

IN THAILAND, HOMO TRANSVESTITES

GET LOVING CUPS INSTEAD OF

LUMPS

By Herb Cole

Most stories out of southeast Asia these days concern war, social unrest, political chicanery, etc. And they're pretty unsettling.

So it's refreshing to get some news from Thailand that may be unsettling, but is a least pretty. And if you glance at the pictures accompanying this article, you've got to admit there's a lot of pulchritude on display

The unsettling part — depending, of course, on how upright or uptight you are — is that it isn't female beauty you're admiring. No sir, those dolls are guys.

In Thailand, such folks are known as "kratoeys," a mild slang work meaning homosexual transvestites. Over here, we call them drag queens, or things more pejorative. But Thai kratoeys frequently sashay off with top prizes as beauty queens.

Long treated with tolerant amusement rather than disdain by most of their countrymen, kratoeys generally have an easier time of it than their North American counterparts (who frequently go to jail rather than to beauty contests).

For example, last Oct. 23, on the 61st anniversary of the death of the King Chylalongkorn The Great, a contingent of kratoeys marched in a parade, then took part in the wreath-laying

ceremony at the royal plaza in Bangkok.

Although the Kratoeys drew one or two scornful stares from the older citizenry, most of the younger folks in the crowd merely admired their beauty and feminine manners.

One of the best known kratoeys is Rungnapa Sricharoenkul, a fashion model and hairdresser, who is a leader of Thailand's "Gay Liberation Front." Despite the relative

freedom of his country's kratoeys, Rungnapa is campaigning for complete social acceptance and removal of all legal sanctions on homosexuals.

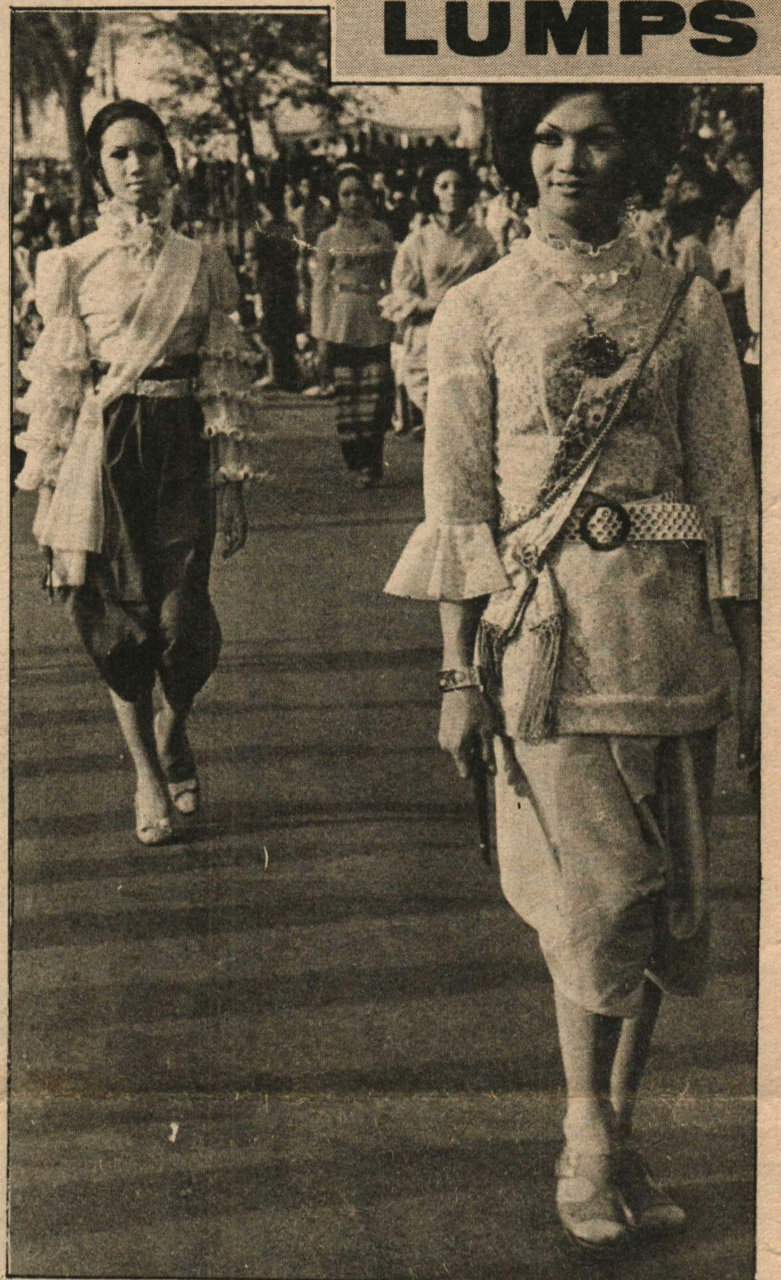
"Why shouldn't I be treated like a woman, and not as a freak?" he said recently. "I've felt like a girl for as long as I can remember. When I was three, my father gave me a toy gun: I gave it back and asked for a doll."

Rungnapa began to be sexually attracted to boys with the onset of puberty at age 12, and began dating them at 15.

"I get along well with women as friends, and my clients at the beauty shop treat me politely," he reported. "They appreciate my advice about hairdos and makeup. But, for making love, I need to have a real man."

And Rungnapa (who speaks in a husky, but decidedly feminine voice) has a "real man." He shares an apartment and a bed with a young male school teacher.

"We have been living together for three years now," Rungnapa



APPEARING IN PUBLIC is something that kratoeys don't mind. They're seen here marching in a Bangkok parade.



TWO KRATOEYS carry a wreath in an official event.

said. "My lover is a very nice to me and would prefer that I don't let people know what I really am."

"He says, 'I know what you are, and I love you. There is no need to tell the whole world.' Yet I want to be accepted by the world, for myself without deceit."

Rungnapa, who owns up that he enhances his figure with buttock padding as well as falsies, possesses a wardrobe consisting of dozens of sexy dresses and traditional Thai female costumes.

"I wear evening gowns in beauty contests," he explained pointing out that the competitions usually raise money for charity.

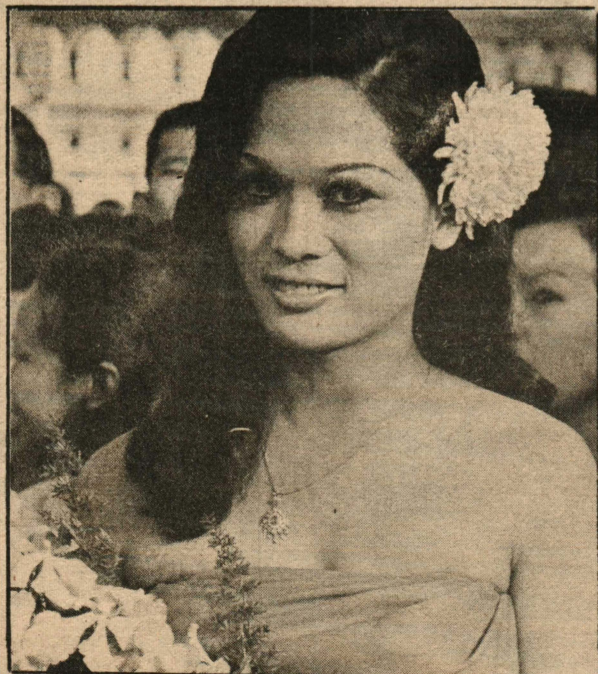
"Although many people come to poke fun at us, we attract bigger audiences and more donations than real girls. It is a better way of expressing Gay Power than with crude demonstrations that offend more people than they enlighten."

Rungnapa intends to continue marshalling Thailand's kratoeys for peaceful — and pretty — participation in public ceremonies, such as the recent memorial celebration for King Chulalongkorn.

"I want to prove that kratoeys aren't necessarily male prostitutes," he emphasized. "I want to show the world that we can live decent, normal lives."



BEAUTIFUL RUNGNAPA SRICHAROENKUL wants to lead a "normal" life.



THIS KRATOEY could fool anyone.



A THAI TRANSVESTITE is a real knockout.