

Mak Nyahs (Male Transsexuals) in Malaysia: The Influence of Culture and Religion on their Identity

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Abstract

This paper discusses a study of male transsexuals in Malaysia, known locally as mak nyahs. This detailed study, funded by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, involved the use of questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire for the mak nyahs, which consisted of 142 questions, was divided into three parts: a) the social aspect; b) HIV/AIDS knowledge; and c) related health issues. In addition to questionnaires, interviews were carried out with some of the mak nyahs as well as with the relevant authorities.

This paper looks into the social aspect of transsexualism in Malaysia. The questions in this section of the questionnaire were derived from studies undertaken in the West. The writer found that transsexuals in Malaysia have many characteristics similar to those from other parts of the world. However, the identity of the mak nyahs in Malaysia is influenced by cultural and religious factors. The definition and identity of male transsexuals in Malaysia may differ in some ways from those in other parts of the world.

Keywords: transsexuals, mak nyahs, Malaysia, culture, religion, identity.

Introduction

In Malaysia, the medical profession and the academic community generally accept the definition of transsexuals as that espoused by Western scholars. The term 'transsexuals' can refer to both male transsexuals, that is males who want to be females in every aspect, and female transsexuals, that is females who want to be males in every aspect. Transsexuals therefore differ from transvestites who are males who cross-dress as females. The transsexual community in Malaysia uses the term 'transsexual', because the ultimate goal of the majority of them is a sex change operation or sex reassignment surgery. However, in Malaysia, 'transsexuals' generally refer to male transsexuals, although there are also female transsexuals around (Teh, 1998: 169). The number of female transsexuals is, however, very small compared to

male transsexuals (Khairuddin et al., 1987). The local term for male transsexuals is mak nyah (mak meaning mother). This term refers to those who have not undergone sex change operations as well as to those who have (Teh, 1998: 169). This term is accepted by male transsexuals in Malaysia. In fact, it was coined by the male transsexual community in 1987 when they tried to set up a society but were denied by the Registrar of Societies. The term, mak nyahs, was considered preferable to terms like pondan or bapok (Teh, 1998: 169), which generally refer to men who are effeminate and, therefore, could also include homosexuals. As for the female transsexuals, they are sometimes known as pak nyah (pak meaning father) or they are usually known as 'tomboys' (Teh, 1998: 169). Another term for female transsexuals is abang – meaning brother or man. They are less noticeable than the male transsexuals who cross-dress, since jeans and T-shirts are part of the female attire in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, mak nyahs are labelled as sexual deviants and are generally shunned by society. It has been estimated by IKHLAS (Pink Triangle), a non-governmental organisation in Malaysia which gives HIV/AIDS awareness information to mak nyahs, that there are about 10,000 mak nyahs in the country (Teh, 1998: 169). About 70% to 80% are Malay; the rest are made up of Chinese, Indian and other minority ethnic groups. Malays make up 50.7% of the total population; the Chinese, the Indians and other minority ethnic groups make up 27.5%, 7.8% and 14% respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 1995). Islam is the religion of the Malay population and is the official religion of Malaysia. The majority of mak nyahs are Muslim.

In Islam, gender can be divided into four groups: male; female; *khunsa*; and *mukhannis* or *mukhannas* (Abdul Aziz, 1987). *Khunsa* are basically hermaphrodites. *Mukhannis* and *mukhannas* are males whose behaviour is similar to that of females. *Mukhannis* want a gender identity that is different from that with which they were born. They loathe their male identity and want to be female. In contrast, a *mukhannas* is one who is effeminate, but does not want to change sex (Wan Azmi, 1991: 6). Islam permits *khunsa* (hermaphrodites) to undergo a sex change operation so that the person can be either a female or a male. However, Islam forbids a *mukhannis* or *mukhannas* who are males to behave like females in terms of cross-dressing, wearing make-up, injecting hormones to enlarge their breasts, and undergoing sex change operations.

In 1983, the Conference of Rulers in Malaysia decided that a fatwa prohibiting sex change operations, should be imposed on all Muslims. However, it agreed that, in the case of a hermaphrodite, such surgery is permitted. Cross-dressing is also prohibited. In 1969, Karim pointed out that in the Islamic teaching, "Prophet Muhammad cursed the males who appear like females and vice-versa" and "the prophet cursed the man who puts on the dress of a woman and the woman who puts on the dress of a man" (Khairuddin et al., 1987). Thus, Muslim mak nyahs are considered to violate the tenets of Islam, and consequently are essentially non-entities in Malaysian society.

Non-Muslim mak nyahs are mainly Buddhists, Christians or Hindus. They are generally allowed to be mak nyahs, although their religion may not allow it. This is because there are no official religious rulings, as there are among Muslims, to enforce the prohibition. Occasionally, they are caught by the police for cross-dressing, and charged with indecent behaviour under section 21 of the Minor Offences Act 1955 (Teh, 1998: 179).

The purpose of this paper is to show that although transsexuals in Malaysia have similar characteristics to transsexuals in other parts of the world, they are influenced to a large extent by their culture and religion. The paper discusses the characteristics of transsexuals in Malaysia in order to show that their characteristics are similar to those from other parts of the world, as observed by other researchers. The paper highlights the strong influence of the Islamic religion and culture on Malaysian transsexuals, especially on their perceptions towards a sex change operation.

Method

The sample consisted of 507 mak nyahs (male transsexuals). This is approximately 5% of the estimated population of mak nyahs. As there is no information on the breakdown, by race, age or number, of mak nyahs across the 13 states in Malaysia, the respondents were drawn from the eight states where the mak nyahs usually live (as estimated by IKHLAS). The mak nyahs usually live in the town centre of the eight states for job purposes. The majority of the respondents were Malays (86%). Chinese, Indians and others made up 5%, 4% and 3% respectively of the total number of respondents.

The religious affiliation of the respondents was 88% Islam, 5% Christian, 3% Buddhist, and 3% Hindu. Two of the respondents were non-believers one respondent belonged to a religion other than those listed.

The majority of the respondents had secondary school education (74%). Only 3% had attended an institute of higher learning.

About half of the respondents (54%) were sex workers. Many of the respondents (73%) had an income of less than RM1,000 (approx. US\$263) per month. About 30% of them lived below or around the poverty line of RM450 (approx. US\$118).

All the 507 transsexual respondents were asked the meaning of the term mak nyah. The most popular answer given was "Men who look like women, and are soft and feminine" (74%) followed by "Men who dress up as women" (17%). All the respondents had given themselves female names and would rather be known by these names.

Results

The majority of the respondents (about 72%) had thought that they were female when they were small. About 23% had thought that they were both male and female when they were small. Sixty-eight per cent reported that they had played only with female toys, 29% played with both male and female toys, and 3% played with only male toys. Eighty-two per cent reported that when

they were small they had played the female role, 17% played both male and female roles and only 1% had played the male role. About 68% had only girls as their childhood playmates, 31% had both female and male playmates, while just 1% had only male playmates. Many of the respondents (about 52 %) who had felt that they were female when small also played with only female toys and adopted the female role when playing.

Most of the respondents (81%) came from ‘big’ families – more than three children. In their families, there were both male and female children. The respondents said that they had both male and female role models in the family, and were not influenced by their sisters, as is generally believed by the Malaysian public.

About a third of the respondents (36%) said that they had other family members who were like them (mak nyahs) from both the father’s side and the mother’s side (see Table 1).

Table 1. Those who have relatives who are like you, who are they?

	Frequency	Valid %
Older brother	21	11.7
Uncle from father’s side	24	12.4
Uncle from mother’s side	43	24.0
Cousin from father’s side	41	22.9
Cousin from mother’s side	19	10.6
Relative from father’s side	15	8.4
Relative from mother’s side	6	3.4
Others	10	5.6
Total	179	100

Most of the respondents came from relatively happy families when they were small (84%) while only 15% said that they grew up in families with problems.

The majority of the respondents (62%) had enjoyed doing a combination of the household chores when they were young. The most popular household chore among the respondents was tidying the house, followed by cooking, washing, sewing, and gardening.

Cross-dressing and body shape

Most of the respondents started cross-dressing between the ages of 11 to 20 years old. They generally cross-dressed at home or in the house of another mak nyah friend. The moral support they received when they started cross-dressing came mainly from their mak nyah friends (42%). Only 16% received moral support from family members, of which their mothers seemed to give them the most support. This

dispels the Malaysian myth that people become mak nyahs because they were encouraged by family members, particularly mothers, to cross-dress when small.

At the time of the study, only 62% of the respondents cross-dressed full time. Nevertheless, the majority of them said that having breasts and a body shape like women were important to them. They reported that the more that they cross-dressed, the more they felt that having breasts and a body shape like women were important to them.

Sixty-three per cent of the sample took hormones. This figure includes those who said that having breasts and a body shape like women were not important to them. Hormones were taken to enlarge their breasts, to have a smooth complexion, to reduce body and facial hair and penile erection.

When asked how they felt about their male organ, more than half of the respondents (68%) accepted it, while only 26% hated it and wished to have it removed. Other perceptions of their penis included accepting it as given by fate, feeling embarrassed by it, confused, feeling strange, sad, and accepting it as "another piece of flesh". One respondent hated it, but would not have an operation to remove it.

Only 19 of the 507 respondents in the study (4%) had had a sex change operation. The two main reasons given by the majority for not having the operation done were:

- 1.They could only have the operation performed overseas, usually in Thailand or Singapore, as the fatwa had prohibited such operations being carried out on Muslim transsexuals in Malaysia. It would be very costly to have it done overseas, and most of them could not afford the cost. The non-Muslim mak nyahs could have the operation in Malaysia but for the fact that there is no trained surgeon in this area. Therefore, they too would have to go overseas to have it done.

- 2.Many of the Muslim respondents had promised their parents, especially their mothers, who had accepted them as mak nyahs, that, in return, they would not undergo the operation. This was because, if they had undergone the sex change operation, it would pose a problem for them to be buried as a male or female according to the Muslim rites. The Muslim burial rites state that only a female can bathe the body of another female – this would not include the mak nyahs even though they may have undergone the sex change operation. Mak nyahs with the sex-changed female organ could also not be bathed by a male.

Religion is the main factor that discourages Muslim mak nyahs from having the sex change operation. This could also be the reason why many of the respondents could accept their penis. Financial constraints stopped the non-Muslim mak nyahs from having the operation. It also appears that non-Muslim mak nyahs have fewer problems with their family members compared to their Muslim counterparts.

Relationship with males

The majority of the respondents (about 97%) had liked men when they were small and had had a male as their first date. They also had had a male as their first sexual partner. Many of the respondents had had their first sexual encounter early in life (see Table 2).

Table 2. How old were you when you first had a sexual relationship?

	Frequency	Valid %
10 years and below	65	13.2
11 to 15 years	264	53.5
16 years and above	164	33.3
Total	493	100.00
Missing	14	
	507	

At the time of the study, 69% of the respondents had boyfriends. Of those who had a partner, 60% said that their relationship was similar to that of a married couple; 35% said that they were like boyfriend and girlfriend; and 3% said that they were like a kept woman or mistress. Most of the respondents (87%) said that they would like to get married to a man in the future if their religion permitted them to do so, while only 7% said that they would not.

Relationship with females

Only 20 respondents had ever been attracted to a girl. Eighteen of these respondents had had sex with a girl. About 96% of the respondents had never been attracted to a girl, but out of this group, nine of them had had sex with a girl. This could be due to the fact that these respondents might not have realised, or totally accepted, their transsexual identity at that time. Of those who had had a sexual relationship with a female, six said that they had had no feeling, four said that they had enjoyed it, three said that it was for fun, one said that it was horrible and repulsive, and one said that it was embarrassing. The relationship with the females finally ended for a number of reasons: because they liked other men; they found a boyfriend; they felt that they were deceiving her; they did not find the relationship enjoyable; and they divorced or broke up.

Dreams and sexual fantasies

The majority of the respondents (92%) dreamt and saw themselves in their sexual fantasies as female and their partner as male.

Sexual practices

The study shows that the majority of the respondents would not allow their boyfriends to masturbate them (76%) or to do oral sex on them (88%). They also would not do anal sex on their boyfriend (93%) or on other people (66%). However, some respondents allowed other people to masturbate them (53%) or do oral sex on them (60%). Some also penetrated other people (34%). The reason given by these respondents was that their clients wanted them to do so.

More than half of the respondents did masturbate themselves (58%). The percentage of respondents who allowed their boyfriends to masturbate them and to do oral sex on them was higher for those who masturbated themselves compared to those who did not masturbate themselves.

Personal happiness

Of the total number of respondents, 71% of the respondents felt that they did not have any conflict with their religion while 29% felt that they had.

78% of respondents who had not undergone a sex change operation said that they would have the surgery if their religion permitted it, while 22% said that they would not do so even if their religion permitted.

About 89% of the respondents said that they were happy even though they had not undergone the sex change operation. As explained earlier, most of the respondents in this group said that they had promised their parents, for religious reasons, that they would not undergo the operation in return for their acceptance of their transsexual status. The respondents added that that they had accepted, since they were small, that their religion does not permit them to have the sex change operation. This also explains why a large number of them had accepted their penis and did not hate it.

Although 89% of the respondents said that they were happy not to have the sex change operation, about half of the respondents (51%) said that they would be happier if they had the operation. These respondents would undergo the operation if their religion permitted. Overall, 78% of the respondents would undergo the operation if their religion permitted them to do so. It seemed that the respondents' decision to have the operation or not was affected by their religion, particularly if they were Muslims. As for those who said they would not be happy if they did not have the operation, 92% said that they would undergo the operation if their religion permitted.

About 93% of all the respondents said that they would like to marry if their religion permitted them to do so. The majority of those who wanted to have the operation (97%) would also want to get married if their religion permitted. The majority of them (about 87%) would opt for an operation if their religion permitted them to do so. About a third of the respondents (36%) hated their own penis.

A third of the respondents (33%) had had doubts at some stage as to whether they wanted to be women. However, 88% of the respondents said that they would still continue as mak nyahs for the rest of their lives.

Out of the total number of respondents, about 14% (n=65) had, at some stage, tried to commit suicide.

Most of the respondents (about 95%) said that they felt happier after they came out as mak nyahs, even though they might be shunned by their family members or society.

Almost all of the respondents used the female public toilets. However, about 24 % reported that they did not mind using male toilets. The reasons given for those who were uncomfortable using male public toilets, were that they were women; they were embarrassed; they were teased by other people; they were frightened; the toilets were dirty; and they would be sexually aroused.

Police and the Islamic religious authority

In Malaysia, mak nyahs can be charged with indecent behaviour, which includes cross-dressing, under Section 21 of the Minor Offences Act 1955. Under this section, they can be fined RM25 to RM50 (approximately US\$6.60 to US\$13.20). The term 'indecent behaviour' has not been defined in the Act, and therefore, it is up to the discretion of the police to determine what constitutes 'indecent' behaviour. If the mak nyahs caught by the police are Muslims, they can be sent to the Syariah department to be charged at the Syariah Court for offences against the Islamic law. The penalty incurred could be a fine of between RM800 to RM3,000 (approximately US\$210.50 to US\$789.50) or imprisonment or both. The Islamic religious authority, like the police, can also carry out raids among the Muslim community to identify wrongdoing against Islam.

About half of the respondents in this study (55%) had been caught by the police at some time. The majority (75%) had been caught on three or fewer occasions. However, 17% had been caught between four and six times, 3% were caught between seven and nine times, and 5% had been caught ten times or more. The main reasons that they had been caught by the police seemed to be for cross-dressing (33%), indecent dressing (18%), prostitution (16%), a drug test, (13%), during a police raid or operation (10%), and loitering late at night (6%).

When they were taken to the police station, 71% had been stripped of their women's clothing in front of other people, and 10% said that they were forced to wear men's clothes. Nearly half (47%) said that they were shamed in front of other people, 46% said that they were jeered at or discriminated against, and 9% said that they were beaten up. Other problems that they faced when they were at the police station were that they were asked to change religion, invited to have sex, asked to show their breasts and private parts, condemned and teased, had their hair cut short. The point was also made that the police seemed to assume that they were people with loose morals and did not treat them humanely.

About 28% of the respondents said that they had been caught by the Islamic religious authority. Almost all of this group (96%) reported that they had been caught on three or fewer occasions: just 3% had been caught between four and six times, and 1% had been caught ten times or more. The main reasons that they were caught by the Islamic authority were for cross-dressing (50%), prostitution (32%), indecent behaviour (7%), during a police raid or operation (5%), loitering (5%), and having a beauty contest (3%).

The complaints that the respondents made regarding the Islamic authority were similar to those made regarding the police. In addition, they were advised and counselled, and they had photographs taken of them.

At the Syariah Court, 55% of this group of respondents were charged with cross-dressing. About 30% were charged with indecent behaviour, 9% were charged with a drug offence, and 6% were charged with prostitution. The majority (93%) of those who had been caught by the police and/or the Islamic authorities said that they would not stop cross-dressing, while only 7% said that they would.

In addition to the research carried out among the mak nyahs themselves, interviews were also carried out with the authorities from different religious groups. From these it could be seen that, in Malaysia, transsexualism is not acceptable to Islam and Christianity, while Buddhism and Hinduism could accept the phenomena. However, since Islam is the official religion it is the only religion in Malaysia that has official religious rulings against some of the practices of the transsexuals. As for the non-Muslim transsexuals, even though they are not under formal constraints from their religion, they are still not accepted in society as the police can carry out raids on them and arrest them for 'indecent behaviour'.

Conclusion

Mak nyahs in Malaysia basically share the same characteristics as transsexuals in other parts of the world (Kuiper and Cohen-Kettenis, 1988; Johnson and Hunt, 1990; Leavitt and Berger, 1990; Tsoi, 1990; Coleman et al., 1992; Doorn et al., 1994). Research has shown that the transsexual phenomenon cannot be adequately explained by social factors. Likewise, this research could not pinpoint any specific causal social factor or factors. Transsexualism could be a more complex phenomenon that needs the explanation of biological and environmental factors as well as social factors.

Muslim transsexuals in Malaysia, who form the majority in the transsexual community, share similar characteristics to transsexuals in other parts of the world. However, due to their religious beliefs many of them have accepted the fact that they are not allowed to have the sex change operation. Islam does not accept transsexualism, as stated in the Hadith. For example, the Hadith in Sahih Bukhari (Vol. 7, Bk. 72, No. 774) stated that:

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas:

The Prophet cursed effeminate men and those women who assume the manners of men, and he said, "Turn them out of your houses."

The Hadith in Sunan Abu-Dawud, (Bk. 32, No. 4087) stated that:

Narrated Abu Hurayrah:

The Apostle of Allah cursed the man who dressed like a woman and the woman who dressed like a man.

Muslim mak nyahs are essentially non-entities in Malaysian society, and they have been brought up with this belief. Although many of the Muslim mak nyahs felt that they would be happy or happier if they underwent the sex change operation, they are reluctant to do so. They believe that if they have the sex change operation, nobody will carry out the burial rites for them when they die, as they are not considered as females and neither are they accepted as males. Some even believe that their soul will float aimlessly when they die if they have the operation because their bodies will not be what God originally gave them. As Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, their beliefs are substantiated by the enforcement of the religious edicts by the police and the Islamic authority. As explained earlier, the mak nyahs can be charged for indecent behaviour, which includes cross-dressing or behaving like a female, under the Minor Offences Act 1955 or under the Syariah Law. Although this has not discouraged the mak nyahs from cross-dressing, many would not have the sex change operation for fear of their religion. This also explains why many of them have accepted having a penis.

It was found that some of the older and elderly Muslim mak nyahs have reverted back to wearing male clothing even though they cross-dressed full time when they were younger. When asked why they did so, they said that it was because they wanted to be buried as a Muslim male when they die, since Islam does not recognise transsexuals even though they may have undergone the sex change operation. However, they revealed that, at heart, they still felt like a woman.

Muslim mak nyahs are influenced to a large extent by their religion. To many of them, cross-dressing and the deep feeling that they are female are enough for them to have the identity of transsexuals. They have accepted that they are transsexuals who, unable to have the sex change operation, will retain a penis, even though this is not part of the female identity.

As for the non-Muslim mak nyahs, they share similar transsexual characteristics to their Muslim counterparts. Since there are no official restrictions imposed on them, as there are on their Muslim counterparts, many do lead the life they want, including going for the sex change operation if they can afford it, though their religion may not accept transsexualism. They also have fewer problems with their family members compared to their Muslim counterparts. Occasionally, they are caught by the police during their raids for indecent behaviour under the Minor Offences Act 1955. This does not deter them from cross-dressing or going for the sex change operation.

In conclusion, it can be said that mak nyahs who are Muslim, who form the majority of the transsexual population in Malaysia, are generally influenced by their culture and religion, which shape their identity. They consider themselves to be transsexuals who have accepted that they are female at heart, but who may not go for the sex-change operation and do not mind the presence of their penis.

Education and Action Plans

As this research was being carried out, other practical projects were being implemented to help the transsexual community. Using part of the research funds, the writer organised a four-day seminar to train about 100 transsexuals as peer educators. This was the first national transsexual seminar in Malaysia. The writer had the collaboration of her co-researcher and the organisation, IKHLAS. The seminar was intended to empower and give awareness to transsexuals on health issues related to them, including HIV/AIDS awareness. It was also intended to make them aware of their legal, religious and social position in society, and how they could help themselves to improve their living standard, since many of them were sex workers. Part of the findings of the research was also conveyed to them. Before choosing the venue for the seminar, an informal discussion with the representatives from the Islamic Department of each state in Malaysia was carried out to obtain their consent for holding the event, and their co-operation in not raiding the seminar venue, since the Islamic religion does not recognise transsexuals. Representatives from some states did not turn up. Eventually, it was decided that Cameron Highlands would be the best place to hold the seminar due to its strategic location and also the co-operation from the Pahang Islamic department. As the seminar was being funded with the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment research grant, the police and Islamic religious authority co-operated and did not interfere although they did turn up to observe.

Some of the research funds were used to organise a one-day dialogue session between the representatives of the mak nyah community, representatives from the police headquarters, the Islamic religious authority and the social welfare department, in order to clear up misunderstandings between them. The session also paved the way for more open communication between the relevant groups in future. After the dialogue session had taken place, the police representative invited the lawyers, who voluntarily represented the transsexuals and personnel from IKHLAS, to his office for further discussion. A follow-up to the first dialogue session was held to further improve the relationship between the transsexuals, and the police and Islamic authorities. This was also funded from the research grant.

The research has generated interest from the local newspapers and magazines. They have reported favourably on the transsexual community. Findings from this research have been used to create awareness among the Malaysian people of the transsexual phenomenon. Forums have been organised by local non-governmental organisations to highlight the issue on sexuality that has always been a taboo subject in Malaysia.

With the remaining research funds, workshops were organised to train 'guides' to give guidance to the transsexual community in legal, religious, social, psychological and health issues, with the collaboration of personnel from the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, and IKHLAS. It is hoped that the Ministry will provide funding and carry out projects in the future to help the transsexual community.

The transsexual phenomenon has also attracted the attention of the Minister of Women and Family affairs, and she has indicated that she will look into the plight of the transsexual community.

With these education and action plans, it is hoped that transsexuals in Malaysia will be accepted like other citizens in Malaysia, without any discrimination and prejudice.

Footnote

1. Part of this paper was presented at the Fourth International Congress on Cross-Dressing, Sex and Gender Issues, The Renaissance Transgender Association, Philadelphia, 5-8 October 2000.

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