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Transgenderism, Othering and Third Way Buddhist Monasticism in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Abstract

Religion and trans studies are a relatively new domain of study, one which surrounds subjects gendered and sexed as (religiously) “Other,” and in the articulation of such voices in a public space. In this paper we employ a case study of a transgendered monastic teacher named Khun Mae Tritrinn in northern Thailand to highlight a case of gendered religious “Othering,” and the construction of the third-way religiosity in the context of traditional hetero-patriarchal Buddhist monasticism. We refer to this thematic domain in the context of an emergent third-way religiosity; theorising in an experiential knowing of transgender subjects, which emerges from their trans-other lives. In the case study we show by resisting the gender binary of Buddhist monasticism how a particular transgendered person seeks a third-way monastic alternative; how she established her own hermitage and religious community, and manages the relationship between discourse and institutions that act upon and through her. The ethnographic focus sheds light on historical moments and voices that have been referred to elsewhere as forms of “subjugated knowledge” (Foucault 1980; Hartman 2000). However, despite being subject to religious Othering, recent trans-other identities have gained an increasingly de-subjugated and respected third-space alternative; an intelligibility and opening beyond a heteronormative binarism. It is argued that religious “thirding” creates a turning point for those seeking alternative spiritual bases, and as a salvific epistemology in an engaged religiosity and praxis.

Keywords: Othering; Third-way Monasticism; Buddhism; Transgender; Thailand

Buddhist practitioners who transgress gender boundaries, although they may be considered successful in their respective religious practice, are not accepted in a normative Theravada Buddhist context, where religious leadership and authority are in the domain of male monastics. In the dominant perspective, only Buddhist men are regarded as fit to become fully ordained (*upasampadā*) and to provide in a classical sense a “field of merit” (*puññakkhetta*; Thai: *naa bun*). Until recently, female ascetic Buddhist devotees in Southeast Asia were (and still are) limited in opportunities to undertake full Theravada ordination as *bhikkhuni*. It is only in taking the vows of eight— or ten precepts (*aṭṭha-sīla* or *dasa-sīla*) which remains the default and most common way of ordaining for females.

Transgendered persons or “ladyboys” (*katoey*) can be ordained in Thailand, however their gender identity is likely to draw criticism and they are looked down by both the *sangha* and lay community. They do not fit in well with either cisgendered male and female monastics. They are often perceived as an— “Other” who transgress traditional gender boundaries. In fact, the mainstream perspective is to condemn these practitioners as unnatural (resulting from bad karma) and seen as going against religious and moral norms. Schedneck (2021: 417) argues that femininity is regarded as of the worldly matter, often made attached to sexuality and beauty, thus it is not compatible with monasticism where body and sexuality need to be carefully controlled.

Some so-called “ladyboys” decide to become Buddhist nuns (*mae-chii*), donning white robes and observing the Buddhist eight or ten precepts. In this case study, “ladyboys” have established a unique nunnery where transgendered Buddhists as well as women can undergo temporary initiation as a

mae-chii. Indeed, it has been argued that *mae-chii*, in many formal bhikkhu monastic settings, tend to live rather ambiguous and frequently subservient lives (Cook 2010: 5, 151–152). Although normative renunciation is traditionally prescribed for males, not every person born and sexed as a male fit in well with a normative model of renunciation. In fact, persons born and sexed as male that identify and/or transition to female have to find a way to work within a normative model of renunciation. Like female renouncers who aspire to become ordained *bhikkhunīs*, any transgendered person pursuing and establishing their own renunciant pathways within Buddhism must establish their public voices (Kelly 2018). In doing so, transgendered persons who seek renunciation challenge normative conventions and establish new gender boundaries. We refer to this trend as a “third-way” religiosity or monasticism. This paper pertains to these contested boundaries which are implicit in “Othering,” and the concerns (and the problematic) of representation and praxis (Fabian 1990; Hall 1997; Vargas-Cetina 2013).

In our use of “Othering” we refer to marginalised identities as originating from feminist theory and post-colonial studies that have also influenced our own anthropological approach. The term “Otherness” in postmodernism refers to a radical difference and as bell hooks (2015: 24) notes it needs to be grounded in discursive practice. The postmodern notion of heterogeneity and the decentred subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness, is still often located within a dominant social order and its master narrative which it seeks to challenge (bell hooks 2015: 25). Gillespie (2007: 2) noted: “the representation of the other is deeply entwined with the representation of self...[O]thering occurs when Self represents Other in terms of what Self is not (and in terms of what self does not want to be) ...”. The “Other” exists because of binaries and juxtapositions in relation to the self and in relation to multidimensional processes that pertain to various social power asymmetries (Spivak 1985).

In this paper we employ a case study of a transgendered monastic teacher named Khun Mae Tritrinn in northern Thailand to highlight a case of gendered religious “Othering,” and the construction of the third-way religiosity in the context of traditional hetero-patriarchal Buddhist monasticism. Transgenderism, in this context, refers solely to the Thai notion of the *katoey*, male to female (hereafter: m-t-f) transgender. That is, as a problematic concern when a person’s gender identity is not congruent with the other markers of one’s sex; or as an identity and expression not in conformity with the social expectations of one’s assigned birth sex (Taylor *et al.* 2018: 13).

Gyatso (2003) noted that transgendered persons were not *ipso-facto* frowned upon in early religious literature and states that “...the rich theoretical potentials of the third sex category, not to mention its actual valorisation in some corners of Buddhist history, makes us wonder all the more pointedly: why did the category remain a problem for monasticism?” Gyatso then goes on to say that despite the often-positive representations in archaic religious traditions “—not just for philosophy but also in tantric physiology, grammar, even sacred iconography—none of these were really about actual third sex people: rather, in each case the third sex stands for a principle, a concept, a category—a gender. This realisation will bring us to the heart of the (normative) Vinaya’s litany of sexual exclusions” (Gyatso 2003: 104–105).

Through Khun Mae Tritrinn’s lived experiences, we argue that nothing prevents anyone gendered male, female and the third sex from practicing the Buddha-Dhamma and achieving the goal of spiritual liberation with the right supporting conditions. For instance, Seeger (2009, 2010, 2013) has shown in the case of the famous Mae Chii Kaew and Khun Mae Bunruean that the monastic and lay sangha recognise women as achieving the highest normative goals in Theravada Buddhism. However, this achievement may be through the sanctioned authority and recognition given to them of accomplished famous ascetic monks. Seeger (2022) has more recently studied the auto/biographical “hidden histories” and distinctive lifeways of earlier female coenobites in Thailand, many of whom have lacked widespread public recognition, unless their achievements were endorsed by well-known monk practitioners. Here we are concerned with m-t-f transgendered persons who seek a particular religious quest, neither male nor female, but a third “Other.” The problems confronting such transgendered persons are confounded by their position of normative ambiguity and exclusion.

The problem is the historic and the normative boundaries which circumscribe the Theravadin monastic life and which tend to leave little “third way” alternatives or openings for categorised and self-identified transgendered or gendered non-conforming persons to experience the renunciant life in its entirety. A nonbinary monastic environment may exclude male renunciants and in their own renunciant

path may seek to develop their own bases of spiritual practice, monastic lineage, and intellectual influence, and work towards establishing a new religious domain.

In the next section we outline some of the doctrinal bases for understanding the new third-way monasticism, starting with the Vinaya texts, followed by an attempt to theorise contemporary monastic “third space.”

The Vinaya, Hetero-patriarchy, and the Theravada Monastic Ordination Problematic

The Buddhist Vinaya serves a variety of functions as a form of “societal management” (Voyce 2010: 185), situated within ritual boundaries. The seemingly finicky nature of rules and the legalistic minutiae in principle supposedly regulate monastic behaviour (male [*bhikkhu*] with 227 rules, and nuns [*bhikkhuni*] with 311 rules). In practice, there is considerable discrepancy in the application of these binding rules, though in many orthodox Theravada monasteries the Pāṭimokkha (or the Vinaya’s monastic rules and prescriptions) is ritually recited fortnightly among groups of at least four fully ordained monks (sangha).

The Vinaya is essentially the founding charter of the monastic sangha and defines the norm/transgression dichotomy, regulating and maintaining the overall disciplinary structure and code (Faure 1998: 284; see also Wijayaratna 1990). The norm maintains monastic tradition and discipline, while its antithesis may involve a transgression of gender boundaries into a new transposed monastic context, shifting these normative boundaries into new frames of (religious) experience. As we argue, this is what Khun Mae Tritrinn is doing at her monastic centre named Dantham (Mahamongkon Paiboonpoonsuk) in northern Thailand (discussed later).

It is not our position to debate the interpretation of normative Pali texts, or its existing vernacular Vinaya rules and regulations in relation to the feasibility of female higher ordination. Nevertheless, there are some parallels with the dilemma around technical points of the Vinaya as magnified in the religious and social acceptance of nonbinary thirds in their gendered self-identification.

The problem for transgendered persons is that they simply cannot fit into either female or male monasticism, especially to sanctioned formal ordination rituals. In the context of gendered forms of ordination, it is a case of self-identification and the social or in-group recognition afforded to identifying individuals that is important. The definition or ascription of an individual or even a specific group’s identity, may, in some cases, also be ritually contested within the context of control and power over a particular boundary (see Cohen 2000b). Azlan (2010: 141) for instance noted how religion has little option but to “contend with society’s...group forming mechanisms”. It is these wider societal group-forming mechanisms which in the end create the sense of Others. Hence, it is these social mechanisms which create boundaries between the notion of established in-groups and disestablished out-groups.

The sangha literally means a crowd/gathering but came to define the Community of monks and nuns in the Theravada tradition as two groups: bhikkhu-sangha and the bhikkhuni-sangha, collectively known as *ubhatosangha* (the “two-fold community”) (Oldenberg 1882: 378). In the Pali tradition, the term sangha strictly speaking does not include lay followers (known as *Upāsaka* (masculine) or *Upāsikā* (feminine): these are included in the normative broader category of religious group formation *catu-parisā* or “the fourfold assembly.”

In the case of in-group or normative societal group forming, we can extend this thinking towards formal monastic ordination rites and the orthodox normative canon. These are in fact increasingly contested, along with their implicit and explicit meanings as a feature of postmodernity. A canon, and the institution of canons, is an ideological construct with which to designate standardisation, or convention and is to be experienced and contested by religious actors in their social and cultural context. It is argued that subcultures, minorities and importantly female, or more recently transgendered voices, have long been ignored in the (authoritative) construction of literary canons. Derrida (1993: 224) noted that even at the centre of a structure (here we can take an authoritative, traditional monastic structure) there may be space in the canon to allow for the free play of its elements inside the total form.

The option in non-acceptance is the struggle for opportunity as we see here in the creation of a third-way monasticism and in generating its wider social and cultural acceptance. Third-way monasticism, as in our case study, is about an alternative Buddhist hermeneutics and praxis. It is an opening and a “play” at the very centre of the canon. The centre, while it holds the whole monastic structure together, limits the

movement (or play) of the elements in the structure. Third-way options and (Derridean) “play” may break open these normative conventions on gender identity and religion.

One’s identity may also be fluid and open to disceptation and is essentially self-referential, relativistic, while also cross-referential as located within a group. In Butler’s (1990, 1993) pioneering work on gender, an attempt to shift the boundaries of binaries and gender stability was evident in her anti-essentialist feminism. Here of course we refer specifically to religion and the renunciation quest that may exclude or include based solely on gender identities and the institutions which construct the discourse of religious power and authority. Transgendered religious identity clearly presents a distinct problem in terms of the location for practice; though Buddhist institutions are cultural, historical, and political and are not circumscribed or closed to wider social forces. Because of historical centre-nation-state early twentieth century sangha reforms, we know that as society changes, so does (Thai) religion (O’Connor 1993). This creates new openings for what we call, following Soja (1996), *thirthing* practices, as discussed in this paper.

McDaniel has also reasonably argued for more actor agency considerations among the various Buddhists who negotiate everyday life, rather than epistemic characteristics that are defined by macro-level cultural forms or religion (McDaniel 2010: 659–660). Focussing on cultural forms and religious institutions deflects attention from micro-level actor orientations and how transgendered Buddhists seek to obtain legitimacy through negotiations and reinventions. Changes are coming from inside and outside normative religious boundaries and that these tend to have local impacts on the values, norms, and practices of conventional Theravada Buddhism. Scherer notes that new “third-Other” or “queer (post)modern Buddhist subjectivities” are increasingly emerging these days as influential voices within certain constructive-critical and reflective emic modes of Buddhist thought and practice (McDaniel 2021).

In the context of queer Buddhist spaces and experiences, we also need to move the conversation beyond a limited expression of gender identity and the deficiencies in the literature. It is crucial that, in addition to cisgender women, we need to consider overall the contributions of nonbinary, transgender, gender-fluid and queer practitioners in the development and understanding of contemporary Buddhist epistemology and actual lived experiences.

We argue that the contemporary gender construct is not so different from that of early Buddhists who categorised gender based on three characteristics: primary (anatomical gender), secondary (gender expression), and tertiary (gender identity). These include male, female, and “third” or intersex (non-conforming) individuals¹ (see also Morris 1994) and the recognition that there are other genders in addition to these three. In fact, the *Pārājikam* of the *Suttavibhaṅga*, which consists of the *Pātimokkha* portion of the *Vinayapiṭaka* and its commentary, which also deals with monastic rules, identifies four genders: male (*purisa*), female (*itthi*), inter-sex (*ubhatovyañjanaka/ ubhatobyañjanaka*), and *paṇḍaka* (Thanissaro 2013: 110–111; Bomhard 2021). However, there are five types of *paṇḍaka* (Methangkun 1986) and according to Jackson (1996: 114), it is generally used as a reference to persons referred to as *katoey*.

The five types of *paṇḍaka*, as found in the extra-canonical Pali literature following Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2013a) are: (1) *āsitta-paṇḍaka*: — where a man who finds sexual gratification in performing fellatio on another man; (2) *usūya-paṇḍaka*: — a voyeur a man who finds sexual fulfillment in watching other people have sex; (3) *opakkamika-paṇḍaka*: — A eunuch - one who has been castrated; (4) *pakkha-paṇḍaka*: — A half-time *paṇḍaka*, that is one who is a *paṇḍaka* only during the waning moon, but be a man in the waxing moon; and (5) *napuṃsaka-paṇḍaka*: — A neuter - a person born without sexual organs. The latter category may imply a person who is not able to identify one’s sex due to the defective, and thus ambiguous, genitalia.

In the context of Thailand’s reformed monastic tradition, ordination options limit *upasampadā* where a male applicant must declare himself to be male (Wachirayan 1969: 4–5); and not a so-called “defective” man. It is worth noting that, *opakkamika-paṇḍaka* and *napuṃsaka-paṇḍaka* are prohibited to be ordained on the ground that their sex (male genital) is unclear. The rule implicitly suggests that ordination is possible for a gay man whose physical body is still of a man even though their mind and sexuality are not heteronormative. There are many cases of gay men and “ladyboys” (*katoey*) becoming monks in the Thai Sangha. They are allowed to be ordained on the ground that they must be a real man, having

¹Coincidentally a third sex was formally recognised by the Supreme Court of India in 2014.

male physio-body and yet must discard their feminine and/or ladyboy nature. Boonnoon (2014), a respected Thai Buddhist scholar, suggests that, in reference to the (Thai) Vinaya, *katoey* and *paṇḍaka* should not and could not be ordained even though their genders are now wildly accepted by society. He notes that historically *katoey* and *paṇḍaka* often create problems in relation to sexuality in the monastic domain. Accordingly, to protect Buddhism, one who is *paṇḍaka*, including *katoey* and gay men should not become a monk. He further concludes that *paṇḍaka* should remain as lay persons, also renounce the world and attain liberation (Boonnoon 2014: 8).

There is a case of a beauty pageant winner who had to take his implanted silicone breast out to conform to the monastic rule and accordingly be able to become a monk (Thai-Rath 2013). Indeed, there are some ladyboy/men monks who could not completely discard their “ladyboy-ness” or feminine sexuality; thus, being the locus for criticism and condemnation by the sangha and society. Scholars explore the relationship between the position of the gay/*katoey* in society and religious domain. Duangwises (2016) argues that, unlike Mahayana, Thai Theravada Buddhism is biased, offering less religious space for non-straight male persons. He and Chladek are of the view that Thai Buddhist monasticism is a place and a means to promote and maintain the idea of ideal man and a male dominant culture in Thailand (Duangwises 2016; Chladek 2021). Buaban formerly a Thai scholar monk, provides a slightly naïve idea by arguing that modernity and globalisation grant higher degree of sexual equality in Thailand which allows more social acceptability of gay monks (Buaban 2018). Especially in local settings, gay monks are asked to do the temples’ clerical tasks, to serve high ranking monks, other nurturing roles. He concludes that lay people and the temple do not take the gay monks as a problem or destroyers of Buddhism, (even though his data showed that some gay monks in his studies created sexual scandal in the monasteries). In contrast to Buaban, Schedneck (2021) notes that the *katoey* lacks maternal qualities of motherhood, and thus their femininity is perceived as negative and not useful for the monasticism. Indeed, in the real context, the ordination of transgender persons is often seen. A family’s expectation towards a son and the amount of merit receiving from ordination are reasons why family and community are likely to have no objection to the ordination of transgender persons.²

It should be noted that the term *paṇḍaka* is problematic and is misinterpreted and misunderstood by imposing the modern term of LGBTQIA+ to described it. This leads to the discrimination of transgender people from the renunciant domain (Vimala 2021: 4). In a Thai social context, *paṇḍaka* refers to a eunuch and a man who prefers to engage in same sex relations, though the term of reference is not used in everyday speech. The term *katoey* means those men who are excessively feminine, act and be like women (Boonnoon 2014). In addition, *katoey* is synonymous with *Tud* and *Taew* (excessive female characteristics in a man), three terms which are used alternately among Thais. On the other hand, while gay men may still maintain their masculinity, their sexuality does not conform to normative social roles. However, gay men are welcome in the monastery, though *katoey*, *tud*, and *taew* are usually discouraged for ordaining.³

Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s (2013a) notable translation into English in two volumes of the modern Pali Vinaya, does not mention *ubhatobyañjanaka* (that is intersex, or literally a person with the signs of both male and female genders). But he says: A person may be absolutely disqualified for ordination if he has an “abnormal gender” which covers *paṇḍakas* (as five specified types) and hermaphrodites. Morris (1994: 21) earlier described the hermaphrodite in earlier northern Thai text as constituting a “third point in a triad in which there can be no single antithesis. Nor can the hermaphrodite be seen as a secondary identity. Rather, it possesses the same ontological status as the male and female characters”.

As for the prohibition in the Pali *Mahavagga* I.61.2 (Thanissaro 2013b), that *paṇḍakas* cannot receive full ordination, the Commentary states that this refers only to those who cannot take the novitiate ordination (*Pabbajjā*, or “Going-forth”). However, in the context of this rule, and other rules in the *Pāṭimokkha* where *paṇḍakas* enter the calculation of an offense, the Commentary does not say whether

²It is believed that once the son is ordained, the parents, especially mother, will go to heaven. In addition, stopping a person from ordination is believed to cause bad *karma*.

³If one is a woman, one cannot receive *upasampadā* ordination under the current canon and their ordination would be known as *vathu-vipatti* (literally the grounds for failure) (Wachirayan 1969: 5).

paṇḍaka covers all specified five types or categories of *paṇḍakas*, or only those not allowed to ordain. It may be reasonable to count them as men under all rules, for if they could ordain and yet were considered *paṇḍakas* under these rules, the texts would have had to deal with the issue of how bhikkhus were to treat validly ordained *paṇḍakas* in the community in the context of these rules. However, Thanissaro disputes this and argues that this shows that the issue never arose, which means that, for the purpose of the totality of rules, these two types of individuals count as men. This argument shows the contortion needed to calculate “thirding” and “Othering” in the context of established ordination rules and practices.

Theorising “Thirdness” and “Other” Spaces in Religion

Third space enables thinking about and interpreting socially produced space (Lefebvre 1991; Borch 2002). Third space potentially creates new openings in monastic practice, redolent with imagery and symbolic elements, it is sourced in a lived (social) history. Lefebvre’s “third” or representational space is alive: it speaks. Its products are symbolic and lived. Soja (1996) developed his concept of third space based loosely on Lefebvre’s social triadic analysis; as the intersection and even combination of first or perceived and second or conceived space. The intersection and combination are a lived and experienced space.

Third spaces are seen as the in-between, or hybrid, spaces, where the first and second spaces work together to generate a new third space. Soja avoids the common dualities of the social and the individual, culture/nature, production/reproduction, the real versus the imagined, (which pervade geographical analysis), arguing “there is always an-other way.” He notes third space as “an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality–historicality–sociality” (Soja 1996: 57).

It may be useful here to refer to Bhabha’s early construction of third space in reference to a subaltern or colonised (“Other”) person, or someone who lives in a diaspora, but does not live in either her native culture or in the colonial or host country (Bhabha 1994). The colonised or immigrant person has a third culture which Bhabha calls the third space; a space of cultural hybridity. In our third-way religiosity, the Buddhist monastic *katoey* is confronted with the same dualistic dilemma; that is, not belonging in either a definitive male or female cultural space as befitting the religious virtuosi, or those striving for religious transcendence.

Soja’s third space is a fundamentally inclusive epistemological and ontological concept that moves beyond dualisms and toward “an-Other.” In this conception, “thirding” is radically open to additional Otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge (Soja 1996: 61). Soja’s “thirding-as-Othering” is important in conceptualising a “third way” monasticism, as a restructuring of the conventional binarism which define male/female toward a “third” in relation to modalities of Buddhist monasticism and the closures and openings emanating from such a space. An important early reference in understanding notions of Otherness and spatial practicalities embedded in difference is in the earlier mentioned social critic bell hooks’ work on racial categories (2015 [1990]).

Soja (1996: 67) states that the spaces of representation and related third space are referred to as that which is “directly lived” and inhabited by those who aim to decipher and “actively transform the worlds we live in”. It is a space of reimagining and recreation. Soja’s third space has possibilities for reimagining existing structures (and institutions), and a more radical movement within the process of “thirding” towards spaces and conceptions of spaces that recognise and attempt to break with existing power structures and dynamics. Here we suggest that “third way monasticism” or religiosity is a means of rupturing the conventional history (historicity), hetero-patriarchy and tradition, and in encapsulating the need for a new lived religiosity.

Case Study of Khun Mae Tritrinn, Dantham Mahamongkon Paiboonpoonsuk

We met Khun Mae at her nunnery in Northern Thailand on a cold winter day in 2023. Though it was our first meeting, Khun Mae spent four hours talking and sharing her thoughts, experiences, and aspirations for promoting the Buddha’s Dhamma, suggesting her willingness to share not only the Dhamma but also her own wish for others to connect with the teachings. Initially, we were not sure if she was a

transgendered nun, her smooth appearance and a small body frame in a white robe prompted us to assume that she is just an ordinary female *mae chii*. From the first meeting Khun Mae was delighted to share her Dhamma knowledge and her loving kindness.

Subsequent field research occurred between January to May 2023 at the nunnery. This included participant observation, extended stays at the monastery, practicing meditation and sutra chanting led by Khun Mae, following the resident *mae chii* on alms round, assisting in monastery activities and tasks such as tree planting and various development activities with university student volunteers. We conducted ethnographic interviews with Khun Mae, five of the resident nuns, ten lay disciples, and seven local villagers. In addition, we also listened to Khun Mae's Dhamma talks which were recorded live and broadcast daily. We also followed her activities and events through her website and Facebook page.⁴

The monastic centre is known as Dantham Mahamongkon Paiboonpoonsuk⁵ (Dantham) which means the dhamma land of great auspiciousness, completeness, and happiness. The name of the nunnery is taken from the eminent monk Luang Phor Paiboon Sumangkhalo, who named the place in the occasion of the celebration of his eighty-fifth year as a monk (*Vassa*). Luang Phor Paiboon Sumangkhalo is in the line of Ajarn Man Bhuridatta (1870–1949), a revered North-eastern reform forest monk (see Taylor 1993). In addition, Dantham is under the supervision of Phraratchawisutthiyan, the abbot of one of the largest monasteries in Chiang Mai and the ecclesiastical Thammayut Nikaya Northern Regional Governor.

Dantham is in a quiet forested hill in Chiang Dao, a subdistrict of Chiang Mai. The spectacular mountain, evergreen forests and clean flowing stream enable a peacefulness for visitors, especially for those seeking Dhamma awareness. It was established in 2018 by Khun Mae (Mother) or Ajarn Mae (Mother Teacher) Tritrinn (as she refers to herself and as referred to by her disciples). There are eight to twelve *mae chii* and lay practitioners staying at Dantham, some of them are transgendered people and others are women. Khun Mae was born in a village in North-eastern Thailand. Her femininity has been expressed since she was a child. She called herself a “daughter” (*looksao*) of the family, which signifies that she identifies herself as a woman or even *katoey* since young. Indeed, she has a petite feminine body, no beard or body hair. New people who first saw Khun Mae often asked us if she is *katoey*: “*khun mae pen [Kateoy] chai mai?*” She never conceals her gender identity and admits that she is not a woman (*khun mae mai chai phu ying*) as she mentioned on the Facebook live. However, her feminine nature and self-perception as *katoey* allow her to decide to shave her head, take eight precepts, be called *mae chii*. In this way she can maintain her femininity.

Khun Mae taught meditation in Central Europe for many years, but after her adopted mother died and her relationship at the time failed, she decided to return to Thailand and become a nun, taking eight-preceptor ordination at a well-known monastery in Chiang Dao. She practiced meditation and followed the tradition of Lunag Phu Doo for some months. Her meditation and ascetic practice resulted in her experiencing insight visions (*nimitta*); one vision led her to the current mountain location where she established Dantham in Northern Thailand after purchasing land from villagers. The purpose of her monastery was to provide an opportunity for anyone interested in practicing meditation and learning Dhamma from her. In our first meeting she mentioned that “I will create a space for a spaceless person.”

Initially Khun Mae and her disciples used their own money and labour to establish the centre, starting with the building of a shelter for meditation practice. At the beginning she noted how everything was difficult for her getting established as an unrecognised transgendered religious practitioner. Thus, at the time, she had no supporters. Her gender led to many questions and concerns among the villagers and local lay community; some even thought that the *katoey* nun and her followers would bring bad luck (“*khued*”)⁶ to local community. She said: “to get anything like 10,000 THB donation (about 300 USD) for the monastery is beyond a dream, and to be accepted by the locals almost impossible. I faced many challenges, for example people chasing me and other nuns away when going for morning alms round, as if we were animals.”

⁴For online website see: <https://paiboonpoonsuk.com/> and: <https://www.paiboonpoonsuk.org/en/> :Facebook Page ท่านอาจารย์ตรีชนิธิ ฌณฺ์ แดณธรรมมหาภคไพบูลย์พูนสุข อ.เชียงใหม่

⁵Full name of the monastic centre.

⁶A local Northern (Lanna) Thai term to explain any misconduct, thought, or behaviour.

In the conventional sex binaries of Theravada Buddhist monasticism, the local villagers were uncertain if it were appropriate to have a transgendered (*katoey*) nun and they were not sure if Khun Mae was an authentic or a fraudulent spiritual practitioner. From their experience and understanding, there were only male monks and female *mae chii*. It was felt that if a *katoey* person wanted to renounce the world, they should become a monk, not a nun. Moreover, Khun Mae did not regard herself as a nun or a monk. She mentioned in her Facebook page that “I am not a monk nor a nun. I never told anyone that I attained *arahantship*. I am going to be reborn again and again...until I achieve Buddhahood. I vow to be the future Buddha whose name is *Naratha*.” This alludes to Bodhisattva sentiments common in Northern Thailand and to the gender limitation in Theravada Buddhist monasticism. There is no term and category for transgendered religious practitioners, which in turn allows for misrecognition and misrepresentation.

In contesting conventional gendered spaces of sanctity, the challenge was not only from the local community, but also the monastic (*sangha*) community. Initially, the nuns at Dantham wore saffron-coloured robes like monks, or a dark colour of a robe worn in the reformed forest monk lineage.⁷ However, they were asked to change the colour of their robes by one of influential royal temple in Chiang Mai, noting that their ambiguous monastic status is not suited to wearing the monastic saffron coloured robes. Henceforth, Khun Mae and her disciple nuns went back to the conventional *mae chii* white-coloured robes, though they will wear brown robes when they undertake work around the monastery.

Turning Point: Meeting with the Highly Acclaimed Contemporary Ascetic-monk, Khruba Bunchum

Khun Mae turned challenges into an opportunity to make herself being a worthy traditional Buddhist “field of (spiritual) merit” (*naa bun*). She met the ethnic Shan/Tai Yuan Buddhist monk Khruba Bunchum, a famous acclaimed “saint” in the Northern region and was inspired by his pious practice. Bunchum, known for his ascetic isolated retreats, would traverse back and forth across the borderlands of northern Thailand, Myanmar, and into Bhutan (Jirattikorn 2016; Cohen 2000a, 2001) though now semi-captured through centre-nation patronage (Taylor 2023: 5). Bunchum told her she was a “phra-ruesii-yogini” (female hermit yogi). When they met, he gave her a northern Thai style religious hat, a mala bead, and 5000 baht. Khun Mae told us that “the hat refers to Buddhahood, Bodhisattva, and being spiritual leader. The mala bead means *Sīla*, *Samādhi*, *Paññā*, the path to Buddhahood and 5000 baht is for helping humanities and distribute the Buddha dhamma for 5000 years.”

In 2019, Khruba Bunchum made a widely known vow to practice in a remote Northern Thai cave for three years three months and three days. Khun Mae decided to follow his example and practice meditation in a cave taking the vow of silence and abstaining from the food that she likes to eat especially rice, consuming only roots and vegetables. Khun Mae kept the vow of silence for a year, instead of the planned three years, as she had to break the vow of silence due to the widespread Covid-19 outbreak. She also decided to return to Dhamma centre as she felt the desperation and frustration of her disciples and the financial need of people who lost their jobs. Khun Mae decided to manage the dire situation among her followers using online media. Her disciples took her instructions and acted accordingly as she gave away the donations which she had received to those people who were badly affected by Covid-19. All the while no one was able to communicate or see her in person.

After three years, three months and three days, following Khruba Bunchum’s example, she came out from her isolation and interacted directly with the world again. Khun Mae’s pious practice and strong determination in her spiritual quest ensured eventual acceptance and respect from local and wider-level communities. The nunnery receives more support and followers now from the local community and receives more food on daily alms round; while a few villagers have dedicated themselves to be main supporters of the centre. When asked about Khun Mae, respondents showed considerable respect and would mention with reverence about her devout practice. One of the villagers told me that “when Khun Mae came out from the cave, her skin was so bright and light. She has attained something high.” In this context, having light skin signifies not only the beauty from inside, but also Khun Mae’s spiritual achievement. This pious practice seems to be a turning point, as she gains more followers and patronage.

⁷This is mostly the dark brownish *kean khanoon* robe, traditionally dyed by hand from boiled wood chips taken from a Jackfruit tree.

A Meditator and Magical Performer of Revered Lineages

Religious syncretism is not uncommon in the maze of Thai religiosity (see Jackson 2020; Pattana 2005). Khun Mae herself appropriates spiritual advice from many lineages and Theravada practices and Mahayana goal, though she now has a clearer bases of practices following mostly on the idiosyncratic central Thai *Mano-mayiddhi* lineage of Luang Phor Ruesi Ling Dam. *Mano-mayiddhi* (-iddhi) implies mind-made magical prowess. As she notes, this method of practice enables a latent mental power to achieve liberation (*vimutti*) and lead to *nibbana*. The practice as she describes is to achieve a higher state of mind grounded on the right understanding of *sampajañña* (which is usually linked to *sati-sampajañña*, mindfulness and clear comprehension or knowing) and the elimination of defilements or impurities (*kilesas*). As she says, this is the only way to work to achieve liberation.

After one has right understanding, meditation and mindfulness on the breath are practiced, then, when the mind is firmly focussed on the breath, one can move the focus to the image of the Buddha. Then when the mind is strong enough, it can travel to different realms, heavens, and hells, and see and foresee a person's past and future. Khun Mae teaches *Mano-mayiddhi* meditation for disciples who are a serious practitioner; the one who seeks not to be reborn but makes a vow for *nibbana*. Once disciples are strong and stable in meditation, a person can vision hell and heaven in their meditative practice (sometimes with the help of Khun Mae). The suffering in the hell realm together with the peace and happiness found in the heavenly realm, enables a practitioner to avoid bad *karma* and rebirth in a human world. At the same time, she notes the importance of the conventional and normative foundations of Theravada practice: morality, meditation, and wisdom (*Sīla*, *Samādhi*, *Paññā*). If a person fails to maintain this triadic interlocking spiritual basis, the mind would lose its power.

Khun Mae is well known in some quarters for teaching *kammaṭṭhāna* (the work or bases of meditation) to the monks in Bangkok. This practice, connected to its normative and orthodox tradition accepted by the establishment, is useful for her when she confronts some difficulties with the local sangha or administrative authorities. This may include such as the status of her monastery, her unorthodox religious standing as a field of merit.

In addition, Khun Mae follows Luang Phor Guay's magical practices. She can perform appropriate prosperity rituals, chant mantras, provide protection and dispense loving kindness to disciples and followers. But unlike Guay's practices with magic tattoos, she uses instead blessed water (*nam mon*) to sprinkle or even splash on devotees. Each year disciples would come to receive the sacred water from her. Initially, she denied the importance or even the existence of ghosts, spirits, and supernatural power, saying: "I do not believe and have no interest in it [*Khun Mae mai chia lae mai sonjai*]." Though later, she said she had to accept the influence and the existence of the supernatural, and promotes belief in Nagas, *Vessavaṇa*⁸, the land and forest spirits, and other forms of magic and supernatural powers. She suggests to her disciples that it is better to be humble, have friends in every realm and respect other beings, so one can get help and support when confronting problems. However, she notes that "one needs to be aware that our goal is to be happy and not return to this world again."

Taking (Northern) Thai Bodhisattva Vow

Like many monks in the Northern Thai *khrua* region⁹, Khun Mae took a Bodhisattva vow, and her expressed mission is to help her disciples as she expresses it: "Come home my dear children." Her intent is to be reborn again to "help her children (disciples)," until they attain to higher achievements and liberation in their practice. Every moment of encounter between her and a disciple has *kammic* implications. In the past life, one must have met her and been her disciple; so, in this life a new meeting is to nurture and continue in the practice of dhamma.

It needs to be noted that Khun Mae classifies practitioners into two levels, one is as renouncer, and another is as worldly lay practitioners. In regard the latter category, wealth and prosperity is the main goal and she would help her disciples achieve that by encouraging them to practice dhamma, and chanting a

⁸Vessavaṇa (Thai: ท้าวเวสสุวรรณ *Thao Kuwen* or ท้าวเวสสุวรรณ *Thao Wessa'suwan*) has Hindu associations though when brought into Southeast Asia became a (northern) folk Buddhist deity, guardian of the northern quadrant of the world.

⁹See Pisith Nasee (2018) on *khrua* tradition in Northern Thailand.

wealth inspiring *khatha* (mantra recited mentally), and the renown (particularly in Northern Thailand) *Maha Chakkraphat khatha* and *Ngern Laan khatha* (“millionaire” *khatha*) as recommended by the famous central Thai (Ayutthaya) monk Luang Puu Doo Phrompanyo (1904-1990)¹⁰. This provided disciples with some magical power to increase wealth and prosperity. As Khun Mae said: “You are lay person, you need to eat and live life; you have family to take care of and to do so, you need money.” When disciples meet with Khun Mae, they not only get practical guidelines to improve their dhamma practice and merit, but also learn how to be prosperous through the practice of Dhamma and chanting magical *khathas*.

The term *Maha Chakkraphat* refers to a Universal Monarch, and the future Buddha-to-be (Boddhisattva) *Metteyya* who will be reborn many times as a Universal Emperor before his final birth, when he will attain enlightenment. The distinctive Buddha-image is found in most Northern Thai temples. This may not have been the original name of this mysterious and powerful *khatha* but most Thais now recognise this *khatha* by this name (*Phra Khatha Maha Chakkraphat*).

Femininity, Motherhood, and Disciples

The monastic centre now has sizable buildings for new Buddha images and accommodation for practitioners. Recently, with the support of disciples and followers, mostly educated, middle-class linked through Facebook, the centre is expanding, and it seems to be the most outstanding religious place in the area. As such, many disciples have now donated a considerable amount of money, mostly online, to help her develop this “place of Dhamma,” coming together once or twice a year at Dantham for the annual ceremonies. Her disciples are mostly women and *katoey*. Some of her nun disciples were well-known personalities and one was once awarded by Miss Tiffany Universe Thailand.¹¹ Most disciples believed that the spiritual connection with Khun Mae and among disciples has been created since the past life. A disciple told us that: “I knew Khun Mae through Facebook, have listened to her dhamma talks and feel inspired and connected. I followed and supported her since she first established this place. To me she is the world. I dedicate myself to her and the dhamma.”

Facebook is the main channel for contacting followers and to disperse the Buddha-Dhamma as taught by Khun Mae. There are currently about 429,000 Facebook followers and about 30-50 dedicated followers who seem to be the main patrons who know her through mutual connections, friends and/or online media.

Disciples will come to practice at the Dantham throughout the year. A person who may be interested to undertake initiation at the centre is required to stay at the centre for Dhamma training for at least three days. The female/transgendered ascetics at Dantham live a monastic life without going through any formal ordination ritual according to the Vinaya (see Kawanami 2022). However, they have their own ordination rituals modifying the conventional eight-precept rules (shaving heads, customary offerings or “khanda bowl,” maintaining celibacy,¹² reliance on alms food and Dhamma-dana). Here, ordination is undertaken by a nun and it is called “*Khlib Phom*,” meaning “cutting hair.” Day to day practice in the nunnery is informal. Nuns will start the day about 3-4 a.m. with chanting and meditation, then a few of them will go for alms round at 6 a.m. while others will do monastic chores, including cooking breakfast and lunch for everyone. Unlike in other monasteries, breakfast and lunch are simple in many ways.

Nuns will offer food to Khun Mae if she does not go on alms-round and then take food for themselves. The nuns will give ritual blessings on their alms-round to devotees in both Thai and Pali language. Since the place is still under construction, all residents must help with various tasks and undertake labouring work for much of the day. When disciples work, Khun Mae always teaches Dhamma that relates to their work. For instance, she teaches her disciples to focus on their mind, be always mindful in every thought and movement. In the evening there is chanting, meditation, and a Dhamma talk. Afterwards each practitioner will move to their huts to continue practicing meditation or rest. Occasionally, the nuns will have a week or ten-day retreat in which they will not work but focus on their *kammaṭṭhāna* and practice. Every

¹⁰This monk is believed by some of his disciples to be an incarnation of the Metteyya Bodhisatta(P), *bodhisattva* (Skt).

¹¹A beauty pageant for Thai transgender women held in Pattaya, Thailand.

¹²see Kawanami (2001) on female celibacy in Theravada Buddhism.

precept day (*Uposatha*), the nuns will go to nearby temples to make merit, offer *sangha dāna* to monks, and release fish into the pond.

It needs to be noted that unlike the village temples, this place does not get much outside labour support from the local community. Most of the monastery's work is done by the nuns and nearby ethnic hilltribe people who work for a daily income. Khun Mae said that it is not easy to finish any large projects. Sometime to make things work, Khun Mae described that she must reveal her masculine energy. She described a situation where she acted like a man to make the male workers obey her. Occasionally Khun Mae needs to do labouring work together with a male labourer: "Sometimes I must transform myself into a man to get the (ethnic minority non-Buddhist) labourers to work for me efficiently." However, when she interacts with disciples she always appears as a female and regards herself as a mother.

Ideally speaking, a lay person and a renouncer cannot have close physical interaction according to Thai interpretations of the Vinaya, though they are the same sex. However, Khun Mae interactions to disciples are unique and different. Khun Mae will hug her disciples, claiming that she is a human being and thus hugging to express motherly love and care to disciples. Further, she argues that her disciples are like her kindred and need to love and support each other. She interacts with her disciples as if she were their real mother. She will express intimacy and hug female disciples, while many of them will openly share their sorrow with her. She always mentioned that "my children must love and support each other. No fighting and argument!" Femininity expressed by Khun Mae is implicitly the means to attract and connect with disciples. It is not a problematic quality as found in male monasticism. In fact, it is the key element of third-way monasticism. A *katoey* nun at Dantham states that being *katoey* can generate like and dislike among people: "The ones who dislike *katoey* will never come here, but the ones who love us choose to come here because of our gender identity."

Khun Mae Tritrinn confronts established resistance constantly because she chooses to challenge existing cultural norms and politico-religious conventions. Essentially, at her nunnery Dantham Mahamongkon Paiboonpoonsuk, she has generated an alternative and creative new socio-religious space for "a person who does not have a place to stand" (*sang tii yuen hai phuu mai mii tii yuen*). Indeed, in her third-way monasticism, she applies acceptable norms and practices, motherly love and care, the bodhisattva ideal present in Thai Northern Buddhism, magic practices, and popular Buddhism such as providing sacred water (*nam mon*) to disciples. All these ways of being and doing afford her a level of acceptability and respectability among her disciples and surrounding communities. At the same time, she will also display her authority sometimes to ensure the harmonious functioning of the monastic centre.

The adoption of the various traditions and her encounter with the famous ascetic wandering Northern Thai monk Khruba Bunchum reflects her desire to seek an-Other third-way in her spiritual practice through innovation and self-inquiry. This also entails a recognition of her own hybrid identity in a Buddhist monastic world that is often limited by gendered binary relations. Her binary fluidity is especially attractive as a third-way alternative for those Dhamma-seekers who wish to live a monastic life where they could not be readily accepted in conventional binary ordination traditions. She states that this place will be the place for "placeless" persons seeking a religious quest. Those LGBTQIA+ community members and women who are marginalised and unable to find comfort in conventional Buddhist monasteries can find their Dhamma place here. In the context of a third-space monasticism, the gender of Khun Mae and some of her nun disciples is the source of their ambiguous, ambivalent, and marginal "Othering" status.

Concluding Remarks

This paper, based on a regional case study of Khun Mae Tritrinn in northern Thailand, theorises the notion of a religious Other lived space. It has argued for a new third-way monasticism and spirituality as a means for non-conforming, nonbinary persons seeking an appropriate monastic community context for their personal religious quest and its soteriological goals. In this ethnographic case study, the heterodox, polymorphous, and dissenting religious community is led by charismatic transgendered (*katoey*) person who has generated her own followers, mostly intersex, nonbinary "Others." This is an eclectic

religious Othering, where normative and nonnormative (including animism, folk Brahmanism, and maternal love and care) are embraced in a new hybrid space.

In our conception of third-way religiosity, the Buddhist monastic *katoey* is confronted with a conventional binary dilemma; that is, as a person not belonging in either a definitive male or female cultural space as apropos the religious virtuosi, or those individuals who wish to reside in a monastic community and chose to strive for religious transcendence. The paper shows that the third-way “Othering” is a means to contest conventional boundaries in raising concerns about (and the problematic) of representation and praxis in the context of delimiting or normatively defining gendered and transgendered identities within Theravada Buddhist monasticism.

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