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# Femininity in Transition: Sex, Gender, and Sexuality Experiences of Thai Transgender Migrants in Europe

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Many queer foreigners perceive Thailand as a gay paradise. They have an image of the country as having a tolerant attitude towards LGBTIQ+. However, for Thai LGBTIQ+, Western countries evoke wealth, progress, and acceptance where people with a different gender identity or sexual orientation can fully enjoy their rights. Thai LGBTIQ+, like men and women, strive to go abroad seeking a life they dream of. This article aims to give an account of one of these marginalized groups' experience that is often neglected by both Thai and Western transnational scholars. Based on an ethnographic study in four European countries with 26 Thai transgender informants, this article argues that migration needs to be considered as a search for one's well-being, not only in terms of economic aspects, but also in terms of sentimental or emotional needs – that is, the possibility of living their gender and being socially and legally accepted. In this transcultural context, not only do people move across borders, but they also export with them perceptions and understandings about sex, gender, and sexuality from their home country. These aspects are renegotiated and rearticulated in the new socio-cultural milieu of the host countries in order to maximize these new conditions for their own interest. They may or may not reveal their transgender identity, depending on contexts, social interactions, and whom they are dealing with. Their transgender identity can offer them advantages, particularly in the realm of sex.

**Keywords:** Kathoey and Migration; Queer Migration; Sexual Migration; Thai Migration in Europe; Thai Transgender



## INTRODUCTION

According to Thai social representation, Western countries evoke visions of wealth, development, and modernity (Kitiarsa, 2010). Going abroad becomes one of the ultimate goals for many Thai people, men, women, and *kathoeyes* – or Thai transgender male-to-female (MTF) persons – as well. *Kathoeyes* strive to go abroad where, they believe, people with a non-normative gender identity or sexual orientation can fully enjoy their rights and regain social recognition (Pravattiyagul, 2021, p. 85). This image of Western countries has been

maintained and reactivated constantly throughout many mythical and fairy-tale-like stories disseminated by the media as well as by word of mouth among peers, families, and communities. This kind of image still nourishes the Thai imagery of Western countries and their desire to look for possibilities to migrate (Lapanun, 2019, p. 14-15).

For many decades, Thai-Western transcultural studies (Butratana & Trupp, 2021; Cohen, 2003; Sunanta & Angeles, 2013) have been dominated by the theme of *mia farang*, literally Thai wives, transcultural marriages and relationships between Thai women and Western partners. These studies had contributed greatly in terms of theoretical perspective changes and understanding of transnational intimacy in an era of globalization. Yet, the non-heteronormative population had never been integrated in this mainstream thought. This article is part of the pioneer studies that investigated Thai Queer migration in the European-Thai transnational and transcultural context (see also Scuzzarello & Statham, 2022, this issue), with the aim of challenging these common stereotypes and taking into account experiences of those who were left behind.<sup>1</sup>

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, migration policy was restricted and more regulated in many Western countries. At the same time, many European states had started to legalize same-sex marriage or introduced civil partnership laws, which opened up more possibilities to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgender, intersexual, queer + (LGBTIQ+) population to migrate via their union with a European partner. The Netherlands legalized same-sex partnership in 1998, and same-sex marriage in 2001 (Steenhof & Harmsen, n.d.). In France, le Pacs (*Pacte civil de solidarité*) was voted for in 1999, and marriage for all in 2013 (Borrillo, 2017). In Germany, *Eingetragene Lebenspartnerschaft* was legalized in 2001 and same-sex marriage in 2017 (Lauderback, 2018). Thailand still does not have any legal recognition for LGBTIQ+ rights despite its appearance as an LGBTIQ+ friendly country. Consequently, migration via marriage union has become a new way to migrate favored by the new generation of migrants who are looking for “love” and “rights” (Thongkrajai, 2014, p. 83). This anthropological research was conducted in four European countries: France, Germany, The Netherlands, and Switzerland. It aimed to give an account of Thai *kathoey* migrants’ conditions of adaption and settlement. Drawn from interviews, participant observations, and ethnographic fieldnotes, this study considered a *kathoey*’s migration processes as a search for well-being and a life that they long for, not only for achieving their economic goals, but also to fulfill sentimental and emotional needs, such as the possibilities of living as a woman, having a relationship with a partner, or changing their legal status. *Kathoey* migrants utilized different strategies, such as identity camouflage or mobilizing their potential gendered and sexual resources in their new social environment, in order to fulfill their quest for “a better life”. This article will address, firstly, some essential literature that had contributed to construct the conceptual framework and the scope of the study. Then, it will describe methodology and key informants’ profiles. It will present, thirdly, the research findings according to three themes: motivation, femininity in migration, and gender negotiation in intimacy. And, lastly, it will conclude relevant points and discuss future trends of related issues.

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1 This study is based on the author’s PhD. research and the fieldwork took place during 2008 – 2011. This PhD research was under the supervision of Professor Laurence HÉRAULT, Institut d’ethnologie méditerranéenne, européenne et comparative. Aix-Marseille University, France.

## REVISITING THAI QUEER IN TRANSNATIONAL/CULTURAL CONTEXTS

The definition of the term *kathoey* posed some research challenges in a transnational context as it can be interpreted in different ways and refer to many groups of people or sexual/gender identities. According to Matzner (2001), *kathoey* does not only mean MTF transgender. In everyday use, the word can be used to refer to a gay man or an effeminate man, depending on contexts.

This multiplicity and interchangeability of the term raised the question how to identify *kathoey* and limit the scope of research, resulting in an explorative phase in fieldwork, as well as in literature. The researcher began with interviewing five people who were born male and identified as *kathoey*: two who had a masculine appearance with an effeminate manner, two who cross-dressed sometimes, and one who lived as a female and had already had sex reassignment surgery. Those who had a feminine appearance and always cross-dressed mentioned difficulties on how they were perceived and treated socially as female in a European context, but drastically placed in a vulnerable position when their legal identity as ‘male’ had to be verified (e.g., in the situation of passport control). Their masculine-looking counterparts who did not undertake the transition did not seem to have the same problem. In fact, many studies have shown that Thai male-to-female transgenders must face much discrimination due to their cross-gendered characteristics and the mismatch between their gender performance and legal status in everyday life. Many failed to get a decent job despite their qualifications due to the lack of legal gender recognition (Suriyasarn, 2014). Social and legal discrimination as well as sexism in the homeland are push factors for their migration (Pravattiyagul, 2021, p. 99). Focusing on this particularity and due to the lack of existing research, this research focused only on those *kathoey* who were discriminated as *sao praphet song* (second-class women), who had feminine appearance regardless of whether or not they had already undergone sex reassignment surgery, but who were still considered as male in the eye of the law.

Such fluidity of the *kathoey* category finds its origin in the Thai conception of sex and gender or *phet*. Morris (1994) affirms that the Thai *phet* was a ternary system rather than a binary of male and female, in which *kathoey* constitutes an intermediary element between femininity and masculinity. *Kathoey*s can go back and forth between these two polarizations and readapt their gender performances and social roles in order to live socially integrated in different social spheres (Thongkrajai, 2010, p. 170). The malleability of *kathoey* identity shows the contextual sensitivity of *phet*; as Van Esterik (2000) summarizes, the Thai conception of “gender is best theorized as a context sensitive process, constructed through interactions with others. Gender surfaces are carefully and aesthetically presented in public to communicate how one expects to be treated” (p. 203). Rather than being static or fixed, the Thai notion of gender identity is body-based and constructed through what Butler (1990) called a *styled repetition of acts*, which must be understood as a series of performative and interactive acts: “bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (p. 140). Such performative self-display, by which a sense of being is generated, can only make sense in social interaction with other actors as it is a means through which to enter the social world. Regardless of being a man, a woman, or a *kathoey*, it is necessary that one is socially recognized as such (Thongkrajai, 2010).

However, interestingly, such gender fluidity and performance seemed not to bother *kathoey* migrants as much as they were concerned about how to survive their migration experience. Queer migration has invited us to take a deeper look at transnational migrations with a *queer* lens. From this view, not only do people move across the border, but they also transport with them conceptions about identities, sex, gender, and sexuality from their origins and relocate them in the new social settings. Such translocation implies not only movements across different levels of geographic space, but also the back-and-forth relationships and negotiations within the local and the global forces in readjustments of embodied identity, sexuality, and desire of queer lives (Carrillo, 2017, pp. 23-24). In such a framework, *kathoey* migrants lived, moved, and navigated within two or more different social settings where hetero- and cis-normative regimes, or the structure of power and ideologies where heterosexuality and cisgenderism<sup>2</sup> are privileged, as well as other social and sexual politics from both the society of origin and societies of settlement can interweave simultaneously. *Gendered geography of power* (Mahler & Pessar, 2001), intertwining with hetero- and cis-normativity and hierarchies, forces migrants to readjust, adapt, and renegotiate themselves and may create a possibility of escaping, renegotiating, or empowering as well as relocating them in subordination situations. This research is situated in this research line of the *co-presence* (Diminescu, 2002; Nedelcu, 2010), an interconnection between the host country and the home country where multiple and transcultural regimes of sex, gender, and sexuality can interplay and shape the migration process and vice versa. *Sexual migration* points out that migration can be aligned with a coming out process for those who identify themselves as LGBTIQ or non-normative minority groups. According to Hector Carrillo (2004) sexual migration is:

International migration that is motivated, fully or partially, by the sexuality of those who migrate, including motivations connected to sexual desires and pleasures, the pursuit of romantic relations with foreign partners, the exploration of new self-definitions of sexual identity, the need to distance oneself from experiences of discrimination or oppression caused by sexual difference, or the search for greater sexual equality and rights. (p. 59)

However, the passage from a developing country such as Thailand to developed countries in Europe should not be understood, somewhat mistakenly, as a passage from tradition to progression or from oppression to liberation without grasping all the nuances. Carrillo (2017, p. 5) reminded us in his recent work to go beyond a common assumption that such transnational movement is an attempt to escape an oppressive world in the Global South towards a sexual freedom space in the Global North. Manalansan's (2005) work disclosed how Filipino gay migrants in New York

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2 Cisgenderism can be defined as an ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes non-normative gender identities that do not align with assigned sex and gender at birth as well as those behaviors and gender expressions that do not conform to the binary system of masculinity and femininity. Cisgender identities and expression are to be valued more than transgender identities and other non-normative expression. Individuals who do not conform to the cisgender regime are seen as deviant, abnormal, immoral, and even threatening. They can face gender-bias prejudice, discrimination, and even violence (Lennon & Mistler, 2014).

had to identify themselves as *bakla*, a Tagalog term that connotes cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, transgenderism, and homosexuality, to survive their exclusion from the mainstream American gay scene. Recuperation of such homeland-rooted identity “became a tool to negotiate [one’s] cultural discomfort” (Manalansan, 2005, p. 156) when facing the intersecting gender, sexual, and racial regimes in the new social setting of migration and resulting in a daily bricolage of identities, bodily performances, and negotiations.

In *mia-farang* studies, the roles of gender and sexuality were also brought to light. For example, the works of Lapanan (2019) and Suksomboon (2011) show how sexual fantasies and gender stereotypes of both Thai women and Western men shape Thai women’s decision, by engaging in sexscape and romantic encounters with Western men, to look for the opportunity to marry and enter transnational migration. The image of sweet, submissive, traditional as well as exotic and sexually desirable Asian women push European men as well to look for Asian/Thai female partners who can fulfill these roles better than Western women (Lapanan, 2019; Suksomboon, 2011). In return, Thai women as well as *kathoey* migrants make use of these stereotypes of a ‘good woman’ to maintain and stabilize their relationships with Western men and ensure their survival in migration. Such practice reflects their margin of power to carefully manipulate their sexuality, gendered self and sexual roles, and finally their agency in order to survive and succeed in their migrations (Pravattiyagul, 2021, p. 97).

Situated in these directions, this study takes into account the various roles of sex, gender sexuality, and their imbrications in the migration process. The objective is to take into consideration cultural-specific elements in both the host societies and homeland context with the aim to bring to light such fluidity of the *kathoey*s’ gender and sexuality, and to show how hetero, and cis-normativity in *co-presence* were understood and reflected socially in practices and in the negotiation processes of *kathoey* migrants. Considering the *kathoey*s’ migration as a *quest for self* or for well-being, this must be understood as an intertwined combination of economic, social, emotional, and sexual-driven processes to attain a state of well-being and a life that they long for. The *kathoey*s’ migration may not exactly be about coming out of the closet but rather about finding the way to fit in or conform their femininity *translocally in transition* and being fully recognized as a woman of the ‘first class world’. As Brummelhuis (1999) explained:

*Kathoey*s show pride when acquiring a foreign passport that describes them as ‘female’. Lek explained that it was her ambition to get a Danish Passport, and she gave an intriguing explanation, ‘It has higher percentage’ [i.e., status] (*mi persen mak kwa*). She then would not need a visa to travel to Italy or France, which she wanted to visit because she ‘liked old things’. It is fascinating to observe how in her case the reality of changing gender went together with the expectation of becoming a higher-class world citizen. (p. 133)

This article will attempt to answer the following question: How do *kathoey* migrants make use of their transgender identity, an embodied self with such gender and sexual fluidity in between femininity and masculinity, and put into practice different strategies of negotiation to achieve their *quest for self* in migration?

## METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by using qualitative methods consisting of in-depth interviews, participant observations, and open discussions to gain access to the *kathoey*'s life narratives of their experiences in the society of origin and the society of settlement. The fieldwork had started out in France where the researcher lived, then expanded to neighboring countries (Germany, Netherlands, and Switzerland) due to the difficulties of finding a sufficient number of participants. Different methods were adapted to the context of different fieldworks. In France, the researcher was able to spend more time with each informant; therefore, the relationships between the researcher and informants were more personal. In this context, participant observations and field notes were favored. In contrast, in other countries that the researcher travelled to several times, the fieldwork duration was limited. Recorded interviews and discussions were preferred. The researcher used the snowball sampling methods as well as personal networks (peers and entourage networks) to find voluntary informants. Each interview lasted at least two hours on average.

All interviews were transcribed and codified, using a narrative analytic approach to be able to access an overall view of the *kathoey* migrants' experiences and identify different steps of their lives, meanings, and relations. Participant observations and ethnographic field notes were also analyzed using an inductive approach. These methods allowed research to discover progressively different aspects of the process of *kathoey*'s migration – for example, life conditions in Thailand, motivations to migrate, negotiations during migration, struggle to success, relationships with partners/husbands, economical-sexual-emotions continuum in intimate relations' negotiation, gender performance adaptations, and usage of sexuality. Participant observations, fieldnotes, and unrecorded discussions were also very helpful to enable data rechecking and validations of the recorded data. All codified materials were read fully many times to establish relevant themes. Coding and themes were presented and discussed with the researcher's supervisors to ensure accuracy.

This study gathered data from 26 participants, 25 to 65 years old, who come from different social backgrounds<sup>3</sup> (see Table 1). Among the 26 participants, six persons did not undergo any gender reassignment surgeries, but lived their lives as women. There was only one person who did not undergo surgery and cross-dressed from time to time. All of them identified themselves as *kathoey* or transwomen, except one person, who defined her/himself as a bisexual man. They came from different professional backgrounds. Not all of them were engaged in sex work at the time of the research, but more than half of the participants revealed their previous experiences in prostitution either in Thailand or in their countries of settlement. The participants had different marital statuses. The majority were in an official relationship, such as marriage or civil partnership, with a male partner. Eleven of them were single.

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3 Ten people were from rural areas and 16 people from urban areas. Six participants only had primary education, four of them had finished a secondary school. Nine of them had an associate's degree, six had a bachelor's degree and only one person had a master's degree.

Pseudonyms	Age	Social Background	Education	Profession	Marital Status	Country of settlement
Pim	32	urban middle class	master's degree	Ph.D. student	in a relationship	France
Linda	44	rural poor	primary	housekeeper and occasionally engaged in sex work	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Tina	36	urban rich	associate's degree	restaurant owner (ex sex worker)	in an open relationship	France
Kim	41	urban middle class	associate's degree	housewife	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Yumi	40	urban poor	primary	sex worker	single	France
Nou	33	rural poor	associate's degree	restaurant owner (ex sex worker)	single	France
Ploy	30	rural middle class	bachelor's degree	cook (ex sex worker)	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Pai	38	urban middle class	secondary	cook (ex sex worker)	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Maya	25	rural middle class	secondary	housewife	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Ning	42	urban middle class	bachelor's degree	waitress	in a relationship (Pacs)*	France
Lila	44	rural poor	primary	cook	single	France
Lee	52	urban poor	associate's degree	housewife (ex sex worker)	in a relationship (civil union)	Germany
Farah	36	rural middle class	associate's degree	sex worker	in a relationship (civil union)	Germany
Paula	35	urban poor	associate's degree	sex worker	single	Germany
Katty	50	urban rich	bachelor's degree	waitress in her brother's restaurant	single	Germany
Ming	65	urban poor	primary	sex worker	single	Germany
Kanya	42	urban poor	associate's degree	direct selling entrepreneur (ex sex worker)	in a relationship (civil union)	Germany
Nid	42	rural middle class	bachelor's degree	housewife	in a relationship (civil union)	Switzerland
Amy	65	urban rich	secondary	ex sex worker	single	Switzerland
Kate	38	rural poor	secondary	waitress (ex sex worker in Thailand)	in a relationship (civil union)	Switzerland
Noy	46	urban middle class	associate's degree	sex worker	in a relationship (civil union)	Switzerland
Tik	55	rural poor	primary	sex worker	single	Switzerland
Nathalie	39	urban middle class	bachelor's degree	sales and marketing	in an open relationship	Netherlands
Sophie	45	urban poor	primary	bar owner (ex sex worker)	single	Netherlands
Nook	46	rural middle class	associate's degree	waitress (ex sex worker)	single	Netherlands
Tip	52	urban middle class	bachelor's degree	entrepreneur (ex sex worker)	single	Netherlands

**Table 1.** List of participants

\*Cohabitation of two unmarried people recognized by the French state



## FINDINGS

This section will present key findings that are divided in three parts: the motivations to migrate, the negotiation of femininity in migration, and (trans)gender negotiation in intimate relationships.

### From Thailand to Europe, Motivation to Migration

*Pai muang nok* can be translated literally to mean “going abroad”. However, *muang nok* (abroad) does not mean all foreign countries. It connotes the land of wealth, modernity, and progress and Western countries seem to embody these ideas. The *kathoey* informants evoked the same expectation that inspired them to go abroad. For some participants, this had started since a very young age. Linda<sup>4</sup> explained:

Since I was little, I went to the outdoor cinema where they showed the films of *muang nok*. That made me want to go abroad. I wanted to live like in the cinema, having a big house, beautiful cars, having a happy life with all luxury things. (Personal Communication, 9 January 2009, Paris)

The imaginary representation of Western countries was shared by many *kathoey*s, regardless of their social and economic backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> For those who came from poor families, *pai muang nok* represented the preferable choice in order to get out of their distress. Migrating to a Western destination, the land of promise, was absolutely the way out to improve their lives and ensuring social and economic mobility. Farah described how she decided to go to Germany: “I saw other *kathoey*s, the senior ones, who had already gone to Switzerland or Germany, they all came back so glamorous. Why did I need to be scared? Going abroad, we would be absolutely successful” (Personal Communication, 31 March 2009, Berlin).<sup>6</sup> Those who came from rich families explained their motivation by their conception of *muang nok* as ‘civilized’, ‘tolerant’, and ‘egalitarian’. These reputations even became part of the criteria for selecting the country of destination. Nathalie, who quit her job and abandoned her bright future in a press company, explained her reason for choosing to go to the Netherlands as follows:

At that time, I still dressed like a man . . . but everyone knew that I was a *kathoey*. The work conditions were okay, but some people . . . worked less than me, but they gained more than me. . . . I thought this was not right. They were maybe ‘*anti-kathoey*’. . . . At the end of 1991, I quit my job and I came here to Holland. I had done my research. I knew that Holland was the country where they accepted the third sex like me the most. My goal was fixed to here, the only country that I wished to come to. I really had thought so hard before quitting my job. (Personal Communication, 15 May 2010, Amsterdam)

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4 All the names of participants in this article are pseudonyms.

5 This research distinguishes three groups of social and economic backgrounds based on how the participants described themselves. Eleven people said that they came from financially poor families, twelve were from a middle-class income group, and three came from rich and upper-class families.

6 Farah was living in Munich at that time. She came to Berlin to visit a friend, Lee.

In spite of their economic and social background, these examples show how the image of Western countries was nourished and perpetuated in the Thai culture of migration as the best alternative to earn incomes and to improve one's livelihood (Rungmanee, 2021). The culture of migration was transmitted from one generation to another, within families and among relatives, and especially among trans peer networks and communities. The examples of those who had returned home successfully inspired the younger generations who put their effort into imitating the same pattern of migration. In this sense, the departure cannot be considered separately from the return in their reality as well as in the imaginary. The decision to leave can only make sense if the return is hopefully significant (Briquet, 2003, p. 139). Returning home as a successful person (*dai di*) was a compulsory passage of *pai muang nok*.

Although *kathoeys* migrants' motivations were quite similar, their modes of migration were slightly different from each other. We can distinguish two main groups, the older generation who arrived in Europe before 2000 and those who arrived after 2000. The main factor that differentiated these two generations came from policy changes within European countries. For the older generation, *kathoeys* informants affirmed that coming to Europe was easier than nowadays. They could come to work as entertainers, dancers, and later on became involved in sex work, with temporary work permit visas that they could obtain easily. The *kathoeys* migrants often relied on their peer networks to legalize their status. The senior *kathoeyes* who were already well settled in Europe usually played the role of intermediary and proposed their services, helping the younger ones to get a job, providing financial guarantees, and finding a partner to arrange a marriage of convenience. These services were not for free. They had to pay the price, or ended up with a large amount of debt to be paid in installments. Most of the *kathoeyes* in this situation decided to migrate with the aim of engaging in prostitution. For the younger generation, a new wave of migration via same-sex union was more and more popular, due to legalization of same-sex marriage or civil union in European countries. From our participants, all of those who came to Europe after 2000 arrived in European territory via marriage or visitor visa supported by their partners.

The differences exist between different social backgrounds as well. Those from an economically poor social background and with low education attainment tended to explain their reason for migration mainly because of their financial and material needs. However, those from middle-class income or higher social backgrounds with a higher education level shared some other ideas related to transgender identity. Katty arrived in Germany through a work permit visa, as her brother owned many Thai restaurants in Germany. Coming from a very rich family, she proclaimed that her life had never been deprived. She always got everything she wanted as the youngest child of the family. But she still wanted to go abroad. She explained:

At first, I just wanted to come. It was easy for me and my family could support me, so I came here. Just in case I find someone, find my German husband to whom I can marry. And if he is rich too (laugh). Everyone thinks like that and me too. (Personal Communication, 6 April 2009, Postdam)

Many of our informants assumed that the future for *kathoeyes* in Thailand was not very bright. Lacking same-sex marriage laws as well as gender recognition laws, Thai transwomen are legally male. This situation has created social stigma and discriminations in everyday life throughout their life cycle starting from school until adult age. *Kathoey* informants faced job discrimination and discrimination in workplaces, and they were often denied access to protections and social welfare due to their transgender identity, as there is no legal recognition for transgender in Thailand.<sup>7</sup> Ploy explained that her motivation was that she did not want to go to the end of her life all alone: “What can we do next? In Thailand, we cannot have a family” (Fieldnote, April 2010, Marseille). In Thai social representation, a *kathoey* is considered as someone who will never be lucky in love. Thai men will one day leave the *kathoey*, the ‘second-class woman’, for a ‘real’ (biological) woman. Jackson (1997) suggested that this expression may have come from the sexual practices of young men with *kathoeyes*. But, when these young men arrive at the age to get married, they are likely to choose a woman, not a *kathoey*, in order to keep on their masculine role. In this case, *kathoeyes* are only an alternative or ‘a second choice’ for a temporary relationship.

Interestingly, *kathoeyes*’ exclusion from the Thai matrimonial market seems to be similar to some cases of Thai migrant women who seek to marry a *farang* or a Westerner. Many of these women have already been divorced or separated from their Thai husbands. Being of a certain age and having children from their previous unions creates social stigmas and barriers that restrain them from finding new Thai partners (Suksomboon, 2011, p. 233). Therefore, they are excluded from the Thai matrimonial market much like *kathoeyes*. Hence, a *farang* husband seems to be the solution to have a stable and acceptable relationship and eventually start a new life, a new family. For Formoso (2001), *farang* men are viewed as kindhearted men who can accept poor Thai women, despite their family, their social conditions, and financial difficulties. Influenced by this ideology of *muang nok* and *farang* man, *kathoey* migrants were also motivated by the hope of having a faithful relationship, building a family and being accepted as the female partner by a European partner and society.

### Femininity in transition and negotiation

Living in a European context, all participants confirmed that they were able to live as women in everyday life without being labelled as *kathoey*. Being called *madame* at the café or at the shopping mall made them feel more confident to live as females. As the Asian male body usually has less body hair, less muscular and masculine characteristics than Europeans, Thai *kathoey* are also usually pretty small and can blend in among local European females. Most of them had already begun their transition from a very young age. Therefore, for the *kathoey* informants, a European eye could

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7 For example, Thai *kathoeyes* tend to be denied when they apply for a job due to their second-class women status. Hopeless, many try to look for salaried jobs in the informal sector or in the stereotypical jobs where they are more accepted, such as in entertainment as cabaret performers or beauty pageants, in the beauty industry such as make-up artists or sales persons in cosmetics (Suriyasarn, 2014, p. 94). Those who work in public sectors usually can’t wear female clothes or uniforms due to the lack of recognition of their female gender. They are forced to rebecome men by their superiors. (This data is based on the author’s recent research on Gender and Sexual Diversity in Civil Services and Government Agencies in Thailand, forthcoming).

hardly see or distinguish the physical differences between Thai transgenders and biological females from the outside. According to the informants, their femininity and female gender performance pass for real in the European context. They can live their life in the female role without fear of being outed as they experienced in Thailand. Maya told us about her experience of being outed during her honeymoon trip in a restaurant in Phuket, Thailand: “Two Thai women approached my husband and whispered in his ear. They told him that I was a *kathoey*. But he knew it. He did not care. I was very angry” (Fieldnote, August 2009, Toulouse). In Thailand, many *kathoey*s think that *kathoey* acceptance is just an illusion. They were still facing this kind of gender-based discrimination, even violence, in public spaces (Suriyasarn, 2014, p. 41). *Kathoey* informants had experienced being discriminated against when accessing hotels, restaurants, or bars because of their transgender identity. The context of migration allowed Thai *kathoey*s to escape from these social constraints and fully enjoy their lives as females.

However, when it came to situations where legal identity must be revealed, things got more complicated. A more welcoming social setting of the country of settlement did not necessarily mean total acceptance and zero prejudice. Many *kathoey* migrants had bad experiences going through passport control and immigration check points when they travelled. Some of them, who still carried Thai passports with male legal status, were often detained for several hours to have their identity verified. Some were mocked by the immigration officers in front of other passengers. Tina recalled when she had to deal with bankers and accountants when she wanted to open her restaurant in Paris:

I went to see several banks; they were all looking at me. Ah *kathoey*, they looked down on me. When I went to submit my project to get the credit loan, the banker said ‘ah, why Monsieur?’, when he looked at my name, ‘ah, you are not a woman’, he said. It depends on places and people. Some places, everything was fine but some places not . . . I felt like they did not take me seriously. (Personal Communication, 22 October 2008, Paris)

The example of Tina showed that there was still some social prejudice towards transgenders in the host country. She further explained that she was both *kathoey* and *kariang*<sup>8</sup>, which refers to an ethnic minority in Thailand:

We have two *Ka* - *Kathoey* and *Kariang*. Here in France, the word *kathoey* doesn’t exist. Those who are not blended in will be judged. It is because we are both Thai and *kathoey*. We are transsexuals. Here, there are some negative images of trans foreigners, like those who prostitute in the Bois de Boulogne. This is a barrier for us. In France, the papers, the laws, legal identity all matter and are important. We, who do not really conform to the system. We are judged as strange/odd.<sup>9</sup> (Personal Communication, 22 October 2008, Paris).

8 Kariang is the Thai word for Karen, an ethnic minority group living in the border area of Thailand and Myanmar.

9 She used the word *tua pralad* in Thai, which can be translated as freak as well.

Calling herself *kariang* is an act of self-depreciation; she identified herself as an inferior racial minority in the West, similarly to the *Kariang* people in the eyes of the majority of Thais in Thailand. As a migrant and a gender minority, this double social stigma had shaped her experience and forced her to readapt her tactics of negotiation. When she had to deal with French administration, she tied up her long hair and adopted gender-neutral, unisex clothes, without make-up. An androgynous look could keep away unpleasant remarks. Nou, for example, always kept her male identity photo in her purse to attest her previous identity as a male in case of inspection from the authorities (she showed her picture during the interview on 14 May 2009, Paris). Linda, who did not undergo any sex reassignment operations, chose to keep her masculine look during daytime to blend in at her workplace at a gay sauna. She cross-dressed when going out with friends and her partner at night.

In the European setting, the *kathoey*s' female identity was not accepted once and for all. It depended on the situation, interactions, and the power relations structure. Navigating from one context to another, *kathoey* migrants may readapt their gender performances, opting for gender camouflage strategies in order to blend in and fit into the hetero- and cis-normativity of settings and their regulations. Power structures that were imposed on *kathoey*s could be local or national (for example, laws), linked to the social constraints of the society of settlement and from the Thai structure. Lee said she used to avoid or limit her social interactions with the Thai community in Berlin, as someone might out her or reveal her trans identity publicly. Tactics of survival and negotiation depended largely on the capacity to manage social rapports in everyday life. Farah explained the importance of being able to communicate effectively, meaning to be able to speak the local language:

That is why I went to language classes. If you can talk to the police, when you get controlled by them, at least you can tell them something 'I'm sorry I forgot my passport at home'. If you can speak their language, you can tell them a story and get out of the situation. (Personal Communication, 31 March 2009, Berlin)

*Kathoey*s femininity was not something fixed and unmalleable in these contexts of *co-presence*. Rather, *kathoey*s anticipated reactions from other actors and social interaction to find the best way of presenting and modifying their self-display. Many strategies were intentionally planned and put in place to escape from controls and constraints that might threaten their security and destabilize their well-being, as well as their migration project. Trans identity and female gender performance could even be commodified in order to survive in the migration context. Paula identified him/herself as gay man and bisexual. Paula revealed that he/she became *kathoey*, starting gender transition by taking hormones, changing appearance, and getting breast surgery, in order to work in the sex industry for a living:

So, I did it, I started to take hormones, then injections. I also watched *kathoey* cabaret shows, learned how to talk, to walk like them. I practiced in my room in front of the mirror. Now I've got used to it. But if you ask me deep inside me, it is not who I am. But I think if I can earn 10 million baht, I will become a man again. (Personal Communication, 25 June 2009, Berlin).

Paula's story gave us some evidence about the role of sex, gender, and sexuality in the process of migration. A sexed body, gender performances, and usage of sexuality can be mobilized and invested to maximize their earning potential in order to respond to the necessity of survival in migration. *Kathoey* migrants made use of themselves in these new conditions of *co-presence* for their own interest, in other words to make a success of their migration. Sexuality as well as gender performances can become a resource or a tool in order to negotiate in a new social setting and to be able to survive their migration (Lévy & Lieber, 2009, p. 720).

**“To tell or not to tell, that’s the question”: self-exposure and gender negotiation**

When it came to more intimate social interaction, the *kathoey*s femininity was also at stake. Many *kathoey*s were really concerned about how they would tell their partner about their transgender experience. Living their lives daily as women in European society allowed them to enjoy new lives without worrying about *kathoey* social stigma. Consequently, telling ‘the truth’ could disturb their lives as women, and could eventually lead to a rupture in their relationships. Lee explained:

It is the most horrible thing for a *kathoey*. The problem that we fear so much is to be accepted as who we are. And the most important thing when we live with someone is to tell him who we really are. (Personal Communication, 30 March 2009, Berlin).

Some *kathoey*s preferred telling their partner right away at the very first time when they met or had a date. Telling the truth avoids eventually any misunderstanding when it came to intimate moments and could lead to a more open and sincere relationship. Ploy explained that she preferred to make it clear before starting a relationship: “We never know. We can accidentally have to deal with someone who is *anti-kathoey*. He could hurt or kill us” (Fieldnote, May 2010, Marseille). In some contexts, when the possibility to survive in migration was related to a stable relationship with a European man, *kathoey* migrants had to really think and figure out whether they would tell or not tell their partner about their transfemale identity, how, and when to tell it. Lee recalled how she started the relationship with her partner and waited until three years later to tell him about her transgender identity during their New Year trip in Thailand:

It was a wonderful day, but, it was a D-Day for me. I told myself if he could accept it, everything would be fine but if he could not accept it, I would break up. . . . Before this, I took care of him, I was gentle, sweet with him. Housework, cooking, cleaning, I did it all for him. I had showed him who I really was, showing him that everything was going well with me. . . . And I told him ‘I was not like this, like I am now’. I don’t remember exactly what I said. ‘I was a little boy, you know’. He did not seem to be surprised. He said ‘what happened in the past, belonged to the past, I love you as who you are now’, oh my god!!! When I told my friends this story, they said you did not need to tell the man. They already know. Only they don’t say it because they don’t really care about it. I was really relieved after that difficult moment. (Personal Communication, 30 March 2009, Berlin).

The example of Lee showed us that transgender identity revelation to partners could be a long process. Lee had put forward her female qualities, she tried to be a good wife, and the 'right one' for her partner. Female roles as a devoted housewife, gentle and sweet spouse, or skillful sex partner, were invested and valued in the relationship with partners to negotiate and make acceptable their transgender experiences. These traditional and orientalist feminine roles that were perceived socially as stereotypes of Asian females were utilized as strategies to negotiate their female transgender identity.

Revealing transgender identity or trans characteristics can be advantageous in some contexts. To be labelled as a non-operated ladyboy in sex advertisements in adult magazines was part of a process of 'self-branding', differentiating themselves in the sex market. Many trans ex sex workers affirmed that non-operated transgender or ladyboy sex workers were more highly in demand among clients than post-operated *kathoey*s who had to compete within the female market. And these clients, the majority being male, sought passive sexual experiences. *Kathoey*s with "a serpent" (i.e., with a penis) were better paid because they could perform an active role in sexual intercourse. Paula said more than 90% of his/her clients were looking for this experience. And he/she could receive 5-6 clients per day, but sometimes the demands could be more than 20 persons per day. A hyperfeminine-look, active, and exotic sexual role play were his/her 'signature'. Again, gender and sexuality played an important role within intimacy interactions, whether it had to deal with permanent partners in a long-term relationship or in temporary ones like client-prostitute interactions. Being feminine, appropriating feminine roles, and providing accessible sexual fantasy were efforts of *kathoey* migrants meant to maximize the possibility of being accepted and maintaining their status within the context of migration. *Kathoey* migrants could access this status of female because of these gender and sexual negotiations. Most of our participants affirmed that their Western partners accepted them as women (there was only one person who said that her boyfriend could not accept it and they broke up). At the same time, these efforts and negotiations seemed to make the relationship between *kathoey*s and *farang* men possible in the European context. These couples appeared to be totally ordinary heteronormative couples, unlike the stereotype of *kathoey* and Thai men in the Thai context.

Sometimes, the negotiation of female identity could also become a couple's or even a family-in-law's affair. Some European partners also worried about their wives' 'truth'. Nid recalled how her husband told her to buy sanitary pads when she went shopping with his mother. This was their strategy to appear 'normal' and dissimulate her trans identity from his mother. Tina also told us a similar story when her mother-in-law told her to put down the toilette seat every time when she finished using the bathroom, in case there were other guests in the house, so that they would not suspect her behavior and her gender identity. Gender camouflage or identity readaptation strategies were now a family's affair that involved other actors from the entourage.

These examples showed that gender identity, far from being independent, individualist, or disconnected from other social aspects, is rather situated and intertwined within other social tissues. The imbrication of gender and sexual roles were put into practice and experienced differently by *kathoey* migrants throughout time and space and within different contexts. While being oneself was linked to being with others,

*kathoey* migrants' subjectivity was constructed spatially and temporally in the everyday lived experiences of migration by employing different forms of agency and negotiations. Sometimes male or female, sometimes trans, *kathoey*s reappropriated what was considered as normal, valued, or accepted in the *co-presence* of migrations. Hence, the femininity of *kathoey* migrants was constantly in transition, navigating through processes of readaptation and relocation in these transcultural settings.

## CONCLUSION

This article aims to point out important roles of sex, gender, and sexuality in the process of migration. Firstly, they were mobilized and strategized in *kathoey* migrants' gender performance to be more feminine in one situation or more masculine in others. *Kathoey* migrants were crossing borders not only between masculinity and femininity, but also across the borders of culture and multi-level social contexts of *here and there*, where different hegemonic power and both hetero- and cis-normative regulations are at play. While moving back and forth in everyday situations, the juxtaposition of the *co-presence* structures moved, creating a margin of possibilities to escape and to relocate one's self and renegotiate (well-)being. Concurrently, these dynamic mobilities reshaped power structures and social constraints that could also create the risk of falling into new forms of oppression or social exclusion. From gender camouflage, female gender performances, reappropriation of heteronormative social norms, or playing the 'queer', as well as a usage of sexuality, *kathoey* migrants strategically adapted their way of being and presenting themselves, depending on different contexts and different actors that they were facing in order to fit in the new social environment where they now had to live and survive. Identifying as women, transgender, Thai ladyboy, male migrant, or disidentifying to such categories, their *femininity in transition* appeared to be a dynamic and multilayer process, showing the fluidity of the sexed and embodied self as well as the *kathoey* migrants' agency. The *kathoey* migrants make use of the interactive roles of embodied sex, gender, and sexuality that can potentially represent a stigma in one situation, but also a resource for migration in others (Chossière, 2021; see also Scuzzarello & Statham, 2022, this issue). Thai *kathoey*s' migration experiences showed that sex, gender, and sexuality are not necessarily and definitely fixed in place, but they have to be grasped in terms of material and structural aspects without ignoring the cultural and social particularities that play a role in the production of migration strategies (Carrillo, 2017, pp. 259-260).

The case of *kathoey* migrants can lead to further implications on sex, gender, and sexuality in the heterosexual relationships of *mia-farang* and *farang* men, especially the role of sexuality in the migration process. From this fieldwork, some complex and complicated Thai-European heterosexual relations were encountered, such as the case of a Thai wife who discovered sexual pleasure with a *farang* male partner, then realized that she had always been attracted to women. So, she decided to break up with him and now lives with a female partner. In another example, a Thai woman was married to a German man but also maintained an intimate relationship with another Thai woman who was a *tom* (or a butch, a masculine lesbian). In *mia-farang* studies, the question of sexual identity transformation of *mia-farang* as a consequence of the process of migrations is still overlooked, taking for granted that Thai-Westerner



relationships conform steadily to a heteronormative model. This empirical visibility of *kathoeyes* in migration can lead us to ‘queering’ or ‘sexualizing’ Thai migration in a broader way. Another limit of the research is that we have so little information about the Western partners, how they also adapt and negotiate in such transcultural relationships. This study has brought to light some clues on the European partners’ participation in the *kathoeyes*’ gender performance and negotiation. Future research can potentially study this aspect in depth and expand these research questions.

Thai *kathoey* migrants, similarly to other queer migrants in Europe, risked being doubly marginalized as they were ethnic minorities in the host countries and sexual minorities within both the host society and the home community (Mole, 2021). However, their case seemed to be different from those transgender or queer asylum seekers from more conservative countries as they were not facing high or severe risk and danger back home or within Thai communities. Seen as a gay’s paradise, the motherland still does not warmly ensure their rights with open arms. Recently, the Thai constitutional court declared officially that LGBTIQ+ people cannot be recognized as having the same rights as men and women by refusing the possibility of same sex marriage. This legal discrimination and political pressure can increase the recent tendency of *kathoeyes*’ migration to developed countries (Ocha, 2020, pp. 132-133). In addition, with the COVID-19 crisis, and consequently the Thai tourism business collapse, many transgender cabaret theaters and other night entertainment businesses were closed, including bars, night clubs, and massage parlors, where a lot of *kathoeyes* worked. The young generation now has a hard time finding jobs, especially those who come from very poor social backgrounds. This prevailing phenomenon can push more and more young *kathoeyes* to seek to go abroad and migrate. Searching for a *farang* partner via social media and applications will possibly be an increasing phenomenon, deserving closer attention from academic scholars, since the *kathoeyes*’ culture of migration might be intensified in the next couple of years.



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