3 Christmases past and present

A Phet tee saam lamb's search for their flock

Panu Sahassanon

Christmastime in 2019

It was the first Christmas that a tanned-skin guy with black hair celebrated while living outside of Thailand. That guy is Panu. He came to Edinburgh to complete a doctorate in counselling. He was walking along the busy, iconic Princes Street lined with shops, looking for a Christmas gift for his mother. He admired the vibrant Christmas market across the street, crowded with visitors and locals soaking up the festive atmosphere. Envisioning himself walking with the snow falling, a freezing wind and occasional raindrop replaced his imagination. Amidst this cold and the feeling of being alone, his heart was still warm and enthusiastic about finding the proper gifts for family and friends. Nine thousand kilometres away, almost halfway around the world, he had been missing those times of the year with them. He was longing for those times while wavering between buying a lipstick or makeup gift set. What has Christmas meant for him?

Living at the rural border of Bangkok, when Panu was a young boy, he grew up with a mixture of two religions. Panu's father was Protestant Christian and his mom a Theravāda Buddhist. His paternal grandmother, a devout Christian, also lived in their house. On Sundays, grandmother always urged her son and grandchildren, him and his younger sister, to attend the church activities: the bible class for children and the liturgy for adults. Faced with reluctance, torpidity, and the distance between church and house, their father brought them there twice a month. They kept up this routine until his grandmother passed away. After that, the frequency of attendance dropped dramatically to once a year – at Christmas.

Annually, the Tawan Church, near the heart of Bangkok City, had held Christmas worship whose pattern was quite similar. Never remembering when worship started, by the time they arrived, around 10.30 or 10.45, most of the Christian members had already congregated in the chamber of worship and were listening to the pastor's sermon. A performance by some children who acted and sang on stage, bringing smiles and laughter to the audience, followed this. Each year the theme of the play would revolve around the love and history of Jesus Christ. A tall, skinny boy, compared

to his peers, Panu had never been on stage. The songs of worship sung by members of the choir – some of whom he recognised – would be the sign of the approaching end of the Christian ceremony. At noon, members went down to the ground floor, which usually served as a carpark, but at this time of year, it was filled with tables and chairs instead. He received coupons to trade for food at the food kiosks. Menus regularly included fish maw consommé, and grilled chicken with sticky rice. At this gathering, his father gave white meringue cookies with almonds (bought and managed by his mother) as the family's traditional gifts to friends, the pastor's family, and the relatives who accompanied them. Unexpectedly, the boy also sometimes received chocolate or cookies from his sister's friends. He was happily surprised by their kindness, spoke briefly with them, and then left so that his sister would be free to have some private conversations, while Panu sat waiting.

He was a quiet and polite boy who had never made any close friends to share Christmas presents with. At church he felt uncomfortably different and scared of the consequences that would follow if the people there knew he was gay; that is, attracted to another guy. In grandma's room, there was a thick, old cartoon Bible, drawn and coloured beautifully, standing on her wooden bookshelves. Often borrowing it to read for enjoyment, he was curious why he could not find gay characters in the Old or New Testaments. In the book of Genesis, when God first created man and woman, Adam and Eve, there was no room for Adam and other guys. At church, he was the odd one out. Feeling different and isolated from others, he decided, then, to hide, using taciturnity to protect himself from others. *He considered himself the black lamb, wondering what underlying reason God had for creating him.* For Christians, this symbolic animal is normally represented in pictures of Jesus as the shepherd, but the black colour is also rooted in the Thai proverb that portrays the one who is different or deviates from others.

Despite considering himself a black lamb, every Christmas Panu was unhesitant to go there. When he was born, his father was working as a sailor and could only come to visit on weekends. His grandmother had a major role in supporting his mother. When at night a storm hit the house with rumbling thunder and lightning, or when he was scolded by his mother, he would run into grandma's room. Her hugs and comforting words were an important source of solace. One day, she shared with him a story about her eight miscarriages and how, in her ninth pregnancy, she converted to Christianity. Miraculously, she gave birth to a boy: his father. Since then, she had dedicated herself to God.

Grandson Panu gradually absorbed her loving faith in God. He never spoke explicitly with her about his attraction to guys. Maybe he was unsure of the consequences or was too young or too scared. And then she died. He cried a lot. After her passing, whenever he prayed, he believed that she already knew; he felt more certain of her acceptance and believed that her love for her grandson would be the same. Although she was physically

missing, her warmth and love remained within him, like a Winnicottian good internal object. Her good image of care, attention, and presence was internalised, instilling him with hope and strength. Every Christmas day, when all the Christians were gathering at the top floor of the church, he looked for one of the empty rooms and sat there silently. In that peaceful room, he prayed directly to his holy spirit with his grandma nearby. It was the place in this living world where he was most closely held, cherished, and empowered by them. *He considered himself the black lamb, but at Christmas, he always had his dearest grandmother.*

Christmastime in 2009

Panu was a sophomore at a university situated amid luxury shopping centres. During Christmas and up to the New Year, it was one of the busiest districts, where Bangkok residents and visitors came to buy gifts from shops that were unanimously promoting their end-of-year sales. A giant Christmas tree with sparkling decorations shone as the perfect setting for photographs. Fancy restaurants were booked, and when dusk fell, alleviating the temperature from 32 to 24 degrees Celsius in December, it was a time for celebrations as a sea of people arrived.

Panu's school was nearby, so he and his gang promised to experience this vibrant and warm festival as a yearly excursion. His first boyfriend joined the group to savour this atmospheric Christmas vibe. Panu could not remember where they started and finished their saunter, but he remembers they were sitting on a brown couch when his boyfriend gave him two presents. The first one was a teddy bear dressed in a Santa Claus costume. He named him Ping-Pong, which rhymed with the giver's name. He gave the second present when Panu turned his face away: it was a quick peck on his cheek. Embarrassed and blushing, Panu looked around with concern in case others had seen this public display of affection. His boyfriend giggled. This second-year student thought his boyfriend was a gift from God.

Although gay people might be seen as mainly concerned with sex (Rodriguez, 2016) there was nothing related to sex at that moment when his boyfriend's soft lips landed on Panu's cheek. Like a fragrance, feeling embarrassed and blushing worked as the top notes, the first reaction to the kiss. The heart notes later emerged as a warm feeling of bliss. That kiss significantly symbolised an intimacy that bonded him and Ping-Pong's buyer more closely as a couple.

For the base notes, however, uncertain feelings rooted in his childhood memories formed the last impression of the fragrance, making him tremble inside. A long time ago, while he and his mother were watching a TV show hosted by an effeminate gay celebrity, she said: 'He will never successfully find his true love, only a deceitful one'. Having not yet come out, Panu pondered whether 'She might feel concerned about me being gay'. But these deceptively simple words had impacted somewhere inside, making him

doubt the existence of gay, true love. ‘Will gay people like me be able to find long-lasting love?’ he asked himself. This question could imply that gay love was inferior and temporary compared to a straight couple’s love. Growing older, he encountered similar curiosity from others in the Thai internet forum ‘Pantip’. There were many posts asking ‘Rak thae khong gay mi ching rue?’ or ‘Thammai rak thae nai mu gay ha yak chang?’ (Does true love exist between gay people? Or why is gay, true love so difficult to find?). Panu was carrying this doubt as he sat next to his boyfriend, touching his ankle through black slacks. This guy might provide evidence against his mother’s words. With the future unknown, this Christmas brought something romantic, something new, and something uncertain. *He considered himself the black lamb, but this Christmas, the black lamb experienced his first romantic love.*

Christmastime in 2014

Panu met his friends in a quieter and less crowded district, which was recognised as Bangkok’s hipster hangout. For merriment, they wore Santa hat hairpins. Six girlfriends and one gay man had formed a group called TGIF girls (Thank God It’s Friday). They had known each other for years and aimed to celebrate significant occasions together: members’ birthday parties, excursions, and of course, Christmas.

‘How was your life, how was your love?’ was the common question at the table, although they had a brief overview of some stories via the group’s instant messages.

Christmastime in 2010

This student was again strolling in familiar surroundings, from the Paragon department store en route to Central World, without Ping-Pong’s buyer. He had broken up with Panu three months earlier, nearly a year into the relationship. It was devastating. Panu was sitting with friends in a giant plastic snow globe, holding a Santa Claus cardboard stand-in with cats placed inside; they were waiting for their picture to be taken. Although he was still hurt inside, Panu smiled for the picture. Less than two months earlier, he was sobbing, witnessed by mom, who asked in frustration: ‘Why do you cry so much for him?’ ‘Because he was my boyfriend’, he shouted back with tears covering his face. It was the first time he had openly confessed that he liked men. Silence fell, and she never mentioned it again; their conversation faded away like his own memory after that confession.

During that time, when he was looking at his reflection in a mirror, with puffy crying eyes and teardrops rolling down, the thought of Granny came to him. ‘She would be sad and downhearted seeing her grandson crying in pain’, he thought. Knowing that she would always want him to be stronger and to get through this adversity with God’s help, he slowly wiped away the tears.

Since then, he has been better. They further explored the Christmas vibe in Central World square, taking a picture of themselves from the reflection of a red Christmas ball. Before leaving, he hugged and held hands with his friends as they had done with him when receiving the heart-breaking news. Panu was thankful to have friends in his life during this festive moment together.

Back to Christmastime in 2014

Waving goodbye to his TGIF gang, he walked swiftly across Ari Road to a nearby café where two old friends from his Catholic school were arriving. They had known each other ever since primary school.

In an all-boys school, other students mocked them with the name ‘dtut’, an insult aimed at someone who displayed effeminate characteristics. Despite being defined by this unwelcome word, they grew up exploring and crystallising who they really were. Among Panu’s friends, there were some who dreamed of wearing long hair and makeup so as to become women; some who yearned to acquire a ripped six-pack; and some who were undecided about their gender identities. Later, ‘kathoe’ and ‘gay’ were their specifically given names or the way they perceived themselves. Panu witnessed the genders in his group diversifying like the branches of a tree. Despite the differences, they, like others, were essentially on their journey of life, hoping for a successful career and finding love.

After finishing school, Panu’s gang grew apart. Here they are in a restaurant, putting on Santa hats after being seated. One of them brought a camera and took Polaroid pictures, rotating the mouth-watering dishes for the best photogenic angles and holding their favourite fruit beers. Panu looked into their eyes, witnessing with glee the physical and mental changes they were going through. While waiting for the pictures to emerge, they spoke of the same topics: jobs, love, life, and other members of the gang.

When with them – the student gang, the TGIF group, and his gay friends – Panu showed his quiet and polite persona, in the same way as he had done at church. However, he also allowed himself to share his other sides: he showed himself as lively, amusing, diligent, and gay. He opened himself and felt accepted and loved in return.

These recollections from 2010 to 2014 were significant examples that he would carry through life, making Christmas time a special occasion of togetherness and celebration. This line from Pose’s main character in the Christmas party would fit beautifully: ‘The men will come and go, but we [family and friends] are always here for you’ (Pose, 2018). *He considered himself the black lamb, but at Christmas, this black lamb experienced companionship and love.*

Christmastime in 2017

He had been working as a lecturer – his first job. Earning income was symbolic of maturity which seemed to bring on a splurge, tempered by the need

to make ends meet. With his extra savings, he intended to buy gifts for his mother and sister. Two silver bracelets, with a white primrose charm on the first and a blue star charm on the second, were meticulously matched with their skin tones. He did not choose these for his father, who was not a fan of jewellery. Planning to surprise them with these gifts at the resort where members of both families spent the night together, he hid the gifts in his suitcase. When they were opening their boxes, curious to discover what was inside, he was excited too, wondering whether they would like these bracelets.

‘Whether they would like it’ would consistently echo the question of whether they would love and accept him as who he was. Why? Panu pondered. It could be related to television shows and movies he had watched in what was once a daily assemblage of family members in Thailand. The queer characterisations in Thai movies such as *Kungfu Tootsie* (2007) or *The Last Song* (2006), often featured exaggerated outfits, makeup, and body language. These characters embodied effeminacy through their voices and speaking style; they were selected to provide humour or tragedy, as in ‘The Last Song’, whose principal character ended up with a broken heart followed by self-annihilation (Taweewuttichai, 2016). Whenever these actors popped up, an awkwardly silent atmosphere arose in the room. In this world centred on gender binary and heteronormativity, he wondered whether his parents thought, if their children had deviated from the proper societal and gendered expectations, what it would mean for them. Bad parenting? Or, what else was on their minds while watching those characters?

‘Did I disappoint you that I might never get married with a woman or give you grandchildren?’ He had not asked them directly, and, despite their rarely spoken concerns after all these years, his parents still supported his education and provided sufficient love. They needed to be financially savvy to raise and support him because Panu’s family came from the lower-middle class. He was grateful for their love and dedication and promised himself that he would make them proud of him by being a good person and a diligent student. Diligence and excellence in education, he believed, was the key to success in life. To be a lecturer at one of Thailand’s renowned universities, therefore, was his passionately desired and achieved goal. It was time for him to play a part in supporting his family and to occasionally purchase something they had never dreamed of, like these Christmas gifts.

As the gift boxes disclosed what lay inside, surprised faces beamed with delight. Witnessing their joy, he grinned. Beneath Panu’s broad smile was a hope. His lifetime achievements – membership in a respected profession and the ability to help his family, as symbolised by the bracelets – could manifest itself in their perception that their own son, whatever gender he might be, could make them proud and happy. *From the black lamb, this Christmas he considered himself as the black sheep, living and taking care of his family, hoping to make them accept and be proud of him.*

Back to Christmastime in 2019

Finally, Panu chose a gift set for his mother. ‘Mom would like it’, he thought, watching the sales assistant skilfully wrap his present. His mother had a major role to play in celebrating Buddhism’s religious days. Occasionally offering food to the monks, making a libation, and carrying a candle around the statue of the Buddha were practices that made him feel fortunate to be growing up in a bi-religious household.

Theravāda Buddhist practice has long been circulating in and permeating Thai society. Its central theory of karma (Keyes, 1983) is stated simply in Thai, as: ‘*Tham di dai di; tham chua dai chua*’ (‘Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil’). In popular Thai culture, karmic theory could explain physical and social differences among humans. For example, some people are rich or poor, attractive, or unattractive as the result of their acts in previous existences. We believe the karma accumulated in the present life can potentially determine the quality of the rebirth that follows.

Panu could not fathom what karma or what things he had done in past lives that had brought him into this current world as a gay person. Curiously, he searched in Vinaya Piṭaka, the Buddhist scripture, and found that genders are not just male and female but include two others: *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka* (Jackson, 1996). *Ubhatobyanjanaka* is interpreted and described as the combination of male and female biological characteristics, and *pandaka* is described as a man who does oral sex with another man and gains sexual arousal and satisfaction from it. These two terms can be understood partially as referring to homosexual behaviour, showing that gender is not limited to binary categories but is diverse, like *Phet tee saam*. Meaning ‘the third sex/gender’, this broad and diverse term in Thai culture is used to encapsulate being gay, kathoey, lesbian (*tom & dii*), bisexual, or transgender.

Now he was outside Jenners, a Renaissance building in Edinburgh, pondering whose presents were still missing. His academic pursuits had brought him to that city. On Princes Street, he walked back to TK Maxx, intending to buy Calvin Klein’s low-rise trunks for his two gay companions from Catholic school. His editor, Edgar, later enquired, ‘Why did you choose these particular gifts for your friends?’.

Some gay people might buy small, light underwear that was nearly transparent when wanting to reveal their bodies (Cole, 2000). But for Panu, giving underwear symbolised close, trusting friendships in the same way as his girlfriends purchased sexy lingerie for their besties.

While striding along Princes Street, the grandest street where the gardens now turned into a vibrant market, Panu was thinking ‘Is there a Christmas market like this in Bangkok?’ In Thailand, Christmas is interlinked tightly with the New Year as the entrance to the year’s long holiday. It is a special time to go shopping and dining with friends or lovers and to return home to their loved ones on New Year’s Eve (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Underwear for friends

Despite the long distance, he continued sending Christmas gifts. Luckily, one of his close friends would come to the UK and promised to deliver these gifts to others in Bangkok. That was why he was here in his eventual destination, having a rummage through the undergarments. He ended up with an acceptable second choice, Tommy Hilfiger. He looked inside his shopping bags, smiling knowingly. All these gifts would symbolise his love and nostalgic feeling for those people who were like the threads of love woven through his life. Christmas, his all-time favourite festival, is the time to reminisce about his grandmother; to value his friendships that were respectful regardless of gender differences; to become an adult capable of supporting his parents. *Still, he might not fully answer the question of why God created him as a black sheep/gay, but throughout this paper and his everyday life, he was never truly alone.*

Christmastime in 2020

To end this paper, Panu asked: What would Christmas in 2020 be like since the world is still facing the COVID-19 pandemic? There were two issues, however, arising in Panu's mind after editing his chapter. One author, Cináed Thomas, wrote a chapter called 'Sunday: An intimate self-dialogue

about loneliness' (this volume). His line 'Even within the intimacy of a family Christmas when growing up, I felt lonely' portrayed the loneliness of middle-aged gay people. In addition, during the time Panu was drafting his chapter, the draft Civil Partnership Bill was initially approved in Thailand, recognising same-sex partnerships and providing some significant rights, such as child adoption and inheritance claims (Regan and Olarn, 2020).

Thomas's quote about Christmas raised Panu's concern about the sense of permanency of supportive relationships. After he flew to Edinburgh, one of the TGIF girls got married. Eventually, the baby showers or the upcoming weddings would queue up. His parents and he would inevitably age. As a result, the time of joy for him in the Christmas celebration would inevitably change. Also, the civil partnership draft, though not considered equal to marriage and still in the process of ratification, could be a significant development for Thai Phet tee saam people, affecting their lives and Panu himself.

The future, like the blank pages waiting to be written, was unknowable. He would not know how his perception of himself and relationships with others would change. The same is true of autoethnographic work, which is resistant to closure and finality because social life, identity, and relationships are not static but fluid and open-ended (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013).

'You never know what will come first, tomorrow or the next life': indeed, even the next Christmas. His mother's words were distasteful to him but undeniably true. Possibly, the only time people have is this moment; to go on and cherish with our own threads of love ...

*Black sheep is existing
Christmas is arriving
Love & support is surrounding
Time is fleeting ...*

Making sense of this experience

This 'making sense' section is the most challenging part of writing my chapter. I am left wondering what the essence of my piece is. You, the reader, may have noticed I, Panu, wrote the first section in the third person. Doing so was intentional: I wanted to create a space for the unknown or the psychic distance for readers (Wyatt, 2006), and I thought it would be useful to see this narrative of myself in the third voice. Now, I use the first person to be in closer contact with you.

Throughout my chapter, the black lamb (and later the black sheep – Gae Dam) is the backbone about which I depict sexual and gender identities – my identity. It is the metaphorical symbol I give to my gayness, that is, my being part of the Phet tee saam world. In Western countries, the definition of gender and sexual identities (e.g., homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual)

are constructed differently than they are in Thailand, where the cultural, traditional, and local discourse should be acknowledged. Therefore, echoing Storer (1999), I too argue against ‘the uncritical application of Western paradigms to the study of Thai sexuality’ (p.142).

Being gay, in my understanding, is not only the sexual attraction to someone of the same gender, but it also includes a sense of identity characterised by what I consider masculine and feminine characteristics. I am not just a man – Phuuchai – or a woman – Phuuying – but Phet tee saam. Maybe, for me, being born Phet tee saam is common. However, the binary gender identities of male and female somehow have tainted these genders away from who I really was. Being outside of the gender norm, I was afraid of being rejected or hurt by family members. Or in school, I might experience harassment or mockery from schoolmates and question the longevity or permanence of true love.

As I moved from childhood to the University of Edinburgh, the reader can also witness the gradual change from the lamb to the sheep, the mature one. The maturity I portray here is an achievement in life through an academic career, which could be one way for the black sheep to alleviate the inferior feeling inside, to nourish his life with some esteem, and secure his place in the heteronormative world. The sense of self, especially for Thai people, is closely related with the adoration of family members. As I write about becoming an adult – that is becoming a sheep – with some success in life, therefore, might make me – as a Thai gay man – prouder, accepted, and loved in my identities. Maybe this is when the internalised black sheep found his internal flock.

Christmas scenes meticulously interweave throughout Panu’s story. The Christmas in the church is the birthplace of my internalised black sheep. Here I felt the shame and inferiority that would haunt me for Christmases to come. But more importantly, I portrayed Christmas as evidence that gay, Phet tee saam people can love, find companions, friends, or someone who loves us regardless of what gender we identify with. This festival of joy and love for Christians reminds us – me – of the flocks of support we – I – have. Research from Fingerhut (2018) corroborated that receiving support, especially from friends, statistically predicted and related negatively with depression in gay people. So, I, Panu, and the Phet tee saam, black sheep people about whom I think about, are never alone because we can search for our own flock, which might consist of diverse metaphorical animals (e.g., black or white sheep or any type of animal). We can find our own sanctuary – a Phet tee saam flock.

Finally, Christmas is a repeated annual festival, giving each year fresh memories to cherish and celebrate with friends and family. Still, the implicit message is that change is inevitable. Life for many gay, black sheep – indeed for many in this world – can be transient. They can be here today and gone tomorrow. Living in the here and now and spending life in every moment as best and meaningfully as we – I – can probably be the ultimate contribution of my chapter. Merry Christmas, everyone!

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