Title
Ladyboys and Good Sons: Contemporary Gender Identity in Northern Thai Trance Dance

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Founded in the 13th Century as a kingdom, the Lanna region of northern Thailand stretches across parts of northern Burma, northern Laos, and a small portion of southern China. Lanna society retains its own alphabet, dialects, as well as visual culture. Additionally, Lanna spiritual practices are largely Animist in origin. Belief systems and rituals that go back possibly over a millennium and refer to humans’ relationship with and dependence on spirits of the dead are found in various forms throughout the region. Prominent among these is the Chiang Mai region, including the cities and surrounding areas of Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang.

Each year in the late Spring and early Summer months leading up to the Buddhist Lent, dozens of trance dance possession rituals, called *Faun Pii*, literally “spirit dance,” take place that pay homage to royal, communal, and hero spirits within family, clan, and social lineages. Faun Pii are believed to descend from ancient, pre-Buddhist, Mon culture rituals.

In this presentation, I will give a basic overview of how Faun Pii operates and outline some essential findings from my pilot fieldwork this past summer on the traditional background and contemporary gender identity formation in the current population of mediums participating in Lanna trance dance.

There are three types of spirits in Faun Pii: Pii Mod, Pii Meng, and Pii Jiao Nai.

Pii Mod are generally spirits of people those who were not in positions of power. They tend to hew closely to familial and/or clan lineages and are most common in the areas around Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, the two major cities in Lanna and the former capitals of the Lanna Kingdom.

Pii Meng are spirits of members of the royal class and are most popular in the Lampang area, east of Chiang Mai.
Pii Jiao Nai are spirits of heroes and leaders. While Pii Mod and Pii Meng are found in traditional practices, Pii Jao Nai is a relatively recent phenomenon in the last couple of decades. It contains a number of less traditional aspects, such as the ways in which a medium enters into a trance state, the architecture of the ritual tent, music, and the level of interaction with attendees outside of the medium group.

Generally, Faun Pii rituals take place in tent-like pavilions constructed of natural or man-made materials. After preparations take place on-site during the preceding two or three days, anywhere from a couple to a few dozen mediums come together on the day of the ceremony, which usually lasts from mid-morning to late afternoon.

One by one, when the moment is right and they feel a spirit entering them, the other mediums slip into trance. Throughout the day, mediums will dance in their trance states, some mildly, others boisterously, depending on the type of spirit that they are possessed by. Spirits will also talk to each other, especially during breaks in the music, generally in a familiar tone, typically making philosophical pronouncements, prophetic statements, and even ribald jokes.

As described by Ajarn Vithi Phanichphant, a scholar at Chiang Mai University who specializes in Lanna art and culture, the act of possession in Faun Pii is propitiatory and social:

> You present yourself as the Maa Kee, the horse for riding...Otherwise the spirits can’t enjoy drinking, eating, or dancing. They have no body, so they can use yours. Offering yourself is a gesture of being grateful. It’s also being honored by society.

In terms of gender identity in Lanna Faun Pii, there are a few basic influences that I’ve found in my research so far.
For one, Lanna society has been traditionally matriarchal as well as animist since before the introduction of Buddhism between the 6th and 13th Centuries AD. Thus, women have traditionally been responsible for leading spiritual duties within the family and, to a certain extent, the community.

Thai, and especially Lanna, people generally believe that there are spirits associated with major physical elements in nature, such as trees, lakes, and rivers, as well as every man-made structure, especially dwellings, that need to be actively honored and respected. Thus, there are typically specific spirits associated with family and clan lineages with mediums. These have always needed to be treated with the same respect, which meant that women were responsible for leading rituals to accomplish this purpose. Faun Pii is a major example of this type of ritual.

Males, on the other hand, were largely in subservient roles when it came to matters of the spirit. One reason was because they traditionally moved into their wives’ homes upon marrying and were forced to adopt the spirit of their spouse’s family.

As Theravadan Buddhism, a strict form of the religion generally disallowing for female participants, became the major religion and mainstream spiritual practice in Thailand, men found a new spiritual home where they were allowed to be in control. A clear gender split occurred with males taking control of civic religious duties and females maintaining their purview over domestic spiritual practices. The temple for men, the tent for women.

SLIDE:
(text) Female domestic role
(image) female medium at altar

Since the spirits that most people had interaction with were connected to the domestic lair, where women maintained control and led all communal interaction with the spirits, Lanna mediums over the centuries have traditionally been overwhelmingly female.

SLIDE:
(text) Youngest daughter - Single and virginal (or celibate) upon initiation

In Lanna, it is traditionally the youngest daughter in a family that inherits the medium and/or spirit lineage. She is therefore also expected to stay at home, even after marrying. Upon moving in, her husband will officially change guardian spirits, as it were, from his family’s to hers. While not every family has their own spirit, for the ones that do, the spirit ostensibly transfers only to the youngest daughter. Moreover, when the youngest daughter inherits her family’s spirit, she must still be unmarried and a virgin, as this state is considered the best for receiving the permanent connection with the spirit. She may also remain unmarried and celibate as well.
Thus, until recently, Faun Pii had always been a predominantly female practice, with males mostly allowed in service roles, such as musicians, cooks, and attendants. In the context of Faun Pii, for a few days a year, women were allowed to take on stereotypically masculine behavior not considered acceptable in daily life, such as smoking, drinking, dancing wildly, and speaking frankly. Additionally, many of the spirits that women are possessed by have been male. This has also led, therefore, to a mixed masculine-feminine identity for mediums within Faun Pii practice.

So, now we have the current generation of Faun Pii practitioners. As you may have noticed from the video and photos, the majority of the younger participants are male. In addition, nearly all of them are gay.

While a confluence of many socio-cultural factors has brought about this change, my current research points to the interaction of at least four general factors. The first two factors, contemporary female and gay male identity, exist in an extremely symbiotic relationship.

With the rapid modernization and industrialization of Thai society in recent decades, long-standing gender roles have begun to erode, including those traditionally under the influence of the family, such as mediumship. As depicted by musicologist Ajarn Thitipol Kanteewong, being a medium has become more stigmatized for young women but less so for young gay men:

The real transformation from mother to youngest daughter was destroyed by modernization and education. They send their daughters to school, and they’re told that dancing like this and being a medium is uncivilized. Western education doesn’t respect this. Also the girl leaves home to go to school, so who else will
stay home and care for the spirit? Gay sons for some reason are able to spend more time than other sons to focus on these activities.ii

Even more than in the West, gay men have reached a level of acceptance in mainstream Thai society beyond that of most countries. The most “out” individuals are even referred to as a third gender. Krathoey, or ladyboys, as they are generally referred to in English, are transvestite and/or transgendered gay males of all ages. In both large cities and small towns, krathoey are generally free to express themselves and are a somewhat integral part of everyday society. In the Lanna region, they also make up a sizable percentage of the gay male medium population.

The third factor is greater acceptance of male mediums in Faun Pii. Males have always been occasionally allowed to be active mediums in the ceremony, but the young generation is primarily male, which was not the case at all until recently. As Ajarn Viti puts it, in the past, with stricter social roles, a man was expected to become a monk: “Something much more prestigious than a medium. But…there were those who had been defrocked or disrobed… (with) all the knowledge of witchcraft from his time being a monk, and he gets out and acquires more black magic…This kind of person is quite interesting. You know how to handle the spirits, handle the Buddha, how to handle everybody, so you become an important or elite member of society.”

So we see lay males with medium abilities acquiring increased social status, and, thus, active acceptance in non-Buddhist, spiritual practices.

A fourth factor is the increased sexual freedom that has taken place in Thai society, much as in the rest of the world. Ideally, mediums are considered and expected to be celibate and asexual within the context of their role as such. However, of course, in contemporary society, as people in general have greater freedom to engage in, not only traditional relationships, but non-traditional forms as well, there are many mediums who are either married, in a relationship, or sexually active. Thus, whether or not a community involved
in Faun Pii is aware of a given medium’s relationship, sexual activity status, or sexual preference, this is a subject that is generally left unaddressed in public, essentially a do not ask, do not tell policy.

As Ajarn Thitipol points out, the androgynous quality of gay men also predisposes them for medium status: “Nowadays, there are more out gays. They also have more freedom to take on these roles. Spirits cannot go direct to the straight man very easily. Half man, half woman is better for the spirit.”

So then, given these factors, what happens? Sons who are straight are expected to move out, and, if they get married, they lose the family spirit. Unlike straight men, gay men are not necessarily expected to leave home for marriage. They are free to develop their femininity and connection to their home family spirit, putting them in a position comparable to the traditional one of the youngest daughter and making them ripe for potential inheritance of their family’s medium lineage.

As Ajarn Thitipol describes, “If there is no daughter, and the youngest son is gay, then he takes (her) place in that lineage. You see good (Faun Pii) dancers in northern Thailand, most are the youngest gay sons of a family if not the youngest daughter.”

Ajarn Viti explains that this also allows these individuals to do double-duty, as it were, in both animist and Buddhist practice:

You happen to be a male in the family, and you really don’t know how to make your way out of that…but you’re not a full female, and therefore I think…to show that you’re somebody, that’s when the gay boys start to take that position, being both male and female. The female role…means to take care of everything in the house. But if they have a boy and he’s gay, then he can…both service the ancestor spirit and also become a monk…You can take care of the spirits and also be a community leader in a Buddhist culture.

Conditions:
- Fewer females staying home, becoming mediums
- Gay men more accepted in society
- Unmarried gay men considered asexual
- Gay men who stay home take on more social domestic roles
- Men more accepted as mediums
- Sexual activity more common, thus increasingly unacknowledged for mediums as still ostensibly celibate

Immediate result:
Gay men treated as celibate or asexual accepted as mediums

(describe slide text – conditions and result)

SLIDE:
(text) Increasing result on Lanna medium population: Younger generation of Lanna mediums is primarily gay males
(image) Gong dancing at Dhara Dhevi

Thus, the overall effect of the factors I’ve described on the Lanna medium population is that its younger generation is composed primarily of gay males and increasingly so.

SLIDE:
(text) Further results:
• Fewer lineage-holding mediums
• Erosion of traditional forms (Pii Mod and Pii Meng)
• Greater public appeal (Pii Jao Nai)
• Potential for increased confluence of spirits within mediums

Finally, while I don’t have to outline the underlying rationale, the circumstances related to this population shift point toward a few basic conclusions. Because an increasing number of young mediums are not only gay males but non-lineage mediums as well, the lineage-based practices of Pii Mod and Pii Meng are slowly being eroded. The majority of new gay male mediums are based in Pii Jao Nai. Pii Jao Nai practices and ceremonies are also less complicated than Pii Mod or Pii Meng and have concomitantly greater public appeal.

There is also the possibility for greater confluence of spirits within individual mediums.

SLIDE:
(text) Ping Pong – A case study in contemporary Pii confluence
(image) Ping Pong at wedding

A case study in this area is a medium from Lampang, east of Chiang Mai, named Ping Pong, an artist, dancer, local village administrator, and gay man in his mid 30s.
Ping Pong has two spirits associated with him, Jao Noi, a young prince, and Jao Fah Mengrai, a king from Chiang Mai. Both are Pii Jao Nai and came to him without any direct familial inheritance. However, the latter king spirit also happens to be an ancient royal spirit associated with Ping Pong’s family from previous generations, and thus a Pii Meng as well. Because of this, Ping Pong is also considered a powerful medium with shamanistic healing powers, high standing in the regional society, and carte blanche to participate in all three forms of Faun Pii.

SLIDE:
(image) Young gay male medium at altar w/old female medium

Thus, by being able to take on either Jao Nai spirits unaligned with family or clan lineages and/or Mod and Meng spirits from those lineages as well, gay male mediums in Lanna Faun Pii represent the potential for an altogether new breed of medium, one in which the spirits of young and old alike, ancient and contemporary, possibly regardless of hierarchy, may share communally in the honor and celebration of earth, humanity, and life itself.

Thank you.