

GENDER STUDIES

TEH YIK KOON

THE MAK NYAHS

Malaysian Male
to Female
Transsexuals



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THE *MAK NYAHS* Malaysian Male to Female Transsexuals

This book explores the issue of the transsexuals in Malaysia. Through numerous studies, interviews with the relevant parties and accounts from the *mak nyahs* themselves, the book gives a profound insight into the world of transsexuals - the history and definition of *mak nyahs*, what it means to be a *mak nyah* in Malaysia, transsexuals in other countries and the views of the relevant parties regarding transsexuals in Malaysia, among others.

For those who seek a deeper understanding of the *mak nyahs*, this book provides intriguing and enlightening facts and accounts, which help to broaden one's perspective of this community who form part of the diversity of the human landscape.



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Transsexuals



PUSTAKA PERDANA



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CONTENT

Acknowledgements	v
Pledge of the <i>Mak Nyah</i> Community.	viii
Chapter 1 Introduction: My Research Experience	1
Chapter 2 History and Definition of Transsexuals	11
Chapter 3 Studies on Transsexualism Done in Other Countries	18
Chapter 4 Studies Done in Malaysia	45
Chapter 5 Methodology of This Research	53
Chapter 6 Findings of the Research	55
Chapter 7 Summary: What It Means To Be a <i>Mak Nyah</i> in Malaysia	99
Chapter 8 Conclusion	102
Chapter 9 Interviews:	109
• 4 different religions in Malaysia	109
• Dato' Prof. Dr. Khairuddin Yusof, retired gynaecologist at University Hospital (University Malaya	

IV

	Medical Centre) who used to perform the sex reassignment surgery	123
	• The late Prof. Woon Tai Hwang, clinical psychologist at University Hospital (University Malaya Medical Centre)	126
	• Mariam, a 63-year-old <i>mak nyah</i>	128
	• Police from Bukit Aman and Dang Wangi	130
	• Director of Social Welfare Department of Wilayah Persekutuan	135
	• The Registration Department	135
CHAPTER 10	Stories from the Transsexuals	138
	Pictures	153
	Index	169

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Pledge of the *Mak Nyah* Community
(during the first national *mak nyah* seminar, 9-12 November
1998)

We pledge to:

- Always be disciplined
- Give a good image of ourselves to the society
- Respect each other and always be united
- Share experience and information with our peers
- Improve the quality of life and health of *mak nyahs*
- Achieve all the suggestions that have been agreed upon at the First National *Mak Nyah* & HIV/AIDS Seminar

Ikrar Komuniti *Mak Nyah*
(pada seminar kebangsaan yang pertama kaum *mak nyah*,
9-12 November 1998)

Bahawa kami berikrar untuk:

- Sentiasa mengamalkan disiplin diri
- Memberi satu imej yang baik kepada masyarakat
- Saling menghormati antara satu sama lain dan sentiasa bersatu padu
- Berkongsi pengalaman dan informasi bersama rakan-rakan
- Mempertingkatkan kualiti kehidupan dan kesihatan *mak nyah*
- Mencapai segala cadangan yang telah dipersetujui di Seminar Kebangsaan Pertama *Mak Nyah* & HIV/AIDS

1

INTRODUCTION

My Research Experience

In Malaysia, the society generally shuns the male to female transsexuals (or male transsexuals) or locally known as the *mak nyahs* and makes fun of them without understanding why they are as they are. They are also labelled as weirdos or freaks because they are men who dress-up and behave like women. Using the concept coined by Anthony Giddens (1973), they are considered the ‘underclass’ of Malaysian society. Whatever problems they have are said to be their own doing, and no thought is given to the possibility that part of their problems is derived from society’s treatment towards them. This is because the general perception towards this community is that “they choose to be who they are and, therefore, they deserve what they get. Why should we be nice to them if they do not want to follow the norms and values of the society?” When the general public was told that many of the *mak nyahs* started behaving differently when they were small, they replied that it was because their parents wanted female children, but they did not have any so they dressed up one of their male children as a female. This male child would grow up as a female and, ultimately, think of himself as a girl. Another answer from the general public was that the *mak nyah* had only sisters in the family and they did not have any male role model. Eventually, he was influenced by his sisters and grew up with effeminate behaviour.

All the answers that were given by the general public are, at best, generalisations without any proofs. It is because of this deep curiosity and fascination to find out about these ‘sexual deviants’ in our society in a scientific way, i.e. through a proper and valid research, if they really have the choice to be who they are or if they were

socialised to be a transsexual that propels me to carry out this research on them.

The research started with a preliminary study funded by my university on a small group of *mak nyahs* who lived in Alor Setar. The first encounter with the *emak nyah* community was at the place where they usually hang out at night, i.e. near the railway station, where they carried out their job as sex workers. That was the only place I knew where they were. I had the help of two of my colleagues from the language school who went as my chaperons. This was because we had never had any dealings with any transsexual before and we did not know what to expect. My two colleagues were worried for my safety and they insisted on coming along with me, especially since I could only carry out my research at night when they came out to do sex work. With a list of questions which I derived from reading researches done by other academics, especially from the West, we went to Alor Setar at 9 p.m. almost every night for about a week. The place was divided into 2 camps; at the beginning of the road were the younger and prettier *mak nyah* sex workers and further down the road were the older and less pretty ones. When we first approached the younger group, we were yelled at as they thought we were reporters trying to write something bad about them. When there were signs of impending physical assault, we went further down the road. This group did not entertain our questions, but at the same time, they were not hostile towards us. We stayed around for a few hours asking them for an interview, but were refused. When it was early in the morning and we still could not get anyone to help us, we decided to visit the place again the following night. This went on for a couple of nights. Our time there was not wasted as we were able to observe the events around us and also to talk to some of the families living around that area. The interesting thing we observed was that all sorts of men sought the services of the *mak nyahs*: young, old, poor, rich (who came in cars), ugly, good looking, of all races and of all religions. These men also liked chatting up the *mak nyahs*. It made me wonder if these people were closet gays. We were told that even politicians came to seek some of these *mak nyahs*. That was why whenever the police carried out a raid, the *mak nyahs* always knew in advance and would not come out that night. The *mak nyahs* who were sex workers would not be in the profession if there was no demand for their services. Society shuns them during the day, but at night, some of them seek their services.

Eventually on the third night of our visits, one of the *mak nyahs* in her 40s asked us why we were there for 2 nights in a row. As a desperate researcher by then, I told them that I was a student at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) and that I had to do a project for one of my courses. I decided to do this as it was the only way I could get my data, but I was not totally dishonest in saying that I had to do a project and that I was from the university. I intended to tell the truth eventually. The *mak nyah* took pity on me and she gave me the first interview. I paid her RM5 for her time since it was during her 'working hours'. In between the interviews, I told her about the *mak nyahs* at the beginning of the road who were quite hostile. She said those were the 'Sophia Janes' and naturally, they could afford to be arrogant!

After the interview, she, then, called out to her other friends to come and help me so that I could pass my project paper! That was the beginning of my friendship with the *mak nyah* community. Soon, I had almost everyone (7 respondents) at that place interviewed within the week. On the last night of my research there, I bought some chocolates and biscuits to share with them. They were quite surprised since I had already paid them RM5 each for the interviews. I told them that I had not been totally honest with them because I was afraid they might not help me. I revealed that I was actually a staff member at UUM and not a student. I apologized to them and they accepted my apology. They explained that they had to be careful in giving interviews as a few reporters had pretended to be nice to them, interviewed them and then, wrote negatively about them. I assured them that I was conducting a research and would report whatever facts I found. They also revealed that some of the closet *mak nyahs* who were professional people would join them occasionally for socialising purposes and support.

While carrying out the interviews in Alor Setar, I contacted Khartini Slamah of Pink Triangle, the organisation which gave HIV/AIDS awareness to 6 marginalised groups - sex workers, transsexuals, homosexuals, lesbians, drug users and people living with HIV/AIDS. Khartini, at that time, was the manager in charge of the transsexual group. When she knew that I was interested in doing a research on the *mak nyah* community, she invited me to participate in a workshop for 'peer educators' for the *mak nyah* community at Langkawi. At this workshop, I stayed for four days with 22 *mak nyahs*. This was a good interview and observation platform for me as a researcher,

and gave me ideas on how I could do a proper representative research. I also took the opportunity to ask them to fill up a questionnaire which I formulated from my interviews with the *mak nyahs* in Alor Setar. The stay with them at the hotel was an eye opener for me. The *mak nyahs* who had 'come out' (declared openly that they were *mak nyahs*) only for a short time were soft spoken and very feminine. This could be because they believed that this was the way biological females behaved. They had put in too much effort and thus, became too gentle and unnatural. This made them very conspicuous in public areas. However, for the *mak nyahs* who had come out for quite sometime, their behaviour was more natural and similar to any other woman.

As for their dressing, all of them spent a 'fortune' and much time on making themselves looked beautiful. They were well versed in the art of make-up and the latest fashion trends, and were always well dressed. They were also figure conscious like the general female population and they took great pride in the shape of their bodies, especially their enlarged breasts. When asked why it was so important for them to look good, they said that they wanted to look every inch like a woman, if not better, as this was how they felt about themselves. They also revealed that they had to compete with biological women to get the attention of men. Looking good all the time was very important to them. They all gave themselves 'glamour' names - female names like Sheila, Rose, Amy or Emma.

When they chatted among themselves, they had their own 'slang' words, for example *topi keledar* (safety helmet) means wig, *kuba* means taking drugs and *ting tong* means insane or mad. They would admire good looking men who passed by, like any woman. Some would be brave enough to chat up men they liked. They also had their own tactics in chatting up men like women. They gave me some tips and demonstrated it when we were taking a break along the beach in Langkawi! Interestingly, these men enjoyed chatting up the *mak nyahs* as well. The *mak nyahs* made fun and joked about each other like females, for example, how others were jealous of him because his boyfriend was very good looking.

Those who cross-dressed openly had accepted their identity as *mak nyahs* without any inhibition. They even made fun of their own transsexuality - for example, their parents were expecting them to be either a boy or a girl and how lucky they were to have both! They consider themselves heterosexuals and not homosexuals as they were

women attracted to men. If they had relationships with a woman, then they were considered as lesbians. When asked if they would ever consider having a relationship with a female, most of them found the question offensive. They considered themselves as straight women who could only have relationships with men.

The *mak nyahs* were a very cohesive group that did not discriminate in terms of class, race or religion. This could be because they all shared the same 'identity' in the society and belonged to a very distinctive group of people. Some *mak nyahs* had set up their own informal organisations. In these organisations, every member had to contribute about RM5 every month. If there was a special occasion, part of the money would be taken out for presents. The money was also used to bail out any member who was caught by the police.

A large number of them were rather religious as they observed and respected many practices of their religion. They were confused at times whether they could carry out certain religious rites since they were transsexuals. For example, when we visited the Mahsuri's tomb in Langkawi, they were not sure whether they could enter the place since it is considered sacred by Muslims.

It is interesting to note that my research in Alor Setar had given me the opportunity to meet *mak nyahs* who had and had not undergone the sex reassignment surgery. Of those who had not undergone the sex reassignment surgery, a single *mak nyah* who was in his 40s, had adopted 3 children - 2 girls and 1 boy. Of the 3 who were married, one of them who was a technician at a government department, said that he had been forced to marry by his family as he was the only male child in the family. The first marriage ended in divorce as his wife could not understand his problem. The second wife was quite open about his cross-dressing at night and his need to mix with his fellow *mak nyahs*. He had 6 children. One of his sons was like him - wanted to be a *mak nyah*. Of the three *mak nyahs* who had undergone the sex reassignment surgery in Malaysia before the *fatwa* banning such operations was introduced, two of them held respectable jobs - an executive at a big corporation and a sales person at a retail shop. The third one was married with 2 adopted children. She had become a grandmother and had a very happy married life. All three said they had received very good care from the doctors involved in their operation. They went through 2 years of counselling before and after the operation. The pre-counselling was to help them

to decide whether the operation was the best option for them and the post counselling was to help them to adjust to their new roles and way of life. All three were satisfied with their new roles. They had no regrets over their choice and they were being accepted by society as females.

After the report for this preliminary study was done, I decided that a more representative study of the *mak nyah* community was feasible. A proposal to get funding to carry out the research throughout Malaysia was written and submitted to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment under the Intensification of Research In Priority Areas (IRPA) programme. I invited Khartini Slamah to be my co-researcher as I needed her to help me distribute the questionnaires and to introduce me to the *mak nyah* respondents. Moreover, Khartini is a *mak nyah*, and it would be easier for her to approach the *mak nyah* community as they would not see her as a threat. Khartini mentioned that a section on HIV/AIDS awareness of the *mak nyah* community should be done based on the questions from an earlier study carried out by Donna Rae Palmer, executive director of Mobilization Against AIDS based in San Francisco, with the collaboration of Pink Triangle on a small group of *mak nyahs*. As both of us are not medical personnel, we invited Assoc. Prof. Dr. Wong Yut Lin from University Malaya to contribute a section on certain health issues of the *mak nyahs*.

This larger study hoped to look into as many aspects as possible in an in-depth manner on the *mak nyahs*, for example the social, psychological, legal, religious and health aspects. The objectives of this study were:

1. to achieve a better understanding of the transsexuals in Malaysia;
2. to identify problems that transsexuals face in society;
3. to determine the effects of the law, law enforcement agencies and religious principles on transsexuals;
4. to assess the health status of transsexuals;
5. to assess the overall well-being of transsexuals;
6. to identify ways which could help them to adjust into society without any discrimination.

The proposal was accepted by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment. The Ministry gave us a very generous research grant. The grant enabled us to carry out the research in the town centre of the 8 states of Malaysia where the *mak nyahs* generally live for job purposes. The data collection, i.e. distribution of the questionnaire was carried out mainly by Khartini and a few research assistants whom we chose and trained from the *mak nyah* community. The interviews were done by me.

As we wanted the research to be a representative and a valid one, we had to have a proper sample size. Pink Triangle had estimated the total number of *mak nyahs* in Malaysia to be around 10,000. From this figure, the sample size according to research procedure should then be 370 (see section on research methodology for further details) or 516. We managed to obtain 507 respondents.

The initial pilot study was carried out on 30 respondents in Kedah. We had to modify some of the questions in the questionnaire after the pilot study as they were not clear. After modifying the questions, we tested the questionnaire with some *mak nyahs* before distributing them to our respondents.

As for the interviews, besides interviewing the transsexuals, the relevant authorities from the following government departments had been interviewed - the Police Department, the Islamic Centre, the Registry and the Welfare Department. Personnel from the following relevant organisations had also been interviewed - Legal Aid Centre, the Buddhist Maha Vihara, the Malaysia Hindu Sangam, the Catholic Church of Malaysia and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship. Prominent individuals interviewed included Dato' Prof. Dr. Khairuddin Yusof, a gynaecologist attached to University Hospital (University Malaya Medical Centre), who carried out the sex reassignment surgery for the male transsexuals before being banned by the Islamic *fatwa* in the early 1980s prohibiting the operation by him and on Muslim transsexuals; the late Prof. Woon Tai Hwang, a clinical psychologist at University Hospital (University Malaya Medical Centre) who did the psychological assessment on transsexual patients of Dato' Prof. Dr. Khairuddin before the sex reassignment surgery; M. Puravalen, Leena Ghosh and Sivarasa Rasiah from the Legal Aid Centre; Munif Zariruddin Fikri Nordin from Universiti Utara Malaysia; and Mariam, one of the oldest transsexuals in Malaysia, at the age of 63 years.

While doing the interview with Mariam, I had the opportunity

to meet the *mak nyahs* in Johor. The best place to meet a large group of them would be at the place where they hang out at night. Some would be working as sex workers while others would be there to socialize with other *mak nyahs*. I was able to observe how the clients of the sex workers chose them and the way they bargained with each other. Some clients were curious if I was also a *mak nyah*. One actually came up to ask me! This was not the first time that I encountered 'curious' people when I was with the *mak nyahs*. One client also asked me "How much?"!

While I was with the *mak nyahs* in Johor, the police came to raid the place. The instinct of all the *mak nyahs* was to run as fast as they could - some tripping and falling down, and some losing their high-heeled shoes. I could feel the terror of being 'hunted down'. I was so confused and panicky that I just could not move. All my knowledge about my rights and dealings with the police when apprehended just went blank! The first thought I had was "I will be in big trouble with my university if the following day's headline in the local papers reads - UUM lecturer caught by the police during a raid on sex workers"! However, as I was dressed decently in jeans and T-shirt, and did not look like a *mak nyah* or sex worker, the police left me alone.

Mariam used to work as a cook at the home of the headmaster of the Malay Boys' College, Kuala Kangsar, when she was younger. As she loves cooking, she invited us for lunch. She cooked a feast for us and was very pleased that we enjoyed her food so much. I had double helpings of everything! The informal, friendly atmosphere was very conducive for us to have a good discussion about the plight of the *mak nyahs* in Malaysia. I made quite a few friends among the *mak nyahs*.

The research grant had enabled us to carry out other practical projects while the research was being done. These projects were good observation, fact-finding and discussion platforms for us as researchers, besides helping the *mak nyah* community. A four-day seminar to train about 100 *mak nyahs* as peer educators was organised during the first year of the research. This was the first national transsexual seminar in Malaysia. The seminar was intended to empower and give awareness to the *mak nyahs* on health issues related to them which included HIV/AIDS awareness, their legal, religious and social position in society, and how they could improve their living standard since many of them were sex workers. Part of

the findings of the research was also conveyed to them. Before choosing the venue for the seminar, an informal discussion with the representatives from the Islamic Department of each state in Malaysia was carried out to obtain their consent for holding this seminar and their cooperation not to raid the seminar venue as Islam, the official religion, does not recognise transsexuals. Representatives from some states did not turn up. Eventually, it was decided that Cameron Highlands would be the best place to hold the seminar due to its strategic location and also the cooperation from the Pahang Islamic department. As the seminar was being funded with the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment research grant, the police and Islamic religious authority cooperated and did not interfere although they did turn up to observe and requested us to produce the relevant documents.

A one-day dialogue session was also organised at the end of the first year of the research between the representatives of the *mak nyah* community and representatives from the police, the Islamic religious authority and the social welfare department to clear up misunderstandings between them. Representatives of the Registration Department were also invited, but, to the disappointment of the *mak nyahs*, they did not attend. The session also paved the way for more open communication between the relevant groups in the future.

After the dialogue session had taken place, the police representative invited the lawyers who voluntarily represented the transsexuals and personnel from Pink Triangle to his office for further discussion.

A follow-up to the first dialogue session had also taken place at the end of the second year of the research (i.e. at the end of the research) to further improve the relationship between the transsexuals, and the police and Islamic authorities.

The research had generated interest from the local newspapers and magazines. They had reported on the actual findings on the transsexual community instead of on a biased opinion. The media used the findings from this research to create awareness among the Malaysian public on the transsexual phenomena.

Some local non-governmental organisations had invited us to their forums to highlight the issue on sexuality that has always been a taboo subject in Malaysia. Many families with children of different sexuality did not know about the phenomenon and how to handle

its problems and issues. This had created lots of tension and strain in the family.

With the remaining research funds, a three-phase workshop to train 'guides' to give guidance to the transsexual community in legal, religious, social, psychological and health issues were organised with the collaboration of personnel from PINTAS, an organisation attached to the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development, and Pink Triangle. It is hoped that with the collaboration of PINTAS, it will take over the role of helping the *mak nyah* community in providing funding and carrying out of projects in the future as we have exhausted our research funds.

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

2

History and Definition of Transsexuals

Transsexualism has always been a feature of human civilisations all over the world. It is not unique to any particular era, race or country. However, it is not recognised as part of the society in many countries. This is because human beings still divide themselves according to the binary gender system, that is either a male or a female according to the sex a person is born into. Anybody who considers himself or herself outside this binary system is said to have deviated from the norms of the society. Another major reason is that some religions, like Islam and Christianity, do not recognise transsexualism.

Researches in this area are few, particularly in Asia. The estimates of transsexuals range from 1 per 100,000 in the United States to about 1.9 in England, Wales and Sweden (Franzini and Casinelli, 1986: 535).

Transsexuals can refer to both male to female transsexuals (or male transsexuals), that are males who want to be females in every aspect, and female to male transsexuals (or female transsexuals), that are females who want to be males in every aspect. They are born with the sex organ which they do not want and would like to change for those of the opposite sex. The expression that is commonly used by male transsexuals about themselves is, "I am trapped in a man's body" and vice versa for a female transsexual (Khairuddin and others, unpublished). Male transsexuals are attracted to men and not women, and vice versa for female transsexuals.

Anne Bolin (Herdt (ed.), 1993:451) said that male transsexuals

regarded themselves as heterosexual if they were attracted to men, lesbian if attracted to women and bisexual if attracted to both. Male transsexuals were generally said to define themselves by a bottom line criterion of desire for hormonal reassignment therapy and sex reassignment surgery. If one was not committed to having surgery, then one was considered as a transvestite or a gay cross-dresser who was an impersonator of women. It should be pointed out that transsexuals differentiate themselves from transvestites which refer to males who have the urge to cross-dress as females, but are not 'really' women.

The term transvestite was coined by Hirschfeld in 1910 to distinguish this group of cross-dressers from homosexuals (Ekins, 1993: 3). He stressed that transvestites most typically were heterosexual in overt choice, although they might be homosexual, bisexual, monosexual or asexual.

The word 'transsexualism' came into the English vocabulary in the early 1950s (Raymond, 1979: 20). It was coined by D.O. Cauldwell as a medical term to classify a girl whom he described as obsessively wanting to be a boy.

The publication of the sex reassignment surgery of Christine Jorgensen, formerly known as George Jorgensen, in Denmark in 1953 by a team of Danish physicians - Christian Hamburger (the head of the team), George Sturup and E. Dahl-Iverson - brought the issue of transsexualism to the attention of the public (Raymond, 1979: 20; Herdt (ed.), 1993: 455). However, this was not the first known case of sex reassignment surgery. The earliest known sex reassignment surgery was performed on 'Lilli Elbe' in the 1920s (Herdt (ed.), 1993: 455) and another case carried out by a German physician, F.Z. Abraham, in 1931 (Raymond, 1979: 21).

In 1959, Lukianowicz defined transsexuals as persons having the following attitudes (Khairuddin and others, unpublished):

1. A desire to wear the dress of the opposite sex;
2. A wish to be looked upon and to be socially accepted as a member of the opposite sex; and
3. A persistent urge to undergo a 'conversion operation', i.e. to have an anatomical change of inborn sex.

In 1966, Benjamin used the term 'transsexual' for sex-changers (Ekins, 1993: 3). He also distinguished transsexuals from transvestites. He contended that the essential difference between transvestites and transsexuals was that for the latter, the sex organs were objects of hatred and disgust which drove them to seek the sex reassignment surgery (Raymond, 1979: xxv). However, transvestites had no such drive or even desire. He helped the transsexuals by obtaining hormonal and surgical intervention for them.

Benjamin was reknown for treating a male client experimentally with ProgynonRX (an estrogenic hormone) and was successful in promoting breast growth (Herdt (ed.), 1993:455). He was recognized as the parent of the discipline of transsexualism (Herdt (ed.), 1993: 455) and the founding of the Harry Benjamin Foundation in 1964 brought together a group of professionals from different fields to carry out systematic research on transsexualism (Raymond, 1979: 21).

In 1967, a major expansion of transsexual research and activity took place with the formal opening of the John Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic in Baltimore, Maryland (Raymond, 1979: 22). With the opening of the centre by a prominent institution like John Hopkins, the sex reassignment surgery gained acceptance and was carried out in other respected medical institutions.

Person and Ovesey distinguished primary and secondary transsexuals in 1974 (Ekins, 1993: 3). Primary transsexuals were seen to have a gender identity at variance with biology from an early age, whereas secondary transsexuals were seen to take a transsexual route after following a career path more typically associated with transvestites who were seen to cross-dress for sexual gratification or to achieve pleasure from the adoption of the opposite gender role.

Fisk coined the term 'gender dysphoria' in 1973 (Freund and Watson, 1993:15). This term referred to a profound sense of unease or discomfort about one's identity as a male or female which was felt to be in opposition to one's physical sex (Ekins, 1993: 3). Transsexuality, then, had been defined by Kuiper and Cohen-Kettenis (1988: 440) as "an extreme form of gender dysphoria accompanied by the desire to be delivered from one's own primary and secondary sex characters and to live entirely as a person of the opposite sex". Gender.dysphoria was defined by Kuiper and Cohen-Kettenis as "a sense of discomfort, which the person in question ascribes to the incongruence between his/her gender identity (subjectively

Objective and compassionate, Dr Teh Yik Koon has written not only about her research on which the book is based upon, but a work imbued with humanity, supported with hard facts and figures from thorough research.

Her book fills a large void in sexuality literature particularly on male transsexuality in Malaysia. It demystifies the *mak nyah* who is seen, at best, a deviant or an aberration of society, or at worse, a religious blasphemy.

This book would not only benefit students and researchers interested in the issue, but the general reader - for instance, parents concerned for their transsexual children - and those seeking answers to the transsexual question.

— Ong Ju Lynn, Journalist, *The Star*, Malaysia

Co-author & researcher, *The Rape Report: An Overview of Rape in Malaysia*

The transgendered communities of Southeast Asia are little understood, either within the academic community or in the societies at whose margins they are forced to live.

Professor Teh's study of the Malaysian *mak nyah* shines a bright light on the lives of people who, apart from growing up with an identity that fails to match their body, turn out to be much like the rest of us.

In reducing our ignorance about these people, we contribute to reducing the prejudice and discrimination that *mak nyahs* are daily subjected.

— Dr Sam Winter, Director of Transgender Studies, Faculty of Education

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