

MAK NYAH BODIES AS SACRED SITES:

Uncovering the Queer Body-Sacramentality of Malaysian Male-to-Female Transsexuals

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Muslim *mak nyahs*¹ or male-to-female transsexuals constitute seventy to eighty percent of 10,000 *mak nyahs*² in multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia. Often seen as the epitome of sinfulness for their perceived transgressive and obfuscating melange of gender and sexual identities, *mak nyahs* are frequently subjected to heinous treatments from the collaborative efforts of law enforcement and religious quadrants.³ Despite improvements in relationships between *mak nyahs* and Muslim authorities,⁴ *mak nyahs* are generally treated as violators of Islam due to their liminal embodiedness.⁵ *Mak nyahs* have responded primarily from a human rights perspective⁶ and from hopeful dialogues with representatives from Islamic departments.⁷ Against the backdrop of this nationwide vilification, there have been few ventures to understand both the spiritual and theological undertones of the lived, bodily experiences of *mak nyahs*.⁸ In my interviews with the *mak nyahs* who were employed in the *Mak Nyah Programme*⁹ of the Malaysian non-governmental organization that provides HIV-related services, PT Foundation, I uncovered spiritual sensibilities that were “largely free of the rules, regulations, and responsibilities associated with religion.”¹⁰ *Mak nyah* spiritualities were negotiated upon a resistance of discourses of “body fascism,” understood as the “policing, controlling and punishing of bodies which do not adhere to hegemonic constructions of society.”¹¹

In this essay that focuses on the embodied negotiations of *mak nyahs* with institutional Islam, I employ queer theoretical and theological

insights to argue that *mak nyah* bodies are sacred sites of queer body-sacramentality, rather than vehicles of sin and religious violation. I begin by addressing the issue of *mak nyah* bodies as sites of contestation in Malaysia and briefly explain the dynamics of my interviews with them. I continue with a queer discussion of bodies and sacramentality before examining discourses on the body, religion, and God by seven *mak nyah* employees of PT Foundation who professed some form of affiliation with institutional Islam. I conclude by highlighting the ways in which *mak nyahs* “struggle against the straitjacketing effects of institutionalisation”¹² by reconfiguring notions of God and institutional Islam, thus allowing their embodiedness to become queer, sacred spaces of interaction with the divine.

Bodies of contestation

Hundreds of people bore the heat and humidity one November afternoon as they elbowed their way for a closer look at the *mak nyahs* who had taken to the performance stage for a karaoke rendition of the Korean all-girl pop group Wonder Girls’ “Nobody” for the annual Red Carnival event in 2010.¹³ Spearheaded by PT Foundation and held at one of Kuala Lumpur’s major shopping centers, this event is part of its efforts to raise awareness on issues of HIV and AIDS *apropos* World AIDS Day. As transbodies proudly paraded themselves in sequined dresses and lip-synching and dancing ensued, the crowds and the *mak nyahs* laughed together. For several minutes, everyone had forgotten how *mak nyah* bodies are regularly monitored and persecuted in the “anatomy-politics”¹⁴ of Malaysia by civil and Islamic authorities.

With their “soft and feminine”¹⁵ ways, *mak nyah* bodies face multivalent persecution and discrimination.¹⁶ This view of *mak nyahs* is frequently transposed to the Malaysian media and relayed to millions of subscribers. A startling example lies in the airing of a segment on *mak nyahs* in the *Wanita Hari Ini* (Women Today) program on October 4, 2011 by a local television station, TV3. Entitled *Pondan, Ancaman Wanita* (Transgender/Transsexuals, a Threat to Women), the show claimed that *mak nyahs* were aping and usurping the role of women and involved in conspiracies of husband-stealing and monopolizing jobs held by women. The response of the *mak nyah* communities by demanding an apology from TV3 for statements that were “defamatory and slanderous”¹⁷ revealed a concerted

effort in rejecting a perpetuation of stereotypes that saw them as homosexual male impersonators who engaged in deviant sexual behavior.

In November 2010, I conducted face-to-face, in-depth interviews with eight *mak nyahs* of PT Foundation. Here, I privilege only seven voices—Jaylane, Catania, Nuk, Amara, Chantal, Comel, and Candy¹⁸ who professed Islam in varied ways. The interviews were conducted in English, the national language Malay, and code-switching between one and the other to analyze the spiritualities of *mak nyahs*. These *mak nyahs* hailed from different Malaysian states and were of different ethnicities, age groups, and religious inclinations. Questions that were more pertinent to the topics of *mak nyah* embodiedness, religion, and God included: (1) “How old were you when you had your first awareness of being a *mak nyah*?”, (2) “How did you feel when you realized it?”, (3) “What was your initial response to this awareness?”, (4) “Have you undergone genital reconstruction surgery (GRS)? If so, why? If not, why not?”, (5) “Did you experience any response from religious authorities? If so, what were they?”, and (6) “How do you see yourself now?” During the interviews, some *mak nyahs* responded directly to these questions whereas others spoke on issues related to them.

Bodies and sacramentality

In queer critical analyses, “what is otherwise taken for granted as stable is challenged, interrogated, and explored.”¹⁹ In challenging a perspective of sacramentality that often suffers from “thingification”²⁰ or a purely utilitarian concept, thus rendering it “epiphenomenal to human life,”²¹ I commence with the premise that sacramentality refers to what *God is doing for God’s people* throughout their lives and the polyvalent ways in which people consequently *respond* to these divine actions. The emphasis is not on what sacraments *are* and what they *do* in mediating God to human persons, but on God who invites people to different spaces to encounter God, within which people respond to God as embodied persons. I borrow from and develop Kenan B. Osborne’s insights that sacramentality is “an event and a discourse that occurs only when there is a meeting of the primordial divine disclosing and the secondary human response”²²—a gratuitous, *a priori* initiative of God to which persons respond. This perspective affirms the initiative of God in sacramental ventures but is not divested of the critical role of human agency. Human

persons who exist in the world as bodies respond to the loving actions of God in fluid, diverse, embodied expressions, thus revealing bodies as sites for human–divine encounters. I also suggest that these responses are neither compelled to an explicit attribution to “God” as a personal being, nor confined within the ambit of institutional sanctions, but take on multiple meaningful, life-giving human expressions of choice.

Human persons who participate in such projects embark on a process of becoming embodied persons who sacramentally manifest the divine. Thus, the sacramentality of bodies appropriates several levels. First, the sacramentality of bodies acknowledges the flesh, blood, and tears of human beings. Second, it attends to the meaning-making of joy, pain, and sexual desire in human experiences. Third, the sacramentality of bodies also affirms that as “the flesh incarnates in multiple and plural realities and contexts,”²³ any form of gender and sexual discrimination must be eschewed. Divine–human interaction cannot be restricted to any particular human representation, nor can it be limited to people who comply with the “authoritarianism of decency”²⁴ in the choices they make with their bodies. Bodies of all forms provide “windows that shed light on the presence of God in us and in our world.”²⁵ The sacramentality of bodies is queer, for it resists the impulse for sacramental concepts to “fit precisely within a category”²⁶ of theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, socio-politics, gender, and sexuality and thus “destabilizes notions of fixed identities”²⁷ of sacramentality. As such, the bodily experiences of those deemed as “sexual outlaws”²⁸ by heteronormative religious standards harbor queer potential as sites for encounters with God. Bodies are not, however, sacramental “things.” They assume the posture of being sacred sites of sacramentality upon engagement in the sense making of human experiences that allow manifestations of the divine.

Persecutions and body epiphanies

The ill treatment of Muslim *mak nyahs* proved to be a catalyst for contemplation and reflexivity on their part. Rather than destroying their self-worth or obliterating their sense of spirituality, stigmatization proved pivotal in the creation of new spiritual perspectives. While some *mak nyahs* I interviewed faced minor incidents of discrimination, reports of the ignoble abuses suffered by others during their incarcerations were plentiful.²⁹ Consider a testimony from Catania:

I was imprisoned for one month. I already had my [breast] implants and long hair. They balded me, forced me to strip naked. When they brought me to my block I had to pass all the other inmates.

The violence that some *mak nyahs* endured at the hands of those who sought to inscribe “sin” on the surfaces of their bodies based on religious discourses did not extinguish the inherent goodness that they detected in themselves. Although each *mak nyah* I interviewed expressed varying degrees of body acceptance, all of them articulated their joy in aligning their bodily appearances with their “soul gender[s]:”³⁰

Jaylane: I am very clear about myself. Whether or not I do GRS, it does not matter as long as I accept myself.

Catania: I am [pre-operative]. I am happy with what I have now but I intend to go ahead because sometimes I feel I am not complete.

Nuk: I accept what God has given to me. I do not hate my body... after my father told me he was against my GRS or dressing up as a woman I changed my mind.

Amera: I intend to [undergo GRS] but have to consider carefully in terms of family acceptance and finance. If I know I am a *mak nyah* I have to accept myself as a *mak nyah*.

Chantal: I am not sure if I will [undergo GRS]. I am not ready for that because I am comfortable with [who I am].

Candy: I want to go through [GRS] but I am not in a hurry to do it because of financial problems. To me it doesn't really matter because my spouse accepts me as I am.

Comel: I am comfortable with myself now. I am scared my family will be angry with me. They don't want me to change my body.

Their narratives suggest that despite its importance, GRS was not a prerequisite for *mak nyahs* to achieve their individual sense of bodily acceptance and comfort. Monetary concerns and approval from family or a life partner were crucial factors for some *mak nyahs* in their decisions to embark on bodily modifications or physical appearance. In each case, what proved to be paramount for them was the ability and liberty to discover and decide on spaces of bodily ease, growth, and self-love as *mak nyahs*.

Another important source of bodily affirmation for some *mak nyahs* consisted in a fashioning of personal spiritualities by reconstituting their

images of God and reconfiguring institutional Islam either by transforming their affiliations with it, it or by distancing themselves:

Jaylanee: I am a Muslim. Since I accepted myself, and I [obtained] so much information about myself, I am not so concerned anymore about what religion says about me. I used to be a blind believer. Not anymore... Why does my own religion condemn me? Why does it create hatred towards *mak nyahs* and perform hate-crime? Why should I be loyal to this religion when it condemns me? I do not believe in any religion. I believe in myself. *Mak nyahs*... are the most honest persons because they are honest to themselves and do not pretend. They are being their true selves.

Catania: In my life's journey I was brought up Muslim... I respect all religions but don't follow one. I learn about different religions. I believe that there is only one God³¹ because all the teachings are the same. They want us to be good BUT Christianity and Islam, I have problems with because of their biases... I have my own thing about God, God is one. Whatever religion you are [practicing], it teaches [you] to do right... people are using religion to harm people.

Nuk: I consider myself religious. If I do not have a religion, I have no *pendirian* (selfhood). Everything that God creates has a purpose. We human beings may not know of the added benefits [of being *mak nyahs*]... we always think negative but there are benefits from God... being a [*mak nyah*] is an advantage. There are many talents, skills... that [we] possess.

Amera: I have no problems with God. Even though Islam has do's and don'ts, we have never attempted to change our religion. Breast and penile modification are unlawful in Islam because it modifies God's plan. But we still do it for personal satisfaction. It is still between me and God. Only God knows why I do it because God created my soul.

Chantal: Religion is between me and God. Some religions say if I do this I go to hell. People cannot simply say this is wrong or right. I do not feel guilty about being a [*mak nyah*]. I am a Muslim. Even as a [*mak nyah*] I follow my religion as a Muslim. You cannot stop me

from being a Muslim. I can pray; why not? Religious authorities are not God. I reject what they say.

Candy: As a Muslim I have been preached [to by] my family [that] one cannot do anything without God's willingness. If I do something bad it is due to my own human error. If I do good it's because God wants me to do good. If I do something it's because God allows me. The way I talk the way I move is because God allows me. I believe God accepts me because whenever I am sad or happy I do speak to him and he does respond in his own way.

Comel: I am a Muslim and I believe in the existence of God. God created me and so I believe in God... God loves me. Some people... said that I am a special created being. Only a few people can be *mak nyah*.

Queer body-sacramentality and *mak nyahs*

What poignantly emerges in the narratives of the *mak nyahs* is their active queering, as they interrogated the “normativities and orthodoxies”³² of bodies, religion, and God. They exacted a “relocation of interpretive authority to the self”³³ in forms of personal spiritualities based on their bodily experiences, reconstitutions of images of God, and reconfigurations of institutional Islam. By “being their true selves” or living out “their own thing about God,” Jaylane and Catania allowed for life-giving, meaning-making bodyscapes. Amera ascribed her body to the crafting powers of God, which was a matter between her and God. Chantal understood the revelation of God's plan as occurring in her body, rather than in institutional Islam. Candy affirmed the divine origin of her body, which could not come to be “without God's willingness.” For Comel, her body displayed divine beneficence, for God loved her as a “special created being.”

Such insights reveal bodies that cannot be simplistically consigned to categories of sin and religious violations, but are sacred, revelatory sites of life, meaning, and love, and for many, terrains upon which to explicitly respond to “God's queer designs.”³⁴ Some *mak nyahs* appealed to an “ontogeneric”³⁵ argument by conceptualizing their *mak nyah* bodies as intentional creations of a loving God. They invalidated an “image of God as a ‘dominating other’”³⁶ and replaced it with the notion of a deeply caring God with whom they could foster a personal relationship and who

endowed them with extraordinary gifts, “because everything that God creates has a purpose.” While some *mak nyahs* decided to renegotiate their relationships with institutionalized Islam and others chose to distance themselves from it, all of them rejected its commination of them and re-constituted it within their personal spiritualities that permitted them to live as empowered *mak nyahs*. They engaged in a queering or a “deconstructive critique of... heterosexist political theology”³⁷ in institutional Islam by redesigning religious beliefs and notions of God and designating their bodies as spaces of divine encounter. Thus, I postulate that by manifesting divine activity in and through their bodies that were replete with the meaning-making of “lived realities and life circumstances,”³⁸ these *mak nyahs* evince a queer body-sacramentality.

Notes

1. In “Mak Nyahs (Male Transsexuals) in Malaysia: The Influence of Culture and Religion on Their Identity,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 5(3) (2001), http://www.wpath.org/journal/www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/IJT/97-03/numbers/symposion/ijtv05no03_04.htm (accessed on July 30, 2012), Yik Koon Teh explains that the term *mak nyah* encompasses pre-operative and post-operative male-to-female transsexuals.
2. See Teh, Yik Koon, “Politics and Islam: Factors Determining Identity and the Status of Male-to-Female Transsexuals in Malaysia,” in *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, eds., Fran Martin et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 89.
3. See Khartini Slamah, “The Struggle to Be Ourselves, Neither Men nor Women: Mak Nyahs in Malaysia,” in *Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in South and Southeast Asia*, eds., Geetanjali Misra and Radhika Chandiramani (London: Sage Publications, 2005), pp. 102–103.
4. Based on conversations with the *mak nyah* staff of PT Foundation.
5. Teh, Yik Koon, *The Mak Nyahs: Malaysian Male to Female Transsexuals* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002), p. 110.
6. For example, see the press statement by the *mak nyahs* in response to the *Syariah* Criminal Enactment (1992) of the state of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia at <http://www.seksualitimerdeka.org/2010/12/justice-for-sisters-helping-mak-nyah.html> (accessed on July 28, 2012).
7. See Khartini, p. 109.
8. Some notable contemporary studies on transgenderism in relation to spirituality and theology in non-Asian contexts include Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *Trans/Formations* (London: SCM Press, 2009); Virginia R. Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan, *Transgender Journeys* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003); Justin Edward Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003); Leanne McCall Tigert and Maren C. Tirabassi, eds., *Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality, Spirituality* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004); and Jakob Hero, “Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing: Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency,” in *Queer Religion: Homosexuality in Modern Reli-*

gious History, Vol. 2, eds., Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), pp. 143–165.

9. PT Foundation, “Mak Nyah Programme: Transgenders”, http://www.ptfmalaysia.org/transgender_programme.php (accessed on July 30, 2012).

10. Koenig, Harold G., “Research on Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health: A Review,” *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 54(5) (May 2009), p. 284.

11. Córdova Quero, Hugo, “Queering Migrant Bodies: Sexuality and Intimacy among Japanese Brazilian Migrants in Japan” (presented at Bodies and Borders: Exploring Issues of Intimacy and Corporality across Social and Cultural Boundaries, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan, 2009), p. 4.

12. Sullivan, Nikki, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. v.

13. See http://www.ptfmalaysia.org/photo_gallery.php?id=53 (accessed on July 28, 2012).

14. Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 138.

15. Khartini, p. 100.

16. Teh, “Politics and Islam.” See also section 8 of the *Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 (Act 559)*, available at <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%2012/Act%20559.pdf> (accessed on July 26, 2012).

17. “Mak Nyah Community demands Apology from TV3,” *Free Malaysia Today*, <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/2011/10/13/mak-nyah-community-demands-apology-from-tv3/> (accessed on July 28, 2012).

18. These names are all pseudonyms.

19. Gedro, Julie, “Understanding, Designing, and Teaching LGBT Issues,” *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 12(3) (2010), p. 354.

20. Bieler, Andrea and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, & Resurrection* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 107.

21. Osborne, Kenan B., *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 44.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

23. Méndez Montoya, Ángel F., “Flesh in Flux: Theology and Dancing Bodies” (presented at the Tuesday Night Talks, Bade Museum, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA, August 2, 2011).

24. Althaus-Reid, Marcella, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 1.

25. Vogel, Dwight W., and Linda J. Vogel, “Sacramental Living: A Distinctive Spirituality,” *Liturgical Ministry* 9, (2000), p. 219.

26. Turner, William B., *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), p. 8.

27. Gedro, p. 354.

28. Faderman, Lillian, and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 23.

29. Khartini, p. 103.

30. Wiley, Cody, "I'm a Tomboy Who Grew into a Transman," *Sojourner: The Women's Forum* 26(3), (November 2000) p. 15, cited in Tanis, *Trans-Gendered*, p. 26.
31. During the interviews, the *mak nyahs* used the terms "God," *Allah* and *Tuhan* interchangeably. In this essay, all these terms have been subsumed under "God."
32. Browne, Kath, "Challenging Queer Geographies," *Antipode* 38(5) (2006), p. 886.
33. Yip, Andrew K. T., "Queering Religious Texts: An Exploration of British Non-heterosexual Christians' and Muslims' Strategy of Constructing Sexuality-affirming Hermeneutics," *Sociology* 39(1) (2005), p. 61.
34. Méndez Montoya, Ángel F., "Vicissitudes of the Margins: An HIV/AIDS Theological Journey," *CrossCurrents* 61(4) (2011), p. 551.
35. Yip, Andrew K. T., "Dare to Differ: Gay and Lesbian Catholics' Assessment of Official Catholic Positions on Sexuality," *Sociology of Religion* 58(2) (1997), p. 172.
36. Christ, Carol P., "Feminist Theology as Post-Traditional Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 82.
37. Goss, Robert E., *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), p. 250.
38. Yip, Andrew K. T., "Changing Religion, Changing Faith: Reflections on the Transformative Strategies of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians and Muslims," *Journal for Faith, Spirituality and Social Change* 1(1) (2007), p. 83.

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