee. She is so kind and beautiful. I dressed just like in the picture of hers. If you have any trouble, please come to see me. The goddess can help you said Tom Sukjai (alias) from the new group during an interview on 19 September 2012

The transgender group used this community of cultural practice to construct their networks since these networks were sources for money, knowledge, market access and etc. They also used the ritual space to create business opportunities for their benefits. The ritual space was used to publicize their careers or businesses they were working in to other ritual participants. In addition, this ritual space also provided convenience for them to meet new clients in the future.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Many social spaces create opportunities for those who are interested in to investigate and reveal the practice of power relations. The researcher was interested in the cultural practice community under the issues of the identity contest of the transgender in the ritual ceremony, the Ganesh Chaturthi. The researcher found two patterns of identity contest of the transgender including power bargaining between the old and the new groups. The transgender used two strategic forms in space negotiation

with the old group by walking to the ritual chairman to ask for the permission to access to the sacred space in the marquee and used their own potential participating in every activity of the ritual and the power bargaining inside the group of the transgender by identifying god's mediums among the transgender for the stratification among themselves. In addition, the outcomes of the identity contest of the transgender in the Ganesh Chaturthi ceremony were completed through dressing and dancing in the Indian style and creating networks and channels for their business opportunities.

In addition, the researcher also found that the old group used a traditional approach to construct their own space while the transgender or the newcomers used social perspectives to construct their own space. They participated in every activity within the ritual. The transgender did not use the traditional approach to ask for the space to express their identity but, they chose to set their own new social status to support their identity construction and opened the space for their group.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my deepest sincerity and gratitude to Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC), Khon Kaen University, Assistant Professor Dr. Viyouth Chamruspanth and Associate Professor

Dr. Somsak Srisontisuk, my advisors for their support in this research. I would also like to give special thanks to every group of the informants for their cooperation in providing information about the Lord Ganesha and the ritual ceremony.

#### **REFERENCES**

- Denzin, N. and Y. Lincoln, 1994. Handbook of Qualitative Research. 2nd Edn., Sage Publication Ltd., Thousand Oaks CA. USA., ISBN: 10: 0761915125, pp: 1143.
- Kathryn, W., 1997. Identity and Difference. Sage Publications, London, USA., Pages: 358.
- Plummer, K., 2002. Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds. Routledge, London, England, Pages: 247.
- Sedgwick, E.K., 2006. Axiomatic: The Cultural Studies Reader. 6th Edn., Routledge, London, USA., Pages: 269.
- Stephen, L., 2001. Gender, citizenship and the politics of identity. *Lat. Am. Perspect.*, 28: 54-69.
- Totman, R., 2011. The Third Sex: Kathoey: Thailand's Ladyboys. Souvenir Press Ltd., London, England, Pages: 196.
- Winter, S. and N. Udomsak, 2002. Gender stereotype and self among transgenders: Underlying elements. *Int. J. Transgenderism*, 6: 2d-2d.