

# **Comparatively Queer: Homosexuality And Transgenderism In Southeast Asia**

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I would like to thank the organizers of this panel and this conference for giving me the chance to speak today. I apologize that due to a busy schedule at my university, I haven't had time to translate this talk, so I'm giving it in English. I also apologize that my talk has a different title than appears in the program: the title is now "Comparatively Queer: Homosexuality and Transgenderism in Southeast Asia." This talk part of the concluding chapter of a book I'm working on called "Prefigurations: Queer Futures of Anthropology," which will be published with Duke University Press. What I'll do today is provide a quick description of two parts of the chapter. Because this is a project I'm still working on, I'd be thankful for any questions or comments you might have, so please feel free to grab me after the session if we run out of time, or email me.

The first thing I want to do is look comparatively at homosexuality and transgenderism in Southeast Asia, drawing upon my own research in Indonesia and the research of the many excellent scholars and activists working in the region, many of whom are here today. Because I want to keep my comments brief, I will set forth just two points that seem significant to me when you look comparatively at homosexuality and transgenderism in Southeast Asia.

Second, I want to step back and talk a bit about the idea of comparison itself, which as we can discuss later if there's time, is intimately linked to notions of cosmopolitanism. I want to suggest that comparison can imply "queering" received boundaries, and also that the idea of "queer" implies comparing against whatever is taken to be "normal"; the idea of "queer" relies upon the idea of "normal." In other words, comparison is queer, and queerness is comparative. Comparison is often identified with those in power, with a distancing gaze that



orders and controls. But I want to ask how comparison itself can be queered, and can thereby contribute to intellectual projects and activist coalitions in the study of sexuality.

With these two goals in mind, I will turn to my first topic, looking comparatively at homosexuality and transgenderism in Southeast Asia. I think Southeast Asia is a particularly interesting place to do comparison precisely because it's so obvious that the region is an artificial creation. All regions are artificial creations of course, but compared to "Africa" or "Europe," for instance, the concept of Southeast Asia is particularly recent, dating to the late nineteenth century but only really becoming formalized in the 1940s with the creation of the Southeast Asia Command during World War II. The fact that regions are artificial creations, forms of comparison themselves in fact, doesn't make regional comparison impossible, but more possible, while reminding us that comparison is always a temporary act that can produce useful knowledge without the need for trying to turn that comparison into an unchanging typology.

When we look comparatively at homosexuality and transgenderism across Southeast Asia we see many interesting similarities and differences. I am not going to talk about so-called "traditional" homosexualities and transgenderisms today because, while interesting, I believe them to be overemphasized. I want to talk instead about relatively new subjectivities in the region.

The first of my two comparisons today concerns striking similarities in the subjectivities and social lives of male transvestites across the region. Across Southeast Asia, we find subjectivities like waria or banci in Indonesia, kathoey in Thailand and Cambodia, mak nyah or pondan in Malaysia, bakla or bantut in the Philippines, and so on. All of these subjectivities share striking features which they don't share with many other forms of male-to-female transgenderism around the world, like hijras in India or travesti in Latin America.

First, the contemporary versions of these Southeast Asian male transvestite subjectivities all appear to have formed in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, not in the context of ritual or religion but colonial urban networks of commodity trading and lower-class entertainment. They are what Peter Drucker has called "commodified transgender" subjectivities.



Second, there are common tendencies across all of these subjectivities. People with these subjectivities almost never see themselves as a third gender, but instead as men with the souls of women. While some have sex change operations, most do not wish to have such operations. They prefer sex and relationships with men seen as real or normal men, though when they have sex with these men they often take the penetrative role. They're associated with beauty and salon work, and more generally with the idea of transformation, which has significant implications when globalization is so present in people's lives. They're relatively accepted in their communities in the sense that they can usually live their lives as a transvestite, yet are typically considered less than desirable members of society.

Something else these male transvestites share is that their subjectivities are strongly shaped by national borders. What Benedict Anderson terms the "specter of comparisons" operates at a national level in this regard. In other words, in most cases these subjectivities are seen as existing throughout Indonesia or Thailand or the Philippines, but not at a regional level. For instance, typically a waria in Sulawesi assumes there are waria in Sumatra, but isn't quite sure what exists in Thailand.

Let me now turn to the second of my two comparisons, which concerns striking similarities in the subjectivities of female-to-male transgenders across the region, and the possibility of an emerging regional "tomboy" subject position. Across Southeast Asia, we find people seen by themselves and others to have been born as women, but who live as masculine women or even social men in some sense. While for male transvestites we find nation-specific terms like waria, kathoey, and pondan, for these female-to-male transgenders we overwhelmingly find across Southeast Asia terms derived from the English term tomboy. There's much that tomboys across the region share. The similarity in terminology reflects the fact that tomboy subjectivities are much more recent than male transvestite subjectivities, and appear to date from approximately the 1970s. This doesn't mean that there weren't persons before that time born as women who saw themselves as masculine, but that there wasn't a recognized social category for such persons, beyond some possible local exceptions like calalai' in southern Sulawesi. Across the region, tomboys tend to desire sexual and romantic relationships with women seen as real women or normal women, though some partners of tomboys identify themselves as lesbian in some fashion. There's a common pattern that many tomboys don't



like to be touched sexually by their female partners; they focus not on their own sexual pleasure but the sexual pleasure of their girlfriends. As Megan Sinnott has argued, this is fascinating because the idea of setting aside one's own sexual pleasure for that of your partner is seen as a stereotypically female trait in Thailand and much of Southeast Asia, so there's more going on here than simply tomboys acting "like men." Despite the similarity in terms for "tomboy" across the region, it appears that as is the case for male transvestites, tomboy subjectivity is strongly shaped by national borders, and this is an important topic for future research.

I only have time to discuss these two examples of comparison. I would like to discuss some interesting patterns in the lives of gay men in Southeast Asia, including the lack of a notion of "the closet" for many gay men in the region and the role of marriage to women; I'll can talk about this in the question and answer period or informally later if you wish.

Now let me move toward my conclusion by offering a few brief comments about how queerness is comparative and comparison is queer. As noted earlier, Benedict Anderson, one of the greatest scholars of Southeast Asia, has spoken of "the Specter of Comparisons" in this book of the same name. In this book, Anderson extends the analysis of nationalism he began in the book *Imagined Communities*, where he noted that nationalism "lives by making comparisons." While religions can imagine a world in which everyone is, say, Christian or Muslim, and kingdoms can imagine having all humankind as subjects, Anderson noted that "no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind." Drawing upon the work of the Indonesian novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Peng Cheah further explores how national consciousness is linked to comparison. Cheah recalls a moment in Toer's historical novel *Jejak Langkah* (Footsteps) when the main character, Minke, reflects on comparison:

Happy are those who know nothing. Knowledge, comparison, makes people aware of their own situation, and the situation of others, there is dissatisfied restlessness in the world of comparison [*gelisah dalam alam perbandingan*].

Cheah notes that this comparative impulse at the heart of nationalism is only strengthened by transnationalism: quote, "the gradual defamiliarization of our daily lives by globalizing processes has made comparison an inevitable and even unconscious perspective." Following Toer and Anderson, Cheah terms the "ground" for "the world of comparison" as an "anxious restlessness."



How might this spectre of comparison a queer spectre, a spectre whose impulse to compare is “grounded” in being marginalized from the normal, from the heteronormativity that is so crucial to nationalism, a marginalization that marks one as not really belonging, and thus free to move across boundaries, to haunt, to compare?

In her book *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, Terry Castle takes up this issue of queerness and haunting by asking how “the lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night.” For Castle, the figure of the lesbian haunts the Western tradition as that which is denied yet present: “the ghost, in other words, is a paradox. Though nonexistent, it nonetheless *appears*.” By naming this specter a queer specter, I wish to place comparison at the center of queer studies and queerness at the anxious center of comparison. This is a methodological move but also a political one, because the moment of comparison makes certain kinds of coalitional work possible. Comparison is a device for producing difference, and is therefore also a device for producing similitude.

Since 1896, when Franz Boas delivered a paper entitled “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,” anthropologists have played a crucial role in reframing comparison.

Building upon these anthropological approaches to comparison, we can, use Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” to talk about the idea of “situated comparison,” a way of looking at comparison not as the position of domination or authority, but a position of coalition building, listening, and learning. For instance, the existence of male transvestites and tomboys across Southeast Asia does not indicate some shared genetic trait, since sexuality and gender are not directly coded at the genetic level, but instead gives us important information concerning how different spatial scales like local, national, and regional shape subjectivities and cultures. As a result, comparison can challenge dominant narratives of globalization. Comparison can therefore be useful in advocating for the importance of studying sexuality and gender, as well as advocating for the equal rights worldwide.

