

# Into the Light:

## The Thai Lesbian Movement Takes a Step Forward

by Andrew Matzner

Anjaree, Thailand's only lesbian organization, has a thick newsletter which comes out every two months. In order to receive it, one writes to Bangkok with remittance and an address to which the newsletter is then forwarded. Approximately five hundred members of Anjaree, plus a number of NGOs, receive the newsletter, called *Anjareesan*, in this manner.

This past July, a shortened version of *Anjareesan* was produced with the aim of distributing it to the general public, through local bookstores. This means that a person doesn't have to be a member of Anjaree to gain access to information and education about lesbianism. Consequently, a wider range of people will be exposed to Anjaree and its goal of insuring human rights for lesbians.

The publication and distribution of *Anjareesan* is a major step forward for Thailand's lesbian movement as it endeavours to make itself and its objectives more visible. Now interested women can learn about a community which they otherwise may not

have known existed. For while bars, meeting places, and numerous magazines offer gay Thai men opportunities to become part of a community, the options are severely limited for women, particularly those living outside of the capital. In Chiang Mai, for instance, one of the country's largest cities with a population of about 200,000 people, there is only one restaurant which caters especially to women, and it has very limited hours.

Anjaree, the group spearheading the Thai lesbian movement, was founded in 1986 by a small group of women who desired to create a safe space in which lesbians could gather and engage

in social activities. As the years progressed, Anjaree organised and hosted a number of events in Bangkok, among them the first Asian Lesbian Network meeting held in 1990. In 1993 Anjaree had its contact information printed in a weekly magazine, *Blaeck* (literally, "strange"). This sensationalist magazine has an advice column for gay men, but once it started encouraging lesbians to write in with their specific problems, Anjaree's visibility and membership began to increase. In the mid-1990s representatives from Anjaree started attending both domestic and international meetings concerning women's issues. With articles about Anjaree and its co-

founder, Anjana Suvarnananda, appearing more frequently in the Thai and English-language press, the group decided the time was right to emerge fully into the public eye. As a result, the new version of *Anjareesan* was born.

Since many of Anjaree's members live in Bangkok, most of its social activities and conferences take place there. However, there is also an active chapter in Chiang Mai, with approximately 20 members. Recently, I met with Chiang Mai representative Amporn Boontan. She graciously took time out of her busy schedule as the project coordinator for the Thai Youth AIDS Prevention Project to talk to me about Anjaree's new publication, as well as issues and problems presently facing lesbians in Thailand.

To appreciate the importance of the general public edition of *Anjareesan*, it is first necessary to understand the place of lesbianism in Thai society. Women can hold hands and hug in public, live together, even sleep together in the same bed. Thai culture accepts these kinds of intimacies between women. But as soon as any type of behaviour arises which indicates a sexual relationship, that acceptance is withdrawn.

Interestingly, foreigners often comment on the tolerance afforded gays and lesbians in Thailand. This may be because the overt homophobia found in countries such as the United

States and Australia does not typically occur in Thailand. Being non-confrontational and keeping one's emotions in



A copy of Anjaree's newsletter

States and Australia does not typically occur in Thailand. Being non-confrontational and keeping one's emotions in check are valued behaviours in Thai culture. Thus, in public, people will not usually harass women they think are lesbians. In this sense, women who identify themselves as lesbians by their clothing or mannerisms are relatively free to go about their business.

Nevertheless, homophobia—the fear and hatred of homosexuals—does exist, but on a different level. As Amporn stated, “In Thai society, people will ignore homosexuality, but if it comes close to them, they will not accept it. Lots of homosexuals, men and women, are out with their friends, but not with their

families, because their families do not accept them.”

Indeed, it is closer to home where real challenges emerge. I asked Amporn what she felt was the biggest obstacle facing lesbians in Thailand today, and she replied, “Parents. Many lesbians are open to society: to their friends, to their coworkers...but to their parents—that's much more difficult.”

This can be explained by the Thai concept of *boon kuhn*. Children are raised with the idea that they are obligated to their parents, and must repay the debt of their upbringing. This means that children have to give proper respect to their mothers and fathers. Children should also do their best not to cause their parents pain. Accordingly, “To tell your parents that you are a lesbian is very difficult, because they might feel sorry and sad about that.

They expect their child to maintain the family, to have a baby. And also the child will feel bad, since she cares about her parents.”

Physical violence against lesbians is also a problem in Thailand, especially rape. Many Thai men believe that they can “convert” lesbians into being heterosexual. Amporn described a case where a brother could not accept that his sister was a lesbian and raped her. Even among men who appear more liberal-minded, the potential for homophobic violence exists. She told me, “I have a friend, and he talks about gen-

der and stuff like that. But one time he told me that if his girlfriend left him for another woman, he would find that woman and rape her. So even among men like him, who are educated and doing social work, these feelings exist.”

Why do such homophobic attitudes exist? As mentioned above, parents expect their daughters to marry and raise families. Thai culture holds women to very strict standards of behaviour and appearance. Children who “deviate” from the norm embarrass their parents and cause neighborhood gossip. This is something to be



Amporn Boontan, Chiang Mai representative of Anjaree.

ism, therefore, carries a stigma which parents want to avoid. These attitudes also cause lesbians themselves to have feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem.

ing that homosexuality is abnormal. And then this information spreads into their target groups, and that makes the problem worse and worse.”

Lesbians are generally described as being either ‘tom’ or ‘dee’. The former is short for ‘tomboy’, the latter for ‘lady’. Accordingly, *toms* play the man’s role, in that they wear masculine clothing and short hair, while *dees* dress and act in a feminine manner. For many years debates have raged among American lesbians concerning butch/femme roles, and I wondered whether there was any questioning of the terms ‘tom’ and ‘dee’ among Thai lesbians.

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avoided, as it involves the dire consequence of losing face. Female sexuality is even more regulated. The double standard is customary in Thai culture, as men have greater sexual freedom than women. Therefore, many men react negatively when confronted with women who defy heterosexual norms.

Outdated Western psychological theories have also had an effect on the way lesbianism is perceived in Thai society. Newspapers and magazines quote doctors who maintain that homosexuality is “abnormal” and “unnatural,” caused by environment and/or hormones. Lesbian-

Unfortunately, some NGOs which are ostensibly educating people about gender, sexuality and women’s issues continue to perpetuate negative attitudes towards homosexuality. Amporn expressed her disappointment that even the leaders of some NGOs still make jokes about homosexuals and harbour discriminatory attitudes. “Because these kinds of feelings are among the leaders of the NGOs, the NGOs themselves cannot understand the issues. This means that when NGOs are working with people, they won’t deal with lesbianism. Sometimes they will even show their homophobia, say-

I asked Amporn about her own feelings first. She replied, “I usually have short hair, but I didn’t like it when people called me ‘tom’, because I feel that this term has a negative meaning. The ‘tom’ plays the man’s role, like in a heterosexual relationship. Sometimes they are not gentle, and like to smoke, drink, or act macho and harass women, doing what men do, and not being gentlemen. So I don’t feel comfortable with this word. And when people ask me if I am ‘tom’, I say, ‘no, I’m not ‘tom’, but I love women.’”

Amporn also believes that within the Thai lesbian community there is pressure for a

woman to be either 'tom' or 'dee'. She stated, "Actually, there are two pressures. The first is, you want to find a partner, so you have to identify yourself. When I have long hair, people are not sure if I am lesbian, so it is hard to meet people like that. But when I had shorter hair, then if women were interested, they would already know that I like women. And then there is pressure from those around you to copy the heterosexual model. That is, one has to be the leader, and one has to be the follower. And you have to identify yourself as *tom* or *dee* in the lesbian community so

Anjaree and/or Gemini, lesbians become part of a support system which helps to dispel feelings of loneliness and powerlessness. Knowledge is power, and as Amporn told me, it is vital to pass on information to lesbians and to let them know that there are others like them.

Anjaree is also a vital resource for lesbians when it comes to AIDS and safe sex. Thai public campaigns concerning HIV transmission and AIDS have ignored sexual relations between women, which means that among lesbians themselves there are many questions about safe

be able to do this is one of the rights of women in general, so we also want to join other groups which are fighting for women's rights." By disseminating this message through their newsletter, Anjaree is making great strides in its efforts to educate people about lesbianism. The wider availability of *Anjareesan* means that women who would otherwise feel uncomfortable about receiving it at home or work can now purchase it on their own.

In Thai, one of the meanings of the word *san* is "to communicate." Anjaree is doing just that, and although

## **ANJAREE IS MOSTLY TALKING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS, SUPPORTING LESBIANS AND THEIR RIGHT TO LOVE THE SAME SEX.**

we can know where you fit. Especially many older lesbian couples, they expect this. If a lesbian couple doesn't fit into this pattern, they will be confused, or think those people aren't real lesbians. So there is pressure from society. It tells us that the man will be with the woman—even if you are homosexual! So you have to copy that role, that one has to be the man and one has to have the woman's role. I don't know why that should be!"

Anjaree is important because it provides a space in which lesbians can discuss issues of identity such as these. Likewise "Gemini," the restaurant Amporn manages with some friends, and which hosts an "Anjaree night" once a month, offers a safe and comfortable environment in which women can meet and exchange ideas with each other. By taking advantage of

sex practices. Actually, Amporn said that one of the reasons she joined Anjaree three years ago was because she felt the group wasn't adequately addressing health issues related to women. She believed that with her background in public health, she could share her knowledge and experiences with other lesbians in order to increase their understanding of HIV/AIDS.

Besides helping lesbians with personal issues, giving them information about health concerns, and organising social events, one of the major aims of Anjaree has been to fight for the acceptance of lesbianism in Thai society.

Amporn explained, "Anjaree is mostly talking about human rights, supporting lesbians and their right to love the same sex. We believe that to

the full impact of *Anjareesan* remains to be seen, progress is definitely being made. Just the other day, I went to have my copy of *Anjareesan* xeroxed at a neighbourhood shop. After the clerk finished making a copy for me, I noticed that she had also made an additional one for herself. Maybe her curiosity had been piqued by the picture of a Thai media personality on the cover. Or perhaps it was something else. Either way, Anjaree's message is spreading. ☺

*Andrew Matzner, a writer/researcher from the United States, has been living in northern Thailand since October 1997. He writes on the topics of gender, sexuality, and transgenderism.*

*Anjaree can be contacted at PO Box 322, Rajdamnern, Bangkok 10200, Thailand  
E-mail: anjaree@thaimail.com*