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COMMENTARY

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A death, religion and the Transgender Day of Remembrance

by Yuki Vivienne Choe

A well-known transgender make-up artist in Malaysia was found dead in her home last week with the media speculating that she "may have been a victim of a sexual fantasy gone wrong". Transgender rights advocate Yuki Vivienne Choe examines the media's reportage in light of the recent commemoration of the 14th International Transgender Day of Remembrance.

In Malaysia, Dicky Othman was found dead, face down with her hands and legs bound, and her mouth stuffed with a piece of cloth. Her body was discovered at her home near the Kuala Lumpur city centre at 8pm on Tuesday, December 4, when her brother went to her home after she failed to answer her mobile phone. She was 52 years old and believed to have been dead for 24 hours.

Dicky was well known in local celebrity circle as the make-up artist of choice by artistes such as Amy Mastura and Sharifah Aini. She was also a designer and talent agent, and loved by many friends and family. Because of that privilege, her death did not go unreported. Many others were not so fortunate.

Two weeks earlier, a 14th International Transgender Day of Remembrance event was held at Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur, Viva Home, a memorial event to remember the lives of 265 transgender people worldwide, who were murdered the past year, according to Transgender Europe's Trans Murder Monitoring Project's latest report. The figure however, is just the tip of the iceberg. The reality of countless transgender-hate related murders that go unreported or unnoticed due to mis-gendering is disturbing, as with the manner of how transgender people are usually murdered, along with the way the mainstream media treats their deaths.

After Dicky died, the mainstream newspapers mis-gendered her with male pronouns, and even sensationalising her death by claiming her role in "sexual fantasy gone wrong". What was implied in the press was that she brought her death to herself. And the police closed the case immediately as such, giving no room for any possibility that it was indeed murder, just because there was no sign of break in and there was sexual activity involved. Shaming the victim is always the norm when the victim is a transgender person. Unmistakeably, the mainstream news made no mention of her true gender identity. Less attention was given to her talents as a make-up artist, the success she had gained as a businesswoman, or the many friends that she had made, and the beautiful life she lived.

During the night of the Remembrance, a list of transgender victims, a huge majority of them trans women, was read out one by one. It tells even more of the same story of exactly where the society of the world wishes to place them. Many of them died violent deaths, from multiple gunshots to being stoned, and some of them were found decapitated or dismembered. Sex and drugs are two items that are often related with the killings, and sex workers make up a huge majority of the deaths.

Alarming, the death rate continues to climb, from 162 reported deaths in 2009, to 179 in 2010 and 221 reported deaths last year. And there seems to be no stop to it. In fact, intimidation and threats to transgender people are worryingly on the increase worldwide, year by year.

If there is a similarity to all the transgender murders worldwide, would be the fact that it occurs often in nations under heavy influence of religious institutions. Violence and brutality on transgender people happened in countries such as the United States, Turkey, Pakistan, India, Brazil, and even the Philippines, all with strong presence of organised religion. Revered scriptures have been often being misinterpreted and misused as religion is bent to side the privileged against gender minorities, when it is supposed to be used to protect the innocent among human beings.

Reverend Father Joseph Goh spoke about this at length in his talk at the Remembrance, titled Abuse of Gender Variant People and Religious Justifications for Trans-Persecution.



Dicky Othman, 52, was a well-known transgender make-up artist in Malaysia.

"Underlying this gross injustice and hypocrisy is not just the use of religion that supports political power. We need to examine the ways in which religion is interpreted and designed in such a way that it supports the persecution of mak nyahs (transgender women). We need to see the ways in which the theologising of Malaysian Islam justifies religious persecution. We need to examine how religion is explained in such a way that it proves that God is on the side of those who persecute mak nyahs (transgender women)."

"I believe that for mak nyahs and for all LGBTIQ people, Malaysian Muslim and Christian religious leaders must learn to "love the sinner, and love the sin."What I am trying to say is that it is important for Malaysian Muslim and Christian religious leaders to first believe, and then teach Muslims and Christians that mak nyahs are created by God to be who they are, and that God wants them to continue to develop into the persons that they are meant to be."

I shared my thoughts with a reporter who was present: "Most people in Malaysia do not realise there are many trans persons like me who are born with a hard-wired brain sex that is in contradiction with one's biological sex, and the resulting intense distress caused by this incongruence is real and painful. And because the brain sex defines gender, my experiences as a woman, the feel, smell, touch, sense, and even emotional needs are very much part of me, even though I am born in a different sex."

"Transgender Day Of Remembrance to me represents how society treats people who are different, and just how strong the misconception on sex and gender is, to the point that any gender non-conforming individuals are seen as sub-human or lesser people due to the failure of accomplishing their gender based on their biological sex, that leads to plenty of violence, brutality and murder."

"Transgender people are the definitive social justice failure in a world where gender and sex is so fluid, yet many governmental authorities and leaders define it as set, and even create laws that are used to persecute innocent people instead of protecting them."

Reverend Father Joseph Goh concluded on the importance of the LGBTIQ population bonding and protecting each other especially the transgender people, by saying: "It is important for all LGBTIQ people to realise that because they share experiences of being misunderstood, of prejudice and discrimination, it is important for them to support each other. It is just as easy for LGBTIQ people to persecute each other, as it is for non-LGBTIQ people to persecute LGBTIQ people."

This article is dedicated to all transgender people who were killed worldwide, reported and unreported, while we bless and pray for comfort the families and friends who have to mourn for their loss. As we look into the year 2013 and beyond, we hope that someday we would not find the need to light a candle to remember senseless deaths and what could have been for those lives. Until then we need to remember, as our opponents also should for all their hate-mongering and oppression, for as the guiding principle of the Transgender Day Of Remembrance reminds us – those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.

Yuki Vivienne Choe is a transsexual advocate, who read the reports and performed the memorial at the Transgender Day of Remembrance event in Malaysia.

Malaysia
