

Emotional clashes and female public nudity in Thailand

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Abstract

This article revisits cultural controversies over female public nudity in Thai society. It uses Songkran's topless dancing in 2011 and a bare-breast painting performance on the 'Thailand's Got Talent Show' in 2012 to explore cultural and emotional clashes in Thailand's 21st century. It shows that these two cases of public female nudity drew deep and divergent emotional responses from different groups in Thai society. These cases clearly revealed a clash in viewpoints with regard to Thai notions of feminine respectability associated with national identity and women's sexual expression. On the one hand, the controversies prompted moral panic and backlashes against women's sexual rebelliousness. On the other hand, they set off counter-backlashes against hegemonic discourse that tends to normalise oppressive sexual culture, nationalism and totalitarianism.

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In the second decade of the 21st century, Thai society has repeatedly experienced moral panic related to young people's transgressions of social norms and public order. An Office of Cultural Surveillance was established under the Ministry of Culture to deal with all forms of cultural transgression. Its mandate was to insure that traditional social norms, values and morality remain intact. It has become apparent that sexual transgressions, particularly by women, are a major concern of the Ministry of Culture. Women's provocative behaviours, such as wearing seductive clothing, displaying sexual intimacy in public, exposing naked breasts in public, engaging in pre-marital sex or becoming pregnant out of wedlock are deemed to be acts conflicting with the discourses of hegemonic femininity and so frequently have become subjects of the Ministry's outcries.

'Say No to Sex' campaigns are launched every year, especially on Valentine's Day and during the Loy Kratong and Songkran celebrations, warning girls not to engage in pre-marital sex. Bills related to obscenity are more frequently enforced to suppress and control in all sorts of public media the distribution of images of nudes and of sexual conduct viewed as indecent. These generally involve women's sexuality. A frequent rationale for the control of obscenity and nudity associated with women is the need to ensure public order and to preserve the national reputation. Under these circumstances, it is much less likely that women's freedom of expression, sexual agency and sexual rights will be recognised and promoted by the state. On the contrary, Thai women's sexual

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expression has come under increasingly harsh surveillance. The Ministry of Culture and educational institutions are assigned the role of monitoring and rescuing ‘female sexual respectability’ with the goal of taming Thai women and enforcing their sexual modesty and virginity till marriage.

In the 21st century, we can also observe changing sexual attitudes among Thai women (Fordham, 2001). Some Thai girls have attempted to overturn orthodox discourses of women’s sexual respectability and to replace the asexual feminine body with a sexy one. New social media using webcams, internet websites and selfie technology have become popular sites for women of the younger generation to rediscover their sexual bodies and sexual selves. One might argue that these girls are simply experimenting with Western lifestyles and fashions, and that their taboo expressions, such as showing naked breasts, actually have no political intention to attack Thailand’s official preference for 19th century notions of sexual respectability. However, out there in cyberspace, there are in fact some rebellious girls using their nude bodies to confront hegemonic discourses about respectable Thai womanhood. Also, we see a certain number of their supporters who have sent a counter-backlash against the Ministry of Culture when Ministry authorities took abrupt action against girls who bared their breasts in public or on the internet. These phenomena stirred ‘emotional wars’ between the opposing groups, i.e. cultural watchdogs and the newly emerged Thai middle class.

Sex panic and emotion

This article is based on internet research covering the period 2011–2015. The analysis is primarily drawn from dialogues, debates and commentaries associated with major public controversies in Thai society over female public nudity. These controversies rage sporadically on internet websites, in chat rooms, on personal Facebooks, and in online newspapers. The related concepts of ‘moral panic’ and ‘sex panic’ are applied to explore the politics of emotion in Thai society. They are used interchangeably in the article. The concept of moral panic is used to explain forms of transgressions involving rule-breaking behaviours that are perceived as threats to cultural norms and social order. Cohen (2002: xxxi) defines ‘moral panic’ as a wide array of cultural fears responding to moral or normative transgressions. However, Rubin (2011) points out that the distinction between moral transgression and normative transgression cannot be maintained when it is applied to some kinds of sex panic in response to sex crimes, pornography and prostitution.

The concept of ‘sex panic’ was first used by Carole Vance (1984). She applies the concept to moral panic centring on public fears about norm-breaking sexuality. Nonetheless, sexual transgressions are subjectively defined. The community’s normative standards determine which actions are deemed sexually transgressive. Threats are perceived because of some sense that public order is being put at risk. As a rule, no real threats are found, but public illusions or myths about such threats are vivid. Homosexuality, public nudity and public displays of physical intimacy are some examples of phenomena that can trigger a sex panic. Scholars such as Rubin (2011) and Herdt (2009) adopted the term ‘sex panic’ to define situations in which real or imagined public disorder provokes public fear, anger, shame and media hysteria.

Irvine (2009) argues that sex panics are ‘transient feelings.’ Rubin (2011: 25) suggests that sex panics are fluid, unsettled and even useful for people who seek liberation. At the same time, Lancaster (2011) understands that sex panics can impose a form of ‘punitive governance’, legitimising social controls and proclaiming the state’s exercise of power over its subjects. Sex panic episodes usually invite the enactment of new laws and encourage the enforcement of stronger regulations and measures to suppress the sexual desires and agencies of individuals. In the same fashion, Herdt (2009) states that sexual and moral panics are often conceptualised as a tool to be used by particular social groups to take away the sexual rights of some marginalised groups (e.g.

women, sex workers, gay men, lesbians, nude models, clients of pornography and sexually active teenagers).

It has been observed that every moral or sexual panic links to the deployment of emotions which stigmatise certain types of behaviours. Then the target individuals or groups will be depicted as a threat to public order. This article applies social theories of emotion to explore the political meanings of emotions that have been produced out of controversies over cases of female public nudity. According to Oatley (1999: 273), emotion refers to 'a psychological state or process that functions in the management of goals. It is typically elicited by evaluating an event as relevant to a goal; it is positive when the goal is advanced, negative when the goal is impeded'. Oatley (1999) sees emotions as forming an integral part of human psychology. They consist of a continuum of feelings ranging from affection to hatred, from ease to anger. Recently, social scientists have begun to pay more attention to the study of emotions. Most social research has approached emotion from the social-constructionist perspective, emphasising that culture plays a significant role in determining when emotions can be expressed and what kinds of emotional expressions are acceptable or denied in each society. In other words, social scientists emphasise that culture plays a critical role both in the shaping and character of emotion as it is attached with social, political and cultural meanings.

Research on emotion in Thailand is primarily framed in psychological terms. These studies tend to place emotion entirely in the individual domain rather than within the structures of cultural, political and economic ideologies. There is a long-standing moral script advising that Thai people should not overtly express their emotions, especially negative ones such as hatred and anger. Persons who lose their tempers are considered disrespectful and rude. Hochschild (1979) explains that Thai people's suppression of emotions in major part is shaped by Buddhist 'feeling rules', which guide Thai Buddhists to manage and control their emotions, both the positive and the negative. Cassaniti (2014) proposes that, in Buddhist society, emotions serve as a privileged location for a person to obtain moral respectability: Buddhists focus on emotional management in order to achieve ethical superiority over other persons.

Today, one may observe that Thai people express their anger and hatred through many public channels. The current political turmoil and social disintegration obvious in Thailand in the past decades have led to the polarisation of publicly expressed sentiments of righteous indignation. These consist of expressions of strong discontent about actions or incidents that people judge to be offensive, unfair or immoral. However, people ground their judgements on different cultural standards and political motivations. Some use negative emotions as a political tool to attack hegemonic social and political powers. During the political clashes in the past years, it has been noticeable that Thai people were intolerant of different opinions. More than ever before, they expressed their fury through various channels (i.e. on television, in the press and on the internet).

Polarised emotional outbursts among Thais have also been observed in cases relating to female public nudity. The aims of this article are two-fold. First examined are emotions embedded in the poignant debates following female bare-breast incidents in 2011 and 2012. Next to be scrutinised is the political deployment of emotion, especially in counter-backlashes against the outcries of cultural watchdogs responding to female topless shows. In the 21st century, panics about female nudity in Thailand have often led to backlashes and swift counter-backlashes across the new social media. The term 'counter-backlash' is used henceforth to refer to the emotional responses of social critics, radical columnists and internet users who have criticised Thai society's negative responses toward women's public nudity.

Internalisation of sexual respectability

This section traces the history of the ideology of sexual respectability in relation to the occurrence of sexual moral panics and national identity. It also examines why and how sex panic links

women's sexuality with national identity. The body is a major domain affected by hegemonic and power discourses. This is an important insight into the ways in which Thai women's sexual identity is constructed through a disciplinary regime of discourses. Foucault's theory of discourses enables us to understand how sexual respectability as a set of cultural knowledge helps create what has come to be identified as hegemonic femininity in Thai society. Thai womanhood is constituted through society's discourses about the female body and sexuality. Regardless of class, Thai women growing up in modern Thailand are socialised during their school years to behave and to see their sexuality and their body in ways that conform to the norms of sexual respectability. Although liberal sexual attitudes and behaviours are increasingly observed nowadays, many Thai people retain elements of traditional views about women's sexual expression. This is evident in the use of sexual scandal as a powerful weapon to discredit women in every social sector.

Sexual respectability is an ideological construct. It establishes a set of norms, values, beliefs and meaning systems regarding appropriate sexual expressions for women. It also offers moral guidelines and stipulates emotional responses aimed at creating *normal*, natural, virtuous and respectful women (Herdt, 2009). These guidelines tend to separate women into two oppositional categories, i.e. the good and the bad. The origins of this ideology are linked to the colonial period and to Victorian cultural imperialism. Thais have adopted many elements of Victorian respectability since the colonial era in South-East Asia. The result is a set of gender and sexual 'scripts' for Thai women to follow. Thai women signal their respectability by dressing modestly, showing self-restraint, and by demonstrating nice behaviours, especially in their sexual life.

Although Thailand was not officially colonised, its quest for a place in the colonial hierarchy's discourse about civilisation partly persuaded Thai elites to embark on their 'self-colonising' project (Peleggi, 2007; Winichakul, 2000). Thai women's bodies and their sexuality were used by the old elites as a site upon which to ground their claim as a civilised nation. Women's sexual respectability thus became an important part of the foundation of the Thai national identity, which has been celebrated throughout the post-colonial period in nationalist propaganda and rhetoric.

By the mid-19th century, King Mongkut (Rama IV) and his noble men wilfully started a 'crypto-colonising' strategy (Herzfeld, 2002), leading to the adoption of Western standards of civilisation as a tool to establish the best place for Siam in the hierarchy of civilisations alongside European nations. The Siamese elites moved to do away with traditional practices that appeared 'uncivilised' to Western eyes. They did so out of cautious sensitivity to the doctrine of 'white supremacy', a racial notion held by European colonisers to legitimise their need to colonise other peoples and nations. The elites understood that if Siam were able to meet Western standards of civilisation, the nation would be safe from being colonised. The respectability norm has remained current in Thai society and culture ever since.

An acceptance of Western ideas about respectability led Thai elites to relate national identity and morality to feminine propriety. This capitulation came in the wake of attacks by Westerners on the 'primitive' Siamese traditions encountered by these visitors during the reign of Rama IV. These guests at court were offended by the Siamese practice of polygamy, by the lack of gender differentiation in haircutting, and, last but not least, by the topless attire of Siamese women (Barmé, 2002; Morris, 2000). The greatest excitement was associated primarily with Siamese sexual and gender culture (Barmé, 2002). Western criticism incited feelings of embarrassment among the Siamese elites: it was at that time that Victorian sexual morality was introduced into Thai society. The king started to draw a clear boundary between what would be considered 'civilised' gender and sexual performance and what would not.

King Mongkut insisted that men and women in his court cover the upper as well as the lower parts of their torsos (Morris, 2000). There was a defence of the royal practice of polygamy during this reign, but the practice lost its political function in the reign of King Rama V and disappeared

in the reign of King Rama VI.¹ Self-censorship was practiced by the king on many occasions. For instance, he ordered that erotic mural paintings be erased from all Buddhist temples in Bangkok (Kongpien, 1972). He was afraid that these paintings might lead foreigners to interpret Siamese sexual culture as hedonistic. He also criticised as uncivilised the lewd and obscene skyrocket ritual parades organised by Lao ethnic peoples in the Isarn region.

In the same vein, his son, King Rama V, felt uncomfortable before his foreign guests when he saw Siamese village women walking around in public with their breasts uncovered (Shulich, 2009). In order to catch up with European civilisation, King Rama V advised women in his court to wear long hair and to adopt Western blouses. In 1899, he issued a royal decree ordering to female commoners in Bangkok to cover their breasts and men to wear their loincloths at knee length (Peleggi, 2007). European attire for women was adopted and fine-tuned to meet local needs. As a result, a modern dress code for Siamese women was established. It evolved and continued to be refashioned. Women of the royal court were used as exemplars to model the hegemonic femininity of the epoch. Their adoption of Western attire and bodily decoration turned them into 'ideal and civilised women' and set a standard to which middle class Siamese women would aspire (Woodhouse, 2012). In the 1930s, women's sexuality and women's public performance of femininity were vigorously refurbished as a vital part of Thailand's modernisation project. The hegemonic ideal emphasising sexual propriety and the civilised feminine was strengthened by the 'cultural mandates' promoted by civic governments. Victorian sexual mores became more attractive to commoners after a modern education became available for girls nationwide.

Moral sexual panics over female public nudity on the one hand reflect how women's bodies and sexualities are regulated and homogenised by the Thai neo-nationalist project. On the other hand, they reveal how Thai women's sexual agency has suffered under the onslaught of the nationalist discourse. Whenever sex panics happen, they are linked to national reputation and anxiety about threatening Western culture. Female sexual transgressions in Thai society always provoke sex panics, which are manifest via angry critics and the alarmed responses of cultural watchdogs allying with the neo-nationalist government. Sex panics observed around women's sexual transgressions in Thailand emerge as a subject that is worth researching because they represent moments when sex is highly politicised and gendered.

Counter-backlashes: emotional clashes over naked breasts

Recently, a certain number of young Thai girls aged between 15 and 20 years dared to post selfies of their bared breasts on Facebook to attract 'like' comments from their internet fans. Some sources claimed that these girls were excited by doing such drastic and provocative acts. In October 2014, the Ministry of Culture warned women posting naked breast selfie photos on the internet that they could face criminal charges for violating the 2007 Computer Crimes Bill. This bill prohibits content and images deemed offensive to the public, or a cause of public panic and destructive of public order. There was a claim that the Ministry of Culture's 24-hour hotline service had received many complaints about the online fad of 'flashing' breasts. The Ministry's authority justified the enforcement of the bill by condemning the practice and the images as 'inappropriate actions' leading to public disorder. It was of no consequence that the predicted negative effects never actually happened and do not happen.

On 3 June 2015, the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Committee of Thailand levied a fine of 50,000 baht on a private TV channel because it breached article 37 of the Thai Public Broadcasting Service Act, B.E. 2551 (2008). During the national Songkran festival, the owner of one of the programmes assigned his female reporter whose task was to read the weather report wearing a tube top skirt. Authorities said that such a tube-style dress was 'inappropriate clothing'

for a female news reporter to wear, especially when she was presenting an informational programme. The enforcement of the Act in this case cited the need to preserve public morality and social order.

Attempts by Thai authorities to curtail different types of female nudity reached a climax not long ago with hot debates over two incidents of public nudity. One involved topless dancing girls in the Silom area during the Songkran festival in 2011; the other was the case of a bare-breasted painter who displayed a novel way of creating a work of 'art' in a 2012 episode of 'Thailand's Got Talent'. After these incidents were publicised by the media and by internet users, the Ministry of Culture and the police took legal action against the women involved. They were arrested and fined under article 388 of the Criminal Code for committing obscene acts by showing their naked breasts in public.

A few years have passed, and Songkran celebrations and TV programmes are closely monitored by the Ministry of Culture. Women and transvestites have been warned that if they engage in any lewd show they will certainly face criminal charges. However, some young women and some daring transvestites still occasionally challenge the warning. For example, in 2012, a 19-year-old transvestite violated the state's warning. She performed topless dancing on Songkran Day, though not within the precincts of Bangkok. Her actions were reported to the local police, who arrested the perpetrator and fined her 500 baht. In Thai society, breasts are a signifier of womanhood and sexual matters. Thus, whether the breasts belong to a biological female or to a transvestite, any exhibition of female breasts is unacceptable, except for the purpose of breast-feeding. Hence, transvestites, too, are forbidden to expose their female breasts in public.

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Debates over the two abovementioned cases of bared female breasts have stirred up public panic and anger during the past five years. The first case was observed in 2011 during the celebration of the traditional Thai New Year, the Songkran holiday. Three teenage girls stripped off their bras and danced in front of the public on Silom Road in the heart of the nightlife area in Bangkok. An unidentified person videotaped the topless dancing and posted it on the internet. The clip was passed around social media circles and quickly attracted almost a million viewers before it was removed from the internet. Cultural watchdogs and self-proclaimed righteous people – including authorities, journalists and members of the general public – expressed shame about the incident. The three topless dancing girls were harshly condemned, and their behaviour became an occasion to pontificate about 'what it means to be truly Thai'.

The Minister of Culture and a high-ranking policeman publicly stated that the topless dancers had destroyed the country's reputation and ruined traditional Thai culture. The minister urged Thai people to criticise the girls; police was pressured to arrest and punish them. A Bangkok district officer responded by lodging a complaint with police. The girls were urged by their parents to report to the police. Found guilty of committing a lewd action, they were fined 500 baht and required to apologise to their parents and to the general public before being released from the police station.

However, counter-backlashes soon erupted on the internet condemning the authorities' punitive action. Some young writers, columnists and internet users with different levels of academic background strongly criticised officials and cultural watchdogs for the outrage they expressed toward the topless holiday revellers. They labelled conservative people as self-righteous, self-publicising, pro-nationalist frauds, preoccupied with faulty beliefs about 'Thainess'. They ridiculed the authorities for not resolving real social problems such as poverty, extra-judicial violence by agents of the state against citizens, social injustice, gender inequality, prostitution, crime, low quality education, and the lack of freedom of expression. Instead, they derided the Ministry and the police for wasting time and energy dealing with harmless issues like women exposing their bare breasts. These

critics insisted that the country's many truly distressing social problems cause more embarrassment to Thailand's international image and more damage to Thai morality than the occasional topless dancing of young girls.

Sujit Wongthet and Kham Phaka, two columnists and social critics, were the most outspoken reviewers of the words and actions of the cultural watchdogs and neo-nationalists on this occasion. They cited the moral sexual panic over the Songkran topless girls as an ugly example of a totalising view about Thai sexual culture and 'Thainess'. They concluded that it was mostly nervous neo-nationalists and urban middle-class elites who felt that it was disgraceful for Thai girls to show their naked breasts. Sujit and Kham Phaka also claimed that these prophets of cultural doom had internalised wrong information about 'authentic' Thai sexuality and gender culture. They referred to Thai historiographies and argued that notions of nudity and women's sexual propriety did not exist in Siam's pre-colonial era. They also said that some of today's censorious attitudes were framed by the Victorian European sexual culture adopted by Siam's ruling class in the 19th century. Kham Phaka chided the cultural watchdogs who were vitriolic about the topless dancing. They represented, she said, Thais who know little or nothing about pre-modern Thai sexual culture when all Siamese women were bare-breasted in public. In Siamese culture at the time, public nudity was considered neither offensive nor disgraceful, because partial nudity was a traditional element of dress. Only after Western imperialism intruded was the nudity of Siamese women restricted within a new orthodoxy. In their view, the Thai ruling class had set out to bring the people's cultural lives into conformity with colonial standards of civilisation. Sujit added that, traditionally, performances of bizarre or transgressive behaviours on Songkran days were not deemed inappropriate. In the past, Songkran was for country people a special time set aside to rest and relax after long months of hard work. During these holiday periods, bawdy activities were regarded as playful; no one considered them offensive.

Some internet users posted photographs of Siamese women without top clothing as a protest against cultural watchdogs. Several old photographs that were posted on the internet depicted 19th-century Siamese women appearing in semi-nude clothing in public. The photos were circulated around the internet. They were copied and shared. The internet became a site of counter-backlash in the form of mockery of official cultural surveillance.

Internet users soon discovered that the Ministry of Culture had displayed images of topless Songkran goddesses on its website to promote the 2011 Songkran festival. These pictures were copied in web blogs and Facebooks with strong criticism highlighting the double standards of the authorities about nudity. On pantip.com, a popular Thai website, two photos of women with naked breasts were put together in a composite image so that the bare breasted Songkran goddesses from the Ministry of Culture's website and the picture of the topless Songkran girls appeared side by side. The caption read: 'Don't blame the girls. They were just emulating the Ministry of Culture.' The reworked photo was shared widely to ridicule the authorities. This emotional action clearly expressed a counter-backlash. In no time, the Minister of Culture ordered the deletion of the embarrassing bare breasts from the Ministry's website.

The counter-backlash expanded to address problems of class in Thai society. At the very beginning, some observers were saying that the three girls who performed topless dancing on Silom Road must be sex workers or transvestites. In response, social critics such as Kaewmala, a blogger and author of a book titled *Sex Talk*, and Kham Phaka condemned this comment as an expression of class and gender bias. Kaewmala said bluntly in an interview with *Saiyasombut* (2011), a website blogger:

The subtext of these reactions is that women who sell their bodies and 'type 2 female' [i.e., women who were born as biological males] transgendered persons have less value than natural born women who are

the ‘good girls.’ The same people (men) who would demand female chastity from the ‘good girls’ would be visiting brothels or massage parlors and have their ways with ‘type 2 females’ because they are thought to be game, available, easy.

It is true that Thai people tend to think that ‘real’ women and ‘decent’ girls would not dare to show their breasts to the public.

Interestingly, in the same year, Kham Phaka, who was so critical of the cultural watchdogs, posted a photo of her naked breasts on the internet with the words ‘No Hatred for Naked Heart’ painted across her breasts. The photo was re-posted around the internet circuit and on the news website *prachatai.com*. Kham Phaka justified her nudity as a political protest and a fearless rejoinder against injustice. Her nude protest was associated with the enforcement of the Lese Majesty Act. She posted her bared breasts photo to show support for ‘Akong’² Amphon Tangnoppakul, a 61-year-old man who was arrested and charged under the Lese Majesty Act. Mr. Amphon was found guilty of sending text messages considered defamatory to the monarchy and to Her Majesty the Queen from his mobile phone. He was sentenced to 20 years in jail. This sentence was vigorously criticised within the Thai cyberspace community. Many internet users followed Kham Phaka’s action by posting their nude photos to participate in a campaign called ‘Free Akong’. At the same time, however, Kham Phaka’s nude protest received brutal comments from people who disapproved of female nudity.

In 2012, a second case of public nudity involving a woman also ignited emotional clashes in cyberspace. This time it involved a television show, *Thailand’s Got Talent*. The show had broadcast images of a young female competitor who introduced herself as an artist, a painter. On stage, she took off her t-shirt and poured paint colours over her naked breasts. Then she proceeded to use her bare breasts to paint a canvas. Some in the audience were shocked; others flashed the victory sign urging the show’s committee panel to give this contestant a successful ‘pass’.

Pornchita Na Songkhla, a superstar, was the only female judge on the show. She disapproved of the performance, stating that the presentation was inappropriate within a Thai cultural context. On the contrary, the two male judges considered the presentation a type of performing art. They voted to pass the competitor into the next round. Pornchita clearly was very displeased. Not surprisingly, this show quickly stirred up public outrage; once again, the responses were polarised. The Minister of Culture stepped in quickly to take action. The owner of the show was called up for an explanation, while the host was warned that nudity on public television is strictly prohibited according to Thai censorship laws. The Minister of Culture declared the performance to be out of place and pressured the show owner and the producer to apologise to the public. The production team explained that the team had not known in advance precisely what the candidate had intended to do. The host of the show vowed that he would not let it happen for a second time. However, no one was really surprised when the truth came out that the producer of *Thailand’s Got Talent* had in fact given a green light to the performance as a publicity stunt to attract more viewers and advertisers.

The case of the topless painting drew authorities from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to voice a human rights concern. They said that a media event showing topless painting was one kind of violence against the public and against innocent children, because it appeared without any proviso on a public television programme. Columnist Kaewmala quickly picked up on the comment to touch on one of the most pressing political issues of the time. If the NHRC were so concerned about human rights violations, she said, then why were they still indifferent in the matter of state violence against Red Shirt protesters, especially when more than 90 people were killed? Kaewmala pushed the political dimension of the emotional debates over bare breasted painting by relating this issue to ongoing social injustice and the state’s use of violence against the citizenry. She wrote with some emotion:

It would be extremely desirable if the NHRC attended to some of these important rights issues and at least share with the public what it has done in this regard. Not that bare breast violence is not important – but protecting the innocent public from such cultural violence can very well be covered by the earnest Ministry of Culture, which really does need something to do. It would be kind to leave the breast issue to MiniCult (Ministry of Culture). Let Thai MiniCult protect Thai ‘culture’, ‘morality’, and ‘tradition’. The National Human Rights Commission is a serious institution worthy of tackling serious issues with its expertise, which is or should be Human Rights (Kaewmala, 2012).

Thai society may be growing more tolerant with women of the younger generation if they appear in public in a halter top or spaghetti-strap tank. It is still generally true, however, that a Thai woman’s respectability is instantly judged by the way she dresses. A Thai woman is required to keep her body – especially her breasts – covered in a modest and respectful fashion. Otherwise she will be regarded as degraded. Any woman who intentionally uncovers or exposes her breasts in public will immediately become a target for angry criticism. Drawing from these public sexual panics in two cases of topless females, one could argue that the views of Thai people are predominantly patriarchal where women’s sexual expression is concerned. *Seeing women who intentionally bared their breasts in public* is still a big deal for many Thai people and a cause of moral panic. Yet the display of naked breasts in public, on television, on the internet, or in movies is only one genre of sex-related issues that continue to provoke emotional debates. Public outcries over sexual transgressions are usually fraught with strong negative emotions targeting women.

Those who posted their naked breasts on the internet have been strongly criticised under the rationale that the practice destroys Thai culture and disrupts the social order. There is also an argument saying that revealing dress and nudity led to rape and sexual harassment of women. These claims are used to justify strict government enforcement of obscenity laws to keep young girls from breaking women’s dress codes – codes that play a significant role in sustaining binary categories that draw a sharp line between decent and indecent women.

In recent years, laws relating to obscenity have frequently been applied to prevent women from asserting their sexual agency through styles of dress in selfies or via webcams. One might argue that revealing one’s breasts, partially or completely, to the public is a way for young women to exercise their sexual agency, to seek gender equality and to call for freedom of expression. However, a woman who uses her naked body to protest injustice and to call for freedom of expression is not likely to be accepted by Thai people. Instead, the action is seen as a cause of moral decline, a serious threat both to personal integrity and to the national identity. Thai society has therefore – so goes the argument – enacted laws to suppress nudity and obscene actions, regarded as a threat to public order and morality. These acts contain penal provisions for imprisonment and imposition of fines against violators. Nonetheless, Thai society reached a new stage in the politics of sexual respectability. Progressive social critics and passionate internet users are taking up the issue of women’s public nudity in the sexually respectable politics of Thai society in order to deconstruct opposing traditions of moral sexual panic.

Post-colonial inferiority, forgotten memories

It is argued by some scholars (e.g. Streckfuss, 2011) that discourse about ‘national traditions’ in Thailand was firmly established a century ago. The said discourse became an instrumental power for the government to impart social order and regulations to control people’s social and private lives. All generations living in contemporary Thai society have been socialised to internalise the national rhetoric that propagates and preserves ‘authentic’ Thai culture. That powerful state ideology holds to this ‘authenticity’ as the essence of ‘Thainess’. Tejapira (2002), however, observed

that the fiction about authentic national culture in Thailand today is becoming more and more unsettled, fluid, hybrid, mutable, and globalised. Craig J. Reynolds, an Australian scholar and an expert in Thai history, remarks that ‘the tensions and dilemmas of living with ‘authentic’ and ‘globalized’ Thai will be present for some time to come, no less in matters of gender than in all other aspects of culture and behavior’ (1999: 272).

Nevertheless, cultural reforms which took place between the early 19th century and the early 20th century continue to exert critical influence on the experience of contemporary generations, especially of women. In the psyche of the ruling class, women’s bodies and their sexuality emerged as the first and last refuge in becoming ‘civilised and modern’. Intimidated by the foreign assessment that Siamese culture was ‘uncivilised’, compared to the Europeans, Siamese people slowly developed and internalised a sense of inferiority to them. Sex panics over women’s sexuality and rejection of female nudity in Thai society began from this particular political context.

The 21st century in Thailand has been marked by clashes of attitudes and ideas about what is righteous, what is immoral and what is respectable among Thai people. These clashes have often generated strong emotional responses between opposing viewpoints. One common site of cultural confrontation appears in women’s rebelliousness to hegemonic discourses which define and prescribe sexual respectability. We know now that the clash of emotions between neo-nationalists and non-nationalists over women’s sexual rebelliousness is rooted in Thailand’s self-colonising project, which spawned the Thai people’s colonial mentality. This mentality encompasses ‘rebellious attitudes towards the colonial ruler as well as a predisposition towards aping Western ways’ (Constantino, 1977: 227). The colonial mentality complex observed in Thai society necessarily gave rise to two mental states which are contradictory but also closely associated – a complex sense of ‘inferiority’, and a state of cultural ‘amnesia’.

This sense of inferiority suggests a condition in which Thai elite accepted the norms of Europeans as inherent national traditions in the process of transforming the kingdom into a ‘civilised and modern’ state. Leaders of Siam imposed and enforced those Western rules on their subjects for almost two centuries in order to establish these value codes and a hegemonic national identity. Another type of psychic state which also affects Thai people is one of ‘cultural amnesia’, a condition of memory loss (Wieringa, 2009) resulting from the self-colonising process. This condition happens when elite classes attempt to do away with certain pre-colonial cultural norms and practices deemed ‘uncivilised’. The result is the obliteration of memories about older traditions practiced by ancestors in their social lives in pre-modern Siam. Cultural amnesia may be observed in the pride expressed by Thai people in the uniqueness of their national traditions.

This inferiority complex and the state of cultural amnesia are consequences of identity and sexuality politics which dictate for Thai women a hegemonic feminine identity espousing the perpetuation of colonial sexual standards. Contemporary forms of moral or sexual panic mainly affecting women’s claim to sexual autonomy reflect this amnesia and this dread of being inferior. Reynolds’s remarks suggest that the Thai obsession with cultural ‘authenticity’ has relentlessly revolved and will continue to revolve around women’s bodies and their sexuality, which in turn restricts and will continue to restrict women’s sexual agency (1999).

Not so long ago, concepts of sexual obscenity and nudity appeared as consequences of cultural reforms attempting to meet Western standards of civilisation and to build a modern nation-state. In this process of reinventing Siam as a modern nation, Thai women’s bodies and their sexual behaviours were seen as the site not only of the ‘national image’ but also of ‘moral decay’. In the 21st century, this process continues. Nowadays, however, moral sexual codes for women are no longer part of a quest for a high place in the colonially defined hierarchy of the civilised, or for a prestigious position in the new world order. These repressive codes now exist instead to create ‘the other within’ (Winichakul, 2000) in order to sustain both class hierarchy and gender inequality in contemporary Thai society.

The elite attitude proscribing women who uncover their breasts as ‘uncivilised’ was picked up by commoners through modern educational practices. Women’s breasts, traditionally seen simply as a normal physical attribute, increasingly became imbued with disturbing sexual connotations. From the mid-19th century onwards, the traditional topless attire of Siamese women began to be viewed as obscene, and attires revealing female breasts were then regarded as ‘un-Thai’ expressions of depraved Western sexual culture.

The controversies over the two incidents at the Songkran festival and on the TV show are striking examples of the inferiority and amnesia complex of the whole society. They are transparent examples of the respectability politics which sustain sexism and class bias. It is wrong for contemporary Thai women to expose their naked breasts in public: only ‘loose girls’ – sex workers, nude models, or transvestites – would have the nerve to subvert appropriate sexual norms. Women who stray outside normative sexual boundaries can suffer discrimination and injustice in their everyday lives. They can be tortured by police or raped by their clients, and they have no legal protection. Rather than challenging repressive sexual respectability politics, many Thais can be convinced to condemn women who violate these norms and codes.

Negative views toward women’s disobedience to sexual norms have surely not disappeared in the 21st century. Thai society still continues to use sexual respectability politics as a form of gender control. Now more than ever, when there are so many different ways to be Thai and to be a woman, sexual respectability politics still have the power to oppress women. Thai women carry a double burden because they are asked to uphold the sexual respectability of the Thai identity and of the Thai nation. Hence, when she comes under the public eye, ‘a proper and respectable’ Thai woman must present herself as asexual.

Sexual respectability politics facilitates a policing of Thai women’s sexual expressions and choices that deny their own agency and humanity. Angry critics reacting to topless performances in Thailand today reveal the dogged persistence of the colonial mentality within the neo-nationalist middle class. At the same time, counter-backlashes against public anger serve as a means of opening public debates to resist the normalising of the sexual submissiveness demanded of Thai women. They also serve as ways to address the most pressing issues in Thai society, including rights, choices, diversity, and freedom of expression. A backlash implies that it is time for Thai society to recognise people’s liberty and agency and to allow differences to co-exist. Hence, counter-backlashes have political implications. The counter-backlashes against conservatives and neo-nationalists that took place during storms of sex panic in recent years are not yet a social movement; they have mostly been individual efforts to challenge dominant cultural codes. Yet, emotions manifested in counter-backlashes against neo-nationalism reveal that cries for sexual rights and democracy in Thailand become intertwined.

The ultimate aim of these transgressive voices is to deconstruct class stratification, gender inequality and other social injustices. Emotions are deployed as a strategy overlaying a political agenda that promotes flexible new democratic, pluralistic and fair cultural and sexual identities. Counter-backlashes by columnists, writers and bloggers against sex panics may open doors for more equality, in which these voices can be seen as significant and respectable. For the moment, they already urge people to think beyond the state’s hegemonic ‘truth’ about what it means to be ‘Thai’.

Conclusion

This article tried to show how moral panic over female public nudity is, ironically, related to post-colonial mentalities. Indeed, outcries against supposedly lewd sexual behavior and female indecency are rooted in Thai history from the period in which Siam had close encounters with European colonial powers. This period gave rise to prevailing discourses about women’s respectability,

which were heavily influenced by Victorian culture. Now, contemporary sex panics allow neo-nationalists to demonise the present stage of Western sexuality as anomalous and untamed. At the same time, these reactionary minds, ignorant of their own colonial Western legacy, trumpet their pride in normative and ‘authentic’ Thai sexual culture. Their tyrannous demands play out in the lives of Thai women – both for those who submit and for those who resist the stubborn colonial hegemonic forms of femininity.

In recent decades, numbers of voices have emerged demanding that Thai sexual culture break free of those obsolete sexual standards. And more frequently, calls for sexual liberation become entangled with political protest. Via online news as well as the internet, numerous individuals are now opposing the control of hegemonic discourse about Thai sexual culture that tends to oppress women. In essence, these are calls for democracy, for gender equality and for sexual rights. Moral panic reflects the country’s social and political realities, especially at moments of deep civil and political crisis; this is one a core concern of contemporary Thailand.

Notes

1. Winichakul (2000) observed that royal polygamy was not brought to an end by European criticism per se.
2. ‘Akong’ is a southern Chinese word referring to ‘grandpa’.

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