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**The Making of a Local Queen in
an International Transsexual Beauty Contest**

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Introduction

My paper will examine the intricacies in beauty contests and the tensions brought about by the negotiation of a local, authentic culture in the face of Western-derived notions of beauty and femininity. Thailand's many beauty contests feature as an inept part of Thai society, with an emphasis on the "public face" and beauty. Thailand has been romanticized as a land of beautiful women and more recently, of beautiful *kathoey*. One of the aims of my paper is to determine the importance of beauty contests, not just as "anti-pageants", but as a means to consolidate a transsexual identity. However, it can also be shown that beauty contests are both sites of empowerment and subjugation simultaneously.

The structure of this paper will be as follows: the first part explains background of my research and the contexts in which beauty contests emerged in Thailand. The second part of the paper shows the importance of the performance of feminine beauty and the ambivalence of power that contestants are said to achieve in winning the beauty contest. In the third and last part of this paper, I shall show how transsexual beauty contests are both enabling and subjugating sites that simultaneously empower the performance of *kathoey* identity yet subject *kathoey*s' to imitate mainstream notions of beauty and femininity. I will then conclude that transsexual beauty contests are excellent sites in which a "romanticized" transsexual identity and culture based on femininity are paraded.

The Image of Thailand – "Land of Smiles" and "The Brothel of the East"

"Amazing Thailand", "Land of Smiles", the exotic East and the beauty of simple, natural environments. Such is an image constructed to sell Thailand. Attraction to Thailand is more often than not aesthetic. The fascination with beauty and appearances is not coincidental. Thai culture has been constructed in such a way that it is easily and eagerly consumed by non-Thais, potential tourists and even Thais themselves. It is also a nation-building strategy, a means to introduce an "authentic" Thailand to the rest of the world

(essentially, the West) as a modern and therefore, “civilized”, democratic and attractive country.

In recent discourses about Thailand, whether produced by Western observers or by the Thais themselves, Thai identity has been produced in highly gendered and sexualized images. Thailand has come to be recognized internationally in terms of its highly sexualized images, with a disproportionate amount of attention given to its sex industry and the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 90s. (Cook and Jackson, 1999: 1) The image of a “brothel of the East” and of relative freedom and diversity in sexuality remains till today, despite attempts by the Thai government in the last few years to reconstruct Thailand’s image as one of beauty rather than sexuality.

The eagerness to construct a beautiful Thailand has never been more intense. The Thai state plays an active role in the construction of this model of beauty and the pursuit of an orientalizing Western consumer. Thai culture here can be said to have been commodified and packaged for tourist consumption. The image of an “exotic beauty” is thus produced through the stereotyping and mythicizing gaze of the West. It is within these Western orientalist fantasies that images of beauty and sexuality emerge.

Thailand’s beauty contests are not only sites of gender negotiation, but also sites for global processes such as tourism and nationalism (Esterik 1996: 203), and also sites to emphasize and construct an image of “exotic” Thai beauty to the rest of world. It is what Esterik terms as ‘prime time politics’ (Esterik 1996: 207), where Thailand is actively promoted to both non-Thai and Thai audiences.

Much of the beauty and exotica of the “Old Siam” can be captured in performances today. The attributes of gentleness, grace, composure and beauty are essential in portraying the “Thai-ness” of women. Ironically, Western looks and features, such as sharp facial features and fairness in skin colour, are idealized and localized into “Thai beauty”. These are

important assets that beautiful, local women must have and this is exoticized by the appreciation and evaluation of grace and beauty that is said to be entrenched in Thai culture. (Esterik 1996: 142-43, 155)

The Historical, Political and Cultural Contexts of Beauty Contests in Thailand

Thailand's nation-building process and nationalism has been one that is primarily driven to avoid direct colonialization rather than to experience it. (Esterik 1996: 96) Because of the impending need to preserve her independence, Thailand was acutely sensitive to the construction of national identity, culture and representations to appear as a modern, civilized and democratic state. Beauty contests and gender representations emerged from the complexities of such needs and contexts. Changes to clothing and representations of gender and sexuality began to take place.

The first national beauty contest in Thailand, Miss Siam, was held in 1934. This was later changed to Miss Thailand in 1939. (Esterik 1996: 139) National Beauty Contests began to receive substantial attention and support from the state. Beauty contests became an effective way to display how to wear Western and Thai clothing properly. (Esterik 1996: 102-3) Women became embodiments of Thai culture and state propaganda. They adopted the Western dress, hats, make-up, hairstyles and these representations became commonly displayed in beauty contests. Beauty contests became a gendered performance where a new feminine beauty (versus masculinity) was emphasized.

By 1964, beauty contests had evolved into effective advertisements of Thai culture (Esterik 1996: 141) and modernity. Miss Thailand became a commercial enterprise with aims to introduce Thailand to the rest of the world. The Miss Universe criterion of beauty for face, figure and posture was adopted in Thailand in 1964. Beauty contests became avenues through which self-orientalized images of feminine beauty and modernity could be promoted. Women and feminine beauty became rhetoric of Thai culture, which has been

reconstructed during the modernization period which began under King Mongkut. The Thai government began using women and the image of Thai exotica to promote Thai products and places to the rest of the world. Thus, Thai beauty contests were part of a nation-building strategy as it combined efforts to reconstruct a Thai identity and culture based on new-found feminine beauty, promote and authenticate it, while at the same time, appear to the rest of the world as modern, civilized and essentially, Western.

Transsexual Beauty Contests – Transformations and Mimicry

Just as we observe interwoven intricacies of Western (largely American) influence and the construction of a new Thai culture and identity, beauty contests have by and large adopted and incorporated preferences for feminine beauty. With the radicalization of gender norms and definitions, the effecting of gender differentiation and the performance of feminine beauty, as opposed to gender ambiguity before, was adopted and the sexes were now distinguished in opposite of each other on a bipolar scale. Masculinity and femininity also became physical attributes that could be performed and consumed. The men wore the shirt and pants and had short hair, while the women wore skirts and long hair. It was then that transsexuality – the transgression of gender boundaries – became an apparent behaviour. (Jackson 2003: 23-6) This however, does not mean that transsexual behaviour was a new phenomenon. What is new is the evolution of this behaviour into an identity – a *kathoey* identity that was based on transformations and the successful performances of femininity, in the face of biological masculinity.

In transsexual beauty contests, not only do contestants have to transform themselves into objects personifying feminine beauty, they also have to transform their masculinity to femininity successfully. Any indications of the failure to do so, such as having a masculine body structure or doing an over-the-top catwalk, would destroy any chances of winning the crown. In addition to this, contestants also had to show that they could subvert their

masculinity and display femininity and beauty to show that they have undergone a successful transformation. These contestants are not only mediating an American-derived notion of glamour and beauty but this mediation is often routed through an approximation or localization of Western models of ideal femininity.

The Beauty Contests – Miss Alcazar 2004 and Miss International Queen 2004

I shall now give a brief introduction to two transsexual beauty contests, from which I draw my ethnographic data – the Miss Alcazar 2004 and the Miss International Queen 2004, held at the Alcazar cabaret and Tiffany show cabaret respectively. The Miss Alcazar beauty contest is an annual nation-wide event usually held during the Songkran festival period. The contest would span over a period of 5 days, including 4 days of preliminaries and the final contest itself. The contest would see a congregation of over 60 contestants from all over the country, vying for the coveted crown. In the end, Miss *Pakaporn Poakpat*, a 25-year old university student, won the crown.

The second contest is the Miss International Queen 2004, an international transsexual pageant held in Pattaya, for the first time last year. This contest, which occurred 6 months after Tiffany's own national beauty contest, the Miss Tiffany's Universe, saw 24 contestants from various countries taking part. Prior to last year's Miss International Queen contest, Tiffany had on 3 occasions, sent their winner to the Miss Queen of the Universe, which is held annually in Los Angeles. They never fail to constantly remind audiences that on all 3 occasions, the Thai *kathoey* had brought home the crown. Contestants for the Miss International Queen 2004 contest mostly came from Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Laos, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and even as far as France and Germany. Thailand's only representative was Norng Pooi, Miss Tiffany's Universe 2004. There was no limit on the number of contestants from other countries. Thailand, a country

that has come to be known for its beautiful transsexuals, not surprisingly, had its representative winning the crown.

The performance of femininity

In both these two transsexual beauty contests, contestants are expected to perform femininity effectively. As Sky News reported on the Miss International Queen contest, “It was as traditional as any female contest – they all paraded in evening wear and skimpy bikinis before going on to answer questions about their hopes and aspirations.” (see Sky News, “Boys will be Girls, 9th November 2005)

This includes the adoption of a feminine name, such as using a feminine surname such as “ngamwong”. Thus, *Saknarin Malayaporn* became *Treechada Petcharat*, *Cristopher De Guzman* (Philippines) became *Ma Cristina Dandan*, *Jerry B. Dela Cruz* (Philippines) became *Michelle*, *Munaji Bin Salamat* (Singapore) became *Gia Tamalas*, *Muzir Bin Abu Hassan* (Malaysia) became *Natasha* and *Jean-Luc Marina* (France) became *Sylvie*.

Contestants also had to use feminine particles in the Thai language. They also had to show discipline in having a feminine body (such as not developing their biceps) which they parade in the swimsuit segment. Cosmetic surgery is also necessary to give them feminine features, such as breasts, high-bridged noses, sharp chins and a more contoured body. Surprisingly, in my observations, the sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) is one of the least important surgeries for contestants, although they are expected to express the desire to have one. *Nornng Pooi*, when interviewed by a Taiwanese television host, declared that she has undergone SRS after the Miss Tiffany’s Universe contest and that Tiffany had sponsored her operation. This turned out to be untrue, as *Nornng Pooi* had previously told her fellow contestants that she had not gone for the SRS.

Beauty and Power

Although beauty pageant contestants are subjected to “a parade” and indeed an “objectification” of their beauty and bodies on a public stage (the feminist argument), it is also on this very same stage that they are able to articulate their identity and power. The power of transformation and display of a beauty that fits into a society-determined criterion earns them power and social respect. More importantly, the fact that the Thai *kathoe*y was hailed as the most beautiful transsexual in the world emphasized the basis for their identity and culture – one that is strongly based on transformations and beauty. This was opposite to the stereotypical portrayal of the *kathoe*y on Thailand’s mass media, one who is loud-mouthed, uncouth, pretentious and always comic. This image of the *kathoe*y is seen to be highly derogatory and demeaning. In a society that prizes beauty and surface representation above all else, a representation of the *kathoe*y as one who is uncouth and unrefined can be seen as discriminatory. The Miss Alcazar and Miss Tiffany’s Universe showed that not only can *kathoe*y mimic femininity to good effect, they can also epitomize the ideal Thai woman. To be successful in a beauty contest was to be a successful *kathoe*y. And a beautiful, successful *kathoe*y should be a source of national pride.

When conceptualized this way, it becomes clear as to why many are still eagerly fighting to win the coveted crown and joining the beauty pageant in large numbers. It would also explain why beauty pageants remain popular and are seen as “prime time politics” that allows national politics to be played out in the context of a global power system.

Transsexual beauty pageant contestants are often able to recall their desires and pleasures of being able to “parade” themselves on stage, on winning the crown, and becoming an embodiment of a universal concept of beauty. It also allows them to pursue other goals, such as furthering their education or career (with prize money and scholarships), getting opportunities in jobs that would otherwise have eluded them, or “be themselves”

(*sadaeng ork*). In the case of transsexual beauty contests, it could mean winning enough money to fund their sex-reassignment surgery and also give them the opportunity to be recognized as purveyors of ideal femininity, sometimes even more successfully than “real women”. Beauty contests are thus means by which they can achieve beauty, power and agency all at the same time.

The proliferation of transsexual beauty contests came about in the mid 1990s, with the development of tourism in Pattaya, Bangkok and other cities. Skeptics of such beauty contests see them as merely by-products of tourism and are simply entertainment without value. Some scholars, like Esterik, see transsexual beauty contests as “anti-pageants”, deliberately questioning the notions of gender and sexuality in society and such pageants are conscious efforts to question and problematize the mainstream performances of gender and beauty. Transsexual beauty contests are also channels for the articulation of a *kathoey* identity, not just in differentiation and opposition to mainstream beauty contests. In many cases, most of these *kathoey* are happy with their own identity, although they express a desire to be born a woman, they do not seek to transgress the gender boundary in a totalitarian manner.

Transsexual beauty contests, in this way, help them to perform such an identity by publicly recognizing their ability to transform themselves either partially or wholly, and giving them a stage to display their acts of “cross-dressing”, mimicry and gender definition. In all cases, such beauty contests are marketed as transsexual beauty contests, with an emphasis on that the contestants are born biologically male, but possessing admirable skills of performing feminine beauty and transformations. The idea of a “male-female” transformation is never subverted and contestants are never marketed as individuals trying hard to be women, but individuals who are able to perform femininity successfully, sometimes even more successfully than real women. Therefore, transsexual beauty contests

are important channels in which transsexuals are able to articulate their own identity and are performance spaces that legitimize a public space for the transsexual in today's society by "beautifying" their transformation and cross-dressing processes. Beauty contests become a voice for them to express and fortify their otherwise minority existence.

The Ambivalence of Power

Paradoxically, in most cases, this performance of gender is assessed based on the dominant Western definition of gender and sexuality – the binary model of masculinity versus femininity. Contestants in transsexual beauty contests are often not assessed based on their performance of transsexuality and hybridity of femininity and masculinity, but on their mimicry and ability to transgress the gender boundary. On the first instance is appearance and mannerism. The success of the transsexual is thus, not hinged upon their ability to perform transsexuality, but the ability to transgress the gender boundary, at least on the surface.

During the course of my fieldwork, I have noticed many instances of "slippages" that occurred during the beauty contests, albeit not on stage. Such instances of "slippages" would include shouting and screaming on the bus when they saw handsome men on the roads, talking in a masculine voice, exchanging crude jokes about the SRS and their genitalia and even fighting during a skit-presentation. Organizers felt that it was appropriate to write these "slippages" off as *kathoe*y behaviour and would usually use the term "*sia form*" to describe such behaviour. Although not approving of these actions, they hardly found it a problem and rarely is a contestant penalized for it in the contest itself. However, such behaviour would have been deemed highly inappropriate during the actual contest. The question is, why is then the "*kathoe*y behaviour" not allowed to be performed and displayed on stage? Transsexual beauty contests, in this sense, become both enabling and subjugating sites that

simultaneously empower the performance of *kathoey* identity yet subject *kathoey*s' to imitate mainstream (dominant/Western) notions of beauty and femininity.

Wearing the Crown – Power and Representations

In conclusion, I have shown how contestants have to perform femininity effectively before they are recognized as successful *kathoey* and how they can elevate their social status by winning the crown. Motivated by the positive outcomes of these transsexual beauty contests, many of the applicants and contestants are eager to participate in these contests. They feel a sense of agency and are positive about their efforts to improve their lives and increase the level of acceptance for people like them. In these beauty contests, it is often said that such beauty contests “provide an opportunity for transvestites to be more accepted in today’s world community”. (See Miss Tiffany’s Universe official website.

<http://www.missinternationalqueen.com/home.htm>)

Such reiteration of “acceptance through winning” is a double-edged sword. There can be no denial that such transsexual beauty contests do indeed increase awareness and to a certain limited extent, elevate tolerance if not, acceptance levels. However, the continued reiteration that these aims can be achieved through the parade of femininity on stage can also serve to limit the *kathoey* social standing and fortify their minority status. There have always been heated reactions towards these *kathoey* who are seen as purveyors of transformations and “constructed beauty”. Critics often point out that many of these *kathoey* are as beautiful as real women, if not more beautiful, because of the various cosmetic surgical procedures they undergo. Such accusations are not unfounded in actual facts because many of these *kathoey* do undergo massive cosmetic surgery in a bid to attain the femininity they accentuate on stage. Not only are they labeled as fake and pretentious, it also diminishes the very social status they seek to elevate in the first place. In addition, such belief of “acceptance through winning” reinforces their discriminated position in society and subjects them to a perpetual

race to catch up and achieve more social acceptance in society, rather than looking at beauty contests as stages on which they can perform their identity and culture, independent of mimicry and absolute femininity. Though they can “*sadaeng ork*”, they are projecting an image of femininity and beauty that has been dictated by the other parties who hold the real power in these contests, such as the judges, sponsors and the cabaret. They are neither projecting their self-identity nor a *kathoey* identity of which the objectives in these transsexual beauty contests spelt out to achieve in the first place.

Although entering a transsexual beauty contests give contestants a sense of agency, they are also subjected to the various demands of beauty, femininity and appropriate representations that they can project to win the crown. They have to constantly maneuver themselves within these constraints to subvert their masculinity and show that they can transgress the gender boundary without too much effort. However, in my encounters with many *kathoey* performers and contestants, most of them do not wish to transgress the gender boundary totally. Many of them have no qualms about going for cosmetic surgery to enhance their feminine looks, but many of them are in no hurry to go for sex-reassignment surgery. What they were performing was an image that is demanded of them from society at large, an image based on feminine beauty and what has become “romanticized” as the Thai *kathoey* culture. In this sense, a transsexual beauty contest can be seen as both an enabling and subjugating sites that simultaneously empower the performance of *kathoey* identity yet subject *kathoey*s' to imitate mainstream (dominant/Western) notions of beauty and femininity.

Given the impact of tourism, globalization and capitalist development in Thailand today, such ideas of what constitutes a beautiful national culture and identity are not just determined by local politics, but global politics as well. Although there is a desire to retain agency in creating an authentic Thai identity and beauty, the demands created by tourist consumption may mean a flux between adopting a Western outlook and maintaining “local

exotica". Thailand had to be modern and at the same time, "exotic" and the romanticized *kathoey* culture was part of this "exotica". Thus, a continuous process of mediating such power struggles with in a complex web of romanticism, capitalism and global politics is inevitable.

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