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The prisoners of gender



Above: Asan Soho (left) and Ardulmalik Maskul share a selfie. Below: women pray in front of Pattani Central Mosque, one of the kingdom's busiest in the south of Thailand, which is a majority Buddhist nation. Photos: Tibor Krausz, Alamy



Thailand's ladyboys live openly in most of the country except in the south, where Islam prevails. Two of the so-called third gender describe what it's like to be Muslim and trans

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Whenever Ardulmalik Maskul returns from Bangkok to her hometown in Pattani province in southern Thailand, she undergoes a transformation. She removes her make-up, changes into trousers and begins to mind her manners. Mostly, though, she does not leave the house.

Asan Soho engages in similar sartorial subterfuge on her return visits to Pattani. "I don't want to embarrass my parents," she says.

Maskul and Soho are practising Muslims and they're also transgender women. "It's very difficult to be like us," Maskul says in English. "In Pattani, it's a big bad thing to be transgender."

In Buddhist Thailand, male-to-female transsexuals, known locally as *katoeys* or ladyboys, are free to live like women. "They're widely accepted," says Pornchai Sereemongkonpol, the author of *Ladyboys: The Secret World of Thailand's Third Gender*. "They may face some disadvantages, but no one harasses them."

That's not so in Pattani, one of Thailand's three southernmost Muslim-majority provinces, bordering Malaysia, where more restrictive social mores prevail.

A separatist insurgency has claimed thousands of lives in the region since 2001. Islamic militants have subjected local Buddhist civilians, government officials, policemen and suspected Muslim collaborators to a stream of bombings, drive-by shootings and beheadings.

"In Pattani I can't dress like this," says Maskul, gesturing at her tight-fitting, navy blue dress, with a plunging neckline and a hemline that sits well above the knees.

She is in a Bangkok shopping centre and no one pays her any attention.

"If I did this at home, people would shout insults at me. They might attack me," she says.

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ARDULMALIK MASKUL, TRANSGENDER WOMAN

Maskul, 35, who works as an import-export officer at a Bangkok-based company, is bubbly and sassy with a penchant for playful banter. "Even when I'm dressed in unisex style, many people in Pattani look me over from head to toe, toe to head," she says. "I like to be the centre of attention, but not in that way."

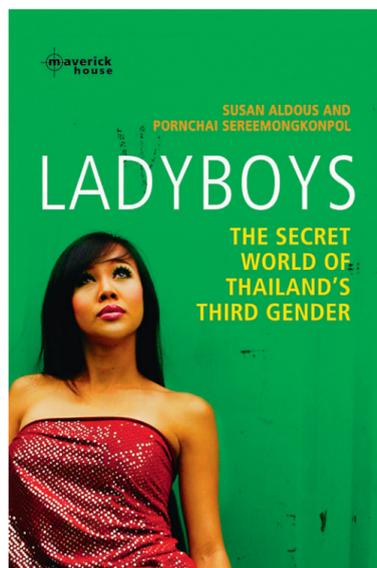
Her gender identity has been no laughing matter for her family, which claims partial descent from Pattani's erstwhile sultans and counts imams among its members. When Maskul was in her teens, one of her uncles, taking her feminine ways to be wilful deviance, tried slapping them out of her. "Even as a child I felt like a girl in a boy's body," Maskul says. "I liked playing with girls, not boys."

Her father, a policeman, didn't like that. He was a stickler for rules, and social and religious codes. "My family is quite strict and conservative," Maskul says. "They always knew what I am. Just look at my mannerisms," she says with another chuckle. "But I know they can never really accept me."

Soho, who is 26, hasn't had it any easier. "My parents are devout and they forbade me from acting like a girl," she says.

So she led a double life: she put on make-up in secret but attended the mosque in boy's clothing. "Instead of trying to change my parents, I tried to conform and act how they wanted me to act."

Outwardly as a male, that is. A few years ago, she moved to



Bangkok to study at a university where she could finally let her hair down – literally. By now, her parents have come to terms with her gender identity. Not so the rest of her family. "I have 11 uncles and aunts. They've all disowned me," Soho says. "They mock me and deride me, but I can live with that," she says. "But I don't like it that they tell my parents not to have anything to do with me."

Demure and statuesque, with delicate features and a well-mannered poise just short of hauteur, Soho works in the entertainment business, like many other transwomen in Thailand. Last year, she was crowned Miss Mimosa Queen at a high-profile beauty pageant for transwomen in the seaside town of Pattaya.

On a recent afternoon, Soho is an eye-catching figure in a stylish white dress, turning heads on the streets of Bangkok. Her destinations included a mosque, where she went for Ramadan – changing in a public toilet into a more low-key outfit: a frilly burgundy blouse and matching trousers.

No one shouted insults at her. Instead, she was treated as a celebrity of sorts. People take selfies with her in the warren of narrow streets that forms a small Muslim enclave opposite a Buddhist monastery. A couple of bearded men eye her with a hint of disapproval, but say nothing.

"We don't have a problem with transgender people in our community," says Woranuch Chalaganadacha, 57, a housewife dressed in a black abaya. "I have *katoeys* in my family. We Muslims are all brothers and sisters."

Such a live and let live attitude is common among Muslims in cosmopolitan Bangkok, but less so in the southern provinces. "We could never do this back home," Maskul says, referring to her visits to a mosque dressed as a woman.

"It's hard for us to be practising Muslims in a conservative society. Islamic society is divided strictly



Government troops in southern Thailand have been fighting Islamic separatists for several decades.

into men and women in public," she says. "I don't know where I should be during prayers. Should I join the women or the men? So I don't go. I stay at home."

The fortunes of transgender women, called *mukhannathun* ("effeminate ones") in Arabic, have waxed and waned in Islam over the centuries, often depending on whether they were seen as gay (homosexuality is a sin in Islam) or as members of a nebulous third gender who were assumed to have been born that way.

In many traditional Muslim societies, transwomen tend to conceal their gender identities for fear of being harassed, or worse. Earlier this year in Aceh, a religiously conservative province in Indonesia, a dozen transwomen were rounded up by police who set out to "re-educate" them. They were taken to a local mosque where they were subjected to religious sermons and publicly humiliated by having their dresses stripped and their hair cut. "If I'd been born in Malaysia or Indonesia, I would have more problems," Soho says.

In Thailand, about a quarter of a million men may be transgender in a country of 69 million, according to some estimates. In free-wheeling touristy areas, ladyboys are highly visible. In the three Muslim-majority southern provinces, however, they're nowhere to be seen. But that doesn't mean they don't exist. One of the brothers of Maskul's father is himself transgender. Uncle Jiseng has never married but he has never come out publicly as a transwoman either.

Some of my cousins are louts and drug users. Yet my family thinks that's still better than being transgender

ASAN SOHO, TRANSGENDER WOMAN

"He dresses like a man, but he loves pretty things like doing flower arrangements. In his heart he's a woman like me," Maskul says. "My mother is more open-minded and often scolds my father: 'Why can't you accept your son? Your own brother is a tootsie,'" she says, and her chuckle erupts again.

Maskul and Soho remain torn between their gender identity and their faith. "If I were to die, I may not receive a Muslim burial," Soho says.

She prays daily, attends the mosque during Muslim holidays and doesn't eat pork or drink alcohol. "There's one thing I can't do for my faith – change the way I am," she says. "Only Allah knows my heart. Only he can judge me."

Neither she nor Maskul would undergo sex reassignment surgery, although the practice is popular among transwomen in Thailand. In Islam, sex-change operations are forbidden.

"I don't want to become a woman 100 per cent," Maskul says. "When I grow old, I want to go on the hajj to Saudi Arabia," she says, referring to the pilgrimage to Mecca that is mandatory for Muslim men.

"We know it's a sin in Islam to be like us. So before we die we'll need to return to the way we were born," she says. "I was born a Muslim and I'll die a Muslim. But I didn't choose to be this way and I'm still considered a sinner. I can't just grow a moustache and work out to have more muscles like a man. That's not me."

The pair wish their relatives would realise that, too. "Some of my cousins are louts and drug users. Yet my family thinks that's still better than being transgender," Soho says. "We don't hurt or bother anyone. We just want to be ourselves."