

Michael Peletz. *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009. 342 pp.

Jane Monnig Atkinson

In this ambitious book, Michael Peletz sets out to explore how and under what conditions “gender pluralism” may develop and thrive in a society or nation-state. Peletz uses “pluralism” to refer to instances in which certain types of diversity are granted legitimacy. By “gender pluralism” he refers in particular to instances in which forms and degrees of legitimacy are granted to culturally recognized inclinations, behaviors, roles, relationships, and expressive forms associated with concepts that go beyond a dualistic opposition of maleness and femaleness to include hermaphroditism, androgyny, and other transgender possibilities.

Peletz locates his study in the broad coordinates of Southeast Asian geography and history. In the course of his analysis, he draws on a wide array of cases from across the region and across the centuries. He establishes a baseline in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—the first half of the early modern period—to identify dimensions of gender pluralism that existed in the region before European colonial influences became a significant factor. He identifies a series of conditions supportive of the forms of gender pluralism thereafter discussed in the book. These include the prevalence of bilateral kinship systems that do not favor the male or the female line; dualistic cosmologies with complementary female and male elements; roles for women in agricultural, life cycle, and healing rituals; women’s participation in politics and trade; tolerance of premarital sex; initiation of divorce by either party; and a relatively high degree of autonomy and agency afforded to women.

Peletz posits that the transgender themes in the hegemonic forms of state ritual and courtly practice built on and afforded legitimacy to behavior in the wider society. He explores how polymorphic patterns of gender in the region were melded with and reinforced by Southeast Asian forms of cosmology and statescraft, strongly inflected by the Saivite and Tantric traditions of South Asia over the course of two millennia. Importantly, he argues that transgender ritual practices were not transgressive exceptions to societal conventions, but rather were consistent with gender pluralism in society at large. Gender pluralism in this era included legitimate sexual relations between same-sex partners who were differentiated genderwise by markers such as dress, occupation, and ritual roles. Ritual practitioners, for example, included anatomical males who performed in women’s dress and married other anatomical males. Such specialists had a place in royal courts as well as in the villages and countryside.

The importance of legitimation by hegemonic structures and ideologies is a point developed carefully across historical eras. In his chapter on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Peletz introduces accounts of two populations in Borneo—the Iban and the Ngaju Dayak—for whom documentation is lacking until the latter half of the nineteenth century. With appropriate caveats, he reviews the evidence concerning transgendered ritual practitioners in these two stateless societies and compares them to the well-known *bissu*, transgendered ritual specialists who have played a well-

documented role in the ritual and political life of the Bugis of South Sulawesi for centuries. As keepers of the lontar-palm manuscripts that contain the royal genealogies, chronicles, and charters, *bissu* were closely affiliated with political authority. Peletz argues that the *bissu* complex has lent legitimacy to *calabai* and *calalai*, anatomical males and females in Bugis society who are not ritual specialists, but do have sex with same-sex partners.

This three-way comparison of Iban, Ngaju Dayak, and Bugis is pivotal for Peletz's argument that gender pluralism is affected by the relationships of a social group to the structures of class and power within the wider polity. Peletz returns to these cases in the second half of his book, where he makes the case that the decline of transgender ritual practice among the Iban and the Ngaju Dayak is connected to the increasing marginalization of these populations within the nation-state, domination by more economically and politically powerful neighboring populations, and the growing influence of hegemonic world religions. And in the case of the Iban, urban migration and female prostitution, he argues, have seriously eroded women's standing as well. By contrast, the Bugis, who number three and a half million in South Sulawesi alone, have sustained a higher degree of gender pluralism and a stronger social position for women, thanks to their economic clout, political influence, and reputation as staunch Muslims. Peletz is sensitive to the risk of imposing an overly deterministic and unilinear model on historical transformations. In the Bugis case, for example, he highlights the fluctuations within the last six decades, a period which saw both persecution of *bissu* in the early years of the Indonesian Republic and a re-florescence of *bissu* in the post-Sukarno era.

The second half of the early modern period—the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—was a time of profound economic, political, and creedal transformations in Southeast Asia, with the intensification of trans-regional commerce, political centralization fueled by increased wealth and competition, and the rise of religious orthodoxies (i.e., Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim). With these changes came dislocations and delegitimization of older cosmological and sociopolitical forms. Peletz traces the displacement of transgendered and female ritual practitioners in this era, as well as factors contributing to a decline in women's cultural, political, and economic standing.

Peletz draws on Barbara Andaya's important work concerning the retrenchment of women during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including her study of how "temporary marriage," once a respectable form of alliance between elite families and foreign traders in which the female partners exercised a high degree of agency, devolved into stigmatized forms of concubinage and prostitution as elites abandoned the practice, and foreign men entered into relationships with women of lower classes who could bring only sex and domestic services, not powerful political and trade alliances, to their unions.¹

In addressing the effects of European colonialism on gender pluralism, Peletz engages Stoler's important work on gender, race, and class, pointing out its failure to

¹ Barbara W. Andaya, "From Temporary Wife to Prostitute: Sexuality and Economic Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Women's History* 9,4 (1998): 11–34.

account for the significance of homosexuality in these intertwining discourses.² To his credit, Peletz freely acknowledges the same omission in his previous books on Malaysia. He argues that, by going beyond the archival records, it is possible to find rich documentation regarding sexual diversity in the writings of travelers, missionaries, ethnographers, and novelists, as well as in artistic work of this period. These sources document European reactions to sexual diversity in local cultures and illuminate the development of stereotypes concerning the “feminized and degenerate East”; racialized accounts of societal evolution and human sexuality; policies that promoted female concubinage and prostitution as a deterrent to interracial homosexual relations between colonial (European) workers and local men; and transformations in the labor markets, including the sex trade, with far-reaching consequences for the health and livelihoods of women and men.

The overarching point of Peletz’s analysis regarding this transformation of acceptable behavior is that transgendered and female ritual participants once played a significant role in the symbolic, ritual, and political structures of precolonial Southeast Asian states. As such, they gave legitimacy to a range of transgender behaviors that existed within the tolerances of Southeast Asian kinship, family, and social systems as long as that activity did not violate the heterogender framework of those systems. Through much of the region, the ties between transgender ritual practice and political authority have been severed in recent centuries. What is more, world religions, with new and reformed orthodoxies, have displaced older cosmological frameworks and often stigmatized their transgender elements. Female participation, let alone prominence, in rituals of statehood has been similarly displaced. Although popular tolerance continues through most of the region for same-sex sexual relations, such relations are less likely to be validated through state ideologies and institutions.

In the second half of the book, Peletz explores the changing dynamics of Southeast Asian gender pluralism as they are playing out in the postcolonial era. Prominent in this section are in-depth analyses of Burma and Malaysia in the contemporary era. (The Burmese government, since the 1962 coup, has resisted modernity and participation in the global economy, in contrast to Malaysia, whose leadership has sought to combine aggressive economic development and growth, Islamic values, and a distinctive approach to modernity.)

Burma has sustained an agriculturally based society in which local religious traditions—including propitiation of *nat* spirits and transgendered ritual practitioners—retain their salience. Peletz reviews a 1996 study of Burmese terminology for transgender categories and sexual behavior by George Van Driem.³ For a Burmese man who is sexually attracted to same-sex partners, the choices have been to become a transgendered ritual specialist married to a *nat* spirit (*acault*), to marry such a specialist himself, or to live a “heteronormative” life as a husband and father while having sex with men on the side. For women, the choices have been more limited still. In recent years, however, with the development of a gay and lesbian rights

² See: Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); and Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

³ George Van Driem, “Lexical Categories of Homosexual Behaviour in Modern Burmese,” *Maledicta* 12 (1996): 91–110.

movement, new options are available. Peletz explores the career of Aung Myo Min, a prominent leader of this movement, who has sought to create space for a secular masculine gay male identity. This liberating assertion of masculine possibilities has coincided with other less laudable changes in Burmese gender politics.

Peletz cites Ward Keeler's recent study of Burmese performance genres that documents a shift in masculine musical and theatrical styles away from classical motifs of aristocratic refinement to angry and aggressive presentations of self that echo conventions of Western rap music.⁴ Significantly, the feminine has no place in these displays—and, indeed, Keeler reports that women fade into the background. Keeler suggests that this new masculine stance is heavily inflected by the economic and political impotence of Burmese audiences that respond to fantasies of aggressively angry men. As for women, newly marginalized in popular performance, the economic conditions they experience under the junta are particularly cruel. By one estimate, one third of females of childbearing age in the Rangoon area were engaged in prostitution in the late 1990s as a result of deteriorating economic conditions, and the growing scourge of HIV/AIDs exacerbates their misery. Such trends only reinforce negative stereotypes of women in Burmese society that are already buttressed by Buddhist concepts of female spiritual inferiority. Peletz examines the harsh government attacks on Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to show how Burma's leaders make use of such stereotypes to impugn her.

The infamous charges leveled by the Malaysian government against Anwar Ibrahim, former deputy prime minister and minister of finance, offer a parallel opportunity for exploring the deployment of sexually transgressive themes in political character assassination in a very different context of nation-state politics and ideology. Peletz traces how conditions for gender pluralism in Malay cultural traditions have been severely constricted by a modernizing framework that recasts the Malay past as feudal, rural, and backward, in contrast to a forward looking globalized future buttressed by Islamic values.

Ironically, Malaysian development efforts have had the effect of promoting urbanization and migration, conditions conducive to the heightened concentration and visibility of transgender and same-sex sexual practices, not to mention the incubation of political consciousness and advocacy regarding sexual rights. Peletz recounts the repressive measures imposed on activities the government has labeled deviant and immoral (ranging from gay clubs to female beauty pageants).

Peletz explores resistance to the government's campaign against sexual deviance, with a special focus on the work of Pink Triangle, a Malaysian NGO dedicated to supporting communities at risk from HIV/AIDs and sexual discrimination. This NGO manages to function with government support for its outreach to AIDS patients, intravenous drug users, and sex workers, but not for its support of transsexuals and homosexuals. Peletz speculates as to whether economic opportunism will ultimately win out over sexual conservatism in Malaysian policies given the attractiveness and potential value of the "pink dollar," i.e., money earned by marketing to gay tourists as

⁴ Ward Keeler, "But Princes Jump! Performing Masculinity in Mandalay," in *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Monique Skidmore (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), pp. 206–28.

well as gay nationals with economic clout, as appears to be happening in neighboring Singapore.

Peletz concludes his fascinating section on contemporary developments with reflections on King Norodom Sihanouk's 2004 expression of support for the issuance of marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples in the United States by the City of San Francisco in February of that year. The embracing of same-sex marriage by an octogenarian Cambodian king has the semblance of a benediction by the *ancien regime indochine* for a contemporary transnational sexual rights movement.

This remarkable book ends with a short epilogue that compares the experiences of Malaysian and Cambodian immigrants to the United States who are struggling to find a way to adapt their identities as men who have sex with men to the legal, cultural, social, and economic world in which they find themselves. The Malaysians in question are fourteen individuals during whose political asylum hearings Peletz served as an expert witness after the Anwar affair. Not surprisingly, given their legal circumstances, these men painted conditions back home as threatening to them as "gay" men and tended to idealize their opportunities in America. By contrast, the Cambodians in Los Angeles, California, interviewed by Karen Quintiliani, tended to idealize conditions in their homeland in contrast to the negative realities they face in the United States, where they encounter racism, heterosexism, denigration of the feminine in Cambodian-American communities, and the pathologies of poverty.⁵ No general conclusions can be drawn from these limited samples about the experience of Southeast Asians adjusting to life as "gay" in America. Rather, the interest of the comparison has to do with how the interviewees portrayed life in their country of origin, their negotiation of "gayness" in US culture, and the different trajectories individuals will experience depending on their opportunities and personal circumstances in dealing with the American class system.

This book is a major contribution to Southeast Asian studies and to scholarship on gender and sexuality. Peletz's thesis is theoretically sophisticated and compelling. His argument is tightly organized, meticulously developed, and densely detailed. True to his Weberian roots, Peletz seeks to build his case historically, with thoughtful attention to patterns and variations across time and space. The result of this approach is an intricately reticulated analysis of complex historical, societal, and cultural processes. Southeast Asianists will find this book compelling for the new light it sheds on history, politics, gender, and sexuality in the region. Readers unfamiliar with Southeast Asia may find it a formidable challenge to grapple with the dense interweaving of theoretical insights and historical and ethnographic detail. I would nevertheless encourage them to persist because of the valuable insights Peletz offers regarding the politics and possibilities of gender and sexual diversity, both past and present.

The book is suitable for graduate level courses. I would be wary about assigning it even in advanced undergraduate courses, although individual students with the scholarly aptitude and appetite—and a strong background in Southeast Asian Studies and/or scholarship on gender and sexuality—may find the book immensely rewarding.

⁵ Karen Quintiliani, "One of the Girls: The Social and Cultural Context of a Cambodian American 'Gay' Group" (MA thesis, California State University, 1995).