

Mary and the *Mak Nyahs*: Queer Theological Imaginings of Malaysian Male-to-Female Transsexuals

JOSEPH N. GOH

Monash University, Malaysia

Many Malaysian *mak nyahs*, or male-to-female transsexuals, undergo tremendous discrimination and persecution in various aspects of their lives. This is due to their liminal identities and their involvement in sex work in Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim country that actively engages in moral policing. In this essay, I expand the notion of queer Christian theologizing by examining both the Muslim and Christian contexts in Malaysia, and pose the question of how queer theological instruments can challenge antagonistic attitudes towards *mak nyahs*. I discuss alternative theological models of Mary and *mak nyahs* by privileging the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, as well as using findings from face-to-face, in-depth interviews with *mak nyahs*, and scriptural imageries in Quran 3: 42, 47; 19: 16–22/Luke 1: 26–38 in which Mary acquiesces to a divine invitation. In so doing, I strive to engage in a concomitant theological imagining of Mary and *mak nyahs* in hopes of providing an alternative and constructive perspective on *mak nyahs*.

KEYWORDS *mak nyah*, Malaysia, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Mary, non-heteronormative sexualities, queer theology, religion and politics, male-to-female transsexuals

Mak nyahs are defined by Malaysian scholar Yik Koon Teh as male-to-female transsexuals “who want to have the surgery as well as [...] those who are comfortable in keeping their penises and who do not seek surgical sex change.”¹ Many *mak nyahs* undergo discrimination and persecution in various aspects of their lives due to their liminal identities and, for some, their involvement in sex work.²

¹ Yik Koon Teh, “Politics and Islam: Factors Determining Identity and the Status of Male-to-Female Transsexuals in Malaysia,” in *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, ed. Fran Martin et al. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 85.

² Khartini Slamah claims that two-thirds of the 30,000 *mak nyahs* in Malaysia are engaged in sex work due to the lack of employment opportunities as a consequence of discrimination. 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*, ed. Geetanjali Misra and Radhika Chandiramani (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 102, 104.

While the persistence in such vituperative attitudes towards *mak nyahs* is often the consequence of politically driven motives, there are underlying theological assumptions in many Malaysian Islamic and Christian institutional circles that these *mak nyahs* transgress divine perimeters. In her interviews with several authorities from Malaysian Islamic and Christian institutions,³ Teh elicited insights that annexed *mak nyahs* with expressions that were seen as undermining godly laws, notably the subversion of the male/female binary and homosexual activity.⁴ The discriminatory treatment of *mak nyahs* is not merely a matter of justice and human rights. The appeal to religion and theology — the use of God — renders the matter “a deeply theological issue.”⁵

My examination of the rhetoric of these religious institutions leads me to believe that their perceptions are predicated on theological visions that command a certain measure of respectability. The issue is not merely one of chastising *mak nyahs* for contravening theological imperatives through their expressions, but a prevailing mentality on the part of certain segments of political and socio-cultural structures in Malaysia that their very embodiments disrespect religious and theological boundaries. In expressing notions of dis/respectability, I hearken to the thought of bisexual feminist and queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid who, in her *Indecent Theology*, critiques liberation theologies for fabricating mythical images of the poor who are “decent, that is, asexual or monogamous heterosexual spouses united in the holy sacrament of marriage, people of faith and struggle who do not masturbate, have lustful thoughts at prayer times, cross-dress, or enjoy leather practices.”⁶ Instead Althaus-Reid calls for a fuller recognition of embodiment in theological pursuits, which embraces unconventional human experiences and in which theology itself is subversively interrogated and reimagined. Her work of “indecenting” provokes an “ideological construction of God from the idealist discourse.”⁷ Seen from the perspective of queer hermeneutics, the project of indecenting confounds the respectable metanarratives of theologies which are complicit with socio-economic and religio-political agendas to maintain their own cohesiveness. The act of indecenting privileges the quotidian realities that are inextricably linked to sexual subjectivities.

Enriched by the findings of my interviews with *mak nyahs*, I employ Althaus-Reid’s queer optics — her theological disassembling of Mary in particular — to engage in a concomitant theological imagining of Mary and *mak nyahs* in hopes providing an alternative and constructive perspective on *mak nyahs*.⁸ I proceed by

³ My references to Malaysian Islamic and Christian institutions in this article are indicative of particular religio-political segments of Islam as well as Christian churches in Malaysia that demonstrate either condemnatory or unfavourable attitudes towards non-heteronormative Malaysians.

⁴ See Yik Koon Teh, *The Mak Nyahs: Malaysian Male to Female Transsexuals* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002), 109–17.

⁵ Desmond Tutu, 1998, as quoted in Nicole J. Beger, *Tensions in the Struggle for Sexual Minority Rights in Europe: Que(e)rying Political Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 78.

⁶ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸ This essay particularly hearkens to the thought of Marcella Althaus-Reid, but also borrows from the insights of Mario Ribas, “Liberating Mary, Liberating the Poor,” in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 123–35; Sian Taylder, “Our Lady of the Libido: Towards a Marian Theology of Sexual Liberation?,” *Feminist Theology* 12:3 (2004): 343–71, doi:10.1177/096673500401200306.

explaining the unusual vulnerability that *mak nyahs* undergo by allowing the voices of my interviewees to come to the fore, after which I continue by addressing both epistemological and methodological issues. I conclude with a theologically imagined vision of the bodies of Mary and the *mak nyahs*.

Unusual vulnerability

Multiethnic Malaysia comprises 26 million citizens that include Malays (54.6%), Chinese (24.6%), non-Malay *Bumiputeras*⁹ (12.8%), Indians (7.3%), and “others” (0.7%). In the midst of such diverse ethnic and religious diversities, Muslims constitute the majority of the population (61.3%).¹⁰ Islam is honored as “the religion of the Federation.”¹¹ In a predominantly Muslim country rife with moral policing for both heteronormative and non-heteronormative¹² sexual expressions, and where sexuality is both a taboo subject and subjected to unmitigated surveillance,¹³ Malaysian institutional Islam takes center stage in denying refuge for *mak nyahs* who are regarded as “the epitome of sinfulness for their perceived transgressive and obfuscating melange of gender and sexual identities.”¹⁴ This antagonistic attitude towards *mak nyahs* must, however, be understood within the larger context of a nationwide surveillance of sexual acts due to increasing pressure for “purer” forms of Malaysian Islamic praxis since the 1970s.¹⁵

Yik Koon Teh claims that a more tolerant attitude towards *mak nyahs* was present between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries in Malaysia¹⁶. Other authors have noted how an amenable atmosphere in which transpersons were visible, tolerated, and even celebrated prevailed in the wider Malay archipelago before and after the said period.¹⁷ Religious strictures mounted in 1983, when the Malaysian Conference of Rulers issued a *fatwa* — “generally understood as an Islamic legal opinion given by an individual *mufti* (fatwa-giver)

⁹ *Bumiputeras* are “sons (or princes) of the soil” and “is a political and often legal definition referring to a group of people [...] construed as ‘native’ [...] to justify preferential treatment in [...] politics and the economy.” Frederik Holst, *Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 35.

¹⁰ See Department of Statistics, Malaysia, *Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics 2010*, 2010, http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf.

¹¹ Federal Constitution, 1957, 3(1), [http://www.agc.gov.my/images/Personalisation/Buss/pdf/Federal_Consti_\(BI_text\).pdf](http://www.agc.gov.my/images/Personalisation/Buss/pdf/Federal_Consti_(BI_text).pdf); Joseph M. Fernando, “The Position of Islam in the Constitution of Malaysia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37.2 (2006): 249–66, doi:10.1017/S0022463406000543.

¹² I am using “non-heteronormative” in this essay in reference to the diverse embodiments and expressions of gender and sexuality which have been denounced by dominant religio-political and socio-cultural narratives in Malaysia, and which are liberally referred to in the Malaysian news media as “LGBT.”

¹³ See Julian C.H. Lee, *Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society and the State* (London: Zed Books, 2011); beng hui tan, “Time’s Up! Moving Sexuality Rights in Malaysia into the New Millennium,” 2007, <http://goo.gl/v15zi>.

¹⁴ Joseph N. Goh, “*Mak Nyah* Bodies as Sacred Sites: Uncovering the Queer Body-Sacramentality of Malaysian Male-to-Female Transsexuals,” *CrossCurrents* 62.4 (2012): 512, doi:10.1111/cros.12006.

¹⁵ Consult Shanon Shah, “The Malaysian Dilemma: Negotiating Sexual Diversity in a Muslim-Majority Commonwealth State,” in *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The Commonwealth: Struggles for Decriminalisation and Change*, ed. Corinne Lennox and Matthew Waites (London: School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2013), 261–85.

¹⁶ See Yik Koon Teh, “Politics and Islam,” 90–91.

¹⁷ For instance, see Michael G. Peletz, “Transgenderism and Gender Pluralism in Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times,” *Current Anthropology* 47.2 (2006): 309–39; and Farish A. Noor, *What Your Teacher Didn’t Tell You: The Annexe Lectures*, 4th ed. (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Matahari Books, 2010).

or group of *muftīs* or ulama”¹⁸ which prohibited cross-dressing and genital reconstruction surgery (GRS). In Malaysia, *fatwas* can “carry the force of law”¹⁹ in certain Malaysian states. The issuance of this *fatwa* was a reaction from the Malay monarchy towards the then prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, who challenged their traditional rights. The *fatwa* was aimed at re-establishing the Malay monarchy as the ultimate Islamic moral authority.²⁰ Consequently, rigid definitions of *khunsa* (intersex persons) and *mukhannis* or *mukhannas* (males whose behavioral patterns mirror those of females) appeared.²¹ For Muslim *mak nyahs*, only *khunsas* were permitted to undergo GRS. All Muslim *mak nyahs* who were born with primary male sexual characteristics but who were seen as persistent in cross-dressing and mimicking women were considered as obstinate in exercising iniquitous agency.²²

The term *mak nyah*, according to Malaysian *mak nyah* activist Khartini Slamah, was invented by Malaysian *mak nyahs* as self-definition “from a vantage point of dignity rather than from the position of derogation” and to distinguish themselves from “gay men [...] and other ‘sexual minorities.’”²³ A grassroots campaign called Justice for Sisters was founded in 2011 to conscientize the Malaysian public on the plight of *mak nyahs*.²⁴ In 2013, the “I AM YOU: Be A Trans Ally” awareness campaign was launched to pursue the acceptance of male-to-female and female-to-male trans* persons in Malaysia, in which various trans* persons spoke up on their life experiences.²⁵ Despite these steadily increasing bursts of empowerment, many *mak nyahs* have been, and continue to be, victims of a panoply of discriminatory acts. Consequently, a lack of career opportunities has forced many of them to turn to sex work,²⁶ thus further compounding their “sinfulness.” Muslim *mak nyahs* often become victims of a plethora of regimented penalties that are often obtuse and illogical. As Catania disclosed:

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.

In a nation where “moral conservatism is strong in all the major religious traditions in Malaysia and [...] there is relatively little traction in publically

¹⁸ Mun'im Sirry, “Fatwas and Their Controversy: The Case of the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44:1 (2013): 100, doi:10.1017/S0022463412000641.

¹⁹ Lee, *Policing Sexuality*, 103.

²⁰ See Teh, “Politics and Islam,” 88–89, 91. As the religio-political complexities of this situation are beyond the scope of this article, I specifically focus on Teh’s insights here.

²¹ Teh, “Politics and Islam,” 91.

²² For other politically driven catalysts in the rise of moral surveillance in relation to Malaysian Islam, consult Joseph N. Goh, “Malaysian Masculine Exposé: Queering the Politics of Non-Heteronormative Malay-Muslim Men,” in *Queer Sexualities: Diversifying Queer, Queering Diversity*, ed. Vikki Fraser, E-book (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 15–30; Shah, “The Malaysian Dilemma.”

²³ Khartini Slamah, “The Struggle to Be Ourselves, Neither Men nor Women,” 99.

²⁴ Justice for Sisters, “Justice for Sisters,” 2011, <http://justiceforsisters.wordpress.com>; Anna Leach, “Justice for Trans Sisters in Malaysia,” *Gay Star News*, January 18, 2013, <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/justice-trans-sisters-malaysia180113>.

²⁵ “I AM YOU: Be A Trans Ally!,” 2013, <http://mytransally.weebly.com/index.html>.

²⁶ See Khartini, 104.

advocating for LGBT-friendly understandings of religion,”²⁷ Malaysian Islamic voices from perspectives of theology and fundamental liberties in support of *mak nyahs* are rare.²⁸ *Syariah* laws in many Malaysian states continue to actively persecute *mak nyahs* for making the willful choice of posing as women.²⁹ The clause that “any male person who, in any public place, wears a woman’s attire and poses as a woman for immoral purposes”³⁰ in the *Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997* can be used to fine and/or imprison Muslim *mak nyahs*. Muslim *mak nyahs* who are sex workers are particularly vulnerable, as they can even be arrested by law enforcement officers for this perceived allusion to “immoral purposes” under *Syariah* law. Generally, *mak nyahs* can be apprehended under the *Minor Offence Act of 1955* for “indecent behavior.”³¹ It is often ambiguous, however, as to which of these two laws is actually being advocated for the apprehension of *mak nyahs*. As very little legal protection and support is provided for *mak nyahs* on an official basis, they frequently find themselves targets of discrimination and violence. In the state of Terengganu in 2011, Mohd Ashraf Hafiz Abdul Aziz was denied an appeal to change his name to Aleesha Farhana Abdul Aziz in his Malaysian identity card on the grounds that gender is determined at birth.³² In 2012, a case brought forward by four Muslim *mak nyahs* in the state of Negeri Sembilan to challenge civil and religious laws that prohibited female impersonations was dismissed by the Negeri Sembilan High Court for being counter-Islamic.³³ In 2013, a Thai *mak nyah* and migrant worker in Malaysia was physically assaulted by four men in the early hours of the morning. A victim of hate-crime, “Lily” suffered multiple blows to her head and body, and received seventy-three stitches on her head and face.³⁴

Some Malaysian Christian churches have also expressed disapproval of *mak nyah* expressions.³⁵ A notable exception is the Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur inclusive community, which offers worship services and various ministries to non-heteronormative persons within an ethos of celebrating gender and sexual

²⁷ Julian C.H. Lee, “Sexuality Rights Activism in Malaysia: The Case of Seksualiti Merdeka,” in *Social Activism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Michele Ford (New York: Routledge, 2013), 178.

²⁸ For more information, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Transgenders, from Islam’s Perspective” (International Institute of Advanced Academic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia, December 29, 2009), <http://www.iais.org.my/e/index.php/publications-sp-1447159098/articles/item/28-transgenders-from-islam%5C%27s-perspective.html>; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Transgenders and Justice in Islam” (International Institute of Advanced Academic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia, August 11, 2011), <http://www.iais.org.my/e/index.php/publications-sp-1447159098/articles/item/81-transgenders-and-justice-in-islam.html>; Leven Woon, “Sisters in Islam Call for Syariah Law Review,” *Free Malaysia Today*, October 15, 2012, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2012/10/15/sisters-of-islam-call-for-syariah-law-review/>.

²⁹ *Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997*, 2006, sec. 28, <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%2012/Akt%20559.pdf>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Minor Offences Act 1955*, 2006, sec. 21, www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.7/Act336.pdf.

³² *Harian Metro Online*, “Jantina Ditentu Ketika Lahir,” *Harian Metro Online*, July 19, 2011, <http://www.hmetro.com.my/articles/Jantinaditentuketikalahir/Article>.

³³ Liz Gooch, “Malaysian Court Rejects Challenge to Cross-Dressing Ban,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/world/asia/malaysian-court-rejects-challenge-to-cross-dressing-ban.html>.

³⁴ Diana Surya Abd. Wahab, “Mak Nyah Parah Dibelasah,” *Sinar Harian*, July 24, 2013, <http://www.sinarharian.com.my/mak-nyah-parah-dibelasah-1-185994>.

³⁵ Yik Koon Teh, *The Mak Nyahs: Malaysian Male to Female Transsexuals* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002), 112–17.

diversities.³⁶ Despite underscoring their pastoral concerns, Malaysian churches have not provided any substantial theological sustenance for non-heteronormative persons.³⁷ The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism (MCCBCHST), an interfaith dialogue organization, has declared its stand “against all forms of harrassment [*sic*], intimidation, threats and violent attacks on any Malaysian including those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) community,”³⁸ but has been reticent in providing more affirming religious perspectives on the issue. As 70–80 percent of *mak nyahs* in Malaysia are Malay-Muslims,³⁹ institutional Islam is evidently a major influence in the tensions surrounding *mak nyah* issues and subsequent oppression. This is, however, not an exclusively Muslim issue, as Christian institutions also engage in the disavowal of *mak nyah* expressions.

The moralistic rage that is hurled against Muslim *mak nyahs* is one that bespeaks a gamut of complexities. *Mak nyahs* are condemned for being ambiguous subjectivities as typified by choice of attire and physical bearing, for deviant sexual activity, and bodily modifications which run “against Allah’s wishes.”⁴⁰ Charges against *mak nyahs* are thus based on Islamic sensibilities that are primarily offended by what is perceived as a transgression of hagiographized roles of gender, sexuality, and biological sex. Malaysian institutional Islam sees *mak nyahs* as men based on their genitalia at birth, despite their feminine compartments and fervent assertions that they understand themselves as heterosexual women who desire heterosexual men.⁴¹ As Comel informed me:

I like to be looked upon and caressed as a woman [...] I have never entered a men’s toilet. Even the lady in charge of the toilet chided me for accidentally entering a men’s toilet. Now I must wear a bra, otherwise I feel odd. I need to take hormones otherwise I also feel uncomfortable.

Malaysian Islamic authorities are notably unrelenting in perceiving *mak nyahs* as recalcitrant homosexual men⁴² who must repent and embrace heterosexual expectations of marriage and progeny.⁴³ Moreover, these Islamic authorities have stated that their biologically deterministic stand on gender will attenuate only “if there is scientific proof that transsexualism is caused by the biological nature of a person.”⁴⁴ Consequently, *mak nyahs* bodies are transmuted into sites of promiscuity, illegitimacy, and sin through accusations of “unmanly” acts of

³⁶ Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur, “Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur,” 2013, <http://gsmalaysia.com/home.htm>.

³⁷ See Joseph N. Goh, “The Word Was Not Made Flesh: Theological Reflections on the Banning of *Seksualiti Merdeka* 2011,” *Dialog* 51:2 (2012): 145–54, doi:10.1111/j.1540-6385.2012.00671.x.

³⁸ KomunitiKini, “Malaysians of Reason and Religion,” *KomunitiKini*, November 5, 2011, <http://iglhrc.org/content/malaysia-ban-sexuality-rights-festival-violates-human-rights>

³⁹ See Khartini, 100; and Teh, “Politics and Islam,” 89.

⁴⁰ Teh, *The Mak Nyahs*, 111.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴² See Joseph N. Goh, “The Homosexual Threat: Appraising Masculinities and Men’s Sexualities in Malaysia,” in *Thinking Through Malaysia: Culture and Identity in the 21st Century*, ed. Julian Hopkins and Julian C. H. Lee (Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2012), 168.

⁴³ Malaysian scholar Ismail Baba uncovered this perception in his research on non-heteronormative men. See “Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia,” in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, ed. Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2001), 153.

⁴⁴ Teh, *The Mak Nyahs*, 111–12.

women-aping and male-to-male sexual acts.⁴⁵ The persecution of *mak nyahs* can thus be understood from one perspective as a war that is waged to bring them to reason, and to realign gender and sexual roles to their proper dispositions so as to eschew sin. *Mak nyah* bodies bear an unusual vulnerability that non-*mak nyahs* may never have to confront. They assume the position of “non-entities,”⁴⁶ which entails the diminishment of subjectivity, as “what gets subtracted is also annulled.”⁴⁷ This signals the insignificance and ludicrousness of their bodies among many in Malaysian society. Nuk recalls one of her most challenging moments: “I was forced to do something I did not want to do [...] to perform sex with gangsters against my will.” Comel encountered what she terms as a horrifying experience at the hands of an Islamic religious officer:

I was detained by [a religious department] while I was hanging out, for no reason. I asked an officer of [this religious department] if he would let me go if I [performed oral sex] on him. He said yes. So I did. And then he let me go.

While these revealing experiences were undeniably shocking for these *mak nyahs* — as was intimated to me in facial expressions, tonal inflections, and bodily gestures during the interviews — what proves even more appalling is how *mak nyah* bodies are utterly defenseless in confrontations with civil and religious law, as well as wanton hate-crimes. In addition to accusations of gender violations, the dearth of assistance rendered to *mak nyahs* in their tribulations is attributed to their perceived sinfulness and indecency, a perception that has given birth to the *mak nyah* as Islam’s sinful Other⁴⁸ and bestowed a *carte blanche* for exacting injustice in its many forms. While such forcefulness is not experienced from Malaysian Christian churches, their rhetoric on the matter conveys a subtle rejection of *mak nyahs*. In Teh’s interviews with representatives from the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship and the Roman Catholic church in Malaysia⁴⁹ both churches declared that their sacred texts revealed little on the issue of transsexualism. Nevertheless, their stance was that, as gender and sexual roles have been divinely designated and are biologically innate, surgical modification is a violation of God’s intent. Moreover, transsexualism could potentially lead to the sin of homosexuality. Thus, *mak nyahs* needed to be aided towards “a normal happy life.”⁵⁰ Evidently, the “problem” ascribed to *mak nyahs* has created a dismissal of the inner workings of their “soul gender.”⁵¹ *Mak nyahs* attain theological legitimacy and sacredness only if their bodies are realigned to Islamic and Christian heteronormativity.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, 110–11. See also the Malaysian Penal Code, sections 377A, B, C, and D, available at <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%2012/Act%20574.pdf> [accessed August 12, 2013]; and the *Syariah Criminal Offences. (Federal Territories) Act 1997*.

⁴⁶ Yik Koon Teh, “Mak Nyahs (Male Transsexuals) in Malaysia: The Influence of Culture and Religion on their Identity,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 5:3 (2001), www.safraproject.org/downloads/Mak_Nyahs-Malaysia.pdf

⁴⁷ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 13.

⁴⁸ This expression is inspired by Lee, *Policing Sexuality*, 107.

⁴⁹ Teh, *The Mak Nyahs*, 112–17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵¹ Cody Wiley, “I’m a Tomboy Who Grew into a Transman,” *Sojourner: The Women’s Forum* 26:3 (2000): 15, cited in Tanis, *Trans-Gendered*, 26.

Contextual strategies for indecenting borders

In November 2010, I conducted individual interviews with eight *mak nyah* employees of the Mak Nyah Programme⁵² of PT Foundation (PTF). The interviews were held in English, *Malay* (the official language of Malaysia), and code-switching between one and the other to uncover the life issues and spiritual sensibilities that fueled their passion for their work. As a community-based, non-governmental organization in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, PTF holds specific programs to provide education, care, and support on issues of gender, sexuality, HIV, and AIDS primarily to marginalized communities, including female sex workers, injecting drug users, people living with HIV, men who have sex with men (MSM), and *mak nyahs*. As I interviewed Jaylane, Catania, Samantha, Nuk, Amara, Chantal, Candy, and Comel,⁵³ I mused on how narratives of their lived realities are rare, sacred texts that can challenge and inform conventional theologies. With the exception of one Christian, all my interviewees identified as Muslims in varying degrees.

My use of Christian frameworks is not to provide simplistic theological answers, nor is it a stealthy desire to colonize “an Islamic problem” by imposing “Christian solutions.”⁵⁴ My use of queer Christian hermeneutics as an initial and a tentative platform in which this discussion occurs is stimulated by the knowledge that much of the theological rhetoric beyond the shores of Malaysia that is used both in support of and against non-heteronormative subjectivities share similarities in both Christian and Muslim frameworks,⁵⁵ and queer Muslim frameworks have been “inspired by their Christian counterparts.”⁵⁶

While not directly dealing with issues of queer Islamic theology, alternative modes of approaching *mak nyahs* by Malaysian Islamic scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali can prove to be particularly helpful. In writing on *mak nyahs*, Kamali’s affirmation of Islam as “*din al-fitrah*, a religion that manifests harmony with human nature”⁵⁷ may be seen as an attempt to subvert current regimes of Malaysian Islam that censure *mak nyahs*. In a separate essay that deals with ethno-religious pluralism in Malaysia, Kamali foregrounds the existence of particular Islamic traits that applaud the value of diversity and pluralism.⁵⁸ Although Kamali does not specifically mention *mak nyahs* in this work, he highlights one particular trait which I find exceptionally significant in theologically approaching *mak*

⁵² “Mak Nyah Programme,” http://www.ptfmalaysia.org/transgender_programme.php.

⁵³ All these names are pseudonyms.

⁵⁴ As a queer-gay researcher who is exploring issues of non-heteronormative men in Malaysia and works in queer Christian theological analysis, I constantly find my frameworks challenged, informed, and expanded by other religions in Malaysia, particularly by how these religions are lived. Although Malaysian Buddhist and Hindu leaders have also spoken on *mak nyahs*, I am limiting the scope of this essay to Malaysian Islamic and Christian authorities.

⁵⁵ For instance, see Scott Siraj al-Haq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010).

⁵⁶ Andrew K. T. Yip, “The Quest for Intimate/Sexual Citizenship: Lived Experiences of Lesbian and Bisexual Muslim Women,” *Contemporary Islam* 2.2 (2008): 108, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/10.1007/s11562-008-0046-y>.

⁵⁷ Kamali, “Transgenders, from Islam’s Perspective,” 2.

⁵⁸ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Diversity and Pluralism: A Quranic Perspective,” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1.1 (2009): 30.

nyahs — “*ikhtilāf al-tanawwu’*.” As a “disagreement that implies diversity,”⁵⁹ *ikhtilāf al-tanawwu’* suggests a genuinely respectful and constructive attitude towards non-compliance, diversity and differences in the complex strata of human existence. Although it may be justifiably argued that Christian strands of queer theology have developed more extensively than Muslim efforts, the rare instance of Kamali’s work evinces a potential incipience of queer Islamic theologizing in Malaysia.

I use the queer Christian theological premise that “the starting point of queer theology is queer *bodies* and queer *lives* and *stories*,”⁶⁰ but wish to extend its tenets beyond the confines of Christian affiliation, theologizing and praxis. Queer theology privileges non-heteronormative sexualities, subjectivities, embodiments, narratives, practices, lived realities,⁶¹ and even the marginalization and alienation that forge connections with the divine, and which may include mainstream religious or theological tenets. In challenging the “coercive norms”⁶² of mainstream theological metanarratives,⁶³ queer theology offers alternative mappings for theological language, discourse, action, and reflection⁶⁴ by appealing to “alternative imaginaries.”⁶⁵ Both Malaysian institutional Islam and a majority of Christian churches in Malaysia resist the notion that non-heteronormative sexualities can contribute to the augmentation of theological discourse. My project is to queer — to interrogate, transgress, deconstruct, reimagine — this prevailing heteronormative perception. Within the ambit of this discussion on *mak nyahs*, my theological reflection benefits from the embodied experiences and insights of Muslim and Christian *mak nyahs*, as well as queer theological methodologies. I am keen on discovering how a queer theological reflection in relation to Mary can provide an alternative view of these male-to-female transsexuals through their lived experiences. Such an endeavor transcends strict religious boundaries of hermeneutics and patrimony in favor of more porous borders through greater theological experimentation.

Some *mak nyahs* of PT Foundation themselves seem to be very open to religious beliefs other than their own. I can vividly recall my attendance at PT Foundation’s International Aids Memorial Day event on May 20, 2012, during which time prayer services for various faiths were held at different places of the same office

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Nancy L. Wilson, “Queer Theology as Change Agent” (presented at the Creating Change Conference, Denver, CO, 2009), <http://moderatorscorner.mccchurch.org/2009/03/03/queer-theology-as-change-agent/>. Emphasis added.

⁶¹ See Yvonne Aburrow, “Is It Meaningful to Speak of ‘Queer Spirituality’? An Examination of Queer and LGBT Imagery and Themes in Contemporary Paganism and Christianity,” in *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities*, ed. Stephen Hunt (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 139–56; Kath Browne, “Queer Spiritual Spaces: Conclusion,” in *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*, ed. Kath Browne, Sally Munt, and Andrew K.T. Yip (London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010), 231–45.

⁶² Laurel C. Schneider, “Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology,” *Religious Studies Review* 26:1 (2000): 11, doi:10.1111/rsr.2000.26.issue-1.

⁶³ See Claudio Bardella, “Queer Spirituality,” *Social Compass* 48:1 (2001): 117–38, doi:10.1177/003776801048001010; Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

⁶⁴ See Grace M. Jantzen, “Off the Straight and Narrow: Toward a Lesbian Theology,” *Theology & Sexuality* 3 (1995): 58–76, doi:10.1177/135583589500300105; Laurel C. Schneider and Carolyn Roncolato, “Queer Theologies,” *Religion Compass* 6:1 (2012): 1–13, doi:10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00315.x.

⁶⁵ Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Sexual Salvation: The Theological Grammar of Voyeurism and Permutations,” *Literature and Theology* 15:3 (2001): 241, doi:10.1093/litthe/15.3.241.

building. I spotted a Muslim *mak nyah* sitting by the corner where a Christian service was held, who even joined in when inspirational songs were sung. When I looked at her, she smiled sweetly at me and appeared to be at ease with blurring the lines of religious boundaries. This *mak nyah*'s subversive action seems to resonate with Catania's sharing:

In my life's journey I was brought up Muslim, but I also went back to [my hometown] for [a Christian celebration]. I respect all religions but don't follow one. I learn about different religions. I believe that there is only one God because all the teachings are the same.

As the *mak nyahs* I interviewed derived little solace from the institutionalized religions that they were born into and grew up with, many of them embarked on an attitude of openness to other faiths, and even found it necessary to reconstitute their religious beliefs in a manner that could spiritually sustain them.⁶⁶ Their lived experiences showcased not only the dismantling of gender and sexual binaries, but also the dissolution of theological and religious boundaries.

In my particular focus on Malaysian Islam and Christianity, I am advocating a methodology that moves beyond a placid exchange of religious information and specificities, and considers greater mutual boundary crossings between Malaysian Islam and Christianity — as well as between diverse Malaysian Christian theologies — through a more radically variegated theological reflection that is informed by the dynamics of lived experiences and personal spiritualities in Malaysia.⁶⁷ Although there have been numerous attempts at interfaith dialogue in Malaysia over the years,⁶⁸ I am highlighting the role of the MCCBCHST in this essay due to its diverse interfaith and interdenominational structure, and its prominence as an organization that promotes interfaith dialogue. The MCCBCHST has sought to respect the constitutional provision that “Islam is the religion of the Federation,” while it seeks to uphold the assurance that “other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation.”⁶⁹ Notably, the MCCBCHST aims “to promote understanding, mutual respect and co-operation between people of different religions” and “to promote unity, harmony and understanding amongst people of different religions through conferences, seminars and other channels.”⁷⁰ My hope is for the incitement of unconventional dialogical departure points in issues of sexual diversity which have not been at the forefront of the concerns of the MCCBCHST or most Malaysian Islamic and Christian institutions. What if we tread on theological paths that are “a little dangerous,”⁷¹ and deconstruct both the theological respectability of

⁶⁶ For instance, see Joseph N. Goh, “*Nyah*–Islam: The Reconstruction of God and Institutional Islam by Malaysian Male-to-Female Transsexuals,” *In God's Image* 31.2 (2012): 33–44.

⁶⁷ I am not advocating an uncritical exchange of Islamic and Christian theological ideas, which in many cases may be incompatible. Instead, I see possibilities of shared understanding which may benefit both belief systems in issues that share similar concepts and responses.

⁶⁸ For a useful, succinct overview, see Wan Sabri Wan Yusof and Arafah Ab Majid, “Inter-Religious Dialogue Models in Malaysia,” *Global Journal Al Thaqafah* 2.1 (2012): 7–13.

⁶⁹ Federal Constitution, 1957, 3(1).

⁷⁰ MCCBCHST, “About,” Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism, 2012, <http://harmony-malaysia.wordpress.com/about>.

⁷¹ Taylder, “Our Lady of the Libido,” 344.

Mary's desexualized and heterosexually imagined body by associating Mary with *mak nyahs*? What avenues would open up if both Malaysian Islamic and Christian institutions were invited to relax the institutionalized cordons of their theologies, and engage in theological reflections on gender and sexual diversities as highlighted by queer interpretations?

Theologically imagining the bodies of Mary and the *mak nyahs*

The disapproval of *mak nyahs* by certain Islamic and Christian institutions, and the theological configurations of Maryam/Mary — who is a respected personage both in Islam and Christianity — are heavily dependent on a heteronormalized “authoritarianism of decency”⁷² which demands theological conformity. Both the Qur’ān and the New Testament ascribe highly idealized attributes to the woman Mary, particularly her “body-deficit”⁷³ virginity in relation to her acceptance of a divine mission (Q. 3: 42, 47; 19: 16–22; Lk. 1: 26–38),⁷⁴ which have become indispensable conditions for her own theological validity. Yet theologians have sought to problematize the regulations of the body in Mary. Marcella Althaus-Reid critically questions the construction of Mary’s “womanness” and heterosexuality through “a theological citational process which gives human coherence to Mary.”⁷⁵ In other words, a figure who “does not have a life outside of our theological imagination”⁷⁶ and who is completely stripped of all sexuality is presented as a straight woman with a decent woman’s body, worthy of emulation through a reiterative process. Islamic theology has also exposed how the body of Mary has trespassed gendered spaces. While Islamic scholar Bahar Davary does not contest the “womanness” and heterosexuality of Mary, she refreshingly draws attention to a Qur’ānic account (Q. 3: 43) in which Mary’s body infringes normatively entrenched spaces of male patriarchy by entering a prayer room that was designated for male worshippers.⁷⁷ Although this insight may still harbor undertones of the male/female and man/woman binaries, it can also be read as a queer display of sexual brazenness in theological interpretation, in which an unapologetic sexual body becomes the authoritative beacon of personal-godly journeys.

My queering of Mary suggests other theological citational procedures which can “configure [...] mystical projections relating human experience to the sacred,”⁷⁸ in which I focus on Mary as divinely guided through/in her sexual, corporeal self. *Mak nyahs* have been subjected to a series of theological citational processes over a period of time that construct their “deviance” and “sinfulness.” Malaysian theologies insist that *mak nyah* bodies must be bereft of sexuality in order to

⁷² Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 1.

⁷³ Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 13.

⁷⁴ Christian scriptural texts are based on the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Quotations from the English translation of the Qur’ān are taken from “The Noble Qur’an – القرآن الكريم” <http://quran.com/>.

⁷⁵ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁷ Bahar Davary, “Mary in Islam: ‘No Man Could Have Been Like This Woman,’” *New Theology Review* 23:3 (2010): 28.

⁷⁸ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 4.

achieve validity and worthiness. In this manner, *mak nyahs* inverse the “Mary-machine model”⁷⁹ of desexualized and respectable personhood by living as bodies that are the antitheses of uniformed decency. Yet both Mary and the *mak nyahs* are imprisoned by decent theologies. By foregrounding sexuality in Mary and *mak nyahs*, and relocating theological visions from “the familiar into unfamiliar contexts,”⁸⁰ it is possible to theologically reimagine Mary as an embodied and sexual theological figure and incite a rethinking of the concept of bodily sacredness in relation to *mak nyahs*. Hence, I explore how such theological dealings can mirror *din al-fitrah* in allowing theology to strive towards harmony with gender variant subjectivities.

The bodies of *mak nyahs* and Mary have not only become theological projects that serve exclusionary agendas of heteronormative power, but are presented as divested of sexual empowerment and spiritual validation without uncontested institutional interventions. By applauding a theological personage who exercises personal, empowered agency based on an “epistemology of the sacred body”⁸¹ of her own, I perform a queer reading of Mary’s body, and foreground Mary’s intimate comprehension and knowledge of her own sexual body as the means by which she connects with the divinity that resides within her. Then I allow this queer, body- and sexuality-affirming vision to share sacred parallel spaces with the “authority of experience”⁸² in the discourses of the *mak nyahs*.⁸³

The disapproval of *mak nyah* subjectivities is predicated on the imagined transgressions of fixed body categories that have been conflated with the notion of sacredness. Similarly, the worth of Mary as a product of theological assemblage rests upon her desexualized⁸⁴ body by virtue of her virginity-maternity. *Mak nyahs* and Mary share very similar spaces of theological terrains — approving nods are given only upon a dismissal of their empowered, sexual bodies and conformity to fixed, “top-down, patronizing”⁸⁵ theological constructions. Althaus-Reid foregrounds the awkwardness and discomfort that comes with a method of theologizing which embraces lived circumstances and the sexual materiality of human bodies. Theology thus begins to understand the sacred from human sexuality, and not from the other way around. Her queer optics courageously displaces theologies that conjure imagined theological subjects that adhere to ideals of decency in order to perpetuate their theological currency.

Althaus-Reid’s thoroughly indecent theology provokes theological workings on Mary from two major perspectives. Firstly, I see her methodology of “indecenting” as deconstructive queering,⁸⁶ a theological disassembling of oppressive, fixed and

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God: Sexuality and Liberation Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 43.

⁸¹ Sharon A. Bong, “Not ‘For the Sake of Peace’: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred Body,” *Asian Christian Review* 3:1 (2009): 66.

⁸² Peter Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People* (London: Cassell, 1997), 36.

⁸³ Transgender persons often interweave their spiritual and bodily experiences; see Justin Edward Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

⁸⁴ See Taylder, “Our Lady of the Libido,” 350.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁸⁶ See Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 64, 71.

obsolete theological categories of Mary. Mary as an “illusory [...] religious alien Virgin [...] [and] a powerful discourse of distorted humanity”⁸⁷ is also a theological creature who bears no resonance with the experiential sectors of humankind that do not reside in proper, decent, and politically correct categories. Mary is framed within a “decency system”⁸⁸ which makes her respectability an aspiration that is simultaneously an affirmation of power for those who toe the lines of normative morality, but an act of violence to those who do not measure up. It is this theological fiction that Althaus-Reid seeks to vanquish. Secondly, her theology of intimacy affords me the language to parse the sacredness that I see inherent in *mak nyahs*’ bodies. Althaus-Reid’s queer theology is grounded in bodies that are at once spatial and temporal, bodies that “reveal the falsity of the border limits between the material and divine dimension of our lives,”⁸⁹ bodies that speak of the “concreteness of hunger and pleasure”⁹⁰ and, might I add for *mak nyahs*, of pain, desacralization, and illegitimacy.

My queer theological reading of Mary reminds me that the plenitude of grace in which Mary’s assent to the divine invitation occurred is one that involves an empowered and embodied decision that is not without its human complexities, the grace of God and integrity of this theological figure notwithstanding. This deliberate provocation forces a rethinking of the centrality of sacred body worth, the affirmation of a theological imaginary in which Mary makes the choice of surrendering her body as an act of faith, a decision that is in direct contradiction with yet undeterred by the patriarchal impositions of her time. I see Mary’s body as queer not because it is a female body that transgresses patriarchal proscriptions, but because it is a body in which sexuality is prioritized and exercised in accordance with the authority of personal agency and body knowledge. It is possible to theologially construct a Mary who manifests a sacred choice of bodiliness due to a keen awareness of her own sexual epistemologies. As such, I advocate a revisioning of theological bodiliness on Mary who discovers her inner holiness in the strength of choice that is informed by the promptings of the God that she finds in her sexual personhood, and whom she has known by a personal God-relationship through years of lived experience. This Mary places authority in the depths of her bodily self-knowledge and locates the “power of the Most High” (Lk. 1: 35) to her embodied, sexual self, not unlike the *mak nyahs*.

Hence, I reiterate that the bodily queerness of Mary is mirrored in the *mak nyahs*. In the empowered choices that they make and body knowledge that they possess, *mak nyahs* demonstrate a profound relationship with their innermost selves that is drawn from years of lived experiences. Jaylane and Chantal provided me with the following insights:

Jaylane: I felt incomplete without breasts. I had a negative feeling about my body. I saw my peers and the older *mak nyahs* with breasts, beautiful. I also wanted to be like

⁸⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁹⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 99.

them. I did not have enough finances to be consistent with hormone treatment. Only when I started work with [PTF] did I start on proper hormone treatment. Once I started doing social work with *mak nyahs*, I accepted myself. I am very clear about myself. Whether or not I do [GRS], it does not matter as long as I accept myself.

Chantal: I feel like a girl trapped in a man's body. I was comfortable with my. I liked and loved my body as I was growing up because my bones, fingers were all small. I have a very feminine, not masculine body. Even my voice is feminine.

Amera's body-awareness was explicitly linked to her belief in God:

Amera: I have already gone for counselling with an imam, [GRS] is between me and God.⁹¹ If I die I will still be buried as a man. I know I am [a *mak nyahs*] [...] I have to accept myself as a [*mak nyahs*]. I know I cannot be married to a man. I can only offer him happiness not a child.

What I wish to foreground is that sacredness resides in bodies that know and trust themselves, but which are constantly vilified and execrated as indecent, sinful bodies.

In deconstructing an "old alliance of theology and heterosexuality"⁹² that undermines the body knowledge of *mak nyahs*, my development of Althaus-Reid's "indecent proposal"⁹³ prolongs unconventional interrogative musings of Mary. What if we reflect on *mak nyahs* from a queer angle by theologically paralleling the bodies of Mary and of *mak nyahs*, a subversive imagining that could shed alternative perspectives on *mak nyahs* in contemporary Malaysia? In this regard, it is worthwhile to consider that the overshadowing of power which Mary experiences in her body also operates in the bodies of *mak nyahs*:

Jaylane: 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 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.

Samantha: I believe there is a God. I do not turn my back to God. I am just confused about people who use the Bible to condemn [*mak nyahs*].

Nuk: I accept what God has given to me and I do not blame anyone. Everything that God creates has a purpose. We human beings may not know of the added benefits [of being *mak nyahs*]. We always think negatively but there are benefits from God. Being a [*mak nyah*] is an advantage [...] many talents, skills [...].

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 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.

Amera: There is only one God. In the Qur'an, there are men, women and *khunsa*. For me I am a *khunsa* that has *hidup semula* [been revived]. I have no problems with

⁹¹ During the interviews, the *mak nyahs* used the terms "God," *Allah*, and *Tuhan* interchangeably. In this essay, all these terms have been subsumed under the term "God."

⁹² Althaus-Reid, "Queer I Stand," 99.

⁹³ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 11.

God. Even though Islam has do's and don'ts, we have never attempted to change our religion. Breast and penile modifications are unlawful in Islam because they modify God's plan. But we do it still for personal satisfaction. It is still between me and God. Only God knows why I do it because God created my soul.

In their narratives, the *mak nyahs* indicate that their bodily and godly experiences are inexorably intertwined, even if these experiences are sometimes fraught with ambivalent views and feelings. In privileging their corporeal realities, as well as by being aware of a distinction between God and religion, they resist being “colonized and treated as though they were someone’s occupied territories, with all sorts of projections and fears mapped out across them.”⁹⁴ By embarking on “the physical/spiritual/psychological process”⁹⁵ of reclaiming their bodies and desires, the *mak nyahs* allow their gender and sexual identifyings to be the conduits through which they connect with God. Despite the inner turmoils and force of oppression they encounter, the *mak nyahs* whom I interviewed manifest not only a profound sense of their bodies. Their subjectivities do not necessarily preclude godly involvement, as there are “no problems with God” — a God who “creates what he wills” (Q. 3: 47), who is ultimately responsible for purposefully crafting *mak nyahs* and who has set a seal of divine approval on them. By appropriating “a positive personal identity”⁹⁶ and their “own thing about God” that tentatively reconcile their gender and sexual identifyings with their own personalized religiosities or spiritualities in relation to their bodies, the *mak nyahs* designate a definitive sacredness to their corporeality.

A queer reading of the parallel between these sacred experiences of the *mak nyahs* with the disruption of Mary in theological discourses as a proper and decent personage sheds even greater light on my discursive deliberations here. Mary and the *mak nyahs* ascribe authority to their bodily-godly knowledge and experience: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord (Lk. 1: 38),” thus proclaim Mary/the *mak nyahs* of her/their body/bodies, “it is still between me and God. Only God knows why I do it because God created my soul.” Pursuing a queer outlook, I present a theological Mary who acquiesces to the divine mandate as receptive, yet immersed in a lack of total clarity and confidence in the situation she encounters in relation to her body and in her socio-cultural milieu. She does not possess an omniscient advantage over the full extent of the plan that is unfolding within her, and what she has chosen to do with her body is beyond normative boundaries. Yet Mary’s queer body connects with God, not as feminine submission to the sexual aggressiveness of divine patriarchy as the “Highest Phallus,”⁹⁷ but in a manner in which uncertainty and incoherence can conceive and birth the presence of God. Building on this perspective, the notion of gender and sexual ambiguity as a violation of theological and ethical prescription lies in dissonance with the lived experiences of the *mak nyahs* who see their subjectivities as divine endowments

⁹⁴ Elias Farajajé-Jones, “Holy Fuck,” in *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power, and Transformation*, ed. Kerwin Kay, Jill Nagle, and Baruch Gould (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2000), 328.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁹⁶ Andrew K.T. Yip, “The Politics of Counter-Rejection: Gay Christians and the Church,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 37:2 (1999): 49, doi:10.1300/J082v37n02_03.

⁹⁷ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 48.

and relate accordingly to God, even if they do not fully grasp the magnitude of their realities. The unknown and the indistinct become multi-pronged pathways that connect, rather than occlude human connections with the divine.

The invitation that is requested of Mary and its ensuing unfoldings do not occur in some ethereal, sanitized space, but are accomplished through flesh, tears, sweat, and blood. Like Mary, *mak nyahs* experience God through the ambiguous choices and becomings of their bodies. The *mak nyahs*' fear and uncertainty encompass, among a myriad of other issues, their career options and financial stability, contraindications of unprescribed hormone therapies, GRS dilemmas, hopes of love and committed relationships, and continual religio-political and socio-cultural discrimination. What serves as the authoritative bridge between Mary/the *mak nyahs* and God are their complex bodily-godly epistemologies that navigate them through the ambivalence of life. Through queer bodies, experiences of God can unfurl, a God who is "encountered in previously unimagined places,"⁹⁸ notably "in the realms of the seemingly unconventional and peculiar,"⁹⁹ an indecent God who shatters presumptions of being exclusively located in decent heteronormative spaces.

The bodies of *mak nyahs* have constantly been at the mercy of theological ideologies and institutional religiosities that denounce their sacred worth due to their ambiguous representations. Nevertheless, what I have endeavored to do in this essay is to allow Mary and *mak nyahs* to share a queer discursive space for an alternative theological imagination of *mak nyahs* that can actualize *ikhtilāf al-tanawwu'*. Theological imaginings — and their attendant tentativeness, contingency, and upheavals — can challenge and destabilize rigidified concepts of gender and sexuality in religious thought, and hold the potential to arbitrate theological impasses towards constructive appreciations of sacredness in the diversity and pluralism of embodied lives. This vision can provoke a reconsideration and reworking of the body sacredness of *mak nyahs* and of Mary, which bespeaks a sense of sexual sacredness that envelops and emanates from each human person.

Bibliography

- Aburrow, Yvonne. 2009. "Is It Meaningful to Speak of 'Queer Spirituality'? An Examination of Queer and LGBT Imagery and Themes in Contemporary Paganism and Christianity." In *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities*, edited by Stephen Hunt, 139–56. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.
- Althaus-Reid, Marcella. 2000. *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Althaus-Reid, Marcella. 2001. "Sexual Salvation: The Theological Grammar of Voyeurism and Permutations." *Literature and Theology* 15(3): 241–48. doi:10.1093/litthe/15.3.241.
- Althaus-Reid, Marcella. 2003. *The Queer God: Sexuality and Liberation Theology*. New York: Routledge.
- Althaus-Reid, Marcella. 2004. "Queer I Stand: Lifting the Skirts of God." In *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, 99–109. London: T. & T. Clark.

⁹⁸ Joseph N. Goh, "Bethlehem Revisited — The Sacred in the Unfamiliar," *Malaysiakini*, December 22, 2012, <http://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/217261>.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

- Bardella, Claudio. 2001. "Queer Spirituality." *Social Compass* 48(1): 117–38. doi:10.1177/003776801048001010.
- Beger, Nicole J. 2004. *Tensions in the Struggle for Sexual Minority Rights in Europe: Que(e)Rying Political Practices*. Manchester University Press, 2004.
- Bong, Sharon A. 2009. "Not 'For the Sake of Peace': Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred Body." *Asian Christian Review* 3(1): 50–68.
- Browne, Kath. 2010. "Queer Spiritual Spaces: Conclusion." In *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*, edited by Kath Browne, Sally Munt, and Andrew K.T. Yip, 231–45. London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Cornwall, Susannah. 2011. *Controversies in Queer Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Davary, Bahar. 2010. "Mary in Islam: 'No Man Could Have Been Like This Woman'." *New Theology Review* 23(3): 26–34.
- Department of Statistics, Malaysia. 2010. *Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics 2010*. http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/census2010/Taburan_Penduduk_dan_Ciri-ciri_Asas_Demografi.pdf.
- Diana Surya Abd. Wahab, 2013. "Mak Nyah Parah Dibelasah." *Sinar Harian*, July 24. <http://www.sinarharian.com.my/mak-nyah-parah-dibelasah-1185994>.
- Farajjé-Jones, Elias. 2000. "Holy Fuck." In *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power, and Transformation*, edited by Kerwin Kay, Jill Nagle, and Baruch Gould, 327–35. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Farish A. Noor. 2010. *What Your Teacher Didn't Tell You: The Annexe Lectures*. Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Matahari Books.
- Federal Constitution. 1957. [http://www.agc.gov.my/images/Personalisation/Buss/pdf/Federal Consti \(BI text\).pdf](http://www.agc.gov.my/images/Personalisation/Buss/pdf/Federal_Consti_(BI_text).pdf).
- Fernando, Joseph M. 2006. "The Position of Islam in the Constitution of Malaysia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37(2): 249–66. doi:10.1017/S0022463406000543.
- Goh, Joseph N. 2012. "Bethlehem Revisited — The Sacred in the Unfamiliar." *Malaysiakini*, December 22. <http://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/217261>.
- Goh, Joseph N. 2012. "Mak Nyah Bodies as Sacred Sites: Uncovering the Queer Body-Sacramentality of Malaysian Male-to-Female Transsexuals." *CrossCurrents* 62(4): 512–21. doi:10.1111/cros.12006.
- Goh, Joseph N. 2012. "Nyah—Islam: The Reconstruction of God and Institutional Islam by Malaysian Male-to-Female Transsexuals." In *God's Image* 31(2): 33–44.
- Goh, Joseph N. 2012. "The Homosexual Threat: Appraising Masculinities and Men's Sexualities in Malaysia." In *Thinking Through Malaysia: Culture and Identity in the 21st Century*, edited by Julian Hopkins and Julian C. H. Lee, 167–86. Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
- Goh, Joseph N. 2012. "The Word Was Not Made Flesh: Theological Reflections on the Banning of *Seksualiti Merdeka* 2011." *Dialog* 51(2): 145–54. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6385.2012.00671.x.
- Goh, Joseph N. 2013. "Malaysian Masculine Exposé: Queering the Politics of Non-Heteronormative Malay-Muslim Men." In *Queer Sexualities: Diversifying Queer, Queering Diversity*, edited by Vikki Fraser, 15–30. E-Book. Oxford, UK: Inter-Disciplinary Press.
- Gooch, Liz. 2012. "Malaysian Court Rejects Challenge to Cross-Dressing Ban." *The New York Times*, October 11. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/world/asia/malaysian-court-rejects-challenge-to-cross-dressing-ban.html>.
- Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur. 2013. "Good Samaritan Kuala Lumpur." <http://gsmalaysia.com/home.htm>.
- Goss, Robert E. 2003. *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Harian Metro Online. 2011. "Jantina Ditemu Ketika Lahir." *Harian Metro Online*, July 19. <http://www.hmetro.com.my/articles/jantinatitemuketikalahir/Article>.
- Holst, Frederik. 2012. *Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia*. New York: Routledge.
- Ismail Baba. 2001. "Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia." In *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, edited by Gerard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson, 143–63. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Jantzen, Grace M. 1995. "Off the Straight and Narrow: Toward a Lesbian Theology." *Theology & Sexuality* 3: 58–76. doi:10.1177/135583589500300105.

- Justice for Sisters. 2011. "Justice for Sisters". <http://justiceforsisters.wordpress.com>.
- I AM UOY Campaign. 2013. "I AM YOU: Be A Trans Ally!" <http://mytransally.weebly.com/index.html>.
- Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. 2009. "Diversity and Pluralism: A Quranic Perspective." *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1(1): 27–54.
- Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. 2009. "Transgenders, from Islam's Perspective." International Institute of Advanced Academic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia, December 29. <http://www.iais.org.my/e/index.php/publications-sp-1447159098/articles/item/28-transgenders-from-islam%5C%27s-perspective.html>.
- Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. 2011. "Transgenders and Justice in Islam." International Institute of Advanced Academic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia, August 11. <http://www.iais.org.my/e/index.php/publications-sp-1447159098/articles/item/81-transgenders-and-justice-in-islam.html>.
- Khartini Slamah. 2005. "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*, edited by Geetanjali Misra and Radhika Chandiramani, 98–111. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- KomunitiKini. 2011. "Malaysians of Reason and Religion." *KomunitiKini*, November 5. <http://iglhrc.org/content/malaysia-ban-sexuality-rights-festival-violates-human-rights>.
- Kugle, Scott Siraj al-Haqq. 2010. *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications.
- Leach, Anna. 2013. "Justice for Trans Sisters in Malaysia." *Gay Star News*, January 18. <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/justice-trans-sisters-malaysia180113>.
- Lee, Julian C. H. 2011. *Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society and the State*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Lee, Julian C. H. 2013. "Sexuality Rights Activism in Malaysia: The Case of Seksualiti Merdeka." In *Social Activism in Southeast Asia*, edited by Michele Ford, 170–86. New York: Routledge.
- MCCBCHST. 2012. "About." *Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism*. <http://harmonymalaysia.wordpress.com/about/>.
- Minor Offences Act 1955, 2006. www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.7/Act336.pdf.
- Peletz, Michael G. 2006. "Transgenderism and Gender Pluralism in Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times." *Current Anthropology* 47(2): 309–39.
- PT Foundation. "Mak Nyah Programme: Transgenders." http://www.ptfmalaysia.org/transgender_programme.php.
- Ribas, Mario. 2006. "Liberating Mary, Liberating the Poor." In *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, edited by Marcella Althaus-Reid, 123–35. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Schneider, Laurel C. 2000. "Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology." *Religious Studies Review* 26(1): 3–12. doi:10.1111/rsr.2000.26.issue-1.
- Schneider, Laurel C. and Carolyn Roncolato. 2012. "Queer Theologies." *Religion Compass* 6(1): 1–13. doi:10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00315.x.
- Shah, Shanon. 2013. "The Malaysian Dilemma: Negotiating Sexual Diversity in a Muslim-Majority Commonwealth State." In *Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Commonwealth: Struggles for Decriminalisation and Change*, edited by Corinne Lennox and Matthew Waites, 261–85. London: School of Advanced Study, University of London.
- Sirry, Mun'im. 2013. "Fatwas and Their Controversy: The Case of the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI)." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44(1): 100–17. doi:10.1017/S0022463412000641.
- Sweasey, Peter. 1997. *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People*. London: Cassell.
- Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997*, 2006. <http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%2012/Act%20559.pdf>.
- tan, beng hui, 2007. "Time's Up! Moving Sexuality Rights in Malaysia into the New Millennium." <http://google/vI5zi>.
- Tanis, Justin Edward. 2003. *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Taylder, Sian. 2004. "Our Lady of the Libido: Towards a Marian Theology of Sexual Liberation?" *Feminist Theology* 12(3): 343–71. doi:10.1177/096673500401200306.

- Teh, Yik Koon. 2001. "Mak Nyahs (Male Transsexuals) in Malaysia: The Influence of Culture and Religion on their Identity." *International Journal of Transgenderism* 5(3). http://www.iiav.nl/eazines/web/IJT/97-03/numbers/symposion/ijtvoo5noo3_04.htm.
- Teh, Yik Koon. 2002. *The Mak Nyahs: Malaysian Male to Female Transsexuals*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.
- Teh, Yik Koon. 2008. "Politics and Islam: Factors Determining Identity and the Status of Male-to-Female Transsexuals in Malaysia." In *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, edited by Fran Martin, Peter A. Jackson, Mark McLelland, and Audrey Yue, 85–98. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Wan Sabri Wan Yusof, and Arfah Ab Majid. 2012. "Inter-Religious Dialogue Models in Malaysia." *Global Journal Al Thaqafah* 2(1): 7–13.
- Wilson, Nancy L. 2009. "Queer Theology as Change Agent." Denver, CO. <http://moderatorscorner.mccchurch.org/2009/03/03/queer-theology-as-change-agent/>.
- Woon, Leven. 2012. "Sisters in Islam Call for Syariah Law Review." *Free Malaysia Today*, October 15. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2012/10/15/sisters-of-islam-call-for-syariah-law-review/>.
- Yip, Andrew K. T. 1999. "The Politics of Counter-Rejection: Gay Christians and the Church." *Journal of Homosexuality* 37(2): 47–63. doi:10.1300/J082v37no2_03.
- Yip, Andrew K. T. 2008. "The Quest for Intimate/Sexual Citizenship: Lived Experiences of Lesbian and Bisexual Muslim Women." *Contemporary Islam* 2(2): 99–117. doi: <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/10.1007/s11562-008-0046-y>.

Notes on contributor

Joseph N. Goh is currently pursuing a PhD in Gender, Sexuality, and Theology with the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Monash University, Malaysia. He holds a Licentiate in Sacred Theology (STL) from the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in Berkeley, CA. An ordained minister with the North American Catholic Ecumenical Church (NACEC), Goh is also a member of the Emerging Queer Asian Pacific Islander Religion Scholars (EQARS) and the editor of the Queer Asian Spirit E-Magazine (QAS E-Zine). Website: <http://www.josephgoh.org>.

Correspondence to: Joseph N. Goh. Email: joseph@josephgoh.org